

# The Minority Spotlight Effect

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## Abstract

Across three studies, members of underrepresented groups felt that they were the center of others' attention when topics related to their group were discussed, and this experience was accompanied by negative emotions. Black participants reported that they would feel most "in the spotlight" when they were the only Black individual in a class in which the professor drew attention to their group with a provocative comment (Study 1). Black and Latino/Latina (Study 2) and female (Study 3) participants likewise reported that two confederates looked at them more when they heard (and believed the confederates had also heard) a recording that pertained to their group than when they heard a recording on a neutral topic—despite the fact that the confederates' gaze did not differ across conditions. We discuss these results in light of research on solo status and targeted social referencing.

## Keywords

intergroup interaction, solo status, social referencing, spotlight effect

Speaking on the news program "60 Minutes," Jeremy Richardson, a high school student from Minnesota, described the uncomfortable experience of being the only Black student in his class while his teacher read aloud from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, a text that makes use of the "n-word": "The teacher read it out loud to everyone, then everyone's looking at me like, 'Oh, well, she just said that. What are you gonna do about it?'" (Schneider, 2011). Readers may well recognize Jeremy's experience: A remark about a particular social group renders that group salient, leading those who are members of the group to feel as though all eyes are upon them, and to feel a sudden and unwelcome responsibility to respond on behalf of their group.

We investigate whether members of minority groups do indeed experience the sensation of being conspicuous in such moments and whether that experience is unpleasant. Our primary point of departure is research on *targeted social referencing*, which shows that members of minority groups often are the targets of others' attention when topics related to their group membership are discussed. In one study, participants looked more at a Black individual when they heard another, non-Black, individual make a potentially offensive remark about affirmative action, but did so only when they believed the Black individual had heard the remark as well (Crosby, Monin, & Richardson, 2008). Because minority individuals may be seen as "experts" on matters related to their minority status (Essed, 1992; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998), it appears that others look to them and use their reactions to help them assess ambiguous situations accurately (Crosby & Monin, 2013; Czopp, 2011).

The present research turns the tables on this past work and explores the phenomenon not from the perspective of onlookers, but from the perspective of the *targets* of others' attention.

We ask whether, and to what extent, such individuals believe they are the focus of others' attention. Although it is conceivable that members of minority groups might expect others to look away when the topic of their group arises—perhaps assuming that others will seek to avoid awkward eye contact—several lines of research lead us to the opposite prediction. First, research on *solo status* indicates that individuals who are the sole representative of a social group (e.g., Black students on mostly White college campuses) often feel chronically conspicuous and responsible for representing their group (Pollak & Neimann, 1998; Sekaquaptewa, Waldman, & Thompson, 2007). Second, research on the *spotlight effect* indicates that people commonly believe they are the target of others' attention and scrutiny—often more than is actually the case—when they feel especially salient or distinctive (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000; Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999).

Putting these lines of research together, we reasoned that an individual who is the lone representative of his or her social group may feel especially conspicuous when circumstances render that group, and his or her membership in it, salient—an experience that may often be unpleasant. We begin with a hypothetical scenario in which Black participants are asked to imagine being in such a situation and to indicate how conspicuous they would feel, along with their emotional reactions

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(Study 1). We then put the issue to a more stringent test in two laboratory experiments in which we ask whether Black and Latino/Latina (Study 2) and female (Study 3) participants feel that they are the focus of others' attention when the topic of their group arises, holding constant the extent to which others are actually looking at them (a procedure that allows us to assess whether or not participants overestimate the degree to which they are the focus of others' attention).

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

Forty-one Black students at Williams College, recruited via e-mail from several predominantly Black campus organizations, were offered a chance to win a US\$50 gift certificate to Amazon.com in exchange for completing an online survey. After excluding 4 non-Black respondents, the sample consisted of 12 males and 25 females.

#### Procedure

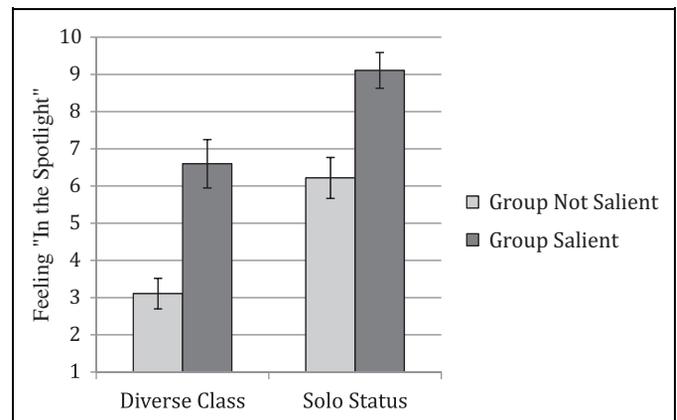
Participants were asked to imagine each of two scenarios (order counterbalanced across participants), one in which they were the only Black student in an otherwise White class ("solo status" condition) and one in which they were one of several Black students in a racially diverse class ("diverse" condition). In each case, participants were first asked to think about a typical day in class ("group not salient" condition), and then to imagine that the professor in each class made a provocative comment about race ("groupsalient" condition): "It's hard to imagine that people still argue that affirmative action is needed; given that we have a Black president, it seems clear that everyone now has the same opportunities to succeed, and people who fail to take these opportunities should stop blaming the system."

All participants thus considered four scenarios in a  $2 \times 2$  within-participant design. In each case, they indicated the extent to which they would feel they were "the focus of the other students' attention, as if there were a 'spotlight' shining down on you"; the extent to which they would feel "like you had to represent your racial group in class"; and the degree to which they would feel uncomfortable, worried, embarrassed, nervous, anxious, distracted, and conspicuous (with proud and happy included as fillers). Judgments were made on scales from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*).<sup>1</sup>

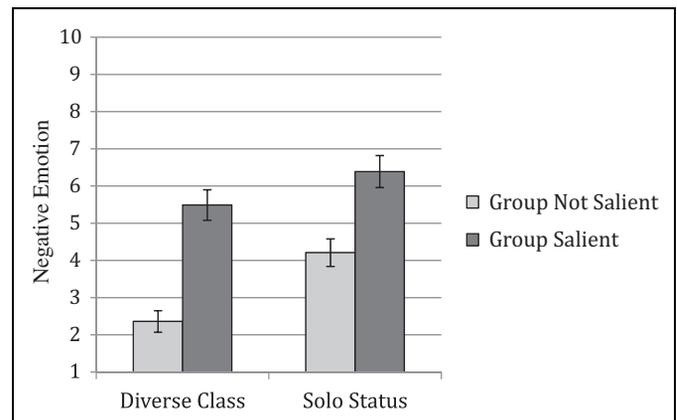
## Results

### Feeling in the Spotlight

A 2 (class composition: solo status vs. diverse)  $\times$  2 (group salience: group salient vs. not salient) within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the degree to which participants felt "in the spotlight" revealed significant main effects of both class



**Figure 1.** Feeling of being "in the spotlight" ( $\pm$  SE) by class type and group salience in Study 1. SE = standard error.

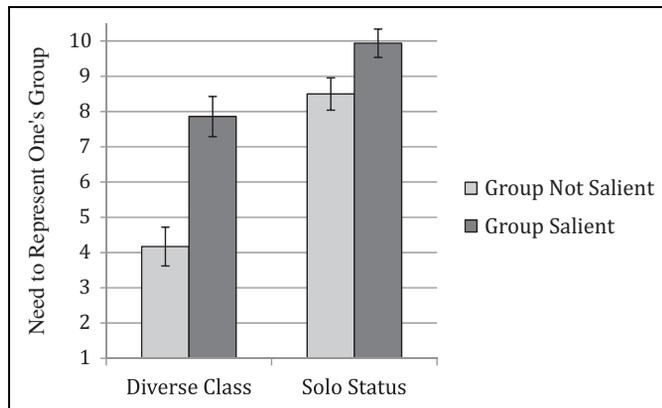


**Figure 2.** Negative emotion ( $\pm$  SE) by class type and group salience in Study 1. SE = standard error.

composition,  $F(1, 36) = 38.52, p < .001$ , and group salience,  $F(1, 36) = 53.94, p < .001$ , and no significant interaction,  $F(1, 36) < 1$ . Participants indicated that they would feel more in the spotlight after the professor's comment in both the diverse, paired  $t(36) = 5.19, d = .89$ , and solo status, paired  $t(36) = 6.16, d = 1.02$ , conditions,  $ps < .001$  (Figure 1).

### Experience in Class

We combined participants' responses for the seven negative emotions ( $\alpha$ s for the four conditions ranged from .84 to .88). A  $2 \times 2$  within-subjects ANOVA revealed significant main effects of both class composition,  $F(1, 36) = 38.73, p < .001$ , and group salience,  $F(1, 36) = 56.06, p < .001$ , and a significant interaction,  $F(1, 36) = 7.39, p = .01$ . Group salience increased negative emotions in both the diverse, paired  $t(36) = 8.03, d = 1.37$ , and solo status, paired  $t(36) = 5.42, d = .90$ , conditions,  $ps < .001$  (Figure 2), although as indicated by the interaction, this increase in negative emotions was stronger in the diverse condition. Similarly, an analysis of the degree to which participants felt they had to represent their group yielded



**Figure 3.** Feeling of representing one's group ( $\pm SE$ ) by class type and group salience in Study 1. *SE* = standard error.

significant main effects of both class composition,  $F(1, 35) = 52.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , and group salience,  $F(1, 35) = 49.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a significant interaction,  $F(1, 35) = 16.41$ ,  $p < .001$ . Group salience increased these ratings in both the diverse, paired  $t(35) = 6.53$ ,  $d = 1.09$ , and solo status, paired  $t(35) = 4.52$ ,  $d = .75$ , conditions,  $ps < .001$  (Figure 3), again with the interaction indicating a stronger effect of topic in the diverse class.

## Discussion

Participants in Study 1 who imagined that their minority group was rendered salient reported that they would experience an increased sense of being in the spotlight (with a corresponding sense of responsibility to represent their group and an increase in negative emotions). The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the accuracy of these intuitions. As noted earlier, individuals who feel that their appearance is especially salient often overestimate the extent to which they are the focus of others' attention (Gilovich et al., 2000). On the other hand, minority individuals often *are* the focus of others' attention when group-relevant topics arise (Crosby et al., 2008). Moreover, the experience of being singled out may inspire individuals to be especially attentive to their surroundings, rendering their perceptions not biased but *accurate*—Murphy, Steele, and Gross (2007) found that women who identified with math and science showed increased memory for details about a video in which women were numerically underrepresented in the domain.

Does the sense among minority individuals that all eyes are upon them when their group is salient thus represent an ego-centric bias (i.e., because they are so self-focused in such moments, they assume, incorrectly, that others are focused on them too), or does it represent a relatively accurate appraisal of their actual salience in the eyes of others? To address this question, we created a laboratory procedure in which we could manipulate participants' perceptions of group salience while holding constant the extent to which the other individuals present looked at them.

## Study 2

### Method

#### Participants

Eighty-two Williams College students were recruited from an introductory psychology course and via e-mails to the campus community, in exchange for either extra credit toward their course grade or US\$10. By a priori decision, we classified White individuals ( $n = 40$ ) as "majority participants" and individuals who were Black ( $n = 19$ ), Latino/Latina ( $n = 9$ ), or either half-Black or half-Latino/Latina ( $n = 2$ ) as "minority participants." Because the current research focuses on the response of ethnic minority participants to provocative comments about affirmative action, and because Asian Americans are often considered high-achieving "model minorities," we decided a priori to exclude Asian Americans ( $n = 11$ ) from analyses. After excluding 1 individual who did not report race, and 1 Black participant because of an equipment failure, the sample consisted of 31 males and 39 females.

#### Procedure

A White, female experimenter greeted each participant, along with two confederates (both White females), and explained that they would be listening to arguments about a social or political issue over headphones. She then escorted them to three chairs facing one another and said, "You have two tasks while you listen to these arguments: to formulate your own opinion about the issue and to learn about the other people in the study, including your impressions of their opinions on the issue. Although it might feel a little awkward, a good way to form impressions of others is to watch them while they listen to the arguments."

The experimenter then instructed the participants to don headphones and excused herself to an adjacent lab, where she started two recordings. One recording, played in the participant's headphones, contained statements about either carbon emissions (control condition) or affirmative action (race-relevant condition). The two versions of this recording were equal in length (approximately 2 min) and each contained statements expressing a variety of positions on the topic.

The other recording, played in both confederates' headphones, contained instructions informing each confederate (separately) where to look at each moment (e.g., "confederate one: look up"; "confederate two: look to participant"). Each confederate looked at the participant one third of the time and spent the balance of time looking at her counterpart and the surrounding laboratory. Care was taken to make this procedure appear as natural as possible and to preserve the illusion that the confederates were in fact hearing the same recording as the participant himself or herself (e.g., participant's and confederates' recordings contained synchronized instructions to raise their hand if they could hear the recording). Confederates were aware that the study involved how members of various groups experience the spotlight effect, but were blind to the specific

research hypothesis and, crucially, were blind to the participant's recording condition.

When the recordings were finished, each individual completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a number of filler items, intended to preserve the cover story (e.g., "How confident are you that you could guess the other participants' views on the topic you heard about?"). Of key interest, participants estimated the percentage of the time, while listening to the recording, that each of the other two individuals (i.e., the confederates) spent looking at them. Using an 11-point scale, they also indicated the degree to which they had felt "like the focus of others' attention, as if there were a spotlight shining down." Finally, participants indicated the degree to which they had felt lonely, self-conscious, singled out, and uncomfortable (embedded in confused, interested, and bored as fillers) while listening to the recording. These judgments were made on scales from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Finally, participants were taken to a separate lab room, probed for suspicion, and debriefed. No participants expressed suspicion about the presence of confederates.

## Results

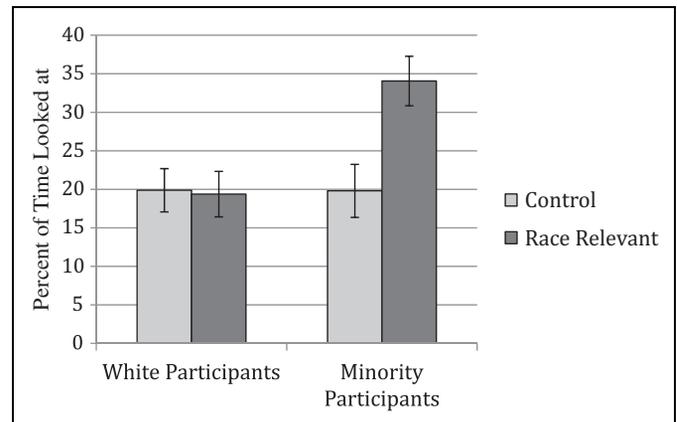
### Estimated Looking

To obtain a measure of how much participants believed they were the focus of others' attention, we averaged each participant's estimate of the percentage of time the other two "participants" spent looking at him or her. A 2 (participant race: White vs. minority)  $\times$  2 (recording: control vs. race relevant) ANOVA yielded significant main effects of both race,  $F(1, 66) = 5.51$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ , and recording,  $F(1, 66) = 4.89$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ , as well as a significant interaction,  $F(1, 66) = 5.63$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ . Minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording believed that the confederates looked at them more than did minority participants who heard the control recording,  $t(66) = 3.03$ ,  $p = .003$ . There was no such difference for White participants,  $t(66) < 1$ . In addition, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording felt that they were looked at significantly more than participants in the other three groups,  $t(66) = 3.91$ ,  $p < .001$  (Figure 4).

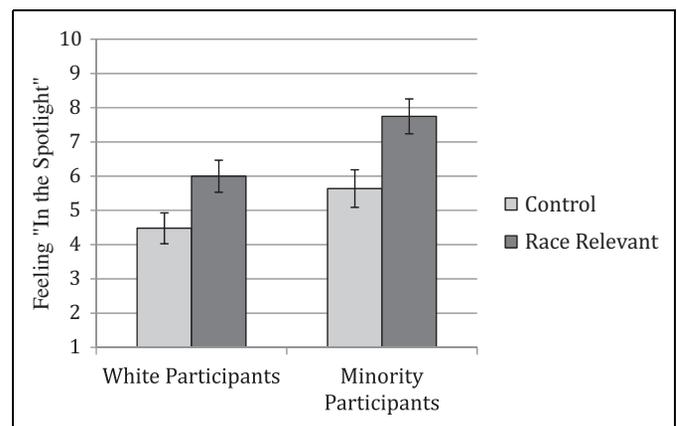
Of note, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording were quite accurate in their estimates of the extent to which the confederates looked at them: Their average estimate of 34.06% was nearly identical to the objectively correct answer of 33%,  $t(15) < 1$ . On the other hand, minority participants who heard the control recording, and White participants who heard either recording, tended to underestimate the extent to which the confederates looked at them (all  $M$ s were significantly different from 33% at  $p < .005$ ).

### Feeling in the Spotlight

An ANOVA on the degree to which participants felt in the spotlight revealed two significant main effects. Minority participants reported that they felt more in the spotlight than did White participants,  $F(1, 66) = 12.27$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ , and



**Figure 4.** Estimates of time looked at ( $\pm$  SE) by participant race and recording condition in Study 2. SE = standard error.

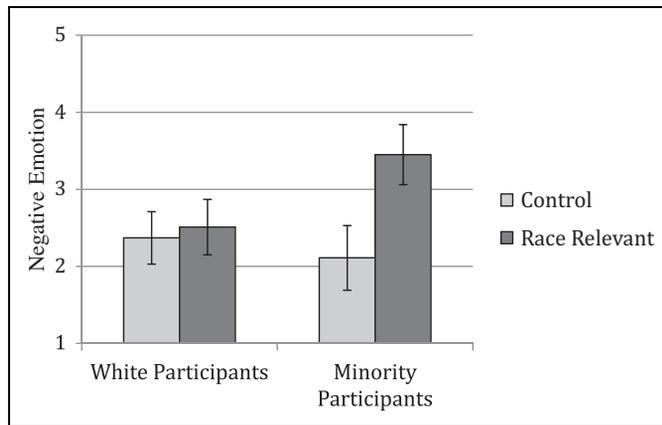


**Figure 5.** Degree of feeling "in the spotlight" ( $\pm$  SE) by participant race and recording condition in Study 2. SE = standard error.

participants who heard the race-relevant recording reported that they felt more in the spotlight than did those who heard the control recording,  $F(1, 66) = 12.27$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ . The interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 66) < 1$ . As seen in Figure 5, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording felt more in the spotlight than did minority participants who heard the control recording,  $t(66) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .02$ , and White participants who heard the race-relevant recording felt more in the spotlight than did White participants who heard the control recording,  $t(66) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .02$ . In addition, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording felt significantly more in the spotlight than White participants who heard the race-relevant recording,  $t(66) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .01$ . Finally, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording reported feeling in the spotlight significantly more than participants in the other three groups,  $t(66) = 4.09$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Negative Emotion

We combined responses for the four negative emotions ( $\alpha = .81$ ). An ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for



**Figure 6.** Level of self-reported negative emotion ( $\pm$  SE) by participant race and recording condition in Study 2. SE = standard error.

recording with all participants, on average, reporting higher negative emotion in the race-relevant condition than in the control condition,  $F(1, 66) = 3.90, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . There was no significant main effect of participant race,  $F(1, 66) < 1$ , and the interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 66) = 2.54, p = .12$ . However, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording experienced significantly more negative emotion than did minority participants who heard the control recording,  $t(66) = 2.36, p = .02$ . There was no such difference for White participants,  $t(66) < 1$ . In addition, minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording reported significantly more negative emotion than participants in the other three groups,  $t(66) = 2.52, p = .01$  (Figure 6).

## Discussion

Confederates were blind to recording condition and received instructions to look at all participants equally. Nevertheless, minority participants who heard a recording (that they believed others heard as well) that rendered their group salient believed that they were the focus of more attention than did minority participants who heard a recording that did not draw attention to their race, or White participants who heard either recording. Minority participants who heard the race-relevant recording did not overestimate the extent to which the confederates looked at them; to the contrary, they were quite accurate in their estimates. In addition, although the interaction of group salience and race did not achieve significance for the measure of feeling in the spotlight, race-salient minority participants did report feeling more in the spotlight than both nonrace-salient minority participants and White participants who heard either recording. Finally, the results of Study 2 replicated our earlier finding that minority participants' sense of being the focus of others' attention coincides with a relatively negative emotional experience. Study 3 was designed to broaden the generalizability of our findings by replicating these results with respect to gender rather than race.

## Study 3

### Method

#### Participants

One hundred and fifty-four<sup>2</sup> Williams College students were recruited from an introductory psychology course in exchange for extra credit toward their course grade. After excluding 8 individuals who expressed suspicion about the use of confederates, the final sample consisted of 73 males and 73 females: 91 White, 12 Black, 18 Asian or Asian American, 17 Latino/Latina, and 8 multiracial individuals.

#### Procedure

The procedure was identical to Study 2 with two exceptions: Both the experimenter and the two confederates were White males, and, in order to make gender salient, we replaced the affirmative action recording with a similar recording about the causes of women's underrepresentation in science, technology, engineering, and math.

## Results

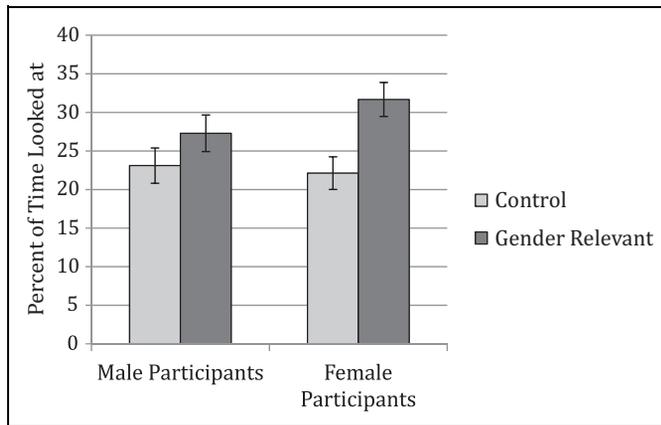
### Estimated Looking

We again averaged each participant's estimate of the percentage of time the other two "participants" spent looking at him or her. A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female)  $\times$  2 (recording: control vs. gender relevant) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of recording topic,  $F(1, 142) = 9.34, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .06$ , but no main effect of participant gender,  $F(1, 142) < 1$ , and no significant interaction,  $F(1, 142) = 1.42, p = .24, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . However, female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording estimated that they had received more attention than did female participants who heard the control recording,  $t(142) = 3.00, p = .003$ . There was no such difference for male participants,  $t(142) = 1.32, p = .19$ . In addition, female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording estimated that they were looked at significantly more than participants in the other three groups,  $t(142) = 2.82, p = .005$  (Figure 7).

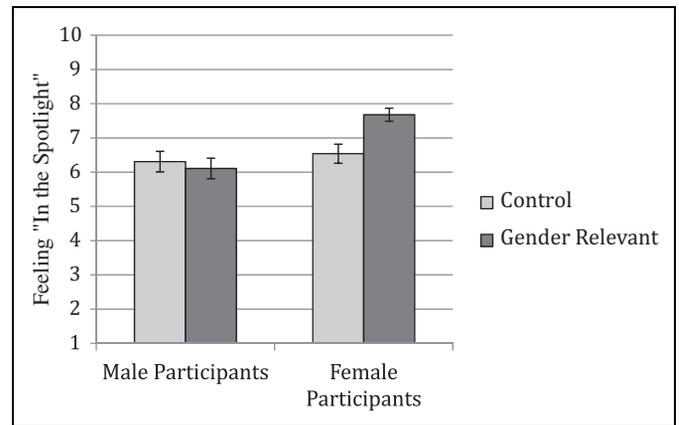
Although male and female participants who heard the control recording, and male participants who heard the gender-relevant recording, significantly underestimated the extent to which the confederates looked at them (all  $p$ 's  $< .05$ ), female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording were quite accurate in their estimates of the extent to which the confederates looked at them: Their estimate of 31.68% was nearly identical to the objectively correct answer of 33%,  $t(33) < 1$ .

### Feeling in the Spotlight

An ANOVA on the degree to which participants felt in the spotlight revealed a main effect of participant gender,  $F(1, 142) = 10.56, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ , a marginally significant main effect



**Figure 7.** Estimates of time looked at ( $\pm SE$ ) by participant gender and recording condition in Study 3. *SE* = standard error.



**Figure 8.** Degree of feeling "in the spotlight" ( $\pm SE$ ) by participant gender and recording condition in Study 3. *SE* = standard error.

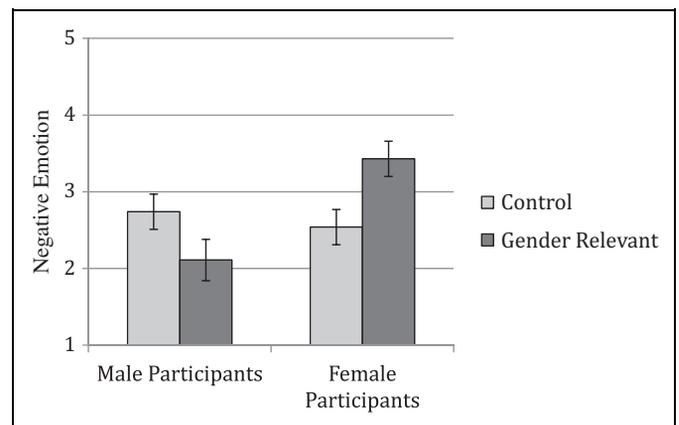
of recording,  $F(1, 142) = 2.83, p = .10, \eta_p^2 = .02$ , and a significant interaction  $F(1, 142) = 5.94, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . Female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording reported feeling in the spotlight significantly more than female participants who heard the control recording,  $t(65.83) = 3.38, p = .001$ , while there was no such difference for male participants,  $t(70.88) < 1$ . In addition, female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording reported feeling in the spotlight significantly more than participants in the other three groups,  $t(88.41) = 5.28, p < .001$  (Figure 8, degrees of freedom adjusted due to unequal variances).

### Negative Emotion

We again combined responses for the negative emotions ( $\alpha = .71$ ). An ANOVA revealed a main effect of participant gender,  $F(1, 142) = 5.28, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$ , and a significant interaction,  $F(1, 142) = 9.85, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . There was no significant main effect of recording topic,  $F(1, 142) < 1$ . Female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording reported significantly more negative emotion than did female participants who heard the control recording,  $t(142) = 2.58, p = .01$ , while men who heard the gender-relevant recording reported marginally *less* negative emotion than men who heard the control recording,  $t(142) = -1.86, p = .07$  (Figure 9). In addition, female participants who heard the gender-relevant recording reported feeling significantly more negative emotion than participants in the other three groups,  $t(142) = 3.36, p = .001$ .

### Discussion

The results of Study 3 provide a replication of Study 2 with respect to a different, traditionally underrepresented social group. Female participants who listened to a recording (that they believed others heard as well) that rendered their group salient felt more in the spotlight than did female participants who listened to a recording that did not draw attention to their gender, or male participants who listened to either recording.



**Figure 9.** Level of self-reported negative emotion ( $\pm SE$ ) by participant gender and recording condition in Study 3. *SE* = standard error.

Although the interaction of topic and gender was not significant for the measure of feeling looked at, women in the gender-relevant condition did report feeling looked at significantly more than women in the control condition, as well as men in both conditions. Like the minority participants in the race-relevant condition in Study 2, women in the gender-relevant condition were quite accurate in their estimates of the extent to which the confederates looked at them. And once again, the sense of being the focus of others' attention coincided with a relatively negative emotional experience.

### General Discussion

The results of three studies corroborate the experience of high school student Jeremy Richardson. Black participants reported that they would feel most in the spotlight when they were the only Black individual in a class in which the professor drew attention to their group (Study 1). Likewise, Black and Latino/Latina (Study 2) and female (Study 3) participants felt they received more attention when they heard (and believed the confederates had also heard) a recording that

pertained to their group than when they heard a recording on another, unrelated topic.

It is worth noting that the measure of feeling looked at produced a significant race by topic interaction in Study 2, but not a significant gender by topic interaction in Study 3. Similarly, the measure of feeling “in the spotlight” produced a significant gender by topic interaction in Study 3, but not a significant race by topic interaction in Study 2. This difference is surprising, as these measures were highly correlated ( $r = .57$  for Study 2 and  $.44$  for Study 3, both  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ). Perusal of Figures 5 and 7 suggests that the responses of majority group members may have affected the significance of these interactions. In particular, Whites in Study 2 reported significantly higher levels of feeling in the spotlight in the race-relevant condition. While topic did not have a significant effect on men's estimates of looking in Study 3, there appears to be a trend toward men in the gender-relevant condition reporting being looked at more than men in the control condition. Future research might investigate why majority group members may respond differently to these two operationalizations of detecting the attention of others. Importantly, in both studies, participants in the key cell (minority race-relevant and female gender-relevant) reported feeling looked at, and feeling in the spotlight, significantly more than participants in the three other cells, which is consistent with our predictions.

What leads minority individuals to feel so conspicuous when the topic of their group arises? One possibility is that they are so accustomed to being the center of attention in such moments (Crosby et al., 2008) that they overgeneralize and assume (perhaps incorrectly) that they are the focus of attention whenever a group-relevant topic is discussed. The mere mention of one's social group may make one feel self-conscious, increasing feelings of being in the social spotlight even when one is not (Gilovich et al., 2000). To elucidate this matter, future research should examine whether members of other groups also feel especially conspicuous when the topic of their group arises, including those whose group membership is relatively hidden (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963), and members of majority groups who find themselves occupying a solo status position (Craig & Rand, 1998). It may also be instructive to consider the effects of making a group salient in ways that are flattering rather than provocative or threatening.

Contrary to research on the spotlight effect, we found no evidence that participants overestimated the extent to which others looked at them. Instead, we found a tendency for most participants to *underestimate* the degree to which they were the focus of others' attention, coupled with a striking degree of accuracy among members of underrepresented groups who heard a recording pertaining to their group. Although it is possible that this accuracy is a mere coincidence, we believe it may well reflect accuracy stemming from careful observation of the confederates on the part of these participants. If so, our findings lend credence to previous research showing that making individuals mindful of the low numerical representation of their group in a

social setting renders them vigilant to cues associated with social identity threat, leading to enhanced observation of details of their physical surroundings (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007).

Ironically, then, the feeling of being in the spotlight may not always lead to bias; sometimes, it may inspire attentiveness to one's surroundings that can result, instead, in accuracy. In addition, our results are the first to show that the experience of being in the spotlight can be decidedly aversive. It was associated, in Study 1, with the sense of being burdened with a responsibility to represent one's group, and, in all the three studies, with negative emotions. It is worth noting that in Study 1, negative emotion and concern over representing one's group were significantly higher in the solo status condition than in the diverse condition, even on an “average day,” when no race-related comment had (yet) been made, and only intensified after the comment. Unfortunately, solo status is likely to be common for minority students at elite colleges; Black students comprise only 6% of students at the top 25 universities and only 5% at the top 25 liberal arts colleges (commondataset.org). The present studies add to existing research on the cognitive and emotional consequences of such solo status (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000, 2003; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003; Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002), and expand on it by identifying a particularly problematic nexus: solo status and a group-relevant topic.

Do our results imply that individuals are best advised to steer clear of sensitive topics such as race and gender that might lend themselves to a minority spotlight effect in the classroom or the workplace? We do not think so. Research has shown that addressing issues related to race and ethnicity directly is more effective for intergroup interaction than leaving such issues unaddressed or attempting to remain “colorblind” (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Instead, the most effective way to improve the experience of members of underrepresented groups is not to avoid group-related topics, but to work toward the ability to discuss them in an environment where there is a critical mass of minority group members present.

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## Notes

1. Participants also answered some exploratory items (not analyzed here) about class participation and the racial composition of their hometown and high school.
2. Data were collected in two waves ( $n = 58$  and  $n = 96$ ) to increase power. The pattern of results did not differ across the two waves.

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