It's All in the Presentation: The Influence of Framing on Attitudes toward Diversity Initiatives

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While there is considerable scholarly attention devoted to the unique experiences of student-athletes, relatively little research focuses on African American female student-athletes (AAFSA; Bruening, 2005). As these women hold multiple minority group statuses (i.e., athlete, woman, racial minority), they face several unique challenges, especially at predominately White institutions (PWI). For instance, these women may not have access to adequate support systems on campus or mentors who understand the experiences they encounter. Consequently, the student-athlete is left feeling isolated, and has no one to talk openly and honestly with about her experiences (Carter & Hart, 2010). One way to remedy this problem is to offer social support networks for these student-athletes (Carter & Hart, 2010).

The positive outcomes associated with creating social support networks for these students could be invaluable to both the athletes and their institutions. Specifically, research suggests that involvement in social support networks can increase one’s college satisfaction, psychological well-being, and enhance career development (Allen et al., 1991). Unfortunately, many minority student-athletes are not able to benefit from these programs. Unlike African American students from the general student population, minority student-athletes may not have the time to join African American student organizational groups, and in turn, might fail to reap the benefits of joining support structures that are specific to their needs. In addition, some majority group members within athletic departments may not see the advantages of offering such programs, and consequently devote their attention elsewhere. It could also be possible that athletic departments fear backlash from non-minority student-athletes who view these programs as exclusive. Harrison et al. (2006) demonstrated many of these same effects in their meta-analysis of organizational members’ reactions to diversity initiatives. For these reasons, it is imperative that greater attention is devoted to how athletic administrators should implement programs that provide support for AAFSA at predominately White institutions.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore students’ perceptions of programs geared toward helping AAFSA on predominantly White campuses. Specifically, we draw from framing literature (Holladay & Quinones, 2005) and distributive justice theories (Cohen, 1987) to assess reactions towards athletic departments offering a program specifically for AAFSAs. Framing literature contends a frame is “a psychological devise that offers a perspective that manipulates salience in order to influence subsequent judgment” (Rhoads, 1997). In the context of diversity initiatives, if the program is framed as a beneficial plan that helps an entire organization, it is generally viewed more favorably (Holladay & Quinones, 2005). Therefore, we predict that people will react more positively to the program when they know the benefits of the program, and believe the program benefits the athletic department as whole (Hypothesis 1). Also, in line with distributive justice theories, if individuals perceive distributions to be inequitable, they will typically respond with negative emotions or attitudes. These negative attitudes motivate the individual to resist, or reject completely, the method of distribution (Adams, 1965). Thus, we predict people will view the program more favorably when there are programs for all students, not just minority athletes (Hypothesis 2). Of course, certain factors can influence one’s attitudes toward diversity programs, and we examine two in the current study: the participants’ social dominance orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and their openness to experience (OTE; McCrae, 1994). Research suggests that both of these psychosocial dimensions are associated with whether one accepts or rejects a diversity initiative (Cokley et al., 2010). Consequently, we expect that those high in SDO will view these programs less favorably than those with a low SDO (Hypothesis 3), and participants who rate high on the OTE personality scale will view the program more favorably than those who rate low (Hypothesis 4).

Approximately 250 students from a large, public university in the Southwest will be surveyed for this study. We will conduct a 2 (benefits: unknown, known) × 2 (program beneficiaries: AAFSA, all students, including AAFSA) experiment in this study. Consistent with previous research in diversity framing (Holladay & Quinones, 2005), participants will read one of four descriptions regarding the program. Benefits will be manipulated by either disclosing the benefits of the programs (e.g., providing a safe space, psychological benefits of the program, enhanced well-being) or not divulging that information. On the other hand, program beneficiaries will be manipulated by only listing the programs geared toward AAFSA individuals or by including said programs but also listing others, such as career development, resume writing, It Takes a Team, Athletes for Christ, and so on. Once participants read the description, they will respond to various questionnaire items that assess their attitudes toward the program, perceived fairness of the program, SDO, OTE, and demographic variables. We will also include items at the end of the questionnaire to assess the efficacy of the manipulations.

Moderated regression will be performed to test all hypotheses. We will enter two control variables (sex of the participant and academic status) into the model, and test for interactions with the independent variables of interest.
race of the participant) in the first step. After entering the controls, we will enter the first order effects (i.e., the two conditions, the standardized SDO score, and the standardized OTE score) in the second step. The four relevant two-way interactions (i.e., SDO × benefits condition, SDO × program beneficiary condition, OTE × benefits condition, and OTE× program beneficiary condition) will be entered in the third step.

Results from this study can potentially inform practice in a number of ways. First, framing literature has primarily focused on diversity training, and not the implementation phase of diversity initiatives. This study can potentially fill this gap in the literature. Second, diversity scholars devote much (warranted) attention to describing the advantages of diversity-related programs in an organization, yet little focus concerns how these programs should be implemented. By examining different ways to frame diversity initiatives, we expect our study will fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, the findings should help athletic administrators implement a successful program that benefits their minority student-athletes.