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Affirmative Action Alters Identity-Related Psychological Processes: A Phenomenological Study in South Africa

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Abstract

As group identities form, they construct social structures. Reciprocally, policies that alter social structures also influence an individual's identity-related psychological processes. This study investigated how affirmative action, by changing external social structures, affects identity-related psychological processes. Twenty-seven participants were furnished with a survey in which they listed twelve of their identities and evaluated each identity's significance toward continuity, belonging, self-perception, distinctiveness, and meaning. Thereafter, detailed write-ups of their lived experiences in spaces with affirmative action were gathered. A thematic analysis revealed that affirmative action affected both identity enactment and self-verification processes. These included changing (1) the degree of centrality and salience of identity categories such as racial versus national identity (2) intergenerational continuity and continuity across spaces (3) striving for distinctiveness in those perceived as benefiting from the policy (4) self-perceptions based on self- or policy-attribution of success or failure experiences, and (5) forging of meaning for 'pioneers' among beneficiaries of the policy. Based on the similarity of experiences related to affirmative action, the study shares subgroups within those benefiting from the policy that highlight the significance of (1) perceptions about the policy and (2) self- versus policy-attribution by individuals in altering their identity-related psychological processes.

Keywords

Despite increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that have significantly increased the speed of social change in general (Mack et al., 2016), diversity statistics are changing relatively slower (Crosby et al., 2006; Daya & April, 2021; Makgetla, 1995). A faster pace of change can occur when diversity targets are supported through legal innovation. Affirmative action is such a policy that aims at speeding the pace of change toward supporting diversity in targeted spaces (April et al., 2023). Numerous examples worldwide provide empirical evidence that institutions and organizations adopting affirmative action have observed greater shifts in diversity and equal opportunity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Such studies have concluded that "the transformation of the extant system of power relations in the workplace cannot be divorced from the broader macro-level factors" (J. Syed & Özbilgin, 2009, p. 2442); thus, supporting legal innovation that disrupts social structures at the macro-policy level (Ettlinger, 2001).

Contrary to the above, opposition to affirmative action by members of dominant, privileged groups is socially prominent and also available in the literature (Bobo, 1998). Additionally, many scholars who take the minority group's perspective have also critiqued affirmative action, linking it to victimization mentality, withholding of effort, hindering reconciliation across social groups, casting doubt on the accomplishments of minority achievers, reversing historical prejudicial practices, and providing legal loopholes for corruption, to name a few (Crosby et al., 2006; Heilman, 1996).

Other scholars have maintained a neutral stance on affirmative action, intending to find common ground between supporters and opponents to uncover agreed specificities between the two, largely polarized, opinions (Reyna et al., 2005).

This study neither aims to join the debate for or against affirmative action nor to identify racial ideology or dimensions of racial identity that can lean toward or against such policies (Schmermund et al., 2001). Such discussions are relevant and being addressed in current literature with the aim to align macro-level support for ensuring dignity and protecting the self-worth of those marginalized. Instead, the paper stemmed from an unaddressed and reversed phenomenon, not focusing on social structures that demand legal innovation such as affirmative action but instead on how such legal innovation disrupts social structures in targeted spaces and impacts individuals, including those benefiting from affirmative action policies (Heilman, 1996). To critically evaluate the phenomenon, the research avoided limiting the effects to the known, positive outcomes for beneficiaries of the policy (Bell, 2021) to uncover the counterintuitive phenomenon of how such disruption, despite being aimed at benefiting individuals from marginalized groups, can have unintended consequences on individuals belonging to these groups.

Only limited literature has addressed this phenomenon. For example, one research has highlighted and contested how such policies can place unprepared individuals into certain spaces, such as higher education, and as a consequence, concluded that affirmative action can reinforce stereotype threats (Fischer & Massey, 2007). As such, non-preferential approaches to affirmative action were endorsed as means for supporting diversity and inclusion (Kravitz, 2008). This research extends some of the known impacts of affirmative action on beneficiaries to uncover its influences on an individual's identity-related psychological processes. Common themes of identity-related influences on the psyche are used to develop an understanding of the underlying psychological factors that are salient and dictate the implications of affirmative action on identity-related psychological processes.

Literature Review

Colloquially, identity refers to a social group to which an individual belongs. However, needs-based theories that explore motivations for identity development have proposed further motives for identity development beyond satisfying the belonging need. For example, Vignoles et al.'s (2006) framework of needs-based identity development identified five motives of continuity, belonging, distinctiveness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and meaning as motives behind identity development during adolescence. In their framework, firstly, continuity refers to adolescents' experience of being the same person today, compared to what one has been in the past and will be in the future (van Doeselaar et al., 2018); secondly, integration into a group permits feelings of belonging (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016); thirdly when the group is perceived as high-worth, belonging to it supports self-esteem and self-efficacy needs, or collectively the individual's self-perception; fourthly, incorporating the group's practices and values, integration into a group can permit the "forging of meaning" (Solomon, 2013); and lastly, when personal differences do not entirely align with the master narrative of the group, that potential for belongingness is threatened but distinctiveness needs are satisfied (M. Syed & McLean, 2016). While the needs are interlinked, such as the need for distinctiveness when met can also support self-esteem and self-efficacy to further develop a perception of oneself, the foundational differences between the needs remain clear as these link to needs and personality attributes that are foundational to the study of psychology.

Beyond needs-based theories of identity development, Breakwell (1986), while researching scenarios when identity is threatened, concluded not only identity formation but the notion of identity to be a process. From such a perspective, the post-adolescence impact of these identity-development motives was acknowledged as the processes of identity verification and enactment.

- Self-verification processes satisfy identity-related motives of meaning, self-esteem, and distinctiveness, where the meaning motive is founded on a need to establish or maintain a purpose in one's existence (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), self-esteem motive maintains or enhances a positive self-perception (Onorato & Turner, 2004), and distinctiveness motive pushes one towards individuating one from others in the identity group (van Doeselaar et al., 2018).
- Identity enactment processes satisfy one's self-esteem, belonging, and efficacy needs, where the belonging motive maintains or enhances closeness to other people in the identity groups (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016), and self-efficacy processes maintain or enhance a positive domain-specific self-perception through an individual's belief of their

capacity to execute behaviors necessary for specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1994). While not included in the framework, the autonomy motive has also been suggested as a part of the identity enactment processes (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012). Autonomy's influence on ego identity is easily sketched, but it remains questionable if it fulfills a vital social identity motive; thus, it continues to be excluded from the social identity framework.

Affirmative Action and Identity-Related Processes

The study of diversity and inclusion leverages identities to group people. As per Stets and Burke (2000), group membership is theorized to arise from three foundational factors:

- Social identification: through which people may modify their own behavior to match the group to which they belong,
- Social categorization: the process through which people and objects are sorted into groups to make them more understandable, and
- Social comparison: where individuals compare their shared ingroup with other out-groups.

The three factors above most frequently work in unison for identity development, and empirical research has statistically proven persistent inequality between identity groups at the macro level (Crosby et al., 2006). One way that has been adopted in practice for correcting these is through legal innovation. For example, to protect members of marginalized identity groups, crimes that target members due to their belonging to these groups are classified as 'hate crimes'. Similarly, unfair treatment of individuals of marginalized identity groups is regarded as 'discriminatory' and bears legal consequences in many jurisdictions. Affirmative action presents such a policy that "regulates the allocation of scarce positions in education, employment or business contracting to increase the representation in those positions of persons belonging to certain population" (Fryer & Loury, 2005, p. 147).

Since statistical evidence proves that power disparities between such socially categorized groups are uncontestable (Daya & April, 2021), many countries have adopted policies to correct such an imbalance. One exception is Slovakia, where affirmative action policies are regarded as unconstitutional (Sowell, 2017). Similarly, in the U.K., affirmative action is treated as positive discrimination and deemed illegal, except for cases of parity between candidates where more favorable treatment of protected identity groups is permitted. Other countries have opted for opportunity enhancement programs over preferential selection and positive discriminatory programs (Krings et al., 2007). Excluding these few exceptions, typically, affirmative action policies favor the inclusion of certain social identities to offset exclusionary practices in certain targeted institutions or organizations. The scope of affirmative action policies varies in the protection of some or many identity groups in a few or several targeted spaces. The oldest such policy exists in India which was designed to counteract discrimination based on the caste system (Deshpande, 2019). Similarly, there are laws protecting Bumiputera in Malaysia, Taiwanese Aboriginals in Taiwan, Romani in Romania, Emiratis in the United Arab Emirates et cetera. The United States of America also had one of the oldest of such policies. However, having been subjected to constitutional legitimacy for quotas or race-conscious admission programs at universities, such a policy was recently deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court (Tanne, 2023). Nonetheless, rewards for schools and institutions for including minorities and allocating federal financial aid and scholarships have been retained so far.

The influence of such policies that aim to change systems of inequality on identity-related psychology is limited in the literature. Instead, scholars researching in this field have more frequently focused on the disruption of identity-related processes throughout life events. Such disruption differs from changing external societal systems because a focus on events that alter levels of ease or distress is also typically at a micro-level. As such, findings from such event-focused research, even when relatively aligned to identity-related facets such as self-worth to mitigate the effects of identity-influencing events (Burke, 2004), emanate from a premise of relatively fixed societal systems and a stable hierarchy of privileges between identity groups at a macro-level.

Instead, research that acknowledges changing social systems would need to address events that alter societal privileges assigned to identity groups at a macro-level. Some research has investigated the disruption of identities by changing external social structures in spaces that have adopted or abolished affirmative action. For example, a study in Brazil investigated the influence of the removal of affirmative action on individuals. Upon abolishing affirmative action, multiracial individuals with some black ancestries were found to be 30% less likely to identify as black, a position associated with lower privileges in the Brazilian setting. On the contrary, multiracial individuals with some

Asian ancestry were about 20% more likely to identify as Asian, a position of higher privilege in the setting, once affirmative action policies are abolished (Antman & Duncan, 2015). Such studies confirm that affirmative action, by shifting privileges for certain targeted groups in targeted spaces, can influence the identities of individuals (Op't Hoog et al., 2010), concluding that identities shift towards those identities that provide economic incentives or privileges in society (Antman & Duncan, 2015).

Except for the minority of individuals whose identities lie at the boundaries of social categories that separate identity groups, an option to change social categorization is not available to most people. Specifically addressing affirmative action and identity, a study in South Africa explored racial and ethnic identities in historically disadvantaged South African middle-managers to conclude a "stronger" racial identity component than ethnic identity in defining themselves in their mining work environment where affirmative action policies were adopted (Op't Hoog et al., 2010). Simultaneously, the study highlighted the participants' desire for a "...non-racial working environment where individual merits supersede racial association" (Op't Hoog et al., 2010, p. 60).

The Study

For most adults, social categorization that includes racial or gender identities, cannot or does not readily shift in response to external stimuli. As such, while valuable insights can be obtained from prior research that observed shifts in identities upon introduction or abolition of affirmative action, research regarding the experience of affirmative action on the identities or identity-related processes of those individuals who cannot shift identities towards privileges given by affirmative action legislation is largely absent. To address this gap in the literature, this study focused on those identity groups that do not identify at the fringes of these social categorizations and cannot shift their identities in response to affirmative action to shift their identities towards those that enhance societal privileges. Such a study has been explicitly demanded in the literature, highlighting that current research: "do[es] not articulate sufficiently the different macro-social contexts experienced by the various subgroups and the possible effects of these contexts..." (Porter & Washington, 1993, p. 144).

Identity-related motives (Vignoles et al., 2006) that develop identities are instrumental in creating social structures. Unfortunately, such a process is frequently inequitable. It assigns privileges to certain groups and oppresses non-dominant groups. To correct social injustices experienced by such groups, affirmative action aims to shift privileges by non-passive preference towards marginalized group members in targeted spaces. This research investigated how such policies affect individuals, such as prompting shifts in social identification. However, where identities are founded on social categorization, individuals cannot readily make such a shift towards identities with greater privileges in society (see Figure 1). Therefore, this study aimed to address the gap in the literature by answering the research question: How does affirmative action policy, which shifts social structures in targeted spaces, alter an individual's identity-related psychological processes?

Figure 1

Diagrammatic Illustration of the Focus of This Study Shown in Dashed Arrows
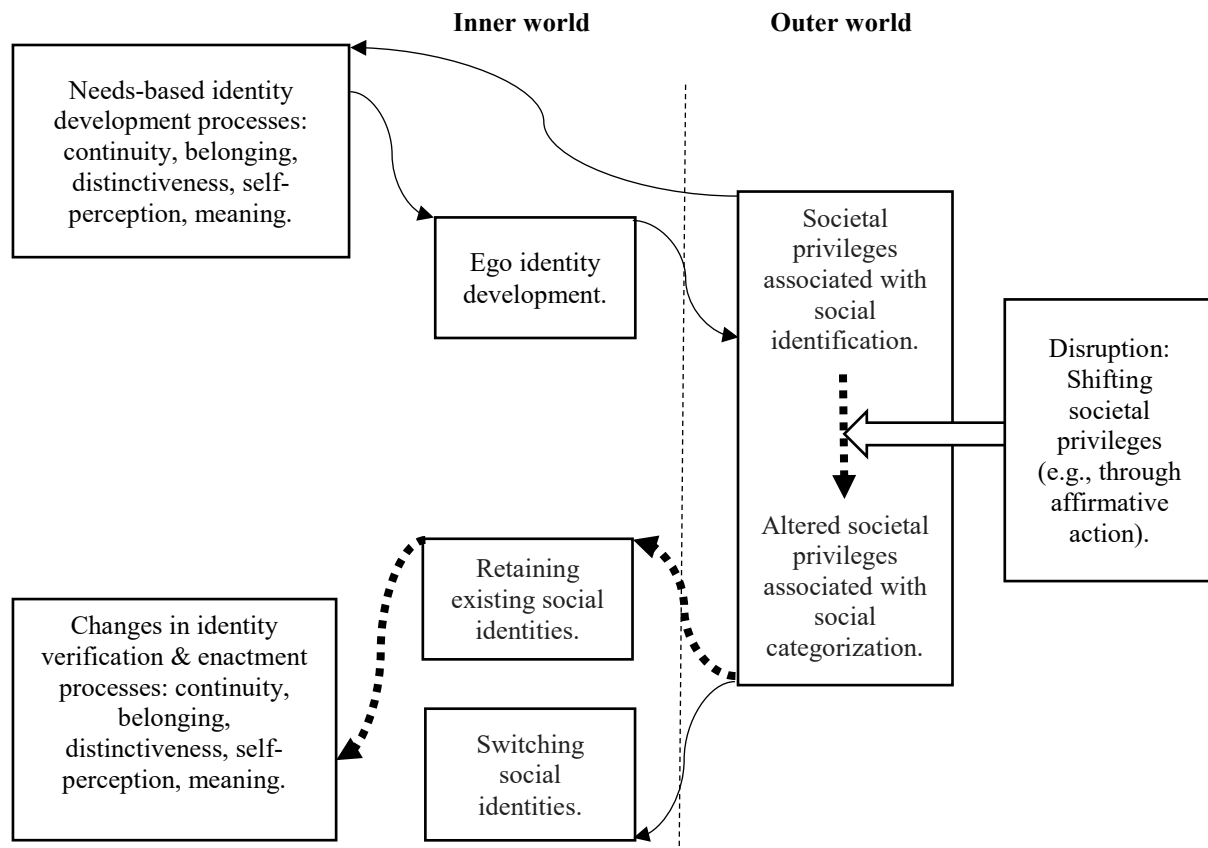
Note. Needs-based theories explain ego-identity development during adolescence, which has resulted in unequal distribution of privileges to different groups in society. This hierarchy of privileges can be disrupted through affirmative action, which either leads to changing social identities based on social identification or, where identities are unable to change, it alters identity-related psychological processes.

Method

The wide scope of identity-related processes that range from continuity to self-perception, tensions between belonging versus distinctiveness, to identities providing meaning in life (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012; Vignoles et al., 2006) entail that deductive testing would require multiple studies, each with narrower scope to individually address identity-related psychological processes, or constructs within the larger concepts in the framework. Additionally, since prior research leads to an anticipation of links between affirmative action and identity-related processes that have not been explicitly addressed in the literature, an inductive, exploratory approach was taken, and a qualitative method was deemed suitable for answering the research question.

Due to the availability of substantial groundwork around identity-related motives (Batory, 2014), such as a suitable framework for identity-related processes (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012) and the availability of a survey (Vignoles et al., 2006), the research did not need to follow a grounded theory method. Instead, an exploratory approach towards the phenomenon of disruption of identity-related motives supported a phenomenological approach (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Since the phenomenon is founded on subjectivism, the study aimed to develop a theory from the lived experiences of participants from their experiences in spaces that had adopted affirmative action policy. The limited use of lived experiences in policymaking has been a source of inquiry in social policymaking (Speed & Reeves, 2023). As such,

a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology approach was taken (Laverty, 2003). The methodology is founded on a philosophy of interpretivism (Morgan, 1980), where lived experiences of the participants are gathered during data collection, which is interpreted by researchers. Due to the need to interpret the stories shared by the participants, the methodology explicitly demands interpretation from researchers and acknowledges that their lived experiences present a vital element for interpretation (Greatrex-White, 2008), which requires "bringing 'self' to the situation" (Spence, 2017, p. 836).

However, unlike the typical method of conducting interviews for data collection, a write-up was preferred over interviewing the participants due to limited options for in-person interviews due to social distancing requirements that would only allow impersonal online interactions, diminish the need for political correctness (Van Boven, 2000), and encourage participants to freely narrate their experiences without interruptions or fear or judgment from the interviewee. Guidelines for hermeneutic phenomenological writing, as available from the literature, were shared with the participants. These included how language is spoken over how it is written, sharing varied examples, leaning toward a reflective writing style, and revising by conferring with confidants, to name a few (Lauterbach, 2018).

Setting

The ideal setting for answering the research question lay where the scope of affirmative action policies is widespread. Firstly, in terms of the population of the targeted identity groups by the policy. In the absence of this, finding suitable participants for the study can pose a practical challenge for research. Secondly, the policy needed to be far-reaching in respect of segments of the economy and institutions targeted by it. Most affirmative action policies are narrowly focused on civil or academic institutions (Sowell, 2017). For a prominent influence, the scope of affirmative action policies needs to be wider and across spaces for it to have an impact on identity-related psychological processes. In the absence of this, disruptions may be domain-specific rather than generalized, whereby space-related identities may be influenced rather than salient identities that remain central to psychological processes across spaces. Thirdly, the policy needed to have been adopted during the lifespan of the participants for them to have the ability to share their lived experiences of its adoption.

The relatively new South African constitution of 1996 includes the Employment Equity Act that regulates affirmative action. A legislatively suggested framework for its implementation led to the development of the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) scorecard in 2003, which was broadened in scope in 2013 into Broad-Based Black Empowerment (B-BBEE) to include African-black, Indian, colored, and mixed-race, and women specifically, in equity ownership, management control, skills development, enterprise and supplier development, and socio-economic development of 'previously marginalized identity groups', which makes it wide in the scope of its influence on institutions and organizations (Ndhlovu, 2019). The incorporation of a relatively recent and broader targeted affirmative action (e.g., in all businesses with more than 50 employees) policy in South Africa that targets the majority of the population made it an optimally suitable setting for the research.

Due to the long (since the arrival of Europeans and colonization in the 15th century and subsequently during apartheid in 1948; Greenstein, 1998) and complex history of double colonization, briefly addressing the contextual history around the subject poses a challenge. While this contextual knowledge is important (e.g., the continued use of racial identity categorizations of the apartheid era by B-BBEE that bear the legacy of overt prejudice and institutionalized racism) for interpreting participants' hermeneutics; hence the paper and its findings, this section has limited its scope to address the choice of South Africa as an optimally suitable setting for answering the research question.

Sampling

To effectively address the research's aim, the participants needed to have passed the stage of psychological development associated with identity development (Marcia, 1966). Borland (2000) researched identity development in college, and while its dynamics are under debate, the relative stability of identities post-adolescence is largely agreed upon. Since B-BBEE applies only to South Africans who were citizens before 27 April 1994, participants over the age of 28 were needed as samples for the study.

Participants were sought from a post-graduate elective course addressing diversity and inclusion that was attended by voluntarily enrolled candidates. This course was hosted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing regulations. While based on convenience sampling, an interest in matters of diversity ensured that the participants had relevant experiences in different spaces to share their reflections in the write-up. Informed consent was sought through signed consent forms, confidentiality and anonymity of the participant were ensured by assigning participants numbers, and data were protected by saving it on a secure University server. Additionally, participants were assured that there would be no repercussions for not providing consent and that they could revoke their consent retrospectively, if they wanted, by contacting the researcher.

Data Collection

Intersectionality of identities (Crenshaw, 1991) theorized that individual experiences are colored by not one identity but at the intersection of multiple identities. A survey that required participants to list twelve of their identities and calculate their respective identity-related motives (Vignoles et al., 2006) was made available to the participants. The purpose of the survey was to use the ranks revealed by the survey to aid in identifying those identities that are significant to the six identity-related psychological processes. These ranks were used to guide the qualitative data analysis toward significant identities for exploring identity-related psychological processes.

Additionally, a write-up was requested from them that addressed their lived experiences and reflections on affirmative action in organizations and institutions in which they have worked or studied. Phinney (2000, p. 28) stated that: "A narrative approach is being recognized as a means of examining how individuals make sense of their lives within a changing sociohistorical context". The self-reflective document was encouraged to encapsulate personal narratives freely in allignment with the hermeneutic phenomenological method. Since this study explored changing settings across spaces in which participants live their lives that differ in their levels of adoption of affirmative action, detailed stories of the participants' experiences and their reflections on these experiences regarding their response and influences on identities were necessary to be gathered in the data to unpack the significance of these experiences on elements of their identity-related psychological processes.

Data Analysis

The write-ups were uploaded on NVivo and the first round of coding was conducted during which all identities in the personal reflection document were coded. Thereafter, these identities were triangulated with the identities and their motives, where available from the qualitative data. Any differences between the twelve identities shared by participants in the survey data and the identities that the participants wrote about were analyzed. One such difference was noted in the majority of South African participants in the sample who shared ethnic, national, and language as significant identities in their write-up, even though these while not always quantitatively identified in the survey. The above difference was explained by the fact that some colloquial identity terminologies used in South Africa reflect multiple identity categories; as such, any omissions of identities in the survey were checked across multiple identity categories within one terminology that could have been used in completing the survey. For example, the identity of 'Muslim' in South Africa can define ethnicity, race, and/or religion. Similarly, Afrikaans as an identity can define ethnic identity and language identities, and even race for white South Africans. While this greatly assisted in triangulating the two sources of data, it revealed a shortcoming of Vignoles et al.'s (2006) survey in the South African setting, where one term in the survey can frequently refer to several identity categories, which makes it challenging to assign identity-related psychological processes to identity categories.

Where the survey ranked some of the participants' identities significantly lower than other identities, and the participants did not refer to these lower-ranked identities in the survey in their write-up, these identities were considered to be insignificant for further analysis relating to effects on psychological processes. On average, only six of the twelve possible identities that could be listed in the survey were used for conducting the qualitative data analysis. Also, since the survey ranked some identities to be equally significant, it led to a variety in the number of identities that were used for qualitative analysis. The number of identities used for the qualitative analysis ranged from 11 identities (P22) to 2 identities (P4).

This above triangulation (Annells, 2006) of quantitative and qualitative, hermeneutic data was used to tabulate a list of significant identities for each participant (see Table 1). The identities in the table are those that were ranked high in the survey for their influence on identity-related processes (Vignoles et al., 2006) and were referred to in the self-reflective write-up.

Table 1

List of Participants and Their Significant Identities Derived From Vignoles et al. (2006) Survey

#	Significant identities
1	Indian, woman, intelligent, concerned about community reputation.
2	Black, male, heterosexual, Christian, African, millennial, finance professional, father.
3	Black, female, Mozambican, foreigner, curvy, middle-child.
4	Black, woman.
5	White, male, heterosexual, not believing in any particular religion, South African, non-drinker, father.
6	Colored, woman, heterosexual, Muslim, immigrant, career-oriented.
7	Black, female, South African.
8	Black, woman, Congolese, South African resident.
9	White, male, Christian, Afrikaans, Educated, youngest sibling, husband.
10	Colored, male, Indian married to a white woman, mixed-race children.
11	Colored, female, previously and currently disadvantaged, South African.
12	Black, male, Mpondo, isi-Mapondo speaker, limited aspirations.
13	Colored, woman, youngest member of the Board.
14	Indian, cis-gender male, heterosexual, well-educated, middle-aged, able-bodied.
15	Black, perfectionist, firstborn, foreign, able-bodied, international student, mother, wife.
16	Black, male, middle manager.
17	White, male, attracted to and married to a woman, Cape Townian, English, overweight, no disabilities.
18	Colored, female, middle-aged.
19	Indian-Malay heritage, deeply influenced by Muslim upbringing, no longer following Islam, traditional, feminist.
20	White, male, heterosexual, South African, abled, middle-upper class.
21	Heterosexual, Mosotho, not fluent in English.
22	Colored, male, heterosexual, Christian, born and raised in Cape Town, South African, Young, middle-class, English-speaking.
23	White, male, heterosexual, South African, English speaker.
24	Colored, cis-gendered male, heterosexual, Camissa heritage.
25	White, male, 40-year-old, brown hair and green eyes, chair of local Police committee.
26	White, woman, heterosexual, Christian, German.
27	Black, woman, Ndebele.

The above exercise allowed for identities to be used to segregate participants into similar identity groups. Additionally, a second round of coding the qualitative data was conducted based on identity-related processes in Vignoles et al.'s (2006) framework of continuity, belonging, distinctiveness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and meaning. The sub-codes within each identity-related psychological process were thematically collated based on the similarity of experiences. To share an example, one group of second-round codes included experiences of encountering explicitly advertised B-BBEE positions, the opaqueness of the outcome of candidate selection from hiring interviews, and similar for a promotion that was attributed to B-BBEE, lack of clarity regarding B-BBEE policy adopted by the organization such as not knowing the organization's B-BBEE score, et cetera. Some of the other themes merging from the second round of coding included experiences of preferential treatment, tokenism, being treated as incompetent by managers and colleagues, or the contrary (e.g., juniors viewed as managers due to their gender, race, or height compared to team members). Patterns and commonalities between the axial codes were used to group similar themes of experiences and their influence on identity-related motives. Further identity groups than those identified in the survey and the write-up emerged

during this process, such as different perceptions of 'pioneers', that facilitated the sensible grouping of the experiences influencing identity-related motives for specific identities.

Descriptive Analysis

The survey of identities and their significance and identity-related motives (Vignoles et al., 2006) required the sharing of twelve identities by each participant. The significance of the identities ranged from 40 to 10 out of a possible range of 42 to 6. Nine (33%) participants were African-black, ten (37%) identified themselves as colored, Indian, or mixed races, seven (26%) were white, and one (4%) did not reveal his race explicitly. Data analysis revealed the greatest significance of race for the participants, with 26 of the 27 participants (96%) survey data ranking race to be of high significance. Thirteen (48%) participants were men, ten (37%) participants were women, and three (11%) did not explicitly reveal their gender. The second most significant identity was gender, as identified by 24 (89%) of the participants. Out of the three that did not mention gender as their identity, one mentioned the role of being a mother and wife as two significant identities (P15), and another as being a daughter and feminist (P19). As such, race and gender were regarded as the most significant identities in the sample.

Sexuality was listed as a significant identity by eleven participants (41%), and religious identities by eight (30%). Other significant identities included personality attributes, such as being a perfectionist, age-related identity (e.g., millennial or middle-aged), socio-economic status, profession, disabilities, and body shape (e.g., curvy, overweight, or muscular built).

Results

The research sought to explore the influence of affirmative action on identity-related psychological processes of continuity, belonging, distinctiveness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and meaning. The survey revealed the significance of race and gender for the participants. As such, the qualitative data analysis remained focused on these identities. Irrespective of race or gender, the policy's effects on identity-related processes were evident, which are presented below in their respective headings.

Continuity

A major criticism of affirmative action legislation is that it does not alter societal categorizations of people, but instead legislatively supports groups while using definitions based on the same identities during their oppression (Heilman, 1996). As such, based on the literature review, continuity in social identities was expected. This was observed in the data, with two nuances that are discussed under the sub-headings below.

Intergenerational Continuity

Continuity represents a need for an individual to perceive themselves similarly across a lifetime. However, the need for continuity across generations in collectivist cultures has been shown by previous research (Phinney, 2000). Since the majority of South African children grow up living in multi-generational homes (Hall et al., 2018), conflicts between generations form a part and parcel of the generation gap within a household. Affirmative action, by altering privileges available, provides sources of additional differences in lived experiences between generations within the family despite belonging to the same identity group. An overwhelming majority of the participants regarded many of the constraints imposed within the definitions of vertical identities that pass from parents to children as restrictions on freedom for developing their novel understanding of these identities and for exploring horizontal identities that are developed by joining peer groups outside the family home (Solomon, 2013). For example, while affirmative action encourages women's participation in education and the economy, prior generations of women were discouraged due to patriarchal and apartheid norms. These differences alter the experiences of women across different generations within households. One participant shared: *"The struggle for work-life balance is intensified by cultural perceptions of women and particularly*

mothers. Women are encouraged to make sacrifices for their children while simultaneously seeking self-fulfillment in their work lives. Maintaining both of these... have resulted in a work-family conflict" (P19). The gender-role disparity between the generations was also a challenge for men who shared their burdens of fulfilling roles, particularly of being a provider, as challenging in current challenging economic conditions (Dharani et al., 2021). While these challenges to intergenerational continuity did not alter the identity terminologies (i.e., different genders still identified themselves with the gender identities across generations); however, disruption to inter-generational continuity emerged from differences in what is meant for the participants to belong to that identity. For example, while there was continuity in women claiming womanhood as their identity, the understanding of womanhood varied across generations, which was specifically pronounced with respect to their understanding of gender-based roles. One participant shared: *"My family is very traditional where the duties of the man and woman [are] concerned, but I have experienced … shift [of] perspectives on assumed gender-based roles" (P18:840).*

Fragmentation Across Spaces

An individual's identity is multifaceted, and each component of this multifaceted identity potentially serves some or multiple identity-related processes. Coherence includes contextual integration of various domains, temporal coordination of past, present, and future, ego integration of domains over time, as well as person-society integration. While these identities (even if developed in the same stage of psychological development) don't need to achieve coherence (M. Syed & McLean, 2016), continuously needing to act and behave differently across domains can lead individuals to experience identity fragmentation or development of identities that are collectively incoherent. From a continuity-motivation perspective, identity can be viewed as being contextually constrained (space-specific or domain-specific), and individual identity freedom is restrained by the boundaries imposed upon individuals in the space/s which they occupy.

Since apartheid excluded the majority of South Africans from most formal organizations and institutions, these spaces evolved from norms and rituals of the previously advantaged, dominant, white group (Daya & April, 2021). As affirmative action supports those identity groups that were either wholly or partially excluded from such organizations and institutions, their pioneering participation in spaces has meant that they entered institutions or organizations with cultures that did not resonate with their cultural upbringing and even values. Participants with such experiences were grouped as 'pioneers' within the group of those perceived to economically benefit (black South Africans, particularly women from B-BBEE). This required participants from previously disadvantaged groups to straddle between different cultures across the family home, community, and work, which posed a continuity concern across spaces. Demands for defeminization and deculturization for inclusion are well-researched in the diversity and inclusion literature (April et al., 2023), which were echoed by our participants. One participant shared: *"Honestly, I think there are times I just pretend to be okay with things. Pretend I like the same things. Pretend I have the same wants. Pretends I have the same likes [and] needs. Pretend I have the same accent. Pretend I agree. Pretend I am not negatively impacted. I think it is just easier to pretend in these spaces to overcome certain challenges" (P22:859).* He goes on to conclude: *"I can see that the people of color that get selected … and … promoted are not their authentic self – they try to fit into 'the superior race'" (P22:859/2),* highlighting how exhibiting proximity to the dominant, white group, or even 'passing' (Clair et al., 2005) as white due to a lighter skin color or a white South African accent, continues to yield privileges in the workplace. While the above can be attributed to organization cultures that resist change, it is the tension between affirmative action that demands a certain speed and entry into culturally resistant 'white spaces' that generates a societal environment that places burdens of cognitive dissonance on non-dominant identity group members.

Even those workspaces in the formal economy that have emerged post-apartheid have largely followed Western or white organizational norms. However, many participants aspired to challenge the fragmentation of identities across spaces and exhibited a strive for authenticity in spaces that did not cater to their authentic selves. Existential authenticity is the ability to freely express and define oneself, determine one's own identity and discover their meaning, and respond to the environment in their way (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). This fragmentation emerged as a psychological challenge that demanded introspection and ironing out incoherence. For example, one participant shared: *"I've learnt that in order to show up authentically, I need to first introspect and figure out exactly who I am and want to be" (P6:221).* One participant shared her wish to avoid fragmentation and: *"...ensure that I remain authentic in these spaces and not allow my discomfort to cause changes or 'white-washing' of my behavior" (P13:813).* A demand for the decoloniality of

such spaces emerged, whereby socioeconomic practices needed to shift the pillars of Western foundations (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). The course of actions demanded ranged from language in organizations to organizational culture (Flores & Rosa, 2015), and a host of precautions against exclusionary practices (April et al., 2023).

Belonging to Distinctiveness

From the literature review, shifts in racial versus ethnic identity components in spaces with affirmative action (Op't Hoog et al., 2010) led to an anticipation that shifts in identity-related processes for belonging may be uncovered from the data. Due to the clarity among the participants of whites as non-beneficiaries of affirmative action, a shift away from national identity to racial and ethnic identities was noted in white South Africans. One participant shared: *"I consider myself South African, first and foremost. This reality is a difficult one to navigate [now]. It [B-BBEE] makes me question whether there is a place for me in South Africa and if I am wanted here at all" (P5:219)*. Another participant shared: *"Affirmative action, in the form of B-BBEE, excludes me, a white male, from many future career opportunities in South Africa" (P5:219/2)*. Many participants linked this lack of continuity of belonging to a national identity as being evidenced in the emigration statistics of the white workforce. As such, for white South Africans, the policy has decreased belonging to their national identity. In the absence of national identity, catering to belonging needs has shifted toward racial identity as white or ethnic identity within the white race, predominantly of English or Afrikaans identities.

Unlike the exclusion of whites through affirmative action, expressions from Indian, colored, and mixed race participants indicated a perception of continued exclusion (previously through policies adopted by apartheid, and currently through the adoption of B-BBEE) despite the term 'black' in the employment equity legislation as encompassing African-black, Indian, colored, and mixed races. As such, most of the participants regarded affirmative action not to have enhanced their national identity, colloquially referred to as 'first, we were not white enough, now we are not black enough'. One participant shared: *"While I am disadvantaged, it appears that I am [neither] considered as... black [n]or white... I am neither"*. The participant concludes: *"I often feel that Indians and coloreds alike were an afterthought when affirmative action and employment equity were being designed and institutionalized" (P14:822/2)*. As such, despite being beneficiaries of the policy, Indian, colored, and mixed-race participants did not share shifts in identity-related processes for their belonging, which remained within their ethnic subgroup identity. Nuances within this were noted where participants shared their Muslim identity as ethnic rather than merely religious identity. Additionally, Participant 10 shared belonging challenges as his identity shifted from being colored to a mixed-race family identity. While democracy was expected to support national identity's emergence in all marginalized race groups; however, the data revealed it to have done so for Africans-blacks only. As such, rather than democracy, the influence of perceived inclusion and exclusion in affirmative action policy, and B-BBEE in specific, is concluded. For Africans-blacks, since affirmative action legislation excludes foreigners, non-South African black participants explicitly linked it to rifts amongst people from the African-black race based on nationality. About B-BBEE, one non-South African participant stated: *"I have not been directly exposed to xenophobic attacks, but I know the struggle of being an African[black] foreign[er] in South Africa." (P15:830/5)*.

While African-black South Africans and immigrant in our sample still regarded themselves as African-black and placed great significance on race for their identity in the survey, national identity as a divider for a pan-African, black racial identity group emerged in the qualitative data. One African-black participant, when talking about areas with an overwhelming African-black majority, shared: *"I am afraid to enter townships and informal areas... As a black person, why am I so scared about another black man rooming around our neighborhood than I am of the white man?" (P16:833)*. Therefore, in contrast to findings from the literature at a meso-organizational level of a "stronger" racial identity component than ethnic identity in black middle management in the mining sector where affirmative action policies were adopted (Op't Hoog et al., 2010), the data from this study at a macro-level suggests that affirmative action altered centrality and salience for African-blacks toward national identity becoming more salient over African-black racial identity.

A vital motivation behind forming an identity is one of belonging to a group. Once belonging needs are satisfied, distinctiveness from the group permits additional psychological benefits (Rowan, 2015). By supporting entry into

former 'white' educational institutions, Africans-blacks, Indians, colored, and mixed-race identities are presented with the opportunity that can enable their entry into professions that were previously reserved for whites. Additionally, affirmative action supports their entry into the formal commercial sector of South Africa. By entry into educational institutions, professions, and formal organizations, affirmative action has subsequently supported the exploration of horizontal identities, which are acquired by joining a peer group (Solomon, 2013). These horizontal, professional identities permitted the participants a mode for distinctiveness from other South Africans or those within their ethnic and racial group. For example, participant 14 considered being well-educated as an identity that not only supports his self-esteem but ranked highly on providing him distinctiveness. Participant 2's survey data for the identity of being a finance professional did the same, and Participant 16 regarded being a middle manager as one of his identities. Since only African-black South Africans were perceived to benefit from affirmative action, in general, distinctiveness-seeking hermeneutics emerged from participants from that group. While the above scenario was typical, not all African-black South African participants leveraged affirmative action to seek distinctiveness through accomplishments through exploration at institutions of higher education (Borland, 2000). For example, one participant regarded having *"limited aspirations" (P12:810)* as his identity. The fact that this rather unusual identity ranked highly in its contribution to the participants' distinctiveness suggests a social push amongst African-black South Africans to strive for distinctiveness through achieving economically and professionally ambitious aspirations.

Self-Perception (Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy)

While it can be expected that an inability to enter spaces due to affirmative action by white men would influence their self-perception, it was not evidenced in the data. This is because the participants regarded spaces where affirmative action was implemented were acting against their entry or success. As such, any cases of inclusion in such spaces despite the implementation of B-BBEE supported their self-perception, while any lack of progress or success within such spaces was attributed to affirmative action rather than to their self-worth or abilities. As such, the data did not reveal affirmative action to hamper their self-perception, as their entry into spaces adopting B-BBEE and any successes were attributed to themselves while failures were attributed to the affirmative action policy, presenting white men with a scapegoat in non-accomplishment scenarios.

Self-perception boosts from affirmative were shared by those paving the way or 'pioneers'. One participant shared: *"Throughout my education and career thus far, I have often found myself being the only Indian female... this has made me proud"* (P1:205). While pioneers shared expressions of pride from entering spaces that were previously designated for whites during apartheid, most black participants shared experiences of how their personal efforts for achieving objective career successes were brushed aside by others around them, who attributed their successes to affirmative action than on their individual distinctiveness. They shared examples of their hard work, dedication, commitment, sacrifices, or reliance on support from family to uplift themselves; however, these did not have a corresponding beneficial influence on their self-perceptions due to the attribution of their achievement on affirmative action. One participant shared: *"Finally, when you make a sports team based on your ability and the fact that you are good enough then you are referred to as a 'quota' player or only there because of transformation, and it was a mechanism of those to continuously try to oppress me"* (P10:805). The motive by organizations for 'tokenism' (Alexander, 2007) was also shared by our participants. One referred to "fronting" (Juggernath et al., 2013) and shared: *"...companies create the impression that they are complying with B-BBEE priorities, to benefit from government contracts"* (P15:830), explained by another participant as: *"... large, mostly government, contracts which require these commitments to equity & transparency"* (813).

Meaning

In comparison with other identity-related motives, a lack of contribution toward the identity-related process of meaning was evident from the survey. Specifically, contributions to meaning from vertical identities such as race and gender were limited (except for gender-based roles such as being a mother or daughter for women and being a provider or protector for men). While outside of role-based identities, meaning is typically derived from horizontal identities (Solomon, 2013), an exception to this was noted in pioneers, who leveraged their racial identity for activism. In respect of disruption by affirmative action, activism against apartheid and efforts towards amalgamation gave meaning to some African-black,

Indian, colored, and mixed-race participants. As such, the enhanced participation of previously marginalized identities gave pioneers a source of meaning. For these participants, the shift from apartheid to democracy was insufficient for their inclusion, and they explicitly regarded employment equity to have supported their entry into former 'white spaces'. For example, one participant stated: *"Thank God for B-BBEE. I have always believed that it is the only law that made a difference between the post-Apartheid South Africa and... current South Africa" (P15:830/2)*. The above sentiment was particularly intense in the lived experiences of participants where affirmative action made them pioneers in spaces that were previously reserved for whites only. One participant shared: *"In grade five, my parents moved me to a model C school [that was reserved for whites during apartheid with superior educational facilities], this was my first real experience and engagements with whites... I felt so uncomfortable, I was one of two people of color in the entire class... The only other people like me were the cleaning staff" (P22:859/3)*. Despite the challenges faced by our participants while breaking into such spaces, the aftermath of the experience revealed deep-seated meaning that emerged from having paved the way for their respective racial and ethnic communities and supporting the national amalgamation of groups previously segregated.

Discussion

A thematic analysis of affirmative action altering identity-related psychological processes of the participants revealed five groups that shared similar influences on their identity-related psychological processes. Since the survey had conveyed the salience of race and gender identities in South Africans, the grouping of participants remained cognizant of these significant identities. The first distinction between participants was based on those benefiting from the policy and those participants disadvantaged by it. With respect to race and gender identities, this segregated the participants into the first group comprising of African-black, Indian, colored, and mixed-race participants, particularly women, and the second group of those disadvantaged by affirmative action (white South African and foreign men). Within the first group of beneficiaries of the policy, lay a third group who perceived the policy not to benefit them and a fourth group with distinctly different experiences of those who were pioneers. This third group included Indian, colored, and mixed-race participants of any gender. The third group included those participants who perceived a continuation of being marginalized despite their inclusion within the term 'black' in the affirmative action policy, as such, technically being beneficiaries of the policy. The fourth group of pioneers had lived experiences as first entrants into former 'white spaces', as dictated previously by apartheid policies (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Thematic Analysis Revealing Groups Founded on Experiential Similarities of Influences of B-BBEE on Identity-Related Psychological Processes of the Participants
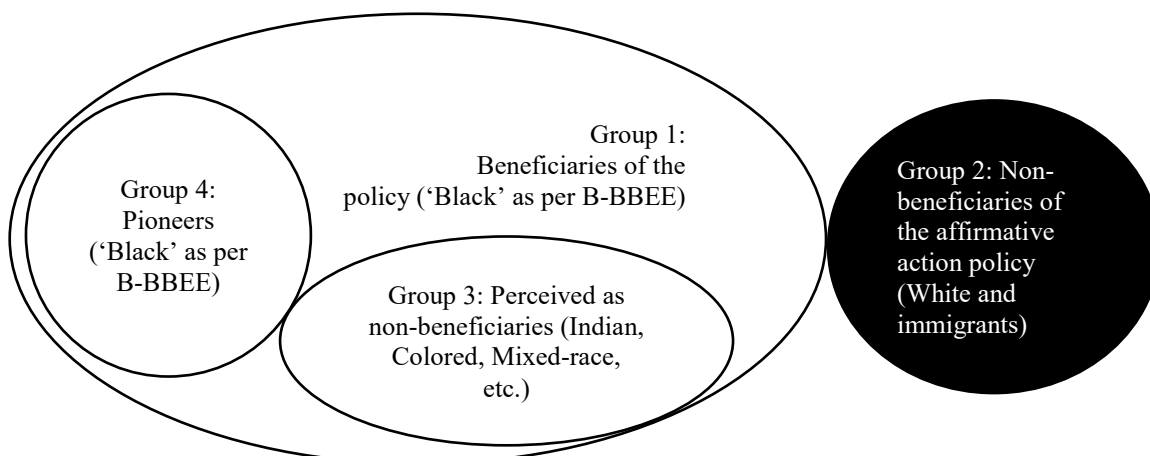
Perceptions

While it was expected that all beneficiaries of affirmative action and all non-beneficiaries would have contrary experiences and similarities within the two groups of the effects on their identity-related processes, the dichotomy of experiences and effects was founded on perceptions of being beneficiaries from affirmative action rather than being beneficiaries of the policy. As such, within Group 1, Subgroup 3 shared similarities with participants in Group 2, referred to by one participant from the group as belonging to: *"...the party that is currently being discriminated against under the banner of affirmative action" (P20:851).* However, the proximity of Group 3 with non-beneficiaries of affirmative action from the data was a point of puzzlement. Certain factors in the data explained this finding.

1. Firstly, Indian, colored, and mixed-race minorities perceived B-BBEE to marginalize them. This arose from a mistaken understanding of the policy, such as a perception that higher points on the B-BBEE scorecard were assigned to African-blacks and lower points to Indians, colored, and mixed-race individuals, which is inaccurate as per the B-BBEE scorecard.
2. Secondly, even where the participants' understanding was correct of the scoring system, there were claims that the policy's reference to 'black' was being interpreted by those adopting affirmative action as referring to African-black South-Africans only; thus, excluding coloreds, mixed-race, and Indians. While the policy's use of the term 'black' refers to all African-black, Indian, colored, and mixed races, the perceptions and lived experiences of the policy were similar to an exclusion of all Indian, colored, mixed race, and white from affirmative action.

In conclusion, the first two reasons shared above reflect that participants and adopters of the policy were "relatively uninformed about what the policy means and how it operates" (Schmermund et al., 2001, p. 799). It is noteworthy that only after the completion of the study, this misinterpreted social understanding noted during the study was supported in recent legal documentation. The latest eighteen industry-specific, regional quotas circulated by the Employment and Labor Ministry do not only collectively set targets for 'blacks' in organizations according to the B-BBEE definition, but specifically mention the recommended percentages of "A, C, I, & W" which refer to African-black, colored, Indian and white respectively (BusinessTech, 2023).

Even in cases where participants and organizations are accurately interpreting the policy, two reasons further supported the shared experiences of Group 2 with Group 3 participants.

3. The hierarchy of privileges amongst African-black, Indian, colored, and mixed races during apartheid, such as access to education, infrastructure, and designated areas of residence, has had greater repercussions on African-blacks than on other oppressed minorities. As such, when adopting affirmative action policies, the acknowledgment of greater injustices towards African-blacks during apartheid encourages preferential treatment toward African-blacks over Group 3 members when adopting affirmative action.
4. Lastly, even when affirmative action policies are not officially being adopted, it is perceived that there exists a moral inclination to reverse injustices of apartheid encourages preferential treatment for African-blacks over Subgroup 3. Since most of the research participants occupied managerial positions, instances of voluntarily incorporating equitable ways in their businesses supported this claim. One such participant when referring to performance appraisals for African-black till operators shared how the company: *"...decided to tweak the performance appraisal process [for the African-black till operater] to make it more equitable to avoid discriminating" (P2:210).*

The above factors explain the similarity of experiences by members of Groups 2 and 3. Due to the significance of perceptions in altering its adoption, legislative accuracy in the adoption of affirmative action policy has limited consequential effects on identity-related psychological processes. This distinction is of significance as individual perceptions entail that although differences in realities of affirmative action that exist between Groups 1 (beneficiaries) and 2 (non-beneficiaries) are not decisive for similarities in lived experiences. Differences in perceptions can bridge differences in realities and lead to the similarity of the lived experiences of certain members within beneficiaries to more closely resemble the experiences of Group 2 (non-beneficiaries).

Attribution

Since attribution theory is founded on perceived and not actual causes (Weiner, 2010), it aligns with the perception differences discussed earlier. Research has shown that attributions have the greatest influence on interpreting causality due to the uncertainty of the causes surrounding outcomes in complex environments (Harvey & Dasborough, 2006). These retrospective causal attributions shape subjective realities that alter present experiences as well as future motivation and achievements of individuals (Bouchaib et al., 2018). Therefore, the significance of perceptions works hand-in-hand with attributions, playing a vitally important role in identity-related psychological processes and determining the quality of people's lives in the present and also how their lives unfold in the future.

While the affirmative action realities within members of Group 1 are similar, perceptions and attributions varied within the group members. Similar to how perception differences created Subgroup 3 that is discussed earlier, experiences shared by Subgroup 4 (pioneers) significantly differed from other Group 1 members. Pioneers shared emotionally moving lived experiences during apartheid of being excluded from previously designated 'white spaces' Their subsequent entry into these spaces was accompanied with an attribution of their success to themselves. The use of the term 'entry' instead of 'inclusion' is intentional, as these pioneers shared inclusion challenges despite entry into 'white spaces' (April et al., 2023) that formed systems of oppression that were targeted at their race. However, unlike other members in Group 1, pioneers experienced positive disruption to their self-perception. This is because they had attributed their failures externally to exclusion and unfair practices of the apartheid legislation. Subsequently, their participation was attributed internally to themselves, and perceived as correction of unjust practices during apartheid. Other than pioneers, Group 1 (non-pioneer beneficiaries) attributed their entry into previously designated 'white spaces' externally to the helping hand of affirmative action, which did not support positive effects on identity-related psychological processes.

Additionally, by paving the way for other members of their respective racial identity groups, pioneers regarded the challenges and adverse experiences after entry into such spaces as worthwhile due to a sense of meaning associated with hardship, as well as to achieve egalitarianism, satisfying their meaning needs to be cognitively 'forged' (Solomon, 2013) from experiences of adversity during apartheid (Ryff, 2014). Though not included in the framework, the autonomy motive (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012) was also shared as having been successfully achieved by pioneers due to 'entry' into corporate spaces that provided them with opportunities to become more financially independent.

On the contrary, other non-pioneer Group 1 members shared largely negative repercussions of affirmative action on their identity-related processes, such as inter-generational continuity challenges, struggles with self-worth, and heightened distinctiveness needs. The difference between pioneers and non-pioneers within Group 1 members was founded on attribution, whereby non-pioneers in Group 1 shared explicit experiences that compromised self-attribution and externally attributed their achievements to affirmative action. These experiences presented a stumbling block to attribute their successes to themselves and their qualities, characteristics, or efforts. Consequently, they shared continued self-doubt and hampered self-worth, despite sharing stories of successes, and regarded affirmative action to be sabotaging self-attribution. Preferential treatment due to affirmative action may serve them in reality by partially compensating for their position in the hierarchy of privileges but psychologically, it does not support their self-perception. Similarly, there was a lack of evidence of affirmative action continuing to satisfy the identity-related motive of providing meaning to them. The hermeneutics for this group were significantly less emotional than those of pioneers and frequently lacked explicit mention of any identities supporting any meaning in life.

While attribution was significant in distinguishing pioneers (Group 4) from non-pioneers within Group 1 discussed above, its significance for Groups 2 and 3 also deserves mentioning. Group 3 members shared experiences and sentiments of continued marginalization before and after democracy, and regarded affirmative action as unjust, while Group 2 members acknowledged pre-democracy privileges, they regarded affirmative action as unjust, despite the continuing skew of economic supremacy associated with whites in South Africa (Daya & April, 2021). One participant from Group 2 mocked the legacy of privilege associated with whiteness and commented: *"I am 'privileged' in knowing that there is the perceived necessity to discriminate against me to bring about equity for others" (P20:851/2).* Such sentiments emanated from experiences of exclusion, particularly for employment where positions were advertised as "B-BBEE positions". For both Groups 2 and 3, the attribution of failures in progression in spaces incorporating B-BBEE (such

as the absence of employment opportunities or promotions in their organizations) was attributed externally, providing them a psychological scapegoat for attributing failures externally. As such, this external attribution of failures did not disrupt their self-perceptions.

Future Research Direction

The study concludes significant unintended consequences of affirmative action on identity-related psychological processes for beneficiaries of the policy. Having remained unaddressed in the literature, ways of overcoming any negative effects on identity-related psychological processes remain unavailable. This study contributes to theory by identifying the main foundational sources of the challenges that future research can use for seeking solutions. Firstly, beneficiaries who perceive themselves as non-beneficiary or misinterpret the policy compromise psychological benefit towards beneficiary's identity-related psychological processes. Additionally, even where beneficiaries accurately perceive the policy, the policy risks sabotaging the attribution of successes and failures. The contribution of self-attribution style (Kramer, 1994), though not tested in the study (Lefcourt et al., 1979), presents as potentially a significant influencing factor to the relationship between affirmative action and self-perception.

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Appendix

Figure A1

Template of the Survey Furnished to the Participants (Vignoles et al., 2006)