**The Backlash Threat:**

**How Backlash Against Diversity Occurs**

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**Abstract**

Instances of backlash against diversity practices are increasingly common in the current contentious climate, making understanding backlash an important focus for research. Yet, knowledge pertaining to backlash against diversity is fragmented across disciplines which have limited the overall success of diversity efforts. This paper addresses this by conducting a conceptual review of the literature and mapping the concept of backlash to facilitate a more integrative and cumulative understanding. Specifically, we use the individual and societal antecedents and consequences found in the literature to propose a process model of backlash threat against diversity practices. While this is not an exhaustive review of backlash, our focus helps clarify and enhance existing backlash knowledge, to chart the process in which backlash occurs and to identify potential gaps for future efforts.

Keywords: backlash, diversity practice, process model

**1.0. INTRODUCTION**

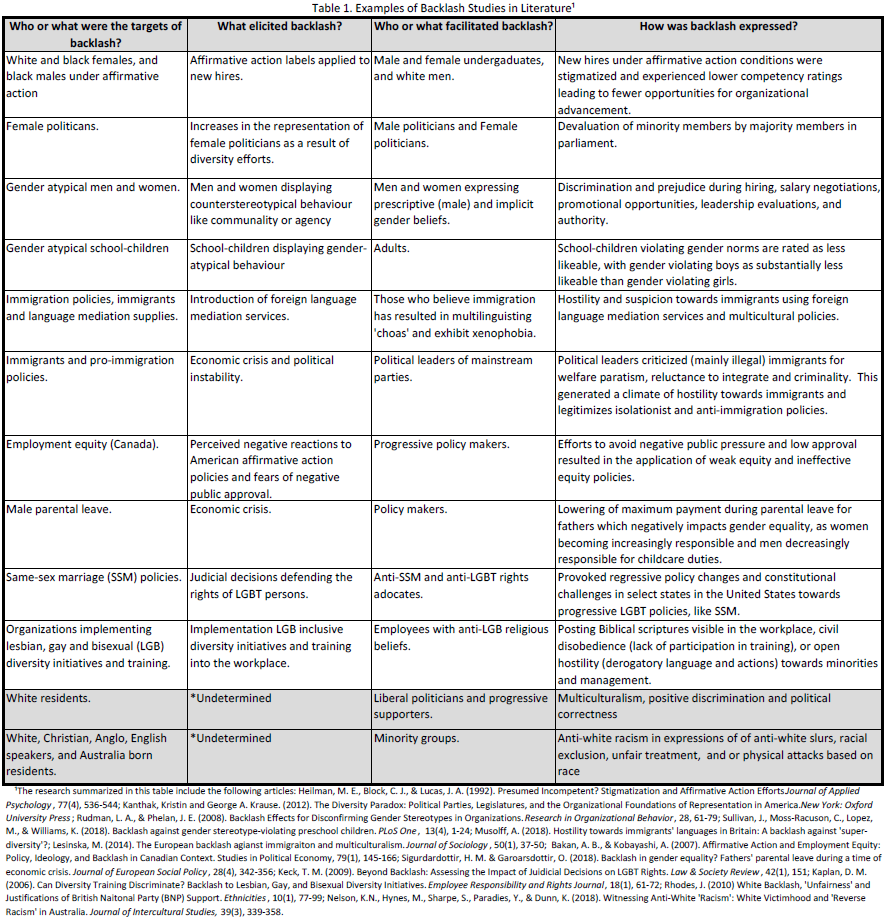
The limits of diversity efforts are increasingly evident in the current contentious climate where backlash against diversity practices are commonplace. In August of 2017, Google engineer James Damore posted a public complaint against the company’s diversity policies arguing that affirmative action policies (AAPs) resulted in a culture of unfair imbalances in the workplace. Yet at the time of his complaint, only 2 percent of Google’s workforce was African-Americans, and only 20 percent are females, far below the national average of 47 percent for women (Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, 2019). A year later, former Facebook engineer Brian Amerige accused the tech company's equity policies of an intolerant liberal culture. Backlash also occurs beyond the workplace and into a variety of other diversity practices like immigration policies, stereotype violations and changes in representation. Nevertheless, the overall efficacy of diversity practices and the well-being of target populations are limited by backlash incidents (see Hill, 2009), making understanding backlash a priority for both research and practice.

However, thus far backlash knowledge is fragmented across disciplines resulting in a disjointed understanding of backlash. While we recognize the growing breadth of literature, we argue the lack of cohesiveness has limited the overall success of diversity efforts. As such, the aim of this paper is to map the concept of backlash to facilitate the development of a more integrative and cumulative understanding across fields and diversity practices. We do this by exploring the psychological, behavioural, and industrial/societal-level antecedents and consequences of backlash against diversity practices. In this article, we answer the following questions: What is the backlash threat and how does it occur? How can the threat of backlash be reduced?

To this end, the paper is structured as follows. We first explore how backlash has been examined in the literature through previous work. Next, we propose a process model of backlash against diversity practices. Here, we document the known conditions that increase the threat of backlash as well as the primary and secondary consequences of backlash. We then close by reviewing strategies that lessen or mitigate backlash expressions along the process of backlash. We acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive review of backlash; rather our focus is to clarify and unify backlash knowledge, chart the process in which backlash occurs, and highlight important emergent concepts and themes for future efforts.

**2.0. HOW IS BACKLASH EXPRESSED: BACKLASH IN ACTION**

In general, backlash is understood as instances where people react negatively to policies or decisions believed to cause others – minority populations – to receive “undeserving” outcomes or benefits (Crosby and Gonzalez-Intal, 1984; Kidder, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, and Friedman, 2004). The effects of backlash are often cumulative and can (re)produce structural inequality, moral panic, and social divisions (Garland, 2008; Hughey, 2014). At the same time, minority populations affected by incidents of backlash experience individual repercussions in the form of mental health, lack of opportunity, and overall well-being. As shown in Table 1, the consequences of backlash consistently affect a wide range of targets and diversity practices



**2.1. Equity initiatives: In the workplace**

Affirmative Action Programs (AAPs), first introduced in the 1960s during the US Civil Rights Movement, attempt to rectify historic exploitation and discrimination through formal means and are a commonly used method to increase diversity in the workplace and educational institutions. Yet, increasingly precarious job security and structural changes in the economy have resulted in disenchanted majority populations seeing formal equity policies and other diversity efforts as unfairly benefiting undeserving minorities. One stream of the literature has focused on understanding backlash towards AAPs and its variations. A classic study (2 experiments) by Heilman, Block, and Lucas (1992) looked at AAP backlash and its effects on minority employees. The first asked 129 male and female undergraduate students to review male and female applicants under AAP conditions. The second asked 184 white men in the workplace to provide information on co-workers potentially hired under AAPs. The studies found AAPs to negatively affect the perceived competence of white female hires, regardless of whether the jobs were sex-typed; these effects also affected the black male and female hires. The negative characterizations of candidates hired under AAPs were associated with more negative evaluations of their interpersonal attributes which in turn limits their career progression.

Heilman et al.’s findings, in which efforts to increase minority representation through progressive policy is found to result in backlash and minority devaluation have been replicated. For instance, Kanthak and Krause (2012) argue that attempts to increase the influence of under-represented groups in parliament by increasing their critical mass often results in *the diversity paradox*. Rather than increasing the efficacy of female politicians, increased female numbers cause male politicians to actively undermine their influence due to a perceived threat to their [male] majority status. At the same time, increasing minority representation fails because of a glass-ceiling effect. Female politicians who achieved status without benefitting from equity policies perceived fellow female coworkers hired under equity policy conditions as threats, resulting in a lack of support for each other.

**2.2. Stereotype Violations**

Research on males and females exhibiting counterstereotypical behaviour finds similar forms of backlash. Rudman and Phelan (2008) found women exhibiting agentic behaviours -- such as ambition and competitiveness, which are commonly associated with men -- experiences more negative career outcomes such as lower hiring rates, more difficult salary negotiations, fewer promotional opportunities, lower leadership evaluations, and less positional authority. Male and female coworkers who hold implicit gender beliefs also show more negativity towards agentic women. Likewise, men who violate gender stereotypes (e.g., exhibiting communal traits such as being friendly, unselfish, and expressive) also experience negative treatment by their peers, including taking financial penalties. More recently, Sullivan, Moss-Racuson, and Lopez (2018) found these trends even apply to school-aged children who exhibit gender-atypical behaviour. Specifically, they found that three-year-old children experience backlash from adults when they exhibit gender atypical behaviours. In this instance, backlash was expressed as lower likeability ratings compared to stereotype-conforming peers. Gender-norm violating boys were viewed as substantially less likeable than gender violating girls. Implicit beliefs held by both majority and minority group members explain the backlash against those exhibiting counter-stereotypical behaviours.

**2.3. Immigration Policies**

Musolff’s (2018) study on immigration and language services in Britain found instances of backlash against “super-diversity.” Sociolinguists use the term super-diversity to describe the dense multidimensional change in language composition that has occurred in traditional mono-linguistic identities after incidents of mass migration. Using data collected from press media, internet forums and blog data during the immigration debate in Britain during the 2010 general election, Musolff found a majority of postings blame immigrants for communication problems with British ‘home’ communities and allege immigrants’ unwillingness to learn English. The introduction of state-sanctioned language mediation services brought increased instances of backlash against pro-immigration policies, non-English speaking immigrants, and British multiculturalism. Many of these posters express underlying ethnocentrist beliefs by using monolingualism to argue for a strong national community and social coherence.

Backlash in the form of public pressure can result in further instances of backlash in mainstream political rhetoric and public policy. Economic instability across Europe after the 2008 economic recession resulted in increasing unemployment and social upheaval among many countries in the European Union. Under pressure to address the subsequent anti-immigrant and xenophobia among citizens, Lesińska (2014) found many political leaders of mainstream parties openly expressed criticism of immigrants. These included claims that immigrants abused welfare, posed burdens to already indebted states, were a threat to social and political order, and made claims that multiculturalism had failed. Backlash occurred in two ways. The first was the introduction of open hostility towards immigrants and pro-immigrant policies into mainstream political discourse. The second was the practice of policy concession as isolationist and anti-immigrant policies were legitimized. Bakan and Kobayashi (2007) found similar expressions of backlash in policy concessions practiced in Canadian Employment Equity Act (1986) (see Agocs and Burr, 1996). Specifically, to avoid similar backlash directed towards AAPs in the United States, progressive policymakers adopted less controversial terminology and narrowed the scope of coverage: equity policies were not applied to educational institutions, only a small segment of the workforce was included, and employers were not sanctioned for failing to achieve representative hiring goals. The outcome was a repeated practice of policy concession in subsequent iterations of a weak equity policy. Policymakers’ efforts to avoid initial incidents of backlash resulted in a greater backlash in the form of concessions with enduring negative consequences on attaining diversity goals.

**2.4. LGBTQ+ and Gender Equity Policies**

Policies and organizations supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (LGBTQ+) rights, such as same-sex marriage (SSM) policies, are also targets of backlash. Keck (2009) reviewed court cases concerning LGBT rights in the United States and found that instances of backlash in the form of legal and political counter-mobilization can occur following judicial victories for LGBT rights, especially when LGBT rights were fiercely debated in mainstream society. Hawaii’s Reciprocal Beneficiaries Act, Vermont’s Civil Unions Act, and California’s series of domestic partnership laws resulted in spikes in electoral setbacks on progressive issues. Keck argues that legal mobilization of LGBT rights is an effective means for progressive change when other tactics were unavailable. Nevertheless, backlash is found to occur following progressive judicial victories. Organizations implementing LGBT training can also be targets of backlash. For instance, Kaplan (2006) found that organizations implementing LGBT diversity initiatives in their hiring process and professional development elicit backlash from employees, particularly those ascribing to religious beliefs and do not support LGBT rights. Expressions of backlash range from posting Biblical scriptures visible in the workplace to civil disobedience (lack of participation in training), and outright open hostility (derogatory language and actions) directed at minorities and management.

Sigurdardottir and Garoarsdottir (2018) examine the impact of the economic crisis on fathers’ use of parental leave and found subversive forms of backlash can impact gender equality policies. Policy changes based on gender equality introduced during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in increased birth rates, increased time spent by fathers on household chores, and increased involvement of fathers in childcare. However, after the 2008 economic crash and subsequent economic recession, childcare and parental leave benefits were cut; the largest among fathers in high-income groups. The researchers found that fathers’ use of parental leave declined while mothers use of parental leave increased with lesser pay. Subsequently, mothers increasingly become responsible for childcare duties thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles. Taken together, LGBTQ+ and gender issues become targets of backlash resulting from the judiciary, organizational support, or economic crisis.

**2.5. White Backlash or Reverse Discrimination**

Experiences of backlash have also been reported by majority group members in the form of white backlash or reverse discrimination. The last two rows (shaded) of Table 1 identify two studies which explore these instances. Unlike backlash expressed by minority populations which stem from issues arising from systemic discrimination, white backlash occurs as a result of perceived violations of principles of fairness or merit. For instance, Rhodes (2010) found supporters of the British National Party (BNP) -- known for its attraction to ‘Thatcherism’ and white national unity -- portray themselves as victims suffering through multicultural policies which they view as unnecessary, unfair, and discriminatory. Progressive counter-arguments were minimized as political correctness and were used, along with multiculturalism and positive discrimination, as evidence of future exclusion of white residents. Furthermore, many BNP voters argued that equality and parity between races were already present, obscuring existing evidence of racial inequalities like lower comparative wealth in ‘Asian’ areas of town (p. 95).

A more recent study by Nelson, Hynes, Sharpe, Paradies, and Dunn (2018) find reported experiences of white backlash or reverse discrimination are expressions of asymmetrical victimhood. Specifically, their study on anti-white racism in Australia found the type of racism experienced by white participants was different than those targeting minorities. Firstly, the anti-white slurs reported to be used were based on axes of disadvantages. The insult, ‘Captain Cook Cunt’ highlights the negativity attached to white colonialism while simultaneously intersecting gender to taint ‘whiteness’. Underlying the insult is the assumption that whiteness is positively valued. Subsequent survey data also showed that those reporting that they witnessed anti-white discrimination had personally experienced more extreme forms of racism. This suggests respondents already had strong perceptions of victimhood. Nelson et al. conclude that it is likely respondents exhibited a loose and generalized understanding of racism and that they failed to acknowledge structural, white privilege.

**2.6. What We Learned**

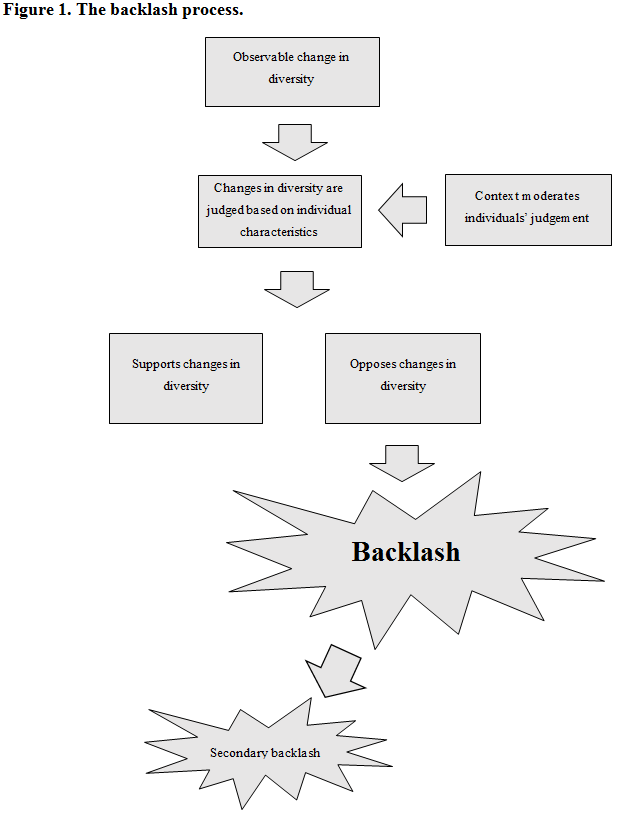
The research compiled in Table 1 is not an exhaustive review of the literature pertaining to backlash against diversity, but it highlights important themes. Firstly, there is much variation when considering backlash against diversity. The targets of backlash vary from members of minority groups, progressive policies supporting diversity and organizations supporting diversity initiatives. Similarly, the expressions of backlash range from individual stigma, hostility, and counter-political or judicial challenges. Secondly, it is often an observable progressive change that elicits backlash towards diversity, like the application of equity policies and initiatives, increases in minority representation, atypical behaviour, and progressive judiciary decisions. Thirdly, there is a wide range of who or what facilitated backlash against diversity. This included traditional opponents of progressive policies such as majority groups, conservative policymakers and those ascribing to religious beliefs, but also women (who are beneficiaries), mainstream politicians, and progressive policymakers. Taken together, with the understanding that backlash against diversity is reactions towards observable changes in diversity initiatives designed to alleviate historical discrimination, we can map a more nuanced definition of backlash towards diversity.

Table 1 also sheds light on backlash that targets majority groups. Of interest, *what elicited backlash* is found to be undetermined; rather, research shows that those who reported being targets of white, majority or reverse discrimination argue that progressive policies or changes aiding minorities are unfair. This reflects a recurring theme of white backlash in western democracies, like the United States (Hughey, 2014) and Australia (Hatchell, 2004), where dominant white groups increasingly perceive themselves as racially disadvantaged. Furthermore, they express active dismissal or unfamiliarity with historical or structural discrimination (see also Garland, 2008; Hughey, 2014). It is important not to dismiss instances of white racism or reverse discrimination, as Nelson et al. (2018) show, they can occur. However, literature has thus far determined such instances of backlash are in reaction to changes in diversity and are based on perceived unfairness, underlying prejudice, or unfamiliarity to historical or structural discrimination. If this is the case, then white backlash can be situated as part of the process which results in backlash against diversity practices.

However, the process that leads to backlash towards diversity remains unresolved. Research suggests several different conditions and mediating explanations but there has yet to be agreement, primarily due to the fragmentation of backlash literature across fields and disciplines, in explaining the causes of backlash. One dominant explanation is “reverse discrimination,” where opponents perceive a zero-sum framework where gains by minorities are met with equivalent losses by majority group members (Norton & Sommers, 2011). Another explanation is the “diversity-excellence dilemma,” where backlash occurs when diversity goals and excellence are in opposition with each other and prioritizing diversity goals will result in a decrease of talent (Valian, 1999). As Bergman and Salter (2013) state, there are many reasonable explanations of why backlash occurs, and research has clearly identified some of the conditions under which backlash threat can occur. We use these conditions to propose a model of the backlash process.

**3.0. THE BACKLASH PROCESS**

Backlash against diversity is elicited by some observable change in diversity like AAPs, changes in the number of minorities, or expressed atypical characteristics. However, Table 1 also shows a great deal of variance in who or what facilitated backlash, how backlash is expressed and the targets of backlash, which suggests that many variables interact with each other to result in expressions of backlash. An observable change in diversity alone is simply insufficient to create a threat of backlash. Rather, extant research shows certain conditions which are more likely to increase the threat of backlash towards diversity: the perceived “unfairness” of a change in diversity, particular individual characteristics, as well as environmental context. Variations of and interactions between these variables determine whether one facilitates or opposes the observed change in diversity. Based on these findings, we propose a model that describes the process of the backlash threat. We have diagrammed this model in Figure 1.



**3.1. The Spark: What type of observable change in diversity results in backlash?**

Figure 1 shows that backlash threat begins with an observable change in diversity; however, the manner in which a diversity practice is framed is found to predict the likelihood of backlash threat. Specifically, literature finds observed changes in diversity are more likely to draw opposition when principles of fairness and merit are violated. In Western democracies, opportunities and rewards such as wealth, jobs, and power are expected to be distributed on the basis of merit (i.e., intelligence, effort, ability, training, and experience) (see Deutsch, 1975). Factors of ethnicity or gender are considered irrelevant when allocating outcomes such as pay, promotional opportunities, or grades (see Hook and Cook, 1979). The consequences of violations of merit are most evident when considering AAPs and its variations. AAPs -- introduced in the 1960s in the United States -- seek to address systemic marginalization arising from historical discrimination through aggressive hiring of minorities (Chrisman, 2013). Yet, based on a survey of 1,004 college students, Gose (2000) found 79 percent of respondents thought that lowering application standards for some, even when considering minority status, was unfair to all. Violations of merit are seen as more unfair than systemic marginalization of minorities since AAPs are perceived to violate the principle of equal treatment for all, or organizational justice norms (e.g., Liptak, 2014). Similar arguments of merit and fairness are also seen among other diversity initiatives. For instance, the increased representation of minorities either through migration raises issues of fairness violations. Lensinska (2014) found members of majority groups express backlash towards immigrants and pro-immigration policies during periods of economic downturn since immigrants were perceived to unfairly take jobs and practice welfare parasitism.

Violations of fairness and merit are dependent on the prescriptiveness (strength) in which demographic characteristics are weighted against merit. As the prescriptiveness increases, race and gender are prioritized over merit. When considering AAPs, there are four forms of prescriptiveness ranging from weak to strongest (Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, and Lev-Arey, 2006). The weakest policies are *opportunity enhancement* which offers minority groups small benefits in the form of training to improve their qualifications; however, only merit is considered during selection decisions. Next, *equal opportunity policies* forbid selection decision makers from assigning a negative weight to minority group candidates, but only for those with comparable qualifications. The third are *tiebreak policies,* also called weak preferential treatment. These allow decision makers to select minority group candidates in instances where all other qualifications are equivalent. The most prescriptive policies are the *strong preferential treatment* which explicitly prioritizes minority hirings even when minority candidates are lesser qualified than majority candidates. Quotas fall under this category where a number of percentage of positions are allocated for minorities. In a meta-analytic review of 183 justice studies, increases in policy strength or prescriptiveness result in greater opposition due to violations of organizational justice beliefs (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, and Ng, 2001). Similar effects are seen when considering immigration policies. In a study on attitudes toward highly skilled and low-skilled immigration, Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010) found that locals are opposed to low-skilled immigration due to perceptions of provisions of welfare and higher taxes which they viewed as unfair. The negative attitudes are more pronounced for undocumented immigrants (see Fenelly and Federico, 2008). In sum, the threat of backlash is high when observed changes occur but this is particularly so when principles of merit and fairness are violated. As such, highly prescriptive policies, initiatives or changes in diversity are most likely to elicit strong backlash.

**3.2. Individual Characteristics: How one judges the observable change in diversity**

An observable change in diversity, particularly those perceived as highly prescriptive and violating, is judged through individual characteristics. These include self-interest, prejudice, stratification beliefs, beliefs in excellence, and demographic variables. Self-interest has consistently been found to predict reactions towards diversity, as individuals will more likely support policies and initiatives which enhance, rather than oppose, oneself. Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, and Goff (2006) found that, in a sample of 136 participants, the self-interest of dominant-group members dictates the attitudes towards AAPs, independent of the outcomes for out-groups. When policies were framed as losses for whites, white identity is negatively related to AAP support. Furthermore, Son-Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna (2002) found that even AAPs which do not harm dominant groups can still elicit backlash due to perceived threats to dominant group positions. This is evident in negative attitudes towards immigration policies, as economic self-interest is found to predict more negative attitudes towards immigration. Malchow-Moller, Munch, Schroll, and Skaksen (2008) examined the relationship between economic self-interest and support for immigration and found that increased economic self-interest decreased support for immigration policies.

Greater levels of prejudicial beliefs also evoke greater opposition against diversity efforts. Research commonly finds racism and sexism to be strong predictors of negative attitudes towards diversity initiatives (Bobo and Klugel, 1993; Harrison et al., 2006; James et al. 2001). For instance, James, Brief, Dietz, and Cohen (2001) found racial prejudice to be negatively related to perceptions of AAPs and satisfaction with promotional opportunities among white participants. More nuanced research has looked differences between *old-fashioned* and *modern* forms of prejudice. Old-fashioned prejudice, based on assumptions of innate minority inferiority, has become less socially acceptable and is generally held in check by social pressure. This, however, has led to modern prejudice which denies opposition on the basis of discrimination, but on claims of incompetence and lack of ability (Henry and Sears, 2002). Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter (1995) found modern prejudicial beliefs, such as sexism, to be more subtle and covert while old-fashioned prejudice is more explicit. Nevertheless, prejudicial beliefs continue to predict backlash behaviour against diversity.

Stratification beliefs can be understood on a continuum, ranging from individualism to egalitarianism (Taylor, 1991). Those high on individualism belief success and failure are based on individual characteristics (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993). Diversity initiatives which focus on group equality contradict values of meritocracy and fairness, hard-work, and individual achievement, thereby increasing their opposition (Ozawa, Crosby, and Crosby, 1996). Only when individual rights are violated are inequalities faced by groups recognized (Kemmelmeier, 2003). At the same time, merit is used to deny notions of inequality, as achievements and failures are rooted in individual efforts rather than other explanations. For instance, Knowles, Lowery, Chow, and Unzueta (2014) found merit to be a foundational argument to deny the existence of White privilege. For some societies that widely accept individualism and are rarely exposed to alternative belief systems, individualism has prevented diversity initiatives from gaining widespread support (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every, 2005). The literature widely sees values of individualism to have a propensity to predict opposition and backlash against diversity.

Beliefs in the diversity-excellence or diversity-validity dilemma is another factor. Valian’s (1999) study on equity policies in the workplace found many participants who oppose hiring practices benefiting minorities believe diversity initiatives to be in opposition to excellence. Specifically, some participants believe candidates who represent the face of diversity in the workplace as less talented. Similarly, Pyburn, Ployhat, and Kravitz’s (2008) paper introduced the diversity-validity dilemma. They argue that implementing employment policies that consider racio-ethnicity and sex subgroups during the selection process results in organizations using less than optimally valid selection procedures.

Individual demographic variables are also found to predict attitudes towards diversity. Based on principles of self-interest, groups that benefit most from changes in diversity are most likely to express support for diversity initiatives. This is supported by research which shows that women are more likely to support diversity initiatives than men. Related research also shows that personal experiences of discrimination are likely to increase support for diversity, whereas men are more likely to feel threatened by increasing diversity. Racial minorities are more likely to support diversity policies with some arguing that race is a stronger predictor for policy support than gender, even for gender-based policies (Baunach, 2002). Baunach argues that is because racism contains elements of historical [racial] hatred that is absent in sexism.

**3.3. The Context: What moderates one’s judgement?**

An individual’s judgement of a change in diversity is found to be moderated by the environmental context. For instance, managerial beliefs and organizational practices impact attitudes toward AAPs (Hiemstra and Derous, 2017). One reason might be that organizational decision makers who oppose AAPs do what is minimally required which reduces the effectiveness of equity policies. In contrast, organizations that support AAPs are more likely to take steps to ensure AAPs are communicated and perceived as fair. In turn, this practice influences the support for AAPs among organizational members. Taylor (1995) found dominant group members whose employers reinforce equity policies are less prejudiced and are more supportive of race-based interventions. They are also more likely to acknowledge that the discrimination and disadvantages minorities face are due to systemic barriers, rather than personal or merit-based reasons.

The type of human resource practices also impacts the support of diversity initiatives. Levi and Fried (2008) explored white and African-American differences in attitudes towards hiring, promotion, training, and layoffs. They found AAPs when applied to layoff and promotion decisions elicited the greatest opposition, while hiring and training elicited lesser resistance. These findings are explained in various ways. First, there are greater procedural violations occurring in layoffs and promotions, than there are in hiring or training since these activities are more likely to have clear rules and well-defined outcomes. AAPs applied to layoffs elicit the greatest opposition, as they are traditionally subject to strict guidelines of seniority and merit. Second, layoffs represent a zero-sum situation, where when one individual is laid off, another is retained. Similarly, those that are passed over in promotions would blame the failure solely on equity policies, especially among organizations with limited promotional opportunities. Missed hiring or training opportunities are also diffused among a greater number of individuals. Those who were not hired see opportunities in other employers and those who were not included in training may see a future opportunity.

Economic stability is consistently found to moderate attitudes towards diversity initiatives, especially when considering immigration. From Table 1, Lesińska (2014) found economic crisis in countries in the EU lead to greater instances of backlash towards immigrants and pro-immigrant policies. In line with the findings from Malchow-Moller et al. (2008) and economic self-interest, we conclude that individual self-interest interacts with environmental instability which results in increased economic self-interest and opposition to diversity initiatives such as like immigration policies.

**3.4. The Judgement: In support or opposition to diversity**

Support for diversity practices has been explained through ideas such as white guilt and group-based sympathy. Most commonly used to explain support for AAPs, white guilt is defined as the awareness of unearned white privilege along with the awareness of racism that occurs as a result of structural discrimination (Steele, 1990). Swim and Miller (1999) examined white guilt closely and found that white guilt was associated with more negative personal evaluations of white groups and stronger beliefs in the existence of white privilege, greater estimates of discrimination and lower prejudicial attitudes against Blacks. Furthermore, they found that white guilt mediated the relationship between awareness of discrimination and positive feelings towards AAPs. Iyer, Leach and Crosby (2003) explored this further and found that white guilt predicted support for AAPs aimed at compensating blacks. Of note, however, white guilt did not predict support for more prescriptive AAPs like quotas which can increase opportunities for minority groups. Rather, other-focused emotions of sympathy were a stronger predictor of support diversity initiatives more generally. These findings reflect research by Harth, Kessler, and Leach (2008) who looked at the impact of inequality within groups and between groups. They found that when inequality (created by student concentration) is within group and legitimate, participants expressed feelings of pride. When inequality is within group and illegitimate, participants expressed guilt and sympathy. When inequality is observed between group and illegitimate, feelings of sympathy increases. They conclude that pride predicts less willingness to let young immigrants participate in sport, whereas sympathy and guilt predict greater willingness. Guilt and sympathy by dominant (white) group members are important indicators of support for diversity initiatives.

On the other hand, opposition against diversity practices and the facilitation of backlash have been explained by ideas of white racism or reverse discrimination. Backlash against diversity initiatives increases when those who opposed perceive they were being discriminated. Specifically, they portray themselves as victims suffering through diversity policies which are unnecessary, unfair, and discriminatory against majority groups (see Rhodes, 2010). Much of this is a result of a belief in the zero-sum game, where majority group members perceive minority progress to be made at their expense (Norton and Sommers, 2011). These perceptions can be explained through individual characteristics as well as a lack of knowledge of historical or structural discrimination towards minority groups.

**2.5 Primary Consequences of Backlash**

Subsequent expressions of backlash towards diversity practices are found to lead to several acute outcomes, namely stereotyping, the stigma of incompetence, self-perceptions, and relationships. Backlash towards certain diversity initiatives evokes negative stereotypes that affect women and minorities’ hiring and advancement (Phelan and Rudman, 2010; Rudman and Glick, 2001). Stereotypes derived from social gender roles ascribe communal traits (such as people-oriented, warm, and kind) to women. Men, on the other hand, are stereotyped as more agentic (i.e., more achievement-oriented, competent, and confident). The research found gender stereotyping impacts career, as those who exhibit nonconforming traits or pursue careers that do not fit gender roles experience backlash. For instance, Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) found that women in politics who seek advancement are hindered by gender role stereotyping. Their results show that voting preferences for female candidates were negatively influenced by power-seeking intentions (actual or perceived) that violate prescribed communal expectations; male candidates, however, were unaffected. This research extends previous work where male managers describe female managers more negatively than male managers (Heilman, Block, and Martell, 1995). The effects are similar under AAP conditions. Ng and Wiener (2007) found that in the presence of AAPs, women are again more likely to be hired than men; however, when AA policies were stronger (or more coercive), women experience backlash and were hired less frequently. Taken together, this suggests that backlash towards diversity can express gender-stereotypical or counter stereotypical traits.

Gendered stereotyping and backlash also extend beyond women and into the LGBT community. LGBT commonly experience invisibility, erasure, and silence, even in organizations with “gay-friendly” policies (Hill, 2009). In instances of backlash, supporters would argue LGBT minorities can be tolerated if they don’t flaunt their sexuality (see Kumashiro, 2002). Like women and racial minorities, LGBTs are resented due to the attention and perceived advantages they receive. Furthermore, due to a lack of social sanctions against homophobia, backlash incidents against LGBTs are often much more explicit than those against females or racial minorities. Some of these can be seen in anti-gay shareholder activism at stockholder meetings or refusal to partake in work teams with LGBT members (Hill, 2009, p. 39).

Heilman, Black and Lucas (1992) conducted two studies to investigate whether the stigma of incompetence is associated with those who were hired under diversity policies. In the first study, they found female AAPs hires were perceived as incompetent regardless of job type; stereotyping in addition to perceptions of incompetence increased for females hired for male “stereotyped” jobs. They interpreted these findings to suggest subjects believed qualifications played less of a role in hiring decisions under AAPs. Furthermore, AAPs hires were thought to be more passive and communal than non-AAP hires, regardless of the gender of the candidate. In their second study, the authors found the stigma of incompetence affected not only white women but black men and women as well. Career progression was found to be less likely for AAP hires. Thus, the stigma of incompetence can result in prejudice and serious long term career consequences for women and minorities. Men violating gender stereotypes are also at risk of being stigmatized. Rudman and Mescher (2013) found that men who request family leave are viewed as poor organizational citizens, weak, score lower on agentic masculine traits, and risk work penalties like a demotion. Of note, results were consistent regardless of the participants’ race or gender. Taken together, the stigma of incompetence can result in prejudice and serious career consequences for women and minorities.

This stigma can also impact self-perception and self-ascribed capacity. Islam and Zilenovsky (2011) tested whether AAPs would negatively affect women’s self-expectations of leadership. Their study follows previous work by Heilman and Alcott (2001) who found self-perceptions to negatively affect self-efficacy, capacity, and achievement motivation. Swann, Johnson and Bosson (2009) similarly report that self-ascriptions can result in women underestimating their own capacity. Islam and Zilenosvsky (2011) found partial support for these studies. Specifically, women’s desire but not self-ascribed capacity to lead is reduced when they believe that AAPs were a factor. These results were moderated by justice perceptions, or how fair they thought the equity policies were. Specifically, those who believed AAPs were fair and believed that they were hired under such policies had higher self-ascribed leadership capacity and motivation to achieve, compared to hires who viewed AAPs to be unfair. In this way, backlash can influence minority perceptions of their own abilities, as well as impact their motivation for leadership achievement.

Finally, backlash also negatively impacts work relationships. Faniko, Burckhardt, Sarrasin, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Sorensen Iacoviello, and Mayor (2017) found that women hired under strong AAPs are perceived as threatening to men. The researchers add that members of dominant groups (men) strategically stereotype to AAP hires in attempts to bolster their social standing within the organization. This shows that high-status in-groups essentialize lower-status out-groups when under threat (Morton, Hornsey, and Postmes, 2009). Of note, weaker AAPs evoke lower perceptions of threat. Furthermore, female leaders who succeeded through conventional means, and therefore exhibit agentic traits, were critical and attempt to distance themselves from other female colleagues who were unable to overcome stereotypes, especially those hired under AAPs. These results confirm previous research that finds gender quotas fuel conflict among female coworkers, as those hired under AAPs are regarded as less legitimate, lesser qualified, and less competent (Whelan and Woods, 2012). Interpersonal workplace aggression can also take the form of sabotage during peer performance reviews. Leibbrandt, Wang, and Foo (2017) explored the impact strong AAPs have on sabotage and peer performance review in the workplace and found that in instances where peer review is available, women hired under gender quotas become targets of sabotage by other women. Interestingly, women tend to focus on sabotaging other women hired under gender quotas whereas men sabotage indiscriminately. Therefore, backlash towards AAPs can create environments of passive or aggressive hostility among peers in the workplace.

**3.6. Secondary Consequences of Backlash**

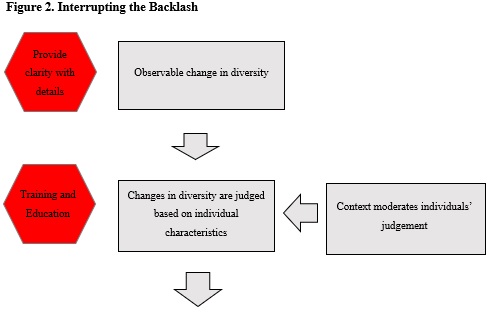
Literature shows some expressions of backlash can be less obvious and periphery but can be equally or more dangerous since they can reproduce existing structural inequality and have long-lasting consequences. This can be seen through legal precedence, everyday discursive practice and policy concessions. Legal expressions of backlash set important precedence in determining subsequent cases with similar interests. In University of California v. Bakke (1978) (see Ball, 2000), race was importantly legitimized as a compelling interest in higher education and as a national value. As such, diversity as a value and AAPs as policy were both formally recognized by the state; however, it was also articulated that AAPs were not remedies for past societal discrimination, but rather as means for economic interests with tenants in neoliberalism (Hode and Meisenbach, 2016). In this way, the definition of diversity was formally separated from its systemic and historical underpinnings, with violations only being recognized when the individual or state economics are infringed. Legal backlash expressions can result in a formalized narrow scope of diversity, allowing prejudicial inequality to continue.

Discursive practices of “racing for innocence” in the workplace are similar. Specifically, Pierce (2003) illustrated how white middle-class men use speech to disavow accountability and proclaim innocence for instances of prejudice in the workplace while simultaneously acting prejudicially (p. 54). Racing for innocence is rooted in neoliberalism where values and sociality are enshrined in the individual experience. Prejudicial instances are then narrowly viewed as unusual, isolated and personal incidents, not as broader expressions of systemic injustice. Subjects used innocent speech to claim neutrality and colour-blindness, insisting that racial inequality had improved or were nonexistent. Highlighted incidents of prejudice were blamed on minority inadequacy and AAPs were redundant policies unfairly costing deserving white men jobs. AAP backlash expressed in the legal realm or in the workplace narrows the scope of understanding of diversity values and prejudicial expressions, allowing inequality to continue.

Fear of backlash or continued backlash from the public can compel policymakers to pivot to avoid disapproval and to gain legitimacy though pragmatically passing versions of progressive policies that reflect the wishes of the majority. Thus, political acquiescence is equally or more powerful than explicit and dynamic forms of backlash -- like protest, where backlash defenders become confident and aggressive resulting in ineffective equity outcome. Bakan and Kobayashi (2007) explore the trend in Canada through the Abella Commission. The Abella Commission, (1984), was tasked with crafting a Canadian equivalent of American AAP, which resulted in the Canadian Employment Equity Act (1986). In attempts to avoid backlash seen in the US and to be more palatable to conservatives, the Canadian Employment Equity policy adopted less controversial terminology and carried a narrowed scope: equity policies were not applied to educational institutions, only a small segment of the workforce was included, and employers were not sanctioned for failing to achieve representation goals. A decade later during the 1990s, the Ontario government repeated these concessions. To pass an equity policy, Premier Bob Rae watered down provisions and surrendered responsibility for goals to employers to accommodate “different kinds of workplaces and workforces.” A few years later, the policy was repealed, and equity was no longer a focus. Even in Canada, which is socially progressive, pragmatism and fear of backlash led, rather than avoided, to greater backlash.

**4.0. INTERRUPTING THE BACKLASH PROCESS**

The backlash process shows that backlash towards diversity practices can occur in a variety of conditions and contexts which make interrupting or reducing backlash difficult. Thus far, researchers have emphasized tackling the threat of backlash by changing the manner in which observed changes in diversity are perceived and addressing individual characteristics, like self-interest and prejudice, to foster feelings of collective sympathy for historical and structural discrimination. We have highlighted where these efforts can interrupt the process of backlash in Figure 2.



**4.1. Providing Clarity and Details**

As shown, attitudes towards diversity are affected by implicit associations and assumptions of tacit characteristics which can be of equal or greater importance than the actual diversity measure. This is most readily seen in AAPs where many often believe policies are highly prescriptive where minority characteristics are emphasized over merit (Kravitz, et al., 2008). When policies are presented generically with little detail, they tend to be interpreted through the personal biases individuals hold (Arriola and Cole, 2001; Golden, Hinkle and Crosby, 2001). When AAPs are unclear or poorly explained, individuals are likely to interpret them through their own knowledge and biases, resulting in greater opposition and resistance. As such, descriptions must convey clear and convincing information. Friedrich, Lucas, and Hodell (2005) found that including more outcome information, like organizational frequencies of minority and dominant groups increased policy support. Additionally, distributive justice concerns are minimized when information about candidates of equal merit is made explicit, although it is unclear such effects persist over time (Aberson, 2007). More generally, to limit opposition, procedures must explicitly communicate fairness and include positive equity arguments that promote change. These justifications can evoke positive beliefs since they convey concerns for individual wellbeing and whether decision makers could and should act differently.

Policymakers should also account for message salience, as literature finds justifications to be more effective when processed centrally. White, Charles, and Nelson (2008) found higher levels of AAP support when information is presented clearly, explicitly, and processed centrally. This is based on Petty and Cacioppo’s elaboration likelihood model (ELM), where messages are processed either through the central or peripheral routes. The central route is a deep, careful and semantic evaluation of arguments; the peripheral route is a cursory evaluation of associated physical cues. Information processed centrally applies the greatest cognitive effort and exhibit the greatest attitude change over time. Conversely, information processed peripherally exhibit little change in attitude. Interestingly, positive information expressing the benefits of AAPs and support both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries result in greater support compared to negative or threatening information.

**4.2. Training and Education**

Efforts to change attitudes can be addressed through attempts to address individual characteristics and training that promotes dialectical thought. Dialectical thinking is a cognitive style where concepts, events, and objects as inherently related (Srivstava et al., 2010). High dialectical thinking is shown to support equity policies through holistic views and individuals are more likely to discount inconsistent messaging (e.g., diversity-excellence dilemma) (Hideg and Ferris, 2017). Specifically, high dialectical thinkers perceive individual and inconsistent violations of fairness or merit as fair on a broader scale. This may contribute to feelings of white guilt and the relative deprivation of others (perceived advantages compared to others (see Crosby and Gonzalex-Intal, 1984)). High dialectic thinkers can connect an acknowledgement and feelings of guilt for collective wrongs against minorities with an awareness of advantages and gratitude for being white (Swim and Miller, 1999). Conversely, low dialectical thinkers expect consistency in events and believe in absolutes, such as good and bad. Low dialectical thinkers are, therefore, uncomfortable with inconsistencies and seek to resolve them by opposing equity policies and upholding organizational justice.

Training and educational programs designed to increase dialectical thinking often focus on creating diversity experiences and increasing perceptions of discrimination. Experiences with (racial) diversity, personal experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of discrimination are found to strongly impact stratification beliefs (Harrison et al., 2006). As such, training involving perspective taking is found to be highly effective. Using a longitudinal field experiment, Lindsey, King, Hebl, and Levine (2015) found that those who participated in perspective taking showed increased support for LGB individuals, as well as African Americans. However, much of the literature is uncertain of the overall effectiveness of diversity training (see Vedantam, 2008). In fact, diversity training can potentially result in further incidents of backlash. In Table 1, Kaplan’s (2006) study on LGBT diversity initiatives and training in the workplace found backlash to readily occur in the form of Biblical scriptures in the workplace, civil disobedience and open hostility. Hill (2009) similarly found strong religious beliefs and personal biases resulted in greater resistance towards training efforts. Thus, it is important for training to be designed effectively. Mobley and Payne (1992) offer several important factors to consider when implementing training. First, they suggest involving employees to identify issues and general attitudes, to ensure employees feel involved and vested in the process. During training, acknowledge resistance instead of minimizing or ignoring it, to avoid further threats of backlash. Allow participants to engage (have a voice) and direct their own discoveries. Sameness with others should also be valued as it plays a role in identity development and building cohesion. Specifically, they caution against devaluing sameness in efforts to value diversity in the workplace. Lastly, Mobley and Payne suggest political correctness should be limited, as this increases cynicism, distrust between groups, and increases the threat of backlash. Hill (2009) emphasizes the importance of inclusion, where all groups can interact in free, open and honest spaces

**5.0. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this paper is to integrate backlash literature in order to help focus attempts to reduce backlash towards diversity initiatives. Existing pieces of literature are often siloed, resulting in an expansive but limited body of research. Addressing this is increasingly important when considering the current political climate where ideas of diversity and equality are met with open resistance. To summarize, we compiled a general review of existing literature on backlash towards diversity practices where we highlighted a few broad themes. Namely, there is much variation in the targets of backlash, what elicited backlash, who or what facilitates backlash, and how backlash is expressed. Secondly, it is observed changes in diversity that spark expressions of backlash. Thirdly, in addition to White majority groups, minorities and left-leaning politicians are also susceptible to facilitating backlash towards diversity initiatives.

From these findings, we propose a process model of the backlash threat. The backlash threat is highest when observed changes in diversity practices occur, particularly when principles of merit and fairness are violated. Highly prescriptive, like AAPs framed under quota conditions, are then most likely to result in stronger expressions of backlash. The observed changes in diversity practice are judged through individual characteristics like self-interest, prejudice, stratification beliefs, and demographic variables. Higher levels of self-interest, prejudice, and beliefs in individualism are found to more strongly oppose diversity practices. Similarly, those who strongly believe in diversity-excellence or diversity-validity dilemma find diversity practices to be antithetical to selecting the best candidate. Those part of minority groups based on gender and ethnicity are found to be more supportive of diversity practices. Conversely, those who ascribe to majority groups express greater opposition to diversity practices. Such individual characteristics are moderated by environmental contexts like managerial beliefs and organizational practices, human resource activities, and economic stability. Greater managerial and organizational support for diversity practices is shown to increase support for diversity practices. Human resource activities concerning layoffs and promotions garner greater opposition while hiring and training was less. Periods of economic downturn are also shown to result in greater backlash expression.

Backlash expressions can be separated between primary and secondary forms. Primary backlash expressions are acute outcomes like stereotyping, stigmas of incompetence, negative self-perceptions, and antagonistic relationships. Secondary backlash expressions are less obvious but through legal precedence, discursive practices of avoidance, and policy concessions, existing structural inequalities are reproduced with long-lasting consequences. Interrupting the backlash process emphasizes promoting dialecticism through diversity descriptions and training that foster collective sympathy for historical and structural discrimination.

Effective management of backlash against diversity practices depends on attaining a comprehensive understanding of the conditions that ultimately result in backlash. Our review has attempted to do this by identifying some concurrent trends that exist among divergent streams of backlash literature. Furthermore, we used these findings to offer a process model of the backlash threat that highlights the important steps leading to backlash expressions, while also identifying avenues to minimize backlash. The hope here is to help future research find notable gaps to help diversity efforts in an era where themes, like diversity, are increasingly met with overt resistance.

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