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Why do outsiders commend us? Reactions to group-based praise concerning morality or competence

In intergroup contexts, praise is important to encourage the members of a group to keep the desired behaviors and seems to be generally well-accepted. However, there is some evidence that, under specific conditions, recipients are more suspicious of praise delivered from outgroup rather than ingroup members. The current study ($N = 126$, university students) examined how people responded to ingroup and outgroup praise that concerned different dimensions (morality vs. competence). Although morality is considered the most important dimension in group evaluation, recipients of morality praise judged it as less pleasant and less sincere and attributed less benevolent motives to the speaker when the speaker was an outgroup (vs. ingroup) member. These findings contribute to the knowledge on responses to group-directed praise, suggesting that outgroup representatives should be careful about the dimension of praise if they wish the praise to be accepted.

Key words: intergroup communication, praise, morality, speaker evaluation, intergroup bias

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Intergroup processes pervade a large part of interpersonal communication. Everyday conversations with acquaintances, colleagues, and even partners and family members can be influenced – at either a subtle or more explicit level – by group belongingness as well as by expectations and beliefs about other groups (Harwood, 2018). At the same time, through the messages we exchange with others, we contribute to the maintenance and the transmission of our stereotypes of ingroups and outgroups (e.g., Maass, 1999).

Intergroup communication sometimes takes the form of group-based feedback, that is, feedback that concerns the characteristics or the performance of a group as a whole rather than focusing on those of individuals (Rabinovich et al., 2015). Sociopsychological research has mainly addressed negative feedback (i.e., criticism), given its potential to facilitate change in a group's behavior or (if conveyed in a nonoptimal way) provoke negative reactions by the members of the criticized group (Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Moscatelli, Prati, et al., 2019). Praise also represents a powerful tool in intergroup communication, as it can be used to encourage, support, and strengthen the target's desired behaviors. However, if recipients consider praise insincere or driven by hidden agenda, its potential can be undermined, and the supposed positive effects can be reversed or even backfire. Thus, examining how people respond to group-based praise is important to understand how intergroup feedback can be shaped to obtain the intended outcomes.

As an example of group-based feedback, one might think of intergenerational interactions. Whereas younger and older people usually do not have overtly conflictual relationships, they hold both positive and negative stereotypes of each other (Chan et al., 2012; Kite et al., 2005). Suboptimal or inappropriate feedback might feed miscommunication and reciprocal mistrust (e.g., Gasiorek, 2016). Thinking of the Italian political debate, at several times, politicians and governors criticized younger people for being “big babies” (*bamboccioni*) who lack autonomy and initiative and are still dependent on their parents during adulthood (e.g., Alesina & Ichino, 2009). Whereas such criticism, understandably, fostered negative reactions in the recipients, sometimes governors addressed younger people in a very positive way. For instance, Prime Minister Mario Draghi, talking to professional school students, recently claimed to be impressed by their “idealism, capability, commitment” (Draghi, 2021). Although young people are likely to feel flattered by such a compliment, they might also wonder whether the speaker really believes what they say or is generalizing too much. Would recipients regard similar praise with suspicion? Would they react similarly if the praise came from a member of their group?

Research showed that, in general terms, people appreciate positive feedback, even when it comes from outsiders (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004). However, there is some evidence that individuals respond differently to praise coming from ingroup or outgroup speakers under specific conditions (e.g., depending on the level of linguistic abstraction of the praising message, Moscatelli & Rubini,

2021) and might attribute prejudice to outgroup members who praise them (Fiske et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2006; Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

The current study aims to extend the knowledge on the conditions under which group-directed praise is more likely to raise recipients' suspicion. Specifically, it examined how people respond to ingroup and outgroup praise concerning different evaluation dimensions. Studies on social judgment (for a review, see Brambilla et al., 2021) pointed to the primacy of morality over other basic dimensions of judgment, such as competence, in group evaluation. Accordingly, we investigated the impact of praise of the target group's morality or competence and delivered by either an ingroup or an outgroup speaker on recipients' perception of pleasantness and sincerity of praise. Moreover, we examined recipients' attribution of benevolent motives and hidden agenda to the speaker and tested whether such attributions accounted for variation in the appraisal of the praising message.

Reactions to Group-Directed Feedback

Research on group-based feedback highlights that recipients often react in a different way depending on the source's group membership (e.g., Rabinovich & Morton, 2015). In general terms, studies on group criticism and group praise can be located within the theoretical umbrella of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which argues that individual sense of identity is connected, at least in part, to the groups to which we belong. Accordingly, individuals are motivated to view such groups in a positive light to maintain a positive social identity. This desire shapes relationships with members of ingroups and outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Thinking of negative feedback, it is clear that criticism toward one's group is likely to be perceived as threatening to social identity, especially if it comes from outsiders (Bourhis et al., 1979; Giles, 2016). This is especially true for criticism from outgroup members, as people trust them less than ingroup members (Brewer, 1996; Tanis & Postmes, 2005). Indeed, studies on the intergroup sensitivity effect showed that criticism by outsiders is perceived as more threatening, irritating, or offensive than criticism by insiders (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004), highlighting that this phenomenon is driven by recipients' attribution of more constructive motives to ingroup critics (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2008; Moscatelli, Prati, et al., 2019).

Praise is not as threatening to one's social identity as criticism is. Indeed, recipients usually appreciate positive comments about the groups they belong to, consider ingroup and outgroup praise as equally constructive, and even react less negatively to outgroup criticism if it is accompanied by praise (Hornsey et al., 2008). Nevertheless, recipients are not so keen on praise if they have reasons to question its sincerity. For instance, recipients exposed to positive feedback on a certain dimension might infer that the speaker is omitting negative information, especially stereotyped information (e.g., Fiske et al., 2015). Moreover,

recipients reported lower group-based esteem and lower ingroup identification in response to praise inconsistent (vs. consistent) with their beliefs about the core characteristics of their group (Rabinovich & Morton, 2017). However, even compliments concerning stereotypical characteristics of the group might trigger anger and enhance the attribution of prejudice to the speaker (Garcia et al., 2006).

More in line with our purposes, other studies showed that people are sensitive to the speaker's group membership. For instance, research on subtle racism (e.g., Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018) showed that members of racial minorities were suspicious about praise delivered from members of the White majority, attributing their kindness to covert prejudice rather than actual recognition of the recipient's deservingness. Moreover, Rabinovich et al. (2012) found that recipients of outgroup praise were more likely to behave in line with the positive feedback when the feedback referred to external causes (i.e., circumstances) rather than to internal causes (i.e., efforts), an effect due to their greater desire to uphold the ingroup's image in the former condition.

Another key element influencing responses to group-directed praise is represented by individuals' different expectations concerning ingroup and outgroup members. Not only do people trust the ingroup more, favor the ingroup over the outgroups whenever they have the chance, and often compete with the outgroups (Tanis & Postmes, 2005; Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000), but they also expect others to favor their own group (Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Moscatelli et al., 2014). Thus, recipients might be suspicious of praise delivered by outgroup speakers – especially if the praising message is extremely favorable – since they do not expect such favorable treatment from outgroup members.

Supporting evidence comes from Moscatelli and Rubini (2021), who varied the wording of group-directed praise. They exposed Italian participants to ingroup or outgroup praise formulated either in concrete (e.g., “Italians socialize easily”) or abstract (e.g., “Italians are sociable”) terms. Since abstract terms elicit inferences of greater enduringness and higher generalizability of the information described (Rubini et al., 2014; Semin & Fiedler, 1989), abstract praise conveys a more favorable view of the target than concrete praise. Consequently, Moscatelli and Rubini found that recipients of outgroup praise were more suspicious of the speakers' motives and considered the praise as less sincere when the linguistic abstraction of the message was inconsistent with the general expectation of being discriminated by the outgroup (i.e., when outgroup praise was formulated in abstract rather than concrete terms). Conversely, recipients of ingroup praise were more suspicious of the speaker's motives when the wording of praise was inconsistent with the expectation of ingroup favoritism (i.e., when the ingroup message was formulated in concrete terms).

Similarly, Vázquez et al. (2018) showed that participants who received unexpectedly positive evaluations from outgroup members (i.e., immigrants) displayed more prejudice and discrimination than participants who received less overtly positive feedback. Such enhanced discrimination was attributed

to recipients' attempts to reaffirm their identities that were threatened by nonverifying, excessively positive feedback.

Overall, these studies suggest that recipients might question the speaker's motives and respond negatively to praise in specific conditions – especially if outgroup praise appears to be too favorable. Accordingly, one might expect recipients to be sensitive to the dimension on which the group is commended and regard with suspicion praise on a highly favorable dimension.

Morality and Competence in Group Evaluation

An impressive corpus of research underlines that people ground their evaluation of individuals and groups on a few key dimensions (e.g., Leach et al., 2007). Recent theorization (Brambilla & Leach, 2014) contends that social judgment is organized around morality (which refers to the perceived correctness, honesty, and trustworthiness of social behavior), sociability (i.e., friendliness, intention to have good relationships with others), and competence (which concerns the group's ability to pursue its goals). Even though these dimensions make unique contributions to social judgment, there is consistent evidence that morality dominates individual and group judgment (Brambilla et al., 2016; Crocetti et al., 2016; Menegatti et al., 2020; Prati et al., 2019).

In particular, people rely more on morality than other dimensions in forming an impression of groups and see groups lacking in morality as more threatening to the ingroup's safety than groups lacking in the other dimensions (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). Moreover, morality is the strongest predictor of pride in group and ingroup identification (Leach et al., 2007; Moscatelli, Menegatti, et al., 2019). Finally, individuals engage in group affirmation strategies (e.g., outgroup derogation, morality shifting) when the moral image of the ingroup is threatened (e.g., Glasford et al., 2009).

Based on the reviewed evidence, one might argue that people will show a preference for praise concerning their group's moral traits rather than other dimensions such as competence. However, as mentioned, people expect others to show a preference for their own group (Moscatelli et al., 2014; Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000). Accordingly, reactions to praising messages concerning a highly valued dimension such as morality are likely to differ depending on the speaker's group membership. Specifically, morality praise from an outgroup member is likely to be regarded with higher suspicion than praise from an ingroup member because of the former's higher value. Even though one might argue that, in principle, the same can hold for competence praise, we reasoned that, in that case, the impact of the speaker's group membership should be reduced or even absent since competence is not as highly valued as morality in group evaluation (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2021).

The Current Study

The current study examined whether people's reactions to group-directed praise would be influenced by the underlying dimension of praise (morality or competence) and the group membership of the speaker (ingroup vs. outgroup). To this aim, young undergraduate students were exposed to a praising message delivered by an older retired man, who depicted young people as either competent or moral. We measured the participants' perception of pleasantness and sincerity of the praise as well as their attribution of motives to the speaker in terms of benevolent motives and hidden agenda.

As mentioned, recipients are likely to see praise as less sincere if it appears too favorable and inconsistent with expectations about ingroup and outgroup members' behavior (Moscatelli & Rubini, 2021; Vázquez et al., 2018). Thus, we expected that praise concerning morality – the most valued characteristic of a group – would be considered less pleasant if delivered by an outgroup rather than an ingroup speaker (H1a). The speaker's group membership should have a lower impact (or no impact) on the perceived pleasantness of competence praise (H1b). As a result, morality praise should be considered less pleasant than competence praise, especially when delivered by an outgroup speaker (H1c). The same patterns were expected for perceived sincerity of praise (H2a, H2b, and H2c).

Since recipients are more suspicious of outgroup than ingroup members who deliver highly favorable praise (Moscatelli & Rubini, 2021), the outgroup speaker should be attributed less benevolent motives than the ingroup speaker when praise concerns morality (H3a). Such attributions should be less (or not) affected by the speaker's group membership when praise concerns competence (H3b). Moreover, recipients should attribute less benevolent motives to the speaker when the praise concerns morality rather than competence, especially for outgroup speakers (H3c). Conversely, recipients should show higher attribution of hidden agenda to the outgroup rather than the ingroup speaker for morality praise (H4a). Speaker's group membership should have a lower or no impact with respect to competence praise (H4b). Recipients should attribute greater hidden agenda to a speaker who delivered morality versus competence praise, especially for outgroup speakers (H4c). Finally, the attributions of benevolent motives and hidden agenda were expected to account for the effects of the speaker's group membership and the evaluation dimension on the perceived pleasantness (H5a and H5b) and sincerity (H5c and H5d) of praise.

Method

Pilot Study

Statements regarding young people's morality-related and competence-related qualities were generated based on the traits used in previous studies (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2012; Prati et al., 2018). For morality, the following statements were generated: "Most young people have strong morals," "Most young people are sincere," and "Most young people place great value on helping others." For competence, the statements were: "Most young people have strong technological skills," "Most young people are smart," and "Most young people place great value on studying."

A pilot study was run to test whether the statements referring to the ingroup's morality and competence qualities were equally credible and desirable. Thirty Italian undergraduate students (22 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.56$, $SD = 1.81$, range = 19-27 years) were asked to rate the extent to which the above statements were credible and referred to desirable characteristics (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Overall, ratings of credibility were similar for morality statements ($\alpha = .67$, $M = 5.46$, $SD = 0.54$) and competence statements ($\alpha = .64$, $M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.55$). Similarly, morality statements were considered as equally desirable ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.56$) as competence statements ($\alpha = .74$, $M = 5.40$, $SD = 0.56$). Thus, the morality and the competence statements were collapsed into morality and praising messages, respectively, as reported in the main study's procedure.

Participants and Experimental Design

One hundred twenty-nine university students from a large north-Italian university, all of Italian nationality, voluntarily participated in the study. Three were excluded as they failed the manipulation check on the dimension condition, leaving a sample of 126 participants (77 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.37$, range 18-31 years, $SD = 2.01$). Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions of a 2×2 (speaker's group membership [ingroup, outgroup] \times dimension of praise [morality, competence]) between-participants design. A sensitivity analysis conducted with G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) showed that our sample was sufficient to detect a medium effect of $f = 0.25$ (equivalent to $\eta_{\text{part}}^2 = .06$), assuming an α of 0.05 and power of 0.80 for a between-participants analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in a study on people's evaluation of young people. Participants were given a paper-and-pencil questionnaire where they read a fragment of an article from a fictitious online journal (see Moscatelli & Rubini, 2021, for a similar procedure). The article reported an interview with

either a twenty-year-old university student (ingroup condition) or a seventy-three-year-old retired professional (outgroup condition). In both conditions, the interviewee had been asked what they thought about the “youth of today.” Depending on the condition, the interviewee answered, “I have a very positive view of the young. Most young people place great value on helping others, have strong morals, and are sincere” (morality condition) or “I have a very positive view of the young. Most young people place great value on studying, have strong technological skills, and are smart” (competence condition).

Afterward, participants rated the sincerity and pleasantness of the praise and completed the measures of attribution of motives to the speaker. As a manipulation check of the speaker’s group membership manipulation, they were asked to indicate whether the interviewee was a twenty-year-old or a seventy-three-year-old. All participants indicated the correct option. They were then asked whether the speaker’s main point concerned morality- or competence-related qualities. As mentioned, three participants failed such a manipulation check and were excluded. Finally, participants answered the demographic questions and were debriefed.

Dependent Variables

All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Participants rated the extent to which they perceived the interviewee’s words concerning young people as “pleasant,” “gratifying,” “rewarding,” and “constructive” (pleasantness, $\alpha = .73$) and “honest,” “insincere” (reversed), “credible,” and “well-grounded” (sincerity, $\alpha = .81$). They then indicated the extent to which the interviewee was moved by benevolent motives (“The speaker wishes to underline the positive qualities of young people” and “The speaker wants to convey his appreciation for young people,” attribution of benevolent motives, $\alpha = .75$) or by a hidden agenda (“The speaker has a hidden motive,” “The speaker wants to flatter the youth,” and “The speaker wants to make a good impression,” $\alpha = .69$).

Results

Means and *SDs* of all measures are reported in Table 1. All measures were submitted to a series of 2 (speaker’s group membership) \times 2 (dimension of praise) between-groups ANOVAs. Bonferroni-adjusted significance tests for pairwise comparisons were run after statistically significant interactions.

Pleasantness and Sincerity of Praise

The ANOVA for pleasantness of praise revealed no statistically significant effect of speaker’s group membership, $F(1, 122) = 1.85$, $p = .176$, and a statistically significant main effect of dimension of praise, $F(1, 122) = 4.05$, $p =$

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of All Measures

	Ingroup speaker		Outgroup speaker	
	Morality	Competence	Morality	Competence
Pleasantness of praise	3.83 _a (0.94)	3.80 _a (1.13)	3.16 _b (1.15)	3.95 _a (1.04)
Sincerity of praise	4.33 _a (1.16)	4.93 _{a,c} (1.56)	3.53 _b (1.14)	5.09 _c (0.95)
Benevolent motives	5.03 _a (1.02)	4.97 _a (1.11)	4.13 _b (1.24)	4.90 _a (1.25)
Hidden agenda	2.84 _a (1.31)	2.31 _a (0.97)	3.69 _b (0.95)	2.35 _a (1.04)

Note. Standard deviations are in parenthesis. Means with different subscripts differ significantly ($ps < .050$) within rows.

.047, $\eta^2 = .032$. Morality praise was overall rated as less pleasant ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.17$) than competence praise ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.12$). This effect was qualified by the statistically significant interaction between the two factors, $F(1, 122) = 4.69$, $p = .032$, $\eta^2 = .037$. Supporting H1a, post-hoc comparisons revealed that morality praise delivered by an outgroup speaker was considered less pleasant than morality praise delivered by an ingroup speaker, $p = .013$. Ingroup and outgroup praise regarding competence did not differ, $p = .574$ (H1b). Morality praise was less pleasant than competence praise when the praise was delivered by an outgroup speaker, $p = .044$, whereas morality and competence praise did not differ when the speaker was an ingroup member, $p = .912$ (H1c).

The analysis of the perceived sincerity of praise revealed no statistically significant effect of speaker's group membership, $F(122) = 2.12$, $p = .148$, and a statistically significant main effect of dimension of praise, $F(1, 122) = 24.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .167$. Scores were lower in the morality ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.22$) than in the competence ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.28$) condition. The interaction was statistically significant, $F(1, 122) = 4.83$, $p = .030$, $\eta^2 = .030$. Morality praise was considered less sincere when delivered by an outgroup speaker, $p = .010$ (H2a), whereas ratings of ingroup and outgroup praise did not differ for competence, $p = .605$ (H2b). Morality praise was rated as less sincere than competence praise when delivered by an outgroup speaker, $p < .001$ (H2c), whereas the comparison did not reach statistical significance for ingroup praise, $p = .054$.

Attribution of Motives to the Speaker

The ANOVA for the attribution of benevolent motives showed a statistically significant main effect of speaker's group membership, $F(1, 122) = 5.51$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2 = .043$. Recipients attributed less benevolent motives to the ingroup ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.22$) than the outgroup speaker ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.18$). The dimension of praise did not affect the attribution of benevolent motives, $F(1, 122) = 2.99$, $p = .086$. The interaction was statistically significant, $F(1, 122) = 4.15$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = .033$. The outgroup speaker was attributed less benevolent motives than the ingroup speaker when the praise concerned morality, $p = .002$ (H3a), whereas the

scores did not differ for competence praise, $p = .827$ (H3b). The outgroup speaker was attributed less benevolent motives for morality than competence praise, $p = .009$ (H3c), whereas the attributions did not differ for the ingroup speaker, $p = .828$.

The analysis on the attribution of hidden agenda revealed statistically significant main effects of speaker's group membership, $F(1, 122) = 5.39$, $p = .022$, $\eta^2 = .042$, and dimension of praise, $F(1, 122) = 23.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .163$. Scores were higher for outgroup ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.20$) than ingroup speaker ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.18$), and for morality ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.22$) than competence ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.00$) praise. These effects were qualified by the statistically significant interaction between the two terms, $F(1, 122) = 4.46$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2 = .035$. Supporting H4a, recipients of morality praise made stronger attributions of hidden agenda to the outgroup than the ingroup speaker, $p = .002$. Scores did not differ for competence praise, $p = .883$ (H4b). The attribution of hidden agenda was higher for morality than competence praise delivered by the outgroup speaker, $p < .001$ (H4c), whereas the comparison between competence and morality praise delivered by the ingroup speaker did not reach statistical significance, $p = .054$.

Mediation Analysis

Table 2 shows the correlations between the variables. A series of moderated mediation analyses run using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 8, 5000 bootstrap resampling) tested whether the attribution of benevolent motives and the attribution of hidden agenda – inserted as parallel mediators – mediated the effect of the speaker's group membership (entered as the independent variable; 0 = ingroup, 1 = outgroup) and the dimension of praise (entered as moderator variable; 0 = morality, 1 = competence) on the perceived pleasantness and sincerity of praise.

First, the analyses showed a statistically significant effect of speaker's group membership, $b = -1.75$, $SE = 0.65$, $t = -2.69$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [-3.04, -0.46], and a statistically significant interaction between speaker's group membership and dimension of praise, $b = 0.84$, $SE = 0.41$, $t = 2.04$, $p = .044$, 95% CI [0.02, 1.66], on the attribution of benevolent motives to the speaker (first mediator). The analyses also revealed a statistically significant effect of speaker's group membership, $b = 1.66$, $SE = .61$, $t = 2.75$, $p = .007$, 95% CI [0.46, 2.86], and a statistically significant interaction between the predictor and the moderator, $b =$

Table 2. *Correlations Among the Study Measures*

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Pleasantness of praise	1	.52***	.37***	-.19*
2. Sincerity of praise		1	.32***	-.45***
3. Benevolent motives			1	-.05
4. Hidden agenda				1

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

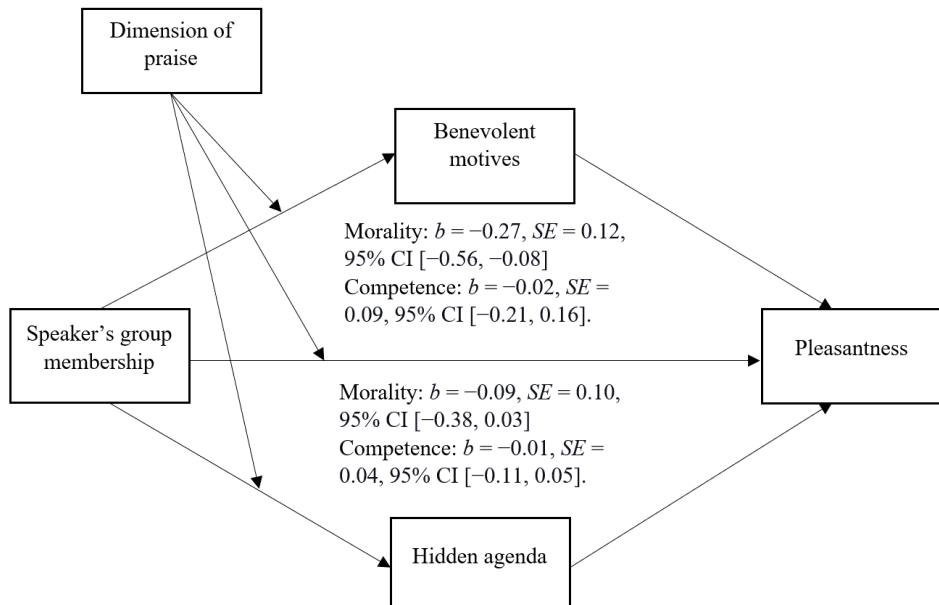
-0.81, $SE = 0.38$, $t = -2.11$, $p = .037$, 95% CI [-1.57, -0.05], on the attribution of hidden agenda (second mediator).

The analysis of perceived pleasantness of praise as the outcome variable, $R^2 = .18$, $F(5, 120) = 5.25$, $p = .002$, showed a statistically significant effect of the attribution of benevolent motives, $b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 3.70$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.45]. The attribution of hidden agenda was not statistically significantly related to the outcome variable, $b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -1.24$, $p = .217$, 95% CI [-0.28, 0.06]. No other effects were statistically significant, $ps > .188$.

The index of moderated mediation was statistically significant with respect to the attribution of benevolent intentions, estimate = 0.25, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.64], whereas it was not statistically significant for the attribution of hidden agenda, estimate = 0.09, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.40]. The conditional indirect effects revealed that the attribution of benevolent motives to the speaker worked as a mediator of speaker's group membership in the morality praise condition, but not in the competence praise condition (see Figure 1).

Thus, the findings partly supported the hypotheses. As expected, the lower attribution of benevolent motives to the speaker accounted for the lower pleasantness of morality praise when the speaker was an outgroup rather than an ingroup member (H5a). The findings showed no support for the expected mediational role of the attribution of hidden agenda (H5b).

Figure 1. Moderated Mediation Model of the Effects of Speaker's Group Membership and Dimension of Praise on Perceived Pleasantness of the Praise. Conditional Indirect Effects are Reported.

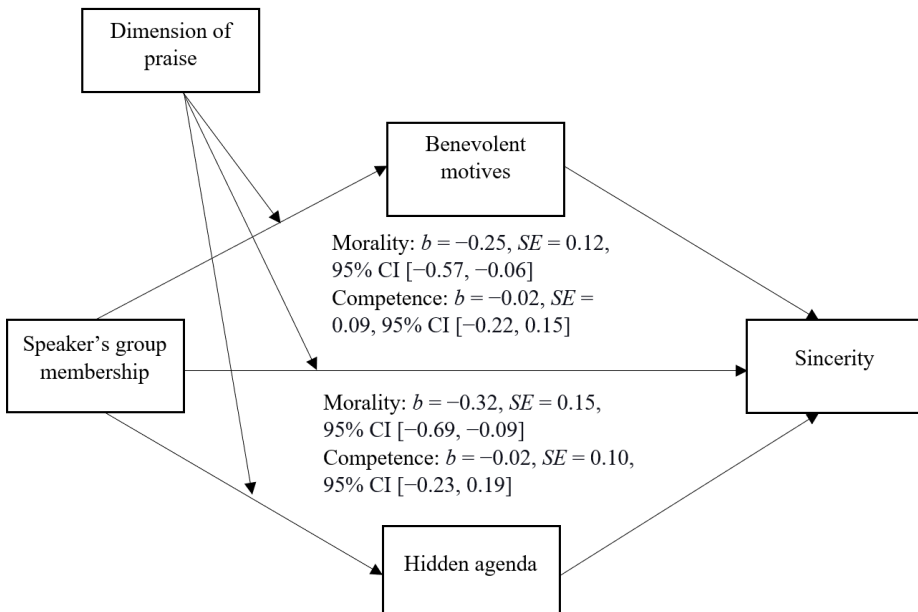


The moderated mediation analysis of perceived sincerity of praise, $R^2 = .34$, $F(5, 120) = 12.14$, $p < .001$, revealed statistically significant effects of both the proposed mediators, that is, the attribution of benevolent motives, $b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 3.16$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.53], and the attribution of hidden agenda, $b = -0.38$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -3.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.56, -0.19]. No other effects were statistically significant, $ps > .319$.

The moderated mediation index was statistically significant for both the attribution of benevolent intentions, estimate = 0.24, $SE = .15$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.63], and the attribution of hidden agenda, estimate = 0.31, $SE = 0.18$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.77]. Supporting H5c, the conditional indirect effects revealed that the attribution of benevolent motives worked as a mediator in the morality condition, but not in the competence condition (see Figure 2).

Similarly, with respect to the attribution of hidden agenda (H5d), the conditional indirect effect was statistically significant in the morality condition, whereas it was not in the competence condition. Thus, even though one should be cautious in inferring causal mediation from a single significant statistical test (Fiedler et al., 2018), these findings revealed that recipients' perception of morality praise as less sincere when delivered from an outgroup (vs. ingroup) speaker could be explained by the lower attribution of benevolent motives and the higher attribution of hidden agenda to the speaker.

Figure 2. Moderated Mediation Model of the Effects of Speaker's Group Membership and Dimension of Praise on Perceived Pleasantness of the Praise. Conditional Indirect Effects are Reported.



Discussion

The present study investigated how people reacted to group-directed praise delivered from ingroup or outgroup speakers and focused on different evaluation dimensions, that is, morality or competence. We also examined whether recipients attributed different motives to the ingroup and the outgroup speakers depending on the dimension of praise.

As expected, individuals exposed to morality praise judged it as less pleasant and less sincere when the praise came from an outgroup rather than an ingroup speaker. Moreover, recipients of morality praise attributed less benevolent motives and higher hidden agenda to the outgroup than the ingroup speaker, and such attributions explained the lower sincerity and lower pleasantness of morality praise delivered by the outgroup speaker.

Overall, the present study extends the knowledge on responses to intergroup praise by highlighting for the first time that the content of group-directed praise, in terms of the dimension of evaluation, is key to recipients' reactions. Specifically, people seem to enjoy compliments about their group's competence regardless of the source. However, for morality, they are likely to consider compliments delivered from outsiders as less sincere and less pleasant than those from insiders. Such an effect can be partly explained by recipients' greater suspicion of the motives of outsiders.

As mentioned, morality is the most desirable quality for individuals and groups (Brambilla et al., 2021), and people wish to belong to moral groups rather than groups considered competent (Moscatelli, Menegatti et al., 2019). However, people plausibly do not expect outsiders to publicly commend such a valued quality of their groups because, in general terms, they do not expect as favorable a treatment from outgroup members as they do from ingroup members (Moscatelli et al., 2014). Since morality pervades more aspects of one's reputation than competence (Pagliaro et al., 2016), receiving morality praise from outsiders might lead individuals to wonder about the speaker's actual motives, concluding that the speaker must have some personal interest in praising and, therefore, the praise is insincere. Such an interpretation is in line with Vázquez et al.'s (2018) finding that overtly positive evaluations from minorities diminished recipients' perceptions of being understood and enhanced compensatory prejudice against the minorities.

These findings could also be interpreted by referring to the theoretical framework of communication accommodation theory (CAT, e.g., Giles, 2016), which describes how people adjust to (or diverge from) each other's verbal and nonverbal behaviors while communicating. According to the theory, the partners in social interactions signal their attitudes towards each other and their respective social groups through specific communication strategies. Whereas group-directed criticism could be a means to express divergence (thus emphasizing the distance and dissimilarity) from the interlocutor, especially if the speaker is an outgroup member (Gasiorek, 2016), group-directed praise might be intended as a strategy

to show convergence toward a valued group in order to foster liking and positive relationship with the partner (Soliz & Giles, 2014). In this respect, excessively positive praise resembles the communication strategy of overaccommodation, an instance of nonaccommodation that involves the recipient's perception that the speaker exceeds the level of adjustment necessary for a satisfying interaction (Gasiorek, 2016). Specifically, praise concerning morality – the most important and pervasive dimension of group evaluation – might be perceived as overaccommodating when delivered by an outgroup member, leading recipients to infer that the speaker is patronizing them (Harwood, 2000; Speer et al., 2013). Whereas the current findings do not allow to test this contention directly, future studies might examine intergenerational interactions in greater depth, for instance, by analyzing real communication exchanges between younger and older people. This would help better understand the naturally-occurring dynamics of group-based feedback in such a setting and show how to ameliorate issues in intergenerational communication (e.g., Giles et al., 2021). Moreover, future studies should include measures of group salience to understand the extent to which recipients consider their age group important and see the speaker as part of an outgroup.

To get a more complete picture of group-based feedback in an intergenerational context, it would also be interesting to examine whether even older people react with suspicion to morality praise delivered by younger people or whether other variables – for example, the different social status of the groups involved, or the different stereotypical expectations concerning younger and older people – come into play. Regarding the latter point, our pilot study showed that the morality- and competence- related statements used in the praising messages were equally credible. Nevertheless, one might argue that praise concerning competence-related qualities raised lower suspicion than morality praise since competence (especially in technological skills, as made salient by our stimulus message) is a characteristic often attributed to young people (e.g., Kite et al., 2005). However, it should be noted that, based on previous evidence (e.g., Garcia et al., 2006), one should expect recipients to react more negatively to compliments on stereotypical rather than atypical characteristics of the target group.

In a similar vein, it seems plausible that recipients consider information about young people's morality as harder to obtain for older adults than information about competence. Such a perceived lack of experience could explain recipients' higher suspicion about an outgroup speaker who referred to the target's morality. Future studies might test this interpretation by varying the alleged amount of contact between the speaker and members of the target group or by considering praise focused on more concrete (i.e., easier to verify) moral behaviors (e.g., organizing collections of basic necessities for the poor) rather than more general moral traits.

Despite its limitations, the current study adds to previous research on praise in intergroup communication (e.g., Rabinovich & Morton, 2015) by showing, for the first time, how people respond to group-based praise related to different dimensions. Praise has the potential to strengthen social ties and build more

positive relationships between groups. However, praise delivered by outsiders can also foster mistrust and prejudice, especially if excessively positive (Vázquez et al., 2018), formulated with abstract language (Moscatelli et al., 2020), or, as in the current study, centered on morality-related characteristics. Whereas the current study focused on an intergenerational setting, we believe that similar dynamics could also emerge between other groups, such as national, ethnic, or political groups. Of course, considering other groups would require taking into account other factors related to the specific intergroup settings. For instance, morality praise is likely to appear even less credible and, therefore, more likely to be rejected if the groups involved have a history of conflictual interactions. In male-female interactions, it might instead appear to convey benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) if addressed to women.

Finally, the current findings speak to theorization on group judgment. Notwithstanding people's preference for morality in evaluating their own group (Brambilla et al., 2021; Leach et al., 2007), they do not appreciate positive comments about their group's morality from outsiders the way that they do when similar comments come from insiders. In other words, only ingroup members seem entitled to emphasize the group's morality. Nevertheless, despite the primacy of morality in group evaluation, our findings did not reveal any preference for praise on morality rather than competence even when praise came from an ingroup speaker. Indeed, recipients considered ingroup morality praise equally pleasant and slightly less sincere than competence praise, even though the comparison did not reach statistical significance. It might be that moral judgment is so pervasive, abstract, and hard to verify (Pagliaro et al., 2016) – as it is focused on the inner qualities of the target– that praise concerning morality is seen as somehow inappropriate, even more so when the speaker is an outsider rather than an insider. Future research might address this issue.

To conclude, the current study extends the knowledge of intergroup communication processes by highlighting some conditions under which group-directed praise might fail to achieve its goals. Thinking of intergroup conflicts, intergroup negotiations, or relations between advantaged and disadvantaged groups within a society, all the actors involved might need to comment upon each other's conduct. Publicly recognizing a group's qualities can be important if one wishes the group to maintain the desired conduct. These findings can help understand a possible reason why sometimes discussions and negotiations between group representatives are not successful, even when they involve praise. Indeed, positive comments upon the other group's conduct risk being interpreted as insincere or, in some sense, motivated by the speaker's hidden agenda. If so, not only does praise fail to reach its intended goals, but it can even backfire on the source and have negative repercussions on the relationship between the groups involved. For instance, if majority representatives who commend a minority group's conduct perceive that their praise is regarded with suspicion, they might even end their support in favor of the minority. The current findings, together

with those of previous research on group-based feedback (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2008; Moscatelli & Rubini, 2021; Rabinovich & Morton, 2015), suggest that all the actors involved should carefully avoid generalization and stick to verifiable conduct if they wish to achieve the best of results.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The Author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Research Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with APA ethical guidelines and was approved by the Bioethical Committee of University of Bologna.

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