

# The fairness of affirmative action: In the eye of the beholder

M. Coetzee & M. Bezuidenhout

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the major components of affirmative action (AA) fairness from an organisational justice point of view and to measure the perceptions of employees on AA fairness.

A literature study and an empirical study were conducted. A questionnaire was developed to collect information on respondents' biographical details and their perceptions of the fairness of AA.

Using SPSS, principal axis factor analysis was performed on the data, with a Varimax rotation, in order to uncover the different factors related to affirmative action fairness. Four factors with latent roots greater than unity (Kaiser's criteria) were extracted from the factor matrix of affirmative action. The factors postulating affirmative action fairness included interactional justice, procedural justice (input), procedural justice (criteria) and distributive justice.

The influence and effect of the biographical variables on fairness perceptions were determined by comparing the responses of various employee subsets with one another by means of univariate and multivariate analysis of variance. The results of the t-tests revealed that staff category and ethnicity have a statistically significant effect on employees' perceptions of the distributive justice of AA. Decisions such as granting AA employees token positions, paying unrealistically high salaries to AA managers and appointing less-qualified AA employees play a key role when employees form perceptions of the fairness of AA.

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This study contributes to a better understanding of the dimensionality of employee perceptions of AA fairness. It should assist organisations with the knowledge required for more effective management of AA in the workplace.

**Key words:** affirmative action, distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, employment equity, equality, discrimination

## Introduction

The first democratic and multi-ethnic election in South Africa on 27 April 1994 brought hope to thousands of South Africans. Through the government's affirmative action (AA) policy, workers were able to visualise a more prosperous future. Prior to the implementation of AA, people from previously disadvantaged groups who attempted to uplift themselves from poverty through higher education were thwarted by discrimination, prejudice and institutional lag. Those seeking improved economic positions through employment were blocked by a tradition of preferential treatment for whites. Caught in the web of prejudice and legal discrimination, they found that their ethnicity was reason enough for those in charge to deny them social and economic opportunities. These injustices not only led to poverty, but also destroyed their spirit.

Since the general election in 1994, attempts to make South Africa a more just society have increased, and topics such as equality and social justice have frequently appeared at the top of all agendas. The government realised that legislation was necessary to guide organisations in promoting justice in the workplace, and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) was therefore used as the primary source of any legislation pertaining to people's fundamental right to equality.

Some of the most important aims of the Constitution include rectifying injustices of the past and establishing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights (Van Wyk 2002). The necessity to redress injustices of the past becomes apparent when one considers the social and economic inequalities that still exist in South Africa, especially those generated by apartheid. Any attempts to redress inequalities, however, should be based on upholding the values of human dignity, equality, freedom and social justice in a united, nonracial and nonsexist society in which all may prosper. Unless redress is approached in this way, discrimination and social and economic inequalities will continue to exist, and any

attempts to create a just society in which all people can live together in peace and harmony will be doomed to failure.

When the terms 'affirmative action' or 'black advancement' are used in South Africa, they evoke numerous reactions from various quarters. Fears are expressed such as the lowering of standards, new kinds of discrimination and the general misconception that able whites will have to make way for less able blacks. These, in turn (it is feared), will lead to the dwindling of the bottom line, the loss of work ethic and the ultimate decline of the economy. Although AA is a frightening concept and resembles reverse discrimination for some people, for others, it has positive connotations. The widespread effect of AA has created interest, and as a result many studies have focused on the fairness of affirmative action and its influence on organisational behaviour. In his research, Kravitz (2008) identified four categories of AA plans: elimination of discrimination, opportunity enhancement policies, selection of target group members and, lastly, filling quotas and engaging in preferential activities. The results presented in this article will show that engaging in preferential activities involves distributive justice, which influences employees' perceptions about the fairness of AA the most. Walker, Field, Giles, Bernerth and Jones-Farmer (2006) refer to the soft/weak or hard/strong approaches to AA plans. According to these researchers, non-beneficiaries of AA plans support more general soft approaches but not AA plans that use demographic characteristics in employment decisions. Krings, Tschan and Bettex (2007) support this view and state that preferential treatment is not only unfair but also harmful to the beneficiaries, as their competence is then questioned. Moreover, there are very limited conditions under which preferences are legal (Kravitz 2008).

With reference to the preceding discussion, it is clear that most of the controversies and problems surrounding AA arise not from the principle as such but from the manner in which AA is implemented. When organisations regard AA as a political imperative with which they have to comply, people are appointed in 'AA positions' merely to window-dress or fill quotas, usually without due consideration of their suitability for the position or the possibility of support and development. Such arbitrary appointments leave other employees dissatisfied and are unfair to the appointees themselves, since they are placed either in meaningless positions or cannot handle their tasks, thus confirming the belief that AA appointees are 'no good' (Bendix 2001; Heilman, Block & Lucas 1992).

South African organisations will continually be evaluated in terms of how well they meet employment equity (EE) targets. This will ensure that the changing nature of society is reflected in the composition of an organisation's workforce. As already mentioned, for a programme to be regarded as effective, it needs to comply with

both legal and fairness requirements. Organisations will thus be under increasing pressure to make use of AA programmes that are technically and morally sound (Esterhuizen 2008).

In view of the widespread recognition of the importance of fairness as an issue in organisations, it stands to reason that theories of justice have been applied to the question of understanding behaviour in organisations. For many years, the study of fairness in organisations was dominated by a *distributive justice* orientation, an approach that focused on the fairness of outcomes/decisions. Folger and Cropanzano (1998) defined distributive justice as the perceived fairness of an outcome or decision. According to Leventhal (1976), decisions or outcomes are determined by utilising three major justice rules: the *equity* rule, the *needs* rule and the *equality* rule. The equity rule focuses on contributions; the needs rule is applied for personal welfare reasons; and the equality rule is used to preserve social harmony. From an AA point of view, the equality rule should thus be used to make decisions. As this distributive perspective gained dominance, an independent approach to the study of justice began to develop. Soon studies of reactions to the *procedures* used to reach decisions were conducted. Researchers became interested in expanding the distributive justice orientation to include consideration of the methods, mechanisms and processes used to determine outcomes – that is, adopting a *procedural justice* orientation. Further research focused on people's feelings about unfair treatment and revealed a third dimension of organisational justice – *interactional justice* – people's sensitivity to the quality of interpersonal treatment they receive during the enactment of organisational procedures (Greenberg 1996).

Theorists have taken a variety of approaches in examining attitudes toward AA plans. Kravitz (1995) identified the specific AA plan and employee characteristics (racism, self-interest) as determining factors when forming attitudes. According to Parker, Baltes and Christiansen (1997), attitudes towards AA plans are determined by prejudice attitudes, perceived fairness of AA plans and individuals' self-interest. Research by James, Brief, Dietz and Cohen (2001) focused on the role that prejudice plays in whites' negative reaction to AA plans. Other researchers have adopted Gilliland's model and focused on an organisational justice perspective to explain attitudes toward AA plans (Gilliland 1993).

According to the self-interest expectancy theory, whites respond negatively to AA plans because these plans prevent them from attaining their own career goals (Kravitz 1995; Walker et al. 2007). Research done by Krings et al. (2007) revealed that women and blacks are more favourable towards AA than men or whites, possibly because they are the beneficiaries of AA plans, thus supporting the self-interest theory. Research done by Mangum (2008) investigated black opinions of AA.

According to the results, middle-class, high-income, highly educated and professional blacks are strong supporters of AA. Middle-aged and younger blacks were also found to be more supportive than their white counterparts, thus also supporting the self-interest expectancy theory. Contrary to these findings, Matheson, Warren, Foster and Painter (2000) found that even members of previously disadvantaged groups may regard preferential treatment as unfair because it may be perceived as violating the ideology of individualism. Preferential treatment based on group membership might negatively influence individuals' perceptions about their own credibility.

In South Africa, no other issue has raised as many concerns about justice as AA. For many years, AA has been a battleground for competing values, especially competing concepts of distributive justice. In the USA, after 20 or more years of AA, the government finally admitted that the process had failed. Why? Because AA programmes were not implemented fairly; neither were employees' perceptions of the fairness of the AA programmes managed. In South Africa, a similar situation exists. According to a statement by the president of South Africa published in the *Economist* on 4 March 2010, the policies governing AA have failed. The leadership of most big companies is still in white hands, and South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a huge gulf between rich and poor.

As soon as employees regard something as unfair, they tend to reject it, and any further interventions will be doomed to failure. If South Africa wishes to make a success of AA, organisations should understand how perceptions of AA influence employees' attitudes and behaviour and consequently impact on the success of the organisation. Although significant progress has been made in restructuring and transforming South African society and its institutions, inequalities and unfair discrimination remain deeply embedded in social structures, practices and attitudes, undermining the good intentions of the country's constitutional democracy (Van Wyk 2002). In this regard, Greenberg (2009) reported on studies being done to generate knowledge about justice in organisations, but according to him very little is done to apply justice. One researcher who has proposed specific actions that organisations could take to apply justice principles was Kravitz. As part of his research, he identified strategies for attracting, selecting and retaining employees from previously disadvantaged groups (Kravitz 1995).

With due consideration of these problems, the aim of this study was to determine which actions constitute AA fairness and how the various employee groups (based on ethnicity, gender, staff category and income) differ with regard to perceptions about the fairness of AA. Most of the literature reviewed focused on AA in a non-South African context (for example, Kravitz 1995, 2008; Matheson et al. 2000), hence the need for this study to investigate perceptions about the fairness of AA in South

Africa. A brief overview of the development of affirmative action in South Africa will be provided. The research objectives and methodology will then be discussed, and in the results section, affirmative action fairness and employee perceptions will be analysed.

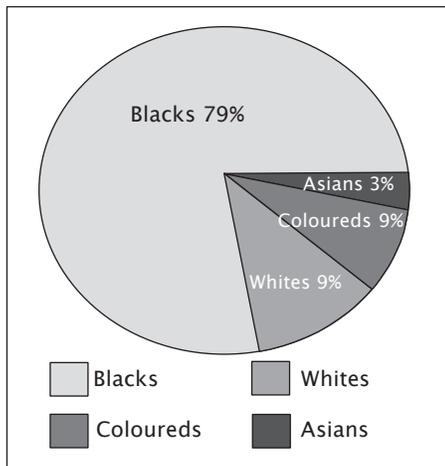
## The development of and justification for affirmative action

In South Africa, AA was a response to identified inadequacies in anti-discrimination legislation. The question of discrimination was originally addressed in the definition of an Unfair Labour Practice and later discussed in greater detail with the promulgation of the Employment Equity Act (Act No. 55 of 1998), which has both an anti-discrimination leg and an AA leg. Chapter 3 of the Employment Equity Act deals with AA. It obliges every designated employer to put measures in place to ensure that suitably qualified persons from designated groups are afforded equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels of the workforce. These measures include the elimination of barriers, the furthering of diversity, making reasonable accommodation for persons from designated groups, training and the establishment of numerical targets, but do not include the establishment of an absolute barrier to the prospective or continued employment of persons who are not from designated groups (Sabbagh 2004). The designated groups include the disabled, women and blacks, with 'blacks' being used as a generic term to include all coloureds, Asians and Africans (Bendix 2001).

Organisations in South Africa are increasingly under legislative pressure to overcome past discrimination in the workplace by providing more employment opportunities for previously disadvantaged group members, such as blacks, women and people with disabilities. Diversifying the workforce is a key organisational goal as governments continue to mandate equity in the workplace to ensure that the workforce is representative of the population.

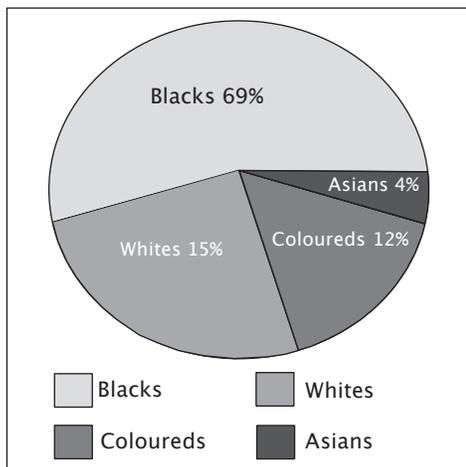
Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the composition of South Africa's population according to ethnicity, while Figure 2 illustrates South Africa's total employment profile according to ethnicity. It is clear from Figure 2 that South African organisations have made significant progress towards employment equity over the past few years. In 2001, blacks occupied 55% of the labour market, and this percentage has since risen to 69%. The employment of blacks needs to increase by a further 10% in order to render the employment of blacks representative of the population. By comparison, the employment of whites has decreased by 10% since 2001.

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Source: Statistics South Africa (2010)

Figure 1: South African population according to ethnicity



Source: Statistics South Africa (2010)

Figure 2: Total employment profile according to ethnicity

Many organisations have adopted AA programmes to achieve a diversified workforce. But what exactly are AA and employment equity? One of the best explanations of AA was given by Nelson Mandela to the ANC conference in October 1991 (Charlton & Van Niekerk 1994: xix):

The primary aims of affirmative action must be to redress the imbalances created by apartheid ... We are not ... asking for hand-outs for anyone. Nor are we saying that just as a white skin was a passport to privilege in the past, so a black skin should be the basis of privilege in the future.

Nor ... is it our aim to do away with qualifications. What we are against is not the upholding of standards as such but the sustaining of barriers to the attainment of standards; the special measures that we envisage to overcome the legacy of past discrimination are not intended to ensure the advancement of unqualified persons, but to see to it that those who have been denied access to qualifications in the past can become qualified now, and that those who have been qualified all along but overlooked because of past discrimination, are at last given their due ... The first point to be made is that affirmative action must be rooted in principles of justice and equity.

## Justification for affirmative action

Justifying AA without reference to justice and equality is impossible. As already mentioned, justice consists of distributive and procedural components. *Distributive justice* refers to the perceived fairness of the outcomes or allocations that an individual receives. In an organisational setting, a job offer or a promotion will resemble the outcome or decision. *Procedural justice* refers to fairness issues concerning the methods, mechanisms and processes used to determine outcomes (Cropanzano 2001). In an organisational context, it refers to the methods or processes used to make a selection decision or to decide who should be promoted. *Equality* refers to the principle of similar treatment irrespective of background or ethnicity. This in itself poses a problem, however, because people are not the same, and treating them as if they are the same actually promotes inequality. True equality will exist only if it is not seen as a removal of social barriers but a process of balancing in which differences in all social, cultural and ethnic contexts are taken into account.

In order to understand why AA can be viewed as fair, it is essential to determine how AA is related to justice and equality. Inevitably, a certain amount of tension will prevail between the anti-discriminatory and AA legs of employment equity. Anti-discrimination measures protect and promote equality by stating clearly that no discrimination may take place with regard to ethnicity, gender and disability, whereas the AA measures allow for unequal treatment that is deemed to be fair discrimination (Van Wyk 2002).

Affirmative action is intended to restore diversity in society and the workplace where previous discrimination practices excluded it – hence its association with social justice and fair balances. In South Africa, AA is described as a ‘tool of justice’ that could rectify past discrimination practices while contributing to the demand for equality. One should accept that even if the discrimination created by AA may not be entirely justifiable, it should in some ways be morally excusable if past discrimination is taken into consideration.

A goal of AA programmes is to put individuals on an equal footing in order to make employment competition fair and just. This can only be achieved if similar

treatment is translated into equal treatment and takes diversity into account. It should be accepted that not all AA programmes can result in absolute fair equality. Individual differences in talents and skills will have an influence. Affirmative action does not claim to bring forth absolute equality. What it does profess is to address the effects of discrimination through remedial policies. The question of how AA can have equality as its goal when in practice it discriminates against white workers is thus largely answered by the preceding explanation of social justice. Although future inequalities may be inevitable, the notion of fairness, reciprocity and justice should be accepted as being part of social reality.

Society has been adamant that inequality should be addressed and the victims of discrimination afforded an opportunity to catch up with the rest of society. But how long will it take previously disadvantaged people to catch up? In order to keep the justification for AA fair, it is believed that the practice should not exist indefinitely. One of the purposes of AA programmes is to provide members of previously disadvantaged groups with opportunities for advancement, even if this entails elements of discrimination. Neither organisations nor a country, however, can afford to engage in social and community upliftment programmes for an indefinite period of time. At some stage, the beneficiaries of AA programmes should be held accountable for their own development and advancement. When this stage is reached, preferential treatment should become something of the past, since everybody will then have been placed on an equal footing.

## Research design

Various methods are available for the collection of primary data depending on the type of data required (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch 1997). This study made use of a survey to collect data on employees' biographical details and their perceptions and attitudes towards AA fairness. The first step in the design of the questionnaire involved the translation of the research objectives into information goals. Thereafter specific questions were formulated to include biographical details and employees' perceptions and attitudes towards AA fairness. Because very limited research had been done on AA in South Africa, a complete new set of questions was developed.

## Population and sampling

The sample consisted of employees from a leading bank in South Africa. To obtain the sample, a letter requesting a list of all permanent employees, categorised according to ethnicity, gender and job category, was sent to the human resource manager at the bank.

A disproportionate, stratified sampling method was used. Stratified sampling involves separating the population into subgroups called ‘strata’ and then randomly drawing a sample from each stratum. In this study, the subgroups were determined according to ethnicity, gender and staff category. With regard to ethnicity, employees from population groups other than white (blacks, coloureds and Asians) were treated as a single component of ethnicity. Regarding staff category, employees from top management, middle management and supervisory level were treated as a single component. Once this process had been completed, a list of employees was drawn from each group. Table 1 provides a representation of the grouping of employees, the population and sample size of each employee group as well as the response and response rate.

**Table 1:** Population, sample and response rate of each group

	Population		Sample	Response	Response rate
<b>ETHNICITY</b>					
Blacks	12 007 (40%)	100%	688	128	18.6%
Whites	17 681 (60%)		1 032	221	21.4%
<b>GENDER</b>					
Men	10 088 (34%)	100%	585	120	20.5%
Women	19 600 (66%)		1 135	229	20.2%
<b>STAFF CATEGORY</b>					
Top management	253	29%	498	168	33.7%
Middle management	5 975				
Supervisory level	2 502				
Clerical staff	20 958	71%	1 222	181	14.8%
		100%			
<b>TOTAL</b>	29 688		1 720	349	20.3%

Regarding the low response rate (10%) of mail questionnaires, various statisticians state that the *representivity* of the population in the response is of greater significance than the general response percentage (Aaker, Kumar & Day 1995; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 1997). This principle is especially important when a stratified sampling method is used. The response is in line with the composition of the sample – hence the response rate of 20.3% in this study is satisfactory.

### Levels of measurement

The purpose of this study was to determine employees’ perceptions on and attitudes towards AA fairness. The study therefore measured employees’ attitudes by means of

a six-point Likert interval scale. The statistics that were used for interval data included the mean (average score for a group), frequencies, standard deviation and Pearson's product moment correlation (a statistic used to measure the degree of association between two interval or ratio variables). T-test statistics (for two groups) and one-way analysis of variance (for more than two groups) were used to measure any statistically significant difference between the means and distributions of samples.

### Statistical methods

A number of statistical techniques such as descriptive, associational and comparative statistics were used to analyse the data. These included univariate and multivariate data analysis, correlations and factor analysis. Issues such as means and standard deviations, as well as the level of statistical significance, were also considered. For this study, a principal factor analysis was performed to determine employees' perceptions of the fairness of affirmative action. Varimax rotation was used to determine the factor matrix, and all factor loadings higher than or equal to 0.40 were considered to be significant. The Cronbach alpha coefficient and inter-item correlation coefficients were used to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was above 80% for all the factors identified, thus indicating that all the items measured the same attribute. Descriptive statistics (for example, means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis) were used to analyse the distribution of the values of each item included in the different factors. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and the results of the reliability analysis. Comparative statistics such as analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine the differences between groups. The associational statistics made use of correlation analysis. The appropriate

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis

Statistics	Interactional justice	Procedural justice: input	Procedural justice: criteria	Distributive justice
Mean	31.5910	26.4689	23.2494	31.3033
Variance	67.4864	64.3630	50.9708	61.1748
Std deviation	8.2150	8.0227	7.1394	7.8214
Skewness	-.198	-.006	-.147	-.194
Kurtosis	-.222	-.717	-.711	.029
No. of participants	349	349	349	349
No. of items	8	7	6	8
Cronbach alpha	.8844	.8642	.8796	.8064

**Table 3:** Rotated factor matrix for AA fairness

	Factor B1	Factor B2	Factor B3	Factor B4
<b>Factor B1: Interactional justice</b>				
Recognising the value of AA employees	0.727			
Recognising the capabilities of AA employees	0.644			
Guiding AA in respect of realistic career expectations	0.590			
Informing employees about EE policy	0.572			
Training supervisors to manage diversity	0.519			
Accommodating AA culture when socialising	0.507			
Having accurate and complete records available	0.491			
Informing about EE implications for careers	0.488			
<b>Factor B2: Procedural justice – input</b>				
Regarding all employees’ careers as equally important		0.681		
Opportunity to appeal		0.677		
Equal chances to influence selection decision		0.614		
Joint decision-making		0.550		
Mechanisms to protect against discrimination		0.520		
Applying rules/procedures strictly and consistently		0.491		
Adjusting systems to integrate AA employees		0.435		
<b>Factor B3: Procedural justice – criteria</b>				
Applying selection criteria consistently			0.742	
Using accurate performance data for evaluation			0.702	
Same performance standards			0.681	
Using predetermined, job-related selection criteria			0.601	
Using more than one performance appraiser			0.503	
Disciplinary action applied strictly and consistently			0.447	
<b>Factor B4: Distributive justice</b>				
Giving black managers token positions				0.682
Training AA employees to replace jobholder				0.668
Unrealistically high salaries for AA managers				0.653
Appointing/promoting less qualified people				0.650
Recruiting AA people through provisions in advertisements				0.504
Using EE plan and workforce profile to appoint				0.481
Focusing on development/advancement of AA				0.464
Using criteria (ethnicity, gender) to appoint				0.434

statistical procedures were selected according to guidelines provided by various authors, and SPSS for Windows Statistical Package, Release 11 and 12.5, was applied for all the statistical procedures.

## Results

In this study, a principal factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed for AA fairness. The purpose was to identify the latent variables underlying AA fairness. Table 3 outlines the rotated factor matrix for affirmative action fairness. Consistent with the findings of previous research on organisational justice (Cropanzano 1993; Folger & Cropanzano 1998; Greenberg 1987; Konovsky 2000; Leck, Saunders & Charbonneau 1996), four factors in respect of fairness were identified.

### Factor B1: Interactional justice

This factor includes issues relating to how employees are treated and what employees regard as important when judging the fairness of AA. The elements of this factor include recognising the value and abilities of employees from designated groups, helping employees from designated groups to build realistic career expectations, keeping employees informed about employment equity issues, training supervisors to manage diversity, having complete and accurate records available about any decisions that were based on employment equity provisions and accommodating diverse cultures. The focus is primarily on how employees are treated and how interpersonal relationships influence employees' perceptions of the fairness of AA.

### Factor B2: Procedural justice – input

This factor refers to the procedures used in implementing AA and the opportunities that employees receive to influence the final outcome of or decision about AA issues. The elements of this factor include the following: regarding all employees' careers as equally important; allowing employees to appeal; affording employees the opportunity to influence a selection decision; making use of joint decision-making; providing mechanisms to protect employees against discrimination; applying rules and procedures strictly and consistently; and adjusting systems to integrate AA employees.

### **Factor B3: Procedural justice – criteria**

This factor also refers to the procedures used to deal with AA issues, but focuses on the criteria or standards used in making a decision. The elements of this factor include applying selection criteria consistently, using accurate performance data when evaluating an employee, applying the same performance standards to all employees, using predetermined, job-related selection criteria, using more than one person to appraise an employee's performance and taking disciplinary action strictly and consistently.

### **Factor B4: Distributive justice**

This factor refers to the actual decision on or outcome of AA. When a decision is based on the following, employees perceive it as unfair: giving black employees token positions, training AA employees to replace current jobholders, paying unrealistically high salaries to AA managers, appointing or promoting less qualified AA employees, recruiting AA employees by means of special provisions in advertisements, making selection decisions on the basis of the employment equity plan and workforce profile, focusing on the development and advancement of AA employees and making selection decisions on the basis of criteria such as ethnicity and gender. Distributive issues refer to preferential treatment and are likely to evoke feelings of resentment and resistance. Research by Krings et al. (2007) highlights the unfairness of these practices and the harm they do to beneficiaries of AA plans.

Table 4 provides an analysis of the relationship between employee demographic characteristics and perceptions of AA fairness. The most important findings include the following:

#### *Gender*

No significant differences exist between men and women in respect of AA fairness perceptions. Research by Matheson et al. (2000) found that women, who are hired because they are women, devalue their own qualifications and competence, show reduced motivation to excel and are less committed to the organisation. Women's perceptions about the fairness of AA thus differ from those of men, but this difference is not significant.

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**Table 4:** T-test: comparison of the mean scores of ethnic, years' service and staff category groupings in respect of AA fairness

Behavioural domain	Ethnic group	N	Mean	Std deviation	Levene's test for equality of variances		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Practical significance d
					F	Sig.				
<b>Ethnicity</b>										
B1. Interactional justice	Black	128	29.950	9.564	15.113	<b>0.000*</b>	-2.870	347	0.004	0.27
	White	221	32.542	7.175			-2.663	210.389	<b>0.008</b>	
B2. Procedural justice (Input)	Black	128	25.345	8.208	0.001	0.971	-2.000	347	<b>0.046</b>	0.21
	White	221	27.120	7.859			-1.977	255.987	0.049	
B3. Procedural justice (Criteria)	Black	128	21.787	7.215	0.031	0.861	-2.945	347	<b>0.003</b>	0.32
	White	221	24.097	6.972			-2.918	257.958	0.004	
B4. Distributive justice	Black	128	<b>27.070</b>	7.094	0.316	0.574	-8.436	347	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.93</b>
	White	221	<b>33.755</b>	7.159			-8.457	267.335	<b>0.000</b>	
<b>Years' service</b>										
B1. Interactional justice	1-7 years	173	31.011	8.824	4.588	<b>0.033*</b>	-1.273	343	0.204	
	8-39 years	172	32.140	7.603			-1.274	336.217	0.204	
B2. Procedural justice (Input)	1-7 years	173	26.360	8.225	0.164	0.686	-0.138	343	0.890	
	8-39 years	172	26.479	7.900			-0.138	342.593	0.890	
B3. Procedural justice (Criteria)	1-7 years	173	22.692	7.232	0.023	0.879	-1.370	343	0.172	
	8-39 years	172	23.746	7.054			-1.370	342.876	0.172	
B4. Distributive justice	1-7 years	173	<b>29.599</b>	7.932	0.005	0.945	-4.167	343	<b>0.000</b>	0.43
	8-39 years	172	<b>33.041</b>	7.398			-4.168	341.607	0.000	
<b>Staff category</b>										
B1. Interactional justice	Management	168	<b>32.541</b>	7.495	4.061	<b>0.045*</b>	2.092	347	0.037	0.21
	Clerical	181	<b>30.709</b>	8.759			2.104	344.761	<b>0.036</b>	
B2. Procedural justice (Input)	Management	168	26.914	7.585	1.226	0.269	0.998	347	0.319	
	Clerical	181	26.056	8.408			1.002	346.723	0.317	
B3. Procedural justice (Criteria)	Management	168	<b>24.173</b>	6.945	0.038	0.846	2.344	347	<b>0.020</b>	0.25
	Clerical	181	<b>22.392</b>	7.229			2.347	346.583	0.019	
B4. Distributive justice	Management	168	<b>33.442</b>	7.490	0.321	0.571	5.094	347	<b>0.000</b>	0.54
	Clerical	181	<b>29.319</b>	7.615			5.097	345.826	0.000	

### *Ethnicity*

There are statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ) between blacks' and whites' perceptions of *organisational justice*. The differences between blacks and whites are of practical significance only with regard to *distributive justice* ( $d = 0.93$ ). With regard to distributive justice, the mean scores indicate that the actual decisions taken on AA issues strongly influence whites' perceptions (33.755) about the fairness of AA. Blacks (27.069) are less concerned about most of the decisions taken on AA when forming a perception of the fairness of AA. A possible explanation could be that most AA decisions favour blacks, and they are therefore unlikely to question the fairness of a decision. This finding supports the results of other researchers on the self-interest expectancy theory (Kravitz 1995; Walker et al. 2007; Krings et al. 2007; Mangum 2008).

### *Marital status*

Married and single employees differ significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) with regard to *distributive justice* ( $p = 0.003$ ). This difference, however, is not of practical significance since the practical significance value is less than 0.50. According to the mean scores, married employees (32.251) regard distributive justice issues as vital to the fairness of AA.

### *Years' service at the bank*

Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) exist between employees with seven or more years of service and employees with less than seven years' service. However, the practical significance of this difference is small ( $d < 0.50$ ), and one can therefore conclude that the number of years' service has only a minor effect on the perceptions of the fairness of AA. According to the mean scores, although these are not conclusive, employees with more than seven years of service (33.041) seem to regard distributive justice issues as critical to the fairness of AA. Since there is a significant association ( $\eta = 0.498$ ) between years of service at the bank and ethnicity, it is possible that ethnicity rather than the number of years' service determines perceptions of AA fairness.

### *Staff category*

There are significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between management and clerical staff in respect of *distributive justice* ( $p = 0.000$ ). AA decisions such as giving AA employees token positions, paying unrealistically high salaries to AA managers, appointing less qualified AA employees, focusing on the development and advancement of AA employees, and making selection decisions based on criteria such as ethnicity and gender play a prominent role in forming perceptions about the fairness of AA.

According to the mean scores, management views distributive justice (33.442) and the criteria used when dealing with AA issues (24.173) as vital considerations in forming perceptions about the fairness of AA.

### *Income levels*

There is a significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) in the mean scores relating to *distributive justice* between employees earning R5 000 or less per month and employees earning R15 001 and more per month. The mean scores of employees earning low salaries (29.607) indicate that distributive justice strongly influences their perceptions of the fairness of AA. They are therefore most concerned about decisions affecting their financial position. Decisions on appointments, promotions, career advancement and training thus have a direct influence on their perceptions of the fairness of AA.

In her research, Tate (1993) investigated black opinions of AA and found no relationship between social class, age, education, income, gender and support for AA. She did, however, find a strong relationship between ethnicity and support for AA. That finding supports the findings of this research that significant differences exist with regard to ethnicity and that other biographical characteristics such as age, marital status, staff category, income levels and job tenure do not significantly influence employees' perceptions about the fairness of AA.

## Summary

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the major components (factors) of AA fairness from an organisational justice point of view. The factor analysis extracted four factors related to AA fairness, namely *interactional justice*, *procedural justice (input)*, *procedural justice (criteria)* and *distributive justice*.

In an attempt to determine which biographical factors influence employees' perceptions of the fairness of AA, the various employee groups (for example ethnicity, gender, staff category, and age) were compared.

In order to meet the research objectives, a literature study and an empirical study were conducted. The literature study focused on fairness principles and outlined AA practices that influence employees' perceptions of fairness.

On completion of the literature study, a measuring instrument, namely a questionnaire, was developed. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information on respondents' biographical details and their perceptions of and attitudes towards AA fairness.

By means of a disproportionate, stratified sampling method, a list of all permanent employees, categorised according to ethnicity, gender and staff category, was obtained from the case bank.

Consistent with the findings of previous research on organisational justice, the factor analysis identified the following four justice factors: interactional justice; procedural justice (input); procedural justice (criteria) and distributive justice.

In order to determine which biographical factors influence employees' perceptions of the fairness of AA, the means of the various employee groups were compared. The biographical factors that played a key role included the following:

### Ethnicity

There are statistically significant differences between blacks and whites with regard to perceptions of distributive justice. Actual decisions taken play a vital role in whites' formation of perceptions of the fairness of AA.

### Marital status

Married and single employees differ significantly with respect to perceptions about distributive justice. Married employees are much more concerned about the fairness of decisions taken. This could be due to the fact that married employees have dependants, and any AA decision will have a much greater influence on their lives than on single employees.

### Number of years' service at the bank

There are significant differences between employees with seven or more years of service and employees with less than seven years of service. Employees with seven or more years of service seem to be extremely concerned about distributive justice issues when forming perceptions of the fairness of AA. A possible explanation is that those employees with more than seven years of service are mostly white, and when blacks receive preferential treatment in promotions, ethnicity rather than the number of years' service plays a role in forming a perception about the fairness of AA.

### Staff category

There are significant differences between management and clerical staff in respect of *distributive justice*. As far as the practical significance of differences between

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management and clerical staff are concerned, it is only in respect of *distributive justice* that the difference is of any practical importance. AA decisions such as giving AA employees token positions, paying unrealistically high salaries to AA managers, appointing less qualified AA employees, focusing on the development and advancement of AA employees, and making selection decisions based on criteria such as ethnicity and gender play a big role in forming perceptions about the fairness of AA. Management views distributive justice as integral to forming perceptions of the fairness of AA.

### Salary

Respondents were categorised according to three categories of salary level, namely R5 000 or less, R5 001 to R15 000, and more than R15 000. There is a significant difference relating to *distributive justice* between employees earning R5 000 or less per month and those earning R15 001 and more per month. Distributive justice is crucial to employees earning low salaries because it has a direct bearing on their financial position. Decisions about appointments, promotions, career advancement and training thus play a major role when employees form perceptions of the fairness of AA.

The MANOVAs and associated ANOVAs indicated that only ethnicity, age and job category had a significant effect on the differences between the groups' perceptions of the fairness of AA.

### Limitations and suggestions for future research

Overall, the results suggest that the measures of distributive, procedural and interactional justice are sufficiently reliable and valid to capture the perceived fairness of AA programmes. However, elements that influence overall perceptions of fairness may depend on various factors such as the type of organisation, leadership style, self-interest, prejudices and organisational culture. This supports Greenberg's (1987) concerns about the context sensitivity of justice perceptions. Researchers should thus endeavour to select measures that incorporate elements that are relevant to specific contexts, and support the need for caution in generalising the results of AA fairness research across organisational contexts. Not limiting the sample to a single organisation could solve some of the problems related to the context sensitivity of perceptions of AA fairness.

## Managerial implications and recommendations

Ethnicity plays a primary role in the differences between the various employee groups regarding perceptions of AA fairness. Whites base their perceptions of the fairness of AA on *distributive justice* issues. Preferential treatment, one of the categories of AA plans identified by Kravitz (1995), should thus be avoided as far as possible. This means that the following human resource practices should be *avoided*:

- Allocating token positions to black managers
- Training AA employees to replace existing employees
- Paying unrealistically high salaries to AA managers
- Appointing or promoting less qualified AA people.

Since management is compelled to meet employment equity targets, it is almost impossible to avoid such practices. Although management might be aware of the issues that create negative perceptions, managers face conditions that constrain their ability to put the views of employees first. Management does have a role, however, in implementing these practices in a procedurally and interactionally fair manner. As Kravitz (2008) suggests, AA plans should rather emphasise the elimination of discrimination and provide opportunities for enhancement as opposed to treating people in a preferential manner.

Unless AA is rooted in principles of justice and equity, it will be doomed to failure, with negative consequences for the country. This research has identified issues related to AA that might give rise to feelings of resentment and perceptions of injustice. By bearing justice principles in mind, management could implement AA in a fair and just manner.

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