Haters are all the same: Perceptions of group homogeneity following positive vs. negative feedback

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HIGHLIGHTS

• Individuals who are judged negatively by a group regard the members of the group as relatively homogenous.
• Doing so calls into question the reliability of the group's negative appraisal so that it can be dismissed.

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ABSTRACT

The more similar the members of a group are to one another, the less reliable their collective judgments are likely to be. One way for individuals to respond to negative feedback from a group may thus be to adjust their perceptions of the group's homogeneity, enabling them to dismiss the feedback as unreliable. We show that individuals appreciate this logic (Study 1) and that they put it to strategic use by regarding the members of a group as more homogenous when the group judges them negatively than when it judges them positively (Studies 2, 3, and 4). We underscore the self-protective nature of this tendency by showing that individuals adjust their perceptions of a group's homogeneity more when they themselves are the target of the group's judgment than when the group judges someone else (Study 4).

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Everyday experience occasionally brings painful negative feedback. A grant proposal may be reviewed unfavorably, a job may be offered to another candidate, or one's entry in the *New Yorker* cartoon caption contest may be rejected yet again. Such feedback is easier to rationalize, all things considered, when it comes from an individual than when it comes from a unanimous group—a single grant reviewer, say, rather than an entire review panel (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Although one may readily conclude that a single evaluator is mistaken or biased, thereby discounting the evaluator's negative appraisal and maintaining one's positive self-views (Greenwald, 1980; Tesser, 1988, 2001), it is more difficult to do so for a unanimous group. Multiple judges bring diverse perspectives and group opinions are therefore difficult to dismiss as unreliable.

Or are they? One strategy for discounting negative evaluations from a unanimous group may be to view the group members as relatively homogenous, transforming them into the functional equivalent of an individual. Viewing the members of a group as similar to one another—as all "*that* kind of person"—can serve to lower the diagnostic value of the group's appraisal (Kelley, 1967), helping one preserve positive

self-views in the face of negative feedback. As Goethals and Nelson (1973) have noted, the diversity of a group whose members ascribe to a particular view calls to mind the navigational principle of triangulation: "As in the navigational analogue, the greater the difference in perspectives converging on a judgment, the more confidently that judgment can be held" (p. 122)—and, conversely, the more homogenous those perspectives, the more readily that judgment may be dismissed.

We propose that individuals appreciate and make strategic use of this logic, adjusting their perceptions of group homogeneity to alter the putative diagnosticity of the group's judgment in an effort to manage the emotional consequences of feedback they receive. A number of investigations have shown that perceptions of group homogeneity are indeed malleable and are sensitive to various contextual and motivational influences (e.g., Lee & Ottati, 1995, Pickett & Brewer, 2001, Rothgerber, 1997). Adding to this past research, we propose that individuals who are judged negatively by a group may tend to regard the members of the group as relatively homogenous, calling into question the reliability of their negative appraisal, whereas those who are judged positively may tend to regard the members of the group as a relatively diverse assortment of individuals whose varied perspectives render their positive appraisal highly reliable.

We report four studies that put this idea to the test. First, we show that individuals do indeed grasp the attributional logic inherent in our

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hypothesis (Study 1). We then show that they employ this logic strategically: those whose application for a prestigious campus position is rejected by a committee (Study 2) or who are told by a collection of computer systems that they have a poor sense of humor (Studies 3 and 4) regard the group that evaluated them as more homogenous than do those whose application is approved or who are told that they have an excellent sense of humor. Finally, we underscore the self-protective nature of these judgments by showing that participants adjust their perceptions of a group's homogeneity when they themselves are the target of the group's judgment more than when the group judges someone else (Study 4).

1. Study 1

As an initial investigation, we sought to determine whether individuals would grasp the attributional logic inherent in our hypothesis—whether participants who imagined receiving unanimous positive or negative feedback from a group would feel that the feedback was of greater diagnostic value when it came from a relatively diverse group than when it came from a relatively homogenous group, and whether the diversity of the group would be related to differences in participants' stated satisfaction over the feedback.

1.1. Method

Participants (N = 200; M age = 31.4) were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and completed the study online in exchange for $0.30. Participation in this and all other MTurk studies reported here was restricted to individuals residing within the United States.

Participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they were an aspiring filmmaker and that they had entered their work into a film contest. They were asked to imagine that all four members of a selection committee had voted "no" and that their film had been rejected (negative feedback condition) or that all four had voted "yes" and that their film had been declared a winner (positive feedback condition).

Participants were then asked to consider each of two alternative possibilities: that the members of the committee were "all very similar to one another" (homogenous) or "all very different from one another" (diverse). (The order in which these possibilities were presented was counterbalanced across participants.) Those in the negative feedback condition were asked to indicate which of the two possibilities would make it easier for them to "dismiss or 'write off'" the committee's negative feedback, and in which case the committee's decision would make them most unhappy. Those in the positive feedback condition were asked to indicate which of the two possibilities would make it easier for them to "take the selection committee's positive feedback to heart," and in which case the committee's decision would make them most happy.[1]

1.2. Results and discussion

A majority of participants in the negative feedback condition (81 out of 98; 83%) indicated that they could more easily dismiss the feedback if it came from a homogenous committee than if it came from a diverse committee. In contrast, a majority of participants in the positive feedback condition (95 out of 102; 93%) indicated that they could more easily take the positive feedback to heart if it came from a diverse committee than if it came from a homogenous committee. Consistent with these responses, a majority of participants in the negative feedback condition (81 out of 98; 83%) indicated that they would be most unhappy, and a majority of participants in the positive feedback condition (89

out of 102; 87%) indicated that they would be most happy, if their feedback came from a diverse committee (all *ps* < .001).

As expected, then, participants in both conditions harbored the intuition that the diagnostic value of the group's feedback would be diminished (i.e., negative feedback would be more easily dismissed and positive feedback less easily taken to heart) when the group was relatively homogenous (Goethals & Nelson, 1973), and also expected group homogeneity to moderate their emotional response to the feedback.

2. Study 2

The results of Study 1 show that individuals appreciate the implications of group homogeneity when it comes to group feedback—i.e., that they grasp the attributional logic that underlies our hypothesis. The purpose of the remaining studies was to test our hypothesis that individuals invoke this logic strategically in an effort to manage the emotional consequences of positive vs. negative feedback. In Study 2, we took advantage of a naturally occurring instance of group feedback at Williams College and asked students who had been evaluated favorably or unfavorably by a selection committee for a coveted campus position to rate the degree of diversity among the members of that committee. We expected those who had been rated unfavorably to regard the committee members as relatively homogenous and those who had been rated favorably to regard them as relatively diverse.

2.1. Method

We contacted all members of the incoming junior class at Williams College (N = 537) by email during the summer prior to their junior year and invited them to complete an online questionnaire in exchange for entry into a lottery for one of three $30 restaurant gift certificates. A total of 231 individuals (43%; M age = 19.9) completed the questionnaire.

Participants were asked if they had applied to be a Junior Advisor (JA) and, if so, whether they had been accepted for the position. JAs at Williams live among first-year students, providing them with academic and social guidance. Each spring, 50 juniors are selected for the coveted position by a committee of 25 students on the basis of an interview conducted by two current JAs. A total of 74 participants in our sample indicated that they had applied for the position; 31 had been accepted and 43 had been rejected. (Data from the remaining 157 individuals who had not applied are not presented here.)

Participants were asked to indicate how they had felt when they first learned the committee's decision, from 1 (very unhappy) to 7 (very happy)[2] and were then reminded that "some committees are made up of very similar people and so really represent only one perspective," whereas other committees are "made up of people who differ greatly from one another so that the committee represents many different perspectives."[3] They were then asked to rate the JA selection committee on two scales—the degree to which the committee was diverse, from 1

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[1] We also asked participants to indicate their certainty in each of their responses from 0 (not at all certain) to 5 (extremely certain). On average, participants indicated a high level of certainty (overall M = 4.3) that did not differ significantly across conditions.

[2] In addition, we asked participants who had applied to be a JA and had been rejected to indicate the extent to which they had felt each of six emotional states (jealous, angry, alone, overlooked, unappreciated, and left out), from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). An index of these measures (α = .88) had a mean of 3.52. Due to a procedural oversight, participants who had been accepted to be a JA did not complete comparable items.

[3] Our language in these instructions conflates two varieties of diversity: demographic diversity (i.e., diversity in individuals' backgrounds and/or group memberships) and viewpoint diversity (i.e., diversity in individuals' perspectives and beliefs). To be clear, the attributional logic behind the effect we are hypothesizing hinges most directly on the latter form of diversity: viewing the members of a group as homogenous in terms of their perspectives and beliefs is arguably what can best decrease the diagnosticity of the group's negative feedback and allow it to be discounted. On the other hand, these two forms of diversity are commonly thought to be related, as when rationales for promoting institutional diversity are premised on the assumption that people from different backgrounds can be expected to contribute different viewpoints (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Sommers, 2008). Thus, we believe that invoking both types of diversity in our instructions probably seemed natural to most participants and that many of our participants regarded them as interchangeable.