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Some Effects of Solo Status for African Americans in Organizational Settings

Kellina Craig

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“Despite the fact that in the last 30 years the number of African Americans who occupy senior positions in organization has increased substantially, these employees typically find themselves in ‘solo’ proportions relative to Whites.”

Despite the fact that in the last 30 years the number of African Americans who occupy senior positions in organizations has increased substantially, these employees typically find themselves in solo proportions relative to Whites (Ledvinka and Scarpello, 1991; Morland, 1965). A "solo" is a group member who is perceptually distinctive because a salient characteristic (e.g., race, sex, or age) they possess is proportionally rare. Race and sex are two of the most salient categories of distinction, and as such carry "a host of assumptions about culture, status, and behavior highly salient for majority members" (Kanter, 1977; p. 968). Solos who are distinctive because of their race or sex, may be susceptible to uniquely negative effects.

To date, researchers have used the term "token" interchangeably with the term "solo," implying equivalence. For present purposes such a distinction is drawn, and whereas usage of the term token connotes information about the criteria involved in the selection of a solo, usage of the term solo conveys nothing about the means by which the solo came to acquire a position. Hence, a token is a solo who is assumed to have been preferentially selected. According to this type of distinction, all tokens are solos, but not all solos are necessarily tokens.

Solos are highly visible and are often negatively stereotyped (Crocker and McGraw, 1984). Previous field and laboratory research has shown that solos attract a disproportionate amount of attention and are either evaluated negatively or irrespective of their merit on the basis of their solo status (Cohen and Swim, 1995; Craig and Sherif, 1986; Crocker and McGraw, 1984; Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, and Camay, 1981; McGuire and McGuire, 1981; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, and Ruderman, 1978; Yoder, 1994). According to Kanter (1977), the dynamics of solo arrangements engender perceptual distortions that result in heightened visibility of the solo, among other things.

The salience of the solo results in enhanced attention from observers, and may influence attributions about causality (Taylor and Fiske, 1978). Within an organizational setting, this may trigger ruminations by majority group members about how the solo came to acquire his or her position (Kanter, 1977). The present is based in part upon the notion that observers may frequently attribute the presence of African Americans in organizational settings to race-based selection policies such as affirmative action.

Selection procedures that take the race or sex of an applicant into account are highly

controversial (Johnson, 1990; Nacoste, 1994; Peller, 1992; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo; 1988; Sowell, 1989; Steele, 1990). Factors such as race and sex are believed by many to contribute more than merit to the selection of women and minorities in organizational settings (Bobo and Dlugel, 1993; Kluegel, 1985; Dravitz and Platania, 1992; Crosby and Blanchard, 1989; Turner and Partkanis, 1993). Even in the absence of any reference to affirmative action policies, people may assume that the presence of minorities and women is a result of such policies (Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, and Casmay, 1981) and tend to discount the employee's abilities (Heilman, Block, and Lucas, 1992); (Jacobson and Koch, 1977).

Many Whites appear to be opposed to race-based selection policies because they believe that discrimination is rare, and that members of minority groups have made substantial progress within the last 10 to 20 years (Kluegel, 1985; Feagin and Porter, 1995). Because some Whites believe affirmative action to be a widespread policy (Barnes-Nacoste, 1990; Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Dravitz and Platania, 1992), they may be likely to attribute the presence of members of minority groups in senior (e.g., high power and high prestige) positions to such policies. Correspondingly, they may assume that these persons are less qualified for these positions than their nonminority counterparts. This is especially likely when the relative proportion of minority members in the group is very low, as is the case with solos (Kanter, 1977).

In a series of laboratory studies, African American and White participants judged the likelihood that African American, White, male, and female solos in work groups were selected for membership in a work group on the basis of either affirmative action or ability. Following this, they were asked to imagine themselves as managers of the group and to assign tasks to each of the employees. Judgments of the overall work groups were also obtained. As expected, the extent to which observers attributed the presence of the solo to affirmative action and assigned tasks depended upon the sex and race of the solo and, more importantly, the sex and race of the majority of group members. Overall results indicate that solos' status resulted in greater attributions to affirmative action when the solo was an African American, and in particular when the solo was an African American male. These and other results indicate that solo status has different consequences for male and female, African American, and White work group members. Findings are discussed in terms of the especially debilitating effects of solo status for African Americans.

PRESENTER

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