Employee Reactions to Positive Action Policies in the United Kingdom: Does the Organization's Justification Matter?

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Abstract

Affirmative action remains a contentious topic in both research and practice. While advocates suggest that such action is necessary to overcome demographic imbalances in the labor market, some research shows that these policies can prompt undesirable employee reactions that negate their value. While *positive discrimination* (i.e., recruiting or promoting solely based on a protected characteristic) remains illegal in the United Kingdom, organizations have increasingly begun adopting *positive action* measures (i.e., measures aimed at alleviating disadvantage or under-representation based on protected characteristics). However, there is little research looking at how these policies specifically affect employee attitudes or how different organizational rationales for positive action might moderate these effects. This lack of research is even more notable in the UK context. In two experimental studies of UK professionals ($N = 353$) we find that perceived organizational justice explained the relationship between positive action and affective commitment / turnover intention. However, evidence supporting the effect of organizational rationale was limited.

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1. Introduction

Issues surrounding equality, diversity, and inclusion have become a central focus for many organizations in recent years, as phrases such as "unconscious bias" and "systemic racism" have permeated the public consciousness. Broadly, diversity has been studied extensively in the economic literature (e.g., Alesina & Ferrara, 2005; Docquier, Turati, Valette, & Vasilakis, 2020), as well as in the management literature (e.g., Bezrukova, Spell, Perry, & Jehn; Guillaume et al., 2014). And yet, despite having received considerable attention in both research and practice (see Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Kölle, 2017), positive discrimination and positive action (also collectively known as "affirmative action") remain contentious topics in regard to both their moral and economic value.

In particular, "affirmative action" (AA) has been a popular research topic in the United States. However, diversity management is contextual, and the vast majority of the research on AA policies is not applicable to the modern legal and societal context of the United Kingdom. *Positive discrimination,* the sort of quota-based recruitment and selection policies most associated with AA, is illegal in the UK. However, *positive action*, which allows organizations to treat a group with protected characteristics favorably to help them to overcome past disadvantage through training and employment opportunities (Government Equalities Office, 2010), remains legal. For example, if an employer identifies an underrepresentation of women in a particular job role within their organization, they may voluntarily choose to use positive action through targeting the advertisement of this job role, and they may also favor a woman applicant over an equally qualified man. However, they could not select a woman over a more highly qualified man solely based on gender — this would constitute positive discrimination.

While this type of positive action is becoming more and more common among UK employers (Gregory-Smith, 2017), the existing research largely focuses on less relevant quota-based policies (e.g., Neschen & Hügelschäfer, 2021; Shaughnessy, Braun, Hentschel & Peus, 2016). Given the continued lack of demographic representation in UK businesses (ONS, 2019), the striking dearth of ethnic minority representation on UK Boards of Directors (Parker, 2020), and the clear evidence for the moral and economic benefits of increased diversity in the workforce (see Guillaume, Dawson, Otaye-Ebede, Woods, & West, 2017; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004), understanding the efficacy of these positive action policies is a pressing concern. However, research on affirmative action policies indicates that they are often met with skepticism (Dobbin, Schrage & Kalev, 2015; Shaughnessy et al., 2016; Wilton, Sanchez, Unzueta, Kaiser & Caluori, 2019). As such, it is essential that research investigates positive action policies specifically in the UK context.

2. Conceptual framework

Given the clear and present need to understand the effects of positive action in the UK context, and given the evidence of the potential for employee backlash (e.g., Leslie, 2019; Shaughnessy et al., 2016), this research sets out to answer two key questions: 1.) How do positive action policies common in the United Kingdom affect employee attitudes and 2.) Does the rationale offered by the organization for these policies moderate their effects?

2.1 An intergroup conflict approach to positive action

In addressing the first of the aforementioned questions, this work builds on the findings of Shaughnessy and colleagues (2016), who found in their experimental work that quota-based selection policies (i.e., positive discrimination) have a negative effect on job pursuit intentions among potential applicants. This relationship was sequentially mediated by

procedural justice perceptions and organizational attractiveness, which supports previous survey findings from Leck, Saunders, and Charbonneu (1996) in establishing justice as an explanatory variable in the relationship between positive action and employee attitudes. Also relevant is Neschen and Hügelschäfer's (2021) work, in which the authors found that neither the announcement nor implementation of quota policies significantly increased bias against women in performance evaluations. The present work builds on these findings in two important ways. First, as previously mentioned, this research is conducted in the UK legal context (see Equality Act, 2010), such that positive action (rather than positive discrimination) is considered as the independent variable. Second, the experimental vignette asks participants to imagine themselves as current employees rather than potential job seekers or performance evaluators. Additionally, within the social exchange framework (Emerson, 1976), perceived organizational justice is well established as an antecedent of employee outcomes such as affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001) and turnover intention (Cohen, 2017; Fazio, Gong, Sims, & Yurova, 2017). As such, both of these are considered as dependent variables in this research, in order to demonstrate a more direct connection to tangible work-related outcomes.

While the argument for increased demographic representation in organizations has been made effectively from both a moral and economic perspective (Van Dijk, van Engen, & Paauewe, 2012), its efficacy in practice is largely a question of intergroup conflict. In workplace diversity research, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) have played a fundamental role since their inception. According to the social identity approach, individuals derive their social identity (i.e., their self-image) from the social categories and groups to which they perceive themselves belonging (Abrams & Hogg, 2006). This often includes

demographic categories such as race and gender. From a business perspective, this social identity approach forms the most widely accepted theoretical basis for our understanding of the negative outcomes that can result from diversity and diversity-relevant policies in organizations (Leslie, 2019; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Morgenroth and Ryan (2018) note evidence for numerous negative outcomes of affirmative action policies but conclude that their potential benefits outweigh the potential costs. Todd, Bodenhausen, and Galinsky (2012) found that perspective taking (resulting in increased identification with an out-group) reduced the opposition to affirmative action policies, further supporting the social identity approach as a useful theoretical paradigm to understand the impact of positive action. Further, in a recent mixed methods study, Gardner and Ryan (2020) found that individuals who promoted diversity in organizations were viewed as more self-interested when they demographically matched the group for which they were advocating. Affirmative action policies, by their nature, propose increasing the proportion of some minority group in a given workplace, which inherently reduces the proportion of jobs held by one or more other groups. Renfro, Duran, Stephan, and Clason (2006) connected this to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, by demonstrating that intergroup anxiety and in-group identity mediated attitudes toward affirmative action. Whether the goal is a fairer professional world for minority groups, or the economic benefits associated with more diverse teams and organizations, both outcomes are threatened if such policies result in an untenable level of intergroup conflict.

2.2 Organizational rationale for positive action

Given the body of work that highlights the clear and present risks that intergroup processes pose to positive action policies, it is essential to consider factors that may affect

how they are received in organizations. In this, we build on recent work considering

organizational justifications for diversity policies (e.g., Marcinko, 2020; Windscheid et al.,

2016). A review of the diversity management literature offers a practical starting point.

Broadly, *diversity management* is defined as the implementation of practices and policies by

which an organization attempts to facilitate the positive effects and inhibit the negative

effects of diversity (Scarborough, Lambouths & Holbrook, 2019). Many in research and

practice consider it a moral imperative for organizations to be demographically representative

of the community in which they are based (see Pringle & Strachan, 2015 in Bendl et al.,

2015). Further, many have also made the business case for diversity with ample research

evidence suggesting that diverse teams and organizations are capable of outperforming more

homogenous ones (Guillaume et al, 2014; van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Homan, 2013).

As such, organizations across all sectors have been increasingly motivated to increase their

demographic diversity and manage it effectively (Leslie, 2019).

      However, the efficacy of these diversity management practices (including positive

action) is often determined by how employees perceive them (Cox and Blake, 1991; Kossek,

Lobel, & Brown, 2006; McMillan-Capehart & Richard, 2005; Mor Barak, Cherin &

Berkman, 1998). Leslie (2019) compiled a comprehensive review of the potential unintended

consequences of various diversity management efforts. Recent experimental work has found

that employees often perceive hypocrisy or inauthenticity in organizational diversity

management efforts (Marcinko, 2020; Windscheid, Bowes-Sperry, Kidder, Cheung, Morner,

& Lievens, 2016). In general, it is well established that employee perceptions of diversity

management practices are of paramount importance in understanding their potential

effectiveness (Cox and Blake, 1991). In other words, the success of diversity management

practices are contingent on how employees perceive them. Thus, in addition to understanding

what diversity management practices are most effective in a vacuum, we must also

understand how these policies and practices are best communicated to employees; if employees perceive them more positively, they will potentially be more likely to have the desired effects.

As such, this work also considers the rationale an organization might offer in support of a positive action policy and how these rationales might affect the policy's efficacy. To effectively conceptualize these rationales, we borrow from the work of Dwertmann, Nishii, and van Knippenberg (2016), which addresses the concept of "diversity climate". Dwertmann and colleagues (2016) use the terms "synergy" and "fairness and discrimination" to describe the two most prominent organizational diversity climates. These align with the "dualism" outlined by Pringle & Strachan (2015, in Bendl et al., 2015), which contrasts the economic/business case for diversity with the social justice/moral case for diversity. In the Dwertmann et al. (2016) conceptualization, *synergy* represents a focus on realizing the potential performance benefits of diversity (i.e., a business case), while *fairness and discrimination* represents a focus on fair treatment, the absence of discrimination, and equal opportunities (i.e., a moral case).

The "business case for diversity" — sometimes referred to as the value-in-diversity hypothesis (Van Dijk et al., 2012) — has grown in popularity in recent years (Bell et al., 2011). The synergy climate embodies this approach as it focuses on maximizing the performance benefits that can be gained from diversity (Van Knippenberg, Nishii, & Dwertmann, 2020). However, others have noted drawbacks and moral questions (Ely & Thomas, 2020). This is clearly an important debate, but we do not seek to address it in this research — We draw on this work (Dwertmann, Nishii, & Van Knippenberg, 2016) in designing our experimental manipulations as it represents the clearest conceptualization of the two most common organizational rationales offered for positive action programs.

3. Experimental design and hypothesis: Study 1

In Study 1, we set out to test the direct relationship between positive action and perceived organizational justice among UK employees. A vignette was developed based on a review of how real-world organizations convey positive action policies.

Hypothesis 1: Positive action will have a negative effect on perceived organizational justice among employees.

3.1 Sample and Design

Participants. The total sample $N = 77$ consisted of 43 women (55.8%) and 34 men (44.2%). The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 71 years ($M = 35.63$ years, $SD = 11.58$). An a priori power analysis conducted in G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) based on a large effect size (d = .8, a more conservative estimate than observed in a similar experiment by Shaughnessy et al., 2016) indicated that 70 participants would be necessary to detect an effect at the .95 level. Non-student UK residents over the age of 18 were recruited online using Prolific – a commonly used platform in this type of experimental research (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Participants were compensated at an hourly rate of at least the UK minimum wage.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they were an employee at the (fictitious) organization 'TalentPlus'. They were made aware that TalentPlus were concerned by the lack of BAME (Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic, a common acronym in the UK) representation within the company. Following this, participants were randomly allocated to one of two conditions, in which they were advised that TalentPlus would either take positive action or they would not.

3.2 Measures

Perceived Organizational Justice. Items were adapted from the Perceived Organizational Justice (POJ) scale developed by Ambrose and Schminke (2009). This was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, 1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree. An example item includes 'TalentPlus would be fair in its hiring practices' ($\alpha = .81$).

Attention check. Participants were asked an attention check question – 'What was the name of the organization that was mentioned?'.

Manipulation check. To ensure the effectiveness of the positive action manipulation, participants were asked 'Do you think that this organization will rely on diversity targets, diversity quotas, and other forms of "positive action" in its hiring practices?' An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare manipulation checks in 'positive action' and 'no positive action' conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores for positive action ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .84$) and no positive action ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.10$) conditions; $t(75) = 3.89$, $p < .001$.

4. Results: Positive action and perceived organizational justice

To test Hypothesis 1, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the level of perceived organizational justice in the positive action and no positive action condition $t(75) = -2.42$, $p = .02$, $\eta2 = .07$, with the positive action condition ($M = 3.07$, $SD = .96$) lower than the no positive action condition ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .79$), supporting Hypothesis 1 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Study 1: Mean perceived organizational justice, split by positive action vs no positive action conditions

The Effect of Positive Action on Perceived Organizational Justice
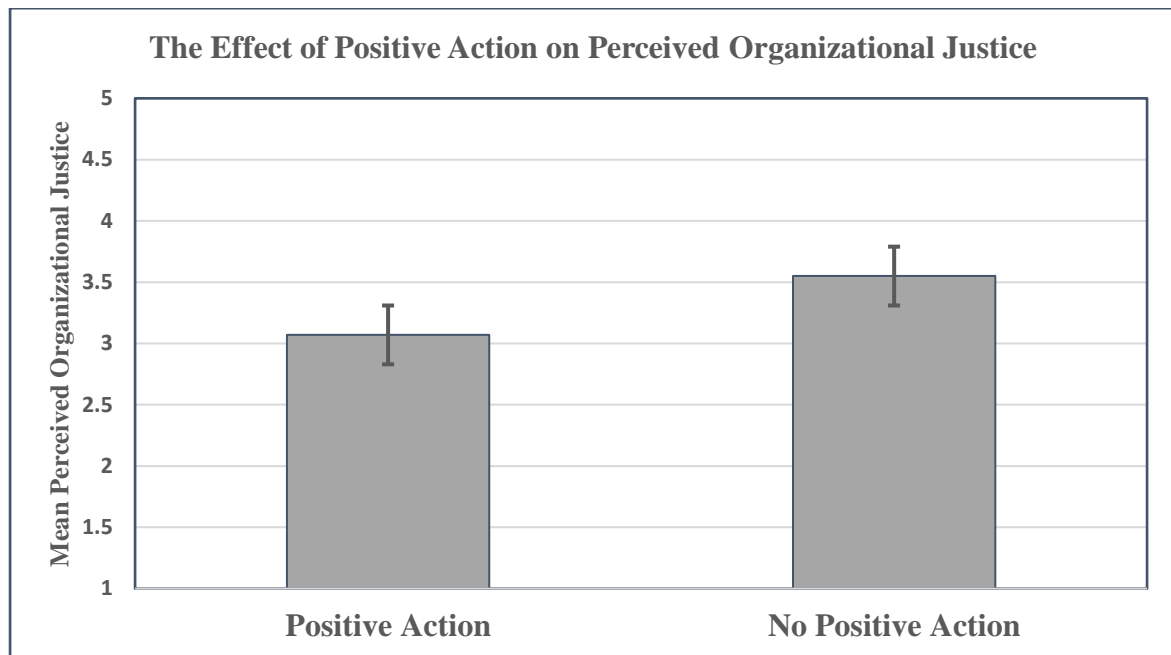
5. Experimental design and hypotheses: Study 2

The results of Study 1 clearly supported the hypothesis that positive action is negatively correlated with perceived organizational justice. Further, the effect size is almost exactly in line with Shaughnessy et al (2016), reinforcing the validity of the experimental manipulations. In Study 2, we attempt to build on this initial finding by testing a mediation model that includes affective commitment and turnover intention, as well as considering the organization's rationale for positive action as a moderator (See Figure 2).

Figure 2

Rationale for Positive Action → Perceived Organizational Justice → Affective Commitment → Turnover Intention; Positive Action → Perceived Organizational Justice; Positive Action → Turnover Intention
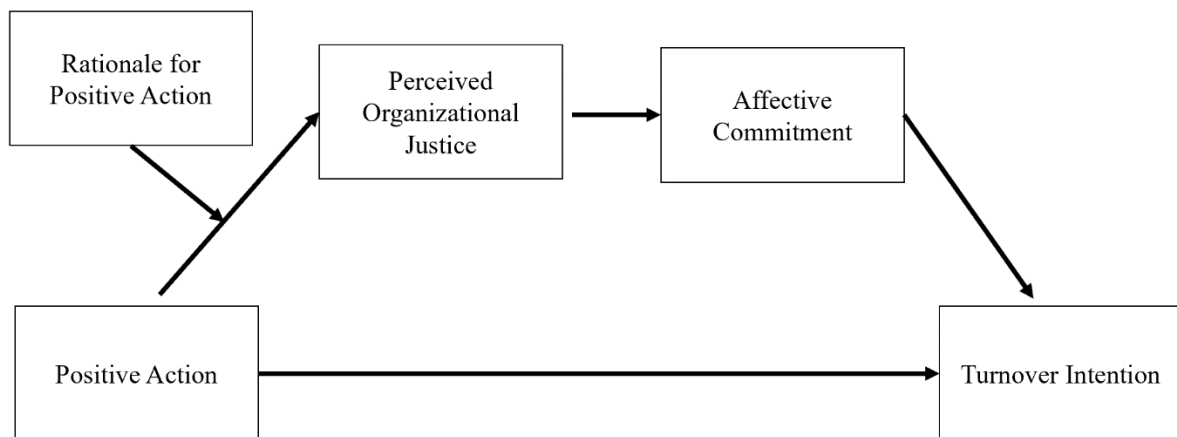
For rationale for positive action, three conditions are included: synergy, fairness, and no justification. These are conveyed in the vignette using a fictious email from the participants' "line manager", in attempting to maintain a degree of realism. The positive action manipulations are the same as those used in Study 1. Gender was coded as 1 = woman, 2 = man, and ethnicity was coded as 1 = ethnic majority (i.e., "white", in the UK context) and 2 = ethnic minority.

> *Hypothesis 1*: Rationale for positive action will moderate the relationship between positive action and perceived organizational justice, such that the negative effect will be weaker when a synergy rationale is offered (as compared to fairness or no justification)

> *Hypothesis 2*: Perceptions of organizational justice and affective commitment will sequentially mediate the relationship between positive action and turnover intention

5.1 Sample and Design

Participants. The total sample $N = 276$ (after the removal of 15 participants who failed the attention check question) consisted of 174 women (62.6%), 99 men (36.3%) and 3 participants (1.1%) who did not disclose their gender. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 78 years ($M = 38.14$ years, $SD = 12.6$). The sample was 92.3% ethnic majority and 7.7% ethnic minority individuals. Participants were recruited online using the platform Prolific.

Because mediation analysis will be conducted using a bootstrapping technique (a type of Monte Carlo simulation) with 10,000 bootstrap samples, power is unlikely to be an issue (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Our sample size was based on previous research using similar statistical techniques (e.g., Gloor, Li, & Puhl, 2018; Windscheid et al., 2016). Participants were compensated at an hourly rate of at least the UK minimum wage.

Procedure. The design was identical to Study 1 with the addition of the organizational rationale manipulations and several outcome variables. This additional manipulation took the form of a fictitious email, purported to be sent by the regional manager, which provided a rationale for the decision to either implement positive action or not. These rationales were developed based on the guidance and examples provided by Dwertmann, Nishii, and Van Knippenberg (2016, p. 1152, Table 2). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three rationale conditions: synergy, fairness, or no justification.

5.2 Measures

Perceived Organizational Justice. This scale was identical to that used in Study 1 (α = .83). A similar attention check was also included. Note that UK spellings were used for all survey items to maintain experimental realism for the participants. All responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, 1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Affective Commitment. Items were adapted from the Affective commitment scale by Allen and Meyer (1990). An example item includes "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organisation" (α = .90).

Turnover Intention. Items were adapted from Fazio et al. (2017). An example item includes "If I worked for this organisation, I would often think about quitting my job..." (α = .87).

Diversity Beliefs. Items were adapted from the diversity belief scale by Van Dick, Van Knippenberg, Hägele, Guillaume, and Brodbeck (2008). An example item included "I think that groups benefit from the involvement of people from different backgrounds" (α = .72).[3] A complete list of items is available at the end of the manuscript.

6. Results: Organizational rationale for positive action and mediation model

As in Study 1, there was a significant main effect of positive action on perceived organizational justice when controlling for rationale $F(1,270) = 20.63$, $p < .001$ $\eta^2 = .07$. As expected, the mean perceived organizational justice score was higher in the no positive action condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .81$) than the positive action condition ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .87$) (See Figure 3). See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Figure 3

Study 2: Mean perceived organizational justice, split by positive action vs no positive action conditions

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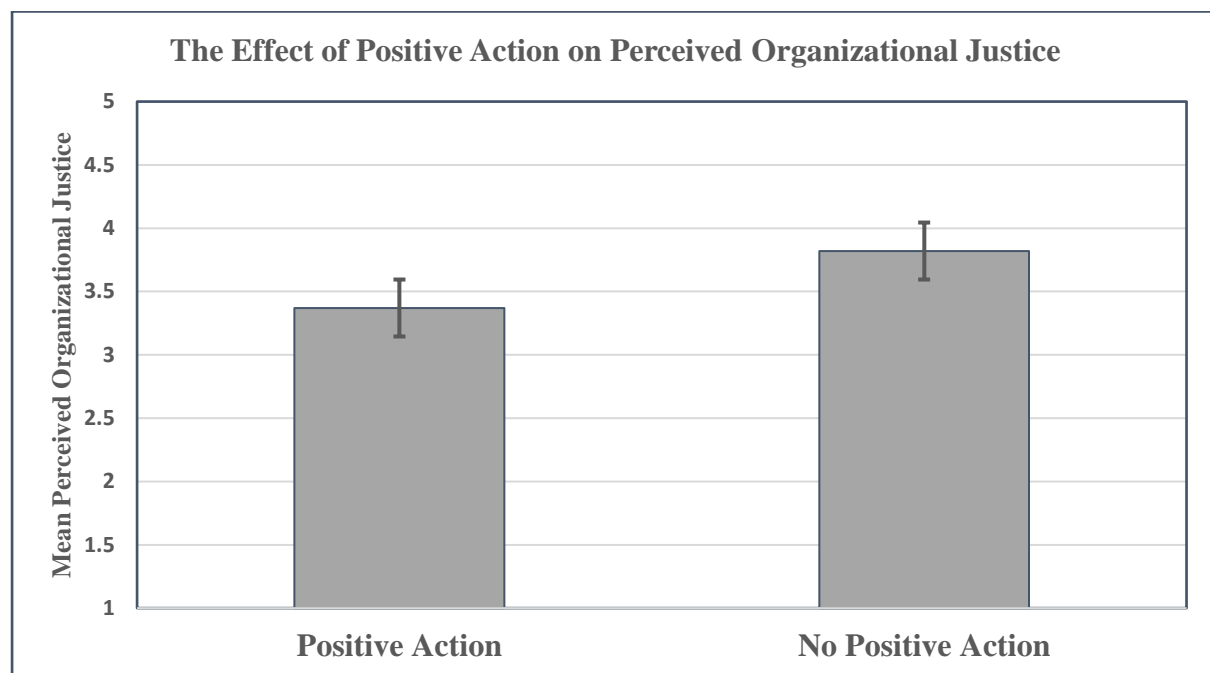
[3] Diversity beliefs was collected as a potential covariate but was not included in the final analysis at the recommendation of the reviewers. However, upon examination, its inclusion as a covariate does not meaningfully change the results.

Table 1

Study 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	Mean (SD)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Positive Action	1.50 (.50)	.26**	.04	.00	-.05	-.05	-.08	-.03
2. Perceived Organizational Justice	3.59 (.87)		.65**	-.53**	.28**	-.05	.09	.02
3. Affective Commitment	3.21 (.83)			-.65**	.34**	-.01	.21**	.05
4. Turnover Intention	2.35 (.93)				-.36**	.03	-.19**	.03
5. Diversity Beliefs	4.18 (.64)					-.10	.29**	-.05
6. Age	38.21 (12.68)						-.14*	-.18**
7. Gender	1.67 (.48)							.05
8. Ethnicity	1.08 (.27)							

Note. $N = 276$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1 predicted that rationale for positive action would moderate the relationship between positive action and perceived organizational justice. The results failed to support this hypothesis $F(2, 270) = 1.21$, $p = .30$, $\eta^2 = .01$. We also tested this hypothesis while excluding those participants who viewed the "no justification" condition, but this result was also non-significant $F(1, 176) = 2.16$, $p = .14$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 predicted a mediation relationship, such that a positive relationship between positive action and turnover intention would be sequentially mediated by perceived organizational justice and affective commitment respectively. Using a 10,000-sample bootstrapping procedure in PROCESS (Hayes, 2015, Model 6), the hypothesized mediation model was supported ($B = -.17$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [-.27, -.09] (See Figure 4). Pairwise contrasts of indirect effects supports the sequential mediation model, as alternative mediation models were all either not significant or explained less of the total effect.

Figure 4
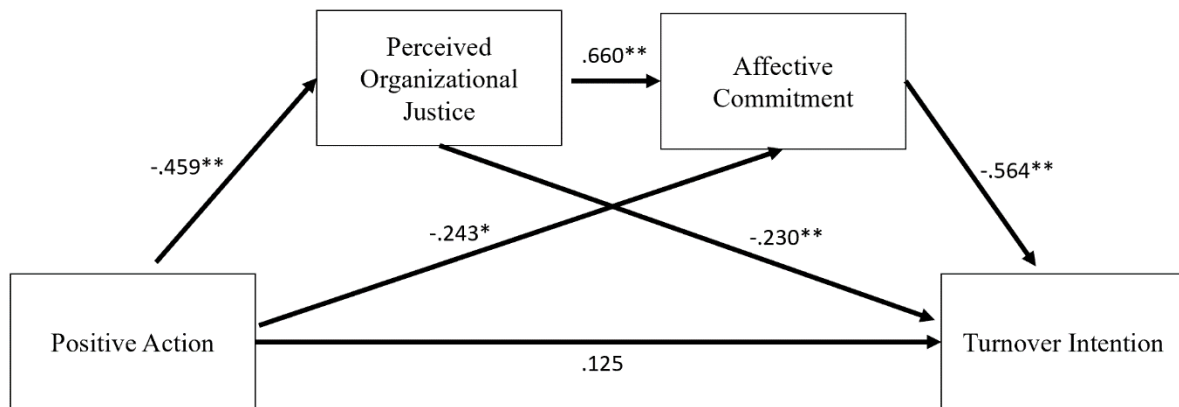
Note. Unstandardized *B* coefficients for sequential mediation analyses using PROCESS Macro model 6.. **$p < .001$. *$p < .05$

Despite the failure to support the moderation predicted in Hypothesis 1, we also tested the full moderated-mediation model (See Figure 2) using a 10,000-sample bootstrapping procedure and incorporating a multicategorical moderator variable (Hayes, 2015, Model 83). As expected based on the results on the moderation analysis in Hypothesis 1, the overall moderated-mediation hypothesis was unsupported for both possible conditional indirect effects W1: $B = -.06$, *SE* = .09, 95% CI [-.24, .12] W2: $B = .09$, *SE* = .10, 95% CI [-.09, .29]. However, we also note that the overall indirect effect was significant for the no justification ($B = -.18$, *SE* = .07, 95% CI [-.32, -.06]) and the fairness conditions ($B = -.24$, *SE* = .08, 95% CI [-.40, -.10]. However, the overall indirect effect was not significant for the synergy condition $B = -.10$, SE = .07, 95% CI [-.24, .05]. While the overall index of moderated-mediation was not significant, the conditional indirect effects across the three multicategorical rationale conditions do indicate some limited support for Hypothesis 1, in that a significant indirect effect was found in the sequential mediation models for both the no justification and fairness conditions but not for the synergy condition.

7. Discussion

Whether motivated by moral, economic, or reputational reasons, many organizations are eager to increase their demographic diversity. While UK law prohibits positive discrimination, many UK organizations have begun utilizing positive action policies in order to achieve this goal. However, the results of both Study 1 and Study 2 offer evidence of the potential for a backlash effect among current employees, which threatens to mitigate any potential economic gains. In Study 1, participants perceived lower levels of organizational justice when a fictitious organization utilized the sort of positive action policies currently common in UK organizations. In Study 2, that relationship further predicted a reduction in affective commitment and an increase in turnover intention. Turnover is currently one of the most challenging and costly issues faced by organizations (Douglas & Leite, 2017), which serves to underscore the importance of better understanding positive action policies. Further, research has consistently shown the vast potential of demographic diversity to increase shareholder value (Carter, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003), creativity and innovation (Guillaume et al., 2017), and team performance (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). This work makes a significant contribution to research and practice by being one of the first to address positive action in a specifically UK context, by conducting experimental research with a non-student, UK sample.

The findings reported in this work reflect a considerable body of research that establishes the importance of understanding intergroup conflict in organizational settings, and particularly in relation to diversity management. Even outside of business and economic research, justice has long been positioned as a mediating variable in the study of intergroup conflict (see Leidner, Castano, & Ginges, 2012; Mikula & Wenzel, 2000). These findings serve to further establish employee perceptions of organizational justice as a key explanatory variable, building on the work of Shaughnessy and colleagues (2016). This links closely with other work establishing trust (Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002) and authenticity (Marcinko,

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2020; Windscheid, 2016) as mediating variables. As Lehman, O'Connor, Kovács, and Newman (2019) note in their recent review, it is clear that the extent to which employees trust their organizations and view them as fair, just, and authentic will be an essential consideration in research and practice in the coming years.

This work also helps clarify in what contexts affirmative action policies will have undesirable effects within organizations. In their summary and meta-analysis, Harrison and colleagues (2006) find clear evidence of negative attitudinal reactions to affirmative action policies in certain contexts. This is in line with more recent experimental research (Shaughnessy et al., 2016; Shteynberg, Leslie, Knight, & Mayer, 2011) that explored this question from an organizational justice theory perspective. However, Harrison and colleagues (2006) also note that this effect is variable for different individuals in different contexts. For example, Neschen and Hügelschäfer (2021) did not find any negative effect of quota policies on performance evaluations. Given the complexity of this research area, this work lends important clarity to understanding the contexts in which employees may have negative attitudinal reactions to affirmative action policies.

However, we found only limited support for our hypothesis that rationale for positive action would moderate the relationship between positive action and organizational justice. While there was some evidence in the moderated mediation analysis supporting our prediction that a synergy approach would mitigate the undesirable effects of positive action policies, the moderation analysis and overall index of moderated-mediation were not significant. This poses a challenge for organizations. Positive action policies may well be the most effective way to rapidly increase demographic diversity (Gregory-Smith, 2018), and while there is a compelling argument that their moral and economic benefits outweigh any potential drawbacks (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018), organizations still run the risk of limiting the potential benefits if employees react negatively to such policies (Grubb III, McMillan-

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Capehart, & McDowell, 2009; Leslie, 2019). Further research is needed to understand how organizations can present positive action policies in such a way that they are well-received by employees, or conversely, whether they should avoid positive action policies altogether in favor of other strategies to increase diversity.

Importantly, our findings here should not be taken to mean that positive action policies will inevitably reduce perceived organizational justice. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether these attitude changes are persistent over a period of time, or whether employees might simply "get over it" over a period of weeks or months. Further, while our experimental methodology enables strong internal validity and the determination of causality, it can be difficult to capture the full context of an organizational setting in a vignette. It is possible that an employee who was immersed in a synergistic diversity climate on a daily basis would be more receptive to their organization's positive action policies.

7.1 Practical Implications

While the practical implications of this work may seem clear, we would strongly caution organizations not to rush to judgement about positive action policies. These findings do offer evidence that positive action policies may result in some undesirable employee outcomes such as reduced commitment and increased turnover intention. However, as noted above, longitudinal and field research are needed to further clarify these effects. Even if this effect does hold true, it is also possible that the moral and economic benefits of increasing demographic diversity outweigh the negative attitudinal effects among employees, as suggested by Morgenroth and Ryan (2018). As such, we would caution UK organizations to avoid rushing to scrap their positive action policies. However, we would also advise that they monitor employee reactions to these policies carefully, with a particular focus on perceived organizational justice.

7.2 Limitations and Future Avenues for Research

The experimental design used in both studies ensured high accuracy and control, however, it may have lacked ecological validity (Araujo, Davids & Passos, 2007). As both studies presented a hypothetical scenario where a participant was asked to imagine themselves as part of a fictitious organization, this may have allowed less bias to be present as the participant would have had no pre-existing opinion about the organization, but it also means that the findings are less generalizable. Future field research and randomized controlled trials should be conducted to measure employees' perceptions of positive action in their own workplaces. Future research should also consider whether positive action toward different demographic groups effects employee attitudes in different ways, and whether or not these effects are different among employees with different demographic characteristics.

We also note the relatively high correlations between affective commitment and perceived organizational justice ($r = .65$) and between affective commitment and turnover intention ($r = .65$). While it is clear that these variables are closely related, there is strong theoretical and empirical support in previous literature for considering them separately (e.g., Andrews, Kacmar, Blakely, & Bucklew, 2008; Tett & Meyer, 1993). However, in future work, we urge researchers to consider behavioral outcome variables such as turnover, productivity, and organizational citizenship behaviors.

8. Conclusion

Increasing demographic diversity will be a top priority for many organizations this decade. However, there is ample evidence of the potential for employee backlash toward policies and practices with this intention (Leslie, 2019). Further, the vast majority of previous research is based in the legal and societal context of the United States. To our knowledge, this research is the first to experimentally assess employee reactions to positive action policies in

the UK context and is framed both in terms of its moral and economic ramifications. It offers a substantial contribution to research, as well as sounding an early note of caution for practitioners. The results support the prediction that employees may perceive their organization as less just when they employ positive action policies, and that this perception in turn may have undesirable effects on other employee attitudes. However, we found only very limited support for the prediction that different organizational justifications would moderate this effect, leaving open the question of how organizations should approach this predicament. Management scholars should further examine the implications of these findings in order to guide organizational practice in relation to positive action.

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Materials

Synergy Condition

Updated Recruitment Policy: Please Review. Inbox

(0 minutes ago)

Dear Team Member,

You will have recently read a memo from the Board of Directors about our updated hiring policies. I wanted to offer a bit more detail on the rationale for this decision.

As an organisation, TalentPlus believes that this action plan will lead to better discussions, decisions and outcomes for everyone involved. Our goal is a workforce that will be a source of strength underpinning the exchange of ideas, innovation, and debate at the heart of our strategic mission as a company.

Put simply, we believe that it is our people, working together using their differences as strength which make our organisation what it is.

As your regional director, I will be available to support you as we roll out this new plan. If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to let me know.

Kind Regards,
Regional Director

Fairness Condition

Updated Recruitment Policy: Please Review. Inbox

(0 minutes ago)

Dear Team Member,

You will have recently read a memo from the Board of Directors about our updated hiring criteria. I wanted to offer a bit more detail on the rationale for this decision.

As an organisation, TalentPlus believes that implementing the proposed action plan is the fair thing to do. Our goal is to avoid any discrimination and ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed at our company.

Put simply, we believe that we should avoid discrimination and treat everyone fairly.

As your regional director, I will be available to support you as we roll out this new plan. If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to let me know.

Kind Regards,
Regional Director

No Justification Condition

Updated Recruitment Policy: Please Review. Inbox ×

Dear Team Member,

(0 minutes ago)

You will have recently read the memo from the Board of Directors about our updated hiring criteria.

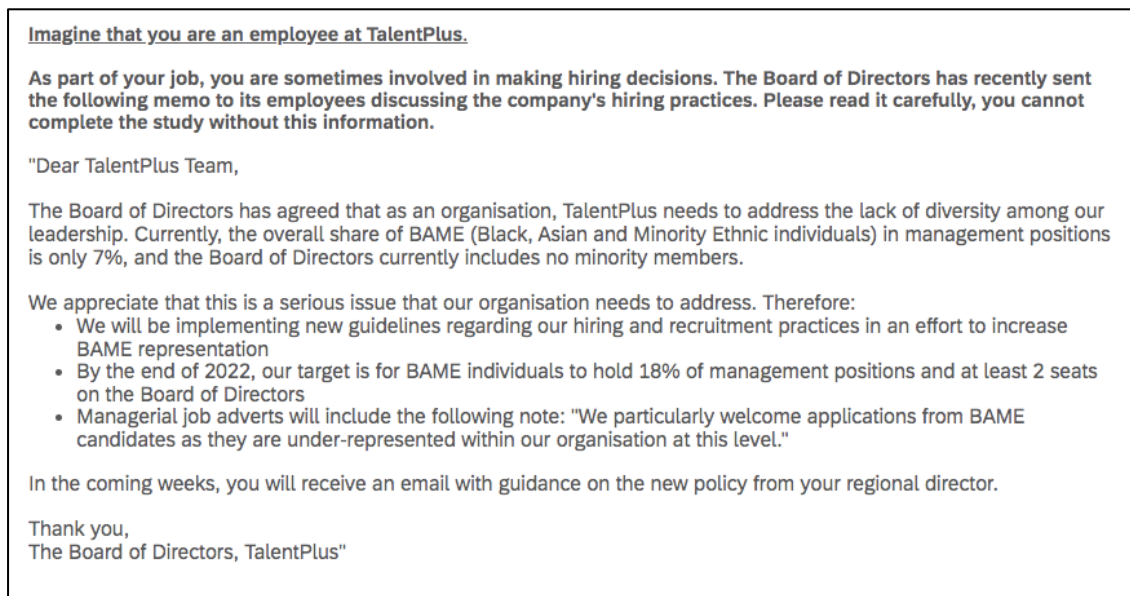As your regional director, I will be available to support you as we roll out this new plan. If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to let me know.
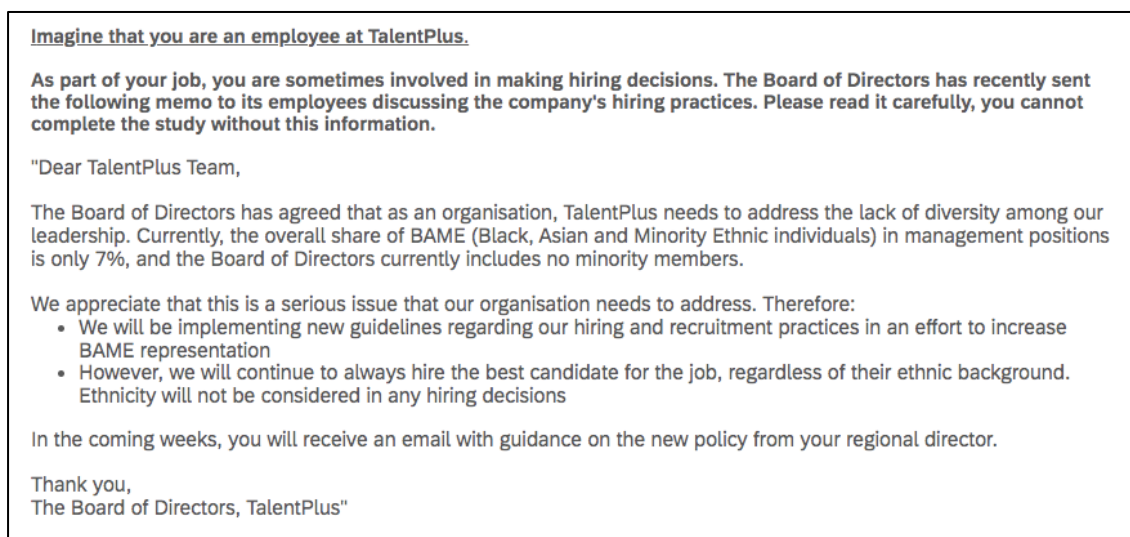
Kind Regards,
Regional Director

Positive Action Condition

Imagine that you are an employee at TalentPlus.

As part of your job, you are sometimes involved in making hiring decisions. The Board of Directors has recently sent the following memo to its employees discussing the company's hiring practices. Please read it carefully, you cannot complete the study without this information.

"Dear TalentPlus Team,

The Board of Directors has agreed that as an organisation, TalentPlus needs to address the lack of diversity among our leadership. Currently, the overall share of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals) in management positions is only 7%, and the Board of Directors currently includes no minority members.

We appreciate that this is a serious issue that our organisation needs to address. Therefore:
- We will be implementing new guidelines regarding our hiring and recruitment practices in an effort to increase BAME representation
- By the end of 2022, our target is for BAME individuals to hold 18% of management positions and at least 2 seats on the Board of Directors
- Managerial job adverts will include the following note: "We particularly welcome applications from BAME candidates as they are under-represented within our organisation at this level."

In the coming weeks, you will receive an email with guidance on the new policy from your regional director.

Thank you,
The Board of Directors, TalentPlus"

No Positive Action Condition

Imagine that you are an employee at TalentPlus.

As part of your job, you are sometimes involved in making hiring decisions. The Board of Directors has recently sent the following memo to its employees discussing the company's hiring practices. Please read it carefully, you cannot complete the study without this information.

"Dear TalentPlus Team,

The Board of Directors has agreed that as an organisation, TalentPlus needs to address the lack of diversity among our leadership. Currently, the overall share of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals) in management positions is only 7%, and the Board of Directors currently includes no minority members.

We appreciate that this is a serious issue that our organisation needs to address. Therefore:
- We will be implementing new guidelines regarding our hiring and recruitment practices in an effort to increase BAME representation
- However, we will continue to always hire the best candidate for the job, regardless of their ethnic background. Ethnicity will not be considered in any hiring decisions

In the coming weeks, you will receive an email with guidance on the new policy from your regional director.

Thank you,
The Board of Directors, TalentPlus"

Scales

You will now be asked a series of questions relating to the information you just read.

While answering the questions, please continue to **imagine that you are an employee** at TalentPlus, after the action plan has been put in place.

To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
TalentPlus would be fair in its hiring practices	○	○	○	○	○
TalentPlus's hiring practices would be free from bias	○	○	○	○	○
Most employees at TalentPlus would be treated fairly	○	○	○	○	○

Please answer the following questions as if you were a TalentPlus employee, after the action plan has been put in place.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organisation	○	○	○	○	○
I would really feel as if this organisation's problems were my own	○	○	○	○	○
I would feel like 'part of the family' at this organisation	○	○	○	○	○
I would feel 'emotionally attached' to this organisation	○	○	○	○	○
I would feel a strong sense of belonging to this organisation	○	○	○	○	○

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

If I worked for this organisation, I would often think about quitting my job...

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○

Q15.   iQ   x→

If I worked for this organisation, I think I would start searching for a new employer...

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
○	○	○	○	○