

Constructive feedback in cross-race interactions

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Abstract

In two experiments, White college students provided a local high-school student with feedback on her substandard college admissions essay, via electronic mail. Motivation to provide appropriate feedback was manipulated by alleging comparison to experts or novices. Experiment 1 compared feedback to White versus Black recipients, with the expectation that accountability would attenuate previously observed positivity biases in cross-race feedback. Experiment 2 manipulated concern about being prejudiced by providing false scores on an Implicit Associations Task (IAT)-type task; this experiment examined whether accountability plus attenuated concern about prejudice could encourage feedback to Blacks that was objectively helpful. Feedback characteristics included evaluative connotation, communication style, subjective feedback helpfulness and objective feedback quality. Findings generally supported these hypotheses. We discuss the implications of our findings for intergroup contact situations, including the potential pitfalls that face feedback-givers responding to superior performance.

Keywords

communication, feedback, prejudice

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“Good criticism is very rare, and always precious.”

“Criticism should not be querulous and wasting, all knife and root-puller, but guiding, instructive, inspiring.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

well documented both generally (e.g., Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Ilies & Judge, 2005; for a review see Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and in cross-race settings (e.g., Britt & Crandall, 2000; Cohen, Steele, &

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What motivates majority-group members to provide criticism to minorities that is guiding, instructive and inspiring rather than querulous and wasting? Although the *effects* of both negative and positive feedback on feedback recipients are

Ross, 1999; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003), only a handful of studies address the *causes* of delivering various types of feedback in the first place (i.e., focus on factors that influence the strategies adopted by feedback-givers). Even fewer studies consider feedback-givers' potential motivations in cross-race settings; this handful of studies report a reticence among majority-group members to provide negative feedback or constructive criticism to minorities, even if criticism is warranted (Crosby & Monin, 2007; Harber, 1998, 2004; but see Rubovits & Maehr, 1973). Constructive criticism and honest feedback is vital for minority academic achievement and economic aspirations (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004; Bowman, Kite, Branscombe, & Williams, 1999; Crosby, 1999; Crosby & Monin, 2007), and may be instrumental in reducing occupational risks to minorities that derive from insufficient instruction and feedback (e.g., Murray, 2003; Yoder & Berendsen, 2001), as well as for encouraging proactive and aggressive treatments for life-threatening illnesses (Bach et al., 2002). But under what circumstances do majority-group members provide constructive criticism and useful feedback to minority-group members? The current paper examines what are proposed as two key ingredients for encouraging constructive criticism in cross-race interactions. First, majority-group feedback-givers must feel accountable for delivering appropriate and constructive feedback. Second, their concerns about appearing prejudiced toward the minority group must be minimal. Two experiments examine the role that these factors play in reducing reticence to give negative feedback when it is warranted, as well as in encouraging feedback-givers to provide feedback that contains advice that is objectively useful and subjectively helpful.

A positivity bias

A fairly extensive literature shows that Whites avoid displaying a wide variety of negative behaviors toward Blacks, particularly when those

negative behaviors are easily attributed to prejudice. For example, withheld assistance (for a review see Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005), overt aggression (Beal, O'Neal, Ong, & Ruscher, 2000), evaluative judgments (Monin & Miller, 2001), and employment recommendations (Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000; McConahay, 1983; Monin & Miller, 2001) are less harsh when prejudice is an obvious explanation for negative responses. In like fashion, research on feedback shows a reticence among Whites to deliver negative feedback to Blacks. In a seminal study, Harber (1998) found that Whites' peer feedback on a substandard essay was less harsh and more applauding of "subjective" domains (e.g., essay content) when the essay was attributed to a Black rather than a White student. Moreover, particularly if a Black feedback recipient behaved in an unfriendly fashion, Whites provided excessively positive feedback (Harber, 2004), perhaps to further undercut potential attributions of prejudice. Along this same vein, peer advisors (from a non-Black and primarily White sample) were less inclined to warn an average student about an overly ambitious academic plan when that student was Black rather than White (Crosby & Monin, 2007). Though few in quantity, the lesson of these studies is quite clear: Whites who feel threatened by the possibility of behaving in a prejudiced fashion may withhold negative feedback or advice from Blacks, and they also may lavish praise where it is unwarranted.

In low-stakes situations, delivering positive feedback and withholding negative feedback may be harmless and also may uphold norms of politeness. Positive feedback also may communicate high expectations (Cohen et al., 1999), or buffer the effects of concurrent or subsequent criticism (Bello & Edwards, 2005; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). But in the long run, withholding honest criticism and simply embellishing on the positive might be costly (Crosby & Monin, 2007; Harber, 1998). Accurate comprehension of performance and aptitude is critical for improving future performance and for strategic selection of subsequent tasks (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). Feedback that

is vacuous—devoid of corrective information, directive guidance, goal-setting, strategy development—is unlikely to help future performance. Although prior work hints that cross-race feedback may lack substance (Crosby & Monin, 2007; Harber, 1998), empirical work is limited with respect to feedback features beyond evaluative connotation. In addition to examining factors that could attenuate a cross-race positivity bias, one goal of the present research was to examine whether those same factors could facilitate feedback that potentially was helpful for improvement.

Encouraging better (and less biased) feedback

Because feedback delivery is, essentially, a task that the feedback-giver must perform, efforts to provide quality feedback presumably are encouraged by factors that are known to enhance task motivation and performance. First and foremost, motivation to perform a task depends upon understanding the criteria for acceptable performance (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Shah & Higgins, 1997). In the present research, undergraduate participants provided peer feedback on a writing sample (a task familiar to this cohort; Sadler & Good, 2006), so it was important to establish that they understood what comprised helpful and motivating feedback. Consequently, in pilot work, an independent sample from the current population reported on various features of writing feedback. They perceived expert feedback on essay assignments as respectful, positive but not patronizing, and as focusing on organization and theme as strategies for significant improvement. They also viewed higher level feedback (e.g., organization, theme development, expansion) as more helpful to significant improvement than lower level feedback (e.g., correction of spelling or grammatical errors).¹ College teachers also report relying heavily on these higher level features when assigning grades for written work (Freedman, 1979), which corroborates our contention that our population had understanding of and familiarity with factors that comprise useful feedback on writing.

Beyond knowing what constitutes good task performance, motivation for performing a task well requires some reason—intrinsic or extrinsic—for exerting effort. Accountability for meeting performance standards, a familiar strategy used in both industrial and educational settings, can provide such motivation. When performance standards (i.e., accountability) are high but realistic, task effort increases (Bobko & Colella, 1994; cf. Cohen *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, in laboratory settings, accountability can be manipulated by indicating that performance will be judged against the performance of experts (Rosenblatt, 2001; Ruscher, Hammer, & Hammer, 1996).² Accountability for meeting expert standards implicates a correct way of performing the task, which typically increases performance effort (Matsui, Okada, & Inoshita, 1983). Our initial study included a manipulation of the recipient's race, which has been examined in previous research, as well as the invocation of expert performance standards. In this way, we hoped to ascertain whether high standards not only could undercut the positivity bias, but also whether it could enhance feedback with respect to its tone and utility.

Feedback characteristics

A review of the feedback literature consistently reveals two additional aspects of feedback that are relevant to consider: (a) feedback quality, including utility in the context of task-dependent features (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; i.e., constructive feedback on essay writing is different than constructive feedback on musical performance) and (b) stylistic aspects of the feedback (e.g., Alder & Ambrose, 2005; Atwater, Brett, & Charles, 2007; Baron, 1990), including attention to extra-task concerns such as embarrassment, tone, and respect for autonomy (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). These features primarily have been examined empirically with respect to their effects on recipients' performance, affect, and motivation (i.e., as predictor variables), but are only rarely assessed as outcomes. To this end, we examined feedback quality and stylistic elements as outcomes which should be affected by the

feedback-giver's level of accountability and the race of the feedback recipient.

Quality

Perhaps the most important feature of feedback is its usefulness: Does the feedback potentially facilitate improvement? Ultimately, quality feedback highlights errors, provides specific strategies for correcting those errors in the future, and helps the recipient develop toward higher levels of achievement. In the broadest sense, quality feedback should include features that experts recognize as having the potential to facilitate significant improvement. In terms of the particular task in the present study (i.e., writing an essay), quality feedback should comprise commentary on the higher level features noted earlier, such as organization, theme development, and expansion. Mechanistic comments about spelling and grammar are helpful to improvement only to the extent that the higher level features are in place (Freedman, 1979). More globally, we also examined whether writing experts judged the feedback to be helpful for significant improvement. Our hope was that feedback-givers faced with high-performance standards (i.e., accountability) would provide feedback that was helpful and focused on high-level features, regardless of the feedback recipient's race.

Stylistic characteristics: Communication style

Successful feedback in work and academic settings has been described as democratic, supportive, not compromising self-esteem, respectful of recipients' autonomy, and unpatronizing (Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Kluger & DeNisi, 1998; Wentzel, 1997). To capture this stylistic aspect of feedback, we turned to accommodation theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). When a speaker accommodates appropriately, she or he adjusts the message for the receiver's unique characteristics, and is attentive and supportive. In the case of written feedback, advice would be rendered with respect for the recipient's autonomy (i.e., recognition that the recipient may decide to ignore the

feedback or modify the suggestion) and with mindfulness of the negative affect and self-awareness that often accompanies criticism (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). Inappropriate accommodation, to contrast, often proceeds from stereotypic expectations of the listener. Younger adults who hold stereotypic beliefs that elderly individuals are incompetent, for example, may adopt a speech register that involves babytalk. Babytalk may include simplified language, repetition, and almost saccharine sweetness. Babytalk is a good example of *overaccommodation*, in which speakers go overboard attempting to account for (stereotypically presumed) needs. Alternatively, individuals can *underaccommodate*, appearing to care little for the speaker's autonomy, individual requirements, or feelings. Underaccommodation can include curtly telling the recipient what to do (without respecting the recipient's autonomy), as well as inappropriate brevity despite signals that more detail and assistance is necessary. The curt, impatiently cold style that some individuals adopt with nonnative speakers (i.e., foreigner-speak), or to employees being laid off (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998), are good examples of underaccommodation (DePaulo & Coleman, 1986).

Under low accountability, an abysmal performance should elicit underaccommodation toward a White recipient but overaccommodation toward a Black recipient (i.e., mimicking the evaluative findings in previous work by Crosby and Monin, 2007 and by Harber, 1998). In contrast, to the extent that high accountability motivates people to provide good feedback (which our population recognized includes being respectful but not patronizing), more appropriate accommodation would be expected under high accountability for both the Black and the White feedback recipients.

Design and predictions

In Experiment 1, White college students read an alleged local high-school student's substandard college admissions essay; the essay was attributed to either a White or a Black student. In addition, participants learned that their feedback would be compared either to that of experts or of novices

(i.e., high or low accountability). We expected low accountability largely to mimic prior work: a positivity bias toward the Black student with respect to evaluative connotation, as well as an overaccommodating style. In contrast, high accountability was expected to undercut the positivity bias in evaluation, as well as to encourage appropriate accommodation. Moreover, high accountability should encourage advice on high-level features of writing and generally produce feedback that experts perceive as helpful for significant improvement. We hoped that accountability would encourage this pattern, regardless of the feedback recipient's race.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants Fifty-three White undergraduate students (20 male, 33 female) participated in this study in exchange for extra credit in a psychology course. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 26 ($M = 19.41$). Participants were assigned randomly to either recipient race condition (White, Black) and either accountability condition (low, high). The data of two women were discarded because participants clearly directed their feedback to the research team rather than to the alleged recipient.

Procedure One White female experimenter conducted participants individually through the procedure. The experimenter explained that the School Psychology and Service Learning programs were investigating the feasibility of providing peer feedback to local high-school students on drafts of their college admissions essays. (University programming with the community is typical at the participants' university, and at the time of data collection the city population was approximately 67% Black/African American.) The experimenter told participants that high-school students had emailed their drafts to the researchers' laboratory electronic mail address, and that participants would send their own feedback from this address; this procedure minimized participants' concerns about

later contact to their own electronic mail address, provided anonymity, and allowed us to access all sent messages. The experimenter further indicated that participants' feedback would be compared to that of a School Psychology doctoral student (high accountability) or to that of a freshman college student (low accountability; cf. Ruscher et al., 1996). Pilot data confirmed that this cohort viewed School Psychology doctoral students as experts in the provision of feedback that was characterized as respectful, positive, and unpatronizing.

After logging into the university's web-based electronic mail server, the experimenter produced a hard-copy of the emailed essay purportedly sent by a local high-school student. In all conditions, the poorly written essay was disorganized, unfocused, unprofessional, and riddled with grammatical and spelling errors. For half of the participants, the alleged essay author was Keisha Johnson, who had sent her essay from the address *hiphopgyrl@* through a well-known free web-based electronic mail server. As the experimenter typed the alleged email address into the composition window, she spoke aloud "H-I-P-H- oh, I get it! hip hop girl!" For the remaining participants, the alleged author was Hillary Johnson, who used the address *smyliegyrrl@*, and prompted a similar revelation upon spelling aloud. Prior work had shown that White participants presume Keisha and Hillary to reference Black and White females, respectively (Beal, Ruscher, & Schnake, 2001). Until reading the alleged recipient's email name, the experimenter was unaware of condition. The experimenter then withdrew to minimize possible expectancy effects. When participants finished typing their feedback, they alerted the experimenter. She then probed them for suspicion, and held a postprocedural interview about the purposes of the study.

Feedback characteristics A White condition-unaware coder examined the messages for the features discussed below; a Black condition-unaware coder examined a random third of the messages to assess intercoder agreement. Given that coders were unaware of recipient race (i.e.,

email addresses and other race identifiers were deleted prior to printing transcripts), coder agreement not surprisingly did not differ across Black versus White targets.

Coders first examined feedback for evaluative statements about essay quality, and marked each such statement along a 5-point interval scale; no participants made multiple statements in this regard, and such statements tended to appear at the opening of the message or as a wrap up at the end. A rating of 1 reflected an unequivocally negative evaluation (e.g., "This essay is horrible"), 2 reflected a generally negative evaluation (e.g., "There are some good points, but this essay needs a major overhaul"), 3 reflected a neutral evaluation or potential for growth (e.g., "It's okay but not as good as it could be"), 4 reflected a generally positive evaluation ("Overall, the essay is really good, but it needs a few minor changes"), and 5 reflected an unequivocally positive evaluation ("Wow, what a terrific essay!"). Intercoder agreement on these designations was $r = .91$, and their average ratings did not differ statistically.

As the primary index of communication style, coders next rendered a judgment regarding the overall level of accommodation in the entire essay on a 5-point interval scale. A value of 3 reflected accommodation for giving feedback in which the feedback-deliverer provided commentary with awareness of the recipient's feelings, autonomy, or perspective without being patronizing or gushing (e.g., "you might consider selecting a single theme, then building the essay around that theme"). A value of 1 reflected extreme underaccommodation, in which the feedback-deliverer provided commentary in an aloof style that displayed no awareness of the recipient's feelings, autonomy, or perspective (e.g., "you can't jump from theme to theme . . . just pick one"). A value of 5 reflected extreme overaccommodation, in which the feedback-deliverer went overboard in acknowledging the recipient's potential feelings and adopted a patronizing tone (e.g., "I know it's really really hard to rewrite a paper that you've put your whole heart and soul into, but you really need to watch your spelling. You seem so nice and caring, so I'm sure there is a teacher who'd be happy to read over

the paper for you. I know that you really want to make a good first impression"). Values of 2 and 4 were used as intermediary designations. Intercoder agreement on these designations was $r = .89$, and there were no mean differences between coders.

The primary objective assessment of feedback quality was whether the feedback focused on higher level qualities of an essay, such as theme and organization. Coders separated comments into one of three mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: low-level advice, high-level advice, and comments not reflecting advice or changes. Low-level advice focused on the mechanics of the writing, such as correction of spelling, word choices, or grammar (e.g., "The verb should be changed from 'have' to 'had'"; "You wrote 'don't' in the second paragraph: don't use contractions"); note that these were specific corrections rather than general recognition of mechanistic problems. High-level advice focused on organization, flow, and expanding with supporting sentences (e.g., "There are several themes now, maybe pick a single theme and work it through the entire essay." "Expand the section about the mock UN so they'll know what you learned."). Comments that were irrelevant to advice included self-references (e.g., "I've been asked to evaluate your essay"), well wishes (e.g., "I hope you get into the college of your choice"), and reminiscences of the feedback-giver's experiences (e.g., "We did that in high school, too"; "When I was writing my essay, I also was taking a bunch of AP courses"); comments in this catch-all category were not submitted to analysis. Intercoder agreement on type of comment was excellent, with only one disagreement present ($k = .93$).

Finally, a second condition-blind set of coders (one White and one Black) with expertise in college writing instruction made subjective assessments of how helpful the feedback would be for significantly improving the quality of the essay. Both coders carefully read the alleged recipient's essay, and then read each participant's electronic feedback. On 1–5 scales, they rated how helpful the feedback potentially could be in significantly improving the essay ($r = .84$); there were no mean differences between coders, so their averaged ratings were submitted to the analyses.

Table 1. Evaluative comments, communication style, and feedback quality in Experiment 1, as a function of recipient race and accountability for providing appropriate feedback

	Low Accountability		High Accountability	
	White	Black	White	Black
Evaluative connotation	2.30 _a (.26)	3.40 _b (.28)	3.36 _b (.29)	2.71 _a (.26)
Accommodation	1.86 _a (.26)	4.25 _c (.28)	3.18 _b (.29)	3.64 _{bc} (.26)
Feedback quality				
Low-level advice	3.57 (.67)	5.08 (.72)	3.09 (.76)	3.64 (.67)
High-level advice	1.64 _{ac} (.47)	2.75 _{bc} (.49)	4.18 _b (.52)	3.00 _{bc} (.46)
Helpfulness	1.86 _a (.27)	2.50 _{ac} (.29)	4.09 _b (.30)	2.93 _c (.27)

Note: Within measure, means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$ by Newman-Keuls tests. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below the corresponding mean.

Table 2. Correlations among outcome variables (Experiment 1)

	Eval.	Accom.	Low advice	High advice
Eval. connotation				
Accommodation	.63**			
Low-level advice	-.06	.23		
High-level advice	.17	.19	-.27	
Helpfulness	.47**	.46**	-.07	.57**

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Results

Data were entered into 2×2 between-groups ANOVAs, recipient race (White, Black) and accountability (low, high). Means appear in Table 1; correlations among outcome variables appear in Table 2.

Evaluative connotation Three participants failed to make *any* explicit evaluative comment on the essay; their missing data underlie the difference in degrees of freedom between this analysis and

those appearing further below. This ANOVA detected only the race-by-accountability interaction, $F(1,44) = 9.70, p < .03 (\eta^2 = .181)$. Under low accountability, posttests showed the previously observed positivity bias of more favorable evaluative comments directed toward Black than White recipients (Harber, 1998). Posttests further showed a reversal of the positivity bias in the high-accountability condition (a point to which we return in the interim discussion).

Accommodation The ANOVA on accommodation detected the main effect of race, $F(1, 47) = 26.94, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .364)$, qualified by the predicted race-by-accountability interaction, $F(1, 47) = 12.34, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .208)$.

In the coding scheme used, scores of 1 reflected the cold aloofness of underaccommodation, scores of 5 reflected the effusive warmth of overaccommodation, and scores of 3 reflected appropriate accommodation that was respectful of recipients' autonomy and feelings. Mimicking the evaluative findings, feedback was underaccommodating to the White recipient and overaccommodating to the Black recipient under low accountability. Under high accountability, accommodation toward the White and Black recipient were statistically indistinguishable from one another. It merits attention that accommodation patterns toward Black recipients were similar regardless of accountability, which suggests that accountability did not entirely undercut some amount of overaccommodation (a point to which we return in the interim discussion).

Feedback quality: Low-level and high-level advice, and helpfulness As seen in Table 1, low-level advice about the mechanics of writing did not vary significantly across conditions (all $ps > .15$). In contrast, high-level advice about organization, theme, and expansion varied across conditions. The ANOVA detected a main effect of accountability, $F(1, 47) = 8.41, p < .006, \eta^2 = .052$, qualified by the race-by-accountability interaction,

$F(1, 47) = 5.66, p < .02, \eta^2 = .108$).³ Although the pattern is in the correct direction, posttests only distinguished between the high-level feedback to White recipients as a function of accountability. That is, highly accountable feedback-givers communicating to White recipients provided a good deal of high-level feedback relative to less accountable feedback-givers. The amount of high-level feedback delivered to Black recipients did not vary as a function of accountability. Moreover, it was statistically different than the amount delivered to White recipients. Finally, the pattern for high-level advice was mirrored by a race-by-accountability interaction for feedback helpfulness, $F(1, 47) = 9.948 = p < .003 (\eta^2 = .18)$. Condition-unaware experts on college writing considered the feedback provided to White recipients by highly accountable feedback-givers to be more helpful than to recipients in other conditions.

Interim discussion

As anticipated, high accountability undercut the positivity bias that previously has been observed in cross-race feedback situations. Under high accountability, feedback to Black recipients was less favorable than feedback to White recipients, and also less favorable than the feedback to Black recipients under low accountability. Accommodation patterns also suggest attenuation of positivity bias under high accountability: under low accountability, feedback to Whites was coldly aloof and feedback to Blacks was effusively patronizing. These exaggerated accommodation patterns were muted under high accountability. Looking at the pattern of evaluative connotation and accommodation together, one might say that although highly accountable Whites expressed less positive evaluations of the essay, they tried to communicate that sentiment with gentleness. Conceivably, these individuals still felt some concern that their negative comments could be construed as prejudice, so they were attentive to the manner in which they communicated. Unfortunately, this mismatch of more negative evaluative content with a warmer communicative style (i.e., slightly overaccommodating) might create

ambiguity, a point to which we return in the general discussion.

The manipulation of accountability also helped provide some insight into feedback quality. When the recipient was White, high accountability engendered advice on high-level features of writing and prompted judgments that the advice provided could facilitate significant improvement (i.e., helpfulness). Statistically, high-level advice to Black recipients was similar to that provided in the White high-accountability condition, but the feedback in general was not judged to be as helpful. Thus, high accountability appears to undercut the positivity bias in cross-race feedback, but it does not quite succeed at encouraging Whites to provide optimally helpful feedback to Blacks. With the exception of the evaluative connotation of the essay, accountability seemed to exert little effect on the feedback delivered by Whites to Blacks. That is, feedback delivered to Black recipients was relatively similar across accountability conditions. A very likely explanation for the relative invariance, especially in evaluative aspects, is that Whites delivering feedback to Blacks experienced high concerns about appearing prejudiced, regardless of accountability. In both conditions, White college students were faced with the unenviable task of delivering feedback about an abysmal essay written by a local Black high-school student. Even though the feedback purportedly would be anonymous, privately felt ethnic prejudice is not acceptable to many individuals (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002) and can threaten an egalitarian self-image (Monin & Miller, 2001). Task performance—such as providing quality feedback—can suffer when people are concerned about behaving in a prejudiced fashion (Shelton & Richeson, 2003) or have concerns in general about being negatively construed by the self or by others (Feinberg & Aiello, 2006; Lord & Saenz, 1985; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In order to provide feedback that is judged to be truly helpful, feedback-givers need to be able to focus on the task at hand—giving quality feedback—rather than being plagued by extra-task concerns such as fear of behaving in a prejudiced fashion.

Consequently, in Experiment 2, we examined whether high accountability could enhance feedback quality, as a function of reduced concerns about appearing prejudiced. We manipulated the degree to which White feedback-givers felt concerned about being prejudiced. Research indicates that Whites who establish nonprejudiced credentials during initial interactions with Blacks are less encumbered by the distracting, extra-task prejudice concerns (Dutton, 1971; Monin & Miller, 2001). These extra-task concerns likely undercut the quality and helpfulness of their feedback, just as many extra-task concerns interfere with task performance (cf. Lord & Saenz, 1985). Although the inclusion of a White recipient might have allowed a test of whether the Black–White gap could be eliminated entirely, we elected to examine only Black recipients in Experiment 2 for the following reasons: (a) our interest was in probing the nominal differences between the Black recipient conditions in Experiment 1, (b) unless a manipulation completely *eliminated* concern about prejudice toward a Black recipient, no White recipient comparison would be comparable, and (c) pilot work (Walker & Ruscher, 2005) had confirmed that the reduced concern manipulation that we utilized was believable; a stronger manipulation that attempted to eliminate concerns about prejudice entirely seemed unlikely to be believed by our participants. In Experiment 2, we established more or less prejudiced credentials by providing bogus scores on a task modeled after the Implicit Associations Task (IAT). After taking the IAT-type computerized task, the computer provided a score and narrative information asserting either a somewhat rare but strong association between Black people and positive concepts (low concern), or a common and moderate association between Black people and negative concepts (high concern). This procedure reliably and believably produced low and high concern about prejudice in a previous study (Walker & Ruscher, 2005).

With the exception of manipulating concern about prejudice and alleging that all feedback recipients were Black, Experiment 2 procedures were nearly identical to those used in Experiment 1. Our focal feedback condition was high

accountability when concern about appearing prejudiced had been reduced. We predicted that reducing concern about appearing prejudiced would allow highly accountable White feedback-givers to focus on the task at hand, resulting in enhanced feedback quality relative to the other conditions.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants Sixty-six White undergraduate students (24 male, 42 female) participated in exchange for extra credit in a psychology course; participants were between the ages of 18 and 23 years old ($M = 18.77$ years). Participants were assigned randomly to one of four conditions created by the cross of concern about prejudice (low, high) and accountability for providing appropriate feedback (low, high). The data of three men and three women from various conditions were discarded because participants failed to follow or misunderstood directions.

Procedure One of two White female experimenters conducted participants individually through the procedure. The experimenter introduced the study as two short computer-based tasks. The first purportedly involved a computerized task that would reveal to participants how they saw certain groups of people, and the second purportedly involved emailing a high-school student with feedback on a draft of a college admissions essay. After obtaining consent and setting up the first task, the experimenter withdrew to a seat outside the participant's range of vision.

Concern about prejudice Participants were assigned randomly to receive bogus feedback on a 16-trial computerized task modeled after the Implicit Associations Task (IAT) written in Supercard™.⁴ On any given trial, one of four White faces, four Black faces, four negative words (e.g., murder), or four positive words (e.g., love)

appeared on the center of the window. Participants then used the mouse to click one of two button options. Options on half of the trials were "White or Good" versus "Black or Bad," and options on the remaining trials were "Black or Good" versus "White or Bad." After the 16 trials were complete, the computer presented factual information about IAT procedure, presenting scientific references and indicating how it measures the strength of association between race and evaluative connotation. Further, they learned that their scores would be normed against other college students nationwide (with a bogus study cited). When the participants were ready, they mouse-clicked the button to view their own score.

After a brief delay during which the computer allegedly was norming and calculating their score, the screen changed to reveal one of two randomly assigned outcomes. In the low-concern-about-prejudice condition, participants discovered that their score was 20/100 which the computer asserted was a moderate-to-high tendency to associate positive concepts with Blacks. Thus, these participants had established nonprejudiced credentials (cf. Monin & Miller, 2001). To contrast, in the high-concern condition, participants learned that their score was 60/100 which the computer asserted indicated a moderate tendency to associate negative concepts with Blacks (pilot work had demonstrated that these values and an alleged moderate association were believable, and that these values attenuated and raised concern about appearing prejudiced, respectively). The computer then prompted participants to call the experimenter to begin the second part of the study. The experimenter supposedly needed to "reset" the computer before opening the web browser for the email task, which allowed participants to believe that the experimenter may have seen their IAT scores.

Accountability When the participant alerted the experimenter that the first task was complete, the experimenter surreptitiously ascertained to which level of accountability the

participant had been assigned. Until that point, the experimenter was unaware of accountability and remained outside participants' view. She then followed the procedures for the email feedback task outlined in Experiment 1, with the exception that all participants addressed their feedback to a Black high-school student named Keisha Johnson whose email name was *hiphopgyrl*.

Feedback characteristics Condition-unaware coders (one Black, one White) used the same coding scheme as in Experiment 1, yielding the following intercoder agreement information: evaluative connotation: $r = .90$; accommodation: $r = .79$; advice-type: $k = 94$; feedback helpfulness: $r = .78$. As before, there were no mean differences between coders on data that used interval scales.

Results

Data were submitted to separate 2×2 between-groups analyses of variance (ANOVAs) concern about prejudice (low, high) by accountability for delivering appropriate feedback (low, high). Means appear in Table 3; correlations among outcome variables appear in Table 4.

Evaluative connotation The ANOVA on evaluative comments about the essay detected the prejudice-by-accountability interaction, $F(1, 54) = 10.49$, $p < .01$ ($\eta^2 = .163$). Under high concern about appearing prejudiced (i.e., the situation most similar to the Black recipient conditions in Experiment 1), high accountability reduced favorability; under low concern about prejudice, accountability increased favorability. (Two participants failed to make any evaluative comments, so these cases were treated as missing data.)

Accommodation The ANOVA on accommodation also detected the prejudice-by-accountability interaction, $F(1, 56) = 9.26$, $p < .004$ ($\eta^2 = .142$).⁵ Highly accountable feedback-givers with

Table 3. Evaluative comments, communication style, and feedback quality in Experiment 2, as a function of concern about prejudice and accountability for providing appropriate feedback

	High concern		Low concern	
	Accountability		Accountability	
	Low	High	Low	High
Evaluative connotation	3.00 _a (.22)	3.63 _b (.20)	3.77 _b (.23)	3.00 _a (.21)
Accommodation	2.07 _a (.24)	3.00 _b (.23)	4.00 _c (.25)	3.47 _{bc} (.24)
Feedback quality				
Low-level advice	4.00 (.73)	3.44 (.70)	4.14 (.75)	4.40 (.73)
High-level advice	1.53 _a (.40)	3.30 _b (.38)	2.00 _a (.41)	2.00 _a (.40)
Helpfulness	1.60 _a (.19)	3.50 _b (.19)	2.00 _{ac} (.20)	2.47 _c (.19)

Note. Within measure, means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$ by Newman-Keuls tests. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below the corresponding mean.

Table 4. Correlations among outcome variables (Experiment 2)

	Eval.	Accom.	Low advice	High advice
Eval. connotation				
Accommodation	.05			
Low-level advice	-.09	.06		
High-level advice	-.09	.15	-.11	
Helpfulness	-.03	.23	-.02	.68**

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

alleviated concerns about appearing prejudiced accommodated appropriately, avoiding both the coldness of less accountable individuals who had reduced concerns about prejudice, as well as the effusiveness of less accountable individuals who retained concerns about appearing prejudiced.

Feedback quality: Low-level and high-level advice and helpfulness As in Experiment 1, low-level advice about the mechanics of writing

did not differ significantly across conditions, all $F_s < 1$. In contrast, the ANOVA on high-level advice detected the prejudice-by-accountability interaction, $F(1, 56) = 4.98, p < .03 (\eta^2 = .082)$. Highly accountable feedback-givers whose concerns about prejudice had been minimized provided more high-level advice than participants in other conditions. Judgments of the helpfulness of the feedback mimicked this pattern, $F(1, 56) = 13.74, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .197)$.

Overall, then, accountable White feedback-givers who were unfettered by concerns about appearing prejudiced delivered relatively positive feedback using an appropriately accommodating style. Most important, that feedback focused on higher-level features of writing that potentially allowed for ultimate success, and that indeed was judged by experts to be most helpful.

General discussion

The provision of critical feedback by teachers, managers, and others, without undermining the recipient's sense of motivation and intrinsic interest, is indeed challenging (London, 2003; Sansone, Sachau, & Weir, 1989). More difficult still is critical feedback delivered when the feedback-giver and recipient are members of high- and low-status groups, respectively (Cohen et al., 1999). Although the impact of feedback on performance outcomes has been widely studied, few attempts have been made to address how the motivations of the feedback-giver evince instructive, wasting, effusive, or empty feedback. To this end, we examined how feedback varied as a function of accountability and concern about behaving in a prejudiced fashion.

Our preliminary conclusion from these data is that the provision of constructive criticism—particularly in cross-race settings—is facilitated by accountability for providing appropriate feedback without simultaneously juggling extra-task concerns, such as concern about appearing prejudiced. A White teacher or supervisor giving negative feedback to a Black student or subordinate is a near-perfect prototype of a situation that would exaggerate self-presentational concerns in

cross-race settings. Many interactions between Blacks and Whites are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and even threatening for both parties (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Shelton & Richeson, 2005; Stephan et al., 2002; Trawalter & Richeson, 2006). Whites fear that their behavior will be construed as bigoted or prejudiced (Crocker et al., 1998; Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998; Shelton, 2003), whereas Blacks often are concerned that their behavior will be perceived in terms of negative social stereotypes (Crocker et al., 1998; Pinel, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Although they may be well-meaning, Whites who are concerned about appearing prejudiced can bungle their feedback attempts in two distinct ways. First, if there is little accountability for delivering appropriate feedback, Whites may produce the embellishing positive feedback that Blacks often discount (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991); our findings further suggest that such feedback is unlikely to include features that potentially improve subsequent performance and is not judged as particularly helpful. Second, if concern about prejudice is not alleviated, high accountability may produce ambiguously mixed messages. Across both studies, essays received unfavorable commentary when concerns about accountability and concerns about appearing prejudiced were high (statistically equivalent to the conditions where neither concern was raised). Although these situations produce similarly unhelpful feedback, they differ with respect to accommodation. Unhelpful feedback and more negative evaluation, but a warm style of transmission may convey the stereotypic message "you're nice but dumb." Such prescriptions of low competence and high warmth engender paternalism, which involves feelings of sympathy and pity (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Groups regarded as incompetent yet warm are often the subject of discrimination efforts to keep them "in their place" (Czopp & Monteith, 2006; Glick & Fiske, 2001) which legitimizes the status quo (Kay & Jost, 2003). Feedback in this

vein clearly does disservice to Blacks and other lower status, marginalized groups. Moreover, using a warm style may allow the feedback-giver to believe that she behaved well when, in fact, she failed at the very task allotted to her. Clearly, accountability for delivering appropriate feedback *and* attenuated concern about prejudice may be needed to enhance Whites' feedback quality to Black recipients.

Given that reducing Whites' concern about behaving in a prejudice fashion can backfire (e.g., Dutton & Lake, 1973; Monin & Miller, 2001), one might question whether reducing prejudice concern—albeit concurrent with increasing motivation to provide quality feedback—is an odd solution to examine. Indeed, under conditions of low accountability, reduced concern about prejudice resulted in unhelpful feedback that was delivered in an abruptly cold style. Once outside the feedback setting, one might fear that a "credential" White person who was highly accountable in this particular situation might pocket a license to discriminate. The long-term effect of credentialing is not known, but it is an interesting question. An alternative possibility is that, rather than securing a license to discriminate, the highly accountable White feedback-giver eventually is reinforced for providing constructive critical feedback to Black recipients: her student's work improves, his employee develops new skills and productivity, a reputation as a fair, honest, and truly helpful trainer grows. Conceivably, learning that cross-race feedback has been successful will reinforce use of similar strategies for delivering feedback in the future; eventually a style of providing feedback and training would become a dominant behavior set, one that is difficult to disrupt with extra-task self-presentational concerns. And, as cross-race feedback is successful, it continues to "credential" the feedback-giver so that, over time, concerns about appearing prejudiced may fade into the background, at least in feedback settings. From an applied standpoint, hands-on training that reinforces use of appropriate feedback strategies would be useful, as well as ensuring that feedback-givers feel sufficient accountability to put forth the needed effort.

Possible artifacts

In the present experiments, the feedback recipient's performance was woefully substandard. Poor performance by a Black individual in an academic domain is consistent with racial stereotypes, and may have been exacerbated by the target's urban residence and alleged choice name for her electronic mail address. High accountability could have undercut these stereotypes somewhat (c.f. Ruscher et al., 1996), though without reduced concerns about prejudice, accountability had nominal effects on feedback quality in either experiment. Whether feedback patterns would be similar with ambiguous or superior performance is an empirical question, though in the case of superior performance, concerns about appearing prejudiced would be at reduced levels across the board. It also bears mention that the high-school student was not seeking admission at the participants' university; if the additional goal of attracting a diverse student body (or facilitating a homogeneously White student body) was operating, participants may have exerted more or less effort on the feedback task.

Long-term implications

Because feedback guides future task performance, bad feedback ultimately may cost the recipient (London, 2003). In particular, Black students who expect to be treated in accordance with negative racial stereotypes tend to mistrust feedback in stereotype-relevant domains (Cohen & Steele, 2002). When feedback occurs across racial and status lines, feedback recipients are concerned that feedback reflects their social status, rather than the true merit of their performance (Cohen et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1991). Because members of stigmatized groups know the negative stereotypes that are associated with their particular group (Crocker et al., 1998), overly positive feedback may be assumed to reflect pity or sympathy, and as a result, feedback may be discounted (Crocker et al., 1991). Under these conditions, attributing positive feedback to one's social stigma may actually diminish

self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1991). As such, ethnic minority students (Blacks, in particular) are often left to discern and decipher those parcels of feedback that are not cloaked in prejudice; this ambivalence creates a situation of attributional ambiguity (Crocker et al., 1991). Because students are unable to decipher when feedback is appropriately positive or negative, they have trouble calibrating (i.e., appropriately estimating) their abilities (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004). In the long run, supervisors and teachers who deliver inaccurate feedback to a large number of individuals could have a cumulative effect on achievement at the group level. Our findings therefore have implications and potential applicability across a host of disciplines and domains, especially when there is some real or perceived difference between the feedback-giver and recipient. When feedback-givers and recipients belong to different social groups, the potential exists for the stigmatized status of the recipient to color the feedback that she receives from a mentor, teacher, or supervisor. As occupational and educational organizations seek to recruit and retain employees representing diverse social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), it becomes especially important to understand how the motivational concerns of feedback-givers translate into feedback that is guiding, instructive, and inspiring rather than querulous and wasting.

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Notes

1. Details on pilot work are available from the first author.
2. In common parlance, the expression "accountability" sometimes connotes the (real or perceived) threat

of punitive sanctions to be levied by oversight panels and governing boards, without regard to whether the accountable individual has sufficient resources or a voice in defining fair and appropriate standards. We are not conjecturing how accountability in this lay sense influences feedback.

3. Preliminary analyses that included participant gender also detected a race-by-gender interaction only on high-level advice dependent variable in Experiment 1, $F(1, 43) = 6.70, p < .013$. Women tended to give more high-level advice to the White recipient, whereas men tended to give more high-level advice to the Black recipient. Importantly, the critical race-by-accountability interaction remained significant in this analysis.
4. Our IAT-type task was designed to manipulate the independent variable rather than to provide an individual difference predictor. To keep the task brief and simple, it did not have the control features of the actual IAT in terms of counterbalancing buttons, number of trials, etc.
5. Preliminary analyses that included participant gender detected a three-way prejudice-by-accountability-by-gender interaction only on the accommodation dependent variable in Experiment 2, $F(1, 52) = 5.80, p < .02$, and includes about two men in each of the eight cells. That said, the pattern of the prejudice-by-accountability interaction appeared to be slightly stronger among men.

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