Support for employment equity policies: A self-enhancement approach

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The effectiveness of employment equity (EE) policies has been hindered by negative reactions to these policies. We draw on the self-enhancement literature to expand self-interest accounts of reactions to EE policies to explain inconsistent findings showing that both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries react negatively to EE policies. Across four studies, we found that self-image threat influences reactions to gender-based EE policies. Studies 1 and 2 established that EE policies threaten the self-images of both men (nonbeneficiaries) and women (beneficiaries). Study 3 found that those least likely to experience self-image threat when faced with a gender-based EE policy are the most likely to show positive reactions to EE policies, while Study 4 showed that both men and women react more favorably to EE policies when self-images threats are mitigated through a self-affirmation task. Implications for our understanding of reactions to EE policies are discussed.

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Introduction

At the dawn of the 21st century, women and racial minorities continue to face barriers in the workplace that hinder their career advancement. Women hold only 16.1% of board seats and 7.5% of top earning positions in companies, while women and minority men hold only 28.74% of board seats at Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2011). To address these inequalities, employment equity (EE) policies, which aim to reduce discrimination and increase the hiring of disadvantaged groups, have been implemented in many countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India, Malaysia, South Africa, and the United States (Sowell, 2004). Despite the positive and socially beneficial goals of EE policies, considerable research documents that employees react negatively to EE policies (see Harrison et al., 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993), for a meta-analysis). This presents a problem for organizations and governments that mandate these policies, as without the support of employees, such policies tend to be ineffective (Hitt & Keats, 1984; Nacoste & Hummels, 1994).

To account for how individuals react to EE policies, past research has frequently invoked self-interest as one prominent factor influencing employees’ reactions (Harrison et al., 2006; Kluegel & Smith, 1983; Lehman & Crano, 2002). According to the self-interest argument, nonbeneficiaries, people who do not stand to benefit from the policies (e.g., men and Whites), react negatively to EE policies because EE policies go against their self-interest by hurting their employment and career prospects. By contrast, beneficiaries, people who do stand to benefit (e.g., women and racial minorities) should react positively to EE policies because such policies increase beneficiaries’ employment and career prospects, which is in line with their self-interest. Yet, many studies have shown that beneficiaries do not have uniformly positive reactions to EE policies. Some studies find that beneficiaries react positively to EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993), while others find that beneficiaries react negatively to EE policies (e.g., Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Matheson, Echenberg, Taylor, & Rivers, 1994). Thus, while a self-interest argument may partially explain reactions to EE policies it seemingly cannot in and of itself explain both nonbeneficiaries’ and beneficiaries’ reactions to EE policies.

Although these findings may be taken to indicate that a self-interest framework for reactions to EE policies is invalid (at least for beneficiaries), we argue instead that a more nuanced view of self-interest is required to account for why beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries alike hold negative views of EE policies. In particular, past work has primarily defined self-interest in material terms, meaning that EE policies have tangible material consequences such as providing (for beneficiaries) or limiting (for nonbeneficiaries) employment opportunities. However, self-interest involves considering both what is best for one’s material self-interest as well as one’s psychological self-interest (Miller, 1999; Ratner & Miller,
Building on this notion, we suggest that reactions to EE policies may also be driven by the fundamental human desire for self-enhancement (Ferris, Lian, Brown, Pang, & Keeping, 2010; Pfpeffer & Fong, 2005; Sedikides, 1993). In particular, reactions to EE policies may be negative because such policies invoke a self-image threat, or a threat to the overall worth and integrity of the self (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sedikides, 1993). For beneficiaries, EE policies uniformly imply that their success is a result of biased systems, which threatens their self-image of being competent and skilled individuals. For beneficiaries, the nature of the self-image threat differs: EE policies introduce the possibility of failing to secure a job despite the provision of explicit advantages in hiring, which similarly threatens their self-image of being competent and skilled. As a result, both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries may react negatively to EE policies as a means of maintaining positive self-images – which ultimately serves their psychological self-interest and desire for positive self-regard.

We provide converging evidence that self-image threat plays a role in negative reactions to EE policies across four studies using gender-based EE policies. First, Studies 1 and 2 establish that EE policies threaten the self-images of both men (nonbeneficiaries) and women (beneficiaries), and that the nature of the self-image threat differs for men and women. Then, Studies 3 and 4 use a moderation-of-process design (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005) to provide more direct evidence that self-image threats underlie negative reactions to EE policies. Moderation-of-process designs employ moderators of the underlying psychological process (self-image threat) and observe whether the effects seen on dependent variables differ as a function of the moderator. In our studies, variables that mitigate the self-image threat EE policies represent should therefore mitigate negative reactions to EE policies. In particular, Study 3 examines a moderator that uniquely alleviates self-image threat for beneficiaries (interviewing self-efficacy) while Study 4 experimentally mitigates the self-image threat to both men and women through use of a self-affirmation paradigm. In using this variety of methods, our set of studies provides compelling triangulation regarding the presence of self-image threat processes underlying reactions to EE policies.

Our paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, at a theoretical level, we expand the perspective of what should be considered in one’s self-interest when applying a self-interest framework to reactions to EE policies. We do so by applying a self-enhancement perspective to elucidate psychological self-interest as an additional concern above and beyond material self-interest. Second, in applying this theoretical insight we provide a lens with which to understand the paradox of why both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries of EE policies demonstrate negative reactions to EE policies. Our work also reconciles inconsistent findings regarding beneficiaries’ positive or negative reactions to EE policies by identifying an important moderator of how beneficiaries react to EE policies. Third, at an empirical level our paper provides converging evidence for the role of self-image threat across multiple studies and methodologies. Finally, our findings point to applied interventions governments and organizations can implement as a way to mitigate negative reactions to EE policies.

Past research on reactions to EE policies

EE policies have become important tools for reducing discrimination against and increasing employment opportunities for women, racial minorities, and other disadvantaged groups worldwide (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Tougas & Beaton, 1993). For example, in Canada groups protected under EE policies are women, racial minorities, aboriginal people, and individuals with disabilities (Jain, Sloane, Horwitz, Taggar, & Weiner, 2003), and in the United States protected groups are women, racial minorities, individuals with disabilities, Vietnam era veterans, and special disabled veterans (Spann, 2000). The basic premise of EE policies is that beneficiaries of the policies have prospered less in the past, in part owing to systemic advantages and privileges provided to nonbeneficiaries of the policies. EE policies are meant to address these inequalities by giving beneficiaries an advantage in employment systems. Supporting their effectiveness, EE policies have been shown to increase diversity in the workplace, with past research finding that relative to other policies and initiatives designed to promote diversity (e.g., diversity training), EE policies lead to increases in managerial diversity (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Yet, the effectiveness of EE policies and their full potential has been seriously undermined by negative reactions from both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries of EE policies (Hitt & Keats, 1984; Nacoste & Hummels, 1994).

Meta-analytic research suggests two broad categories of causes of negative reactions to EE policies: policy type and perceiver characteristics (Harrison et al., 2006). Policy type refers to the degree to which EE policies consider applicants’ disadvantaged group status, ranging from policies that use group status to decide between two equally qualified candidates (i.e., a weak preference policy), to policies that give preference to disadvantaged groups with less regard to qualifications (i.e., a strong preference policy; Harrison et al., 2006). Past research suggests that reactions become increasingly negative as EE policies assign greater consideration to disadvantaged group status with little regard to candidate qualifications (Harrison et al., 2006; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995a). However, such strong preference policies are illegal in most countries (Pyburn, Ployhart, & Kravitz, 2008), which has led researchers to call for more research on reactions to legal, weak preference policies (Harrison et al., 2006). Consistent with this perspective, our studies employ legal weak preference EE policies.

The second category of causes of negative reactions, perceiver characteristics (e.g., race and gender), uses perceiver characteristics to indicate the extent to which the perceiver will benefit from or be harmed by the EE policy. This category typically reflects research conducted using a material self-interest framework for understanding negative reactions to EE policies (Harrison et al., 2006; Tougas & Beaton, 1993). Namely, those individuals who by virtue of their gender or race do not materially benefit from these policies (i.e., nonbeneficiaries) typically have negative reactions to EE policies because these policies harm their employment and career prospects. In line with these predictions, past research has found that men and Whites have negative reactions to EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006; Hideg, Michela, & Ferris, 2011).

By contrast, individuals who materially benefit from these policies (i.e., beneficiaries) should have positive reactions to EE policies because these policies advance their self-interest by increasing employment opportunities and enhancing career prospects. In line with these predictions, studies have found some evidence that women and racial minorities hold favorable attitudes towards EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993). However, inconsistent findings have also emerged. In the context of gender-based EE policies, Kidder et al. (2004) found that women reacted just as negatively to EE policies as men; Fletcher and Chalmers (1991) reported equally unfavorable attitudes toward EE policies among women and men; and Matheson et al. (1994) found that women opposed EE policies even when they were told that women are discriminated against in hiring. Similarly, in the context of race-based EE policies Kravitz and Klineberg (2000) found no differences between Hispanics’ and Whites’ attitudes toward weak preference EE policies; and Konrad and Linnehan (1995b) found that both racial minorities and Whites had low organizational commitment towards organizations that had the highest percentage of race-based EE policies. These findings suggest that despite the fact that EE policies are inherently advancing the material self-interest of beneficiaries, beneficiaries can still react negatively to EE policies.
Self-enhancement and reactions to EE policies

The negative reactions of beneficiaries to EE policies present a problem for the self-interest framework – as it is typically construed. In particular, the self-interest perspective typically uses perceiver characteristics of race or gender as a proxy for whether one's self-interests will be advanced, arguing that if the policy aims to increase (decrease) one's employment opportunities, the policy works for (against) one's self-interest. We argue that to fully understand whether or not EE policies serve one's self-interests requires going beyond considering the effects such policies have on material self-interest (e.g., employment opportunities). Rather, one must consider the effects such policies have on one's psychological self-interest as well: particularly, self-enhancement or the desire to view oneself in the most positive light possible (Chen et al., 2013; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). We suggest that by evoking a threat to self-images, EE policies can represent a threat to the psychological self-interests of beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries alike. The presence of such self-image threats can result in the counterintuitive findings that beneficiaries sometimes react negatively to EE policies.

Self-image threat refers to situations in which the overall worth and integrity of an individual is devalued or diminished (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Ferris, Brown, & Heller, 2009; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998). EE policies can represent a threat to the self-image of nonbeneficiaries of EE policies by suggesting that their accomplishments are due to external factors. In particular, one of the goals of EE policies is to redress past discrimination and the unequal distribution of resources that typically has favored men and Whites. Thus, inherent in EE policies is the implication that a nonbeneficiaries’ success is in part due not to any characteristics inherent to the individual, but rather due to belonging to a privileged group. As such, nonbeneficiaries may feel that their self-image is threatened by the implication that their past success was facilitated by an unearned privilege rather than by their personal characteristics such as effort and ability (Kelley, 1973; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). EE policies thus may invoke external attributions for nonbeneficiaries’ successes and threaten their sense of competence (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Given that individuals are highly motivated to defend their positive self-images when threatened (Fein & Spencer, 1997), we suggest that nonbeneficiaries have negative reactions to EE policies as a way of preserving their positive self-image against the threat EE policies imply. In particular, holding negative attitudes towards EE policies and refusing to support them serves to decrease the success of EE policies (Hitt & Keats, 1984). Thus, by derogating EE policies and the premise underlying such policies, the threat to one's self-image is minimized.

On the other hand, EE policies suggest that beneficiaries prospered less in the past not because of internal attributes such as a lack of competence, but rather because of external factors such as systematic biases favoring men and Whites in the employment systems. Thus, in contrast to the negative implications that EE policies hold for nonbeneficiaries, EE policies imply that beneficiaries’ lack of success may be due to external, not internal factors. While this doubtlessly holds true, at the same time EE policies can pose a considerable threat to self-image of beneficiaries should they nonetheless fail to gain employment. If beneficiaries of EE policies fail to obtain employment, despite the presence of EE policies providing them with an edge, then the beneficiaries must deal with the fact that not only have they failed to gain employment, but they failed when given an advantage over others. Such failure would therefore need to be attributed (by themselves and others) to the beneficiaries’ internal attributes such as a lack of competence and ability. As such, beneficiaries may react negatively to EE policies, especially if they have concerns over their own abilities to successfully gain employment.

At first blush, suggesting that EE policies threaten the self-images of beneficiaries may seem similar to the proposition that EE policies can cause concern among beneficiaries over being stigmatized. In particular, past work by Heilman and colleagues notes that women may feel threatened by EE policies because they would label beneficiaries as incompetent and unable to succeed without the support of EE policies. For example, Heilman and colleagues have found that others rated women as less competent if they were hired under EE policies (e.g., Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Block, & Statathatos, 1997) and that women rated themselves as less competent if they believed that they were selected for a role based solely on their gender (Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987). Similarly, Turner, Pratkanis, and Hardaway (1991) and Turner and Pratkanis (1993) found that women had lower self-evaluations of ability when were told that were picked for a role based on gender only compared to merit.

However, the perspective we advance differs from a stigma perspective both methodologically and theoretically. Methodologically, an important caveat to this past research is that it has primarily found that such perceptions of stigma are limited to the use of strong preference policies (which are now illegal in the USA and Canada). In particular, when women are picked for a position solely based on gender without any consideration for merit, concerns over stigma are prevalent; however, when (legal) weak preference policies are used, concerns over stigma are mitigated or non-existent (Evans, 2003; Heilman, Battle, Keller, & Lee, 1998; Unzueta, Gutiérrez, & Ghavami, 2010). Thus, concerns over stigma should be less of an issue with legal weak preference policy. In our studies, we consequently only examine legal weak preference policies.

Methodological concerns over policy type aside, the perspective we advance also differs from a stigma perspective in at least three theoretical respects. First, a stigma perspective only addresses the negative reactions beneficiaries have towards EE policies; our self-image threat perspective is broader in that it suggests self-image threat can influence the reactions of not only beneficiaries, but also nonbeneficiaries, towards EE policies. Second, we suggest that self-images can be threatened for reasons other than concern with stigma. Preliminary evidence supports this, in that beneficiaries also react negatively to weak preference policies (Matheson et al., 1994); given weak preference policies do not invoke stigma concerns, this suggests that there is more to beneficiaries’ reactions to EE policies than purely stigma concerns. Finally, the rationale surrounding the nature of the self-threat for beneficiaries that we advance is qualitatively different from a stigma perspective. We propose that fear of failing to obtain a position even when given an edge with EE policies, which is profoundly threatening to one’s perception of oneself as being competent, is what threatens the self-image of beneficiaries – not concern over being viewed as incompetent by others once hired under EE policies. An important difference between these two perspectives is that with our perspective, if the self-image threat is addressed – that is, if beneficiaries are more confident in their abilities to obtain a position – they should be more likely to support the EE policy. Under a stigma perspective, being confident of being able to obtain a position should result in less support for the EE policy, as greater confidence results in greater certainty that one will be hired and subsequently stigmatized. In our Study 3, we will test the differential nature of these predictions.

In summary, in our theoretical model we propose that self-image threats underlie reactions to EE policies of both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries. We further suggest that the nature of self-image threats posed by EE policies differs for nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries. For nonbeneficiaries the threat comes from implications of EE policies that their past success was due to biased employment systems, whereas the threat for beneficiaries comes from a possibility to fail find employment despite advantages given...
Overview of studies

To test our theoretical model, we conducted four studies with four distinct samples in the context of gender-based EE policies. In Study 1 we examined whether EE policies threaten the self-images of both men (nonbeneficiaries) and women (beneficiaries). In Study 2, we tested whether the nature of the self-image threatens differs for men and women. In Studies 3 and 4 we tested more directly whether self-image threatens undermine negative reactions to EE policies by employing moderators of the underlying psychological process (self-image threat) and examining whether the effects seen on dependent variables differ as a function of the moderator (i.e., employing moderation-of-process designs).

To begin, Study 1 sought to empirically demonstrate that EE policies can threaten the self-image of both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries. To do so, we exposed participants to either an EE policy or a comparison (environmental) policy, and assessed participant self-image perceptions following exposure to the policy. If, as we argue above, EE policies threaten the self-image of beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries alike, we should observe more negative self-images for participants exposed to the EE policy, compared to those exposed to a comparison policy. Thus, we put forward the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Men and women who are presented with a gender-based EE policy have more negative self-images, compared to those presented with a comparison policy.

**Study 1: Method**

Participants and procedure

Participants were 81 business undergraduate students (51% female) at a large Canadian university who received course credit for participation. The study took place online. After consenting to participate, participants were randomly presented with one of two policies ostensibly under development by their university: a gender-based EE policy or an environmental policy (see below). Following the policy presentation, participants completed a measure assessing their self-images.

Materials

An EE policy for women, which was adapted from a policy used in past research (Hideg et al., 2011), described the various aspects of and the rationale for a new EE policy for women ostensibly under development at the university. The policy pertained to hiring students into cooperative (co-op) jobs. The business program at the university where the study was conducted has its own co-op center dedicated to job placements of business students. The policy proposed that companies hiring students through the co-op center should favor interviewing and hiring women over men to begin to redress the unequal representation of men and women in the workforce – with the caveat that this preferential treatment should only occur when the candidates possessed equal qualifications (see Appendix A for the full policy).

An environmental policy was created for this study as a comparison policy that should not threaten the self-images of participants. The policy described the various aspects and the rationale of a new environmental policy for students’ campus ostensibly under development at the university. The policy involved broadening the campus eco-friendly focus by making environmental sustainability a socially accepted norm. In particular, environmental studies courses offering in the department of management would be improved, students would be given an opportunity to study campus and local environmental problems, conduct environmental audits of its practices, reduce campus waste, and maximize energy efficiency (see Appendix A).

**Measures**

All measures in this paper used a 7-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Self-image**

We measured self-image using a measure developed by Heatherton and Polivy (1991), 20 items, $z = .88$. This particular measure was chosen as Heatherton and Polivy found the scale comprised three facets of self-image: performance perceptions, which reflect the extent to which people feel assured about their abilities (e.g., “I feel confident about my abilities”; $z = .81$); social perceptions, which reflect the extent to which people feel self-conscious about their public image (e.g., “I feel self-conscious”; $z = .82$); and appearance perceptions, which reflect the extent to which people feel sensitive about their physical appearance (e.g., “I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now”; $z = .72$). Thus, this measure allows us to examine whether or not self-image in general is impacted by EE policies, or whether only specific aspects of self-image were impacted. Given that we propose that EE policies render beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries concerned regarding their performance, we expected to see effects of EE policies on the participant’s performance self-image in particular, and not on their social and appearance self-image.

**Study 1: Results**

The primary purpose of Study 1 was to establish that gender-based EE policies threaten the self-images of both men and women, particularly performance self-image. To test this prediction, we examined whether both men and women held more negative self-images when presented with an EE policy compared with an environmental policy (Hypothesis 1). We conducted 2 (gender: males vs. females) x 2 (policy type: EE policy vs. environmental policy) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the overall self-image measure, as well as its three facets.

Table 1 provides the means of overall self-image and its three facets by policy type and gender. In predicting overall self-images, there was a main effect of policy type. Supporting Hypothesis 1, participants presented with the EE policy ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.64$) had more negative self-images than participants presented with the environmental policy ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.69$), $F(1,77) = 5.80$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .07$). Consistent with past studies showing women have more negative self-images than men (Feingold, 1994; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999), we also found a main effect of gender; women ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.57$) had more negative self-images than men ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.67$), $F(1,77) = 19.46$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .20$). There was no significant Policy Type x Gender interaction, $F(1,77) = 1.22$, $ns$ ($\eta^2 = .02$).

In predicting the performance self-image facet, there was a main effect of policy type such that participants presented with the EE policy ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.86$) rated themselves more negatively on the performance self-image facet than participants presented with the environmental policy ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.91$), $F(1,77) = 11.07$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .13$). There was also a main effect of gender; women ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.90$) rated themselves more negatively on the performance self-image facet than men ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.82$), $F(1,77) = 15.52$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .17$). There was no significant Policy Type x Gender interaction, $F(1,77) = .32$, $ns$ ($\eta^2 = .004$).
In predicting the social self-image facet, the main effect of policy type was marginally significant such that participants presented with the EE policy \((M = 3.80, SD = 0.75)\) rated themselves more negatively on the social self-image facet than participants presented with the environmental policy \((M = 4.01, SD = 0.75)\), \(F(1,77) = 3.95, p < .05 (\eta^2 = .05)\). There was also a main effect of gender; women \((M = 3.66, SD = 0.60)\) rated themselves more negatively on the social self-image facet than men \((M = 4.25, SD = 0.79)\), \(F(1,77) = 15.37, p < .05 (\eta^2 = .17)\). There was no significant Policy Type x Gender interaction, \(F(1,77) = .08, ns (\eta^2 = .001)\).

In predicting the appearance self-image facet, there was no main effect of policy type \(F(1,77) = .002, ns (\eta^2 = .001)\) and no significant Policy Type x Gender interaction, \(F(1,77) = 2.96, ns (\eta^2 = .04)\). A main effect of gender was significant; women \((M = 4.54, SD = 0.86)\) rated themselves more negatively on the appearance self-image facet than men \((M = 4.98, SD = 0.84)\), \(F(1,77) = 5.05, p < .05 (\eta^2 = .04)\).

**Study 1: Discussion**

The results of Study 1 showed that compared to an environmental policy, a gender-based EE policy threatened the self-images of both men and women, and additional analyses showed that one particular facet of self-image – performance – was threatened. This is in line with our theorizing that suggests EE policies may invoke concerns regarding their performance capabilities. We also found a marginally significant effect of policy type on the social self-image facet. Although unexpected, a closer examination of the items comprising the social self-image facet reveals some items reflect concern regarding social perceptions of one’s performance or capabilities (e.g., “I feel inferior to others at this moment”), which may account for the marginally significant findings.

Study 1 provides evidence that EE policies pose self-image threats to both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries. Our theorizing further suggests that the nature of self-image threats differs for nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries. For nonbeneficiaries, the threat comes from the implication that their past success is due to unearned privilege accorded to them in employment systems. For beneficiaries the threat comes from the possibility of failing to find a job despite the advantages given by the policy. Consistent with this theorizing, EE policies are typically framed as redressing historical advantages given to nonbeneficiaries and discrimination against beneficiaries; indeed, such imbalanced treatment are one of the main reasons for the existence of EE policies (Jain et al., 2003), and documenting such imbalances are required for the implementation of an EE policy (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012).

If framing EE policies as addressing past discrimination is threatening to the self-images of nonbeneficiaries, we reasoned that an EE policy framed such that it does not emphasize past discrimination and biased employment systems may therefore be less likely to threaten the self-images of nonbeneficiaries. One way to do so is to frame EE policies not as addressing past discrimination and biased systems, but rather as promoting diversity. When an EE policy is framed as aiming to diversify the workplace by promoting more women, without suggesting that it also addresses past discrimination and biased privileges given to men, then the implication that men’s past success was due to unearned privileges is reduced. Consequently, the threat for men should be mitigated.

On the other hand, the threat for beneficiaries should still remain. Regardless of the framing of the policy, the fact remains that an EE policy gives an advantage in hiring to beneficiaries and introduces the possibility of failing to find a job despite the advantages given by the policy. We thus expected that a diversity framing for an EE policy (compared to a discrimination framing for an EE policy) should mitigate threats to men’s self-images, but not to women’s self-images. In Study 2 we thus manipulated the framing of the EE policy to provide evidence regarding the underlying nature of the self-image threat EE policies pose to nonbeneficiaries. In particular, we tested the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** Men have more positive self-images when presented with a gender-based EE policy framed as promoting diversity, compared to an EE policy framed as addressing past discrimination; the framing of the EE policy does not influence women’s self-images.

**Study 2: Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Participants were 87 business undergraduate students (66% female) at a Canadian university who received course credit for participation. The study took place online. After consenting to participate, participants were randomly presented with a gender-based EE policy ostensibly under development by their university framed in one of two ways: as addressing past discrimination or as promoting diversity (see below). Following the policy presentation, participants completed a measure assessing their self-images.

**Materials**

The gender-based EE policy framed as addressing past discrimination resembled the EE policy used in Study 1. By contrast, the
gender-based EE policy framed as promoting diversity suggested that the goal of the policy was to diversify and increase the pool of qualified candidates. Thus, there was no mention of past discrimination and no implication that this proposed EE policy was a consequence of past biased employment systems where men had an unearned privilege. Both policies still proposed the same outcome that women should be hired over men if they have equal qualifications (see Appendix B).

**Measures**

**Self-image**

We used the same 20-item self-image scale with three facets as in Study 1 (overall scale \( z = .91 \); performance self-image facet \( z = .80 \); social self-image facet \( z = .83 \); appearance self-image facet \( z = .84 \)).

**Study 2: Results**

The purpose of Study 2 was to provide evidence for the nature of self-image threats posed by EE policies for nonbeneficiaries by testing whether an EE policy framed as promoting diversity would mitigate self-image threats for men (but not for women). To test whether men’s self-images (and in particular performance self-images) are higher when presented with an EE policy framed as promoting diversity compared to addressing past discrimination (Hypothesis 2), we tested for Policy Framing \( \times \) Gender interactions in ANOVAs when predicting the overall self-image measure and its three facets.

In predicting overall self-images, as expected there was a marginally significant Policy Framing \( \times \) Gender interaction, \( F(1,83) = 3.79, p < .05 \) \( (\eta^2 = .05) \) (see Fig. 1, Panel A). Supporting Hypothesis 2, men had marginally more positive self-images when presented with an EE policy framed as promoting diversity \( (M = 5.03, SD = 0.78) \) than framed as addressing past discrimination \( (M = 4.53, SD = 0.54) \), \( F(1,83) = 3.34, p < .07 \); there were no differences in women’s self-images when presented with an EE policy framed as promoting diversity \( (M = 4.34, SD = 0.69) \) than framed as addressing past discrimination \( (M = 4.53, SD = 0.86) \), \( F(1,83) = .49, ns \). There was no main effect of policy framing, \( F(1,83) = 1.02, ns (\eta^2 = .01) \). However, there was a marginal main effect of gender such that women rated themselves more negatively on the overall self-image \( (M = 4.46, SD = 0.79) \) than men \( (M = 4.78, SD = 0.71) \), \( F(1,83) = 3.69, p < .06 \) \( (\eta^2 = .04) \). This main effect of gender is in line with our findings in Study 1 and with the past literature on gender difference in self-images (Feingold, 1994; Kling et al., 1999).

In predicting performance self-images, there was a significant Policy Framing \( \times \) Gender interaction, \( F(1,83) = 3.80, p < .05 \) \( (\eta^2 = .04) \) (Fig. 1, Panel B). As expected, men had more positive performance self-images when presented with an EE policy framed as promoting diversity \( (M = 5.31, SD = 0.85) \) than framed as addressing past discrimination \( (M = 4.69, SD = 0.91) \), \( F(1,83) = 3.67, p < .05 \); there were no differences in women’s performance self-images when presented with an EE policy framed as promoting diversity \( (M = 4.76, SD = 0.86) \) than framed as addressing past discrimination \( (M = 4.92, SD = 0.92) \), \( F(1,83) = .41, ns \). There was no main effect of policy framing, \( F(1,83) = 1.32, ns (\eta^2 = .02) \), or gender, \( F(1,83) = 0.62, ns (\eta^2 = .007) \).

In predicting social self-images, there was no significant Policy Framing \( \times \) Gender interaction, \( F(1,83) = 1.62, ns (\eta^2 = .02) \). There was also no main effect of policy framing, \( F(1,83) = .22, ns (\eta^2 = .003) \), or gender, \( F(1,83) = 1.61, ns (\eta^2 = .003) \).

In predicting appearance self-images, there was no significant Policy Framing \( \times \) Gender interaction, \( F(1,83) = 2.87, ns (\eta^2 = .03) \). There was also no main effect of policy framing, \( F(1,83) = 0.85, ns (\eta^2 = .009) \).

**Study 2: Discussion**

The results of Study 2 provide evidence for the nature of the self-image threat posed by EE policies to nonbeneficiaries by showing that the threat to self-images of nonbeneficiaries are mitigated when implications that men had unearned privileges in employment systems are minimized. In particular, the results showed that when a gender-based EE policy was framed as promoting diversity, compared to being framed as addressing past discrimination, it mitigated the self-image threat for men. It is important to note that framing EE policies as addressing past discrimination is common as that is one of the main reasons for the existence of EE policies (Jain et al., 2003). Yet, our results here show that such framings of EE policies may actually backfire by threatening self-images of nonbeneficiaries.

**Self-image threat and reactions to EE policies: Further evidence using a moderation-of-process design**

To this point, Studies 1 and 2 have demonstrated how EE policies produce self-image threats among beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries. However, the effect of such self-image threats on reactions to EE policies is likely of greater concern for organizations. Hence, in Studies 3 and 4 we sought to provide evidence that
self-image threats underlie negative reactions to EE policies. With that being said, the self-image threat concept that we argue underlies reactions to EE policies presents unique issues associated with its measurement as a mediator.

The literature on self-image threats (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) suggests that self-image threat operates at an unconscious level; its effects can be seen with direct measures (e.g., by assessing its impact on outcome variables such as self-perceptions of competence, as seen in Study 1 and 2), but the very act of such assessment brings what was previously an unconscious process into consciousness. In turn, this may alter the relation of self-image threats to subsequent outcomes (e.g., attitudes towards the EE policy): participants may become sensitive to the idea that their (now conscious) self-images can influence what they think and how they behave. Consequently, participants may act to disrupt that relation given people prefer to believe that their judgments and behaviors are objective, and being influenced by self-images may not be seen as objective (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Sherman et al., 2009). In line with this notion, research on priming and self-affirmation shows that once participants are made aware of unconscious processes, they act to reduce any biasing effects and even react completely opposite to how others who are not made aware react (Bargh et al., 1996; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman et al., 2009).

To overcome this problem, we employ a moderation-of-process design which allows us to test the mediating role played by self-image threat without directly assessing it (and hence bringing it to consciousness). Moderation-of-process designs employ a moderator of the underlying mediating process and observe whether the strength of the relation between an independent and dependent variable differs in the presence or absence of the moderator. In other words, by using a moderator that is associated with the strengthening or inhibiting of the underlying mediating process (here, self-image threat), and observing that said moderator affects the relation between two variables whose relation is premised on that underlying mediating process (here, exposure to EE policies and reactions to EE policies), one obtains evidence that the underlying mediating process is responsible for the relation between the two variables without directly measuring the mediating variable. Moderation-of-process design has been hailed as a powerful method for providing evidence for mediation when (a) the underlying psychological processes are difficult or impractical to measure (e.g., due to the issues outlined with self-image threat in the prior paragraph); (b) a theoretically appropriate moderator can be easily identified; and (c) when there is evidence in the literature that the selected moderator influences the proposed psychological process (Spencer et al., 2005). As such, in Study 3 and 4, we use a moderation-of-process design by employing different moderators that should serve to mitigate or exacerbate the self-image threats EE policies pose for beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries.

In Study 3, we use a moderator that particularly influences the self-image threat EE policies pose for beneficiaries, again highlighting the differential nature of the self-image threat for beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries. Our theorizing suggests that the self-image threat EE policies pose for women comes from the potential of failing to obtain employment despite having EE policies that promote their hiring. Women who lack confidence in their own abilities to gain employment may conclude that they are likely to fail despite the benefits provided by an EE policy, which would be especially threatening to their self-image. As such, they may have particularly unfavorable reactions towards EE policies. By contrast, highly confident women may be less likely to consider failing a possible outcome, and hence may be less likely to fear potential negative self-image threats from failing to gain employment (especially when given an advantage through EE policies). As such, they should be less likely to have negative reactions to EE policies.

From a moderation-of-process perspective (Spencer et al., 2005), we reasoned that the threat to women’s self-images posed by EE policies may be mitigated by differences in interviewing self-efficacy, which refers to the feeling of being assured of one’s abilities to do well in an interview and obtain employment (Tay, Ang, & Van Dyne, 2006). Interviewing self-efficacy is particularly appropriate because women with high interviewing self-efficacy should be confident in their ability to do well in interviews and secure a job, and hence may be less likely to experience self-image threat arising from the possibility of failing despite EE policies. On the other hand, such concerns should be paramount for women with low interviewing self-efficacy, who should experience a correspondingly greater self-image threat from EE policies. Moreover, interviewing self-efficacy may be one of the most salient indicators of women’s confidence to obtain jobs in samples of job applicants who are applying and interviewing for jobs (which is the case with our samples where students are applying for co-op jobs).

By contrast, we do not expect that high interviewing self-efficacy will mitigate self-image threats to men. Inherent in gender-based EE policies is that they are redressing past discrimination against women and unequal distribution of resources based on gender. As such EE policies should threaten men’s self-image even if they have high interviewing self-efficacy, because EE policies convey the notion that men prospered not based on their competence but based on systematic biases in their favor (Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Thus, for men, the self-image threat comes not from the possibility of failing to obtain employment when given preferential treatment (as is the case for women). Instead, the self-image threat for men is that EE policies communicate that men have succeeded due to unfair advantages; this implication is unaffected by male’s interviewing self-efficacy.

In summary, we suggest an interaction between interviewing self-efficacy and gender in predicting support for gender-based EE policies. Having high interviewing self-efficacy should reduce the self-image threat EE policies present for women and hence increase their support for EE policies, but it should have no effect on the self-image threat EE policies present for men and hence men should be uniformly unsupportive of EE policies. In line with past research (Harrison et al., 2006; Hideg et al., 2011), we conceptualized policy support in terms of favorable attitudes toward the policy and behavioral intentions that promote the EE policy. Behavioral intentions are conceptualized as an individual’s stated willingness to promote an EE policy (Hideg et al., 2011). We put forward the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3a.** Women with high interviewing self-efficacy, compared to women with low interviewing self-efficacy, have more favorable attitudes toward a gender-based EE policy, whereas interviewing self-efficacy does not affect men’s attitudes.

**Hypothesis 3b.** Women with high interviewing self-efficacy, compared to women with low interviewing self-efficacy, express higher behavioral intentions that promote a gender-based EE policy, whereas interviewing self-efficacy does not affect men’s behavioral intentions.

**Study 3: Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Participants were 249 business undergraduate students (53% female) at a large Canadian university who received course credit for participation. Participants first completed an online survey at the beginning of a semester assessing their interviewing self-efficacy.
One month later, participants were given an in-class presentation of the same EE policy as in Study 1. Following the presentation, the participants completed the questionnaires assessing their attitudes and behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy.

Measures

Interviewing self-efficacy

We measured interviewing self-efficacy with Tay et al.'s (2006) five-item scale (e.g., “I am confident that I can persuade potential employers during the job interview to consider me for a job”). A composite score was computed by averaging the five items ($x = .90$), and a higher score indicated higher interviewing self-efficacy.

Attitudes toward the EE policy

We measured attitudes towards the EE policy with Hideg et al.'s (2011) three-item scale (e.g., “My opinion of developing this proposed Employment Equity program for student hiring is favorable”). A composite score was computed by averaging the three items ($x = .75$), and a higher score indicated more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy.

Behavioral intentions

We measured behavioral intentions with Hideg et al.’s (2011) eight-item scale. Participants rated to what extent they would be willing to implement a range of behaviors that would promote the EE policy (e.g., “Volunteer for one day at an information booth to create public awareness about the Employment Equity program”). A composite score was computed by averaging the eight items ($x = .84$), and a higher score indicated a higher endorsement of behavioral intentions.

Study 3: Results

The primary purpose of Study 3 was to provide evidence that self-image threats underlie negative reactions to EE policies by examining an important moderator of women's responses to EE policies in a job search context: interviewing self-efficacy. We conducted hierarchical moderated regression analyses to test our hypotheses that interviewing self-efficacy and gender would interact to predict attitudes towards the EE policy (Hypothesis 3a) and behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy (Hypothesis 3b). Following procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), we mean-centered interviewing self-efficacy prior to creating an interaction term from the cross product of the centered interviewing self-efficacy variable and gender variable (dichotomous variable). In the first step of the regression we entered main effects of interviewing self-efficacy and gender. In the second step, we entered the interaction term between interviewing self-efficacy and gender.

The interactive effect of interviewing self-efficacy and gender in predicting attitudes

In predicting attitudes toward the gender-based EE policy, there was a significant interaction between interviewing self-efficacy and gender, $b = .23$, $t(244) = 2.16$, $p < .05$ ($f^2 = .03$) (see Table 2 for a full regression model). To interpret the interaction, we graphed the interaction at high and low levels of interviewing self-efficacy. Following Aiken and West (1991) high and low levels of interviewing self-efficacy were defined as plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean (see Fig. 2). Supporting Hypothesis 3a, a simple slope analysis revealed that as women's interviewing self-efficacy increased, their attitudes toward the policy became more positive, $t(128) = 2.43$, $p < .05$; the simple slope for men was nonsignificant, $t(116) = -.62$, $ns$. There was also a main effect of gender, indicating that on average women ($M = 5.26$, $SD = .86$) had more favorable attitudes toward the policy than men ($M = 4.31$, $SD = .95$), $b = .96$, $t(245) = 8.31$, $p < .001$.

The interactive effect of interviewing self-efficacy and gender in predicting behavioral intentions

In predicting behavioral intentions, there was a significant interaction between interviewing self-efficacy and gender, $b = .27$, $t(245) = 2.07$, $p < .05$ ($f^2 = .018$) (see Table 2 for a full regression model). To interpret the interaction, we graphed the interaction at high and low levels of interviewing self-efficacy (see Fig. 3). Supporting Hypothesis 3b, a simple slope analysis revealed that as women's interviewing self-efficacy increased they were more likely to endorse behavioral intentions promoting the EE policy, $t(129) = 3.12$, $p < .05$; the simple slope for men was nonsignificant, $t(116) = .21$, $ns$. There was also a main effect of gender, indicating that on average women ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.04$) had higher behavioral intentions than men ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.24$), $b = .82$, $t(246) = 5.70$, $p < .001$.

Study 3: Discussion

The results of Study 3 provide further evidence that self-image threat underlies negative reactions to EE policies by showing that those the least likely to experience self-image threat in reaction to an EE policy – women with high interviewing self-efficacy – were the most likely to support a gender-based EE policy. These results offer an explanation for past research findings showing a greater variance in women's positive and negative reactions to EE policies, compared to men's typically uniformly negative reactions. Namely, our research suggests that one reason for this variance may lie in the extent to which women are confident in their ability to take advantage of the benefits EE policies provide: women who do not feel very competent may perceive these policies as potentially threatening their self-image and as such they may have especially negative reactions to EE policies. As expected, interviewing self-efficacy did not moderate men's support for the EE policy. The self-image threat that men face relates to external attributes of their past success in the employment systems that suggests that they were privileged, a self-image threat that remains regardless of interviewing self-efficacy. Thus, Study 3 also provides evidence for the nature of threats EE policies pose to beneficiaries.

We also found a main effect of gender: women, regardless of interviewing self-efficacy, on average showed more favorable attitudes and expressed higher behavioral intentions to support the EE policy than men. This is in line with previous findings on material self-interest that suggest that women should support EE policies more than men because EE policies provide tangible, material benefits to women by providing them with advantages in employment.
However, this main effect was qualified by an interaction between gender and interviewing self-efficacy showing that women support EE policies more when they have higher, compared to lower, interviewing self-efficacy, indicating that self-image threats posed by EE policies can undermine women’s support.

So far our studies suggest that (a) EE policies undermine self-images of both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries, (b) the nature of self-image threats differs for nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries, and (c) threats to self-images underlie negative reactions to EE policies of beneficiaries. To do so, we examine an intervention that should mitigate self-image threats for both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries, and hence increases their support for EE policies.

In particular, self-affirmations represent one well-studied and established way to mitigate self-image threats, regardless of the nature of the threat (see McQueen & Klein, 2006, and Sherman & Cohen, 2006, for reviews). Self-affirmation theory posits that by affirming one’s positive self-image through a reminder of one’s important values, one should be less vulnerable to threats to one’s self-image and more open and supportive of image-threatening ideas that otherwise one may be less likely to accept (Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006; Tesser, 2000). In the present context, following a moderation-of-process design (Spencer et al., 2005), if gender-based EE policies are threatening to the self-image of men and women (albeit for different reasons), then giving men and women an opportunity to affirm their self-image should mitigate the self-image threat process, rendering individuals less likely to negatively evaluate EE policies. We thus propose that both men and women who self-affirm will support a gender-based policy more so than those who do not self-affirm. We put forward the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4a.** Men and women who self-affirm, compared to those who do not self-affirm, have more favorable attitudes toward a gender-based EE policy.

**Hypothesis 4b.** Men and women who self-affirm, compared to those who do not self-affirm, express higher behavioral intentions that promote a gender-based EE policy.

### Study 4: Methods

**Participants and procedure**

Participants were 86 business undergraduate students (70% female) a large Canadian university who received course credit for participation. The study took place in class. First, participants were randomly assigned to an affirmation condition or a non-affirmation condition. After completing the affirmation manipulation, participants watched a presentation on a gender-based EE policy under consideration by their university. Finally, the participants completed questionnaires assessing their attitudes and behavioral intentions to promote the policy.

**Materials**

**Affirmation manipulation**

At the beginning of the study, participants completed a standard self-affirmation manipulation (Fein & Spencer, 1997;
Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). All participants were asked to rank 11 values (artistic skills, sense of humor, relations with family/friends, spontaneity, social skills, athletics, musical ability, physical attractiveness, creativity, business/money, romantic values) in order of importance. Next, half of the participants were asked to describe their most important value and write why it is important to them personally (affirmation condition). The second half of the participants were asked to describe their ninth most important value and why it might be important to other people (non-affirmation condition). In line with the recent research that suggests affirmation may only be effective if introduced prior to a threat (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010), we administered the affirmation manipulation prior to the presentation of the gender-based EE policy (i.e., threat).

Gender-based EE policy

Participants viewed a slide show presentation of an EE policy for women, which was the same as the policy that participants read about in Study 1.

Measures

Manipulation check

To assess to what extent individuals have self-affirmed and thus whether the self-affirmation manipulation was successful, following Harris and Napper’s procedure (2009) two independent judges rated participants’ writings that they provided in the self-affirmation task on the following two questions: “Setting aside your own opinions and values, how self-affirmed would you estimate the writer of this passage to be?” and “How important does the value they have selected appear to be to them?” These two questions assess to what extent individuals are self-affirming and have followed instructions in the self-affirmation task. To measure interrater reliability we computed intraclass correlations (ICCs; Bliese, 2000). ICCs for the two questions were significant and high (.90 and .91, respectively) providing evidence for interrater reliability.

Attitudes toward the EE policy

We used the three-item scale as in Study 3 (α = .83).

Behavioral intentions

We used the eight-item scale as in Study 3 (α = .88).

Study 4: Results

Manipulation check analyses

We found, as expected, that judges rated participants’ writings in the affirmation condition compared to the non-affirmation condition to be significantly more self-affirming (affirmation: M = 6.43, SD = 0.84; non-affirmation: M = 1.74, SD = 1.39), t(84) = −19.22, p < .001 (d = 4.08); and the value selected to be significantly more important to them (affirmation: M = 6.75, SD = 0.64; non-affirmation: M = 2.06, SD = 1.32), t(84) = −21.43, p < .001 (d = 4.52). Thus, these results provide evidence for the success of the self-affirmation task.

Main hypotheses analyses

The primary purpose of Study 4 was to provide additional evidence that self-image threats underlie reactions to EE policies by showing that when people have an opportunity to reinforce their self-image they will be more likely to support EE policies. We conducted 2 (gender: males vs. females) × 2 (condition: affirmation vs. non-affirmation) ANOVAs to test our predictions that both men and women who self-affirm have more favorable attitudes (Hypothesis 4a) and are more likely to endorse behavioral intentions promoting the EE policy (Hypothesis 4b), compared to those who do not self-affirm.4

The effect of self-affirmation on attitudes

Table 3 provides the means of the attitude scores by condition and gender. In predicting attitudes toward the policy, there was a main effect of condition. Supporting Hypothesis 4a, participants in the self-affirmation condition (M = 4.92, SD = 0.19) showed more favorable attitudes toward the EE policy than participants in the non-affirmation condition (M = 4.07, SD = 0.19), F(1,82) = 9.75, p < .05 (η² = .11). There was also a main effect of gender with women (M = 4.86, SD = 0.15) showing more favorable attitudes than men (M = 4.13, SD = 0.23), F(1,82) = 6.78, p < .05 (η² = .08). There was no significant Condition × Gender interaction, F(1,82) = .98, ns (η² = .01).

The effect of self-affirmation on behavioral intentions

Table 3 provides the means of the behavioral intentions scores by condition and gender. In predicting behavioral intentions that promote the EE policy, there was a main effect of condition. Supporting Hypothesis 4b, participants in the self-affirmation condition (M = 4.01, SD = 1.19) expressed higher behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy than participants in the non-affirmation condition (M = 3.13, SD = 1.39), F(1,82) = 8.39, p < .05 (η² = .09). There was also a main effect of gender with women (M = 3.89, SD = 1.29) expressing higher behavioral intentions than men (M = 2.94, SD = 1.29), F(1,82) = 8.84, p < .05 (η² = .10). There was no significant Condition × Gender interaction, F(1,82) = 1.16, ns (η² = .002).

Study 4: Discussion

The results of Study 4 showed that both men and women who self-affirmed on a personally important value, compared to men and women who did not self-affirm, had more favorable attitudes and expressed greater behavioral intentions to promote the EE policy. These findings are in line with our theorizing that self-image threats underlie the negative reactions of both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries towards EE policies. It is further noteworthy that the effect of affirmation on both attitudes and behavioral intentions was not small and negligible. According to Cohen (1992) the effect sizes observed were of medium size suggesting that the affirmation effect on reactions to EE policies is fairly substantial and of practical value.4

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4 It is possible that our self-affirmation manipulation might have altered the mood of participants; in particular, thinking about (and, for half of our participants, affirming) values might have positively or negatively influenced one’s affect. To rule out this possibility, we assessed participants’ experienced positive emotionality (α = .80) and negative emotionality (α = .88) with Differential Emotions Scale (Izard, Libero, Putnam, & Haynes, 1999). Because there were no significant differences between the affirmation condition and the non-affirmation condition in positive emotionality (Maffirmation = 2.23, SDaffirmation = 0.57; Mnon-affirmation = 2.03, SDnon-affirmation = 0.61; t(84) = −1.61, ns, d = 0.34) and negative emotionality (Maffirmation = 1.33, SDaffirmation = 0.38; Mnon-affirmation = 1.38, SDnon-affirmation = 0.49; t(84) = −0.40, ns, d = 0.11) and because controlling for emotionality had no effects on our results, we present analyses without controlling for positive and negative emotionality.4

4 We also replicated these findings by re-running this study in another sample of 136 undergraduate students, with the addition of a comparison policy (i.e., an identity-blind policy that encourages applications from diverse candidates, but it does not take demographics into account during hiring decisions). As expected, we found that self-affirmation bolstered support for the EE policy, but it did not bolster support for the comparison policy. This provided additional evidence that self-image threats underlie reactions to EE policies, because self-affirmation, as a tool for mitigating self-image threats, did not influence support of a policy that was not supposed to pose self-image threats. We thank a reviewer for suggesting this.
Consistent with past research (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006) and our own Study 3, we also found a main effect of gender. Regardless of self-affirmation condition, the fact remains that EE policies do put men at a disadvantage. Hence, based on objective material self-interest, to protect their employment prospects men should be less supportive of such policies and this fact should be unaffected by self-affirmation. However, the threat to one’s self-image should be affected by self-affirmation and hence this barrier to psychological self-interest should dissipate, as implied by the significant self-affirmation effect that rendered nonbeneficiaries’ reactions to the EE policy more positive.

General discussion

This research makes several important contributions to our understanding of reactions to, and support for, weak preference EE policies. First and foremost, our research builds on work suggesting self-interest may not only be material but also psychological (e.g., Miller, 1999; Ratner & Miller, 2001). By drawing on the self-enhancement literature we offer a broader conceptualization of what types of self-interest are influenced by EE policies: both material self-interest concerns over employment opportunities and psychological self-interest concerns over self-image threats. In arguing for the consideration of psychological self-interest concerns, our work provides a parsimonious account for why both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries alike can have negative reactions to EE policies: both material and psychological self-interest concerns must be considered.

In contrast, a focus on material self-interest alone cannot account for instances where beneficiaries react negatively to EE policies. Moreover, considering psychological self-interest also suggests when nonbeneficiaries may have more positive reactions to EE policies despite these policies harming their employment prospects: when self-image threats that EE policies present are reduced. In sum, by reconceptualizing how we understand self-interest through the consideration of concerns over psychological self-interest and the desire to preserve a positive self-image, we both gain a better understanding of past findings documenting the reactions of both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries towards EE policies, as well as generating interesting new directions for both research and practical applications.

That being said, we do not argue that material self-interest should be marginalized, or that psychological self-interest is preeminent. Indeed, our results also indicate that material self-interest (as self-interest has been traditionally conceptualized) works alongside psychological self-interest (self-image threats) to influence reactions to EE policies. In particular, Studies 3 and 4 clearly indicated the presence of a main effect of gender, which is exactly what one would expect based on a traditional, material self-interest perspective where beneficiary status alone is considered. In particular, men tend to not support EE policies that do not benefit them, while women do tend to support EE policies that benefit them. Thus, our studies both illustrate support for a self-image threat perspective as well as suggesting that both material and psychological self-interest jointly influence EE policy reactions.

Aside from contributing to our understanding of the role of self-interest in reactions to EE policies, our work also contributes to recent research that has suggested one’s sense of self plays an important role in perceptions of EE policies. Unzueta and colleagues (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008; Unzueta et al., 2010) found that despite quota (or strong preference) EE policies being illegal in the United States since 1978 (Spann, 2000), White men and women under self-image threat are more likely to believe in the existence of such policies, presumably because it protects White men and women’s self-image. Further, Hideg et al. (2011) found that when nonbeneficiaries participated in the development of EE policies, they developed a sense of psychological ownership over these policies (i.e., they were more likely to view the policies as an extension of their sense of self). Consequently, they were more likely to support the EE policies, presumably because not supporting something one has psychological ownership over is akin to threatening one’s self-image. Our work provides a coherent framework to interpret these findings by highlighting the role of self-image threat: one’s reactions to EE policies is more positive when they advance one’s self-image (Hideg et al., 2011) and more negative when one’s self-image is under threat (Unzueta et al., 2008, 2010).

Comparing a self-image threat perspective with alternate explanations

Our self-image threat explanation for why beneficiaries have negative reactions to EE policies should also be contrasted with prior explanations for this paradoxical finding. One prominent explanation for negative reactions of beneficiaries invokes concerns over a stigma of incompetence. This past work suggests that others (e.g., Heilman et al., 1992, 1997) and women themselves (e.g., Heilman et al., 1987) perceive women as less competent if hired under EE policies. As such, women may be afraid to be stigmatized if hired under EE policies and show low support for EE policies. Although both a stigma and self-image threat explanation can be seen in our findings in Study 3 – that women with high as opposed to low interviewing-self-efficacy have more favorable reactions to EE policies. Such an effect would be

Table 3

<table>
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<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Non-affirmation</th>
<th>Affirmation</th>
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<td>Non-affirmation</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Non-affirmation</td>
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</table>

Note. In each row, means with no overlapping subscripts differ significantly at p < .05 in planned contrast tests.
counter to what a stigmatization perspective would predict. Namely, if women are afraid of stigmatization if hired under EE policies, then women who believe they are especially likely to get jobs should be particularly against EE policies because they would perceive themselves as more likely to attain the job and be stigmatized thereafter. In other words, if concerns regarding stigma is underlying women's reactions to EE policies, then women with high, not low, interview self-efficacy should have more negative reactions to EE policies. Yet, our finding for both attitudes and behavioral intentions that promote EE policies ran counter to this argument.

Another explanation advanced for why beneficiaries have negative reactions to EE policies has been that women (especially White women) do not perceive themselves as beneficiaries given that many EE policies may also be race-based (Kidder et al., 2004; Unzueta et al., 2010). However, our studies took steps to rule out such explanations in that we used a policy that was clearly benefitting women and made no mention of race. Thus, our research also rules out this particular explanation in favor of a self-image threat explanation.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Our research has a number of strengths. We provided converging evidence that self-image threat influences both nonbeneficiaries’ and beneficiaries’ reactions to EE policies across four studies and two different methodologies in the context of a gender-based EE policy that was proposed to influence real outcomes for our participants, namely their co-op jobs. First, in Study 1 we used an experiment to provide evidence that EE policies undermine self-images of both nonbeneficiaries (men) and beneficiaries (women). In another experiment (Study 2) we provided evidence for the nature of nonbeneficiaries’ self-image threats by mitigating threats to men’s self-images when the EE policy is framed as promoting diversity rather than as addressing past discrimination. In Studies 3 and 4, using a moderation-of-process design, we demonstrated that self-image threats underlie negative reactions to EE policies. In particular, in a correlational study (Study 3) we showed that those least likely to experience self-image threat when faced with a gender-based EE policy – women with high interviewing self-efficacy – are also the most likely to show positive reactions to EE policies. In Study 4 we showed that when the threat posed by the EE policy was mitigated for both men and women by giving them an opportunity to reinforce their positive self-image through a self-affirmation task both men and women were more likely to support the EE policy.

By using a moderation-of-process design to test our overall model in which self-images underlie negative reactions to EE policies, we also provide stronger evidence for the causal chain of events we outline (Spencer et al., 2005). Most experimental research only manipulates the independent variable while the mediator and the dependent variable are measured; consequently, causality is not established between the mediator and the dependent variable. In our own studies, we provide evidence for mediation and for our causal chain of event by manipulating both the independent variable and mediator. That is, we manipulate the independent variable (policy type) and show the effect on our mediator (self-image threat, Studies 1 and 2); we further manipulate our mediator via self-affirmation, and show how this affects our dependent variables (Study 4). Our model is thus supported in a compelling set of studies and results.

It is also possible that the effects we observed are actually underestimates of what might occur in more natural environments. First, while the threat for nonbeneficiaries may be seen as an immediate threat to one’s self-image (in that being presented with an EE policy should immediately threaten one’s self-image by suggesting their past performance has been benefited by unearned advantages), the responses of beneficiaries may be seen as responses in anticipation of a threat (i.e., the possibility of failing to gain employment in the future). This may underestimate our effects for beneficiaries, given that people tend to underestimate their negative reactions to anticipated negative events (Loewenstein, 1996). Second, the threat to self-images and perceptions of competence may be more pronounced when individuals have more extensive experience in the workplace. For example, beneficiaries with more work experience may have experienced more rejections and failures than students, and consequently experience greater fear that they may fail to obtain jobs despite the advantages provided by the EE policy. Similarly, nonbeneficiaries with more work experience may feel more threatened by EE policies than students as EE policies may imply that their achievements to-date have been due to biased employment systems rather than their competence.

Another strength of our research lies in the type of the EE policy we examined. The EE policy presented in our studies represents a weak preference policy (Harrison et al., 2006) wherein gender is considered only when two candidates are equally qualified. This is in comparison to a strong preference policy wherein qualifications are disregarded and employment decisions are based on gender. Strong preference policies are illegal in most countries (Pyburn et al., 2008). Hence, our use of a weak preference policy is more in line with what individuals are likely to encounter in the workplace, is within the legal realms of the Canadian employment laws, and answers calls to examine more realistic EE policies (Harrison et al., 2006).

With that being said, several limitations of our research should be noted. First, our participants were undergraduate students, inviting questions about the generalizability of the results to the experiences of employees and more experienced job applicants. First, it could be expected that students may have been less invested in issues concerning EE policies because they might have had less at stake in terms of livelihood, welfare of families, status, career progression, and money than employees. However, the EE policy proposed was specifically designed for employment of students and as such it had real consequences for them. Participants were led to believe that the policy presented would influence their own internship, summer, and professional job placements offered through their co-op center. While internships and summer jobs may not have the same stakes as full-time jobs, they influence students’ future employability, which ultimately leads to the very stakes described above (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). Further, the proposed EE policy could have had a long-term impact on students’ future career by influencing their chances of obtaining high quality work experience, which ultimately would have consequences for students’ careers after school. Thus, the consequences of the EE policy were real and relevant to our participants.

Another potential limitation is that we examined reactions to EE policies only in the context of gender-based policies. Thus, whether our results would replicate to other types of EE policies (e.g., race-based EE policies) is open to question. We expect that similar results would be obtained with race-based EE policies given our theoretical framework applies equally well to nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries of race-based EE policies. At the same time, future research examining race-based EE policies may provide more nuanced views on self-image threat, especially in regards to beneficiaries of different race. In particular, the beneficiary group in race-based policies encompasses different minorities such as Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics. Past research has found differences in support of EE policies among racial minorities such as that Blacks tend to support these
policies more than Hispanics (Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000; Kravitz & Platania, 1993) and Asians’ reactions to EE policies tend to be mixed (Bell, Harrison, & McLaughlin, 1997). It could thus be that these different groups are more or less susceptible to self-image threat arising from EE policies, which in turn may influence their reactions to EE policies. For example, past research has suggested that Blacks tend to have higher self-esteem than other racial groups (Twenge & Crocker, 2002) and high overall self-esteem may protect individuals from variety of threats (Spencer et al., 1998). Thus, given their high overall self-esteem Blacks may experience less threat from race-based policies compared to other racial minorities and hence react less negatively to EE policies.

While our studies were designed to specifically test self-image threats and while we provide evidence for the effect of self-image threats on reactions to EE policies in multiple studies, other factors may also be influencing reactions to EE policies. We focused specifically on self-image threats because the goal of our study was to provide an account that explains both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries’ reactions to EE policies and such solve past research inconsistencies. Future research should examine how other factors that past research found to influence EE policies (e.g., stigma effects, prejudiced attitudes, etc.) interact with self-image threats to predict reactions to EE policies.

Relatedly, future studies should examine other important indices of reactions to EE policies apart from attitudes and behavioral intentions. For example, it is possible that the greater threats to one’s self-image experienced from EE policies, the less likely individuals are to see EE policies as fair. Thus, denigrating the fairness of the policy may act as another way to preserve positive self-images. In line with this, past research has found that perceptions of fairness are related to threat experiences (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2012) and that prejudiced individuals perceive EE policies as violating fairness principles more so than non-prejudiced individuals (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Son Hing et al., 2011).

Finally, in all our studies the measures were collected at the same time (except in Study 3) suggesting a potential common method bias. However, following Podsakoff and colleagues’ (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012) recommendations we reduced common method bias by having a different source for our independent and dependent variables in our experimental studies (i.e., Studies 1, 2, and 4); and by separating measures in time in our correlational field study (i.e., Study 3). In addition, our interaction effects in Study 3 are more robust to common method biases (Evans, 1985), particularly because a common method bias explanation would require that the level of common method bias increases or decreases as a function of the moderator, which is unlikely.

**Practical implications**

This research offers important practical implications for governments that mandate EE policies and for organizations that strive to successfully implement these policies. First, these policies explicitly state that one of their goals is to redress past discrimination (Jain et al., 2003). Yet, our research shows that this goal highlights the self-image threat for nonbeneficiaries. To avoid highlighting this potentially self-image threatening information to nonbeneficiaries, the goal of redressing past discrimination could be emphasized less and more weight could be given to other goals. For example, another important goal of EE policies is promoting and enhancing diversity at the workplace as a way to broaden the pool of qualified job candidates and to gain a competitive edge in today’s highly global and diverse workplace (Jain et al., 2003). Alternatively, organizations may use self-affirmations to mitigate self-image threats when EE policies are introduced as past research shows that one-time self-affirmation interventions can provide long-term benefits (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzu-stoski, 2009).

Second, one way to enhance beneficiaries’ support for EE policies would be through self-efficacy training, with government- or organization-sponsored employment centers providing self-efficacy training. This kind of training may be especially important for immigrant women and women from cultures where traditionally women participate in a workforce to a lower degree (e.g., Yanar, Budworth, & Latham, 2009). These women may have especially low interview self-efficacy, which may make them less supportive of EE policies. Given the high immigration rates and high gender and cultural workforce diversity in Canada and the United States this may be an especially important aspect of increasing women’s support for EE policies.

**Conclusion**

EE policies are important tools for promoting diversity in the workplace (Kalev et al., 2006), yet their effectiveness has been hindered by individuals’ negative reactions to these policies. One prominent explanation in the literature for these negative reactions has been a self-interest framework where reactions are driven by beneficiary status. However, inconsistent results have emerged showing that beneficiaries, despite being the ones to benefit from such policies, can also have negative reactions to EE policies. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of why both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries may have negative reactions, we proposed a broader conceptualization of self-interest where self-image threats partially underlie negative reactions to gender-based EE policies. In context of legal, weak preference gender-based EE policies, we found that in addition to self-interest operationalized as beneficiary status, self-image threat plays an important role in reactions of both men and women. Given that EE policies are important tools for increasing employment of traditionally disadvantaged groups that are mandated in many countries and that their effectiveness depends on both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries support, gaining deeper understanding at what factors influence support has important implications for future development and success of EE policies.

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**Appendix A. Materials for Study 1**

**A.1. Employment equity policy**

The Statistics Canada 2011 census showed that while women make up more than half of the total Canadian workforce, they tend to be concentrated in occupations of lower status and pay. The largest percentage of women is currently employed in sales and service jobs and only a small percentage is working in management, professional, or supervisory positions. This uneven
distribution of females across certain positions can be mostly attributed to past discrimination against women in employment systems.

To address these inequalities, many organizations in Canada implement employment equity (EE) policies. EE policies refer to the elimination of unfair practices that prevent the entry, promotion, or retention of women in the workplace. [University] is also committed to the principles of employment equity and implements an EE policy for women when hiring faculty members and staff. However, there is no EE policy for women in place for co-op hiring and this may present an important area for an expansion of this policy at [university].

Research involving [university] students estimates that the hiring rate of female students for certain, more desirable co-op jobs is 35% and the hiring rate for males is 65%. Given that [university] consists of approximately 55% female students and 45% male students, the proportion of female students hired for certain jobs does not reflect the proportion of female students.

To address this imbalance, a new EE policy for women is proposed to be implemented for student hiring in [university] Co-op programs. This proposed EE policy suggests the target hiring rate for female students to be 55%, an increase of 20%. This would mean that the hiring rate for women would increase for co-op positions in which they are currently underrepresented. This EE policy would involve hiring female students over male students only if they had equal qualifications.

A.2. Environmental policy

The most recent Maclean's annual review of Canadian universities suggested that many universities across Canada have spent millions of dollars in the past years to become more eco-friendly. Despite this, there are still many challenges in achieving environmentally friendly and sustainable campuses. For example, it has been reported that recycling is still an issue on many campuses. The magazine suggests that these issues can be mostly attributed to a lack of general awareness of the importance of environmentally friendly and sustainable practices.

To address these challenges, many universities in Canada implement environmentally friendly policies such as a green campus policy. The green campus policy refers to broadening the campus’ eco-friendly focus by mandating the inclusion of environmental issues in university decision-making and by making sustainability a socially accepted norm on campus. [University] is also committed to the principles of environmentally friendly and sustainable practices and implements a green campus policy. However, this policy does not engage students and this may present an important area for an expansion of this policy at [university].

As such, [university] is proposing to implement a new Green Campus Policy to increase students’ awareness of the importance of environmentally friendly practices and to engage them in implementing those practices. This new policy would integrate environmental knowledge into all relevant disciplines, such as improving environmental studies course offerings; providing opportunities for students to study campus and local environmental problems; conducting environmental audits of [university]’s practices; instituting environmentally responsible purchasing policies; reducing campus waste; and maximizing energy efficiency.

Appendix B. Materials for Study 2

B.1. Employment equity policy: Addressing past discrimination framing

The Statistics Canada 2011 census showed that while women make up more than half of the total Canadian Workforce, they tend to be concentrated in occupations of lower status and pay. The largest percentage of women is currently employed in sales and service jobs and only a small percentage is working in management, professional, or supervisory positions. This uneven distribution of females across certain positions can be mostly attributed to past discrimination against women in employment systems. That is, in the past men had an unearned privilege in hiring and promotions over women.

To address these inequalities, many organizations in Canada implement employment equity (EE) policies. EE policies refer to the elimination of unfair practices that prevent the entry, promotion, or retention of women in the workplace. EE policies are thus designed to address past discrimination against women in employment systems and make employment available to women at the same rates as to men.

In line with this, [university] is proposing to implement a new Employment Equity (EE) policy for women for student hiring in [university] Co-op programs. This proposed EE policy suggests a target hiring rate for female students of 55%. This would mean that the hiring rate for women would increase for co-op positions in which they are currently underrepresented. This EE policy would involve hiring female students over male students only if they had equal qualifications.

B.2. Employment equity policy: Promoting diversity framing

In today’s highly globalized business world, a major imperative for organizations worldwide is to find and hire the best employees. To increase the pool of qualified potential candidates, many organizations have started adopting diversity policies. Diversity policies encourage employees that traditionally have been less represented in management and professional positions (such as women) to apply for positions in organizations.

To increase the pool of qualified potential candidates, many organizations in Canada implement employment equity (EE) policies. EE policies refer to practices that promote the entry, promotion, or retention of women in the workplace. EE policies are thus designed to increase and diversify the pool of high quality candidates, which given today’s globalization and difficulty in recruiting top talent makes good business sense for Canadian organizations.

In line with this, [university] is proposing to implement a new Employment Equity (EE) policy for women for student hiring in [university] Co-op programs. This proposed EE policy suggests a target hiring rate for female students of 55%. This would mean that the hiring rate for women would increase for co-op positions in which they are currently underrepresented. This EE policy would involve hiring female students over male students only if they had equal qualifications.

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