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What is This?

Shooting the Messenger to Spite the Message? Exploring Reactions to Claims of Racial Bias

Jennifer R. Schultz[1] and Keith B. Maddox[1]

Abstract

Two experiments examined aspects of the communicator, message, and audience in producing evaluative backlash toward minorities who make claims of ongoing racial bias. In Experiment 1, participants evaluated a White or Black confederate who gave a speech expressing no claim, a mild claim, or an extreme claim of racial bias. Results indicated a race-specific evaluative backlash: Participants more negatively rated Black compared with White communicators, but only when the claim was extreme. Experiment 2 found that participants more negatively rated Black (vs. White) communicators when they used low-quality arguments, but this backlash was eliminated when Black communicators used high-quality arguments. Furthermore, participants who held stronger meritocracy beliefs and who heard low-quality arguments were more likely to evaluate Black communicators harshly. These findings clarify the conditions under which people from advantaged groups are more likely to recognize claims of racial bias as legitimate and respond favorably to the communicator.

Keywords

confrontation, prejudice, discrimination, race, ideologies

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White Americans may get a glimpse of the bias directed toward racial and other minorities in a variety of ways. They may overhear a racist comment, witness an act of apparent discrimination, or hear claims of large-scale bias alleged to create and maintain differences in opportunities for minority group members. Despite these experiences, acknowledgment of racial bias varies significantly between racial groups. For example, 70% of Black Americans expressed dissatisfaction with society's treatment of Blacks, whereas only 29% of White Americans did so (Saad, 2007). Furthermore, recent work suggests that, although Whites perceive a steeper decline in anti-Black bias over time, they also believe that a decrease in anti-Black bias is paired with an increase in anti-White bias (Norton & Sommers, 2011).

While likely explained by a variety of factors, this racial divide in the perceived role of discrimination in interpersonal and intergroup outcomes may have an unfortunate consequence for those recipients of bias who have the desire or need to confront it—they may be reluctant to do so. When people claim discrimination as a factor that influences their outcomes, they are more likely to be derogated by others (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). In the abstract, attempts to reveal bias are often applauded. In practice, the anticipation of evaluative backlash may discourage future attempts at confrontation. Potential minority confronters may fear that their claims will be disregarded and thus they will face scorn from their peers or coworkers. A similar dilemma may face majority confronters who witness acts perpetrated against others, or who advocate for policies or programs that seek to combat bias (e.g., affirmative action). Considering this potential for evaluative backlash, how might minorities and their allies (nongroup members who sympathize with minority struggles) maximize positive outcomes when discussing racial bias at either personal or societal levels? The broad goal of this line of work is to identify the conditions under which people from advantaged groups are most likely to recognize as legitimate, and potentially be responsive to, claims of ongoing racial bias.

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Framing Confrontation As an Act of Persuasion

Essentially, a claim of discrimination is an effort at persuasive communication. The communicator is attempting to present information on which to base attitudes and actions. Based on this assumption, theory and research on attitude change and persuasion may be useful in exploring the phenomenon of evaluative backlash. This literature suggests three broad factors to consider when individuals evaluate claims of racial bias: (a) the communicator, (b) the message, and (c) the audience (for a review, see Albarracín, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005). More plainly, researchers must consider who says what (and how) to whom. For instance, researchers have used the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explore attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The model suggests that variables related to the communicator, message, and audience have implications for attitude change through the manner in which they influence message processing. The current work builds on this model by suggesting that messages about racial bias will be processed differently depending on the communicator's race, how the message is conveyed, and the recipient's worldview beliefs. In the following sections, we review the literature on evaluative backlash through the lens of attitude change research, focusing on evaluations of communicators, message persuasiveness, and audience characteristics.

Who Confronts? The Communicator

The literature on confronting discrimination contains mixed findings on perceptions of confronters. Researchers have focused on how communicators' social category membership—primarily their race or gender—and the content of their confrontation influences how they are perceived. For example, the confronter may be a member of a devalued group (e.g., Blacks or women) or a sympathetic allied member of a valued group (e.g., Whites or men). They may confront discrimination directed toward them personally, or directed toward others. Only a few studies in the persuasion literature have examined whether the communicator's race influences perceivers' reactions (e.g., Petty, Fleming, & White, 1999; Quails & Moore, 1990). As we elaborate in later sections, these studies lend support to work in the confrontation literature showing that the social category membership of the messenger can interact with characteristics of the message and the audience to influence judgments. Much of the confrontation research assumes that the social category membership of individuals claiming discrimination will shape how their audience will respond to them (i.e., that message recipients will be influenced by stereotypes or prejudices).

Blacks and other devalued group members are often viewed more negatively when they attempt to confront discrimination. Devalued group members who confront discrimination tend to be disliked and perceived as complainers compared with those devalued group members who do not confront (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Swim & Hyers, 1999). For example, one study found that a Black target who attributed his failure to discrimination was viewed less favorably and was seen as more of a complainer than when he attributed his failure to the quality of his answers or to the difficulty of the test (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Other research has demonstrated that Blacks are aware of the possibility of such negative evaluations; for example, Blacks report being nervous about being labeled as complainers or troublemakers if they confront discrimination (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Accordingly, Blacks or others faced with discrimination may be reluctant to confront or discuss it because of the fear of backlash.

Little work has compared perceivers' reactions to Black versus White targets who confront discrimination or racial bias. One study found that White third party observers viewing a confrontation evaluated a Black confronter more negatively (and as less persuasive) than a White confronter (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). But backlash associated with making claims of discrimination may not be reserved for members of devalued groups. In Czopp, Monteith, and Mark (2006), Black or White confederates confronted (or did not confront) White participants about their use of stereotypes. Participants more negatively viewed people who confronted, whether or not the confronter was Black or White. Nevertheless, most current work seems to favor the theory that devalued groups members are more at risk of experiencing negative consequences when confronting discrimination.

Although past work provides some evidence that backlash is more evident for minority confronters, it is not conclusive. Findings vary as a function of the target (the alleged offender or an outside observer) and the nature of the confrontation (attribution for failure or stereotype use). We maintain that a persuasion-based framework can help to guide predictions about when backlash is likely to occur and for whom. Knowing whether backlash is more likely for target group members may have implications for framing discrimination claims to mitigate backlash. The effective strategies for (targeted) minority group members may be different from those for (allied) majority group members.

What Do They Say and How Do They Say It? The Message

Research on attitudes suggests that how people respond to claims of bias will depend on message characteristics such as whether the message is more or less intense (i.e., the force with which the message is conveyed), whether it includes high versus low-quality arguments, or whether it includes extreme versus mild views (e.g., Albarracín et al., 2005; Bochner & Insko, 1966). Accordingly, a few studies in the confrontation literature have focused on how the confrontation message is conveyed or its content. In studies comparing

reactions to hostile versus nonhostile confrontations, communicators who engage in hostile confrontations appear to experience the most backlash. For example, compared with nonhostile confrontations, hostile confrontations lead to contempt or anger directed toward the confronter (Czopp et al., 2006; Tangney, 1995). Furthermore, hostile confrontations can produce a heightened threat to the message recipient's self-image. When such a threat occurs, people are more likely to display aggression toward the confronter (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Work examining racism-related confrontations (Czopp et al., 2006) found that, when the confronter was hostile toward the participant, confronted participants showed increased anger toward, and greater dislike of, the confronter (regardless of the confronter's race). Thus, work on confrontation suggests that reactions to discrimination claims should vary as a function of the affective tone or extremity of the claim as well as the content of the claim. When someone uses strong words to confront racial bias, perceivers will show more negative reactions and possibly more anger and less contrition toward the communicator.

To Whom Do They Say It? The Audience

The persuasion literature reveals a variety of audience characteristics that may influence responses to persuasive communications, such as category membership, expectations, and ideologies. Importantly, this work has typically focused on how audience variables interact with communicator and/or message variables. For example, some work has examined how message reception is influenced by the match between the communicator's and recipient's race. When race is matched (e.g., Black communicator and Black audience vs. Black communicator and White audience), the message is more persuasive (Quails & Moore, 1990; Whittler, 1989; Whittler & DiMeo, 1991). Work examining audience expectations has demonstrated that when communicators take a position that is stereotypically expected of them (e.g., a Black supporting civil rights or a woman supporting feminist issues), the message is processed more superficially; however, if the stance is contrary to expectations, the message is processed more deeply (Petty, Fleming, Priester, & Feinstein, 2001). Still others have explored how perceivers' prejudice level influences reactions to Black or White communicators who present high or low-quality arguments. The most prominent finding is that Whites who are low in prejudice are more persuaded by Blacks using high-quality arguments than by Whites using high-quality arguments (Petty et al., 1999). Whites who are high in prejudice show the opposite pattern; when argument quality is high, they are more persuaded by White communicators than Black communicators (Petty et al., 1999). This work suggests that researchers attempting to understand reactions to discrimination claims must consider characteristics of the audience (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006).

Summary and Overview of Experiments

The parallels between the social-psychological literatures on persuasion and reactions to those confronting bias are apparent, but lacking are any attempts to use theory from the former to guide research in the latter. Prior work suggests that reactions to claims of discrimination are influenced by the messenger's group membership, the extremity of the message, and audience characteristics. Much of the past work has investigated each of these variables separately, or in a way that did not allow for an analysis of the independent and joint effects of each variable on perceivers' reactions (e.g., Czopp et al., 2006; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). We explicitly use theory and research from the persuasion literature to guide our examination of how these three variables operate together to shape perceivers' reactions to discrimination claims.

The present work builds on previous research in three ways. First, it extends some earlier work that examined the potential for backlash toward minority communicators by exploring how their race affects perceivers' reactions. Specifically, we examine whether the evaluative backlash toward communicators might differ depending on the target's race (Experiment 1). Second, we attempt to clarify ambiguities in earlier work focusing on the message by examining the potential for backlash as a function of the extremity of the claim (Experiment 1) and the quality of the arguments used to support the claim (Experiment 2). Finally, we extend earlier work focusing on the audience by examining whether worldview beliefs predict reactions to Black or White communicators (Experiment 2).

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined the extent to which characteristics of the communicator (racial group membership) and the extremity of the claim shape perceivers' reactions to a person claiming discrimination. To explore these issues, we simulated an interaction: Participants watched a video of a partner (a confederate) who was either Black or White. In the claiming conditions, the confederate gave a speech that made an extreme or mild claim of discrimination focusing on how to offset the effects of ongoing racial bias against Blacks; in the control condition, the confederate did not discuss racial bias. Prior research suggests that devalued group members who confront discrimination are more likely to be scrutinized and labeled as complainers (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Petty et al., 2001; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Therefore, we predicted a pattern of backlash directed toward the Black confederate: White perceivers would evaluate the Black communicator more negatively than the White communicator when the communicator claimed that racial bias was still an ongoing issue, especially when the claim was extreme. We did not expect differences in reactions to Black or White communicators in the control condition.

Several previous studies have focused on claims of discrimination in which the communicator argued that his own failure resulted from discrimination (Kaiser & Miller, 2001), or the claim was directed toward participants who had been made to feel that they had personally acted in a biased manner (Czopp et al., 2006; Czopp & Monteith, 2003), or in situations in which participants witnessed someone else confront discrimination but in the context of a self-relevant topic (i.e., selection of scholarship recipients; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Scenarios focused on personal discrimination address important real-world concerns worthy of empirical attention; however, they also may heighten message recipients' attribution-related concerns about the communicator (e.g., they may believe that the communicator was playing the "race card" to explain a personal failure), or their manipulations may challenge message recipients' actions or statements to an extreme that causes them to feel threatened. In our efforts to apply a novel framework, we sought to minimize these issues. We created claims that referred to a general environment of ongoing racial bias rather than a personal experience of racial bias. Specifically, our messengers made claims referring to programs meant to ameliorate the effects of past and ongoing discrimination. Therefore, while communicators expressed an opinion about racial bias, they neither (a) claimed that it had affected them personally (minimizing attributional concerns) nor (b) accused a participant of wrongdoing (minimizing a transgression-related threat).

Method

Participants and Design. Participants ($n = 196$) were White undergraduates (115 women) from Tufts University who took part as a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (communicator race: Black or White) × 3 (extremity of claim: extreme, mild, or control) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Pre-speech. The experimenter explained that the study focused on partner interactions and communication and that participants would hear a partner's speech and then give an evaluation speech in response, both recorded via webcam. Participants learned that their partner was scheduled to arrive 30 min earlier and had already recorded his speech, and that their response speech would be evaluated by their partner. Next, participants viewed a 2-min speech by their partner. Participants were permitted to make notes about the current speech to aid preparation. The independent variables were manipulated in the partner speeches.

Communicator race. Participants watched a video of a male confederate who was either Black or White. Confederates' faces did not vary significantly in perceived attractiveness (White $M = 3.43$; Black $M = 3.64$), friendliness (White $M = 4.07$; Black $M = 4.14$), or hostility (White $M = 2.71$; Black $M = 3.07$). Both confederates wore plain, solid shirts and sat the same distance from the camera to reveal their head and upper torso.

Extremity of claim. Participants viewed a video of a confederate giving a speech in which he extremely, mildly, or did not claim racial bias on a college campus. Earlier, participants learned that their partner had been asked to talk about "Culture Houses on Campus" or "Dorm Life" (in the control condition). The extreme and mild speeches both focused on the topic of culture houses on campus, but the extreme speech included stronger, more assertive, and more pointed statements (e.g., "I think that it is important for Blacks to be able to connect with a Black community, especially because Tufts is a predominantly White campus. I definitely think that it is unnecessary for White people to have their own house. I mean everywhere is a White house"; "It's a lot harder for Black people to succeed in school because of all the pressures and feelings of not fitting in"; and "Blacks suffered a lot and are not given much credit or recognition in history books."). In the mild speech, the statements were less extreme and assertive (e.g., "I think that it is good that Tufts offers an Africana house. I think that it is important for Black students to be able to connect with a Black community. I don't know if there is a White house or not"; "I think school is really hard and especially for minorities, but it must be nice to live with a social support group"; and "I think that Blacks along with other groups suffered a lot and they are not given much credit or recognition."). The communicator did not claim that he had personally experienced discrimination; instead, he stated that racial bias is an ongoing problem that has consequences for Black students.

The control speech focused on dorm life and did not mention race or racial bias (e.g., "The dorms are really a living experience that I've never had before. I like being so close to all of my friends"; "You don't have to worry about cleaning a whole house and dining halls make eating really easy"; and "Having more control over my room and more space to live in would be nice. But, the dorms do allow me to hear about everything that is going on around campus.").

Speeches varied in extremity but not in quality. A separate sample of pretest participants rated (on 7-point scales from *not at all* to *very much*) the extreme speech ($M = 4.06$) as more extreme than the control speech ($M = 1.89$), $t(28) = 3.53$, $p = .001$, $r = .55$, and the mild speech ($M = 3.08$), $t(28) = 2.12$, $p < .05$, $r = .37$. The mild speech was nonsignificantly more extreme than the control speech, $t(28) = 1.62$, $p = .116$, $r = .29$. A separate group of participants rated (on 7-point scales from *not at all* to *very much*) three items indexing the quality of the speech, including the extent to which it was persuasive, convincing, and high in quality ($\alpha = .91$). The extreme speech ($M = 3.18$) and the mild speech ($M = 2.44$) did not vary in argument quality, $t(45) = 1.52$, *ns*.

Post-speech. Participants received 2 min to prepare, and 2 min to present, their own speech. Afterwards, the experimenter transferred the speech to a flash drive. The experimenter

informed participants that, while the partner watched their speech, they would complete a questionnaire.

Measures

Impression rating indices. Participants rated (on 7-point scales from *not at all* to *very much*) their partners on 15 items measuring positive impressions (α = .93) and on 6 items assessing negative impressions (α = .82). Positive items assessed whether the partner was likable, friendly, honest, easy to get along with, intelligent, independent, responsible, optimistic, respectable, considerate, nice to converse with, made a good impression, would be a good friend, would be a good coworker, and had a good personality (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Negative items assessed whether the partner was hypersensitive, racist, a complainer, hostile, emotional, and argumentative.

Results

Impressions of the Communicator. Positive and negative impressions were correlated, $r = -.511$, $p < .001$, but because preliminary analyses revealed that they followed very different patterns, we discuss them separately.[1]

Negative impressions index. A 3 (speech type) × 2 (race of partner) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for claim type, $F(2, 190) = 22.81$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .19$. Overall, participants rated partners who made extreme claims more negatively than those who made mild claims, or those who gave the control speech. Planned comparisons indicated that targets giving the control speech were rated less negatively than those giving the mild speech, $t(193) = 3.78$, $p < .001$, $r = .26$, and those giving the extreme speech, $t(193) = 6.40$, $p < .0001$, $r = .42$. Communicators giving the extreme speech were rated more negatively than those giving the mild speech, $t(193) = 2.66$, $p < .01$, $r = .19$. In addition, a main effect of the confederate's race indicated that the Black communicator was rated more negatively than the White communicator $F(1, 190) = 8.34$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

We predicted an evaluative backlash for Black communicators, who would be rated more negatively than White communicators, especially in the extreme message condition. The main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the communicator's race and extremity of the claim, $F(2, 190) = 6.20$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .06$ (Figure 1). Planned comparisons indicated that, as predicted, the Black communicator was rated more negatively than the White communicator when each extremely claimed that the ongoing effects of racial bias influenced Blacks, $t(190) = 4.48$, $p < .0001$, $r = .31$. Although the Black communicator also was evaluated more negatively than the White communicator when he made a mild claim, this comparison was not significant, $t(190) = 1.36$, $p > .05$. As expected, perceivers did not differ in their ratings of the Black versus White communicator in the control condition $t(190) = -.610$ $p > .05$. In addition, participants who viewed the Black communicator rated him
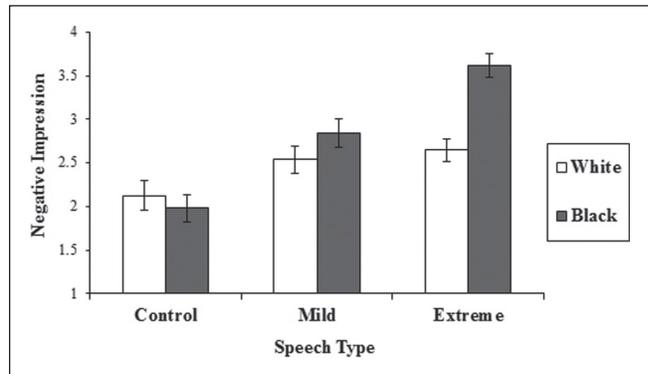
Figure 1. Negative partner impression by speech type and race of speaker (Experiment 1)

more negatively in the extreme compared with mild speech condition, $t(190) = 3.47$, $p < .001$, $r = .24$. Compared with the control, he was rated more negatively in both the mild, $t(190) = 3.82$, $p < .0001$, $r = .27$, and extreme conditions, $t(190) = 7.35$, $p < .0001$, $r = .47$. Participants who viewed the White communicator did not rate him more negatively in the mild compared with the extreme speech condition, or the mild compared with the control. However, he was rated more negatively in the extreme compared with the control condition, $t(190) = 2.28$, $p < .05$, $r = .16$. Overall, when a Black confederate claimed extreme racial bias, he was perceived more negatively than a White confederate who made the same claim.

Positive impressions index. We also tested our hypothesis by examining perceivers' evaluations along the positive dimension. The main effect of extremity of claim was significant, $F(2, 190) = 9.89$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Overall, participants rated all communicators who made extreme claims less positively than those in the mild claim and control conditions. Planned contrasts indicated that communicators giving the control speech were rated more positively than those giving the mild speech, $t(193) = 2.32$, $p < .05$, $r = .16$, and those giving the extreme speech, $t(193) = 4.51$, $p < .0001$, $r = .31$. Participants also rated extreme communicators less positively than mild communicators, $t(193) = 2.25$, $p < .05$, $r = .16$. However, the predicted interaction between communicator's race and extremity of claim was not significant for positive impressions, $F(2, 190) = .867$, *ns*.

Discussion

As predicted, Experiment 1 revealed a pattern of backlash such that (a) extreme claims led to more negative and less positive reactions to all communicators and (b) Black communicators were perceived more negatively than White communicators, particularly when they made extreme claims of discrimination. Experiment 1 diverges from previous research (Czopp et al., 2006; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010) by

demonstrating a context in which minorities experience greater backlash than majority group allies. We see these findings as complementary rather than contradictory due to the methodological differences across the investigations—a point we return to in the General Discussion section.

The university campus where participants reside is a Northeastern, liberal-leaning campus where students tend to see themselves as egalitarian. We assume that our White participants' reactions to the Black communicator are guided in part by their more negative evaluations of Blacks relative to Whites, but also their (dis)belief about the legitimacy of the communicators' claims of ongoing racial bias. However, Experiment 1 provides no direct evidence that participants' message-relevant beliefs predicted their evaluations. In Experiment 2, we sought to replicate and extend this finding through a closer examination of the message and the beliefs of its recipients.

Experiment 2

The Elaboration Likelihood Model proposes that central and peripheral routes to persuasion are sensitive to messenger, message, and audience characteristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When motivation and ability to process the message are strong, people follow the central route where argument quality plays a crucial role. Through this route, perceivers are more likely to scrutinize the messages they receive. Higher quality arguments better withstand this scrutiny than lower quality arguments, and thus are more persuasive. Although little work has examined how race and argument quality interact to influence the perception of messages related to discrimination or race, a few studies have examined reactions to race-irrelevant messages (e.g., Fleming, Petty, & White, 2005; Petty et al., 1999). For example, Petty et al. (1999) found that perceivers held more positive attitudes toward high-quality arguments favoring senior comprehensive exams, but this effect varied as a function of the communicator's race and the perceiver's level of prejudice. Low prejudice perceivers endorsed a high-quality message delivered by a Black communicator, whereas high prejudice perceivers endorsed a high-quality message delivered by a White communicator. Thus, perceivers may process the message differently depending on the communicator's race and their own prejudice, but it is unclear how messenger race will influence responses to a message about racial bias.

In the current context, beliefs about meritocracy may be likely to influence how communicators are evaluated. Majority group members who endorse meritocracy ideologies (e.g., anyone can get ahead in life if they work at it) are more threatened by discrimination because it goes against their worldview beliefs (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). People are quick to defend their worldview beliefs from outside threats (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006), and therefore, it is likely that perceivers

who endorse meritocracy will be sensitive to messages of racial bias because they violate their worldview beliefs. Consistent with this idea, Whites who endorse worldview beliefs that legitimize the existing status hierarchy hold more negative attitudes toward strongly identified minorities (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009), and toward Blacks who attribute personal outcomes to racial discrimination (Kaiser et al., 2006). Accordingly, a Black communicator who discusses discrimination will elicit negativity from a White perceiver to the extent that the perceiver endorses meritocracy.

Experiment 2 extended Experiment 1 in several ways. First, we attempted to mitigate backlash by manipulating a different aspect of the message: argument quality. Second, we included measures of argument persuasiveness and agreement to explore evaluations of the message and messenger. Third, we examined audience characteristics—meritocracy beliefs—that might influence how people process the message.

Guided by the research described above, we tested several hypotheses. We reasoned that presenting low-quality arguments would replicate the evaluative backlash toward Black versus White communicators seen in Experiment 1, but presenting high-quality arguments would mitigate that backlash. Furthermore, we predicted that the backlash effect should be especially pronounced among perceivers who more highly endorsed meritocracy ideologies.

Method

Participants and Design. Participants were 155 White undergraduates (83 women) at Tufts University who took part as a course requirement. Seven participants were excluded due to computer malfunction or because they recognized the confederate. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (communicator: Black or White) × 2 (argument quality: high or low) between-subjects design.

Procedure. The procedure was similar to Experiment 1, with a few exceptions. To reduce suspicion, participants learned that their partners had recorded their speech in a separate experiment and that the partners would watch the participant's speech in a follow-up visit. Finally, participants received 10 min to prepare and type their speech and were allowed to read it.

Communicator race. Participants watched a video of a Black or White male confederate (different from those in Experiment 1). Confederates recorded scripted speeches for the control, low, and high-quality conditions. Pretesting revealed no differences between the confederates on attractiveness (M_W = 3.10 vs. M_B = 3.60) or friendliness (M_W = 4.30 vs. M_B = 4.00). However, pretest participants rated the Black confederate (M = 2.30) as more hostile than the White confederate (M = 1.50), $t(9)$ = 2.45, $p < .05$, r = .63.[2]

Argument quality. Participants watched a speech containing either high or low-quality arguments for why culture houses are important for Tufts University, or a control speech regarding dorm life. Using the speech from the extreme argument condition in Experiment 1, we created two speeches containing the same number of either high or low-quality arguments (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). High-quality arguments were more likely to require deeper processing because they contained specific examples and supporting evidence for having culture houses at Tufts University (e.g., "Culture houses are important because they give Black and other minority students a safe place to study and to connect with a community of people"; "Culture houses play a major role in helping minority students deal with these events and keep these biases from having a negative impact on their college experience"; and "Having culture houses at Tufts helps to address bias issues, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done to improve diversity at Tufts."). The low-quality arguments were more superficial, containing no examples and superficial reasons for having culture houses at Tufts (e.g., "Having culture houses on campus really helps Tufts' image. Culture houses are important because they make Tufts appear more diverse"; "It is important for Tufts University to keep a positive image. These negative events really make Tufts look bad in the public eye"; and "Among other things, culture houses help improve Tufts' image to the outside world, which helps to make students competitive for jobs and other opportunities after graduation.").

A separate set of participants rated the quality of the speeches using the same items as in Experiment 1. They rated speeches with high-quality arguments ($M = 4.20$) as higher in quality than those with low-quality arguments ($M = 3.06$), $t(45) = 2.25$ $p < .05$, $r = .34$. Furthermore, we compared the quality of the speeches across Experiment 1 and Experiment 2. The high-quality speech in Experiment 2 ($M = 4.20$) received significantly higher quality ratings than did the extreme ($M = 3.18$) and mild speeches ($M = 2.44$) from Experiment 1, $t(45) = 2.00$, $p = .05$, $r = .29$, high quality versus extreme; $t(45) = 3.54$, $p < .01$, $r = .45$, high quality versus mild. The extreme (Experiment 1), mild (Experiment 1), and low-quality (Experiment 2) speeches did not differ in quality.

Measures

Impression indices. The impression scales were the same as those used in Experiment 1 (negative scale: $\alpha = .69$: positive scale: $\alpha = .89$).

Persuasiveness. Participants rated the speech on persuasiveness (i.e., how much it was persuasive, convincing, high in quality, and how much they liked it; $\alpha = .90$) on 7-point scales (*not at all* to *very much*).

Argument agreement. Participants rated on a 7-point scale (*not at all* to *very much*) the extent to which they supported culture houses at Tufts.

Meritocracy beliefs. During an earlier session, participants indicated how much they agreed (on 6-point scales from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) with each of 16 statements assessing meritocracy beliefs (O'Brien & Major, 2005; $\alpha = .69$). Four items each assessed permeability (e.g., "Our society is an open society where all individuals can achieve higher status"), legitimacy (e.g., "Differences in status between groups in society are fair"), belief in a just world (e.g., "I feel that people get what they deserve"), and Protestant work ethic (e.g., "If people work hard, they almost always get what they want").

External motivation to respond without prejudice scale. Also during an earlier session, participants indicated how much they agreed (on 9-point scales from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) with each of five items about external motivations to appear unprejudiced (Plant & Devine, 1998; e.g., "Because of today's PC [politically correct] standards I try to appear nonprejudiced toward Black people"; and "I try to hide any negative thoughts about Black people in order to avoid negative reactions from others").

Results

Impressions of the Communicator. As in Experiment 1, positive and negative impressions were correlated, $r = -.209$, $p < .01$; but because they followed very different patterns, we discuss them separately (see Footnote 1).

Negative impressions. A 3 (argument quality) × 2 (race of communicator) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for argument quality, $F(2, 149) = 12.29$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .14$. Overall, participants rated confederates who made claims of discrimination more negatively than those who did not. Planned contrasts indicated that, compared with targets giving the control speech, those using low-quality arguments, $t(152) = 4.71$, $p < .0001$, $r = .36$, and those using high-quality arguments, $t(152) = 3.35$, $p < .001$, $r = .26$, received more negative ratings. Ratings of communicators in the high versus low-quality argument conditions did not differ significantly. Ratings did not differ significantly by the confederate's race.

The predicted interaction between the communicator's race and the quality of arguments was significant, $F(2, 149) = 4.12$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = .05$ (see Figure 2). As predicted, planned comparisons confirmed that the Black communicator was rated more negatively than the White communicator when he used low-quality arguments to claim bias, $t(149) = 2.36$ $p < .05$, $r = .19$. In contrast, negative impressions of the Black communicator were not different from those for the White communicator in the high-quality argument condition, $t(149) = 1.08$, *ns*. Furthermore, perceivers did not differ in their ratings of the Black versus White confederate when no claim was made, $t(149) = 1.23$, *ns*.

In addition, when participants viewed the Black communicator, they rated him more negatively when he used low-quality compared with high-quality arguments, $t(149) =$
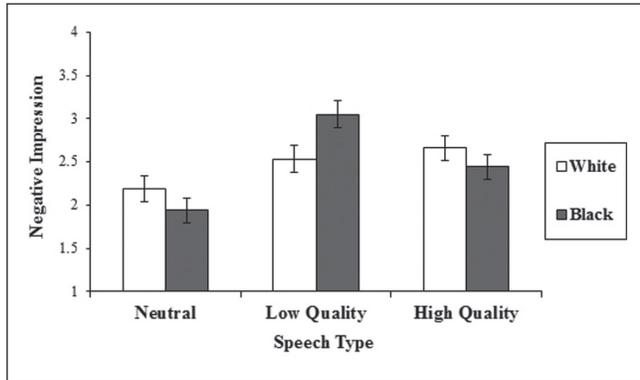
Figure 2. Negative partner impression by speech type and race of speaker (Experiment 2)
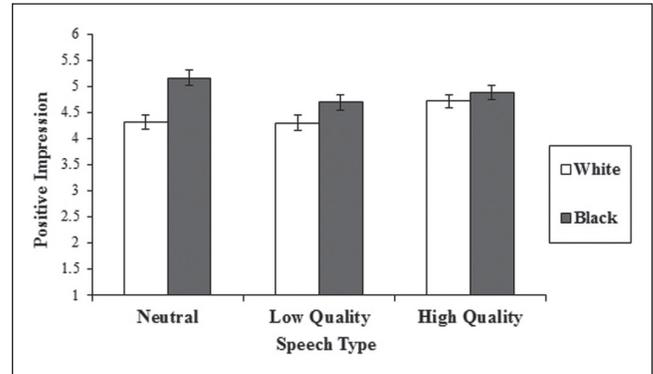

Figure 3. Positive partner impression by speech type and race of speaker (Experiment 2)

2.85, $p < .01$, $r = .23$. They also rated the Black communicator more negatively when he used low-quality arguments, $t(149) = 5.19$, $p < .0001$, $r = .39$, or high-quality arguments, $t(149) = 2.47$, $p < .05$, $r = .20$, compared with the control condition. Note that in the low and high-quality conditions the Black communicator discussed issues related to race, whereas in the control condition, he did not. Thus, simply discussing issues related to race appears to have increased negative reactions to the Black confederate.

Participants rated the White communicator more negatively when he used high-quality arguments compared with the control condition, $t(149) = 2.31$, $p < .05$, $r = .19$, but the White communicator was not rated more negatively in the control compared with the low-quality condition, or the low-quality compared with the high-quality condition.

Overall, when a Black communicator used low-quality arguments to make a claim of discrimination, he was perceived more negatively than a White communicator making exactly the same claim. However, when the Black communicator used high-quality arguments, this difference was eliminated.

Positive impressions. Participants rated the Black communicator ($M = 4.9$) more positively than the White communicator ($M = 4.4$), $F(1, 149) = 18.81$, $p < .0001$, $r = .33$. There was not a significant main effect of argument quality. However, the interaction between argument quality and communicator's race was significant, $F(2, 149) = 3.03$, $p = .051$, $r = .14$. As shown in Figure 3, participants rated the Black communicator more positively than the White communicator in the control condition, $t(149) = 4.28$, $p < .0001$, $r = .33$.

The Moderating Role of Meritocracy Ideologies. We tested whether the effect of the communicator's race and argument quality on negative and positive impressions of the communicator varied as a function of meritocracy beliefs. We hypothesized that meritocracy beliefs would predict more negative evaluations when the communicator was Black (vs. White) and claimed racial bias was still an issue, especially
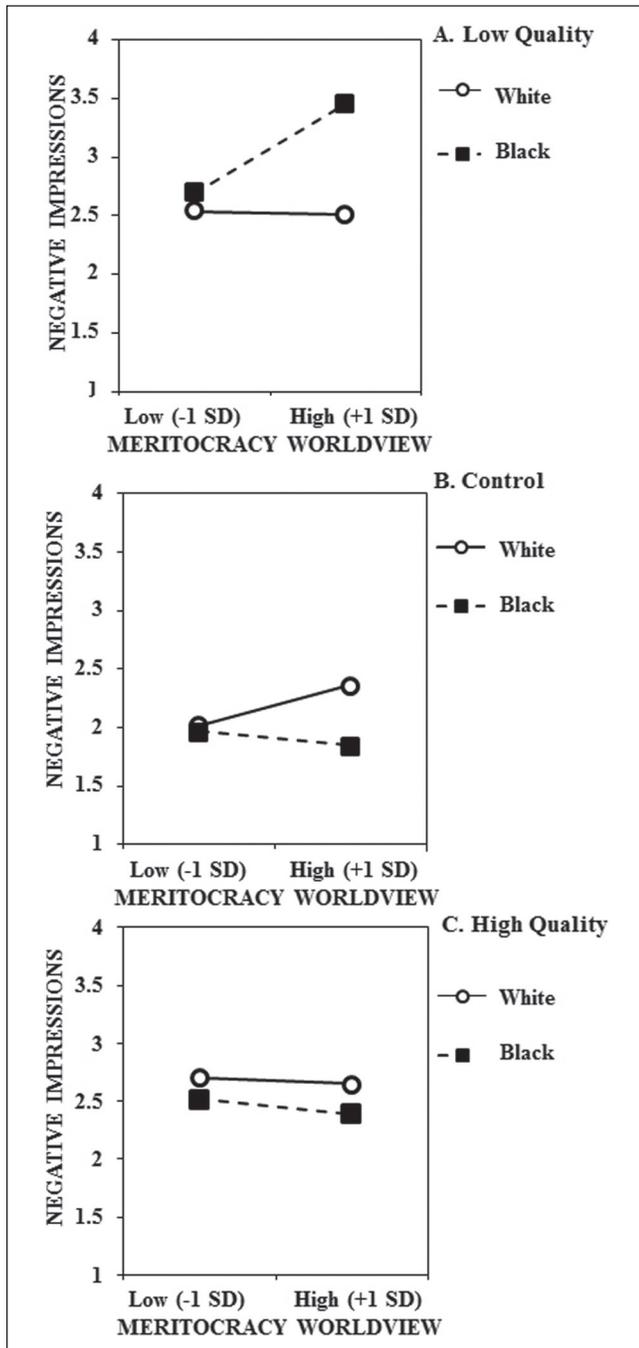
when the claim was low in quality. We did not expect differences by meritocracy beliefs when Black versus White communicators did not discuss discrimination.

To test this idea, we performed regression analyses separately for negative impressions and positive impressions. Predictors included communicators' race, quality of arguments, and meritocracy scores (centered following Aiken & West, 1991). To simplify the analyses (and reduce the number of interaction terms), message quality was included as control versus low quality (dummy coded as 0 and 1, respectively) in one set of analyses, and as control versus high quality (dummy coded as 0 and 1) in a second set of analyses. For each set of analyses, at Step 1, we entered communicators' race (0 = Black, 1 = White), the quality of argument variable, and meritocracy scores; at Step 2, we entered the two-way interactions (race × quality, race × meritocracy, meritocracy × quality). At Step 3, we entered the three-way interaction (race × quality × meritocracy). None of the findings for the positive evaluations were statistically significant, so we limit our description to the negative evaluations.

Control versus low-quality speech conditions. As predicted, the three-way interaction between communicator's race, quality of arguments (control vs. low), and meritocracy was significant, $F(1, 91) = 4.10$, $p < .05$, $b = -.900$, $\beta = -.382$. Figure 4 shows the patterns for participants in the low-quality speech condition (Panel A) and in the control speech condition (Panel B). In the low-quality condition, participants who strongly endorsed meritocracy rated the Black confederate more negatively than the White confederate. People who weakly endorsed meritocracy did not differ in their ratings of the Black and White communicators. The difference between the two slopes depicted in the low-quality condition was significant, $t(95) = -2.25$, $p = .027$. In contrast, ratings of the Black versus White confederate did not vary as a function of meritocracy in the control speech condition, and the two slopes depicted for the control condition did not differ significantly.

Figure 4. Communicator's race, speech type, and meritocracy beliefs as predictors of negative partner impression (Experiment 2)

significant even after controlling for external motivation to avoid prejudice, $F(1, 90) = 3.95$, $p = .05$, $b = −.877$, $\beta = −.372$. External motivation to avoid prejudice was not associated with meritocracy beliefs, $r = −.009$, $p = .92$, or negative impressions, $r = .033$, $p = .69$.

Control versus high-quality speech conditions. A second set of analyses followed the same strategy but compared the control versus high-quality conditions (Figure 4, Panel C). The three-way interaction between communicator's race, quality of arguments (control vs. high quality), and meritocracy was not significant for negative impressions, $F(1, 100) = .294$, *ns, b* = −.249, $\beta = −.125$. No other effects involving meritocracy were significant.

Low versus high-quality speech conditions. We also conducted a third set of analyses to compare the low- versus high-quality conditions. The three-way interaction between communicator's race, quality of arguments (control vs. high quality), and meritocracy was not significant for negative impressions, $F(1, 95) = 1.92$, $p = .17$, $b = −.650$, $\beta = −.260$, although it was in the expected direction. Because we expected the effect to be more pronounced in the low-quality condition than in either the control or high-quality conditions, we performed an additional regression contrasting the control and high-quality conditions (both coded "0") with the low-quality condition (coded "1"). This analysis revealed the expected three-way interaction, $F(1, 147) = 3.80$, $p = .05$, $b = .735$, $\beta = .253$. The patterns were similar to those shown in Figure 4: The Black confederate in the low-quality condition received the most negative ratings from high meritocracy endorsers, whereas ratings did not differ by meritocracy in the other race by argument quality conditions.

Evaluations of the Argument

Persuasiveness. Argument quality significantly influenced persuasiveness ratings, $F(1, 149) = 4.14$, $p < .05$, $r = .16$. As expected, participants rated high-quality arguments as more persuasive than low-quality arguments, $t(101) = 2.74$, $p < .01$, $r = .26$. As in Experiment 1, persuasiveness did not vary by the confederate's race or by the interaction between race and argument quality.

Argument agreement. Participants supported the arguments (by supporting culture houses at Tufts) more in the high-quality condition than in the control condition, $F(2, 149) = 3.06$, $p = .05$, $r = .14$. As in Experiment 1, agreement did not vary by the confederate's race or the interaction between race and argument quality.

Discussion

The findings of Experiment 2 replicated those of Experiment 1, revealing evaluative backlash against Blacks (but not Whites) who made claims of the ongoing impact of racial bias. Furthermore, Experiment 2 found support for two factors that influenced the extent to which backlash was exhibited. The first was the message's argument quality.

To examine whether the effect of meritocracy was distinct from any effect of prejudice, we ran an additional regression controlling for external motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998). External motivation to avoid prejudice did not significantly predict negative impressions, $F(1, 97) = 1.21$, $p > .05$, $b = −.001$, $\beta = −.111$. Furthermore, the interaction between communicator's race, quality of arguments (control vs. low), and meritocracy remained

Black communicators were evaluated more negatively than White communicators only when they used low-quality arguments in their claims. Backlash was eliminated when communicators used high-quality arguments. The second was the perceiver's meritocracy worldview. Only participants who more strongly endorsed a meritocracy worldview showed the pattern of backlash against the Black communicator who used low-quality arguments relative to the Black communicator in the control condition. Although meritocracy endorsers tended to evaluate the Black communicator more negatively in the low-quality versus high-quality condition, this effect was not significant. Differences between these two conditions may have been diminished because both speeches addressed racial bias. Therefore, even in the high-quality condition, individuals who endorsed meritocracy beliefs may have experienced some threat to their meritocratic worldview. Overall, Experiment 2 supports the perspective that the audience's worldview affects their reception of the message and the communicator.

As in Experiment 1, race of the communicator did not influence the persuasiveness of the message. Although the Black communicator was evaluated more negatively when he used low-quality arguments, his arguments were not viewed as less persuasive. This finding is unexpected because previous research suggests that arguments from Black and White communicators are received differently (e.g., Petty et al., 1999). Our finding is somewhat surprising, and it may reflect that the message was fairly consistent with the liberal attitudes of our participants despite the difference in quality. The evaluative backlash directed toward the Black communicator is an unfortunate consequence, but if message agreement is unaffected, the trade-off may be worthwhile. The relative value of this trade-off may change, however, if the minority communicator were to deliver a more attitude-divergent argument.

General Discussion

This study examined how majority group members react to claims of discrimination. Specifically, it focused on integrating three important variables: the communicator's race, aspects of the message (extremity and quality of the claim), and perceivers' worldview beliefs. Our findings support the idea that these factors must be considered together to understand perceivers' impressions of individuals who claim discrimination. Our main findings are as follows: (a) An evaluative backlash occurs for Blacks but not Whites making extreme claims against the impact of racial bias (Experiment 1); (b) high-quality arguments reduce the backlash from making an extreme claim (Experiment 2); (c) when the arguments are low in quality, the backlash effect for Black communicators is mainly driven by perceivers who strongly endorse meritocracy ideologies (Experiment 2); and (d) using high-quality arguments eliminates the costs of claiming discrimination for Blacks (Experiment 2). Each of these findings is discussed in turn.

Who Confronts Determines Backlash

Consistent with our predictions in Experiment 1, we found that, after being exposed to extreme claims of the impact of ongoing racial bias, White perceivers more negatively rated a Black communicator compared with a White communicator. Past research has found that, when a Black individual claims that he has been a victim of discrimination, he will be more likely to be seen as a complainer than a comparable Black individual who does not make such a claim (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). As the present work examined claims against society, our findings suggest that backlash against Blacks generalizes beyond claims directed toward an individual.

Experiment 1 also extended previous work by showing that White perceivers more negatively evaluated Black targets who claimed discrimination. Past work has demonstrated that third parties view Black individuals who confront discrimination as ruder and less persuasive (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Yet, past work did not find differences in negative impressions of Black confronters for one-on-one interactions (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Experiment 1 suggests that the extremity of the claim is crucial in determining whether backlash will occur when a Black person claims discrimination. In Experiment 2, we diminished the backlash of claiming discrimination by increasing message quality. In both experiments, characteristics of the message more strongly influenced evaluations of Black sources than White ones. Importantly, in Experiment 2, Black communicators benefited more from using high-quality arguments, whereas argument quality did not play a role for White communicators.

How They Confront Can Mitigate Backlash

Previous work has focused on the negative consequences of confronting or making a claim of discrimination (Czopp & Monteith, 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). This study adds to this literature by demonstrating one way to overcome the costs of claiming discrimination. A claim of discrimination is also a persuasive message, and often the goal of a claim is to try to alter someone's opinions and/or actions. Previous work has demonstrated that high-quality arguments are more persuasive, but prior work has not shown whether they reduce negative evaluations of the communicator (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

To test whether the costs of claiming discrimination vary as a function of the message and the communicator, in Experiment 2, we manipulated the quality of the arguments used when a Black or White individual claimed discrimination in an attempt to reduce the negative consequences. In line with previous work, we found that White perceivers generally held less favorable impressions of claimers than of nonclaimers. In addition, we found that high-quality messages were more persuasive, regardless of communicator race. More importantly, the quality of the message influenced

perceivers' impressions: White perceivers gave less negative ratings to Black and White communicators who used high-quality arguments. In contrast, White perceivers more negatively rated Black communicators than White communicators only when the communicators used low-quality arguments. This work suggests that high-quality claims lead to more favorable outcomes for Black communicators but that the quality of the arguments matters less for White communicators. Contrary to our expectations, individuals' ratings of how persuasive the message was did not vary as a function of the interaction between race and message quality. Overall, however, we found that individuals rated high-quality arguments as more persuasive than low-quality arguments, and they were more persuaded by high-quality arguments.

Audience Ideologies Determine Backlash

The present work complements research examining how White meritocracy endorsers react when they are exposed to Blacks making attributions of personal outcomes to racial bias (Kaiser et al., 2006) and to Black targets more generally (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). In our work focusing on a nonpersonal claim, we found that the extent to which participants endorsed meritocracy predicted more negative ratings of Black communicators primarily when they used low-quality arguments.

There are several candidates for potential mechanisms underlying this effect. One possibility is that people who strongly endorse meritocracy beliefs feel more justified in their negative evaluations because the arguments are low in quality, yet they are more negative only when the communicator is Black. This explanation is consistent with the notion of aversive racism (e.g., Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009), which suggests that, despite generally egalitarian values, racism surfaces in subtle ways when there is some ambiguity in the situation. Thus, evaluative backlash toward Blacks might be most likely to occur when it can be justified in terms of some other feature of the situation (i.e., low argument quality) that is not related to race. Our findings further suggest that this form of aversive racism might be most likely to occur among individuals who hold particular worldview beliefs (i.e., those who endorse meritocracy ideologies).

Another possibility is that people who strongly endorse meritocracy believe that Black communicators using low-quality arguments are more typical of their group. Previous work has shown that people who strongly endorse meritocracy are more negative toward highly identified Blacks (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). It is plausible that Black communicators using high-quality arguments are viewed as countertypical group members, whereas Black communicators using low-quality arguments are viewed as typical group members. Future work examining these possibilities will provide a more complete understanding of the role of worldview beliefs in evaluating claims of discrimination.

Finally, individuals who highly endorse meritocracy may be more attuned to meritocracy threats. Listening to a message communicated by a minority group member might make individuals who highly endorse meritocracy more aware of the message being communicated. Therefore, perceivers with stronger meritocracy beliefs could be more sensitive to the quality of the arguments, and this greater sensitivity may influence their impressions of the minority communicator.

The current research suggests that endorsing meritocracy ideologies is associated with more negative impressions of Black targets when they claim discrimination using low-quality arguments. Perceivers who strongly endorse meritocracy did not more negatively view Black targets when they used high-quality arguments relative to those in the control condition, suggesting that Blacks who claim discrimination will experience lower costs if they use high-quality arguments. The current work extends the literature on claiming discrimination by looking at how characteristics of the perceiver influence evaluations of communicators.

Limitations

One limitation is that only one confederate represented each race group, and therefore, the findings might be driven by a particular confederate. This explanation seems unlikely because the same Black and White confederates were used in each of the conditions within each experiment. In addition, differences occurred across each of these conditions within race (e.g., in Experiment 2, the same Black communicator was evaluated differently in the control vs. low vs. high-quality conditions), which increases our confidence in the findings. Furthermore, different confederates were used in Experiments 1 and 2, suggesting that the effects may be robust across different representatives of each racial group.

Second, meritocracy beliefs were measured and not manipulated, and thus the findings involving meritocracy beliefs are correlational. Thus, although meritocracy beliefs may lead to different perceptions of Black communicators, a third variable related to meritocracy beliefs (e.g., prejudice) might account for the effect. However, although not a direct measure of prejudice, analyses controlling for external motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998) yielded the same pattern of findings.

Third, the nature of the claims examined here differs from those examined in prior studies. In our experiments, targets did not make attributions for their own behavior. The claims of racial bias had little to do with targets' personal outcomes, although Black targets do have some vested interest in the identification of racial bias against Blacks. That is, perceivers may have thought that the Black communicators had more to gain from discussing racial bias, leading to negative evaluations. Nevertheless, the higher quality argument condition in Experiment 2 was able to override this potential

concern among participants. In addition, the claims in the current experiments did not accuse a participant of racial bias, with or without hostility, thus minimizing the sense of personal threat evoked. However, we maintain that some participants experienced a form of threat—to their meritocratic worldviews—which moderated their reactions to claims of bias. Nonetheless, future research should more closely examine the role of self-interest of the target as well as the affective consequences for the message recipients.

Fourth, our work focused on the perceptions of White perceivers only. Assuming that Blacks are more receptive to the idea of ongoing racial bias, Black perceivers are apt to react differently to claims of racial bias (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006). An important future direction is to examine how Black perceivers respond to claims of racial bias expressed by Black and White communicators and explore factors that influence their responses, such as their meritocracy beliefs.

Conclusion and Implications

Taken together, Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 clarify the conditions under which people from advantaged groups are most likely to recognize legitimate claims of discrimination and to respond favorably to the communicator. This work moves beyond prior research on confronting discrimination by drawing on theory and research from the attitude and persuasion literature to create a novel, more integrated approach. The current research integrates three important persuasion variables in an attempt to understand how people respond to claims of discrimination. Characteristics of the communicator, the message, and the perceiver contribute to the effectiveness of discrimination claims, and therefore, it will be important to determine how to reduce or eliminate potential negative effects arising from each of these sources. Interestingly, spiting the (Black) messenger does not seem to influence the persuasiveness of the message. Future work might look at what aspects of the message are viewed as more or less persuasive; for example, if the race-related topic were more controversial, perhaps the message also would be viewed more negatively. Future work in this area may benefit greatly from adopting the models, methodologies, and measures from the attitudes and persuasion literature to identify additional conditions under which confronting discrimination may lead to attitude and behavior change. Such theory-driven research has the potential to directly inform interventions designed to help individuals successfully confront discrimination and to promote smoother interracial exchanges.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Initial analyses indicated that positive and negative impressions followed different patterns. For Experiment 1, a 2 (White or Black communicator) × 3 (control, mild, or extreme argument) × 2 (positive or negative impressions) mixed-model ANOVA with repeated measures on the last variable yielded a marginally significant three-way interaction, $F(2, 190) = 2.90$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2 = .056$. For Experiment 2, a parallel analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction, $F(2, 149) = 3.54$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .65$.
2. After the experimental tasks, participants rated the confederates' faces on the same dimensions as the pretest participants. Participants' hostility ratings did not differ for the faces of the Black versus White confederate or by condition. Controlling for hostility ratings did not alter the pattern of findings.

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