

## SCIENCE BRIEFS

# Is Feedback to Minorities Positively Biased?

By Kent D. Harber, American Institutes for Research

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Dr. Harber conducted the research described in this article while at the University of Michigan, where he was a visiting doctoral student. The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) awarded this work first prize in its 1996 Social Issues Dissertation competition. A portion of this research has been published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (March, 1998).

**G**iving performance feedback is often a tricky business. In large part this is because feedback delivery involves two social goals that are often in conflict. The primary purpose of feedback is to supply accurate information about performance. But feedback cannot only be veridical. It must also be sensitive to and respectful of a person's dignity, and be protective of his or her self esteem and morale. For these reasons, satisfying both the informational and interpersonal requirements of feedback—particularly negative feedback—can be difficult.

The inherent challenges of supplying feedback may become even more complicated when feedback suppliers are white and feedback recipients are minorities. Our society's lingering legacy of racial discrimination can undermine the mutual trust that is essential for feedback exchanges. Whites, aware of the suspicions minorities may have regarding their underlying attitudes, can become uncertain and awkward in their encounters with members of other ethnic groups. As a result, whites' interactions with minorities can be shaped by efforts to avoid intergroup tension. However, such efforts may run counter to performance feedback, which often involves necessary criticism.

One way that whites may negotiate this dilemma is by muting criticism and

amplifying praise when giving feedback to a minority person. My research explores whether whites do, in fact, place this kind of positive bias on their feedback to minorities.

### *Demonstrations of the Feedback Bias*

In my studies white participants were asked to review an essay they believed had been volunteered by a fellow student who sought to benefit from peer feedback. The essay was intentionally riddled with grammatical errors and content flaws. The following excerpt is representative of the overall quality of the composition.

Similarly, the big oil spills got peoples attention until they go away, then they 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.

Participants learned about the race of the fictive writer by reviewing a demographics survey that the writer had supposedly completed. The fictive writer's survey answers were identical across conditions except for one item concerning campus affiliations. For participants assigned to the "black

writer" condition, this item read "Black Students' Union," while for participants in the "white writer" condition this item was left blank. After reviewing this bogus profile on the fictive writer, the participants critiqued the essay.

The purpose of these ruses was to reproduce the kind of dilemma in which the feedback bias is likely to occur. Participants were asked to take a critical stance towards another student's academic work (a task that many students find uncomfortable), to review material in which some degree of criticism was nearly unavoidable, and to relay their criticisms back to the writer. Recall that effective feedback involves a delicate balance between candor and sensitivity. If the mores of intergroup discourse inhibit hostile communication, then this balance should have been positively skewed among participants who believed that they were giving feedback to a black fellow student.

Indeed, that is what I found. Participants in the "black writer" condition supplied more positive comments and fewer negative comments than did participants in the "white writer" condition. Participants in the "white writer" condition could be quite harsh in their comments, as for example the participant who wrote to the fictive white writer, "When I read college work this bad I just want to lay my head down on the table and cry." Participants in the "black writer" condition were never so negative. They could, however, send paradoxical messages, such as "Great essay! Just fix the organization and grammar, and develop the argument, and it'll be fine!"

Participants also were given 7-point rating sheets to use in indicating how much added work they thought the essay required. These scales called for a more explicit, summative evaluation of essay quality. As with the written comments, the fictive black writer was more favorably evaluated than was the fictive white writer.

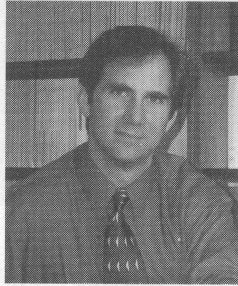
### What Accounts for the Feedback Bias?

Beyond showing that whites place a positive bias on their feedback to minorities, I also wanted to get some indication of why the bias might occur. My hypothesis is that this positive bias reflects social motives, stemming from whites' interracial concerns. However, there are potential cognitive explanations for the feedback bias that do not invoke social motives at all. For example, the bias might arise because many whites hold blacks to a lower standard of writing competence, leading to an automatic handicapping, of sorts, when reviewing a black person's written work. Or it could be that whites have particularly high expectations of fellow whites, leading them to be especially harsh when evaluating blatantly substandard work composed by a white writer. There is a sizable body of social cognitive research consistent with these alternative explanations.

One clue as to whether the feedback bias arises out of social motives or out of relatively automatic cognitive processes is to see if it is equally likely to occur in circumstances of high versus low social risk. If the bias is insensitive to these conditions, then the cognitive case is stronger, because the bias is less likely a response to interpersonal considerations. On the other hand, if the bias is selective for conditions of high social risk, then social motives are more strongly indicated.

As it turns out, writing composition tasks naturally provide the conditions for assessing the role of social risk in feedback delivery. The criteria for reviewing writing are generally of two kinds; evaluation of writing mechanics (e.g., spelling and grammar) and assessment of writing content (e.g., ideas and reasoning). Evaluating mechanics poses relatively little social risk to feedback suppliers. This is because there are objective standards, such as dictionaries and style manuals, which justify criticisms and thereby shield feedback suppliers from the appearance of prejudice. In contrast, there are typically no such established standards for evaluating content. Moreover, the content of what a person writes reflects more closely on sensitive personal attributes, such as their quality of thought. For these reasons, feedback suppliers may experience greater subjective risk when criticizing the content rather than the mechanics of another person's writing.

If the positive feedback bias is



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driven by social motives, then the bias should be especially pronounced in feedback related to essay content. Results from the initial feedback study, and a replication of it, revealed this predicted pattern. The more favorable essay comments and ratings supplied by participants in the "black writer" condition were nearly all related to essay content. There was virtually no difference between "black writer" and "white writer" conditions in the evaluation of essay mechanics. The rating sheet, which asked for separate ratings of content and mechanics, showed the same pattern. These results are not conclusive evidence that the feedback bias arises out of social motives. However, they are consistent with the social motive approach, and they are not readily explained by the social cognitive research on race based evaluation biases.

To further test the social motive explanation I conducted a subsequent study (unpublished) that examined how recipient demeanor and race interactively affect feedback. After reviewing the substandard essay, participants conferred with either a black or a white research confederate who posed as the essay writer. In this face to face encounter, confederates responded in either a friendly or unfriendly manner. I expected participants in the "unfriendly black writer" condition to interpret confederate unfriendliness as a sign that they, the participants, had committed an interracial trespass. Consequently, I predicted that these participants would provide more positive feedback, as a way to repair this inferred intergroup breach. This prediction was confirmed. The "unfriendly" black confederate received verbal feedback that was more positive compared to confederates in any of the other three conditions.<sup>1</sup>

### Social Implications of the Positive Feedback Bias

There is a growing consensus that minority students selectively benefit from academic settings in which they are challenged. Inflated praise and insufficient criticism may undermine this challenge, and thereby deprive

minorities of conditions in which they are most likely to excel. A positive feedback bias might also send minority students down a primrose path of inflated expectations, leading to disappointment and confusion. Repeated exposure to the bias may lead to cynicism regarding positive feedback from whites, causing minorities to dismiss genuine praise as an expression of intergroup politeness, or as a sign of lowered expectations. Cumulatively, these effects might exacerbate the problem of intergroup distrust, as minorities come to regard both criticism and encouragement from whites as tainted by racial attitudes.

### Unanswered Questions Regarding the Feedback Bias

Important questions regarding interracial feedback remain unanswered. Does the bias arise between other racial and ethnic groups, and in situations where minority group members are feedback suppliers and majority group members are feedback recipients? How is interracial feedback affected when the performance being reviewed is of superior, rather than sub average, quality? To what degree does the bias occur among those who routinely supply feedback, such as teachers, supervisors, and physicians? How might the bias be affected when outcomes have important consequences, such as affecting the recipient's academic standing or job status? Answers to these questions are needed to more fully gauge the extent and nature of the feedback bias.

### Conclusion

Interracial feedback may be especially complicated because it involves intertwining sets of vulnerabilities. Feedback suppliers may worry about appearing prejudiced; recipients may worry about being under valued. Both parties, aware of their own and each other's concerns, may be diverted from the forthright give and take that characterizes productive feedback. Yet such frank interchanges are often necessary to advance achievement. It may therefore be important to identify and create the feedback conditions where both minorities and whites expect to be taken at face value. ■

<sup>1</sup>Although participants behaved as predicted, I have no information that directly links their feedback to how they interpreted confederates' response styles.