

# Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful

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## Abstract

Stereotypes and their associated category-based processes have traditionally been considered largely within the context of the negativity of their content and consequences, both among the general public and the scientific community. This review summarizes and integrates extant research on positive stereotypes, which are subjectively favorable beliefs about social groups, and examines their implications for individuals and groups directly targeted by such stereotypes. Furthermore, we examine the beneficial and adverse implications of positive stereotypes for interpersonal and intergroup relations, as well as the ways in which positive stereotypes, more so than negative stereotypes, may contribute to and perpetuate systemic differences in power and privilege.

## Keywords

positive stereotypes, intergroup, system justification

Two of the earliest lessons we learn from our parents and teachers are to be nice to others and not to judge a book by its cover. To promote the former, we are often reminded that if we cannot say anything nice, then we should not say anything at all. As we grow, we learn that saying nice things to others is an important part of developing and maintaining close interpersonal relationships. Eventually, we learn that ingratiating compliments are nuanced forms of social communication and influence that can be used strategically in attempts to gain others' compliance (Vonk, 2002). To promote the latter, we are actively and ardently discouraged from evaluating or even acknowledging others based on any prominent physical marker of social or cultural identity, even when it may be appropriate to do so (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). This anti-stereotyping message is reinforced throughout all levels of education and occupational institutions and has fostered an intolerance of intolerance.

Positive stereotypes represent the seemingly contradictory confluence of these two processes and motivations: They are intended and/or perceived to be complimentary in their depiction of members of a social group, yet nonetheless rely on a categorization process that inherently limits the ability to individualize the targets of the stereotype. We define positive stereotypes as

subjectively favorable beliefs about members of social groups that directly or indirectly connote or confer domain-specific advantage, favorability, or superiority based on category membership. In a world seemingly obsessed with embracing diversity but unsure about how best to do so, positive stereotypes represent an especially complex phenomenon: Are they group-based achievements that should be celebrated as part of inclusive attempts at multiculturalism or are they still merely book covers by which we inappropriately judge others?

We present a synthesis of the psychological research on positive stereotypes that examines the powerful ways in which positive stereotypes influence both targets and perceivers at various levels of analysis. In doing so, we advance the following interrelated points: the complimentary nature of positive stereotypes contributes to their persistence, positive stereotypes influence the psychological experiences of people targeted by them, positive stereotypes are often disruptive to interpersonal and intergroup relations, and positive stereotypes serve to justify existing intergroup inequality. As the first piece to

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comprehensively review and integrate classic and contemporary literature on positive stereotypes, we examine their pervasiveness and influence on individual targets, interpersonal and intergroup contexts, and systemic contexts. We conclude by offering our thoughts on how to reduce the negative consequences of positive stereotypes for targets and for society more broadly.

### Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive

Walter Lippmann (1946) introduced the term *stereotype* to depict pictures in our minds that represent the “strange connection” between facts and reality and our subjective interpretation of them. When we consider the variation in group stereotypes across time to their current forms, stereotypes have been and continue to be snapshots that both reflect and influence the status of social groups within society in a recursive and mutually reinforcing relationship (Jussim, 1991). As the statuses of social groups have shifted throughout history, so too have the content and valence of the corresponding stereotypes of those groups shifted. For example, Black slaves were stereotyped as animals with little intellectual capacity for whom menial physical labor was appropriate and beneficial. After slavery, stereotypes of Black moral and intellectual inferiority persisted. However, new stereotypes of athleticism and musical ability also emerged and strengthened as society permitted, acknowledged, and celebrated the participation and achievements of Black Americans within certain domains of sports and entertainment (Czopp & Monteith, 2006). Stereotypes of Asian Americans have also evolved in a manner reflecting their shifting social status. Nineteenth century Chinese immigrant laborers were stereotyped as dirty, crude, and lazy (Wu, 2003), but as their academic and socioeconomic statuses improved, stereotypes reflecting more positive associations with intelligence, diligence, and competitiveness emerged (Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). Although stereotypes toward gay men (there is considerably less work on lesbians) still possess strong negative associations of psychological and moral deviance and abnormality, they have also begun to accommodate more favorable beliefs related to emotional sensitivity, style, and refinement (Morrison & Bearden, 2007). In contrast to the change in the status of stereotypes of Blacks, Asians, and gay men, the valence of stereotypes of women have changed relatively little across time, a reflection of the corresponding lack of change in the roles and status of women in society (Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, & Lueptow, 2001). In addition to traditional hostile sexist stereotypes, women continue to be stereotyped benevolently as emotionally responsive, nurturing, and relational (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Fiske, 2010; Glick et al., 2000).

Given norms that emphasize and encourage at least superficial attempts to demonstrate inclusiveness, diversity, and multiculturalism at personal and institutional levels, there may be strong motivation to attempt to make positive (though perhaps stereotypic) statements about members of traditionally marginalized social groups. For example, when Americans were asked explicitly about which traits they associate with Blacks, they more frequently identified positive stereotypes as characteristic than negative stereotypes (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Madon et al., 2001). When assessing perceptions of Asian Americans, the subscale measuring positive stereotypes of Asian Americans' intellectual competence accounted for nearly seven times as much variance as the subscale measuring negative stereotypes of Asian Americans' unsociability (Lin et al., 2005). The traits most commonly ascribed to women tend to be evaluatively positive and lead to perceptions of women that are more favorable than those of men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Indeed, Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002) have argued that the content of stereotypes for most social groups contain favorable evaluations along one of two central traits, such that groups are typically perceived as warm or competent but not both. For example, older people, women, and mentally handicapped people are stereotyped as high on warmth but low on competence, whereas Jews, Asians, and rich people are stereotyped as low on warmth but high on competence. This stereotype content model is well-supported across various social target groups and among many different samples of perceivers (Claussell & Fiske, 2005; Cuddy et al., 2009; Walzer & Czopp, 2011).

Further reinforcing the content (but perhaps complicating the meaning) of these stereotypes is the ubiquitous availability of behavioral evidence consistent with positive stereotypes in contemporary society. For example, the majority of professional athletes in some of the most popular sports in America (football, basketball) are Black, and their advantages are often described as a result of innate, physiological differences between Blacks and Whites (Czopp & Monteith, 2006; Kay, Day, & Zanna, 2013). When averaged across the group, Asian Americans continue to represent the “model minority” in academic contexts and outperform all other racial groups including Whites on most standardized test measures (Hsin & Xie, 2014). Almost everyone has had direct experience and close relationships with women (mothers, friends, partners, etc.) who are indeed warm, emotional, and nurturing. Indeed, such experiences likely contribute to the relative ease with which people will agree with and directly express positive stereotypes over negative stereotypes. For example, in a 1998 speech to the Wisconsin state Assembly, former National Football League player

Reggie White stated, "When you look at the Asian, the Asian is very gifted in creativity and invention. If you go to Japan or any Asian country, they can turn a television into a watch. They are very creative" (Associated Press, 1998). In 2007, former Wisconsin governor and Republican presidential hopeful Tommy Thompson attempted to clarify earlier comments that earning money was part of "the Jewish tradition" by stating, "What I was referring to, ladies and gentlemen, is the accomplishments of the Jewish religion. You've been outstanding business people and I compliment you for that" (Rosner, 2007). Although in these examples the speakers were publicly rebuked for their comments, their comfort with expressing them publicly supports the relative acceptability of positive stereotypes over negative stereotypes. Even President Obama made an offhand joke in 2008 (then as presidential candidate) that he would need to assess Bill Clinton's dancing ability to determine the extent to which the former president could be considered culturally Black (Seelye, 2008).

All of these incidents can be identified as stereotyping by traditional definitions in that they involve beliefs that members of a social category possess certain traits or abilities based simply on their category membership. Yet despite strong contemporary norms promoting egalitarianism and denouncing any endorsement or application of stereotypes, the fact that the above stereotypes referenced traits that are favorable, advantageous, and generally positive appeared to render them acceptable. The emergence and prevalence of positive stereotypes seems to correspond with a shift in the sociopolitical climate regarding the inappropriateness of negative stereotypes. As a result, people may have compensated for the omission of negativity toward outgroups by emphasizing groups' positive traits (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012; see also Madon et al., 2001).

A greater acceptance of positive stereotyping extends beyond the self to perceptions of others who state positive stereotypes. For example, Mae and Carlston (2005) demonstrated that speakers who publicly espoused positive stereotypes were perceived as less prejudiced than speakers who stated negative stereotypes. Furthermore, participants evaluated a speaker who stated a positive stereotype as more likable than a speaker who stated a negative stereotype and just as likable as a speaker who refrained from making any stereotypic comments at all. Likewise, White participants evaluated a White speaker who stereotypically "complimented" Black athletes just as favorably as when the compliment was withheld (Czopp, 2008b). Kay and colleagues (2013) have demonstrated that exposure to credible news articles that appeared to confirm racial differences in athletic ability elicited less skepticism and less negative affect than similarly credible articles confirming racial differences in negatively stereotyped domains of intelligence and aggressiveness.

In sum, the "complimentary" nature of many positive stereotypes may facilitate their acceptance and influence among perceivers who may not recognize such non-prototypical forms of bias (cf. Inman & Baron, 1996). The social representation of stereotyping and prejudice has been so acutely tied to hostility and derogation that anything short of such negativity is likely to be unrecognized or unacknowledged as related to those category-based processes (see O'Brien et al., 2010). For these reasons, positive stereotypes appear to fly under society's constant antibias radar.

### **Positive Stereotypes Influence Targets**

Just as positive stereotypes represent a complex duality of favoritism and depersonalization, their influences on individual group members targeted by the stereotype are similarly mixed in their implications. That is, there are numerous lines of theory and research that suggest positive stereotypes offer some psychological benefits to target group members, but a similarly large (and growing) body of research clearly points to profound and pervasive negative consequences.

### ***Benefits of positive stereotypes***

Social-identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), self-categorization theory (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), and optimal-distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) share the general tenet that people attempt to form and maintain a self-concept comprised of personal and social identities that are valued and distinctive. Endorsing positive stereotypes of one's group may be a way to establish valued and distinctive identities. As early as 4th grade, female and Black children accept positive stereotypes that reflect their group more favorably than corresponding outgroups (e.g., reading is for girls, sports are for Black people) while simultaneously rejecting negative stereotypes about their group (Rowley, Kurtz-Costes, Mistry, & Feagans, 2007). Similarly, some women embrace the positive stereotypes of benevolent sexism but reject the negative stereotypes associated with hostile sexism (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998).

For members of stereotyped groups, emphasizing dimensions on which their group stereotypically excels may represent a compensatory coping strategy in response to the stigmatization associated with their group's negative stereotypes or low social status (Crocker & Major, 1989). Women stereotyped negatively in skills and abilities related to science, technology, engineering, and math may shift their attention and efforts to gender-role consistent academic domains in which their group comfortably excels (Steele, James, & Barnett, 2002). Similarly, Black students may selectively promote

behaviors and an identity more consistent with athletics in reaction to negative stereotypes surrounding Black intellectual aptitude (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). Internally accepting positive stereotypes of their group may be a way for women to preemptively shield themselves from the potential antagonism and aggression of hostile sexism (Glick et al., 2000). By selectively self-stereotyping oneself and one's group along positive dimensions, the potential threat of negative stereotypes may be thwarted, helping to preserve a positive self-concept (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996). As a result, group members may come to perceive and accept themselves and their group as manifestations of the stereotype.

Positive stereotypes can also improve others' negative impressions of one's group. Agentic and self-promoting women may act in ways that emphasize positive female stereotypes related to communality and dependence in order to maintain others' favorable impressions of them (Becker, Glick, Ilic, & Bohner, 2011; Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). The positive stereotypes associated with gay men (i.e., warm and friendly) appear to mitigate the negative stereotypes associated with Black men such that, unlike with White targets, gay Black men are evaluated more favorably than straight Black men (Remedios, Chasteen, Rule, & Plaks, 2011). Women who exemplify the positive stereotypes of benevolent sexism may benefit from men's greater romantic interest under conditions that threaten the stability of the status quo (Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008).

Finally, target group members may demonstrate benefits in performance and well-being from the implicit or explicit reliance on the favorable associations and outcomes of positive stereotypes. For example, when positive stereotypes are subtly activated, target group members may experience a boost in performance within the stereotyped domain (Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, & Gray, 2002). Among older participants, priming positive age-related stereotypes associated with wisdom increased performance on memory tasks (Levy, 1996). Self-stereotyping may even lead, at least indirectly, to positive global outcomes related to happiness: Women's endorsement of the positive stereotypes of benevolent sexism is positively related to their reported subjective well-being (Connelly & Heesacker, 2012; Hammond & Sibley, 2011).

### ***Costs of positive stereotypes***

While there appear to be real intrapersonal and interpersonal advantages to the personal acceptance of positive stereotypes, they often come with subtle but substantial costs. For example, Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997) found that among their sample of Asian American students, the

majority (52%) had negative reactions (e.g., feeling marginalized) to their group being considered the "model minority" compared with 26% who had positive reactions. Indeed, Asian Americans who endorsed positive stereotypes of their group were more likely to report psychological distress and negative attitudes toward seeking help from others (Gupta, Szymanski, & Leong, 2011). Although aligning one's identity with the stereotypic strengths of one's social group may be a more immediate and proximal source of group pride and collective self-esteem, there may be considerable long-term consequences.

Although the subjective favorability of positive stereotypes may facilitate their expression among perceivers who intend them as "compliments," the targets of such stereotypes can feel depersonalized as if they are being acknowledged exclusively through their category membership. Women exposed to group-qualified compliments (e.g., "you did really well for a woman") experienced more anger and hostility than when the statements were not qualified with reference to social group (Garcia, Miller, Smith, & Mackie, 2006). Siy and Cheryan (2013) examined the role of depersonalization in target group members' reactions to positive stereotypes by pairing Asian American participants with a White confederate who was to distribute tasks to the pair (one task required math skills and the other required language skills). For half the participants, the White confederate assigned the math task to the Asian American participant because "all Asians are good at math." In comparison with a control condition in which the math assignment was made without any such comment, Asian Americans who were targeted by the positive stereotype reported more anger and annoyance, and these negative emotions were mediated by feelings of being depersonalized (i.e., seen as reduced to merely their racial group membership rather than being seen as an individual) by the confederate. These findings were conceptually replicated using other positive stereotypes of Asians (e.g., hardworking, ambitious) and also with positive stereotypes of women as nurturing. The ambiguity of positive stereotypes (i.e., compliments that nonetheless reflect a depersonalizing form of bias) when repeated across time and circumstance may constitute "microaggressions" that have adverse effects on well-being and mental health (Sue et al., 2007).

The ambivalent mix of praise and category-based judgment can also have negative consequences beyond depersonalization. For example, women who personally endorsed or were merely exposed to benevolently sexist statements reported greater self-objectification and body shame (Calogero & Jost, 2011; Oswald, Franzoi, & Frost, 2012). In the context of psychotherapy, counselors who are unaware of the presence or inappropriateness of their own positive biases may act upon them when attempting to address clients' psychological dysfunction (e.g., assuming an Asian

student's anxiety is related to academic pressure). Positive stereotypes can interfere with the cognitive performance of target group members by placing undue pressures on them or by interfering with necessary cognitive resources. In a daily diary study of Asian American students, those who expressed greater concern with appearing smart to their roommate reported greater anxiety, but only when their roommate was White (Son & Shelton, 2011). When a group is positively stereotyped as good at a domain, a blatant reminder of that stereotype can result in "choking under pressure" (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Shih et al., 2002). For instance, Asian American women who were reminded of their racial identity before taking a math test performed worse on that test than Asian American women who were not reminded of their racial identity (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000). Positive stereotypes can also interfere with confidence and ability to focus on the task required of them (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007). Women who heard that women were "more cultured and sophisticated than men" underperformed on a test of working memory in comparison with women who did not hear such statements. Moreover, women who heard benevolent sexism performed worse than did those women who heard blatant hostile sexism.

Positive stereotypes also steer targets away from achievement-related opportunities. Among Black college students, implicit positive self-stereotyping (i.e., associating Black faces with stereotypic traits such as athletic, rhythmic, cool) predicted less interest in and perceived importance of a college education (Czopp, 2008a). Similarly, women who avoid STEM-related majors and careers because of internal or external pressure to conform to expectations of positive stereotypes lose their voice within an increasingly powerful and prestigious intellectual domain. Among Native Americans, exposure to stereotypic images and symbols of their group intended to reflect strength and pride (e.g., Disney's Pocahontas, sports mascots) caused Native American students to reduce the number of achievement-related selves (e.g., finding a job, getting good grades) that they felt were possible for them in the next year (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008). In addition, exposure to benevolent sexism caused women to describe themselves as less task-oriented (Barreto, Ellemers, Piebinga, & Moya, 2010) and increased their feelings of incompetence (Dumont, Sarlet, & Dardenne, 2010). In both of these cases, positive stereotypes depicted the groups as incompatible with achievement and caused targets to confirm those stereotypes.

### ***Reconciling costs and benefits of positive stereotypes***

Three moderators may explain when positive stereotypes have positive versus negative effects. The first moderator

to consider is how the positive stereotype is stated. Whereas positive stereotypes that are stated blatantly (e.g., "Asians are good at math") appear to invoke negative consequences (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Shih et al., 2002; Siy & Cheryan, 2013), those primed more subtly (e.g., reminding Asians of the languages they speak at home) may have beneficial effects on group members (Shih et al., 2002; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Walton & Cohen, 2003). Blatant positive stereotypes may prime high expectations (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000) or cause targets to feel like their group membership is being inappropriately imposed on them (Siy & Cheryan, 2013), whereas subtly stated positive stereotypes may give group members a sense of confidence and promise. The second factor to consider is who is stating the positive stereotype. Positive stereotypes stated by an outgroup member (e.g., Czopp, 2008b; Siy & Cheryan, 2013; Son & Shelton, 2011) may be more problematic than those stated by an ingroup member or stated without a source (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). When stated by an outgroup member, positive stereotypes may feel more like prejudice than when the same statement comes from someone within the group. A third moderator that is helpful to consider when reconciling positive and negative effects of positive stereotypes is the cultural context in which the positive stereotype is presented. Having one's individuality usurped is more threatening in independent (e.g., U.S.) contexts than in interdependent (e.g., East Asian) contexts (Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Because positive stereotypes deny people their sense of being seen as individuals above and beyond their group membership (Siy & Cheryan, 2013), positive stereotypes are more inconsistent with the ways that Americans define the self than East Asians define the self. As a result, positive stereotypes evoke greater negative emotions in American contexts than in East Asian contexts (Siy & Cheryan, 2013).

Taken together, these moderators suggest that knowing by whom, how, and where a positive stereotype is stated is crucial to predicting how it will be received. Positive stereotypes that are blatantly stated by an outgroup member in an independent cultural context may cause more negative consequences than those stated under different circumstances. Future work should continue to identify moderators that shape responses to positive stereotypes.

### **Positive Stereotypes Influence Interpersonal & Intergroup Contexts**

Unlike their mixed intrapersonal effects among target group members, the influence of positive stereotypes on interpersonal and intergroup dynamics tend to be more consistently negative. In particular, they can adversely

affect dyadic relationships and the attitudes people hold toward one another and provide a socially acceptable means for encouraging disadvantaged group members to adhere to stereotypical traits that both limit economic mobility and encourage the pursuit of goals that are often lower status.

How might the expression of positive stereotypes impact interpersonal relations? Most research examining this question has focused on the effects that expressions of positive stereotypes have on the target's attitudes towards the expresser. Intuitively, it is not hard to imagine why people might expect positive stereotypes to lead to favorable interpersonal evaluations: There is considerable research suggesting that people like those who compliment them (Gordon, 1996) and generally prefer to be seen in a positive light (Schlenker, 1980). Given that people tend to believe positive but stereotypical remarks are flattering (Czopp & Monteith, 2006) and not biased or inappropriate (especially when compared with negative stereotypes; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Lambert, Khan, Lickel, & Fricke, 1997; Mae & Carlston, 2005), it is natural they will also expect them to facilitate smooth interpersonal interactions.

A number of psychological findings, however, suggest the opposite may be true. Though people do appreciate positive evaluations, they are also strongly motivated to be judged accurately, whether that entails positive or negative evaluations (Swann, 1987). Thus, to the extent someone attributes a remark, even if complimentary, as inaccurate, resentment may ensue. Exacerbating this, groups that are frequently the targets of prejudice are especially vigilant as to whether opinions about them, even positive ones, are the result of stereotypes rather than individuating information (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Siy & Cheryan, 2013), and people react negatively when forced to disconfirm category-based judgments (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999).

Emerging research is demonstrating that, contrary to what people may often assume, communicating positive stereotypes engenders dislike, resentment, and negativity. Asian Americans and women who heard a positive stereotype from an outgroup member were subsequently more likely to believe they were also being ascribed negative stereotypes of their group than those who did not hear a positive stereotype, and targets' sense that they were being negatively stereotyped mediated their beliefs that the outgroup member was prejudiced (Siy & Cheryan, 2015). In another noteworthy example, Black participants rated a White actor as less likable and more prejudiced if the actor made a positive but stereotypical remark (noting what amazing athletes Black people are) compared with participants in a control condition without the stereotypic remark (Czopp, 2008b). In a second study, Black and White participants evaluated a friendly

interaction between a Black actor and a White actor in which the White actor made a similar stereotypic compliment about Black athletes (or did not). Without the positive stereotype, Black and White participants evaluated the White actor equally favorably, but with the positive stereotype Black participants evaluated the White actor as less likable and more prejudiced than did White participants and those in the no comment condition. Tellingly, White participants were unmoved by the addition of the positive stereotype into the dialogue, judging the White actor as equally likable regardless of whether he uttered the positive stereotype. In this same experiment, participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they thought the overall interaction they just witnessed was constructive in promoting race relations. Although both White and Black participants viewed the interaction as less helpful for race relations when the positive stereotype was included, the manipulation affected Black participants significantly more than White participants. Thus, not only can the communication of positive stereotypes yield negative interpersonal consequences but, probably because of their positive valence, members of the nonstereotyped group tend not to anticipate this.

Positive stereotypes may additionally adversely affect the way targets are evaluated because their subjective favorability tacitly implies some corresponding deficiency in the same way that "backhanded" compliments often imply subtle but understood negativity (Hall & Blanton, 2009). For example, the mental representation of a dominant Black athlete typically includes an implied understanding that the person is likely intellectually inferior (Walzer & Czopp, 2011). When women were described as exhibiting traits and behaviors related to warmth and friendliness within a work-related context, they were evaluated as less competent than identical male targets (Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012).

The negative consequences of perceivers' positive stereotyping may be partially due to the tendency for positive stereotypes to be more prescriptive (i.e., group members "should be" like this) than negative stereotypes, which tend to be more descriptive (i.e., group members "are" like this). Prescriptive stereotypes may create an expectancy context that is more likely to encourage and reinforce stereotype-consistent behaviors than the descriptive properties of negative stereotypes (Glick & Rudman, 2010). For example, negative stereotypes of Blacks include intellectual inferiority and aggressiveness, but these are almost entirely descriptive. People generally do not believe that Blacks should be uneducated or violent. As descriptive stereotypes, they create "likelihood expectations" and when they are violated (e.g., a smart, articulate, and peaceful Black person), people are often pleasantly surprised and, under

certain conditions, willing to adjust their overall impression of the group (Bless, Schwarz, Bodenhausen, & Thiel, 2001; Weber & Crocker, 1983; Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999). In contrast, positive stereotypes prescribe how targets should behave and create “ought expectancies” that are inherently evaluative. There is comforting reassurance when targets behave stereotypically (e.g., a Black person dancing well, a woman who is good with children). Even positive stereotypes that imply an outgroup’s superiority (e.g., Asians are smart and successful) may evoke begrudging respect that, when paired with additional negative stereotypes (e.g., Asians are interpersonally cold), encourage an overall favorable view of the world (Kay & Jost, 2003). However, targets who attempt to defy and disconfirm the marginalizing effects of positive stereotypes are often punished for their stereotype-inconsistent behaviors (see Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997). For example, stereotypes that portray women as modest, relationship-oriented, and unassuming may result in the professional derogation and exclusion of women (but not men) who engage in the necessary impression management style of promoting one’s competence and accomplishments (Biernat, Tocci, & Williams, 2012; Rudman, 1998). Furthermore, the patronizing yet positive beliefs of benevolent sexism negatively influence the extent to which men assign challenging yet professionally constructive opportunities to women but not men, such that women are “protected” from the burden of difficult work essential to occupational advancement and success (King et al., 2012).

The pernicious nature of such stereotypic beliefs and expectations also extends to situations that compromise the physical safety of targets. Men and women who strongly endorsed the positive stereotypes inherent in benevolent sexism were more likely to blame female victims of acquaintance rape who were perceived to have acted inappropriately (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002). Similarly, the heightened expectations associated with positive stereotypes that link women to motherhood (i.e., women have an inherent ability to care for children) may explain why mothers tend to be punished more harshly for tragic instances involving parental neglect (e.g., forgetting a child in a hot car; Walzer & Czopp, in press). Taken together, despite the well-intentioned yet superficial favorability of positive stereotypes, they can be associated with a number of negative consequences for targets’ emotional and psychological states, their performance-based behaviors, and (to the extent they try to overcome such stereotyping) others’ social, professional, and moral judgments of them.

## Positive Stereotypes Influence Systemic Contexts

Positive stereotypes have also proven to be a uniquely powerful mode of perpetuating inequality and propping up traditional status hierarchies in which certain groups are consistently disadvantaged. Given the perceived acceptability of positive stereotypes to perceivers, targets who disagree with and speak out against such blanket categorization may be perceived as hypersensitive complainers, thus discouraging future attempts to challenge stereotypes (Diebels & Czopp, 2011). Furthermore, because of the relative commonality of positive stereotypes in everyday interpersonal, intergroup communication, positive stereotypes offer a still accepted means for members of dominant groups to funnel members of disadvantaged groups to domains they have traditionally occupied or to subtly communicate what society expects of them. Encouraging someone to pursue a career or competency that is low paying or otherwise low status is much easier when it can be couched in parlance that is flattering and seemingly positive.

Consider the following experimental demonstration. Czopp (2010) asked White participants to assume the role of career counselor and evaluate several high-school student profiles and then provide career advice. One of these profiles described a student who was struggling academically (though he was still passing and maintained interest in academics) but excelled athletically. The picture appended to this profile was manipulated across condition, such that half the participants saw a Black student and the other half saw a picture of a White student. All other aspects of the profile were identical across experimental conditions. After viewing each profile, participants were asked to provide advice as to where this high-school student should focus his efforts to maximize his future life success.

Results revealed that men (but not women; for a discussion of why this effect may have been limited to male participants, see Czopp, 2010) who were high in endorsement of positive stereotypes (as measured previously in an unrelated session) encouraged the Black student to spend more hours per week on athletics (at the expense of academics) and ranked athletics as the most important domain to pursue over academics. The White student, however, was instead advised to spend more time on academics than athletics, and participants ranked academics not athletics as most important for future success. Although participants’ endorsement of positive stereotypes predicted the strength of these effects, their negative prejudice or general dislike of African Americans did not predict this differential advice based on student race.

Thus, it appears that participants were not discouraging Black students from focusing on school out of malicious feelings or a calculated attempt to suppress the academic success of Black students. Rather, these findings speak to the unique influence of positive stereotypes as well-meaning schemas that may ultimately and unintentionally yield detrimental results.

In the case of Black athleticism, given that the number of high school student athletes that actually make a professional career out of their sport can be nearly rounded to zero (according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, .08% of high school football players become a professional athlete, at any rank; NCAA, 2013), advising someone to sacrifice academic rigor for more exclusive focus on athletics is clearly not wise life advice, even for a student that is just keeping his or her head above water academically. But because the Black athletic stereotype is flattering, people may find it easier to funnel Black students toward this path rather than one more likely to lead to conventional success, without concerns of appearing (to themselves or others) as racist or prejudiced or uninterested in promoting social equality. Institutional biases within the education system have long contributed to the discouragement of students based on race, gender, and social class from high-status subjects, occupations, and opportunities in general. However, this traditional form of “tracking” was largely based on negative stereotypes of intellectual incompetence. Contemporary forms of tracking, in contrast, may be more attempts to promote student success based on positive stereotypes of group members and presumed fit between a target and a (low-status and role-restrictive) domain (e.g., “You’re Black, so you should be playing sports!”).

A similar conclusion has been reached among scholars interested in the perpetuation and maintenance of gender inequality. Benevolent sexist stereotypes that characterize women as more refined, pure, and fragile than men are often used to justify directing women to occupations and roles that are best suited to their “strengths” (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994), and legitimize paternalistic treatment and attitudes that limit women’s freedoms in their best interest (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Indeed, it has been noted that the positive stereotypes generally attributed to lower status groups tend to be associated with subordination (Ridgeway, 1992), and may be employed and endorsed strategically by higher status groups so as to flatter subordinate group members into accepting their lower status (Jackman, 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996). The literature is now replete with demonstrations of how seemingly positive stereotypes of women can serve to limit their mobility, sometimes even more so than hostile or negatively-valenced stereotypes. For instance, the endorsement of benevolent (but not hostile) stereotypes predicted increased endorsement of

restricting pregnant women’s choices of what foods they should be allowed to consume (Sutton, Douglas, & McClellan, 2011). Women who are higher in benevolent sexism deemed it more acceptable for husbands to restrict their wives’ freedoms for “protective” reasons (Moya, Glick, Expósito, de Lemus, & Hart, 2007). Women, but not men, who accept benevolently sexist offers of help (e.g., a man offering to help a women deal with a computer problem) were viewed as less competent and less qualified for a high-competence occupation, especially by perceivers who scored high on a chronic measure of benevolent sexism (Becker et al., 2011). Thus, the very pedestal upon which targets of positive stereotypes are placed serves to subjugate, marginalize, and, as we will now discuss, placate them.

Positive stereotypes have also been shown to legitimize uneven distributions of material and social capital within societies, making the social system appear less unfair and less unjust than it may in fact be (Kay et al., 2007). A social system can appear fair or legitimate by conforming to several different types of human conceptions of fairness (Deutsch, 1973; Lerner, 1980). One way that fairness can be achieved is by ensuring that advantages and disadvantages, or benefits and burdens, are distributed equally across people (or groups of people) within a social system (Gaucher, Hafer, Kay, & Davidenko, 2010). Thus, when material goods and social power are obviously and unevenly distributed across social groups, attributing positive stereotypes that suggest some sort of advantage to those with less material or social capital can bolster views of the overall legitimacy of the social system. Evidence for this system-justifying function of positive stereotypes has been observed in many different contexts. For example, exposure to descriptions of individuals who conform to the “poor but happy” or “poor but honest” stereotypes lead perceivers—especially those who are more politically liberal (Kay, Czaplinski, & Jost, 2009)—to view the general social system as more fair and legitimate (Kay & Jost, 2003; also see Lane, 1959). Similarly, exposure to benevolent sexist stereotypes of women as more refined and cultured than men lead women to perceive the social system in general and the system of gender relations specifically as more legitimate (Jost & Kay, 2005). Likewise, experimental manipulations that increase people’s need to see their social system as just and legitimate (i.e., their system justification motive; Jost & Banaji, 1994) produce increased positive stereotyping of disadvantaged groups (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005), including self-stereotyping (Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011). Of note, and consistent with the perspective that positive stereotypes are used to help legitimize social inequality, these effects tend to be strongest when inequality is stable (Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013) or especially pronounced (Glick et al., 2004).

Given that positive stereotypes can increase perceptions that the social system is just and fair, it is logical to wonder whether they can also undermine motivations to engage in actions that promote social change (cf. Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). Although research examining an explicit connection between positive stereotyping, system justification, and motivations to pursue social change is sparse, supportive evidence is beginning to emerge. Becker and Wright (2011; also see Becker, 2012) demonstrated that exposing women to benevolent sexist stereotypes decreased interest in and actual collective action directed at social change, and this decrease was mediated by increased perceptions of system fairness and increased perceived advantages of being a woman. Strikingly, exposure to negative (or hostile) stereotypes of women did not exert a similar effect. In fact, exposure to negative stereotypes increased motivation for social change because they decreased perceptions of system fairness and decreased feelings that being a woman comes with unique personal advantages.

### Concluding Thoughts

We have attempted to review theory and empirical research on the various ways in which positive stereotypes can influence the psychological processes of targets and perceivers across intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, and systemic levels of analyses. Within the education system, positive stereotypes influence the way targets choose educational and career goals, the way perceivers (e.g., teachers, counselors) directly and indirectly encourage/reward or discourage/punish targets for choosing goals that are stereotype consistent or inconsistent, respectively. Among mental health counselors, positive stereotypes have implications for targets' sense of personal and cultural identity. Their depersonalizing effects may represent "microaggressions" that have adverse effects on well-being and mental health for those who value personal distinction. However, in the context of different cultural values, positive stereotypes may represent important psychological tendencies that should be acknowledged and appreciated by those who wish to be sensitive to a group's cultural differences. Collectively, these correlates and consequences of positive stereotyping have policy implications in multiple domains, including workplace harassment (e.g., "compliments" that are perceived as inappropriate) and equal opportunity/affirmative action (e.g., are positively stereotyped groups excluded from such programs?).

Finally, we briefly consider how targets and perceivers alike can attempt to reduce the negative consequences associated with positive stereotypes that we have outlined above. Although we know of no research that directly

examines attempts to influence positive stereotypes specifically, we extrapolate using research largely based on negative stereotypes (cf. Paluck & Green, 2009). However, our suggestions also reflect many of the concerns offered by Dixon, Levine, Reicher, and Durrheim (2012) regarding the complexity of overcoming negative intergroup relations. Specifically, because the complimentary nature of positive stereotypes may unintentionally initiate or perpetuate differences in interpersonal and intergroup attitudes and status, Dixon and colleagues' emphasis on the interpersonal and relational nature of improving intergroup relations is important to consider. First, targets may act in ways that discourage positive stereotyping, yet encourage more constructive social interactions (Neel, Neufeld, & Neuberg, 2013; Stone, Whitehead, Schmader, & Focella, 2011). Upon receiving a stereotypic compliment, targets may point out the stereotypic nature of the compliment and its negative effect on the recipient in an attempt to change the perceiver's future behavior and beliefs (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). Perceivers, either through their own self-awareness or through another person's suggestion, may come to realize that positive stereotyping is inconsistent with their internalized personal standards and learn to regulate their future reactions and behaviors accordingly (Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002). Indeed, any attempt to promote a broader approach to cultural awareness and multiculturalism that allows identities to be valued without reducing people to their group membership may help foster an appreciation of the nuances associated with positive stereotypes (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). For example, educators' expectations for their students should not depend on their students' identities, even if those group-based expectations are positive. High expectations are useful and can be motivating, but they could have the opposite effect if the student knows they are present purely because of his or her group identity. Thus, increasing the general awareness of what positive stereotypes are and do may encourage people to perceive and acknowledge variability (in traits, appearance, outcomes) within social groups while still recognizing the restrictiveness (interpersonally and systemically) of positive stereotypes.

In conclusion, as Allport (1954) himself acknowledged, "People may be prejudiced in favor of others; they may think *well* of them without sufficient warrant" (p. 6, italics in original). Our goal has been to provide a comprehensive review of psychological research related to positive stereotypes and their implications, which include a unique mix of praise and restriction. We hope this review will serve as a springboard for increased awareness and research examining the content and processes related to positive stereotypes.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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