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Applying the Strength Perspective to Bolster Affirmative Action

Nocona L. Pewewardy
University of Kansas

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The purpose of this presentation is to examine affirmative action as an effort at reparation for the past exclusion and oppression of women and men from racially diverse groups and to rethink affirmative action using the strengths perspective.

Few subjects are as hotly contested or poorly understood as affirmative action in the contemporary United States. To a large segment of the public, affirmative action is associated almost exclusively with its most controversial forms (i.e., race- and gender-based quotas and set asides), which many regard as instruments of preferential treatment (Equal Employment Advisory Council, 1997, p.2). In contrast, others see affirmative action as an attempt to "increase the representation and advancement of qualified minorities and women in the workplace to compensate for past discrimination" (Marlow and Rowland, 1989, p.544). Affirmative action is a tool used in the public and private sectors to move us away from a world of lingering biases and poisons of prejudice, toward one in which opportunity is equal (Affirmative Action Review Report to the President, 1997). Affirmative action is consistent with merit-based approaches to achievement and promotes equal opportunity without committing reverse discrimination as evidenced by the Supreme Court Ruling in *Johnson v. Transportation Agency* (1987).

Slavery, genocide, lynching, beatings, intimidation and shame lie at the core of our Nation's development and whether we are engaged in these crimes on a personal level or not, privileged White Americans have inherited the consequent power structure.

This presentation is an attempt to elucidate the institutional power structure that perpetuates the ongoing employment inequity that exists in the United States. Institutional racism and sexism lie at the core of the affirmative action debate, but many of its opponents ignore these tenants and skew the dialogue using words like preferential treatment, quotas and reverse discrimination, while ignoring the inverse relationships between prejudice and discrimination and opportunity and equity.

The strengths perspective rest upon a core of ideas and themes including empowerment, membership, regeneration, synergy, dialogue and suspension of belief (Saleeby, 1992, p.8). Social policy that reflects a strengths approach takes into account that many of the barriers people labeled as being "disadvantaged groups" face in meeting basic needs for food, shelter and positive community participation tend to come from educational,

political and economic exclusion based on demographic rather than individual characteristics (Rappaport et al., cited in Chapin, 1995, p. 510)

The National Association of Social Workers supports five principles for upholding its ethical code to act to prevent and eliminate discrimination:

1. Full endorsement of local, state and federal policies and programs that give all people equal access to resources, services and opportunities that they require.
2. Joining with others to denounce attempts to end affirmative action.
3. A firm commitment to protect the gains realized by affirmative action.
4. Changes in affirmative action that will strengthen practice and policy aimed at ending discrimination and its impact.
5. Working with others to develop more effective and cogent policies and strategies to guide society and communities to that end. (Beebe, 1997, p.14)

This presentation will focus on the application of strengths perspective to these principles as a way to bolster affirmative action.

PRESENTER

Nocona L. Pewewardy is a Ph.D. student at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare where she works as a research assistant in the Office of Social Policy Analysis. She earned a bachelors and masters of social work at the University of Oklahoma.

Prior to continuing her education at Kansas University, Nocona worked for the Department of the Air Force 97th Medical Group Family Advocacy Office as the Family Advocacy Outreach Manager focusing on the primary and secondary prevention of domestic violence and child maltreatment with active duty Air Force personnel.

Nocona taught Introduction to Sociology at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, in the Fall 1994 and the Spring 1995. She currently teaches a research seminar to undergraduate social work students at the University of Kansas. She has presented workshops on social welfare topics ranging from child abuse prevention to the benefits of culturally competent case management.