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Reports

Communicating about others: Motivations and consequences of race-based impressions

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Examined the effects of target race (Black/White) on impressions and communications.
- Internal motivation to respond without prejudice (IMS) moderated race effects.
- Those low in IMS showed evidence of race-based shifting standards in judgment and memory.
- Positive communications about Black targets predicted *increased* racism.

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ABSTRACT

We examined how written communications about other people are affected by racial stereotypes and the race-relevant motivations communicators bring to the situation. Following exposure to a Black or White student's academic transcript, White communicators who were low (but not high) in the internal motivation to respond without prejudice (IMS) offered more favorable evaluations of Black than White students. Thus, those least concerned about expressing prejudice offered the most pro-Black communications, presumably because they use racial stereotypes and evaluated Blacks relative to lower standards. At the same time, they mis-remembered Black students as having lower GPAs than White students. Additionally, racial prejudice increased from pre- to post-test among those who communicated a positive impression of the Black student, compared to those who communicated a positive impression of a White student. Surface positivity of communications about Black students may paradoxically strengthen negative stereotypes and racial prejudice.

Introduction

When we talk about other people, we typically use subjective descriptors or adjectives such as "he's nice," "she's smart," "he's really good at basketball." Such language is slippery and subjective, and its meaning is not obvious without some knowledge of the comparative standard used to produce the judgment (see Dunning, 1993; Huttenlocher & Higgins, 1971). One relevant standard is the category membership – and associated stereotypes – of the target being described. For example, a claim that "she's tall" may be based on a comparison of a particular female target to a female standard; a claim that "he's good at math" may be based on comparison to a male standard. This is a key argument behind the shifting standards model, which suggests that within-category standards of judgment are used to evaluate targets on stereotype-relevant dimensions (Biernat, 2003; Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991).

A consequence of using within-category judgment standards is that the same subjective language may be used to mean very different things about people. "Tall" for a woman is not the same thing as "tall" for a man, because men are stereotyped as being taller than women and therefore judged against a higher height standard. Similarly, "good athlete" may have a different meaning when it describes a White versus a Black target, because Blacks may be stereotyped as more athletic than Whites. A considerable body of research suggests that standard shifts of this sort occur, and result in similar subjective judgments of members of different groups (e.g., women and men judged equally "tall"). At the same time, *objective* or *common rule* judgments, not open to standard shifts, reveal straightforward evidence of stereotypes. For example, though women and men might be judged equally "tall," the men are nonetheless judged taller in feet and inches than women; though Blacks and White may be judged equally "athletic," Blacks are chosen as more athletic than Whites in direct comparisons (for reviews, see Biernat, 2003, 2012).

The use of stereotype-based standards is evident not only when we make judgments of others but when we *translate* descriptive language offered by third parties. For example, equivalent subjective

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language about female and male physics students in letters of recommendation was translated to indicate a lower objective level of performance for the female student (Biernat & Eidelman, 2007). The description "good parent" was translated to indicate greater objective involvement in childcare (e.g., more diapers changed) for women than for men (Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997). In both of these cases, the translations indicate that what it takes, objectively, to be considered a good physics student or a good parent depends on gender stereotypes: *For a woman*, a "good" academic record in physics is less good than that of a man's, and "good" parenting is evident in more plentiful childcare involvement than that of a man.

Recently, we documented a sequence of shifting standards effects in the communication and translation of race-based judgments (Collins, Biernat, & Eidelman, 2009). White respondents designated as "communicators" provided more favorable subjective descriptions of Black than White targets, based on an identical objective record (a college transcript). Although this pattern could also be driven by the desire to appear non-prejudiced, evidence supporting the shifting standards account could be gleaned from the fact that these communicators mis-remembered the Black student as having a lower GPA than the White student (Collins et al., 2009). Additionally, a separate set of "interpreters," who were told the student's race and assigned to read the written description of one communicator, "translated" that description to indicate a worse academic record when the student was Black than White.

The psychology of the communicators in this paradigm is worth exploring further. Having just offered positive descriptions of Black students – a counter-stereotyping or contrast effect – communicators' memories were nonetheless distorted in a stereotype-consistent direction (Collins et al., 2009). In the present research, we seek to examine this effect further, in two distinct ways. The first is to explicitly examine the role of motivations to respond without prejudice in this pattern (Plant & Devine, 1998). In our earlier research we documented that such motivations measured *after* communications were unrelated to target race and positivity of communications. But we were unable to examine whether pre-existing motivations play a predictive role. One might expect that it would be among those high in motivation to respond without prejudice that more favorable communications about Blacks than Whites will be observed — after all, those motivated to avoid prejudice might be most inclined to present a positive view of Black students.

But we suggest the converse, perhaps counterintuitive pattern: those *low* in motivation to respond without prejudice should be particularly prone to the use of racial stereotypes, and therefore to the application of race-based shifting standards. From past research, we know that one must hold stereotypes about a social group in order to shift standards. For example, Biernat and Manis (1994) found that only individuals who explicitly endorsed relevant stereotypes (e.g., that Blacks are more athletic than Whites) showed evidence of shifting standards in their judgments of individual targets. Thus, to the extent that low internal motivation to respond without prejudice is associated with stereotype endorsement, we predict that those *least* motivated to respond in a non-prejudiced way will show the *most* evidence of subjective positivity toward Black relative to White targets.

Our predictions are specific to the *internal* (not external) motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998), which involves concern with "living up to… personally important, self-defining egalitarian standards" (Plant, Devine, & Peruche, 2010, p. 1136). This internal commitment to non-prejudice should reduce the use of race in making evaluations; indeed, for such individuals, non-prejudice is well-rehearsed and relatively automatic (Amodio, Devine, & Harmon-Jones, 2008; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002). But those low in this internal motivation may be more likely to use race when considering a Black target, and therefore, paradoxically, may apply a within-race standard that results in more favorable subjective communications. At the same time, their memory for the objective record of the Black student will be more negative than that of the White student.

We also consider the role of external motivation to respond without prejudice, which is a concern with "avoiding negative reactions from others that would result from an overt expression of prejudice" (Plant et al., 2010, p. 1136). One possibility is that those high in external motivation do indeed communicate more positive impressions of Black than White targets, *and* show a pro-Black memory bias as well — all to avoid any social sanction for overt and "detectable" negative reaction to a Black student (Plant and Devine, 2009). Such an outcome would clearly be distinct from the tendency to shift standards; our data will allow for a test of this possibility.

A second objective of the present research is to examine the *consequences* of communicating a positive impression of a Black student on communicators' racial attitudes. One possibility is that having described a Black student positively, communicators may experience a change in their racial attitudes in that positive direction. Perhaps through a self-persuasion process, positive feelings toward the Black student may extend to the group as a whole (Aronson, 1999). But we consider the alternative possibility that communicators, having reported more favorable subjective impressions of a Black than a White student, may leave the setting endorsing more negative racial attitudes. There are two reasons to suspect this possibility, particularly among those who are low in internal motivation to respond without prejudice. One is simply the activation of racial stereotypes, which gives rise to the use of race-based shifting standards that is evident in positive subjective communications accompanied by negative objective memory for GPA. Such activation may also strengthen negative racial beliefs as reflected in a racism measure. The other is that communicators may earn a kind of *legitimacy credit* (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) or *moral credential* (Monin & Miller, 2001) by speaking positively about a Black student. This credit then "allows" them to subsequently express more prejudice.

Thus we offer what may appear to be counterintuitive predictions about the role of motivation to respond without prejudice on communication positivity and the consequences of communication positivity for racial prejudice. We predict that it is those with *low* internal motivation to avoid prejudice who will use lower standards to evaluate the academic record of a Black versus White student, and will therefore offer the most pro-Black communications. That is, those who care the *least* about living up to egalitarian standards will appear to be *most* pro-Black. Others have documented that White participants – even those high in racism – may engage in behavior that superficially looks unbiased (e.g., Norton, Sommers, Vandello, & Darley, 2006; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Vanman, Paul, Ito, & Miller, 1997; Vorauer, Martens, & Sasaki, 2009). But the shifting standards model makes the unique prediction that this subjective positivity toward Blacks co-occurs with stereotype-consistent anti-Black memory errors (remembering the positively described Black student as having a worse GPA). Additionally, we predict that subjective positivity toward Blacks predicts *more negative* racial attitudes. Paradoxically then, those who communicate most positively about an individual Black student may leave the situation with the most negative racial attitudes.

Method

Participants were 90 undergraduates at the University of Kansas (54 women, 36 men; 89 White, 1 race unknown) who received course credit for their time. In an online pre-test survey completed several weeks before their participation in the main study, all students completed measures of pro-Black and anti-Black Attitudes (Katz & Hass, 1988) and the Internal and External Motivation to Respond without Prejudice Scales (IMS and EMS; Plant & Devine, 1998). Five participants did not complete the IMS/EMS scales and therefore could not be included in the analyses that follow, leaving $N = 85$.