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## Praising others to affirm one's self

### Egalitarian self-image motives and the positive feedback bias to minorities

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U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently discussed the yawning achievement gap between White and minority students and characterized this gap as the civil rights crisis of the current era. He cited the lack of academic challenge that minority students receive at school as one likely cause of the achievement gap and suggested that minorities' academic performance will rise as this challenge deficit diminishes (King, 2010).

Secretary Duncan was not specific about how or why the challenge deficit occurs. However, one likely explanation may be the performance feedback that minority students receive from their White teachers. This is because feedback from White instructors to minority learners can be compromised by a "positive feedback bias," wherein Whites provide more praise and less criticism to minorities than to fellow Whites for work of equal merit. The positive bias has been displayed by men and women, by college undergraduates, teacher trainees, and public school teachers, and in feedback supposedly directed to middle school, high-school, and college students. The bias has been conveyed through written communications and in face-to-face interactions, and it has been observed in the American West Coast, Mid-West, and East Coast (Crosby & Monin, 2007; Harber, 1998, 2004; Harber, Stafford, & Kennedy, 2010; Harber, Gorman, Gengaro, Butsingh, Tsang, & Ouellette, in press).

Although reliable, the positive feedback bias represents something of an anomaly in studies of inter-group relations. This vast body of research generally shows Whites to feel negatively towards minorities, and to use demeaning stereotypes when judging them. As a result, Whites tend to be unduly critical of minorities (Fiske 1998). What is it about performance feedback that not only halts but actually reverses these negative out-group biases? Some plausible explanations are that the positive bias stems from sympathy for the disadvantaged or efforts to publicly display such sensitivities, or that it reflects lower

expectations of minorities. Our research does not support these explanations. Instead, we find that the positive bias is caused by Whites' private, internal efforts in seeing themselves as socially tolerant and non-prejudiced. In other words, Whites may positively bias their feedback to minorities in order to see themselves as non-biased.

To explain how Whites' self-image concerns affect their inter-racial feedback, it is necessary to first consider the interpersonal challenges of delivering critical feedback in general. Feedback is typically dyadic in nature. It is a conversation between learners seeking feedback and evaluators who supply it. Learners bring their questions, concerns, and products to this conversation. Feedback suppliers, in their responses, try to balance sensitivity with candor, conveying respect for learners while at the same time frankly critiquing problems, asserting expertise, and recommending changes (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990). The feedback supplier's task is therefore a delicate public performance witnessed by learners and, critically, by feedback suppliers themselves.

How successfully feedback suppliers achieve this balance can reflect on their intellectual and interpersonal skills, and even the quality of their own characters (Bavelas et al., 1990). Consequently, feedback delivery causes evaluators to "share the stage" with feedback recipients. Their performances as instructors—their ability to balance candor with clarity, to establish rapport and trust, and to promote learning—can count as much as the feedback recipients' ability to benefit from these efforts. This makes interracial feedback distinct from other kinds of out-group evaluations, such as ratings submitted to experimenters or to other disinterested third parties. In the latter case, evaluators are typically unaccountable to those whom they assess, and even their manner of assessment (e.g. rating scales, check-lists, etc.) is typically designed by others. Performance feedback, where evaluations are conveyed directly to learners, forces evaluators out of the shadows, and makes them not only the agents but also the objects of evaluation. For many feedback suppliers, this heightened self-salience is acutely discomforting and leads them to convert clear and direct evaluations into circumlocutions, half-statements, and dysfluencies (Bavelas et al., 1990).

How could the self-salience that often disrupts feedback in general explain the positive feedback bias from Whites to minorities in particular? We believe it does so by making Whites wonder if their criticisms to minorities are signs of underlying prejudices. Many Whites peg their feelings of moral worthiness on holding and upholding egalitarian values, and as a result can be profoundly dis-

turbed by evidence of their own prejudice (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Jones et al., 1984). The importance of egalitarianism to Whites' self-worth is a relatively recent phenomenon and reflects a fundamental shift in American attitudes towards bigotry. Consider these items from Allport's 1946 measure of prejudice (Allport & Kramer, 1946): *In general, Negroes can't be trusted. I can conceive of circumstances under which the lynching of a Negro might be justified.* Racism was sufficiently acceptable mid-century that Allport's measure could reliably gauge attitudes. For current readers, however, these items are jolting. The visceral aversion to them not only makes Allport's measure obsolete, it demonstrates how far attitudes have changed in the past 60 years.

Due to this shift in attitudes, outright racism is itself stigmatizing, and those who express it can incur severe legal, social, and interpersonal sanctions (Jones et al., 1984). Perhaps as important, many people now regard their own displays of bigotry as a stain on their characters or, to paraphrase Goffman (1963), as the mark of a "spoiled identity." Consequently, many Whites are profoundly threatened by evidence of their own prejudices, independent of the external costs of revealing these prejudices to others. These self-image concerns cause egalitarian-minded Whites to suppress, correct, or compensate for their real or perceived lapses (e.g., Devine, et al., 2002; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

Interracial feedback is likely to arouse these egalitarian self-image concerns. This is because feedback typically, and necessarily, includes criticism. However, meting out criticism to minorities, especially in performance domains affected by negative stereotypes, can raise the specter of underlying prejudice, and thereby arouse egalitarian self-image concerns. In order to counter these self-image concerns, White feedback suppliers may emphasize sensitivity over candor, and as a result their feedback to minorities becomes positively biased.

#### INITIAL EVIDENCE OF THE POSITIVE FEEDBACK BIAS AND ITS MODERATION BY SELF-IMAGE THREAT

The first positive feedback studies tested whether the positive bias exists and, if so, whether it is stronger when the risk of appearing bigoted is greater. The studies incorporated a simple design that has been the template for the experiments that followed. Research participants (White college undergraduates) were asked to read an essay supposedly written by a fellow student who was seeking peer feedback in order to improve a work-in-progress. The writer's race was indirectly conveyed by college associations (e.g., "Black Students' Un-

ion”) and/or by her first name (e.g., Ebony, Heidi). The 1.5-page essays, drafted by experiment staff, were riddled with grammatical and content flaws, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Similarly, the big oil spills got peoples attention until they go away, then seem to forget. Whose thought about the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska?... Finally not too long ago the Ozone Hole was discovered and also global warming—raising the Earth’s temperature.

The poor quality of these essays made delivery of critical feedback nearly unavoidable.<sup>1</sup> Participants provided feedback comments directly on their assigned essay which, they were told, would be returned to the writer.

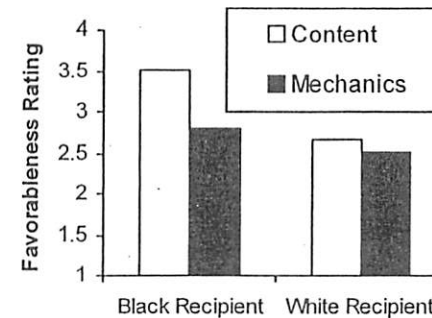
### Content versus Mechanics, and Self-Image Threat

If the positive bias serves to minimize the threat of appearing bigoted, then it should be more pronounced when this threat is greater. Criticisms of writing content versus writing mechanics provide an unobtrusive way to gauge such threats. This is because content and mechanics vary in their “social judgability” (Yzerbyt, Schradron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994), the tacit social license regulating the evaluation of others. Mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation, grammar) are more judgable because they have standardized referents such as style books and dictionaries that justify corrections and thereby shield critics from the appearance of partiality. Content (e.g., ideas, persuasiveness, coherence) lacks such established standards but instead draws upon the feedback supplier’s sensibilities and personal experience. Further, ideas, persuasiveness, and coherence relate more closely to the writer’s intellect and beliefs than do spelling, punctuation, and grammar, making criticism of these features more socially sensitive.

Because content criticisms are both more consequential and less easily justified than are mechanics criticisms, expressing them should increase the threat of appearing prejudiced. If so, and if this threat matters to Whites, then the positive feedback bias should be more evident in evaluations of writing content than of writing mechanics. This is exactly what the initial studies found. The copyedit notes that participants penned directly on to their assigned essays clearly favored the content of essays supposedly written by Black students compared to those written by Whites. In contrast, comments on the subjectively safe domain of mechanics were equally critical for Black and White writers. This selective lenience for Black writers’ essay content also occurred in the “Writer

Evaluation Form,” which participants believed was an anonymous and confidential communication from themselves to their assigned writer (see Figure 1). All these effects were replicated in a second study.

Figure 1. Favorable grade-like ratings to “writers” due to writer race and feedback domain (content vs. mechanics).



Thus, the initial studies showed that the positive feedback bias exists, and does so under conditions consistent with self-image maintenance motives. The positive bias was restricted to the more subjectively-risky domain of content, and it was expressed even on the anonymous “Writer Evaluation Form,” where social desirability pressures were minimal.

### THE POSITIVE BIAS IN FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS

Feedback typically occurs in direct face-to-face interactions between feedback suppliers and feedback recipients. Would the positive bias emerge during such direct one-on-one, real time conversations, and would it reflect self-image maintenance motives? Social-cognitive theories of inter-group relations suggest that the bias might be muted during direct interactions. This is because individuating personal information that people supply during in-person interactions can transcend their racial identities, thereby minimizing stereotype-based judgments of them (e.g., Hamilton, 1981). If the positive bias is driven by stereotype-based judgments, then during face-to-face feedback, where individuating information overrides stereotypes, Whites should be less likely to show the feedback bias.

However, inter-group theories that draw on self-image motives suggest a different outcome. According to these theories, conditions that make egalitarian-minded Whites conscious of their own out-group lapses will arouse Whites’ self-images concerns. These concerns, in turn, cause Whites to think and act in

more egalitarian ways (e.g., Devine et al., 2002; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). A feature of feedback that could cue Whites to their own potentially prejudicial displays is the subtle nonverbal signals they get from minority feedback recipients. Feedback recipients' appreciative nods and willing smiles convey openness to feedback, while furrowed brows and cool glances convey resistance and possibly offense to criticism. Feedback suppliers are often quite sensitive to these signals and craft their feedback accordingly (e.g., Krauss, Garlock, Bricker, & McMahon, 1977).

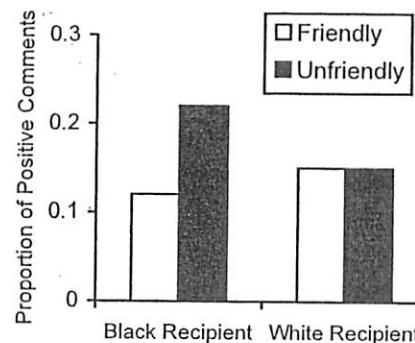
When delivered by a White feedback recipient, these non-verbal cues may be seen as reflecting the recipient's personal character—as either suitably cooperative or as unduly surly. But when delivered by a Black recipient, the same cues could be seen as reflecting on the feedback suppliers themselves. In this case positive cues from a Black recipient might signal that criticism was regarded as fair and appropriate and thereby provide a “green light” for continued candid commentary. However, negative cues from a Black recipient could indicate that criticism was regarded as prejudicial. If so, and if White feedback suppliers are sensitive to such implications, then negative cues from minorities should lead to more positive feedback as a way for Whites to restore their own egalitarian self-images.

These predictions were tested in an experiment where White undergraduates read a poorly written essay supposedly written by either a Black or a White fellow student (an experimental confederate) and then shared their comments to the writer in person (Harber, 2004).<sup>2</sup> During these private interactions the writer/confederates responded in either a friendly manner (direct eye gaze, appreciative smiling) or an unfriendly manner (averted eye gaze, occasional cool stare, inattentiveness and sullen demeanor). Thus there were four experimental conditions: Friendly Black writer, unfriendly Black writer, friendly White writer, unfriendly White writer.

If the positive bias is motivated by self-image concerns, and if such concerns are aroused by signs of having committed an interracial trespass, then the positive bias should be most evident when Whites supply feedback to an unfriendly Black writer. This is what occurred. Feedback to an unfriendly Black writer was more positive than was feedback to a friendly Black writer or to a White writer regardless of friendliness (see Figure 2). Thus, the same cue, writer unfriendliness, apparently had very different meanings depending on the writer's race. What should have been individuating information (the Black writer's emotional reaction to feedback) did not reduce stereotype-primed be-

havior. Instead it apparently triggered self-image concerns that induced the positive feedback bias.

Figure 2. Proportion of positive feedback comments due to writer race and writer friendliness.



#### DIRECTLY TESTING THE SELF-IMAGE MAINTENANCE MOTIVE

The initial positive feedback bias studies provided converging clues that self-image motives drive the positive bias. The bias was more readily displayed for the riskier domain of content rather than the safer domain of mechanics (Harber, 1998), and it was selectively more responsive to non-verbal signs of displeasure from a Black feedback recipient than from a White recipient (Harber, 2004). However none of these studies directly manipulated self-image concerns, and they therefore could not fully confirm whether such concerns produce the positive feedback bias. Further, the previous studies focused mainly on threatened egalitarian self-images; they did not explore the effects of bolstered egalitarian self-images. If the positive bias is in fact moderated by self-image concerns, then affirming Whites' egalitarianism should substantially reduce the positive bias. Showing that the bias rises and falls as Whites' egalitarian self-images are respectively threatened or affirmed would greatly strengthen the self-image hypothesis.

A recent experiment provided this direct test of egalitarian self-image motives and how threatening or affirming Whites' self-images affect the positive feedback bias (Harber et al., 2010). The central methodological challenge of this study was making sure egalitarian self-image concerns, and no other influences, determined feedback to Black versus White recipients. We therefore led participants, White teacher trainees at a major training program, to believe that only they knew whether their egalitarianism had been threatened or affirmed,

and only they could identify themselves to the feedback that they subsequently supplied.

The teacher trainees provided written feedback on a poorly written essay supposedly authored by a Black or a White high school student. However, before the trainees supplied their feedback, they completed a brief "Social Issues Survey" which, they were told, was administered by a separate research team unaffiliated with the feedback study. Trainees slipped their anonymously-completed Social Issues Surveys into a locked box which was supposedly collected by these other researchers. From the trainees' perspective the feedback study staff would have no knowledge of their Social Issues Survey responses.

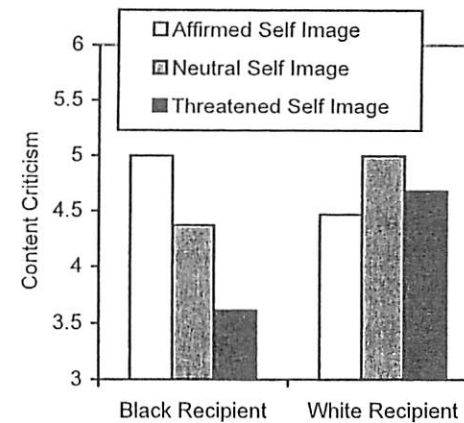
The Social Issues Survey actually served to manipulate teacher trainees' egalitarian self-images by posing questions designed to affirm, threaten, or leave unchanged trainees' egalitarianism. The "egalitarian affirmed" survey invited pro-minority views by asking, for example, whether "Government offices should be closed on Martin Luther King Day" or whether "The Confederate flag should not fly over government buildings." Most trainees—we reasoned and found—would enthusiastically endorse such items. In so doing, they would affirm their own egalitarianism. The "egalitarian threat" survey was designed to push trainees into expressing anti-minority opinions and asked, for example, whether "It should be legal for businesses to remain open on Martin Luther King Day" and whether "People should be allowed to fly the Confederate flag on their own front lawns." The civil liberties issues implicit in people's rights to determine when they conduct business, or what political symbols they can own, made it difficult to disagree with any one of them. Collectively, however, these questions had an anti-minority thrust. By repeatedly endorsing such statements the teacher trainees were confronted with apparent evidence of their own anti-minority sentiment. The neutral condition survey focused on shopping and was irrelevant to racial issues.<sup>3</sup>

A key outcome measure in this study was the Writer Evaluation Form that was, supposedly, a private and anonymous communication mailed directly from the trainees to their assigned writers. From the participants' perspectives, the experimenter would not be privy to the rating sheet, and the feedback recipient would not know the participants' identities. And, of course, neither the experimenter nor the recipient would supposedly know if the trainees' Social Issues Survey responses displayed strong or weak support for minorities. The teacher trainees were thus led to believe that only they knew whether they had upheld or compromised their own egalitarianism, and only they knew how positively

they rated their assigned essays. Consequently the only audience to whom trainees could impress with positive feedback was themselves.

Results showed that this "audience of one" was sufficient to produce the positive feedback bias. Feedback on the "confidential" Writer Evaluation Form, as well as copy-edit comments on the essays themselves, were selectively more positive among teacher trainees in the Black writer/threatened self-image condition.<sup>4</sup> Just as important, there was virtually no evidence of the positive bias among trainees in the Black writer/affirmed self-image condition (see Figure 3). In effect, the positive feedback bias could be switched on by threatening Whites' egalitarianism and could likewise be switched off by affirming their egalitarianism.

Figure 3. Criticism of essay content, due to writer race and egalitarian self-image condition.



Note: Higher scores indicate more negative evaluation.

The egalitarian self-image manipulation affected aspects of feedback beyond the manifest quality of the essays. Teacher trainees in the Black writer/self-image threat condition advised their writers to spend fewer hours on improving writing skills than did other trainees, in effect dissuading their Black learners from improving seriously flawed work. In addition, trainees in the Black writer/self-image threat condition produced a greater number of copy-edit buffering comments. Buffers serve to minimize or apologize for criticisms (Aronsson & Satterlund-Larrson, 1987) and therefore undermine the potency of criticism. Thus, trainees in the Black writer/self-image threat condition

not only supplied less critical feedback but undercut the few criticisms they supplied.

In sum, teacher trainees in the "Black writer" condition whose egalitarianism had been threatened supplied selectively more positive feedback, less stringent remedial advice, and more mollifying buffers. However none of these signs of the positive bias were displayed by trainees in the "Black writer" condition whose egalitarianism had been affirmed. For these trainees, confirmation of their egalitarianism apparently inoculated them from the concerns that motivate the positive feedback bias. As a result, feedback from affirmed/Black writer trainees was no different from feedback given by trainees paired with White learners—whose feedback was unaffected by the egalitarian self-image manipulation.

#### SUMMARIZING EVIDENCE THAT SELF-IMAGE CONCERNS MOTIVATE THE POSITIVE FEEDBACK BIAS

Collectively, the positive feedback studies identify self-image concerns as the cause of the positive bias. The bias was more likely to arise when Whites evaluated material that posed a greater self-image threat (i.e., the socially unjudgable domain of writing content) but was negligible when they evaluated material that posed minimal threat (i.e., the more judgable domain of writing mechanics; Harber, 1998). The restriction of the bias to the riskier domain of content occurred even when participants believed their feedback was private and anonymous, thereby identifying internal self-judgments rather than external social judgments as the underlying cause. This selective favoring of essay content occurred in all the feedback studies.

The positive bias arose during direct, face-to-face interactions with Black feedback recipients, but only if Black recipients conveyed social cues (e.g., anxiety, distrust) that could signal an interracial trespass. Receiving the same cues from White feedback recipients, whose displeasure was irrelevant to egalitarianism, had no effect on a White trainee's feedback (Harber, 2004). Furthermore, the preferential feedback to an unfriendly Black recipient continued into a post-interaction survey, where external impression-management pressures were minimal.

Most critically, the positive feedback bias was moderated by direct threats and affirmations of Whites' self-images (Harber et al., 2010). White teacher trainees who had self-impugned their egalitarianism provided more positive feedback but only if communicating with a Black student. Compromised egalitarianism had no effect on feedback to a White student. As important, trainees

who could self-affirm their egalitarianism did not show the positive bias at all and gave feedback to a Black student that was equivalent to feedback given to a White student. These self-image effects occurred even though trainees believed that only they knew whether they had affirmed or impugned their egalitarian values, and only they could identify themselves as the feedback source (Harber et al., 2010).

In sum, the positive feedback bias is closely tied to self-image threats. These threats can emerge from the evaluative context (risky and subjective content vs. safe and objective mechanics), the interpersonal context (friendly vs. unfriendly recipient response), and the intrapersonal context (affirmed vs. compromised egalitarianism).

#### ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

There are multiple motivational and social-cognitive factors, separate from self-image concerns, which can counter negative biases. Among these are automatic, stereotype-based biases including shifting standards and expectancy violation, and social motives such as sympathy and social desirability. These other influences (especially shifting standards; Biernat & Manis, 1994) are multiply replicated and highly reliable. Could they provide a better account for the positive feedback bias than self-image maintenance? The feedback studies did not systematically test self-image concerns against these other influences. However, we believe that the design and data from the studies show that self-image motives explain the positive bias much better than do these other explanations.

#### Shifting standards

People tend to automatically apply stereotype-based standards to out-groups, but universal standards to the dominant group. For example, a recent Central American immigrant who earned \$50,000 in 2009 might be regarded by Whites as "moderately well-off" when in fact \$50,000 was the median US income that year. It is as if "for an immigrant" is parenthetically tagged to this affluence judgment. Like the positive feedback bias, shifting standards can produce more favorable evaluations of out-groups, and like the feedback bias it applies to academic evaluations of racial minorities (Biernat & Manis, 1994). Furthermore, shifting standards are moderated by subjective and objective aspects of evaluation. For example, a Black student will be rated equally with a White student on a subjective Likert rating of "very poor" to "very good" but will be rated more negatively on the more objective metric of letter grade (Biernat & Manis, 1994).

Despite these similarities in outcomes, the positive feedback bias is probably not due to shifting standards. As has been discussed, the positive feedback bias is sensitive to conditions that arouse or relax subjective threat (i.e., the content vs. mechanics effect, social cues from minorities, and direct affirmations or challenges of egalitarianism). The automatic, cognitively based mechanisms underlying shifting standards cannot account for these affective influences.

What about the finding that shifting standards are limited to subjective rather than objective evaluations? This would seem a conspicuous similarity to the feedback bias results, in that the positive bias mainly affects the subjective domain of writing content and is insensitive to the objective domain of writing mechanics. However, this similarity is more semantic than substantive. In shifting standards research, the terms "subjective" and "objective" refer to the manner of evaluation (e.g., qualitative ratings versus quantitative ratings). In the feedback studies, the terms subjective and objective refer to the material rather than the metrics of evaluation.

The orthogonal meanings of "subjective" and "objective" in these two lines of research are evident in the feedback study results. Thus, a Black student's writing content, a *subjective evaluative domain*, was more leniently evaluated on both subjective measures (e.g., "how much added work does the essay content require?") and on objective measures (e.g., the proportion of positive copy-edit comments). In contrast, Black writers' and White writers' essay mechanics, an *objective evaluative domain*, were appraised equally on both subjective and objective outcome measures. Finally, shifting standards cannot account for such purely interpersonal outcomes such as the greater number of mollifying feedback buffers that were selectively delivered to Black feedback recipients. Nor could it account for changes in feedback due to unfriendliness from a Black feedback recipient (as per Harber, 2004) or from threats/assurances derived from one's own social attitudes (as per Harber et al., 2010).

### Expectancy Violation Theory

According to expectancy violation theory (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987), when people contradict stereotypes about the groups to which they belong, their behavior is judged more extremely in the counter-stereotype direction. Thus, poor verbal performance by middle class White recipients should violate race-based expectations of verbal competence, leading to especially harsh evaluations of this person. Perhaps the positive feedback bias is due to exaggerated criticism of poorly performing Whites rather than heightened lenience to Blacks. The feedback studies do not support this interpretation. If only expectancies

caused the positive bias, then White feedback recipients should have been more harshly judged for deficiencies in writing mechanics as well as for writing content. This did not occur. Also, expectancy violation cannot explain why the bias was moderated by recipient friendliness in Harber (2004) or by direct manipulations of Whites' egalitarian self-images in Harber et al. (2010) and why these manipulations only affected feedback to Black feedback recipients.

### Sympathy motives

Feedback lenience to minorities may reflect sympathy for groups that have been historically subject to grievous mistreatment and who continue to endure profound socio-economic disadvantages (Jones et al., 1984). However, the feedback studies do not support sympathy motives as the cause of the positive bias. For example, sympathy would argue for lenience on both mechanics and content rather than only on content. Sympathy would also be expressed by more interpersonal attention. However, participants in Harber (2004), tended to spend less time with Black confederate/writers, regardless of their friendly or unfriendly demeanors, indicating a desire to escape engagement rather than to establish conciliatory rapport. Finally, if sympathy motivated the positive bias, then both cognitive dissonance and self-perception theory (Elliot & Devine, 1994) would predict that affirming egalitarianism would lead to added lenience, because sympathy with the disadvantaged is congruent with displaying egalitarian values. However, as Harber et al., 2010 showed, affirmed egalitarianism led to more rather than less critical feedback to Black writers.

### Social desirability motives

Social desirability motives have been addressed throughout this chapter, but to recap—the positive bias occurred in Harber, 1998, even when feedback was supposedly delivered privately and anonymously. The self-image manipulations in Harber et al., 2010 affected interracial feedback even though participants believed that only they had witnessed their own affirmed or compromised egalitarianism and only they could identify themselves as the source of subsequently delivered feedback. Thus, there is little evidence that extrinsic social constraints shape the positive bias.

## EDUCATIONAL COSTS OF THE POSITIVE FEEDBACK BIAS

Performance feedback is one of the most potent elements of learning (e.g., Hattie, this volume). It informs learners of their strengths and weaknesses, helps them understand and internalize performance standards, challenges them to produce their best work, and provides evidence of growth and improvement. However, the positive feedback studies indicate that minority students may be systematically deprived of these benefits of feedback. Across studies, poorly written essays received more lenient copy-edit comments and grade-like ratings if the supposed writers were Black rather than White.

Advice to Black writers was similarly diluted. For example, in Harber et al. (2010), teacher trainees in the Black writer/self-image threat condition recommended that Black writers spend only 2.82 hours on improving writing skills. Trainees in the White writer conditions (across threat conditions) recommended that White writers dedicate 4.22 hours on writing skills development. This is not a trivial difference: If this advice were adopted, Black students would spend about one third less time improving their writing skills. The positive bias also led to feedback buffers that, while blunting the edge of criticisms also muddled their messages, such as "Great essay! Just fix the organization and grammar, and develop the argument, and it'll be fine" (Harber, 1998). Collectively, the inflated praise, muted criticism, diluted advice, and garbled communications would provide minority students with less reason to improve their skills, and less guidance on where to focus their efforts.

It is worth noting that many of the teacher trainees in Harber et al. now teach in public schools with large minority populations. It is likely that these new teachers, and many of their colleagues, brought with them the concerns that produced the positive feedback bias in our study. If so, then the bias may be commonplace in public schools and could help explain the deficient challenge that undermines minority schooling (King, 2010).

Minorities may suspect that Whites' feedback is positively biased and as a result can be demoralized by Whites' praise. For example, praise from Whites can depress Blacks' self-esteem if there is even a minimal chance it was due to racial considerations (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). This is especially so among Blacks high in rejection sensitivity (Piff & Mendoza-Denton, this volume). These reactions are understandable. To be regarded mainly as a mirror confirming another's attributes, even laudable ones like egalitarianism, is to be transformed from a person to a device.

## *Praising others to affirm one's self*

The positive bias may also pose a self-presentation dilemma for minority learners. If they challenge feedback they regard as unfair, or simply reveal the disappointment that criticism often creates then, like the unfriendly Black confederates in Harber (2004), they may risk receiving positively biased feedback. This is true even if their responses are non-verbal and relatively subtle. On the other hand, if minorities respond with studied politeness like the friendly Black confederates, they lose the free-flowing give and take and the growing rapport that the best feedback encounters provide.

In sum, the positive feedback bias may deprive minorities of the information needed to produce their best work and to develop as learners, undermine their trust of praise, and constrain the unguarded conversations that make feedback optimally beneficial.

## SELF-IMAGE MOTIVES AND INTER-GROUP COMMUNICATION

Societal repulsion towards outright bigotry has forced many to suppress and even reform their prejudices. As important, people's own aversions to seeing themselves as racists have caused many to internally police their own intolerances. It is just because the taint of racism has become noxious to so many that social scientists have been forced to develop ever more subtle ways to ferret out prejudices. There are obvious and important benefits to this suppression of intolerance. Would-be targets are spared humiliations and inequities, and would-be perpetrators can correct their own hostile attitudes and impulses.

However, there may also be costs to this self-vigilance. If Whites regard encounters with minorities primarily as tests of their own moral rightness, then these encounters may lose the authenticity upon which genuine communication depends. A sanitizing kabuki of egalitarian displays, or just a wary and arid social caution, can supplant spontaneous, non-self-conscious contact with man-nered scripts. As a result, the goal of achieving a unifying "us" among racial groups can be eclipsed by efforts to confirm a racially tolerant "me."

## CONCLUSION

Performance feedback is best done when attention is fully focused on learners—on their strengths and weaknesses, and on their anxieties and their enthusiasms. The positive feedback studies indicate that many Whites are distracted from this outward focus when giving feedback to minorities and divert their attention from the educational goals of minority learners to their own self-image needs. There is an evident irony here, in that preoccupation with an un-



biased identity creates biased behavior. And even though the motivation behind the positive bias may be benign (or at least non-hostile), its outcomes—reduced academic challenge, thwarted intellectual growth, distrust of praise genuinely earned—are not.

However, castigating egalitarian-minded Whites for their self-image concerns may only heighten those concerns, making feedback even less candid and less constructive. Addressing the positive bias might instead require shifting attention from compromised dispositions to compromising situations and to fostering conditions where minorities and Whites can communicate with the authenticity and spontaneity that produces genuine rapport.

## NOTES

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1. Two essays, "Environmental Apathy" and "TV Violence," were developed to control for topic-related confounds.
2. Three Black and three White confederates were recruited in order to avoid confounds arising from the personalities and appearances of any individual confederate.
3. An additional item asked participants to list up to 5 prominent African Americans in well-known domains (e.g., arts, politics, music) or esoteric domains (e.g., sociology, physical sciences, math). Ease of recall (Winkelman & Schwarz, 2001) would imply greater/lesser appreciation of minority achievement and would affirm/threaten self-images accordingly. Control participants listed 5 places where they shopped.
4. Significantly, the positive bias shown on the Writer Evaluation Form was restricted to evaluation of essay content. Thus this study not only demonstrated that self-image threats cause Whites to bias feedback to minorities, but that the bias is restricted to the domain (essay content) where the threat is most potent.

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