

## Feedback to Minorities: Evidence of a Positive Bias

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This research tested the prediction that Whites supply more lenient feedback to Blacks than to fellow Whites. In Study 1, White undergraduates were led to believe that they were giving feedback on essays written by either a Black or a White fellow student. As predicted, feedback was less critical when the supposed feedback recipient was Black rather than White. It was also predicted that the feedback bias would be selective for subjective evaluative domains (i.e., essay content) in contrast to objective evaluative domains (i.e., essay mechanics). An interaction between recipient race and evaluative domain confirmed this prediction. The domain-specific quality of the feedback bias suggests that the bias may arise from social motives rather than from more automatic processes. Study 2 replicated these results.

The literature on intergroup evaluation has been exhaustive in mapping out the nature and causes of biased assessments of minority groups by Whites (for reviews, see Devine, 1989; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Pulakos, White, Oppler, & Borman, 1989). However, in nearly all studies of interracial evaluation, White reviewers have supplied their judgments of minority persons to research staff or to some other third party. Interracial feedback, in which Whites evaluate the performance of a minority person and then communicate their assessments back to this person, has received scant empirical review.<sup>1</sup>

An important way in which interracial feedback may differ from other evaluation modes concerns the direction of evaluative biases. Research on nonfeedback evaluations often shows a propensity among Whites to judge minority targets negatively (e.g., Henderson-King & Nisbett, 1997; Kraiger & Ford, 1985; Lam-

bert, Cronen, Chasteen, & Lickel, 1996). However, evaluations communicated in a feedback encounter may be biased in the opposite direction, such that Whites are selectively lenient when criticizing minorities. This is because of social challenges that, in kind or in degree, distinguish feedback delivery from other evaluation modes.

The literature on direct intergroup communications reveals a host of concerns that may lead Whites to temporize interracial feedback. These include Whites' wishes to display egalitarian values to others (Carver, Glass, & Katz, 1978) or to themselves (Devine, Montieth, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Dutton & Lake, 1973; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Interracial feedback may also be informed by a *norm to be kind* (Hastorf, Northcraft, & Piucciutto, 1979) or by sympathy motives (Jones et al., 1984), which dissuade the nonstigmatized from directly criticizing members of disadvantaged groups. Finally, feedback encounters with minorities may arouse in Whites feelings of generalized awkwardness (Stephan & Stephan, 1985) or discomfiting ambivalence (Katz, 1981). In such situations, Whites may mask underlying unease with overtly positive communications (Jones et al., 1984; Weitz, 1972).

There are also automatic processes that might interfere with feedback delivery. For example, Whites' negative stereotypes of minority persons' capabilities may cause Whites to shift their evaluative standards down (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991) when supplying interracial feedback. Similarly, high standards selectively applied to fellow Whites

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<sup>1</sup> The few experimental studies that have explored this topic have generally identified biases (positive and negative) in expressions of liking and responsiveness (Feldman & Donahoe, 1978; Feldman & Orchowsky, 1979; Taylor, 1979; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). Only Rubovitz and Maehr (1973) reported a bias in performance feedback, and this had a negative valence. However, they did not control for actual performance, thus limiting the interpretability of their results.

may lead to expectancy effects (Bettencourt, Dill, Greathouse, Charlton, & Mulholland, 1997; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987), such that Whites judge members of their own group more harshly than members of other groups for work considered substandard. These more cognitive mechanisms have been shown to mask latent, and negative, discrimination toward stereotyped groups.

Collectively, these various research approaches suggest that Whites may place a positive bias on the feedback they deliver to Blacks. The present research was intended to demonstrate that such a bias exists. In two experiments, White participants were asked to review a poorly written essay supposedly composed by either a Black or a White fellow student. Participants were led to believe that their comments would be returned directly to the writer. Feedback directed toward a "Black" writer was predicted to be more positive than feedback directed toward a "White" writer.

In addition to demonstrating the presence of a positive feedback bias, this research also was intended to identify limiting conditions that determine when the bias will occur. It did so by examining differences in feedback directed toward subjective and objective areas of evaluation. In regard to writing, *subjective evaluation* applies largely to the content of composition (e.g., strength of argument and originality of ideas), whereas *objective evaluation* addresses the mechanics of composition (e.g., grammar, spelling, and usage).

These two evaluative domains differ in the interpersonal challenges that they present to the feedback supplier. Content, according to experts in the field of writing instruction, is more interpersonally difficult to criticize than is mechanics (Shaughnessy, 1976). This is because there are few established guidelines for evaluating content, whereas mechanics have standardized referents such as dictionaries and stylebooks. Such referents supply external justification for criticism and thereby shield critics from the appearance of partiality. In addition, the content of writing often reflects on a writer's thinking and beliefs, which are more central personal attributes (cf. Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979) than are grammatical skills. The faulting of content may therefore present ad hominem connotations that do not attend criticisms of mechanics. In fact, college students rate content as more difficult to critique than mechanics, citing the ad hominem implications and lack of external justification associated with this domain (Harber, 1995).

Because content lacks established standards of evaluation while also presenting the risk of implying ad hominem attacks, it may be less "socially judgable" (cf. Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994) than mechanics. That is, it may lack the standards and norms that insulate judges from untoward appearances. The research on Whites' interracial concerns, cited above, suggests that Whites are likely to exercise particular caution when supplying interracial feedback in a less socially judgable domain. For these reasons, the feedback bias is expected to be revealed by an interaction, such that the predicted lenience in feedback to Black essay writers will appear most strongly in the evaluation of essay content.

### Study 1

The primary purpose of this study was to demonstrate that feedback from Whites to Blacks is positively biased. A poorly

composed writing sample was therefore predicted to be more favorably evaluated when its author was identified as Black rather than White. In addition, this study was designed to detect an interaction between writer race (Black vs. White) and evaluative domain (content vs. mechanics), revealing selective lenience in content-related feedback to a Black writer. This is because the ad hominem implications that content criticisms may convey, and relative lack of uniform justifications that they supply (Shaughnessy, 1976), may arouse Whites' intergroup concerns.

## Method

### Participants

Ninety-two White undergraduate psychology students (44 men and 48 women) participated in this study. Participants were tested individually in 1-hr sessions and received course-completion credit as compensation for their time.

### Stimulus Materials

*Substandard essay.* Participants' principal task involved reviewing one of two editorial-style essays that were, by design, filled with grammatical errors and content flaws. Two separate essay topics were developed to control for any artifacts arising from essay theme. One essay, entitled "TV Violence," discussed television's contribution to criminality, and the second essay, entitled "Interest in the Environment," commented on public apathy toward environmental issues. The essays were of comparable quality, length, format, and, to the extent possible, structure and tone.

*Writer demographics sheet.* This form was used to unobtrusively introduce the fictive writer's race. The writer demographics sheet consisted of a number of self-description questions and the supposed writer's handwritten responses to these questions. These responses described the writer as a female 1st-year student interested in political science, currently living in a large dormitory but planning to live in a sorority the following year. There were two versions of this form, which were identical in all respects except how a question concerning campus affiliations was answered. In the Black writer condition, this question was answered with "Black Students Union," and in the White writer condition, "None" was the reply. The demographics at this university are such that a female sorority pledge living in the indicated dormitory is almost certain to be White, unless otherwise indicated.

### Procedure

*Cover story.* Participants were greeted by the experimenter in a waiting area serving a suite of laboratory rooms. After completing standard experimental-consent forms, participants were taken to one of these rooms, where they were given the study's cover story. The gist of this story was that the research was designed to explore peer tutoring. Participants were told that their contribution to this research would involve reading and critiquing an essay written by a fellow student who was enrolled in a writing skills workshop. Participants were instructed to pen their editorial comments onto the essay. They were told that the copyedited essay would then be returned to the essay writer. Finally, participants were told that the essay writer was fully apprised of these procedures and was expecting to receive the participants' commentary on the essay. After supplying this cover story, the experimenter told the participants that although the writer's name would not be revealed, confidentiality concerns were still paramount. For this reason the participants were asked to review and sign a peer review confidentiality form. In actuality, this form served only to buttress the cover story.

*Editing task.* Participants were next taken to an adjoining experiment room where they could review their assigned essay in privacy. Once seated, participants were informed that their writer's assignment was to compose a two-page editorial-style essay on a topic of the writer's choice. Participants were then handed a copy of either the TV violence essay or the environmental interest essay, according to a randomization schedule. The participants were again reminded to read through the entire essay and to comment on spelling, grammar, structure, and content, as well as anything else that appeared to deserve comment.

*Writer race manipulation.* Before allowing the participants to begin their essay critiques, the experimenter introduced the writer demographics sheet as follows:

You know, in most peer tutoring situations the participants know something about each other. Because that's not possible here, we have had writers fill out this form that asks general questions about them. You should read this form over first, in order to get an idea about your writer.

At this point participants were given either the Black writer or the White writer version of the writer demographics sheet, according to a randomization schedule. The experimenter left the room at this point, with final instructions that the participants should take as much time as needed to conduct the essay review, and to notify the experimenter when the critiquing was done.

*Dependent measures.* Participants' copyediting and margin comments were the first outcome measure of this study. After supplying their essay critiques, the participants were next asked to fill out a brief writer's evaluation form. The form consisted of three scales that addressed essay content, mechanics, and overall quality. Each scale contained the following seven options regarding how much added work these essay features required: *none at all, very little, little, moderate, fair amount, much, very much*. The participants were told that this form would go directly to the essay writer and that no one else would see it. To further the impression that the form was a confidential channel between the participants and the writer, the experimenter supplied participants with an envelope with which to seal the writer's evaluation form after completing its three scales.

*Debriefing.* After all dependent measures were completed, participants were questioned to ascertain the effectiveness of manipulations and to probe for suspicion. Participants were then debriefed, verbally and in writing, regarding the purpose and design of the experiment.

### Data Scoring

Participants' copyediting comments were coded for positive and negative content comments and for positive and negative mechanics comments. Although coders were aware of the hypothesis guiding the experiment, they were blind to participant condition. Interrater coding reliability was satisfactory for each of these dimensions (content positive  $\alpha = .98$ , content negative  $\alpha = .69$ , and mechanics negative  $\alpha = .97$ ). Neither coder found any instances of positive mechanics comments. Participants' negative content comments were subtracted from their positive content comments, and their negative mechanics comments were subtracted from their positive mechanics comments (i.e., from zero). This yielded composite content and mechanics scores, necessary for analyzing the predicted interaction between writer race and evaluative domain (i.e., content vs. mechanics). Finally, because mechanics received many more comments than did content, raw comment totals were transformed into standard ( $z$ ) units. Inferential analyses were conducted on these standard scores.

### Results and Discussion

This study was intended to reveal an interaction between writer race and evaluative domain (i.e., content vs. mechanics).

This interaction was predicted to occur both in the writer's evaluation form ratings that participants believed were being transmitted directly from them to the essay writer and in participants' copyediting comments. The interaction was assessed using a mixed-design repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with evaluative domain (content vs. mechanics) as the within-subjects factor and writer race as the between-subjects factor.

### Preliminary Analyses

There were no significant sex differences in any of the outcome measures, and men's and women's data were therefore collapsed across experimental conditions. The TV violence essay and the environmentalism essay received comparable reviews, and there were no Writer Race  $\times$  Essay Topic interactions. Data were therefore consolidated across this variable.

### Manipulation Checks

*Race of writer manipulation.* During debriefing, all participants were asked to recall the writer's race in order to confirm that participants had registered this central design feature. Two participants failed to make the correct identification (1 in the Black-writer condition and 1 in the White-writer condition). Their data were therefore deleted from the study.

*Overall believability.* Participants rated their level of suspicion as moderate (2.5 on a 5-point scale where 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a lot*).<sup>2</sup> Suspicion did not significantly differ by experimental condition,  $F(1, 88) = 1.27, p = .26$ , or by participant sex,  $F(1, 88) = 1.51, p = .23$ .

### Main Analyses

*Writer's evaluation form.* The writer's evaluation form consisted of three rating scales on which the participant indicated how much additional work the writer should dedicate to essay mechanics, content, and overall quality. Data from this measure verified the predicted Writer Race  $\times$  Evaluative Domain interaction,  $F(1, 88) = 14.62, p = .004$  (see Figure 1). Simple effects tests showed that essay content was rated more favorably when the supposed author was Black rather than White,  $F(1, 88) = 9.59, p = .003$ . In contrast, ratings of essay mechanics did not significantly differ as a function of writer race,  $F(1, 88) = 0.53, p = .46$ . Ratings in regard to the overall quality of the essay did not differ as a function of writer race,  $F(1, 88) = 1.00, p = .31$ .

*Essay comments.* Review of participants' copyediting comments also demonstrates the predicted interaction between writer race and evaluative domain (content vs. mechanics),  $F(1, 88) = 5.70, p < .03$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 2. Simple effects tests showed that participants in the Black writer condition rated essay content more favorably ( $M = .85$ ) than did participants in the White writer condition ( $M = .14$ ),  $t(89) = 3.67, p < .001$ . In contrast to feedback on content, evaluation

<sup>2</sup> Participant pool policy at this institution requires that only those students who agree to participate in deception research be eligible for deception studies.

of essay mechanics showed that comments regarding Black writer mechanics ( $M = .26$ ) did not significantly differ from those regarding White writer mechanics ( $M = .22$ ),  $t(89) = .15, p = .87$ .

The separate contributions of positive and negative content comments were explored to better understand the nature of the domain-specific nature of the bias. This analysis revealed an interaction between writer race and the valence of criticism,  $F(1, 88) = 8.40, p = .006$ . One-way ANOVAs showed that participants in the Black writer condition supplied more positive content comments ( $M = 2.09$  vs.  $M = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 87) = 4.74, p < .04$ , and fewer negative content comments ( $M = 1.04$  vs.  $M = 2.26$ ),  $F(1, 87) = 5.65, p < .03$ , than did participants in the White writer condition.

**Summary comments.** Nearly half of the experimental participants (46%) concluded their essay critiques with short summary notes to the fictive writer. These added comments were not an anticipated outcome. Investigation of them showed that they were more commonly supplied by participants in the White writer condition (59%) than by those in the Black writer condition (36%),  $\chi^2(1) = 4.15, p = .04$ . The evaluative tone of these comments was judged by a rater blind to experimental condition. Comments addressed to the Black writer were more supportive than were those directed to the White writer,  $F(1, 53) = 6.46, p = .02$ . For example, participants in the Black writer condition were more likely to tell the writer how much they enjoyed reading the editorial or how much potential they saw in the essay. On the other hand, participants in the White writer condition could on occasion be quite harsh, as for example the participant who wrote, "When I read college work this bad I just want to lay my head down on the table and cry." Such baldly negative comments were never made by participants in the Black writer condition.

Cumulatively, these results confirm that Whites supply more positive feedback to Blacks than to fellow Whites, and that this feedback bias is selective for essay content.

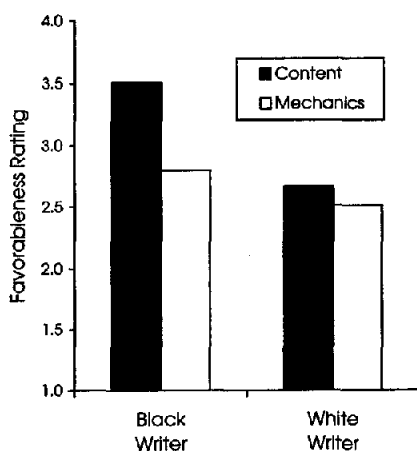


Figure 1. The favorableness of grade-like ratings transmitted to the supposed essay writer, as a function of the supposed writer's race and evaluative domain (content vs. mechanics). Note that ratings have been reverse coded for purposes of interpretability. Also note the actual scale ranged from 1 (lowest rating) to 7 (highest rating) points.

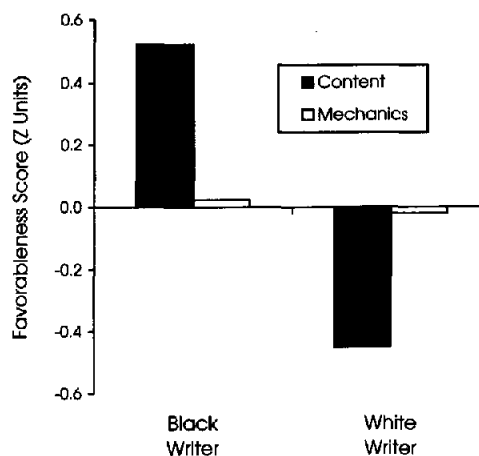


Figure 2. The favorableness of copyediting comments as a function of the supposed writer's race and evaluative domain (content vs. mechanics). Note that favorableness is a composite score composed of positive comments minus negative comments.

### Study 2

The results of Study 1, although consistent with predictions, contrast with a number of meta-analytic reviews showing Whites to rate Blacks less favorably than fellow Whites (Ford, Kraiger, & Schechtman, 1986; Kraiger & Ford, 1985; Landy & Farr, 1980; Sackett & DuBois, 1991). However, these meta-analyses included few feedback studies, and no studies in which feedback biases were empirically examined. Instead, these reviews (which collectively include over 100 samples) focused primarily on biases that arose in third-party contexts, which are less likely to pose the interpersonal considerations that may lead to a positive feedback bias. Nonetheless, the distinctiveness of the results obtained in Study 1 recommended their replication. Study 2 served as an attempt to reconfirm the positive feedback bias.<sup>3</sup>

### Method

#### Participants

One hundred three female undergraduates participated in this study. Only women were recruited because females' greater interpersonal sensitivities (e.g., Davis & Oathout, 1987) promised greater reactivity to the experimental designs. Participation was not restricted to psychology undergraduates, thereby broadening the inferential scope of this study. Participants were tested individually and received \$8 for 1 hr of experimental participation. Data coding and analyses followed procedures used in Study 1.

#### Procedure

The procedure of this study was largely identical to that of Study 1. Participants received the same cover story, reviewed the same materials,

<sup>3</sup> This study also sought to show that self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) would influence the feedback bias. The self-affirmation manipulation, however, had no significant effect.

and completed the same dependent measures tasks as was done in Study 1.

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary Analyses

Data were excluded from 1 participant in the Black writer condition and 3 participants in the White writer condition who either failed to make the correct race identification, or who refused to report what race they believed the writer to be. Overall suspicion reported during debriefing was low. The mean overall suspicion rating was 1.53 on a 5-point scale (1 = *no suspicion*, 5 = *extreme suspicion*). Suspicion did not vary by the fictive writer's race,  $F(1, 97) = .62, p = ns$ .

### Replication of the Feedback Bias

This experiment largely replicated the effects detected in Study 1. The writer evaluation form reconfirmed the interaction between writer race and evaluative domain,  $F(1, 97) = 5.93, p = .02$ . Participants in the Black writer condition more favorably rated essay content than did participants in the White writer condition,  $F(1, 97) = 5.37, p = .02$ . In contrast, the between-groups differences in regard to mechanics ratings were not significant,  $F(1, 97) = 1.82, p = .19$ . Participants' copyediting comments show that participants in the Black writer condition more leniently reviewed content than did their counterparts in the White writer condition,  $F(1, 97) = 4.45, p = .04$ . There was no between-groups difference in mechanics ratings,  $F(1, 97) = .41, p = .52$ . The interaction between race and evaluative domain, although in the predicted direction, was not significant,  $F(1, 97) = 1.54, p = .22$ . However, a meta-analysis (Fisher Combined Test in Wolf, 1986) that combined the Writer Race  $\times$  Evaluative Domain interactions computed in Studies 1 and 2 showed this effect to be reliable,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.04, p < .05$ .

Analysis of the positive and negative content comments replicated the interaction found in Study 1,  $F(1, 97) = 4.35, p < .04$ . Simple effects tests showed, as nonsignificant trends, that participants in the Black writer condition supplied both more positive content comments,  $F(1, 97) = 2.23, p < .14$ , and fewer negative essay comments,  $F(1, 97) = 2.34, p < .14$ , than did participants in the White writer condition. When these results are combined with those from Study 1 (Fisher Combined Test), the effects are clearly reliable for both positive content comments,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.38, p < .05$ , and negative content comments,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.96, p < .05$ .

Overall, results from Study 2 suggest that the feedback bias is a robust phenomenon and that it is most likely to be expressed in feedback that addresses subjective areas of evaluation (e.g., essay content) where intergroup concerns are more likely to be elevated.

### General Discussion

This research tested the prediction that Whites supply more lenient feedback to Blacks than to fellow Whites. Results provide consistent evidence that this positive feedback bias exists. In two separate experiments, White undergraduates gave more

favorable feedback on poorly written essays when the author was described as Black rather than White.

These studies were also intended to identify the conditions in which the bias is expressed. As expected, the feedback bias affected the evaluation of a subjective evaluative domain (i.e., essay content) but had no influence on an objective evaluative domain (i.e., essay mechanics). Examination of content comments shows that Whites selectively supply Blacks more praise, and less criticism, in this domain. The interaction between writer race and evaluative domain was evident in participants' copyediting comments and in their grade-like ratings to the writer.

The domain specificity of the bias was predicted to occur for two complementary reasons (cf. Shaughnessy, 1976). Content criticisms, which address writers' quality of reasoning and coherence of beliefs, can suggest personalized attacks. Mechanics criticisms, which deal with the more neutral topics of spelling and grammar, are less likely to raise such ad hominem implications. Second, there are few objective rules or standard referents that justify content criticisms, whereas such guidelines do exist for evaluating mechanics (e.g., dictionaries and stylebooks). These liabilities of criticizing content may arouse Whites' intergroup concerns (e.g., of appearing racist, of violating internalized values), leading Whites to temper feedback to Blacks.

### Alternative Explanations for the Feedback Bias

Social-cognitive approaches have also identified circumstances in which Whites will display evaluative lenience toward Blacks. Out-group polarization theory (Linville, 1982; Linville & Jones, 1980), for example, has shown that people accentuate their evaluations of out-group members, exaggerating both the outsider's successes and failures. White participants in the feedback studies did exaggerate their ratings of Blacks' written work, but not in the direction out-group polarization would predict. Substandard essays supposedly authored by a Black were consistently reviewed more favorably than were essays supposedly written by a White. According to polarization theory, the essays' poor quality should have led to accentuated criticism, rather than elevated praise, of Black writers' performances.

*Shifting standards* research (Biernat & Manis, 1994) supplies another cognitively based explanation for the feedback bias. According to this theory, evaluations of stereotyped groups are calibrated to group-based stereotypes. Thus, Whites' negative stereotypes about Blacks' verbal skills should cause Whites to employ less exacting standards when reviewing Blacks' verbal performances.<sup>4</sup> Biernat and Manis (1994) and Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) reported data consistent with this prediction.

A key qualification of the shifting standards approach is that its expression is limited to subjective metrics, which permit within-group comparisons (e.g., a target Black in relation to all other Blacks), and does not extend to objective scales, which force raters to evaluate in-group and out-group members using a common frame of reference. The present research also distinguished between subjective and objective evaluations. However,

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, these evaluative shifts have been associated only with a deceptive impartiality that masks underlying negative biases, but not with heightened lenience toward Blacks.

there is a critical difference between the feedback studies and the shifting standards research in how *subjective* and *objective* criteria are defined. In the feedback studies, the terms *subjective* and *objective* refer to the performance being evaluated (e.g., reasoning vs. grammar), whereas in the shifting standards research these terms refer to metrics used to judge performance (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative ratings).

The orthogonal relationship between these different uses of the terms *subjective* and *objective* is evident in the present research. Feedback on essay content, which is a subjective performance domain, revealed the positive bias on both a subjective metric (i.e., the writer evaluation form) and on an objective one (i.e., the number of content-related copyediting comments). In contrast, feedback on mechanics, which is an objective performance domain, showed no race effects on either the subjective or the objective measures.

Expectancy-violation theory (Bettencourt et al., 1997; Jussim et al., 1987) would predict that Whites would more harshly criticize fellow Whites than Blacks, especially when evaluating subpar work such as the essays used in this study. However, expectancy-violation theory and its demonstrations are limited to affective and global judgments (e.g., how one feels about the person being evaluated); it fails to account for judgments relating to specific skills or qualifications (Bettencourt et al., 1997). In contrast, the feedback studies focused exclusively on judgments of actual performance. In addition, the domain selectivity of the feedback bias is not readily explained by expectancy violation, which, again, is limited to global evaluations. Finally, expectancy effects, as applicable to the evaluations of standard work, are generally revealed in a propensity to overcriticize the in-group (Bettencourt et al., 1997). However, the feedback bias was demonstrated by more positive content comments to the out-group, as well as more negative content comments to the in-group.

Why do results in the feedback studies contrast with these other approaches?<sup>5</sup> A likely explanation is that the feedback studies introduced a level of social consequence that these more cognitive paradigms did not present. Feedback study participants believed that they were communicating their essay criticisms directly to the essay authors rather than to an emotionally disinterested experimenter. This may have made salient one or more of the manifold intergroup concerns which cause Whites to approach Blacks with extra caution and conciliation. Participants in out-group polarization, shifting standards, and expectancy-violation studies were not faced with the social constraints that direct feedback entails. As a result, these participants may have been influenced more by automatic processes than by intergroup considerations.

### Limitations of the Research

There are qualifications to the present research that should be noted. The causal role of intergroup concerns, although implicated by the domain specificity of the bias, remains to be more firmly established and more narrowly specified. In addition, it is unclear whether the feedback bias extends to settings other than the university environment in which it was observed, to encounters where the feedback supplier and feedback recipient are of unequal social status (e.g., teacher-pupil) rather than

being college peers, or to work of high as well as low merit (e.g., Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). These unresolved issues suggest further areas of research.

### Educational Costs of Biased Feedback

The positive feedback bias may present serious costs for minorities. Inflated praise and insufficient criticism may dissuade minority students from striving toward greater achievement levels and may misrepresent the level of effort and mastery that academic and professional advancement entail (see Massey, Scott, & Dornbusch, 1975, for elaboration). Biased feedback may also deprive minority students of the mental challenge that educators (e.g., Sommers, 1982) have cited as critical for intellectual growth. Steele (1992, 1995) noted that Black college students, in particular, are subject to low expectations and insufficient challenge and that they suffer both academically and psychologically as a result.

Distrust of positive feedback, even that which is deserved, presents a corollary cost of a positive feedback bias. Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) found that Blacks may be wary of Whites' praise, so much so that the receipt of it can depress their self-esteem. Significantly, the depressing effects that White praise had on Crocker et al.'s Black participants occurred only when these participants received feedback from a White who, supposedly, knew of their racial identity. Blacks who received positive feedback from a White in a race-blind condition showed elevated self-esteem.<sup>6</sup> Crocker et al. believe that Black participants in the race-aware condition regarded praise as a sign of the White feedback supplier's racial concerns, rather than as reliable testimony to the quality of their own efforts.

This catalogue of potential liabilities suggests that a positive feedback bias may lead to negative consequences for minorities. Although the present demonstration was conducted in an educational context, the bias may also arise in work settings, social gatherings, or any other circumstance where intergroup evaluations occur. For these reasons, it is important to learn more about the bias and to determine how it can be addressed.

<sup>5</sup> Other cognitive theories also address positive biases (for reviews, see Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). However, those addressed here subsume many of these other theories and appear most closely related to the present research.

<sup>6</sup> White participants, across experimental conditions, displayed enhanced self-esteem when praised.

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