

Recipients can recognize—and correct—positive bias

September 7 2023, by Mary Catt



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The beneficiaries of "positive bias" due to racial profiling and other types of favoritism are more likely to recognize it and take corrective action if their attention is drawn to the victims of that bias, new Cornell research has found.

There is evidence that people will do this even when it comes at a high cost, such as declining a promotion or an unfairly earned bonus, potentially leading to a fairer society, according to "[Recognizing and Correcting Positive Bias: The Salient Victim Effect](#)," published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Knowing there is a victim is central to that progression, the researchers said, noting that they built on initial studies that found that people who benefit from [bias](#) often don't consider that there were any victims of that bias.

"It's not like they don't care. People do care about others. But our natural reaction is to justify that we deserved a job promotion or other benefit. We accept positive events and don't ruminate about them like we do [negative events](#)," said Emily Zitek, associate professor in the ILR School and the paper's first author. "But we should try to remember that there could be potential victims. When we receive a benefit, there might be other people who deserve it instead. We should try to think about whether these undeserving victims may exist."

Zitek co-authored the paper with Laura Giurge, assistant professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Isaac Smith, associate professor at the Brigham Young University Marriott School of Business.

Most bias research focuses on the losing end of inequity—the victims of prejudice and discrimination, researchers said, but this paper examines positive bias, a common but understudied form of bias.

This research, involving more than 3,000 Americans over four years, probed people's reactions to hypothetical and behavioral situations in which they experienced positive bias. In one experiment, [white people](#) were more likely to report that they had benefited from bias after reading about victims of potential [racial profiling](#) in traffic, retail and travel scenarios. In another experiment, people were more likely to say they would reject a promotion offered because of a family connection when they were reminded of who was harmed by their benefit.

Public recognition of the unfairness of positive bias was piqued by the Black Lives Matter movement, the authors said. In 2020, for instance, entrepreneur Alexis Ohanian resigned from the board of Reddit and urged that a Black candidate replace him.

The research indicates that people might recognize and correct positive bias without the backdrop of a social movement. But first, the beneficiaries of positive bias need to have their attention drawn toward a victim to get them to realize that their favorable treatment was unfair.

Recognition of victims, instead of blame, motivates beneficiaries to consider the harm created by positive bias, Zitek said.

When beneficiaries consider the repercussions of positive bias, Zitek said, "They might think, 'hmm, I'm less excited about taking this job if I didn't deserve it.' They can reflect on what they've gotten at someone else's expense and come to their own conclusion on whether it's a problem or not."

The very prospect of a victim helped people think through the negative impact created by their gain and set the stage for speaking out to correct the injustice, she said.

While the studies didn't fully illuminate which explicit factors impact the

salient victim effect, researchers said, they suggest that the effect may exist across political orientations. Future research, they said, should examine how to use the effect in real-world interventions to recognize and correct positive bias.

"Just recognizing positive bias doesn't do anything for society. It's important to speak up or reject the unfair job offer, for example," Zitek said.

More information: Emily M. Zitek et al, Recognizing and correcting positive bias: The salient victim effect, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104522](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104522)

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Recipients can recognize—and correct—positive bias (2023, September 7) retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-09-recipients-recognizeand-correctpositive-bias.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.