

## The Person-Positivity Bias

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A "person-positivity bias" is proposed such that attitude objects are evaluated more favorably the more they resemble individual human beings. Because perceived similarity should increase liking, individual persons should attract more favorable evaluations than should less personal attitude objects, such as inanimate objects or even aggregated or grouped versions of the same persons. The main findings from 11 studies supported this view: (a) Individual persons were overwhelmingly evaluated favorably; (b) personal versions of a given attitude object were evaluated more favorably than impersonal versions of it; (c) individual persons, as wholes, were evaluated more favorably than their specific attributes were; (d) individual persons were evaluated more favorably than were the same individuals in aggregates or groups; (e) attitudes toward groups were cognitively compartmentalized from attitudes toward individual group members; and (f) perceivers tended to underestimate the positivity of their own and others' attitudes toward individual persons.

I never met a man I didn't like. (Will Rogers)

Predominantly favorable evaluations of persons have been observed in a wide variety of studies of person perception and interpersonal relations. Elsewhere this has been described as a general "positivity bias" (e.g., Sears & Whitney, 1973). It has been observed in several laboratory paradigms. For example, Bruner and Tagiuri (1954) describe a "leniency bias" such that stimulus persons

are typically evaluated predominantly positively in studies of person perception. Zajonc (1968) describes a positivity bias in responses to the triadic social structures studied in the balance paradigm such that observers typically prefer structures embodying positive interpersonal relations. Similar findings emerge in studies of attributional biases that people make both for their own and for others' behavior (e.g., Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976).

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Survey studies also consistently yield mainly positive evaluations of individual stimulus persons. For example, in Gallup Polls during the 1935-1974 period, the public evaluated incumbent presidents favorably 83% of the time. In the University of Michigan National Election Studies during the 1964-1976 period, 76% of the specific politicians presented to national samples were evaluated favorably. Also, in California Polls during the 1961-1975 period, specific political figures were evaluated favorably on 88% of 248 occasions (Sears, Note 1). In short, both laboratory and survey studies indicate that evaluations of specific individuals are much more often favorable than unfavorable.

Why does this positivity bias occur? The first possibility that must be dealt with is that it is merely a methodological artifact. For example, it might be due to the interpersonal situation in which attitudes are measured, because observers generally like people who express favorable evaluations more than they like people who express negative ones (Folkes & Sears, 1977). Experimental subjects and survey respondents alike might therefore bias their expressed evaluations in a positive direction in order to impress experimenters and interviewers who presumably share this preference for pleasant, positive-sounding people. However, a series of experiments by Rook, Sears, Kinder, and Lau (1978) varied opportunity to make ingratiating self-presentations in interview situations in several different ways, but found no increase in positive evaluations of public figures.

A second set of potential artifacts might stem from the positive context that most interview schedules and questionnaires provide for such evaluations. Survey studies often label public figures with prestigious job titles, and in laboratory studies, questions about any given stimulus person are often surrounded by questions about other likable stimulus persons, such as friends or fellow college students. The favorable affects from such positive contexts could simply transfer to the stimulus persons in question. However, Lau, Sears, and Centers (1979) found that the positivity bias remained whether prestigious job titles were attached to the stimulus person, or whether popular or unpopular other individuals were evaluated at the same time.

A third possibility is that scaling artifacts are a problem, but Lau et al. (1979) also found that manipulating scale endpoints had little effect on the positivity phenomenon. Hence, the evidence now available indicates that the positivity bias is not a mere methodological artifact.

Another fundamental question is whether this bias toward positive evaluations holds toward almost any attitude object or whether it is specific to people as attitude objects. Earlier work has identified a "Pollyanna bias," a bias toward positive affects in almost every conceivable situation, presumably stemming from a generalized preference for pleasant affects rooted in simple hedonism

(Boucher & Osgood, 1969; Matlin & Stang, 1978). It is possible that this bias toward positive interpersonal evaluations is just another instance of this more general tendency.

But there seems to be something special about evaluations of individual persons, because not all forms of social evaluation show an equivalent bias toward positivity. In particular, Americans' quite favorable evaluations of specific individuals in public life contrast markedly with their much more negative evaluations of groups and institutions in the very same areas of life. For example, in recent years, Americans have invariably evaluated their own individual congressmen predominantly favorably, whereas their evaluations of Congress as a whole have been predominantly negative, by equally large margins. In California Polls done in 1977 and 1978, every one of the 56 individual officeholders and candidates asked about was evaluated positively, on balance, but less than half of the 50 institutions asked about (such as the United States Supreme Court, the media, or gas and electric companies) were.

Interestingly enough, this positivity toward individuals appears to have been quite stable, but attitudes toward institutions have been quite variable. The great majority of individual political leaders evaluated in the University of Michigan National Election Studies received predominantly favorable evaluations in all years from the 1960s through 1980. However, evaluations of governmental institutions, as reflected in the standard five-item "trust of government" scale used in the surveys, went from quite favorable to highly negative in this same period. In the early 1960s, all five items drew positive evaluations from a majority of the public, but by the late 1970s only one did. The details of these comparisons are reviewed elsewhere (Sears, Note 1). The positivity bias that appears in evaluations of individual persons, then, is not always matched by similarly positive evaluations of other social objects.

The central proposition of this paper, therefore, is that a special bias toward positive evaluations accrues to individual persons as attitude objects, above and beyond whatever factors influence evaluations of other kinds of objects. Because this asserts that a special positive bias holds toward individual

persons that does not hold toward other attitude objects, it can be referred to as a "person-positivity bias." It is based on three assumptions about the uniqueness of individual human beings as attitude objects and why they attract an especially positive response from other human beings. These assumptions rest on some empirical evidence and some speculation, and the mix needs to be made explicit. So what is unique about individual persons as attitude objects?

First of all, all attitude objects can be conceptualized as representing different points on a "personhood" or "humanness" dimension. At the personal extreme would be specific individual human beings, such as you, me, Harry S. Truman, and the clerk at the corner drugstore. At the impersonal extreme would be wholly inanimate natural objects such as rocks or the Sahara. To reflect the fact that the key concept here is similarity between any given attitude object and an individual human being, the term *personhood* will be used below to describe the underlying dimension.

A second assumption is that the more an attitude object resembles an individual person, the more similar human evaluators will perceive it to be to themselves. At one extreme, people assume similarity with other individual humans even in the absence of any information about them (Cronbach, 1955). At the other extreme, it seems probable even without definite evidence that they do not usually perceive inanimate objects to be very similar to themselves.

Collective social objects, such as groups or aggregates of people, it will be argued, are also generally perceived as less personal than individual humans on this personhood dimension and, therefore, as less similar to human evaluators. Such social collectivities are composed of individual humans and in that sense should be more personal than such objects as rocks or armadillos. But a group as a whole is also an abstract entity that is a phenomenologically different perceptual unit from its constituent members (cf. Asch, 1952). A group, as an attitude object, is "more than the sum of its parts." Such unique group properties must by their nature render it somewhat less like an individual person than are its individual members. In-

deed, there is evidence that people in groups are not perceived in the same way as autonomous individuals are. Their behavior tends not to be perceived as dispositionally caused; they tend not to be perceived as distinct from one another; and so on. This is presumably true regardless of whether they are embedded in a genuine interdependent group or are simply an aggregate of individuals (see Wilder, 1981, among others, on these points). In short, groups (such as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL-CIO] or the Boston Red Sox), aggregated people (such as "the aged" or "elected officials"), and institutions that are collections of individuals (such as the United States Congress) all should ordinarily be perceived as intermediate on this presumed personhood dimension.

If so, then evaluators should perceive social collectivities as less similar to themselves than they do individual persons. Any other individual also eats, breathes, hopes, loves, fears, and dies in a way that all humans are familiar with. No institution or even group of people can do so in such a singularly familiar manner. Consistent with this assumption, evaluators have been shown to perceive themselves as more similar to prominent specific individuals in the athletic, entertainment, and political worlds than to aggregates of such others or to institutionalized groups of them (Sears, Brown, & Ditto, Note 2).

The key implication of this argument is that the more an attitude object resembles a whole individual human being, the more favorably it should be evaluated, because similarity promotes liking (Byrne, 1971). Put another way, the more it should be awarded a "bonus" of positive evaluation. Because specific human individuals should receive the maximum "positivity bonus," they will probably be evaluated favorably most of the time. Less personal attitude objects, including collections of people, should receive less of the positivity bonus, because of lesser perceived similarity. Presumably, the person considered as a whole would also receive more of the bonus than would particular aspects of the person, such as his or her abstract traits, individual behavioral acts, or products.

A third assumption is that attitudes toward different objects along this personhood con-

tinuum tend to be compartmentalized, even when they seem to be related in some way. In cognitive terms, Asch (1940) argued that a perceiver imposes a unique configural gestalt on each different attitude object. Evaluations of any given object, being dependent on that special cognitive meaning, tend, therefore, to be specific to that object. In behavioristic terms, a person's attitudes toward any given attitude object are likely usually to have had a unique learning history, and each may have a relatively steep generalization gradient.

Empirical attitude researchers have frequently been surprised by the degree of compartmentalization of dispositions toward objects that, a priori, seem closely related to each other. For example, numerous studies have found little consistency between attitudes toward very general attitude objects and very specific behavioral choices made in roughly the same domain. When objects of more comparable specificity are addressed, however, attitude-behavior consistency often rises to quite a high level (Schuman & Johnson, 1976). Put another way, attitudes and behavior toward different objects tend to be compartmentalized, whereas when they concern the same object, they tend to be more consistent. Similarly, people's attitudes about problems in their own personal lives tend to be compartmentalized from attitudes toward governmental policies in the same domains (e.g., Lau & Sears, 1981). These and other observations are summarized in Converse's (1975) more general assertion that low levels of "constraint," or connectedness, exist in people's attitudes toward various objects in public life. Apparent inconsistencies may not be resolved unless the inconsistency is confronted fairly directly (Carlsmith & Freedman, 1968).

For our purposes, the most important implication of this general view is that attitudes toward groups tend to be compartmentalized from attitudes toward the specific individuals who constitute the group. People's attitudes toward the group as a whole often have quite different learning histories than their attitudes toward specific group members. Probably, attitudes toward the group object are controlled more often by social norms than by direct experience with group members. For example, many Americans have negative

attitudes toward white South Africans but have had scarcely any contact with individual members of that group.

The empirical result is that attitudes toward a group as an entity have often been found not to be closely related to attitudes toward its individual members (Cartwright, 1968). Studies of college-living groups have found evaluations of groups and individual members to be independent of each other both in simple intercorrelations and in factor analyses (e.g., Hagstrom & Selvin, 1965; Scott, 1965). Similarly, stereotypes of racial groups may not be generalized as universally to group members as is often assumed (Brigham, 1971). In short, there seems to be both theoretical and empirical justification for assuming that individual persons tend to be treated as somewhat different (though obviously not wholly independent) attitude objects from the groups they are in.

These assumptions imply that individual persons should normally be somewhat protected from being evaluated very negatively, even given the input of unfavorable information, because of the perceived similarity felt toward them. Such restraints would not prevent sharp negative changes in attitudes toward less personal and, therefore, less similar objects. This is not to say that the latter are invariably negatively stereotyped. Indeed, groups are sometimes idealized: for example, "the Supreme Court," "the workers," or, in time of war, "our fighting men." The argument is rather that such evaluations of non-personal entities are more vulnerable to negative evaluation than are evaluations of individual persons, everything else being equal.

If we assume, then, that (a) there is a meaningful personhood or humanness dimension underlying the perception of persons and other objects, (b) human evaluators perceive attitude objects toward the more personlike, humanoid end of this continuum as more similar to themselves than they do either impersonal objects or groups of people and, hence, award them a positive bonus of evaluation, and (c) attitudes toward objects at different points along this continuum tend to be compartmentalized, six testable hypotheses can be generated:

1. Evaluations of individual persons should be predominantly favorable, on the average.
2. Evaluations of a particular attitude ob-

ject ought to be more favorable when it is presented in personal than impersonal terms. This could occur in at least two ways: (2a) When an individual person is part of a larger attitude object, the person will be evaluated more favorably than the object as a whole. (2b) Any given person may be evaluated more favorably when his or her more personal attributes are made more salient than when his or her more impersonal attributes are.

3. The overall evaluation of a whole, real individual person ought to be more favorable than that of his or her separate attributes. This hypothesis is based on an assumption that the attributes themselves have an abstract and impersonal quality compared to the entire person. Because the evaluator is likely to feel much more similar to a whole person than to an abstract attribute, the former should draw the positivity bonus more strongly. Furthermore, Hypothesis 3a states that this more favorable evaluation should occur for persons but not for impersonal attitude objects, because the latter would not receive the positivity bonus.

4. Individual persons should usually be evaluated more favorably than groups or aggregates of the same individuals, on the average and everything else being equal. Evaluators presumably usually perceive groups or aggregates as less similar to themselves than they do specific individuals and, therefore, should not award them the positivity bonus. Because individual humans should receive the maximum positivity bonus, Hypothesis 4a states that more favorable evaluation of persons than impersonal objects should occur more for individuals than for groups.

5. The cognitive content of attitudes toward a group, like evaluations of it, may not necessarily be tied closely to that of attitudes toward specific group members. This follows from the assumption that attitudes toward groups and toward their members have partially different learning histories, leading the two sets of attitudes to be compartmentalized to some important degree.

6. Perceivers may underestimate the person-positivity bias toward individual group members; that is, they may underestimate how positively they, and others, feel about individual humans. They may not be fully

aware that the positivity bonus is generally given to individuals and may instead misperceive attitudes toward individuals as being the same as attitudes toward the group as a whole.

## Method

### Overview

Tests of these hypotheses required real stimulus people well known to the subject population but not selected for favorability by the subjects (unlike close friends, for example). For college student subjects, college professors and politicians met these criteria. They also had the advantage of covering much of the range in group evaluations, because nowadays college professors are rather well thought of, whereas politicians are regarded more negatively (e.g., Citrin, 1974; Fiske, Milberg, Destefano, & Maffett, Note 3).

The specific methods used will be detailed in the next section, but because of the amount of terrain covered in this paper, it might be wise to summarize them briefly first. The preponderance of positive evaluations of individual persons (Hypothesis 1) will be assessed in terms of the prevalence of both positively evaluated attitude objects and positively evaluating evaluators. The personal-impersonal contrast (Hypothesis 2) was made in two ways. First, evaluations of individual professors were compared with evaluations of their courses (Hypothesis 2a). This assumes that students were evaluating roughly the same experience in both cases: in one case, the more personal aspect of the experience and, in the other, the more impersonal course as a whole. The salience of professors' personal, as opposed to their task-oriented, attributes was varied to test Hypothesis 2b. Evaluations of individual professors as whole entities were compared with those of their specific attributes to test Hypothesis 3. If Hypothesis 3a proves to be correct, this whole versus specific-attribute difference should be more positive for the personal object, the professor, than for the impersonal object, the course.

To compare evaluations of specific individuals with those of groups or aggregated people (Hypothesis 4), evaluations of professors and politicians were measured at three points on the personhood dimension: specific individuals (evaluations of specific political leaders or specific professors the student had had courses from the previous term), aggregated individuals (snap judgments of the proportion of a list of political leaders or of the students' professors they would evaluate favorably, shown so briefly they could not be reviewed individually), and group stereotypes (evaluations of politicians in general or of professors in general). To specify this phenomenon further (Hypothesis 4a), evaluations of professors and their courses were compared at the same three points on this dimension, with the expectation that individual professors would be evaluated more favorably than grouped professors but that the same would not hold for courses.

To test for the compartmentalization of attitudes toward groups away from attitudes toward individual group members (Hypothesis 5), subjects were asked which specific individuals they had in mind when evaluating the group stereotype "politicians"; then the evaluations of those individuals were contrasted with evaluations of the group stereotype. To test for misperceptions of the pos-

itivity bias (Hypothesis 6), subjects' perceptions of the bias (their perceptions of others' evaluations of specific individual politicians and professors and their snap guesses as to their own probable evaluations) were compared to the reality of the bias (the actual evaluations of specific individual politicians and professors in the sample as a whole).

It should be noted that professors, but not politicians, were used to compare evaluations of personal with impersonal versions of an attitude object and of whole individuals with their own specific attributes (Hypotheses 2, 3, 3a, and 4a). The prediction would be the same in both cases, but it seemed unlikely that the young and politically unsophisticated college student subjects used here would be sufficiently familiar with the specific political leaders in question to make it practical to gather such refined data. I hoped that no such problem would arise with their evaluations of professors from whom they had taken a course in the previous school term.

Eleven sources of data were used. Although not all were collected at different times or from different subjects, they will be referred to as different studies, for convenience. Studies 1-4 used standardized university instruction evaluations collected from 1974 through 1979, which yielded evaluations of professors and their courses. Studies 5-7 used questionnaires given to undergraduate students of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) introductory psychology subject pool during the years 1977 to 1980, also yielding evaluations of professors and courses. Studies 8-11 used similar questionnaires focused on evaluations of politicians.

### *Official Instruction Evaluations*

UCLA has for several years used a standard machine-scored form comprising 19 items to obtain students' evaluations of classes. Each item uses a standard 9-point scale whose labeled points are 1 (very low or never), 3 (low or infrequently), 5 (average), 7 (high or frequently), and 9 (very high or always). Two items yield overall instructor and course evaluations and read, "What is your overall rating of the instructor?" and "What is your overall rating of the course?" An overall bias toward positive evaluations of persons (Hypothesis 1) can be assessed from the marginal frequencies of responses to the former item. Comparing these two items provides a comparison of evaluations of personal and impersonal versions of the same object (Hypotheses 2a and 4a), assuming that the professor is more personal than the course, or at least that the subset of the course represented by the professor him- or herself is more personal than is the course in its entirety. Evaluations of the whole attitude object and of specific attributes (Hypotheses 3 and 3a) can be compared using these and the remaining items, seven of which dealt with the instructor's specific attributes, all beginning with a stem explicitly invoking the instructor: for example, "Instructor concern was . . ." or "The instructor was enthusiastic about teaching the course," whereas seven others dealt with the course's specific attributes, and the instructor was not explicitly mentioned.

*Study 1.* Overall means across all classes and students were available for all 19 items for the full campus for each school term for winter 1975 (when the standardized instruction evaluation system began) through spring 1979. The mean for each term came from over 40 de-

partments and were based on from 25,000 to 33,800 evaluations, depending on the term (with some students contributing more than one evaluation per term if they took more than one course that was evaluated).

*Study 2.* In some departments, class evaluations were voluntary, raising the possibility that the least popular professors were not evaluated, artifactually contributing to a positivity bias. To counteract this problem, just those evaluations from the Psychology Department were used, where they were mandatory (a rarely disobeyed norm, though of course not all students were present the day evaluations were taken). The number of these evaluations varies between 2,644 and 4,726 across school terms.

*Study 3.* Although the preceding data yield a highly reliable global overview of students' evaluations, Study 3 used a more conceptually appropriate unit of analysis: the mean evaluation of a given professor (or course). These are normally published in a book called *Guidepost*; a sample of one sixth ( $N = 218$ ) of the classes evaluated in the academic year 1974-1975 was used.

*Study 4.* To take advantage (once again) of the mandatory basis of evaluation in the Psychology Department, Study 4 repeated Study 3 using data from all 55 undergraduate psychology classes given in the fall quarter of 1975. More classes and school terms could have been sampled for both Studies 3 and 4, but as will be seen, the results for this portion of the research are so clear it did not seem necessary.

### *Subject Pool Volunteers: Class Evaluations*

To test the remaining hypotheses, new items and experimental variations had to be introduced. Hence, the remaining studies all used "volunteers" from the introductory psychology subject pool at UCLA. Because most of these students were freshmen taking required introductory classes, and were relatively new to the campus, their choices of classes were generally influenced more by formal requirements and time constraints than by a given professor's reputation. Hence, their evaluations probably reflected little self-selection of particularly likable professors.

*Study 5.* To test Hypothesis 4 (comparing evaluations of specific individuals to evaluations of groups or aggregates), 117 subjects rated both professors and courses at UCLA at the specific individual, aggregated individuals, and group stereotype points on the personhood dimension. Evaluations of specific individual professors or courses used the same 9-point scales as the official class evaluations for classes taken in the prior term at UCLA. The analogous aggregated individuals item read, "Think about your overall rating of the professors [courses] that you have had at UCLA. What percent do you regard more favorably than unfavorably? \_\_\_\_\_. What percent do you regard more unfavorably? \_\_\_\_\_." The group stereotype item read, "What is your overall rating of professors [courses] at UCLA?" and used the same 9-point scale as the official surveys. The personal-impersonal contrast (Hypotheses 2a and 4a) again compared evaluations of professors and courses. Additionally, to test misperceptions of positivity (Hypothesis 6), perceptions of other students' evaluations of instructors and courses were obtained at each of the three points on the personhood dimension (e.g., for specific individuals, "Considering the other students in your class, what do

you think was their average rating of the instructor?”). All subjects completed all these measures. Order of presentation was varied systematically and had no apparent effect. To vary the salience of personal, as opposed to impersonal, aspects of the professor (Hypothesis 2b), some students (the personal attributes condition) were asked to describe “the instructor as a person” in two lines and then rate him or her on four warmth-and-personality characteristics. Others (in the impersonal attributes condition) were asked to “briefly describe the professional qualifications of the instructor;”—“What kind of a professional do you think he/she is in the role of a teacher?”—and rate him or her on four task-oriented characteristics.

*Study 6.* In a later school term, 102 students repeated Study 5 except that aggregated individuals evaluations were not collected to save time and avoid subject fatigue.

*Study 7.* Another replication of Study 5 obtained evaluations only of specific individuals from 122 students. A simplified manipulation of the salience of either the professor or the course was also conducted: “Beside each professor take a moment to describe him/her as a person with a couple of sentences. Then [do the rating].” For other subjects, analogous instructions induced salience of the course. In either case both were then rated, with order varied.

### *Subject Pool Volunteers: Politician Evaluations*

*Study 8.* The same students participating in Study 5 also rated politicians at all three points on the personhood dimension to test Hypothesis 4. For specific individuals, subjects rated each of 26 specific politicians as “mainly favorable,” “mainly unfavorable,” or “I’m not familiar with him.” Half were Democrats and half Republicans, in scrambled order. Sixteen were United States Senators, three governors or former governors, three recently retired Ford administration officials (Gerald Ford, Nelson Rockefeller, and Henry Kissinger), plus the state attorney general, the mayor of Los Angeles, the Vice-President, and a prominent member of Congress. They were selected for high prominence, though the incumbent President and former President Nixon were deliberately omitted. For aggregated individuals, these same 26 names were presented in two single-spaced lists headed Democrats and Republicans, with the instructions, “Skim this list very quickly, then turn to the next page.” There the instructions said, “Answer these questions quickly—just give your snap impression rather than trying to think about it a long time. Answer without going back to the last page. . . . How many of the 26 politicians just listed do you regard mostly favorably, and how many do you regard unfavorably?” A single item measured the group stereotype: “What is your overall rating of politicians such as senators, governors or mayors, in general?” followed by the same 9-point scale used in Study 4. In all three cases, perceptions of the attitudes held by “UCLA students in general” were also assessed (to test Hypothesis 6, concerning misperception). The order of presentation of these six sets of attitudes was varied and again made little difference.

*Study 9.* To replicate Study 8, the same students who had participated in Study 7 evaluated politicians in the

same fashion, although two of the 26 specific politicians were changed because of death and defeat.

*Study 10.* Another replication of the previous two studies was conducted with 190 students. In addition, to test Hypothesis 5—that the specific individuals cognitively associated with the group stereotype “politician” are still evaluated more favorably than the group itself—some subjects were asked to “list the first five politicians that come into your mind when you answer that question” immediately after completing the group stereotype measure. Then they evaluated these five.

*Study 11.* The same subjects as in Study 5 ( $N = 102$ ) also evaluated 26 specific politicians and the group stereotype of politicians to provide another test of Hypotheses 1 and 4.

### *Index Construction*

Development of positivity indexes from such raw data raises two main issues. One concerns the unit of analysis. In Studies 3 and 4, evaluations of each attitude object were averaged across evaluators, so the unit of analysis is the attitude object. Hence, positivity in these studies refers to the proportion of attitude objects evaluated favorably: for example, the proportion of professors who received predominantly positive evaluations. In the questionnaire data (Studies 5–11), evaluations made by a given evaluator were averaged across objects, so the unit of analysis is the evaluator. Hence, positivity in these studies refers to the proportion of evaluators making predominantly positive evaluations. These are conceptually somewhat different approaches to the analysis and should not be confused. In the present data, however, no substantially different results emerge empirically from the two approaches.

Either way, the tendency to give positive rather than negative evaluations can be simply represented in two ways, both of which are used here. One is net positivity: Each evaluator (or attitude object, depending on which is the unit of analysis) is coded as positive, neutral, or negative, depending on whether positive evaluations outnumber negative evaluations; net positivity is the proportion of positive minus the proportion of negative evaluators (or attitude objects). This is the simplest way of representing whether the direction of affect is mainly positive or mainly negative and was available in comparable form for all studies, so it is used in most of the tables that follow. Mean positivity is the number of positive evaluations divided by the number of positive and negative evaluations, for any given evaluator. This can only be used when the evaluator is the unit of analysis (i.e., not in Studies 1–4), but it does yield a more conventional continuous ordinal scale, so it is used when possible in the statistical analyses that follow. There is no difference between the results generated by the two indexes.

It should be noted that reducing all evaluations to positive, neutral, or negative deliberately eliminates any information about extremity or intensity, because strength of feeling is here presumed to be orthogonal to the directional bias toward the positive side of neutral. Hence, the most familiar index of the affective component of an attitude—the mean rating on a simple like-dislike scale—is generally not used here (with the exception of Studies 1 and 2, which provide the most reliable esti-

mates of the absolute level of person evaluation). For further discussion of choices among various possible positivity scales, see Rook et al. (1978).

## Results

### *The Person-Positivity Bias*

Hypothesis 1 was that most evaluations of specific individuals would be favorable, and this was clearly demonstrated in all phases of the data collection. At the grossest level of analysis, individual professors at UCLA, over 14 school terms and about a third of a million evaluations, were rated at 7.22 (Study 1), far above the midpoint of 5 (labeled average). Psychology Department professors (Study 2) averaged 7.04. As shown in Table 1, using the net positivity index, the predominance of positive evaluations of individual professors is clear whether the unit of analysis is the stimulus object (almost all professors were evaluated positively; Studies 3 and 4) or the evaluator (almost all students rated most of their professors positively; Studies 5-7).

This positivity bias was not a function of voluntary evaluation (with less popular instructors avoiding evaluation), because the mixture of voluntary and mandatory evaluations in the campuswide data (Studies 1 and

3) is only slightly more favorable than the mandatory Psychology Department evaluations (Studies 2 and 4). Nor was it a product of the most disenchanted students' failing to complete the official evaluations or of generous students' going easy on the official evaluations because they might affect professors' promotions, because the positivity bias is almost as strong among subject pool students (Studies 5-7), who knew that their evaluations would not affect promotion decisions, as in the official evaluations (Studies 3 and 4).

The same predominance of positive evaluations held toward individual politicians. In the present data, from 57% to 70% of the evaluators (in Studies 8-11) gave favorable evaluations to most politicians they were familiar with, as shown at the bottom of Table 1. In short, most individual professors and politicians received positive evaluations most of the time from most evaluators.

### *Personal Versus Impersonal Attitude Objects*

Hypothesis 2 was that personal versions of an attitude object are evaluated more favorably than are more impersonal versions. The

Table 1  
*The Person-Positivity Bias: Evaluations of Specific Individuals*

Unit of analysis	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Net positivity (%)	<i>n</i>
Professor					
Stimulus person <sup>a</sup>					
Study 3	97	0	3	+94	218
Study 4	92	0	8	+84	53
Evaluator <sup>b</sup>					
Study 5	80	6	14	+66	117
Study 6	91	3	6	+85	102
Study 7	75	17	8	+67	114
Politician					
Evaluator <sup>b</sup>					
Study 8	70	3	27	+43	117
Study 9	70	4	26	+44	121
Study 10	68	4	27	+41	182
Study 11	57	8	35	+22	102

<sup>a</sup> Entries are the percentages of professors who were evaluated positively, neutrally, or negatively by the sample as a whole.

<sup>b</sup> Entries are the percentages of subjects who evaluated most individual professors or politicians positively, negatively, or evaluated equal numbers positively and negatively.



first test focused on whether a person would be evaluated more favorably than the larger impersonal object of which he or she is a part (Hypothesis 2a). Consistent with this view, professors were evaluated more favorably than the courses they teach in all phases of the data. At the grossest level, in Studies 1 and 2, the mean professor evaluations (over thousands of studies and hundreds of classes) were 7.22 and 7.04, respectively, whereas the mean course evaluations were 6.85 and 6.74, respectively. The point is made even more clearly in Studies 3 and 4 in which the individual class is the unit of analysis, as shown in Table 2. In both cases, professors were evaluated more positively than their own courses by a four-to-one margin. The difference is highly significant ( $z = 4.95$  and  $3.85$ , respectively, by binomial test; both  $ps < .001$ ). In Studies 5-7, in which the evaluator is the unit of analysis, most students evaluated their professors higher than they did their courses: Study 5,  $t(115) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Study 6,  $t(97) = 1.83$ ,  $p < .08$ ; Study 7,  $t(111) = 3.30$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Presumably, the stronger results in Studies 3 and 4 than in Studies 5-7 stem from basing the unit of analysis on a greater number of original evaluations, that is, averaging across the evaluations of the many students in the class rather than across the evaluations of any given student's few classes in a single term.

It might also be noted, from analyses of both kinds of data not shown here, that professors were also rated higher than courses in those few cases when the mean course evaluation (or the average evaluation of all courses taken by a given student) was negative. So the bias here is toward positivity not polarization. In any case, the data show that professors are generally evaluated more favorably than are their courses.

Hypothesis 2b suggested that making a stimulus person's personal attributes salient might produce more favorable evaluations than would making his or her impersonal or task-oriented attributes salient. This was tested in Studies 5-7 by varying the relative salience of a professor's personal or task-related characteristics. In Studies 5 and 6, individual professors were evaluated more favorably when they or their personal attributes were made more salient,  $F(1, 112) = 2.82$ ,

Table 2  
*More Positive Evaluations of Professors Than of Their Courses*

Unit of analysis	Professors more positive	Equal	Courses more positive	<i>n</i>
Stimulus object <sup>a</sup>				
Study 3	74	7	19	218
Study 4	73	10	17	53
Evaluator <sup>b</sup>				
Study 5	56	14	30	116
Study 6	51	15	34	98
Study 7	52	20	28	112

<sup>a</sup> Entries are the percentages of classes for which the mean evaluation across all students was higher for the professor, for the course, or was equal; *n* is the number of classes.

<sup>b</sup> Entries are the percentages of students whose mean evaluation across all classes taken the prior school term was higher for their professors or for their courses; *n* is the number of students.

$p < .10$ ;  $F(1, 113) = 4.57$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively. No differences emerged in Study 7 ( $F < 1$ ). So evaluations of a given professor did become somewhat more positive when his or her personal attributes were more salient, though the effect was not overpowering.

### *The Whole Person Versus Specific Attributes*

Hypothesis 3 held that a whole person would be evaluated higher than his or her various specific attributes. The simplest test of this hypothesis compares the overall evaluation of a professor with the mean evaluation of his or her specific attributes. The hypothesis is strongly confirmed when tested in the official surveys at the grossest level, where the unit of analysis is the mean evaluation across all students and classes in a given school term (Studies 1 and 2). As shown in the top two rows of Table 3, overall professor evaluations were almost always (94% and 88% of the time, respectively) higher than the mean evaluations of their specific attributes. The same result holds in Studies 3 and 4, where the unit of analysis is the mean evaluation of a given professor by all of his or her students: The overall professor evaluations were consistently (71% and 70% of the time,

Table 3  
*Percentage of Overall Evaluations That Exceeded Those of Specific Attributes*

Unit of analysis	% of cases in which positivity of overall evaluation exceeded mean evaluation of specific attributes		n	$\chi^2$	p <
	Professor	Course			
School term					
Study 1	94	15	14	17.36	.001
Study 2	88	31	13	7.72	.001
Stimulus object					
Study 3	71	47	218	25.67	.001
Study 4	70	45	55	6.28	.05

*Note.* The entries in the left-hand column are the percentages of cases (school terms for Studies 1 and 2 and classes for Studies 3 and 4) in which overall professor evaluations were more favorable than the average evaluation of the more specific professor attributes; hence, in 94% of the 14 school terms in Study 1, the overall professor evaluation was higher than, and 6% equal to or lower than, the mean evaluation of specific attributes. The same logic holds for course evaluations. In either case, if the overall evaluation equaled the mean evaluation of specific attributes, the entry would be 50%.

respectively) higher than the mean evaluations of their specific attributes. Repeating these analyses using only those specific attributes explicitly describing the professor (i.e., eliminating those focusing on such impersonal aspects of the course as clear course objectives or exams) yields equally supportive data. For example, in both Studies 1 and 2, overall professor evaluations exceeded the average evaluation of separate professorial attributes in every one of the school terms available.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that the more favorable evaluations of the whole than its parts would hold for a person as attitude object (e.g., the professor) but not for an impersonal object (e.g., the course). Individual professors were clearly evaluated more favorably than their specific attributes (as just indicated). Courses, in contrast, were not evaluated overall as favorably as were their specific attributes. In Studies 1 and 2, overall course evaluations reached the mean evaluation of their separate attributes in only 15% and 31%, respectively, of the available school terms, as

shown at the top of Table 3. In Studies 3 and 4, the overall course evaluations were also below the mean evaluations of their separate attributes (though only slightly so), as shown at the bottom of Table 3. Repeating this analysis using only those specific attributes describing the course rather than the professor yields the same picture. Overall course evaluations exceeded the average of the evaluations of specific course attributes in only 1 of 14 school terms for the general campus (Study 1) and in just 5 of 13 for the Psychology Department (Study 2).

In short, the whole person—an individual professor—was usually evaluated well above the average of either his or her own specific attributes, whereas the more impersonal object—the course—was usually evaluated at or below the average of its specific attributes. In Studies 1 and 2, which used the largest number of evaluations, this interaction (of whole/specific-attributes by professor/course) fell in the expected direction in every single school term and so was highly significant (by binomial test,  $z = 3.48$  and  $3.32$ , respectively;  $p < .005$  in both cases).

#### *Individual Person Versus Collectivities*

Hypothesis 4 proposed that evaluations of specific individuals are generally positive, whereas evaluations of groups or aggregates of people are more vulnerable to downward fluctuations in social norms. Consistent with this view, evaluations of individual politicians were consistently more favorable than the group stereotype of them, as shown at the top of Table 4. Evaluations of individual politicians were also more favorable than those of aggregated individuals (snap overall evaluations of a list of the same specific politicians). The *t*s for these comparisons ranged from 3.23 to 8.77, and the degrees of freedom from 59 to 179, so all these differences are highly significant.

In part, the results for professors also support this hypothesis. Individual professors were evaluated considerably more favorably than aggregated professors, as also shown in Table 4: Study 5,  $t(116) = 6.57$ ,  $p < .001$ . (Evaluations of aggregated professors were not collected in Studies 6 or 7.) But evaluations of individual professors seem not to

Table 4  
*Net Positivity of Specific Individuals, Aggregated Individuals, and Group Stereotypes*

Attitude object	Specificity of attitude object		
	Specific individuals	Aggregated individuals	Group stereotype
Politicians			
Study 8	+43	+4	-19
Study 9	+44	+18	0
Study 10	+41	+12	+1
Study 11	+22	—	-27
Professors			
Study 5	+66	+40	+63
Study 6	+85	—	+88

Note. Net positivity equals the percentage of subjects expressing predominantly favorable evaluations minus the percentage of subjects expressing predominantly unfavorable evaluations.

have been more favorable than the group stereotype of professors, contrary to the hypothesis. Table 4 shows that both were highly favorable, and indeed very similar, in terms of net positivity.

It might be possible that this may be one occasion in which the decision to ignore extremity of evaluations may be misleading, however. Almost all students rate more than half of their individual professors favorably (80% and 91% did so in Studies 5 and 6, respectively). Almost all students also rate "professors in general" above the neutral point (73% and 91%, respectively, did so in these two studies). So, if there are real differences in positivity of evaluations toward individual professors and the group stereotype, as Hypothesis 4 suggests, they may be masked by the fact that both are highly favorable. Put another way, our thresholds of 50% positive for individual professors, and "average" for the group stereotype of professors, may be too low to be sensitive to real differences in evaluations of these highly regarded types of attitude objects.

Indeed, the group stereotype of professors falls far short of the usual evaluation of individual professors, once extremity is considered. The mean group stereotype of professors was 6.02 and 6.70 in Studies 5 and 6, respectively, whereas, as indicated earlier, the campuswide average rating was 7.22 for in-

dividual professors (Study 1) and 7.04 for psychology professors (Study 2). However, in Study 5, where both kinds of data are available from the same subjects, the mean evaluation given individual professors was identical to the group stereotype UCLA professors. So although the data are mostly consistent with Hypothesis 4, this one exception remains.

Hypothesis 4a suggested that the positivity bonus given to individuals, rather than to groups or aggregates, should hold for persons but not impersonal entities. This implies that the more favorable evaluations of professors than their courses should hold with respect to specific individuals but not with respect to aggregates or groups. This expectation is quite clearly supported, as shown in Table 5. In Study 5, individual professors were evaluated more favorably than their individual courses (by 26%), but aggregated professors were evaluated only slightly more positively than aggregated courses (by 7%), and the difference actually reversed for group stereotypes of the two objects. The professor-course difference in evaluation was significantly more positive for individual than aggregate objects,  $t(116) = 2.65, p < .001$ , and

Table 5  
*Relative Evaluations of Professors and Their Courses by Specificity of Attitude Object (in Percentage)*

Attitude object	Professors more positive	Equal	Courses more positive	Difference
Study 5				
Specific individuals	56	14	30	+26
Aggregated individuals	44	20	37	+7 <sub>a</sub>
Group stereotype	27	40	32	-5 <sub>a</sub>
Study 6				
Specific individuals	52	15	33	+19
Group stereotype	18	56	26	-8

Note. Each row classifies all subjects according to whether their mean positivity for professors was higher, lower, or equal to that for courses. Difference scores within the same study with the same subscripts are not significantly different ( $p < .01$ ).

more positive than the group stereotype,  $t(116) = 3.48, p < .001$ . In Study 6, the same finding holds—comparing just individual professors with the group stereotype—and it again is highly significant,  $t(97) = 2.68, p < .01$ . Hence, to the extent that a positivity bonus goes to individuals rather than aggregates or groups, it seems to do so for persons but not impersonal entities.

### *Compartmentalizing*

Hypothesis 5 suggested that a group stereotype is an attitude learned toward the group as a separate attitude object rather than a generalization of attitudes toward specific individual group members. Hence, group stereotypes may often be compartmentalized from attitudes toward individual group members. The finding just presented—that negative stereotypes of politicians as a class coexist with very positive evaluations of them as individuals—is consistent with this view. Presumably, evaluations of the object “politician” stem from a group stereotype that is cognitively autonomous of evaluations of specific individual politicians.

Another possible explanation for this finding, however, is that the object “politician” is perceived as intimately associated with specific individuals, but with a particular subset of them (such as Boss Tweed and Spiro Agnew) rather than a more representative subset that would therefore be more favorably regarded. To test this, some subjects in Study 10 were asked for “the first five politicians that come into your mind” immediately after they answered the group stereotype item. However, the 151 responses seem quite representative of the best known public figures, and they were evaluated predominantly favorably. Current and recent Presidents and Vice-Presidents made up 38%, California governors 28%, members of the House of Representatives and the Senate 14%, other statewide officials and Los Angeles mayors 14%, with the others scattered. Pooling all those likely to be thought rascals by UCLA students (Agnew, Nixon, H. R. Haldeman, George Wallace, three local politicians of moral or ideological ill repute, and a recently deposed student-body president) yielded only about 18%. Overall, 50% of these politicians

were evaluated favorably and 37% negatively, yielding a net positivity of +13%. Hence, the poor evaluation of “politicians” as a class appears not to be due to its association with any unusually seamy individuals. Rather, it seems to have its own autonomously negative meaning.

### *Misperception of the Positivity Bias*

Hypothesis 6 suggested that such inconsistencies between positive attitudes toward individual persons and more negative group stereotypes may lead perceivers to underestimate the positivity bias, in both their own and others’ attitudes. Consistent with this view, subjects did substantially underestimate the positivity of their own attitudes toward individual politicians and professors. Their snap estimates of their own attitudes (i.e., of aggregated individuals) were less positive than their actual attitudes toward specific individuals. These misperceptions are shown in the leftmost two columns of Table 4 and are all statistically significant, as indicated earlier.

By one standard, subjects underestimated others’ positivity about individual persons as badly as they underestimated their own. The net positivity of their snap judgments about other students’ evaluations of specific individual politicians (i.e., their perceptions of others’ probable aggregated individuals responses) was  $-2\%$ ,  $-1\%$ , and  $+10\%$  in Studies 8–10, respectively, for an average of  $+2\%$ . The actual net positivity for evaluations of individual politicians in these studies was  $+43\%$ ,  $+44\%$ , and  $+41\%$ , respectively, for an average of  $+43\%$ , as shown in the left-hand column of Table 4. The same misperception occurred with respect to professors in Study 5: The net positivity they estimated for others’ attitudes ( $+35\%$ ) fell far short of the actual  $+66\%$ . In all these cases, snap estimates of others’ attitudes significantly underestimated their actual positivity toward individual politicians and professors (all  $ps < .001$ ).

On the other hand, subjects perceived others’ evaluations rather accurately when asked explicitly to reproduce them at each point on the personhood dimension (i.e., specific individuals, aggregated individuals, or group stereotypes). Because these perceptions fairly

closely resemble the pattern of data shown in Table 4, they are not presented here. The one systematic difference is an overestimate of others' negativity at the group stereotype level for politicians in each study, but it was not significant. In short, perceivers' snap judgments underestimated positivity toward specific individuals, both their own and others', but subjects did perceive others' attitudes fairly clearly when asked specifically to reproduce them.

### Discussion

This study proposed the existence of a person-positivity bias. This begins by assuming that a dimension of personhood or humanness underlies the perception of diverse attitude objects, anchored by individual human beings at one end and inanimate objects at the other. A bonus of positive evaluation should be awarded to individual human beings as attitude objects because of their greater perceived similarity to other humans acting as evaluators. Hence, individual persons should attract more favorable evaluations than should other attitude objects (on the average and everything else being equal). It was also assumed that, to an important degree, people compartmentalize their attitudes toward groups from those toward individual group members. Groups, being somewhat abstract and impersonal, ought not to get the positivity bonus as much as individual group members should. Hence, evaluations of such collective objects ought to be less favorable than those of individual group members.

Six hypotheses were derived from this general view, tested, and, using politicians and professors as the stimulus objects, supported empirically: (1) Specific individual persons were overwhelmingly evaluated favorably; (2) personal versions of a given attitude object were evaluated more favorably than were impersonal versions of it; (3) individual persons, as wholes, were evaluated more favorably than were their specific attributes; (4) individual persons were evaluated more favorably than were the same individuals in aggregates or groups, whereas the same did not occur for impersonal objects; (5) evaluations of groups proved to be largely cognitively

autonomous of evaluations of their constituent individuals and, hence, less positive; and (6) perceivers tended to underestimate the positivity of their own and others' attitudes toward specific individuals.

One inconsistency concerns the hypothesis of more favorable evaluations of specific individuals than of their groups (Hypothesis 4). Most of the evidence was supportive. Individual politicians considered separately were liked more than they were in the aggregate or as a group, and professors considered individually were liked better than the same professors in the aggregate. But individual professors were not liked any more than "UCLA professors in general," contrary to the hypothesis. Elsewhere, my colleagues and I have presented more evidence supporting this hypothesis regarding several other classes of attitude objects in the athletic, entertainment, and political arenas (Sears et al., Note 2). So the weight of current evidence favors the hypothesis, with this one notable exception.

Nevertheless, further research is required to confirm the generality of this aspect of the person-positivity bias. Other disconfirmations are certainly possible to imagine. Humanitarian reformers, for example, have often been charged with just such a reversal: sympathy for the disadvantaged en masse but distaste for them as individuals. The notion of a person-positivity bias argues for a main effect of more favorable evaluation of individual persons than of groups of people. But it does not rule out the possibility that social stereotypes might on occasion generate highly idealized or unrealistically generous attitudes toward groups (as perhaps in the case of professors) any more than it rules out the reality that some particular individuals are very negatively evaluated for reasons having nothing to do with the person-positivity bias.

The other apparent inconsistency lies in the fact that subjects' snap judgments seriously underestimated the extent of both their own and others' person-positivity bias, as expected (Hypothesis 6), but they could quite accurately reproduce others' evaluations of specific individuals when they considered the latter one by one. These findings do indicate some systematic underestimation of the person-positivity bias but limit its extent. Ap-

parently, perceivers are fairly accurate in assessing how (they and) others evaluate particular individuals but are not aware that the overall pattern is as positive as it is.

The results for politicians and professors were very similar, with the one exception noted, providing some generality for the person-positivity phenomenon. But are they representative of all classes of attitude objects? Survival as a politician or professor is partly contingent upon likability, so data on the two classes of individuals might overestimate the prevalence of positive evaluations more generally (i.e., Hypothesis 1). To some extent this is offset by the fact that politicians regularly come under attack (and usually the higher the office, the more frequent the attack) and that UCLA professors are hired and promoted more for their research productivity than their classroom popularity. Moreover, there is much other evidence documenting this point, as indicated earlier, including recent data regarding persons in the entertainment and athletic worlds (Sears et al., Note 2). Hence, the descriptive data in Table 1 are only part of a much larger body of evidence documenting disproportionately positive evaluations of individual persons.

Another potential problem lies in making some comparisons across different scales. Capitalizing on the ongoing official evaluations program of the campus meant that different specific attributes were necessarily assessed for courses than for professors. If somehow the attributes assessed regarding the course were intrinsically less flattering than those assessed for the professor, the data presented as supporting Hypothesis 3a might be misleading. Further evidence will be required to settle this issue. Different scales were also used for evaluations of individual politicians than for group stereotypes of them. In this case, we assumed that the positivity phenomenon could best be captured by using scales that matched the ordinary, natural, phenomenologically typical content of the subject's everyday attitudes and, therefore, opted against using more perfectly comparable but artificial scales, such as the semantic differential. However, in later studies the scales were made increasingly comparable without any discernible effect on the results. The reason for this is probably that all

evaluations were simply reduced to positive, neutral, and negative. People are accustomed to making such trichotomous judgments about persons and groups continuously in their daily lives (e.g., "I like her" or "I don't feel one way or the other, really") so that the scale labels are probably not as important as with more complex and unfamiliar judgments.

Finally, as indicated earlier, net positivity was presented in the tables, for simplicity of presentation, whereas mean positivity was generally used for the statistical analyses, for its greater power. The differences between the two proved inconsequential, as a review of the findings presented above will quickly show.

One goal of the present research was to assess the range of attitude objects to which the person-positivity effect applies. The present data suggest it applies mainly to real individual human beings and to their most personal qualities and not so much to their abstract attributes, task-related qualities, work products, or to groups or aggregates of people. This is a more limited reach for the positivity phenomenon than presented in our earlier reviews, in which it was assumed that groups and institutions received as much of the positivity bonus as did specific individuals (Sears, 1969; Sears & Whitney, 1973). Dichotomizing attitude objects on the personhood or humanness dimension as simply individual humans or not would therefore seem to be an obvious starting point and is consistent with our data. However, still finer distinctions may be illuminating. Some speculative comments may be worthwhile in this connection.

For one thing, not all individuals are treated identically. Even though perceivers are demonstrably capable of imagining a full person on the basis of some few abstract traits (e.g., Asch, 1946), a real, known person seems more likely to get the positivity bonus than is a hypothetical, abstract, and/or wholly novel or unfamiliar person. Specific individuals can sometimes be depersonalized, with harmful consequences for their treatment by others. Zimbardo (1970) has discussed this phenomenon under the more general heading of "deindividuation." Mann (1967), among others, suggests that it is easier to stigmatize

an entire group as an abstract mass than to attack concrete individual persons. It is easier to order death to an anonymous mass from the safe distance of the Pentagon than to an individual soldier from the other end of a bayonet. Of course, one must always consider the idiosyncracies of a particular evaluator's learning history with regard to any stimulus object. Even the fullest application of a person-positivity bias cannot overcome the negative effects of the Holocaust and Watergate on public attitudes toward Adolf Hitler and Nixon.

Human-made products can also vary on this personhood dimension; most clocks are less personal than most speeches (like the Gettysburg Address) whereas most laws, treaties, and government policies might be somewhere in between. So a product intimately associated with an individual person (like a Picasso painting, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, or an individually authored book) should be more favorably evaluated than one produced by a collectivity (like a factory product, a legislative compromise hammered out by a committee, or a collaboratively authored book). Again, of course, other factors may overwhelm the effects of the person-positivity bias; for example, a legislative proposal may lose support by being linked to a well-known political villain. But the hypothesis is that the human connection will boost evaluation, on the average and everything else being equal.

Groups or aggregates may also vary in personhood. Group objects that bring to mind ordinary individuals, who the evaluator might therefore feel more similar to, ought to receive more of the positivity bonus than group objects that depict an abstraction. Hence, groups such as women or old people might be evaluated especially positively, simply because they seem similar to humanity in general and the perceiver in particular. Kaplan (1976), for example, finds a positivity bias for "people in general." Although group stereotypes and evaluations of specific group members may often or even usually be compartmentalized, they can of course be cognitively linked with a consequent spread of affect from one to the other. Much research has shown that direct contact with individual members of a stigmatized minority group can

alter stereotypes in a more favorable direction, under the right conditions. Conversely, labeling an individual with a stigmatizing stereotypical label, such as "politician," can lower his or her evaluation (Fiske et al., Note 3).

Finally, animals and other beings can vary considerably in personhood; for example, monkeys and dogs are usually perceived as very similar to people, whereas amoebas, spiders, alligators, and piranhas are less so. Those more similar to individual humans should be evaluated more favorably. Indeed Sears et al. (Note 2) found that machines or animal characters in children's stories were evaluated more favorably when given human names than when identified in the usual non-human manner. Similarly, alien species in science fiction stories were liked better when they behaved in humanoid ways than when they did not. Karaz and Perlman (1975) found that human perceivers extended the same kind of forgiving situational attributions to racehorses for their poor performances as Taylor and Koivumaki (1976) found perceivers did for their own misdeeds and those of their friends.

The explanation proposed for the person-positivity bias was that more personhood produces greater perceived similarity, which in turn generates more liking. This explanation was not tested directly here, but it has been elsewhere (Sears et al., Note 2). Sears et al. found that human evaluators perceived individual persons as more similar to themselves than they did either aggregated or institutional versions of the same attitude objects, and the greater liking for individual persons than groups or institutions was reduced with perceived similarity controlled, both findings supporting the perceived-similarity theory. A plausible and closely related variant would argue that people usually feel they are in a unit relationship (Heider, 1958) or share a sense of "we-ness" with other humans. Such unit relationships could produce the person-positivity bias because they induce strains toward more favorable evaluations of stimulus persons who might otherwise be evaluated negatively (Tyler & Sears, 1977). Similarity and unit relationships are probably correlated in natural situations, so the two explanations would generally (though

not invariably) yield the same predictions. On the other hand, the person-positivity bias does not seem simply to be another instance of the so-called set-size effect (Anderson, 1967). In the present data, the overall evaluations of courses, unlike those of professors, were less favorable, if anything, than the average evaluations of their specific attributes, even though these latter were also generally positively evaluated. Nothing in the notion of a set-size effect would account for this difference between personal and impersonal entities.

What other phenomena does the person-positivity bias help explain? Most obviously, it accounts for the contrast between the generally positive evaluations of specific individuals in public life and the often more negative stereotypes of groups or impersonal institutions comprising the very same people. For example, Katz, Gutek, Kahn, & Barton (1975) found that Americans evaluated their own specific personal experiences with government service agencies very favorably, but government, agencies, or bureaucracy in general rather negatively. Presumably the person-positivity bias promoted a favorable reaction to the individual government workers who had dealt with the respondents, but these evaluations were cognitively compartmentalized from negative stereotypes about such impersonal entities as bureaucracy. Other aspects of the Katz et al. data point to a perceived-similarity basis for this predominantly favorable response. Most respondents regarded the specific agency personnel they dealt with as "pretty much people like you," citing such personal attributes as friendliness and understanding or saying they were "just average, ordinary, common people" or "thought of [them] . . . as workers like themselves. . . . Identification with office personnel is not only the common response, but it is based upon perceived likeness of personal traits and of commonality of ordinary people working for a living" (Katz et al., 1975, p. 72). Presumably, it is harder to feel this same sense of identity with the Social Security Administration or bureaucracy in general.

The person-positivity bias offers yet another explanation of the puzzling finding in studies by LaPiere (1934) and others of be-

haviors inconsistent with attitudes in race relations. The inconsistency often has proved to fall in a direction contrary to the expected hypocrisy: Prejudiced attitudes toward minority groups in the abstract (when talk should be cheap) go with egalitarian treatment of specific individuals encountered in person (when it really matters). The notion of a person-positivity bias would explain this in terms of the greater personhood of a specific person than of an abstract group and, consequently, more positive attitudes toward the person than toward the group. It would also assume some compartmentalization of any dispositions toward the specific person from those toward the group. Hence, these data could be accounted for without assuming any intrinsic differences between attitudes and behavior.

Another persistent but somewhat puzzling contrast is that liking for an incumbent President is almost invariably higher than approval of his job performance. Both would seem to draw strongly from a general evaluative dimension, but they regularly differ in positivity. For example, this was the case in all 35 Gallup polls that measured attitudes on both dimensions regarding each president from Truman through Nixon (Kernell, 1975, p. 76) and in each biennial Michigan election study in the 1970s. This pattern fits the person-positivity notion that overall evaluations of specific persons tend to be more favorable than those of their separate attributes, such as job performance.

One set of findings inconsistent with the present approach concerns the so-called negativity effect in person perception: Negative traits have more influence over an overall impression than do positive traits (e.g., Amabile & Glazebrook, 1982). Under such circumstances, an overall mixed impression should be more negative than the average of its separate attributes. Most of this research uses hypothetical stimulus people, but not all of it does: For example, Lau's (1979) findings concerned actual presidential candidates. An explanation for this inconsistency is not yet apparent.

Finally, what could be the adaptive significance of the person-positivity bias? That seems easy to speculate about. The human



being depends, probably for survival and most certainly for "the good life," in most environments, on active cooperation with fellow species members. Infants are not capable of independent survival for years after birth. Books and journal articles cannot be written, nor automobiles built, unless someone else forages for food, and so on. Yet, as Freud so poignantly noted (e.g., 1933/1959), human evolution has left our species with an aggressiveness that is a necessary precondition for our overwhelming dominance over the living and inanimate worlds we inhabit but which at the same time constantly jeopardizes that very necessary cooperation in territoriality, war, oedipal and sibling rivalries, and so on. What could be more helpful in facilitating that vital cooperation, in the long run, than a general bias to regard fellow species members benignly?

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