



Suspicion of motives predicts minorities' responses to positive feedback in interracial interactions☆☆☆☆☆☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Anti-bias norms increase attributional ambiguity of feedback to minorities.
- Some minorities suspect Whites' positivity toward them is insincere.
- Suspicion of motives predicts uncertainty, threat and decreased self-esteem.
- Attributionally ambiguous positive feedback is threatening for minorities.
- Suspicion that positive evaluations are insincere can have negative consequences.

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ABSTRACT

Strong social and legal norms in the United States discourage the overt expression of bias against ethnic and racial minorities, increasing the attributional ambiguity of Whites' positive behavior to ethnic minorities. Minorities who suspect that Whites' positive overtures toward minorities are motivated more by their fear of appearing racist than by egalitarian attitudes may regard positive feedback they receive from Whites as disingenuous. This may lead them to react to such feedback with feelings of uncertainty and threat. Three studies examined how suspicion of motives relates to ethnic minorities' responses to receiving positive feedback from a White peer or same-ethnicity peer (Experiment 1), to receiving feedback from a White peer that was positive or negative (Experiment 2), and to receiving positive feedback from a White peer who did or did not know their ethnicity (Experiment 3). As predicted, the more suspicious Latinas were of Whites' motives for behaving positively toward minorities in general, the more they regarded positive feedback from a White peer who knew their ethnicity as disingenuous and the more they reacted with cardiovascular reactivity characteristic of threat/avoidance, increased feelings of stress, heightened uncertainty, and decreased self-esteem. We discuss the implications for intergroup interactions of perceptions of Whites' motives for nonprejudiced behavior.

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1. Introduction

Over the last fifty years, strong social and legal norms have emerged in the United States discouraging the overt expression of bias against ethnic and racial minorities (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). Many researchers have documented the impact of these anti-bias norms on Whites' behavior in interracial interactions (e.g., Croft & Schmader, 2012; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Plant & Devine, 1998; Shelton, 2003; see Vorauer, 2006). In contrast, almost no research has examined how perception of these norms relates to ethnic minorities' reactions to evaluative feedback in interracial interactions. We suggest that the perception of strong social norms discouraging expression of bias against minorities, although having many benefits, has also increased the attributional ambiguity of Whites' positive behavior to ethnic minorities. Minorities who suspect that Whites' positive overtures toward minorities are motivated more by their fear of appearing racist than by egalitarian attitudes may regard positive feedback they receive from Whites as disingenuous. This, in turn, may lead them to react to such feedback with feelings of uncertainty and threat. We tested this hypothesis in three experiments using both cardiovascular reactivity and decreases in self-esteem to index threat.

2. Attributional ambiguity in interethnic interactions

Discerning others' true motives can be difficult, especially in interracial interactions (Crocker & Major, 1989). Not only do people sometimes lie or hide their true feelings, but they also often omit key information, particularly when it is negative (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012). Ethnic minorities typically are aware that they are vulnerable to being a target of negative stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination in interethnic encounters (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Consequently, when ethnic minorities receive negative feedback from Whites who know their race, they often experience *attributional ambiguity* with regard to its cause, i.e., uncertainty regarding whether their treatment is motivated by racial bias or deserved (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Crocker, 1993). A well-established literature has shown that ethnic minorities and other members of stigmatized groups often experience negative treatment or feedback in intergroup encounters as attributionally ambiguous, with important implications for cognition, affect, and health (Major, Quinton & McCoy, 2002).

The present work extends the literature on attributional ambiguity in several important ways. First, it provides an important extension by investigating within-group differences in suspicion of Whites' motives in interracial interactions. Second, it extends this literature by focusing on attributional ambiguity surrounding positive and not just negative feedback to stigmatized groups. Although far less studied, positive treatment in interethnic interactions may be even more attributionally ambiguous for ethnic minorities than negative treatment. There are a number of reasons why positive feedback might be attributionally ambiguous (see Major & Crocker, 1993). For example, members of stigmatized groups may be uncertain whether positive feedback reflects genuine caring or indicates pity. They also may be uncertain whether positive feedback reflects "shifting standards" and lower expectations on the part of the evaluator (e.g., Biernat & Manis, 1994). Yet a third reason that positive feedback can be attributionally ambiguous, and the one that we focus on here, is that members of stigmatized groups may be uncertain of the extent to which positive feedback is motivated by the evaluator's self-presentational concerns, specifically, his or her desire to *not appear prejudiced*.

Strong social and legal norms in the United States discourage the overt expression of bias against ethnic and racial minorities (Crandall et al., 2002). These norms, although beneficial in helping to reduce overt racial discrimination, have made Whites' true attitudes and motives more difficult to decipher. Whites are aware that they are stereotyped as racist, and many strongly desire to be seen as likable

by ethnic minorities (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010). Many studies have shown that in order to avoid the stigma of being labeled racists, Whites often conceal racial biases behind smiles and amplified positivity toward minorities. For example, Whites often behave more positively toward racial minorities in public than they do in private and express more positive racial attitudes on controllable, explicit measures than on difficult to control, implicit measures (e.g., Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). In trying to act or appear nonprejudiced, Whites sometimes "over-correct" in their treatment of ethnic minorities (Vorauer & Turpie, 2004), acting overly friendly toward Blacks (Plant & Devine, 1998) and evaluating the same work more favorably when it is believed to be written by Blacks than Whites, especially when responses are public (Carver, Glass, & Katz, 1978; Harber, 1998, 2004). Furthermore, external concerns with avoiding the appearance of prejudice can lead Whites to amplify positive and conceal negative responses toward Blacks (Croft & Schmader, 2012; Mendes & Koslov, 2013). Thus, strong anti-prejudice norms may function as a double-edged sword, potentially leading Whites (at least those externally motivated to appear unprejudiced) to give minorities overly positive feedback and withhold useful negative feedback (Crosby & Monin, 2007).

Surprisingly, despite a large body of research examining minorities' attributions for and responses to negative treatment in interracial interactions (see Major, Quinton, et al., 2002 for a review), only a handful of studies has examined how minorities interpret and react to attributionally ambiguous positive feedback in interracial interactions. In the one of the first studies to examine this question, Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) exposed Black students to positive or negative feedback from a White peer. Half were led to believe their partner did not know their race, thus removing race as a potential cause of their feedback. The other half were led to believe their partner knew their race, making the feedback attributionally ambiguous. Black students' self-esteem increased after receiving positive interpersonal feedback from a White peer who they believed did *not* know their race, but *decreased* when they believed the White peer *did* know their race. Hoyt, Aguilar, Kaiser, Blascovich, and Lee (2007) conceptually replicated this pattern, finding a decrease in self-esteem among Latina participants who were led to believe that White peers who evaluated them positively thought they were Latina (making the feedback attributionally ambiguous) compared to Latinas led to believe the evaluator thought they were White. Mendes, Major, McCoy, and Blascovich (2008) extended this paradigm using physiological measures rather than decreases in self-esteem to index threat. Black students received positive or negative interpersonal feedback from a same-race or other-race peer who knew their ethnicity. Black participants interacting with a Black partner who had given them positive feedback showed a pattern of cardiovascular reactivity characteristic of *challenge or approach motivation*, generally considered an adaptive cardiovascular response. In contrast, Black participants interacting with a White partner who had given them positive feedback evinced a pattern of cardiovascular reactivity characteristic of *threat or avoidant motivation*, generally considered a maladaptive cardiovascular response.

Collectively, these three studies demonstrate a provocative and counterintuitive effect – that in attributionally ambiguous situations, positive, accepting feedback from White peers can feel threatening to ethnic minorities, as indexed by lowered self-esteem or a threat/avoidant pattern of cardiovascular reactivity. None of these studies, however, directly addressed *why* this pattern occurred. One potential explanation, and the one we focus on here, is that anti-bias norms have made positive feedback from Whites to minorities attributionally ambiguous by creating a salient external motive for a White individual to give positive feedback to an ethnic minority target (e.g., she is afraid of looking prejudiced; Crocker & Major, 1989). In particular, we suggest that the perception that strong anti-bias norms constrain Whites' behavior makes minorities suspicious of Whites' true attitudes and motives for giving them positive feedback. Suspicion is "the belief that

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