Research Report

Accentuate the Negative

The Positive Effects of Negative Acknowledgment

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ABSTRACT—*Three studies investigated the capacity of negative acknowledgment, the admission of an unfavorable quality, to elicit relatively positive responses. In Study 1, an acknowledgment that a written paragraph was confusing led individuals to rate the paragraph as clearer than they did when no acknowledgment was offered. In Study 2, a foreign speaker was rated as possessing a clearer voice when he acknowledged his strong accent than when he did not. In Study 3, a hypothetical college applicant's acknowledgment of receiving less than stellar high school grades resulted in a more positive evaluation of those grades. The interpersonal risks and benefits of negative acknowledgment as an impression-management strategy are discussed.*

"See how I am presuming to speak to my Lord, though I am but dust and ashes!"
—Abraham, in Genesis 18:27 (New American Bible)

In the biblical tale from which this quotation is taken, Abraham has repeatedly questioned God about the likelihood that Sodom and Gomorrah can be spared if a sufficient number of "innocents" can be found within those cities. He essentially engages in a bargaining exercise, continually lowering the number of innocents who must be located, eventually securing an agreement that if a mere 10 individuals can be found, God will not destroy the two cities (evidently, 10 were not found). In the course of the interaction, Abraham, apparently fearing that he might anger his Maker, offers this statement, providing what might be the first recorded instance of what we term *negative acknowledgment*.

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WHAT NEGATIVE ACKNOWLEDGMENT IS

As we define it, negative acknowledgment refers to the admission of an unfavorable quality or characteristic. Its purpose is to manage what would otherwise be a negative evaluation. Thus, statements such as "Here's a crazy idea" and "It isn't politically correct to say this" are often uttered by individuals attempting to minimize the putative negative impressions held by a perceiver (see Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979). We believe that actors who use such acknowledgments often succeed in moderating perceivers' reactions ("That idea is not so crazy" and "That statement might not be politically correct, but at least it's honest").

WHAT NEGATIVE ACKNOWLEDGMENT IS NOT

Negative acknowledgment is not the same as self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978), in which an actor deliberately erects barriers to successful performance, often as a means of managing attributions about the self. Negative acknowledgment does not involve the creation of obstacles, is not limited to performance domains, and is primarily intended to manage the impressions of other people, rather than one's own impressions (cf. Norem & Cantor, 1986). Negative acknowledgment is also not sandbagging, "the false prediction or feigned demonstration of inability" (Gibson & Sachau, 2000, p. 56), in that negative acknowledgments need not be false and in fact can be quite accurate. Similarly, negative acknowledgment is distinct from the strategy of supplication (Jones & Pittman, 1982) in that it is not necessarily intended to elicit assistance or pity, but is intended merely to alter impressions. Negative acknowledgment differs, too, from traditional forms of disclaimer, in which an individual asks for forbearance (e.g., "I know this sounds stupid, but bear with me"; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). Although related to such disclaimers, negative acknowledgment involves the simple highlighting of a negative property without any explicit request to overlook the property (though, as with other forms of disclaimer, the goal is to improve evaluation in the eyes of a perceiver). Negative acknowledgment also need not involve

modesty or humility (cf. Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995), though it often does. Finally, although the two approaches might achieve the same goal, negative acknowledgment is not synonymous with apology, in which an individual not only acknowledges something negative, but typically expresses guilt, regret, or responsibility for a transgression as well.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we investigated the effect of negative acknowledgment by asking participants to read a confusing paragraph that either was or was not accompanied by an acknowledgment highlighting the unclear nature of the passage. To investigate the scope of any acknowledgment effect, we had all participants then read a second clearer paragraph that was not accompanied by an acknowledgment.

Method
Fifty-seven undergraduates participated. They were asked to read the following paragraph, taken from James's (1907) *Pragmatism*:

> Pragmatism, pending the final empirical ascertainment of just what the balance of union and disunion among things may be, must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side. Some day, she admits, even total union, with one knower, one origin, and a universe consolidated in every conceivable way, may turn out to be the most acceptable of all hypotheses. Meanwhile the opposite hypothesis, of a world imperfectly unified still, and perhaps always to remain so, must be sincerely entertained. This latter hypothesis is pluralism's doctrine. Since absolute monism forbids its being even considered seriously, branding it as irrational from the start, it is clear that pragmatism must turn its back on absolute monism, and follow pluralism's more empirical path. (p. 161)

For some participants ($n = 19$), the paragraph was preceded by a written negative acknowledgment ("The following paragraph is rather confusing"); for others ($n = 19$), it was followed by a negative acknowledgment ("The preceding paragraph was rather confusing"); for a final group ($n = 19$), no negative acknowledgment was provided. All participants were then asked to read a second, substantially clearer paragraph, taken from the opening lines of an introductory psychology textbook.

Participants were asked to rate each paragraph with respect to clarity, using a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not clear at all*, 9 = *very clear*).

Results
Participants who were presented with the negative acknowledgment before the confusing paragraph rated that paragraph as clearer ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 2.13$) than did either participants exposed to the negative acknowledgment after the paragraph ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.07$) or those in the no-acknowledgment

control group ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.22$), $F(2, 54) = 6.62$, $p < .01$, $p_{rep} > .98$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$. The latter two groups did not differ significantly from each other, $F < 1$. All three groups rated the second paragraph, which had not been accompanied by any acknowledgment, as relatively clear ($M = 7.26$, $SD = 1.89$), and the groups did not differ significantly from each other in their ratings of this second paragraph, $F < 1$.

Discussion
The results help rule out explanations for the negative-acknowledgment effect that might rely solely on notions of linguistic reciprocity or politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It was not the case that an acknowledgment of the confusing nature of the paragraph uniformly resulted in a more generous evaluation. Only when the acknowledgment preceded the relevant material did such an adjustment occur. In addition, the failure of the acknowledgment to affect ratings of the second paragraph suggests that the acknowledgment did not result in some general criterion shift in participants' use of the rating scale, whereby all subsequent scale responses were altered to favor higher evaluations.

Unanswered is whether participants who read the acknowledgment before the passage devoted more effort to comprehending the passage than other participants did. Study 2 was designed partly with this question in mind, but also to explore negative acknowledgment in a more interpersonal context.

STUDY 2

Study 2 featured a negative acknowledgment delivered orally. Participants listened to a 5-min audiotaped recording of an Austrian psychology researcher presenting a brief lecture in accented English. For half the participants, the speaker's lecture was preceded by his acknowledgment of a "rather strong accent"; for the other half, it was not.

Method
Ninety-four undergraduates participated (47 in each condition). Using 7-point Likert-type scales, participants rated how interesting and likable they found the speaker, as well as how interesting and clear they found his presentation. In addition, participants rated how clear they found the speaker's voice and how noticeable they found his accent. They also estimated how many years the speaker had spoken English. Finally, they were asked to summarize the main ideas presented in the lecture.

Results and Discussion
Ratings in the two conditions differed significantly on only one measure: the clarity of the speaker's voice. Participants rated the speaker's voice as clearer when he acknowledged a strong accent ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 0.99$) than when he did not ($M = 5.33$,

$SD = 1.35$), $t(92) = 3.01, p < .01, p_{rep} = .98$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$. They did not differ in how noticeable they found the speaker's accent, rating it as moderately noticeable ($M = 4.13$). There was, however, a trend for those exposed to the negative acknowledgment to rate the speaker as more likable ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.91$) than did those not exposed to the acknowledgment ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(92) = 1.86, p < .07, p_{rep} = .91$. However, an analysis of covariance controlling for rated liking of the speaker revealed that the effect of the negative acknowledgment remained significant, $F(1, 91) = 6.59, p < .02, p_{rep} = .96$. Participants in the negative-acknowledgment condition also displayed a slight tendency to believe that the speaker had spoken English for more years ($M = 13.03, SD = 7.86$) than did those in the control group ($M = 10.73, SD = 5.39$), $t(92) = 1.65$, $p = .10, p_{rep} = .88$.

A coder, blind to condition and the experimental hypothesis, rated participants' written summaries. This measure indicated that the acknowledgment did not alter how well participants understood the speaker's lecture. Thus, it does not appear that participants who heard the acknowledgment devoted more effort to understanding the presentation than those who did not.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, participants rated a hypothetical college applicant who either did or did not offer a negative acknowledgment for his or her high school grades. In an additional condition, the negative evaluation came from a source other than the applicant.

Method
Sixty-three Swarthmore College undergraduates participated. Participants were asked to imagine serving on the admissions committee at Swarthmore College and were presented with a written description of a hypothetical male or female applicant. The applicant was described as attending a suburban public high school and, in a personal statement, expressed an eagerness to become involved in intramural sports and musical activities in college. In the negative-acknowledgment condition ($n = 23$), participants were informed that the applicant had written: "I know my grades aren't the greatest." In a second condition ($n = 20$), participants learned instead that a high school guidance counselor had written a recommendation letter in which he admitted that the applicant's grades "weren't the greatest." In a control condition ($n = 20$), no commentary regarding the applicant's academic performance was provided. All participants then learned that the applicant's transcript revealed a cumulative high school grade point average "in the B plus range" (this average was designed to be slightly lower than that of the average Swarthmore admitted student), along with an SAT verbal score of 770 and an SAT math score of 750 (fashioned to be consistent with the scores of the average Swarthmore admitted student).

Participants then used 9-point scales to rate the applicant's grades and SAT scores ($1 = poor$, $9 = excellent$), as well as to indicate their decision regarding admission to Swarthmore ($1 = definitely\ do\ not\ admit$, $9 = definitely\ admit$).

Results and Discussion
A three-way analysis of variance (Acknowledgment Condition × Participant's Sex × Target's Sex) performed on participants' ratings of the applicant's grades revealed only a main effect of acknowledgment condition, $F(2, 51) = 3.56, p < .05, p_{rep} > .93$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. Sex of the participant and of the hypothetical applicant did not significantly alter the results on any measure.

Participants who read that the applicant had acknowledged having grades that "weren't the greatest" rated those grades more favorably ($M = 6.78, SD = 0.80$) than did participants who saw no acknowledgment ($M = 6.10, SD = 1.25$), $t(41) = 2.16$, $p < .05, p_{rep} = .94$. As in Study 1, the beneficial effect of the negative acknowledgment was limited to the specific domain in which it was offered; in this case, the benefit did not extend to ratings of the applicant's (admittedly close to ceiling) SAT scores (Ms = 8.39 and 8.45 for the self-acknowledgment and no-acknowledgment conditions, respectively), $t < 1$, n.s., or result in an increased willingness to admit the applicant (Ms = 7.04 and 6.50, respectively), $t(41) = 1.31, p = .20$.

Participants in the condition in which a guidance counselor addressed the applicant's less-than-perfect grades rated those grades ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.38$) similarly to participants in the control condition ($M = 6.10, SD = 1.25$), $t < 1$; ratings on the remaining two measures also did not differ between these conditions. The grade ratings in the counselor-acknowledgment condition were, however, significantly lower than those in the self-acknowledgment condition, $t(41) = 2.32, p < .05, p_{rep} = .95$. Evidently, a feature of effective negative acknowledgments is that they come from the actual target of evaluation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across three studies, an acknowledgment of a negative quality led perceivers to evaluate that quality less negatively than they did when no acknowledgment was provided. Thus, negative acknowledgment seems to constitute an effective interpersonal strategy for managing the impressions of other people. However, it is not without risks, for the possibility exists that one could prime a negative evaluation that would not have arisen otherwise (e.g., "I hadn't thought about it before, but now that you mention it, that does seem like a crazy idea"). Negative acknowledgments also are not panaceas. There are stimuli so negative (e.g., blatantly offensive remarks) that no amount of preemptive acknowledgment can forestall a perceiver's negative response, and the perception of somewhat less negative stimuli may be only slightly improved by an effective acknowledgment.

The evidence presented here suggests that, when used appropriately, negative acknowledgments can temper unfavorable evaluations. However, we have left unaddressed the question of when such acknowledgments are in fact used in everyday social interactions. Although a definitive answer is beyond the scope of this article, it is reasonable to assume that highly evaluative contexts could be ripe for the occurrence of negative acknowledgments. We offer here some anecdotal data on negative acknowledgments used in one such "real-world" context.

A conference of predominantly elite social psychologists was attended by one of the authors (not himself an elite social psychologist), who informally coded whether presenters used negative acknowledgments. Among a sample of 18 speakers whose presentations were attended by the coder, 11 (61%) used one or more negative acknowledgments, which roughly fell into three distinct categories. The majority of negative acknowledgments were offered with respect to some aspect of the speaker's visual aids (e.g., "I've prepared a gosh-awful overhead"; "This is going to look like some crazy medical graph"). In addition, several speakers made negative acknowledgments with regard to some other aspect of their presentations (e.g., "This is a gross oversimplification"; "After I've made a mess of things, I'll turn it over to my coauthor"). Finally, some presenters offered negative acknowledgments for the substance of their own research (e.g., "We asked some crazy questions"; "We thought this study was pretty lame"). Thus, it seems clear that in potentially evaluative settings, many individuals are motivated to employ the strategy of negative acknowledgment. It is also clear from the studies presented here that negative acknowledgments can be effective in attenuating what would otherwise be negative assessments. Future research will determine whether those real-world contexts that commonly feature negative acknowledgments are the same contexts in which such acknowledgments are effective. We suspect they are; however, because we, like Abraham, are "but dust and ashes," we could be wrong.

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