The Positive Feedback Bias as a Response to Out-Group Unfriendliness[1]

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This study tests whether Whites provide especially positive feedback to minorities who respond to feedback in an unfriendly manner. White female undergraduates ($N = 66$) gave verbal feedback to either a Black or a White confederate who posed as the author of a poorly written essay. Confederates responded to participants' feedback in either a friendly or unfriendly manner. As predicted, participants who gave feedback to an unfriendly Black confederate supplied a selectively higher ratio of positive to negative comments and a selectively higher proportion of positive comments. Participants paired with an unfriendly Black confederate also provided the most positive post-interaction ratings, despite minimal impression-management pressures. Collectively, these findings indicate that Whites' self-image motives underlie the positive feedback bias.

Feedback from Whites to Blacks may be positively biased, such that Whites provide more lenient feedback to Blacks than to Whites for work of equal merit. This bias was demonstrated in studies where White participants gave feedback on essays of such poor quality that criticism was nearly unavoidable (Harber, 1998). Participants who believed that the writer was Black provided more praise and less criticism than did participants who believed that the writer was White. In addition, this positive bias was restricted to the more subjective domain of essay content (e.g., development of argument, quality of evidence), where the risk of appearing prejudiced was high. The bias was not evident in the more objective domain of essay mechanics (i.e., spelling, grammar, and word choice), where this risk was relatively slight.

Participants in the initial feedback studies did not engage directly with feedback recipients. Instead, they were told that the recipient would receive feedback

2272

(in sealed envelopes) via the experimenter. This kind of indirect feedback is neither uncommon nor unimportant. For example, graduate advisors, work supervisors, and journal editors often provide feedback through correspondence, rather than through direct face-to-face interactions. However, feedback is probably most potent when conducted face to face. During such real-time encounters, feedback suppliers can monitor recipients' comprehension of and reactions to instructive comments (Lepper, Aspinwall, Mumme, & Chabay, 1990), and feedback recipients can observe their own intellectual process, which helps them *learn how to learn* (Schunk & Swartz, 1993). Through a process of ongoing coordination, feedback suppliers and recipients can establish a pace and focus that maximize feedback efficiency (Lepper et al., 1990).

Does the feedback bias emerge in such direct, face-to-face encounters? Theories of intergroup relations offer differing answers to this question. More stereotype-based perspectives suggest that the feedback bias might diminish during direct interaction. The reasoning here is that when race is the only feature known about a minority person, it becomes more salient and is therefore more likely to guide judgment (Hamilton, 1981). Conversely, the added individuating details that would naturally emerge during a face-to-face encounter should crowd out these stereotype-based assumptions and thereby reduce their influence. Thus, if the feedback bias is driven mainly by automatic stereotypes, then the bias should diminish upon direct encounters where a minority recipient's unique personality can more fully express itself and thereby eclipse stereotype-based assumptions.

However, a direct encounter with the person being evaluated may make evaluators more conscious of themselves, as well as the person whom they are evaluating. In most social judgment experiments, evaluators do not provide their judgments to those they are evaluating, but instead to a neutral third party, who is typically an experimenter. In these situations, the evaluator, in effect, sits in the shadows while the person being evaluated occupies center stage. During feedback, however, evaluators are recast from anonymous, passive critics to more active, visible actors. In face-to-face interactions, feedback suppliers even more fully occupy the evaluative stage. Face-to-face feedback may therefore make White evaluators more *objectively self-aware* (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) regarding their own evaluative behavior and the potentially prejudicial messages that their behavior might convey.

Research on out-group deference (e.g., Devine, Montieth, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Dutton, 1973; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Katz, 1979, 1981; Monin & Miller, 2001) suggests that increased self-consciousness in interracial contexts will amplify rather than mute the positive feedback bias. Common to this diverse body of research is the observation that many middle-class Whites hold egalitarianism as a defining personal value (Jones et al., 1984; Myrdal, 1944). Many Whites experience lapses in their egalitarianism as threats to their sense of

self-worth (Devine et al., 1991; Dutton, 1973; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). In response to such threats, Whites will often take compensatory actions that serve to demonstrate to themselves that they are fair minded and nonprejudiced (Devine et al., 1991; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1983; Dutton, 1973, 1976; Dutton & Lake, 1973; Dutton & Lennox, 1974; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Monin & Miller, 2001). If providing critical feedback to a minority person constitutes a threat to egalitarianism and if positive feedback bias reduces this threat, then the feedback bias should be more pronounced during direct feedback encounters.

Positive Feedback in Response to Social Cues

According to aversive racist theory, egalitarian-minded Whites do not always demonstrate compensatory deference to minorities, but only do so when presented with cues that alert them to the potentially prejudicial nature of their own behavior (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Importantly, these cues can include reactions from the minority persons themselves. Cues signaling egalitarian lapses may be necessary for the positive bias to arise during direct feedback encounters.

Face-to-face feedback delivery is cognitively demanding work. It requires close attention to the performance being evaluated (Salvemini, Reilly, & Smither, 1993) and the careful balancing of criticism with sensitivity (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990; Lepper et al., 1990). These considerations occur in real time, making feedback a cognitively taxing activity with reduced opportunity for circumspection. The multiple cognitive and communicative demands of feedback delivery may add a quotient of *mental business* (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988) in the course of feedback delivery that diverts feedback suppliers' attention away from themselves. For all these reasons, a salient cue may be necessary to cause feedback suppliers to attend to their own behavior and to the intergroup messages that they may be conveying.

During feedback interactions, the cues that feedback suppliers find most relevant typically come from feedback recipients (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Although feedback recipients do not usually provide explicit critiques of the feedback they receive, they commonly do convey their impressions through nonverbal back channels (Krauss, Garlock, Bricker, & McMahon, 1977). These back channels—such as the feedback recipient's enthusiastic nod, furrowed brow, or glazed glance—may signal understanding, confusion, or distraction, respectively (Krauss, 1987). To the feedback suppliers, these behavioral cues may also indicate how favorably they, as people, are being regarded (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974).

When delivered by Black feedback recipients, these cues may take on special meanings for White feedback suppliers. If the signals from a minority feedback recipient are positive, Whites may infer that their feedback is being regarded as valid and that they, themselves, are being regarded as helpful. Such inferences

should constitute a green light, signaling to the feedback supplier that it is safe and proper to communicate in a relatively candid manner. However, negative nonverbal cues from Blacks may signal to Whites that their criticisms are being regarded as unfair and prejudicial. If Whites experience such signals as indictments of their own egalitarianism, then, according to aversive racism theory and related out-group deference research, they should moderate their feedback as a way to recoup their egalitarian credentials.

A study by Katz (1981) provided data consistent with this analysis. Katz had participants interact with handicapped confederates who assumed either friendly or unfriendly response styles. Contrary to Katz's prediction, but in accord with that of the present study, Katz's participants favored the unfriendly handicapped confederate. Katz conjectured that this result reflects able-bodied people's preference for stigmatized persons whose behavior is stereotype-congruent (e.g., the "embittered disabled person"). An alternative explanation, more in line with the current research, is that majority-group members interpret unfriendliness from out-group members as indictments of their own social intolerance. Subsequent acts of favoritism toward the hostile out-group member therefore serve to restore the majority persons' egalitarian self-image.

The present research tests this reasoning. In this study, participants read the same poorly written essays that have been used in previous feedback studies (Harber, 1998). However, in the current study, participants explained their criticisms directly to the purported writer during face-to-face feedback meetings. The purported writer, an experimental confederate, was either Black or White. It was in the course of these face-to-face feedback conversations that participants either received or did not receive cues from their assigned confederate that their feedback was being regarded either favorably or unfavorably. These cues were conveyed through the confederate's demeanor, which was either friendly or unfriendly. Participants were expected to interpret a Black recipient's unfriendliness as a cue that their feedback was being seen as prejudicial. If this inference threatened participants' egalitarian values, then feedback to an unfriendly Black should be selectively more lenient than to other feedback recipients. That prediction is the central hypothesis of the present study.

Positive Feedback Persisting Beyond the Feedback Interaction

If the positive feedback bias in face-to-face encounters reflects efforts to revalidate a core personal value, then the bias should be evident when alternative functions of the bias (e.g., social escape, self-presentation) are not relevant. In order to test this reasoning, participants were given an opportunity to rate essays, in private, following the face-to-face feedback sessions.

From the participants' perspective, the confederate had been dismissed from the study, so favorable ratings at this point would not provide an *escape through*

niceness. Participants believed that these ratings would not be shared with the confederate, and therefore would not provide a means to restore comity with her. Because participants had no knowledge that their face-to-face feedback encounters had been observed, those who interacted with an unfriendly Black confederate would have no selective incentive to use ratings as a way to recoup face with the experimenter. Thus, a positive bias in post-interaction ratings among participants in the unfriendly Black condition would most likely serve internal rather external motives. Specifically, it would give them another opportunity to demonstrate, to themselves, their own egalitarianism.

In sum, this study has complementary applied and theoretical goals. The applied objective is to demonstrate that the positive feedback bias extends to the important domain of face-to-face feedback interactions. As Shelton (2000) pointed out, decades of prejudice research have paid surprisingly little attention to actual encounters between groups and to the dynamics that shape these encounters. The present study investigates these direct encounters and their underlying dynamics, and does so within the important domain of performance feedback.

The theoretical objective of this research is to test whether the feedback bias arises from Whites' egalitarian self-image concerns. Prior research on aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) and compunction about expressing prejudice (Devine et al., 1991; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002) has shown that Whites suppress negative biases in order to retain egalitarian self-images. The present research takes this dynamic one step further, and tests whether these self-image concerns also lead to the expression of a positive bias. Confirming this prediction will also show how a largely intra-personal motive (i.e., the desire to see oneself as egalitarian) shapes the quintessentially inter-personal character of direct, face-to-face feedback. The egalitarian self-image hypothesis will be supported if the positive bias is selectively aroused by negative social cues from Black feedback recipients (i.e., unfriendly reaction to face-to-face feedback), and if this selective lenience persists even in the absence of extrinsic social pressures.

Method

Overview

Participants met either a Black or a White confederate, who posed as the author of a poorly written essay that the participants then critiqued. After reviewing the essay in private, participants explained their criticisms to their assigned confederates in timed and audiorecorded one-on-one conversations. During these interactions, confederates displayed either a friendly or an unfriendly demeanor. Four feedback-condition groups were therefore created:

friendly Black confederate, unfriendly Black confederate, friendly White confederate, and unfriendly White confederate. Following the conversation, participants completed a questionnaire that surveyed their impressions of the essay they had reviewed, of their assigned confederate, and of their experience dispensing feedback.

Participants

White female undergraduates ($n = 66$) participated in the study for psychology course credit. Participants were run individually in 1-hr sessions.

Confederates

Three Black females and three White females served as experimental confederates, playing the role of the essay writer. Multiple Black and White feedback confederates were recruited in order to control for individuating characteristics (e.g., personal appearance, personality style) that might confound the race-based predictions of this study. A dress code for confederates, consisting of informal student garb free of political insignia, religious symbols, or other such markers, was instituted to reduce such confounds further.

Confederates adopted standard vocabularies for their feedback interactions. These vocabularies restricted them to conversational back channels, such as "Uh-huh," "I see," and "OK," which signal attention to and comprehension of speakers' messages (Krauss, 1987). Confederates also were supplied standard answers to the types of questions participants were expected to present (e.g., the meaning of opaque sentences, the purpose of the writing assignment) and were instructed to be as brief as possible when responding to questions that had not been anticipated. These conversational constraints permitted confederates to sustain interactions without communicating in ways that might confound the independent variables of confederate race and temperament.

Feedback confederates were trained to adopt two interactive styles that they assumed, alternatively, during their feedback conversations. The *friendly style* involved direct eye gaze (per Kleinke, 1986), alert and receptive attention to participants' comments, appreciative smiling, and a generally positive manner (per Wayne & Ferris, 1990). The *unfriendly style* involved averted eye gaze, an occasional cool stare, inattentiveness and sullen responses to participants' comments, no smiling, and a generally somber manner. Confederates adopted one of these two styles, exclusively, throughout a given feedback interaction. Confederates were coached extensively in their vocabularies and their temperament styles in order to achieve uniformity in these aspects of their presentation.

Assignment of confederates to participants was determined by a schedule that counterbalanced all six confederates by race and temperament style. This

schedule also counterbalanced essay topic across the confederate and temperament conditions.

Essays

Participants read one of two poorly written essays, supposedly authored by the confederate, but in fact developed for purposes of this research. "TV Violence" discussed television's contribution to social mayhem, and "Interest in the Environment" addressed environmental apathy. These essays, which were filled with grammatical and content errors, were of comparable quality, length, format, structure, and tone. Two separate essays were used in order to control for artifacts arising from essay content. These essays were the same ones used in earlier feedback-bias research (Harber, 1998).

Procedure

The experiment began when the participant arrived at a waiting area that served a suite of experiment rooms. The confederate entered this waiting area 1 minute after the participant's arrival. In order that she display nothing more about herself other than her race and feigned status as a fellow participant, the confederate would, at this point, unobtrusively avoid contact with the participant by immersing herself in reading material.

The experimenter appeared soon after the confederate's arrival, confirmed the participant's identity, and then said to the confederate "You must be Janine, right?" The confederate would nod affirmatively. The experimenter then asked the confederate to produce the writing sample she was to have brought with her. In response, the confederate extracted either the "TV Violence" or "Interest in the Environment" essay from her shoulder pack, according to the counterbalance schedule. The experimenter then obtained a credit slip from the confederate, signed it, and returned it to her, and then reminded the confederate to submit the slip to her instructor so as to obtain credit for participating in the study. This interchange, conducted within the participant's view and hearing, was done to further establish the confederate's cover identity. Throughout these initial interchanges, the confederate did not actually speak, again in order to avoid expression of individuating attributes.

Cover story. After these opening exchanges, the experimenter brought the participant into an experiment room and delivered the cover story to her. The experimenter explained that the study was concerned with peer tutoring. The experimenter stated that the confederate (referred to as "Janine") was a student in a writing workshop who had volunteered a writing sample in order to get peer feedback, and also to receive extra credit in her class. The participant was told that she, the participant, would first review the confederate's writing sample and then give direct one-on-one feedback to the confederate regarding the

confederate's essay. Participants were requested to sign a form attesting to their willingness to respect the confederate's confidentiality. This form was, in fact, an added prop designed to reinforce the cover story.

Essay review task. After the cover story was delivered, the participant was taken to a second experimental room and supplied the poorly written essay. The participant was told to write comments directly on the essay and was encouraged to address all aspects of the essay, including mechanics (e.g., spelling, grammar) and content (e.g., ideas, persuasiveness).

Conversation with the confederate. The participant met with the confederate after reviewing the essay. The experimenter, who ushered the confederate into the participant's lab room, informed the participant and the confederate that at this point they should discuss the participant's essay comments and that they could take as much time as they desired in order to do so. The experimenter closed the lab room door after supplying these instructions so that the conversation could take place in apparent privacy.

The participant–confederate feedback interchanges began at this point, and it was here that the confederate displayed either the friendly or the unfriendly temperament style. The interactions were timed and audiotaped, although the participant was not informed of these measures until after the experiment session ended. From the participant's perspective, this was a private interchange between the confederate and herself.

The ratio of positive to negative comments was the primary outcome of these interactions. This is because feedback suppliers often use praise to satisfy their own needs for self-justification following criticism (Brophy, 1981). For example, inexperienced or inefficacious feedback suppliers often will leaven negative comments with praise in order to project fairness and "to establish communication with alienated, uncommunicative students" (Brophy, 1981, p. 17). For this reason, the "relative balance (of praise and criticism) varies with student ability level and teacher managerial skill, among other factors" (Brophy, 1981, p. 8). This strategic blending of praise and criticism would serve egalitarianism concerns during interracial feedback in situations where criticism is virtually unavoidable and the self-perception costs of meting out criticism are high—as was the case in the present study. The proportion of positive comments and the proportion of negative comments were analyzed separately as well.

Post-interaction ratings. When the participant–confederate feedback meeting ended, the confederate was dismissed. The participant was then asked to complete an Experiment Evaluation Form, which is a questionnaire on which she rated the quality of essay mechanics and essay content.[3] This form sampled the

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[3]All scales in the Experiment Evaluation Form were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1, designating lowest endorsement (e.g., *not at all*), to 7, designating highest endorsement (e.g., *to a great degree*).

participant's concern about hurting the confederate's feelings during the feedback interchange, and also her impressions of the confederate. Participants were told that only experiment staff (and not the confederate or anyone else) would review this form.

The post-interaction ratings focused on writing content (e.g., clarity of ideas, persuasiveness) and on writing mechanics (e.g., spelling, grammar). Initial feedback studies have shown that positive bias is restricted to content, which is more subjective and therefore more open to suspicion of hostile prejudice during feedback delivery. However, the very flexibility that makes content a liability during the course of initial feedback also may provide a means to correct for self-perceived trespasses committed during the course of feedback delivery. If participants in the Black–unfriendly condition were distinctly motivated to make such corrections, then they should demonstrate this through elevated ratings of essay content, rather than essay mechanics. The separate content and mechanics ratings permit a test of this prediction.

Concluding activities. During debriefing, participants were asked questions to confirm delivery of the confederate's temperament manipulation and to gauge their suspicion regarding the cover story. Participants were then fully informed about the purpose and design of the study, thanked, and dismissed.[4]

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Conversation coding. Two raters, blind to experiment condition, coded transcriptions of the participant–confederate feedback meetings. Raters identified the number of positive and negative mechanics comments (e.g., spelling, grammar) and the number of positive and negative content comments (e.g., ideas, persuasiveness) that participants had communicated during the one-on-one feedback sessions. Comments that could not be categorized as positive or negative were coded as *miscellaneous*. Interrater reliability on the coding of these categories ranged from an alpha (α) of .76 to .92. Only 9% of all participants made a positive comment regarding mechanics, and less than half of all participants made more than two positive comments regarding content. Therefore, comment types were collapsed into the two more general categories of *positive comments* and *negative comments*. These categories are independent ($r = .10, p = .41$) and support analyzing positive and negative comments separately. Subsequent analyses were based on these more general categories.

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[4]Participants were informed of the audiotaping at this time and were told why the audiotaping had not been part of the initial consent. They were then given the option of having these tapes excluded from further analysis. No participants requested such exclusion of their taped conversations.

The raw frequencies of comment by type and by condition are presented in Table 1. As is evident from this table, there were many more negative comments (M = 12.87) than positive comments (M = 2.67), $t(65)$ = 8.99, p < .001. This result confirms that participants registered the multiple flaws in the essays and articulated these to confederates. In addition, the generally high volume of comments participants conveyed during the feedback interactions (M = 21.39) indicates that participants were taking the role of feedback supplier seriously. Table 1 also shows that participants in the various conditions did not supply identical amounts of feedback. This difference is not significant, $F(1, 62)$ = 1.67, ns. However, it may distort between-group comparisons. For this reason, subsequent analyses are based on the percentages, rather than absolute amounts, of positive, negative, and miscellaneous comments made during feedback interactions. These percentages are also presented in Table 1.

Summary content and mechanics ratings. Participants' post-interaction ratings consisted of multiple items related to essay mechanics (i.e., spelling, grammar, punctuation, word choice, and paragraphing) and multiple items related to essay content (i.e., development of argument, clarity of ideas, quality of evidence, interesting presentation, and persuasiveness). These were combined into a summary mechanics scale and a summary content scale, respectively. Reliabilities were satisfactory for both scales (mechanics, α = .78; content, α = .86). Further analyses were conducted using these summary scales.

Confederate and essay effects. One-way ANOVA shows that participants' feedback did not distinguish among the three Black confederates or among the three White confederates. Consequently, data from the individual Black confederates were collapsed to create a composite Black confederate variable, and data from the individual White confederates were collapsed into a White confederate variable. The remaining race effects reported here derive from these composite confederate variables. Results also did not differ as a result of essay topic. Therefore, all remaining analyses are collapsed across this variable.

Suspicion. Overall suspicion was low, with an overall mean suspicion rating of 2.22 (2 = *little suspicion* on a 5-point scale). In addition, no participant was able to detect the true purpose of the study when asked to do so.

Manipulation checks. During debriefing, the experimenter mimicked either a friendly or an unfriendly interpersonal style and asked the participant to choose which of these best matched her confederate. All participants made the correct identification, indicating that this manipulation was conveyed effectively. The Experiment Evaluation Form also showed that participants regarded the friendly confederate as behaving in a more positive manner. The several mood items on this evaluation form (shy, friendly, happy, sad, angry) were summed into a general index of confederate mood, as rated by participants (α = .87). Higher scores signifying more positive moods. A two-way ANOVA conducted on confederate temperament (friendly or unfriendly) and race shows that the friendly

Table 1

Mean Numbers and Percentages of Face-to-Face Comments by Confederate Race and Friendliness

Comment type	Black–friendly (n = 17)		Black–unfriendly (n = 16)		White–friendly (n = 17)		White–unfriendly (n = 16)		Total by type (N = 66)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Positive										
Number	2.14	1.03	3.20	2.50	3.28	2.96	2.28	2.24	2.67	2.26
Percent	12	7	22	15	15	12	15	12	16	12
Negative										
Number	13.06	8.86	9.30	8.74	17.22	8.84	12.25	8.34	12.88	9.18
Percent	58	12	50	19	63	16	52	20	56	17
Miscellaneous										
Number	6.42	3.70	5.13	3.50	5.78	5.81	6.13	3.79	5.83	4.21
Percent	30	11	29	10	22	13	33	14	28	12
Total										
Number	21.62	10.74	17.63	12.68	26.28	15.00	20.66	11.64	21.39	12.69
Percent	100		100		100		100		100	

confederate was rated more positively on this index ($M = 2.19$) than was the unfriendly confederate ($M = 0.43$), $F(1, 64) = 13.59, p < .001$.

Overall, Black confederates received higher (more friendly) ratings on the composite mood index ($M = 2.08$) than did White confederates ($M = 0.65$), $F(1, 64) = 8.83, p < .005$. This unexpected result might indicate that Whites are reluctant to ascribe any negative attributes to Black feedback recipients, which generally would be consistent with interracial feedback research. The result of this effect on the main predictions, if any, is likely to be conservative. There was no interaction between confederate temperament and race regarding mood ratings, $F(1, 64) = 0.21, p = .65$.

Behavioral measures (analyzed via a two-way ANOVA) provide further confirmation that the confederate demeanor manipulation was effective. Participants assigned to an unfriendly confederate (across race conditions) interacted for less time with this person ($M = 6.30$ min) than did participants assigned to a friendly confederate ($M = 8.15$ min), $F(1, 63) = 5.22, p < .03$. Participants spent marginally less time interacting with a Black confederate ($M = 6.53$ min) than with a White confederate ($M = 7.91$ min), $F(1, 63) = 2.81, p < .10$. This race main effect may be, in line with predictions, a result of egalitarian self-image concerns aroused by the unfriendly Black confederate, with whom interactions were the shortest ($M = 5.71$ min). However, the interaction between temperament and race on interaction time was not significant, $F(1, 63) = 2.15, p = .18$.

The extent of comments made during feedback exchanges provides another indication that the temperament manipulation succeeded. Two-way ANOVA shows that participants who interacted with an unfriendly confederate uttered fewer feedback comments, as a nonsignificant trend ($M = 19.22$), than did participants who interacted with friendly participants ($M = 23.81$), $F(1, 64) = 2.31, p < .15$. There was no significant difference in the amount said to a Black confederate ($M = 19.84$) compared to a White confederate ($M = 23.47$), $F(1, 63) = 1.49, p = .23$; and there was no Temperament × Race interaction regarding the amount of feedback discussion, $F(1, 63) = 0.06, p = .80$. Cumulatively, these results suggest that interacting with the unfriendly confederate was sufficiently unpleasant that participants curtailed both the duration and substance of their interactions with this person. This provides further evidence that the temperament manipulation produced the intended effect.

Main Analyses

Face-to-face feedback. The main objective of the present study was to demonstrate that participants who interacted with an unfriendly Black feedback recipient would provide more positive feedback than would participants in any of the other three experimental conditions. This prediction was tested in a set of planned contrast analyses (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985) in which responses from
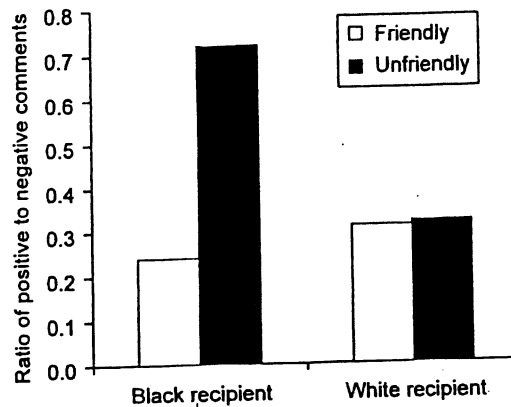
Figure 1. Ratio of positive to negative comments during face-to-face feedback as a function of recipient race and friendliness.

participants in the Black–unfriendly condition were compared to responses from participants in the other three conditions combined.

The first analysis considers the ratio of positive to negative comments delivered during the feedback sessions. As discussed in the Method section, the ratio of positive to negative comments was considered the most sensitive index of bias because it reflects efforts to balance criticism with praise in a situation in which criticism was virtually unavoidable. As predicted, this ratio was most favorably skewed among participants in the Black–unfriendly condition, $t(63) = 2.82$, $p < .01$ (Figure 1). A test of residual variance[5] shows that no systematic, between-condition variance remained beyond the comparison of the Black–unfriendly condition versus the remaining three conditions combined, $F(2, 65) = 0.10$, $p = .91$.

Analysis of positive comments, as a proportion of all comments made during the face-to-face feedback sessions, also shows selective favoritism toward the unfriendly Black feedback recipient, $t(63) = 2.25$, $p < .03$ (Figure 2). A test of residual variance shows that no systematic, between-condition variance remained beyond the comparison of the Black–unfriendly condition versus the three remaining conditions combined, $F(2, 65) = 0.13$, $p = .80$.

Participants paired with an unfriendly Black confederate also gave marginally fewer negative comments (as a proportion of all comments) compared to

[5]See Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwarz (1996) for detailed instructions on computing residual variance in planned contrast analyses. Also, see Keppel (1991) or Rosenthal and Rosnow (1985) to compute the sum-of-squares contrast, which is the only element of this computation not available in SPSS one-way ANOVA printout.
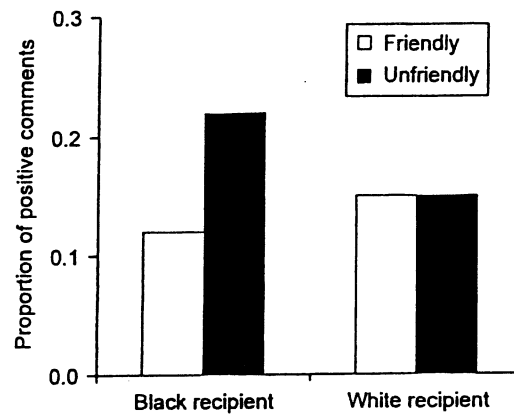
Figure 2. Proportion of positive comments during face-to-face feedback as a function of recipient race and friendliness.

participants in the other three conditions, $t(62) = 1.72$, $p < .09$. However, inspection of group means indicates that this was mainly a result of a confederate temperament main effect. A two-way ANOVA with confederate race and confederate temperament entered as independent variables confirms this to be the case. Participants who gave feedback to an unfriendly recipient (across race conditions) provided a lower proportion of negative comments ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.17$) than did those who gave feedback to a friendly recipient ($M = 0.60$, $SD = 0.14$), $F(1, 62) = 3.90$, $p < .05$. There were no other differences related to negative comments.

There was no prediction regarding the effects of race and friendliness on the production of miscellaneous comments, so this variable was explored in a two-way ANOVA. The analysis reveals a significant Race × Friendliness interaction, $F(1, 61) = 4.49$, $p < .05$. Tukey's tests of multiple comparisons show that the friendly White confederate received fewer miscellaneous comments ($M = 0.22$, $SD = 0.13$) than did the unfriendly White confederate ($M = 0.33$, $SD = 0.14$), $t(30) = 2.38$, $p < .03$.[6] Feedback suppliers often add irrelevant comments when struggling to be both socially sensitive and factually accurate (Bavelas et al., 1990). Such efforts may have been minimal for participants who interacted with a friendly White confederate because this condition presented the fewest interpersonal challenges. As a result, participants in the White–friendly condition may have been the most willing to provide feedback that was task-relevant and critical.

[6]Participants in the Black–friendly condition ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.11$) and in the Black–unfriendly condition ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 0.10$) also made more miscellaneous comments than did those in the White–friendly condition, but the differences were not significant.
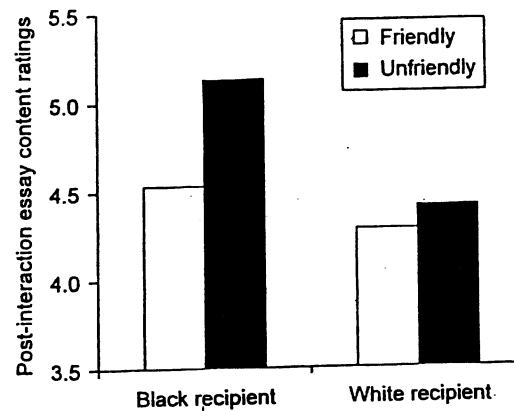
Figure 3. Rating of essay content following face-to-face feedback as a function of recipient race and friendliness.

Ratings to the experimenter. After concluding their face-to-face meetings with their assigned feedback recipients, participants rated essay content and essay mechanics. As expected, participants in the Black–unfriendly condition gave the most favorable ratings on essay content compared to all other groups, $t(65) = 2.32, p < .03$ (Figure 3). A test of residual variance shows that no systematic, between-condition variance remained beyond the comparison of the Black–unfriendly condition versus the three other conditions combined, $F(2, 65) = 0.34$, $p = .71.$

The content ratings given by participants in each of the different conditions may be normatively meaningful. Participants in the three comparison conditions (i.e., Black–friendly, White–friendly, and White–unfriendly) assigned the essay an average score of 4, which was labeled *fair* on the evaluation form: a tepid assessment. Participants in the Black–unfriendly condition assigned the essay an average score of 5, which was labeled *mildly strong*. This rating is not only numerically higher than that given by participants in the other conditions, but it also crosses the threshold from neutral to positive and therefore may have important practical implications. It may misrepresent to feedback recipients that mediocre work is regarded as good and thereby may undermine recipients' motives to improve performance.

Discussion

For many Whites, interracial feedback may represent a wary landscape of vague assumptions and potential missteps, where their social reputations and personal sense of worth are in jeopardy. This combination of risk and ambiguity

may make Whites selectively attuned to social signals from Black feedback recipients. If Black recipients respond agreeably to criticism, White feedback suppliers may infer that all is well and that their own egalitarian credentials remain in tact. As a result, they are encouraged to provide candid feedback that corresponds to the quality of work they are reviewing. However, if the Black recipient responds negatively to criticism, Whites may infer that they, themselves, are being perceived as prejudiced. This implicit challenge to their own egalitarianism, according to previous demonstrations of the positive feedback bias (Harber, 1998) and the extensive research on out-group deference, should lead White feedback suppliers to provide more lenient feedback to unfriendly Black recipients. That is what the current research predicted and found.

White participants in this study supplied face-to-face feedback on a patently flawed essay. When giving feedback to a friendly Black, a friendly White, or an unfriendly White, participants supplied a ratio of positive to negative comments commensurate with the essay's poor quality; roughly one positive comment for every three negative comments. However, when giving feedback to an unfriendly Black, participants supplied nearly equal amounts of positive and negative comments, thereby conveying a considerably more positive assessment of the substandard work that they reviewed. When examined separately, the proportion of positive comments selectively favored the unfriendly Black recipient. Participants in the Black–unfriendly condition supplied an overall higher proportion of positive comments than did participants in the other conditions, who were roughly equivalent on this measure. Participants paired with an unfriendly Black recipient also supplied the lowest proportion of negative comments, although this result reflects the additive effects of recipient race and temperament, rather than the interaction of these dimensions.

This pattern of selectively favoring an unfriendly Black feedback recipient is consistent with the predictions of aversive racism theory (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), which stipulate that Whites are selectively attuned to social cues that impugn their own interracial behavior. When confronted with such cues, Whites are often motivated to inhibit potentially prejudicial behavior. That is, they show out-group deference in order to maintain their own egalitarian self-images. In the current study, these cues were the signs of unfriendliness conveyed by the feedback confederate in response to participants' critical feedback. This unfriendliness was clearly aversive, regardless of confederate race. Participants paired with either an unfriendly Black or an unfriendly White recipient spent less time and said less during the feedback encounters compared to participants who interacted with either a friendly Black or a friendly White confederate. In addition, participants paired with an unfriendly confederate made fewer negative comments than did participants paired with a friendly confederate. Collectively, this abbreviated interaction and reduced criticism would serve to minimize uncomfortable contact.

Positive comments, in contrast, serve to send a message of good will and indicate efforts to repair interpersonal breaches (Brophy, 1981). Participants paired with an unfriendly Black confederate made selectively more of these reparative gestures. Participants in the Black–unfriendly condition supplied a greater proportion of positive comments and a higher ratio of positive-to-negative comments than did all other participants, including participants paired with an unfriendly White. These distinctly positive gestures indicate that participants who were paired with a Black–unfriendly confederate were seeking to do more than leave the field of an awkward interaction (e.g., Bavelas et al., 1990); they were also attempting to change how they themselves appeared within this field (per Brophy, 1981).

Post-interaction essay ratings provide additional evidence that participants who interacted with an unfriendly Black were motivated to correct potential interracial missteps. These ratings, supplied after the recipient apparently had departed from the study, selectively favored the unfriendly Black confederate. The conditions in which these ratings occurred indicate that positively biased feedback to an unfriendly Black recipient satisfied internal motives, rather than external constraints. The ratings occurred after the face-to-face interaction ended, so social escape should not have been a relevant concern. Other extrinsic explanations (e.g., saving face, upholding kindness norms; Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966) are also inconsistent with this outcome because the essay ratings did not provide participants with any such impression-management opportunities. Because the feedback encounters supposedly were conducted in private, participants paired with an unfriendly Black confederate had no selective incentive to impress the experimenter. Thus, it is unlikely that favorable post-interaction essay ratings were done to curry the experimenter's approval.

Finally, the selectively favorable post-interaction ratings given to the unfriendly Black recipient were limited to essay content (e.g., development of argument, quality of evidence). The positive bias did not extend to ratings of essay mechanics (e.g., spelling, grammar, word choice). This pattern replicates the initial studies on positive feedback bias (Harber, 1998), which predicted that the bias would favor content. Content may present greater risks of appearing prejudiced than does mechanics because it lacks objective standards that justify criticisms and because it addresses more personally sensitive attributes, such as quality of reasoning and cogency of judgment. If participants paired with an unfriendly Black feedback recipient were especially motivated to avoid appearing prejudiced, they should have expressed this intent in elevated content ratings, as they in fact did. Furthermore, content permits more flexibility in evaluation than does mechanics (i.e., a word is spelled either correctly or incorrectly, while an argument may lack coherence but also may have "undeveloped potential"). For this reason, content may have supplied participants seeking an opportunity to restore egalitarian credentials a credible means to do so. Only

participants in the Black–unfriendly condition appear to have availed themselves of this opportunity.

In sum, participants paired with an unfriendly Black feedback confederate provided the most positive post-interaction ratings on essay content even though there were no salient external reasons for doing so. In addition, the Black-unfriendly participants restricted their positive ratings to essay content, where the risk of appearing prejudiced may have been greater. This out-group deference under conditions of perceived anonymity is very similar to the findings of Dutton and Lake (1973) and Monin and Miller (2001). The conclusion from those studies, and from the current one, is that when the only audiences to such favoritism are the White participants themselves, then the deference most likely reflects participants' intrinsic motive to restore their own egalitarian self-image. Collectively, the face-to-face feedback comments and the post-interaction ratings support the hypothesis that the positive feedback bias is a result, at least in part, of Whites' concerns with maintaining their own egalitarian credentials.

Isolating the Egalitarian Motive

The mediating effect of egalitarian self-image concerns was strongly implicated by this study. However, because egalitarian concerns were not assessed explicitly, direct associations between these concerns and feedback delivery cannot be made. Unfortunately, obtaining direct reports of egalitarian preoccupation may not be feasible. Such reports may require a level of introspective accuracy that exceeds the capacity of most people (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Also, social desirability motives may contaminate participants' reports of their own egalitarian concerns within specific interracial encounters (e.g., McConahay & Hough, 1976). Future studies may seek additional indirect measures to relate more definitively the feedback bias to self-image concerns.

Alternative Explanations

The results of this research, although consistent with the proposed egalitarian self-image hypothesis, contrast with other studies of intergroup behavior. Research on social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), hostility toward out-groups (Fiske, 1998), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and related programs all show that people favor members of their in-group and disfavor members of out-groups. Yet, the current research, as well as the initial positive feedback bias studies (Harber, 1998), demonstrates favoritism toward the out-group rather than the in-group. What accounts for the discrepancy between these previous studies and interracial feedback research? The present experiment was not designed specifically to relate positive feedback bias to these other approaches, but it is possible to venture some reasoned speculation.

Interracial feedback required Whites to deliver critiques directly to out-group members. In this situation, Whites may become, to themselves, salient actors rather than background observers and, as a result, objects of their own evaluation. The spotlight of *objective self-awareness* (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) may cause Whites to consider how their own behavior could impugn their own egalitarianism. Indeed, much of the related research showing out-group deference occurs in situations where Whites interact directly with out-group members and do so in ways that make their own behavior salient to themselves (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1983; Dutton & Lake, 1973; Hastorf, Northcraft, & Piucciotto, 1979; Katz, 1981). In contrast, research showing out-group hostility typically does not require participants to convey their evaluations directly to out-group members. Because they are not subject to self-evaluative pressures, Whites in studies involving minimal direct contact may be more prone to express latent out-group hostility.

In addition, participants in the present study were alone with their out-group partners and did not have other in-group members available who could either assert an in-group norm or who could otherwise support in-group favoritism (as might arise in minimal group paradigms, for example). This isolation from fellow in-group members may have been important not only because it deprived participants of allies who would embolden out-group hostility, but because it may have prevented the deindividuation that occurs when collective action obscures individual behavior (e.g., Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1980). Dyadic interaction with a Black feedback recipient may have kept White feedback suppliers focused more narrowly on the implications of their own behavior. Absent the self-consciousness aroused by the conditions created in one-on-one interactions, Whites may be more prone to display negative biases toward out-groups.

Heightened self-consciousness concerning egalitarian credentials may explain another seemingly paradoxical outcome of the present study, which is that the unfriendly Black confederate received the most lenient feedback. Prejudice studies have shown more commonly that people who feel threatened by out-groups display hostility rather deference toward out-group members (Fiske, 1998; Henderson-King & Nisbett, 1996). It may be that in situations where Whites become more vigilant of their own interracial attitudes, such as dyadic feedback interactions, a minority interlocutor's unfriendliness is regarded as a sign of one's own lapsed egalitarianism (as per aversive racism theory), rather than as confirmation of out-group hostility. Additional implications of selective lenience toward the unfriendly Black confederate are discussed in the following section.

Social-cognitive approaches to intergroup behavior also have demonstrated out-group deference, but for reasons other than the self-image motives proposed here. Some of the more prominent of these approaches include shifting standards (Biernat & Manis, 1994), expectancy effects (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987),

and out-group polarization (Linville, 1982). However, none of these approaches can account for the specific pattern of results in the current study. For example, it is unclear why standards would shift, expectancies be violated, or out-group extremity occur selectively for an unfriendly Black. Nor do any of the approaches provide ready explanations for selective lenience regarding essay content versus essay mechanics, as occurred in the post-interaction ratings as well as in other feedback studies (Hanson & Harber, 2003; Harber, 1998).[7] The egalitarian self-image hypothesis, as detailed earlier in this paper, not only accommodates these results, but also actually predicts them.

Practical Implications of the Findings

Observers of minority education have cited lower performance standards as a liability for minority students (Espinoza, Fernandez, & Dornbusch, 1975; Steele, 1995). According to these scholars, many minority students are chronically misled about how much effort it takes to perform satisfactorily and therefore perform below their true potential. Results from the present study add credence to these concerns. As in previous feedback studies (Harber, 1998), Whites gave selectively more lenient feedback to Blacks than to Whites for clearly substandard work. The post-interaction ratings indicate that the bias is expressed in normative as well as comparative terms. Participants in the Black–unfriendly condition rated the essay as *moderately strong*, whereas all other participants rated it as only *fair*. For many students, this difference may represent the threshold between continued efforts to improve work and ceasing to make such efforts.

The current study also shows that the positive feedback bias extends to face-to-face feedback encounters, although only when the minority feedback recipient displays signs of discontent. This has important practical implications because of the particular potency of direct feedback (Lepper, 1988; Lepper et al., 1990; Schunk & Swartz, 1993; Watzlawick et al., 1967; Woolfolk, 1978). If Blacks come to regard face-to-face feedback from Whites as compromised by Whites' intergroup concerns (for evidence that they do, see Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991), then Blacks may be deprived of an important source of self-efficacy (Schunk & Swartz, 1993), internal locus of control (Oren, 1983), and intrinsic motivation (Deutch, 1979; Lepper, 1988). If Blacks regard feedback as motivated by sympathy rather than merit, they also may come to see themselves as fundamentally less able to succeed (e.g., Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Graham, 1984).

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[7]Although shifting-standards research distinguishes between subjective and objective evaluations, as does the current research, it does so in a manner that is qualitatively different from feedback studies. In the shifting-standards paradigm, *subjective* and *objective* refer to how things are measured (e.g., relative metrics vs. absolute metrics); while in feedback studies, these terms refer to the types of things being measured (e.g., essay content vs. essay mechanics).

The selectively favorable face-to-face feedback supplied to an unfriendly Black may indicate a dilemma that Blacks face when seeking candid feedback from Whites. In order to receive relatively unbiased face-to-face feedback, Blacks may need to maintain a studiously positive demeanor. If they are less than agreeable, Blacks may risk receiving feedback that is compromised by inflated praise. This amicability constraint would limit the degree to which Blacks can energetically challenge feedback that they find confusing, erroneous, or inappropriate; to display the displeasure people commonly feel when receiving criticism; or simply to reveal the negative moods that occur when one is having a bad day. Thus Blacks, more than others, may be forced to choose between assuming a falsely positive demeanor or receiving falsely positive feedback.

The Looking-Glass Other

The lenient feedback given to the unfriendly Black confederate runs counter to the distinctiveness maxim of attribution theory (Kelley, 1972). According to this principle, behavior that defies situational pressures typically is ascribed to qualities within actors, rather than to forces acting upon them. The unfriendly Black confederate's demeanor deviated from both politeness norms (Aronsson & Satterlund-Larrson, 1987) and the implicit contract between feedback supplier and feedback recipient (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Therefore, such distinctive behavior should have made the unfriendly Black appear more unique and idiosyncratic. Indeed, Hamilton (1981) says that stereotypes are less likely to influence social behavior in direct one-on-one interactions because of the distinguishing behavior that individual out-group members bring to such encounters. However, the atypical behavior of the unfriendly Black confederate apparently highlighted her racial identity, rather than her individuality. It led to the out-group deference (positively biased feedback) that commonly occurs when Whites feel that their own egalitarianism has been impugned.

How is it that behavior that should have been individuating instead became stereotypical? The symbolic interactionist tradition in social psychology provides a way of understanding this apparent anomaly. According to this tradition, we use others' reactions to ourselves as a social mirror. Favorable reactions from others serve to confirm our strengths, while negative reactions highlight our weaknesses. This *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) is a potent social tool. It helps us to maintain our most advantageous social face, and it prevents us from straying too far from our internalized self-images. Therefore, it is common and necessary to see in others' reactions information about us.

In the current study, the unfriendly Black confederates may have served as social looking glasses for the White participants. The Black confederate's unfriendliness may have been the salient cue to participants, per aversive racism theory, that their own behavior represented a potential betrayal of their own

egalitarian values. Thus, what may have been distinctive for participants paired with unfriendly Black confederates was not the behavior of their feedback partner, but instead their own behavior as reflected back to them by their partner.

This analysis may point to an insidious cost of out-group deference. What happens to people who, because of their social classification, become only a reflection of others' attributes; whose expressive behavior is not regarded as communication about them, but instead as descriptive of those with whom they interact? In other words, what is the cost of consigning a person, or an entire group, to the role of social mirror?

Ralph Ellison captured the psychic cost of being trapped in the role of *looking-glass other*. In *Invisible Man* (1947), he wrote

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . It is as though I have been surrounded by *mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, *themselves*, or figments of their imaginations—indeed everything and anything except me. (p. 3, emphasis added)

Ironically, it may be these same concerns about being misperceived that prompt White feedback suppliers to react in such a self-oriented manner when engaging with Black feedback recipients. Whites who give feedback to Blacks may worry that their own earnest comments will be regarded as evidence of intergroup malice and that they will be cast in the role of the bigoted White. If so, then the positive feedback bias, and perhaps much related work on out-group deference, reflects intertwining vulnerabilities between Blacks and Whites. Blacks may be concerned that their own efforts will be unfairly devalued or insincerely applauded; Whites may be concerned that their unbiased observations will be regarded as prejudiced. Unraveling these knotted attributions may be a necessary precondition for more authentic intergroup contact.

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