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The insidious (and ironic) effects of positive stereotypes

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Positive stereotypes are especially detrimental to egalitarian social perception.
- Exposure to a positive stereotype led to increased essentialism.
- Exposure to a positive stereotype led to increased application of prejudicial beliefs.
- These results were relative to baseline and negative stereotype exposure conditions.

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ABSTRACT

The present research demonstrates that positive stereotypes – though often treated as harmless, flattering and innocuous – may represent an especially insidious means of promoting antiquated beliefs about social groups. Specifically, across four studies (and one replication), the authors demonstrate that exposure to positive stereotypes towards African Americans (i.e., they are superior athletes) are at once both especially *unlikely* to arouse skepticism and emotional vigilance while also especially *likely* to produce antiquated and harmful beliefs towards members of the target group (compared to both baseline conditions and exposure to negative stereotypes), including beliefs in the biological (or "natural") underpinnings of group differences and, ironically, the application of negative stereotypes.

Introduction

In the heat of the 2008 primaries, Barack Obama was asked to comment on Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's declaration that former president Clinton was the first "Black president… blacker than any other actual Black person who could be elected during our children's lifetime." After a measured and unsurprisingly evasive response, Obama concluded his remarks by quipping that he would have to more carefully investigate "Bill's dancing abilities and some of this other stuff before I accurately judge whether he was actually a brother." The crowd erupted with laughter and everyone moved on.

But imagine, for a moment, if rather than claiming he needed to see President Clinton's dancing skills in order to assess his "Blackness," Obama asked to see Clinton's IQ score or his criminal record. Would people still have viewed his remarks with such side-splitting humor? Unlikely. Instead, his joke certainly would have been seen for what it actually was: an example (albeit one offered in jest) of social stereotyping, one that almost assuredly would have been decried as shocking, inappropriate and racist.

This (hypothetical) asymmetry in the public response to positive relative to negative stereotypical remarks may seem reasonable, insofar as expressed negative stereotypes can be assumed to be much more likely to negatively impact broad social beliefs — for example, capable of breeding prejudiced and antiquated beliefs about a group's inferiority. We suggest, however, that in contemporary contexts the relative ease with which positive stereotypes can "fly under the radar" and evade red flags may, ironically, make them more damaging to general egalitarian social beliefs than not only the absence of any stereotypic information but negative stereotypes, too.

Most research on positive stereotypes has focused on how exposure to and awareness of them impacts stereotyped group members. For example, positive stereotypes have been shown to: hinder performance in the stereotyped domain (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000), lead stereotyped group members to dislike those who utter these stereotypes (Czopp, 2008), increase the likelihood that positively stereotyped group members will be pigeonholed into certain career and intellectual tracks (Czopp, 2010), and cause targets of the positive stereotype to be held to unfairly high expectations within the stereotyped domain (Ho, Driscoll, & Loosbrock, 1998).

The focus of the present investigation, however, is not on the behavioral, emotional, or cognitive reactions of the targets of positive stereotypes. Nor is it on the implications of positive stereotypes for

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behavior, perceptions, or expectations relevant to the stereotyped domain. We suggest, instead, that because positive stereotypes (such as the Black athletic stereotype) are less likely to be noted as information worthy of skepticism, they may be especially potent means of (i) influencing people's general beliefs about the nature of group differences (i.e., the extent to which African Americans are biologically different from other groups) and, ironically, (ii) triggering other, negative stereotypical beliefs about the target group (e.g., African Americans are criminal).

Importantly, there is reason to believe that positive stereotypes may be unlikely to set off red flags in observers. Researchers interested in benevolent sexism, for example, have proposed that one reason why positive stereotypes of women (e.g., as nicer and more polite than men) may be so potent and detrimental to gender inequality is because these stereotypes appear flattering rather than hostile (Glick & Fiske, 1996; also see Jost & Kay, 2005). Other research that has focused on the prevalence and antecedents of positive stereotypes – including research on the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and the system justifying function of complementary stereotypes (Kay & Jost, 2003) – has similarly theorized about the potentially insidious nature of positive stereotypes. Finally, Mae and Carlston (2005) observed that White participants asked to look for prejudice judged speakers who offered negatively valenced comments about a social group as more prejudiced than speakers who offered positively valenced comments (see also Czopp & Monteith, 2006; Devine & Elliot, 1995). To the extent this suggests positive stereotypes may go unnoticed and unchallenged (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012), we propose two consequences that have not been directly addressed in any previous research.

First, the more people are willing to entertain sweeping generalizations about groups based on social categories (i.e., endorse, rather than deny or try to inhibit, stereotypes), the more likely they should become to believe these differences are the result of something fundamentally and naturally different about the group (Keller, 2005; Prentice & Miller, 2006). Essentialist beliefs can only arise if people accept the veracity of a claimed group difference; that is, if it is accepted rather than challenged. Given this, if positive stereotypes about a specific group are less likely to be coded as biased or trigger negative emotions, they may be a particularly effective means (compared to both negative stereotypes and baseline conditions) of enhancing beliefs that a group is genetically, biologically, or otherwise "naturally" different. Because these types of beliefs have been linked to many consequential outcomes (e.g., Keller, 2005; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) understanding the unique potential for positive stereotypes to facilitate them is important.

Second, positive stereotype exposure may also increase the likelihood of perceivers applying *negative* stereotypes to members of the target group. Models of spreading activation suggest that networks of information about social groups, whether endorsed or not, are intertwined and connected in memory (Neely, 1976). When one aspect of the stereotype is made more accessible, therefore, the others become more likely to be used and applied in social judgment (Higgins, 1996). Perceivers can, however, inhibit the application of stereotypical information if they are made aware of the potential for prejudice to cloud their judgment and/or are motivated to avoid bias (see Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Thus, if positive stereotypes are more adept than negative stereotypes at flying under the radar, exposure to them may be more likely to lead perceivers to apply negative stereotypical information when making subsequent social judgments about members of the target group.

Across 4 experimental studies (and one replication study), we test for these effects.

Study 1

In Study 1, our goal was to test our basic assumption that people will be more skeptical of information that is stereotypical and negative compared to information that is stereotypical but positive. We exposed participants to fake newspaper articles describing recent scientific findings that are consistent with either a common positive stereotype (i.e., superior athletic ability; Czopp & Monteith, 2006) or a common negative stereotype (i.e., inferior intellectual ability) about African Canadians. We then asked participants, in open-ended format, to reflect on the article.

Method

Fifty-two undergraduates (44.4% women, 13.5% undisclosed; $M =$ 21.1 years of age) participated in exchange for course credit (no African Canadians were recruited in any of the studies). Participants were randomly assigned to read a media article describing scientific research. In the positive stereotype condition, participants read an article titled "Science confirms details of athletic ability and performance." It informed participants of a (fictitious) research study that examined physical differences in athletic ability in a large group of individuals from age 5–25. The article was 393 words long and was purported from a major newspaper. The article described research that was conducted by researchers at Harvard University and that was published in the journals, *Science* and *Nature*. The research was conducted using a sample of 14 000 Americans who were evaluated using a standardized Athletic Ability Test (AAT), which included a "wide variety of athletic measures, such as tests of strength, endurance, agility, consistency, and many specific athletic-acquiring skills." Results indicated that scores on the test strongly predicted later athletic performance. In "a follow-up analysis" that was "not the initial focus," they found that Black participants had consistently higher athletic test scores than White participants, even in childhood.

In the negative stereotype condition participants read an article titled "Science confirms details of intelligence and academic ability." The description of the research was very similar to the positive stereotype condition, but the content relevant to intelligence (this time in the negative direction) was substituted for the content relevant to athleticism.

Next, participants received the following set of instructions: "First, please take a moment to reflect on the article that you just read". Media articles often try to present balanced views of the topic. Sometimes, however, they can contain biased information or views. Please describe whether there was (or was not) any biased information or views in the media article you just read. "Two coders determined if participants' answers noted bias (1) or not (0), reliability $\kappa = 1.00$.

Results

Two participants were excluded prior to analyses for questioning the authenticity of the article. As predicted, detection of bias differed by condition, $\chi^2 = 4.43$, $p = .036$. When asked to deliberate on bias in the article, those who were exposed to a positive stereotype of African Americans were less likely to report bias (44.4%) than those who were exposed to a negative stereotype (73.9%).

Study 2

The findings observed in Study 1 are consistent with the notion that positive stereotypes – and the Black athletic stereotype in particular – may be uniquely positioned to evade the skepticism or vigilance that negative stereotypes receive, but this study is not without limitations. First, our dependent measure involved asking participants to explicitly reflect on whether they thought the article included bias. It is conceivable that this explicit request triggered an asymmetry in vigilance that would not have surfaced in its absence. This also applies to previous related studies (Mae & Carlston, 2005). Second, although the dependent measure employed likely captured explicit judgments that the information may be biased, it cannot tell us whether people are emotionally threatened or troubled by this. To resolve both of these issues, in Study 2 we do not ask participants to reflect on the article after they