



Journal of Social Issues, Vol. 71, No. 4, 2015, pp. 834–846
doi: 10.1111/josi.12152

Talking Up and Talking Down: The Power of Positive Speaking

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Consistent with Lewin's legacy and SPSSI's traditions, out work has focused on inequality and power dynamics between people. Drawing on interpersonal positivity biases, stereotype content emphasizing perceived warmth and competence, and on the compensation effect (trading off warmth and competence), we study how people communicate, understand, and present themselves and others, especially across status divides. First, polite communicators omit negativity in describing individuals, especially stereotyped ones. Negativity omission creates innuendo (its absence implies the negative information), which allows stereotype to stagnate. Listeners understand the innuendo and infer the negativity from its omission. Impression-managers understand this dynamic and use positive innuendo: They downplay one aspect (e.g., warmth or competence) to convey the other. Status determines which strategy people use: High-status speakers talk down (warmly), and low-status speakers talk up (competently). Cross-race interactions also show this dynamic. This creates dysfunctional inter-status interactions, the two people operating at crossed purposes.

Winning an award named for Kurt Lewin—like my lifelong membership in the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues—expresses what it means to do science that tries to make the world a better place. Lewin himself worked on only some of SPSSI's three Ps (prejudice, poverty, and peace), but he did work on power (group processes and leadership), relevant to our topic here. More globally, he articulated the force of the social situation, combined with the personality embedded in it. Our message ends in a similar place.

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Much of my own work has focused on inequality and power dynamics between people. Our current work shows how power operates in the nicest possible way, by saying only good things, and thereby maintains the hierarchy to its own advantage. To illustrate, an acquaintance was once passed over for a job, and one of the decision-makers reassured her that if they could have picked the person they *liked* better, it would have been her. Consider this. It simultaneously communicated they didn't actually like the candidate they hired, who must have been supercompetent to make up for it. And that my acquaintance, by extension, was not. So this seemingly kind intervention actually managed to insult both the chosen candidate and my friend. The dynamic is not immediately obvious, but it turns out to be widespread, as several theory-based studies demonstrate.

The Argument

As a rule, polite communicators omit negativity in describing individuals and especially stereotyped ones. However intended, this negativity omission creates innuendo (its absence implying the negativity) and allows stereotype to stagnate. Listeners do hear the innuendo and infer negativity from its omission. Impression-managers understand this dynamic and use positive innuendo: They downplay one aspect (e.g., warmth or competence) to convey the other. Status determines which strategy people use: High-status speakers talk down (warmly), and low-status speakers talk up (competently). This tangles up the inter-status interactions, the two people operating at crossed purposes. Now consider in detail the framework for this argument and the evidence for it.

The Framework

The positivity bias is a common norm in language use, person evaluation, and group description (for references, see Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012). For example, communicators routinely use more positive than negative words, across languages. This Pollyanna effect extends to describing other individuals, where positivity is the norm. For example, in rating scales used to evaluate another person, respondents routinely use only the top half of the scale. Nowhere is the positivity bias more pronounced than in describing people who belong to stereotyped groups. Politeness, political correctness, and self-presentation concerns combine to make communicators accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Positivity biases mean that people omit negativity, especially if they have self-presentation concerns, for example, communicating to more public audiences.

Negativity omission does not require lying. Conversational norms dictate that we respond relevantly and honestly, but they do not require responding exhaustively (Grice, 1975). This gives an out to the polite communicator, especially

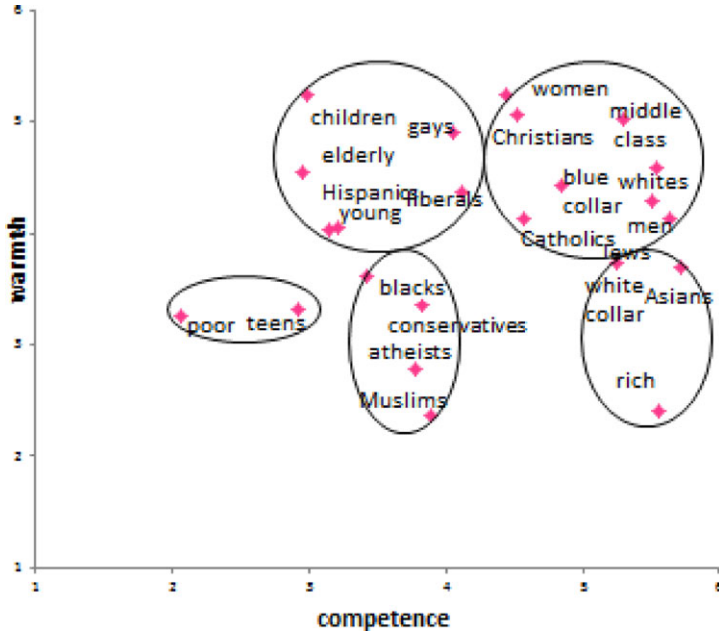


Fig. 1. American groups in warmth by competence space. Circles indicate cluster analysis results. From data in Kervyn et al. (2015); reprinted from Fiske and Durante (2015), with permission.

when the impression is ambivalent, with positive and negative mixed aspects. The communicator can report the positive (“we liked you”) and omit the negative (“we didn’t respect you”).

As the example implies, this dynamic is especially likely to operate by trading off warmth and competence, two basic dimensions of social cognition (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002, in the Stereotype Content Model). Dating back to Asch (1946), at least a dozen research programs have revealed similar dimensions of, on the one hand, warmth, communality, morality, trustworthiness, and sociability, and, on the other hand, competence, agency, ability, and skill (for references, see Fiske, 2015; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). The Big Two Dimensions in social cognition appear in our Stereotype Content Model (SCM), as Figure 1 shows. These dimensions have proved useful in mapping societal groups in dozens of countries around the world (Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante et al., 2013; Durante et al., in progress). We and others have also shown that these two dimensions operate similarly in judgments of individuals (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Russell & Fiske, 2008). One novel and relevant feature of the SCM is that many groups locate as high on one dimension but low on the other.

Trading off the two dimensions appears reliably in SCM-related work on the compensation effect for warmth and competence. In comparative judgments of

both individuals and groups, people assume that warm targets must be incompetent, and that competent targets must be cold (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Demoulin, & Judd, 2008; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010).

Communicators Omit Negativity in Describing Individuals and Stereotypic Groups

Accordingly, we hypothesized that if a target is high on one dimension but low on the other, positivity-oriented communicators will report that one dimension is positive, but omit the other dimension (Bergsieker et al., 2012). This allows them to follow both the positivity norm and the accuracy norm (not lying). We examined this in studies of people describing both individuals and groups.

The first studies focused on whether people describe individuals using negativity omission. A simple design crossed a hypothetical target person's warmth (high/low) by competence (high/low), creating two ambivalent (mixed) and two univalent combinations:

"Imagine someone named Pat, a student of your same age, class year, and gender who lived in your dorm and has taken several classes with you. In the course of getting to know each other, you have observed Pat making many [un]intelligent comments and [but] often treating other students [un]kindly."

Participants reported how likely they would be to describe this person in four ways that matched their randomly assigned vignette or the other variants ("smart and nice," "smart but mean," "nice but stupid," or "mean and stupid") and in four ways that omitted one dimension, characterizing the target as just "smart," "nice," "stupid," or "mean." If participants saw a mixed target (e.g., unintelligent and kind), they could omit negativity by describing the person as simply "nice."

Negativity omission was tested in people's rated likelihood of what they would say to a casual acquaintance (Study 1). Study 2 identically described a Black target (creating more self-presentation concern among White participants). Study 2 also presented various audiences (self, friend, acquaintance) within participants, predicting a linear increase in negativity omission, with more public self-presentation concerns. Study 3 also manipulated the audience, but this time between participants. Study 3 in addition explored mediation by people's reported self-presentation motives (versus concerns with uncertainty or honesty).

In all three studies, when talking to a casual acquaintance (the most public audience), participants preferred negativity omission over both complete accuracy or lying, to describe a mixed target, someone high on one dimension but low on the other. For the high-high and low-low targets, in contrast, participants showed no differences in preferred communication strategy. In the studies that varied the audience, this pattern was clearest to a more public audience (acquaintance) than to a more private one (self)—consistent with negativity omission arising from

self-presentation concerns. Study 3 provided a more direct test of mediation from public audience to reported self-presentation concerns to negativity omission, showing this mediated the effect with both the multiple choice measure described earlier and with more spontaneous open-ended descriptions.

In summary, these initial studies of people describing other individuals showed negativity omission for individuals, especially a Black target. This suggests the question of whether negativity omission might apply equally, or even more so, to descriptions of societal groups. Communicators are wary of seeming prejudiced, yet biases do persist. One way for polite communicators to resolve these tensions would be “stereotyping by omission.” One can communicate a bias with impunity, by reporting the group’s positive dimension and omitting the negative, for example implying a woman’s incompetence by praising her niceness.

Negativity Omission Creates Innuendo and Allows Stereotype to Stagnate

Moving to Princeton in 2000 afforded me an opportunity to revisit a classic series of studies begun now 80 years ago and replicated twice in the 20th century. The studies were conducted in 1932 (Katz & Braly, 1933), 1950 (Gilbert, 1951), 1967 (Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969), and then by us in 2000–2007 (Bergsieker et al., 2012). The Katz-Braly method presents 10 national and ethnic groups, asking participants to rate them on an 84-adjective checklist (with analyses focused on the top 5 adjectives chosen for each group). This time series allowed us to see whether Princeton students showed more stereotype negativity omission over time, given increased anti-prejudice norms. That is, over time, do they endorse fewer negative adjectives, leaving the positive ones intact, and if so, which adjectives for which groups? The result would show stereotype content selectively on the group’s negative dimension moderating over time, especially for ambivalently negative groups.

Independent coders scored the 84 adjectives on both warmth and competence, allowing a re-analysis of the existing data on the two basic dimensions. Figure 2 shows the Katz-Braly (1933) data in Stereotype Content Model space. Notice that six of the ten groups appear high on one dimension and low on the other. Stereotyping by omission would be most clear if initially warm groups (Americans, African Americans, and English) stay warm over time, but initially cold groups (Turks, Jews, Japanese, Chinese, Germans, Italians, and Irish) become less cold, as people fail to report the negative aspect of their stereotype. Similarly, initially competent groups (English, Americans, Irish, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, and Jews) would stay competent over time, but initially incompetent groups (African Americans, Turks) become less incompetent, as people fail to report that negative aspect of their stereotype. These patterns indeed occurred.

Thus, stereotyping by omission fits the selective stereotype change over 75 years, moderating just the negative dimension. The net result however is that

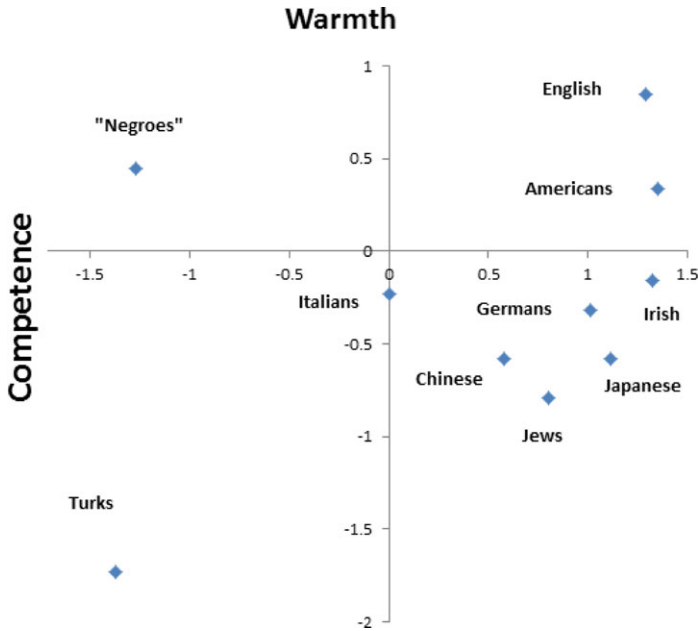


Fig. 2. Katz and Braly (1933) data in warm by competence space.

the groups remain in much the same positions relative to each other. As a group becomes less cold, it is still not warm, and if it becomes less incompetent, it is still not competent. So by simply omitting the negative and becoming neutral, the formerly negative dimensions remain less positive, allowing stereotypes to stagnate. For example, the ambivalent outgroups are still viewed ambivalently. In short, negativity omission contributes to the stickiness of stereotypes over time.

Listeners hear the Innuendo and Infer Negativity from its Omission

The societal change in stereotype reporting—and the resultant stagnation of stereotypes—depends on individual processes of listeners understanding the innuendo and inferring negativity by its omission. A series of studies tested the innuendo effect (Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012). If many outgroups are viewed ambivalently, and if perceivers compensate warmth and competence, then when communicators omit the negative, and communicate only the positive dimension, will listeners infer the negative dimension?

In innuendo Study 1, participants read an ingroup communicator’s positive impression of Pat, which emphasized either warmth, competence, or general positivity. The context was Pat’s potential inclusion in either a social travel or academic

work group. Participants reported (a) open-ended descriptions of the speakers' impression of Pat; (b) Pat's absolute warmth and competence in the speakers' eyes; (c) Pat's relative likeability and capability compared with others; and (d) Pat's suitability for inclusion in the group.

The innuendo effect appeared: When the speaker mentioned positive warmth or competence, listeners inferred that the omitted other dimension must be negative. That is, warmth ratings dropped when only competence was mentioned, and competence ratings dropped when only warmth was mentioned. These ratings in turn predicted suitability for the group, with warmth ratings mattering for the social travel group and competence ratings mattering for the academic work group.

A second study replicated the first with male and female targets, asking for open-ended descriptions. These open-ended descriptions were then given to a second set of participants, to see whether the innuendo was communicated. Indeed, the new participants inferred the omitted negative, salient dimension. That is, given only irrelevant positivity, they inferred a mixed impression, negative on the missing other dimension. Innuendo was especially effective for female targets at work.

So far, our research showed that (a) Communicators omit negativity in describing individuals and stereotypic groups; (b) Negativity omission creates innuendo and allows stereotypes to stagnate; and now (c) Listeners hear the innuendo and infer negativity from its omission. The remaining studies examine whether people understand and use these trade-offs and innuendo in presenting themselves to others, especially across status and racial divides.

Impression-Managers use Positive Innuendo, Downplaying Warmth or Competence to Convey the Other

Impression communicators concerned with self-presentation accentuate the positive and omit the negative, but listeners infer it anyway. We wondered whether people managing impressions of themselves might also use the compensation effect (warmth-competence tradeoff) to convey a desired impression. They could convey a positive impression on one dimension by downplaying positivity on the other (Holoien & Fiske, 2013). For example, sexist women might "play dumb" to impress a sexist man with their niceness.

We developed two study methods to test this hypothesized tradeoff. In one method, on-line participants learned that a hypothetical book club they were joining preferred members who were either warm or competent. They then chose likely words for a sample book review to email to the club secretary. The available words varied on warmth (positivity) and competence (sophistication).

In another study, on-line participants agreed to convey a particular image to a chat partner; we asked them to be warm, competent, or just generally positive.

Participants then chose which warmth- and competence-oriented questions they would want to answer.

In both types of study, not surprisingly, when trying to be warm, participants chose warm words or wanted to answer warmth-related questions. But they also chose less competent words and wanted to answer fewer competence-related questions than in the control (overall positivity) condition. Logically, there is no reason to reduce one's competence when trying to be warm. And the reverse pattern held for trying to make an impression of competence: People conveyed less warmth than in the control conditions.

In a conceptual replication of these compensation effects (Swencionis & Fiske, under review), participants learned that an interviewer wanted either team players or efficient workers (Operario & Fiske, 2001). Participants reported their traits to be shared from ten warmth traits and ten competence ones. As before, their social goals drove warmth-competence tradeoffs. Self-promotion as a competent, efficient worker produced not only more competence traits, but also fewer warmth traits than baseline, and ingratiation as a warm team player produced not only more warmth traits, but also fewer competence traits than baseline.

Status Determines Tradeoffs: High-Status Speakers Talk Down (Warmly), and Low-Status Speakers Talk Up (Competently)

Next, we took these robust impression management tradeoffs to cross-status interactions, hypothesizing that status differences compel distinct concerns up and down the hierarchy. High-status people can assume that they are seen as competent, and low-status people can assume their own competence is in doubt. The status = competence effect is reliable and substantial for individuals and groups (e.g., Fiske, 2015). People endorse meritocracy, in which others get the status they deserve. This means that high-status people can take their presumed competence for granted, but the compensation effect suggests they might worry about whether they are seen as warm. Conversely, low-status people would be more worried about whether they are seen as competent, downplaying concerns about their apparent warmth. In short, all else being equal, high-status people want to be liked, but low-status people want to be respected. They will therefore make different tradeoffs, having different (and contradictory) goals from each other.

A series of studies (Swencionis & Fiske, under review) examined impression management across status comparisons. In the first studies, online participants role-played a new workplace initiative, which paired them with a co-worker ranked higher or lower (from different division). They rated twenty warmth and competence traits for conveying to their partner and reported the importance of conveying warmth versus competence. In downward communication from higher to lower status, as predicted, they wanted warmth (vs. competence) traits to be

known. In upward communication, as predicted, they wanted competence (vs. warmth) traits to be known.

In a later lab study, undergraduate participants showed whether people actually adopt diverging strategies in their verbal and nonverbal behavior. On arrival, they learned that we were studying impression formation and performance in face-to-face versus video-mediated communication. They would be in the video condition, so they would talk with their partner using video cameras. A bogus task (dot estimation task) allegedly indicated their skills in leadership or collaboration. In fact, their assignment to status as manager (high) or responder (low) was random.

They then rated which of the ten warmth and ten competence traits about themselves they wanted to share with their partner. As predicted, managers chose more warmth than competence traits and fewer competence traits than responders did. Responders did not differentiate between warmth and competence, but did choose more competence traits than managers did. The high-status role operated as predicted, as did the competence dimension. The low-status responders and the warmth dimension were more equivocal. We will come back to this point.

Participants also played a public goods game, scored from 0 (cooperative) to 20 (competitive) tokens removed from a shared pool with their partner. Managers cooperated more, consistent with wanting to appear warm, and responders competed more, consistent with less concern over warmth.

Thus, in two different paradigms, higher status people focused on warmth and cooperation, down playing their competence relative to warmth and relative to lower status people. Various processes could be at play here. We tested one of them: People could be trying to match their stereotype of their partner, talking down or talking up, in order to communicate better, but based on stereotypic expectations.

Our tests of this hypothesis returned to the workplace-initiative scenario to test the matching process by providing counter-stereotypic information. If a nonstereotypic high-status partner is actually quite warm and not so competent, a low-status person need not work so hard to earn respect. And vice versa: If a nonstereotypic low-status partner is actually quite competent and not so warm, then a high-status person need not try so hard to be liked. Providing either counter-stereotypical friendliness information or counter-stereotypical intelligence information indeed did attenuate the typical warmth-competence tradeoff strategy between people of differing status.

Overall, then, status comparisons shape impression management goals and compensatory self-presentation strategies. Higher-status, downward comparisons suggest ingratiation: emphasizing warmth, downplaying competence. Upward comparisons suggest self-promotion: emphasizing competence, downplaying warmth. Compensation reduces, with counter-stereotypic information about warmth and competence.

Does Race Imitate Status? Race Determines Which Strategy: White Speakers Talk Down (Warmly), and Black Speakers Talk Up (Competently)

Race imitates status in that Whites have higher status than Blacks, both implicitly and explicitly (Dupree, Obioha, & Fiske, under review). A series of studies sought to extend the compensation effect to interracial interactions, as well as extending previous research showing that interracial interaction promote Whites' concerns with appearing warm (not racist) and Blacks' concerns with being respected for their competence (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010). The present research focused on warmth-competence tradeoffs and on how self-reported goals correspond to strategic verbal communication (Dupree & Fiske, under review).

Using the book-club paradigm, White student participants self-presented warmth and competence to a White or Black partner, Emily or Lakisha, the book-club secretary. We predicted compensation to meet their high-status (White) being-liked goals: increasing warmth and decreasing competence with a Black partner. Indeed, the positivity (warmth) of their word choices was higher, but the sophistication (competence) also was lower in addressing a Black book-club secretary.

To see whether this pattern might reflect the students' liberal bias, a new sample of online White adults participated in the same paradigm. Measuring low on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; i.e., more liberal) indeed predicted presenting less competence, more warmth toward Blacks. More conservative participants showed no difference.

As before, one mechanism could be a (misguided) attempt to match the target; as before, we manipulated the perceived stereotypicality of the Black partner, to mitigate the lowered-competence effect. Do low RWA Whites talk down to a counter-stereotypical Black partner? Indeed, when we manipulated the perceived competence of the Black partner—when Lakisha, the book club secretary, was a phi beta kappa member—this both attenuated explicit goals to be warm (shifting them to be competent) and attenuated self-presentation as less competent (shifting it to be more competent).

Going beyond the scenario method to actual interracial interactions, an archival study took advantage of RWA differences between political parties. White Democratic and Republican presidential campaign speeches to minority audiences (e.g., NAACP, La Raza, Southern Baptist Convention) contrasted with their speeches to predominantly White audiences. Minority-audience speeches—24 from Democrats (John Kerry, Bill Clinton) and 14 from Republicans (Mitt Romney, John McCain)—were paired with 38 comparable speeches to majority-White audience (e.g., Americans for Prosperity). The resulting 76 speeches were coded for warmth and competence, comparing White Democratic and Republican speeches to minority versus predominantly White audiences.

The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) competence and warmth dictionaries, derived from published lists, included respectively agentic words (e.g., assertive, competitive) and communal words (e.g., supportive, committed). Republicans did not differ in their word choices to minority and majority audiences, but Democrats did: They used more competence words to a majority audience than a minority one, and they tended to use more warm words to a minority audience than to a majority one.

What about Black communicators talking to Whites? An online adult sample of minorities provided their political views as a potential moderator, because minority conservatives would support existing status hierarchies and should show the talking-up effects most strongly. Indeed, the most conservative Blacks present more competence to a White partner (talking up), compared with their self-presentation to a Black partner. Liberal Blacks do not differentiate by partner race.

A Note on Competence

Our most reliable effects, in general appear on the competence dimension as a dependent variable. People avoid saying someone is stupid more than they avoid saying a person is mean. Over time, change in low-competence stereotype omission is more dramatic than change in low warmth. In the chat-room paradigm, competence responds most dramatically to instruction (be warm). In the work-place scenario, comparing down has the most reliable effects on self-promoted competence. In interracial interactions, self-presented competence (not warmth) shows the effects of political orientation for Whites. Democratic candidates show a more dramatic shift in agentic than communal words from majority to minority audiences. To the extent these all are cross-status dynamics, competence is more relevant than warmth. Nevertheless, the tradeoff dynamics occur on both dimensions.

Conclusion

To review the argument: Communicators omit negativity in describing individuals and stereotypic groups. Negativity omission creates innuendo and allows stereotype to stagnate. Listeners hear the innuendo and infer negativity from omission. Impression-managers use positive innuendo, downplaying warmth or competence to convey the other. Status determines which one when: High-status speakers talk down (warmly), and low-status speakers talk up (competently). This pattern appears as well in interracial interactions.

The Lewinian significance of this program of research is first that social forces (status) act on individuals, who also bring their own characteristics to the situation (e.g., political orientation). Second, the combination of lab and field, adult and

student samples, contributes to a Lewinian concern for ecological validity. Finally, Lewin founded the research Center for Group Dynamics, and we follow his lead in exploring those dynamics in socially consequential settings.

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