How "It Gets Better": Effectively Communicating Support to Targets of Prejudice

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Abstract
What is said when communicating intergroup support to targets of prejudice, and how do targets react? We hypothesized that people not targeted by prejudice reference social connection (e.g., social support) more than social change (e.g., calling for a reduction in prejudice) in their supportive messages. However, we hypothesized that targets of prejudice would be more comforted by social change messages. We content coded naturalistic messages of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning teenagers from youtube.com (Study 1) and college undergraduates' statements (Study 2a) and found social connection messages more frequent than social change messages. Next, we explored targets' responses (Studies 2b-4b). Lesbian and gay participants rated social connection messages less comforting than social change messages (Study 3). Study 4 showed that only targets of prejudice distinguish social connection from social change messages in this way, versus non-targets. These results highlight the importance of studying the communication, content, and consequences of positive intergroup attitudes.

Members of groups not targeted by prejudice may hold egalitarian views (Livingston & Drwecki, 2007; Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011; Plant & Devine, 1998) and want to exhibit support for members of stigmatized groups who face prejudice. Relative to research on negative intergroup attitudes, little research has examined what these non-targeted individuals communicate in their *positive* intergroup messages to members of a group targeted by prejudice. Although this may only rarely occur in in-person interactions (Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009), the development of online forums for social communication (e.g., youtube.com) provides members of groups not directly targeted by bias a novel way to exhibit their intergroup attitudes. We investigated the content of positive intergroup communications directed at members of a group targeted by widespread prejudice. Specifically, we studied the types of messages communicated to youth who face expressions of explicit bias and bullying based on their actual or presumed sexual orientation.

What types of support messages might people want to communicate to targets of prejudice when these individuals face pervasive expressions of prejudice? The goal of the present research is to both examine the content of supportive intergroup messages produced by those who are not targeted by prejudice and to investigate the impact of these messages on targets of prejudice. Because this issue has been relatively

unexamined by research in social psychology, we first took the approach of content coding communications of this type. We explored naturalistic messages posted on youtube.com through the *#ItGetsBetter* channel (Study 1) as well as those elicited from college undergraduates (Study 2a). Next, we investigated how different types of messages are perceived by the target audience (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning [LGBTQ] youth, Studies 2b-4a) and how they are perceived by non-stigmatized individuals (i.e., heterosexuals, Study 4b).

Majority Group Members' Responses to Prejudice

There is a relative consensus in the social psychological literature about how majority group members respond to prejudice, indicating that direct disagreement following an expression of prejudice occurs only rarely (Ashburn-Nardo,

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Morris, & Goodwin, 2008; Kawakami et al., 2009). For example, White Americans who witnessed a fellow majority group member call an African American student a racial slur rarely responded and did not socially distance themselves from the ingroup member later (Kawakami et al., 2009). While majority group members may rarely respond to prejudice directly at the time it occurs, other response options may be available to them. Developments in online social media allow individuals to express their attitudes in diverse forums online with audiences ranging from their friends to total strangers. Because of this developing platform for expression, it is possible for members of groups who are not targeted by prejudice to exhibit their intergroup attitudes, positive or negative, in online forums. Prominent examples of this exist, such as Facebook.com campaigns and even youtube.com channels targeted toward addressing intergroup conflict (e.g., the *#ItGetsBetter* channel on youtube.com). Some work has begun to document the expression of negative intergroup attitudes online and the corresponding negative impact on minority group members (Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004), but to our knowledge research has not yet examined positive intergroup attitudes in online social communications.

We should note that this is a strikingly different interaction context from those typically studied in previous research on intergroup interactions and prejudice (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). For one, online social communications are not face-to-face interactions. When majority group members exhibit intergroup attitudes online, they do not necessarily know the individuals who compose their audience. Furthermore, majority group members communicating online, unlike those in experimental situations, are not required to address a single incident of bias or to confront a perpetrator of bias immediately following an event, but rather they can address the existence of prejudice and expressions of bias against a group more broadly. Given this, these communications may elucidate the types of anti-prejudice comfort messages that are most salient to those who are not targeted by prejudice. The online communication context also lacks immediate feedback (positive or negative) for members of groups not targeted by prejudice, and therefore may be less risky in some respects. In these ways, the online communication context may reduce or circumvent some of the barriers to majority group members' speaking up to condemn prejudice in in-person interactions, such as their lower likelihood of identifying bias when it occurs (McConahay, 1986; Todd, Bodenhausen, & Galinsky, 2012), their generalized aversion to discussing group memberships (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), and concerns about their standing to speak up in such situations and about the possibility of coming across as biased themselves (Crosby, Monin, & Richardson, 2008; Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006;

Vorauer et al., 1998). By examining the online social interaction context more directly, the present research may contribute to a fuller understanding of the changing dynamics of intergroup relations.

Majority Group Members' Messages of Support

What might be important in communicating support to members of groups targeted by prejudice? Although the online communication context differs from contexts previously examined, we took cues from extant research in forming our hypothesis. Studies have shown that majority group members value interpersonal liking in cross-group interactions (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010) and that after they have been in conflict with another group, higher status individuals focus on restoring social relations (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2012). Related research shows that liking is associated with communion (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). Communal characteristics have to do with an individual exhibiting concern for others and relationships, while agentic characteristics focus on individual expression or efficacy. Communion tends to be associated with low-status groups (e.g., females, low socioeconomic status) while agency tends to be associated with high-status groups (e.g., males, high socioeconomic status; Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). For instance, in recommendation letters for faculty positions, members of stigmatized groups are described by close others as having more communal characteristics, although individuals described as agentic receive more positive hiring evaluations (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009). Integrating these findings into a broader theoretical perspective, the extant research suggests that membership in high-status groups engenders a focus on social relations in interactions with stigmatized and low-status group members.

Informed by the work reviewed above, we proposed that two themes may emerge when people want to comfort those who face bias. First, themes associated with restoring social relations, communion, expressing concern, and exhibiting liking might be prevalent. In this particular online communication context, we labeled messages communicating this theme as *social connection* messages. These messages express a sense of solidarity with those who experience prejudice and emphasize that the social rejection that others exhibit is not universal. Second, themes associated with agentic behavior, affording a sense of efficacy, and exhibiting respect might be prevalent. We labeled these as *social change* messages, describing the need for a reduction in the expression of prejudice and advocating broad-scale shifts in the attitudes of society.[1] Calls for individual targets to take action in response to prejudice were not expected given that such action could risk social and physical backlash against

targets of prejudice. We focused on these two themes out of the diverse other messages that majority group members could possibly express because both messages argue against the expression of prejudice, but in different ways. The social connection message may focus on a more immediate aspect of the problem, the interpersonal rejection inherent in expressing prejudice, while the social change message may be more broad, focusing on the prevalence of biased attitudes across society.

Both of these themes are positive and might together compose an ideal message of support and comfort to targets of prejudice. However, we theorize that majority group members focus on maintaining positive relations in their interactions with subordinate group members (e.g., liking, Bergsieker et al., 2010; restoring relations after conflict, Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2012; communion, Madera et al., 2009). Our first prediction extends this previous work: We hypothesized that members of groups not targeted by prejudice would be more likely to express social connection, rather than social change, themes in their expressions of comfort toward targets of prejudice.

The Effectiveness of Majority Group Members' Messages of Support

In addition to examining the content of positive intergroup messages, we investigated how the intended audience, youth targeted by anti-LGBTQ prejudice, react to these messages. As noted, expressions of support on the part of majority group members are rare, and therefore may be unexpected from the perspective of stigmatized individuals. Given this, we hypothesized that all positive intergroup communications would be comforting to members of the group targeted by prejudice. However, we hypothesized that social connection messages would be less comforting to stigmatized individuals than social change messages. It may seem ironic that we hypothesized that social connection messages would be more frequent in high-status individual's communications and that these messages would also be less comforting to members of stigmatized groups. We again based these hypotheses on documented differences in majority and minority group members' perspectives regarding intergroup interactions. After intergroup conflict, victims focus on empowerment while transgressors focus on restoring social relations (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2012). Moreover, members of minority groups tend to focus on respect more than liking in cross-group interactions, while majority group members focus more on liking than respect (Bergsieker et al., 2010).

Overview of Studies

We tested our hypotheses by content coding naturalistic messages of support for targets of prejudice posted online through youtube.com (Study 1) and elicited from college undergraduates (Study 2a). In study 2b, we tested whether social connection messages communicate more liking while social change messages communicate more agency by investigating lesbian, gay, and bisexual judges' ratings of the support messages generated in Study 2a.

Next, we examined the effectiveness of these support messages. Although we expected all messages to have positive effects, we hypothesized that targets of prejudice would view social connection messages as less comforting than social change messages. We tested this hypothesis in Studies 3 and 4a, by having self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning participants evaluate either a social connection–focused or a social change–focused message. Finally, to examine whether majority group members are attuned to how these messages affect members of the stigmatized group, in Study 4b we examined heterosexuals' perceptions of the two messages.

Study 1

In Study 1, we explored the spontaneous messages of comfort that people communicated to members of groups targeted by bias, in this case LGBTQ teenagers, in a naturalistic data set publicly available on youtube.com. Our goal was to examine the frequency of more social connection versus more social change-oriented content, and we predicted that social connection messages would be more common than social change messages.

Method

Procedure. Youtube.com is an online video-hosting site where users can post videos on any topic of their choosing. Users identify common topics using a "#topic" format and "channels" can be created to host videos pertaining to a single topic using this notation. Through this medium, we accessed a publicly available data set on the *#ItGetsBetter* channel on youtube.com, December 1, 2010. We selected the 50 most viewed videos at that time (representing 15,690,178 user experiences). These videos included adults with a diverse range of sexual orientations, but because these individuals were financially and socially successful adults (e.g., celebrities, political figures, employees at prominent companies), we reasoned that in this context they did not represent targets of prejudice against LGBTQ youth.[2]

Data coding. Two independent coders viewed the messages communicated to the target audience (i.e., LGBTQ teenagers) and rated them for three key themes. To confirm that the videos represented messages of comfort, the raters first coded for explicit expressions of comfort (e.g., "I want you to know that it gets better"). In addition, the raters coded for the two key dimensions of interest: social connection messages, such as the idea that others will be accepting of LGBTQ individuals (e.g., "You will find and you will make

Frequency of Messages
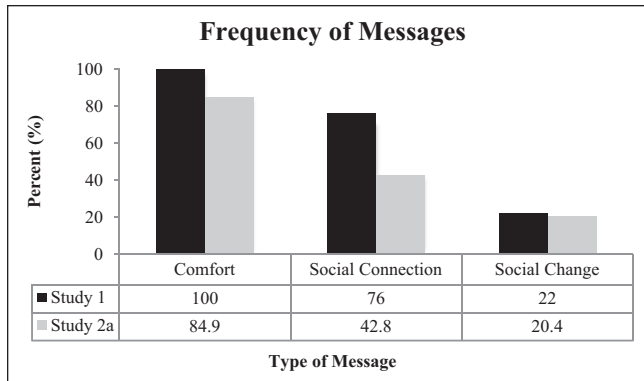
Figure 1. Frequency of comfort, social connection, and social change themes in Studies 1 and 2a.
Note. Social connection content was more frequent than social change content in the messages of support that people not targeted by prejudice expressed.

new friends who will understand you"), and social change messages, such as the idea that people and/or prejudice can, should, or will change (e.g., "the attitudes of society will change"). For the latter two codes, the coders were instructed to count both explicitly stated and implicitly communicated messages (e.g., through personal stories). The coders achieved adequate reliability (kappas > .75, percent agreement > 90%) and then met to resolve differences of opinion.

Results

As expected, all of the videos (100%) communicated comfort, indicating that the videos could, in fact, serve as examples of supportive messages from non-targeted to targeted individuals. A greater than chance (50%) number communicated the social connection message that others would be accepting, 76%, $\chi^2 = 3.9$, $p < .05$ (representing 11,453,829.94 user experiences). Statements classified as qualifying for the social connection code included explicit statements expressing that the speaker cared for audience members, references to others (in general) who care, and mention of caring future others (e.g., friends to be found in college and later, future relationship partners).[3] Relatively few, 22%, communicated the social change message that people and/or prejudice can, should, or will change (representing 5,491,562.3 user experiences). This represented a significantly lower than chance rate, $\chi^2 = 15.68$, $p < .01$. Statements classified as qualifying for the social change code included stories describing schoolmates' negative attitudes shifting for the better over the years, family members changing their attitudes, and explicit statements calling for societal attitudes to change. Together, these results show that non-targets' messages of support to LGBTQ teenagers targeted by bias and bullying were more characterized by social connection than social change messages (see Figure 1).

Study 2a

Study 1 provides initial support from a naturalistic data set to illustrate that members of groups not targeted by prejudice are more likely to communicate social connection, rather than social change, themes in their messages of comfort to members of stigmatized groups. Because this was a naturalistic, user-generated data set, however, many characteristics varied such as the number of speakers, their expressed or presumed sexual orientation, and so on. Therefore, we conducted Study 2a to ensure that any patterns found in the videotaped messages from Study 1 were not idiosyncratic to the online context or people's self-directed choice to post a video. We elicited written "It Gets Better" messages from undergraduates and coded the frequency of comfort, social connection, and social change themes.

Method

Participants. One hundred seventy-nine self-identified heterosexual undergraduates (114 female, 60 male, 5 unreported, 9 African Americans, 37 South and East Asian Americans, 19 Latino Americans, 72 European Americans, and 42 mixed/multi-racial) at a private, west-coast university participated in the survey, which was embedded in a mass testing session.

Procedure. We informed participants about the bias and bullying that teenagers face based on their actual or presumed sexual orientation and asked them to write the message of support that they would communicate, "to remind teenagers in the LGBTQ community that it WILL get better." The instructions clearly indicated that participants' goal was to provide a supportive and comforting message to the outgroup. Participants were given a maximum of 3 minutes to write a message saying what they would communicate to these teenagers faced with expressions of bias.[4] Following the procedure described in Study 1, two independent coders read these messages and coded whether they included (a) explicit expressions of comfort, as an instruction check; (b) the social connection message that others will be accepting of LGBTQ individuals; and (c) the social change message that people and/or prejudice can, should, or will change (kappas ≥ .7, percent agreement > 87%).

Results

The results conceptually replicated Study 1. A majority of participants communicated comfort, 84.9%, at a level greater than chance (50%), $\chi^2 = 87.29$, $p < .01$. Of the participants who communicated this positive intergroup message, a substantial number also communicated the social connection message that others would be accepting, 42.8%, at a rate marginally different from chance, $\chi^2 = 3.18$, $p = .074$. Social change messages were still the least frequent among those

who communicated a supportive message, 20.4%, at well below chance levels, $\chi^2 = 53.29$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 1). Thus, the overall pattern again revealed that among heterosexual participants with the goal of providing a message of intergroup support, social connection messages were more frequent than social change ones.

We include examples to illustrate the content codes here. One participant whose response was coded as containing only a comfort message stated,

> You can't let all of the criticism and negative comments get you down. It truly doesn't matter what people think of you if you are happy with who you are. There is nothing wrong with being yourself, so don't let anyone tell you different. If you can learn who you are and accept yourself now, you will make your life much easier because it only gets better as you move through life. It may seem like a struggle now, but by knowing that everything WILL get better, you can remain hopeful and enthusiastic for the future.

A message coded as containing social connection content (in addition to comfort) stated,

> It gets better. These tough times will not last. Though I haven't experienced what you are going through personally, one of my best friends in college is gay. He had to hide the fact that he was gay in fear of getting beaten up in his tough high school. In college, he's found a great group of friends that support him and accept him just as he is. It gets better, I promise. Once you get into college, into the real world, anywhere but high school, it will get better. Just get through this period knowing that better times are ahead.

The theme coded least frequently was the social change message. For example, this participants' statement of comfort emphasizing that people can and will change:

> The bullying and getting made fun of that you may face in your youth or in high school will soon go away. As people grow up, they care less about differences such as sexual orientation, and more about individual people's personalities because they no longer feel the need to put someone else down to make themselves feel better. Once people grow up and feel comfortable in their own shoes, they will let you feel comfortable in yours. Just get through these difficult teen years. It will get better.

Study 2b

Studies 1 and 2a supported the hypothesis that members of groups not targeted by prejudice are more likely to express themes having to do with social connection rather than social change in their messages of comfort to targets of prejudice. We predicted this pattern based on extant literatures suggesting that high-status or majority group members focus more on maintaining positive social relations with rather than affording efficacy to members of stigmatized groups (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Conway et al., 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Madera

et al., 2009; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2012). Before including messages of intergroup support among the ways in which high-status or majority group members focus on social relations rather than agency in dealings with subordinate or minority group members, it is important to confirm that social connection messages do, in fact, communicate more of a sense of liking and less of a sense of agency to perceivers than social change messages. To further investigate this, in Study 2b, we had independent judges read each of the 179 messages produced in Study 2a and rate how much they communicated a sense of liking, respect, and efficacy (i.e., the idea that bias can be reduced). We predicted that messages coded as social connection would communicate greater liking, less respect, and less of a sense that bias can be reduced than those coded as social change.

Method

Procedure. We circulated advertisements for paid coders at a private, west-coast university. The advertisements specified that coders must self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual undergraduates. Three independent coders were hired for the project: a gay male, a lesbian female, and a bisexual male. The coding procedure was modeled on previous research (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010; Weisbuch, Pauker, & Ambady, 2009). We provided coders with the instructions that participants received in Study 2a, making clear that the participants had been instructed to provide messages to teens who face bias against their actual or presumed sexual orientation. Coders then underwent a 15-min training session. In this training, coders were presented with 6 example messages that were created for the training (i.e., none represented statements generated in Study 2a). The coders' task was to discuss the examples and come to a consensus about how they would be rated on the three dimensions of interest (see below).

After the 15-min training session, the coders entered separate lab rooms where they completed the rest of their task without further discussion or interaction. The coders' task was to rate all 179 statements for how much each Study 2a participant had communicated (a) "the sense that LGBTQ individuals are liked," (b) "the sense that LGBTQ individuals are respected," (c) "that bias against LGBTQ individuals can be reduced," (response scales: not at all "1"—extremely "7"). The order of these coding dimensions was randomized across 3 surveys, one for each rating dimension, which presented each statement from Study 2a in randomized order. Thus, coders rated all 179 statements on one randomly selected dimension, then repeated this process twice more with the other two judgment dimensions.

Results

The coders' judgments were reliable: liked $\propto = .80$, respected $\propto = .72$, reduce bias $\propto = .88$. Therefore, we composed mean

ratings of how much each message communicated that LGBTQ individuals are liked, that LGBTQ individuals are respected, and that bias against LGBTQ individuals can be reduced.

From our theoretical perspective, we would expect the statements coded in Study 2a as containing social connection content ($n = 56$) to communicate more about liking but less about respect or reducing bias than the statements coded as containing social change content ($n = 21$). We should note that an additional 9 messages (out of 179) were coded as containing both social connection and social change content, and therefore these messages were not included in this primary analysis.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted independent samples t tests predicting liking, respect, and reducing bias as a function of the Study 2a codes (social connection vs. social change). As predicted, messages coded as containing social connection content ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.23$) were judged as communicating that LGBTQ individuals are liked to a greater degree than messages coded as containing social change content ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .86$), $t(51.14) = 2.92$, $p = .005$. Also as predicted, social connection messages ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .92$) were significantly less likely to be rated as communicating that bias can be reduced than the social change messages ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(28.10) = 9.92$, $p < .0001$. However, we found no differences on ratings of how much the messages communicated the sense that LGBTQ individuals are respected, $p = .64$. This result suggests that both messages of connection and change might communicate respect.

Albeit a small sample, the 9 messages containing both themes allow for an exploratory analysis to assess the consequences of both versus only one theme for judges' perceptions. We conducted one-way ANOVAs (connection, change, both) with contrasts to investigate how the inclusion of both themes influenced judges' ratings of liking, respect, and reducing bias. For judges' ratings of how much the messages communicated that LGBTQ individuals are liked, the overall test was significant, $F(2, 83) = 3.10$, $p = .05$. A significant contrast was found between messages containing social connection versus social change content. Messages coded as containing both themes ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.20$) were not rated as significantly different on liking from those rated as social connection only, $p = .35$, or social change only, $p = .48$. For judges' ratings of how much the messages communicated that LGBTQ individuals are respected, the overall test was non-significant, $p = .71$, as were all contrasts, ps > .41 ($M_{both} = 3.15$, $SD_{both} = 1.08$). Evaluating the effect of both messages ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.16$) on judges' ratings of how much the statements communicated that bias against LGBTQ individuals can be changed yielded a significant overall effect, $F(2, 83) = 79.95$, $p < .0001$. Contrasts revealed that messages coded as social connection were rated as communicating that bias can be reduced significantly less than messages that contained both themes, $t(83) = 7.89$, $p < .0001$. Messages classified as having both themes were not rated as
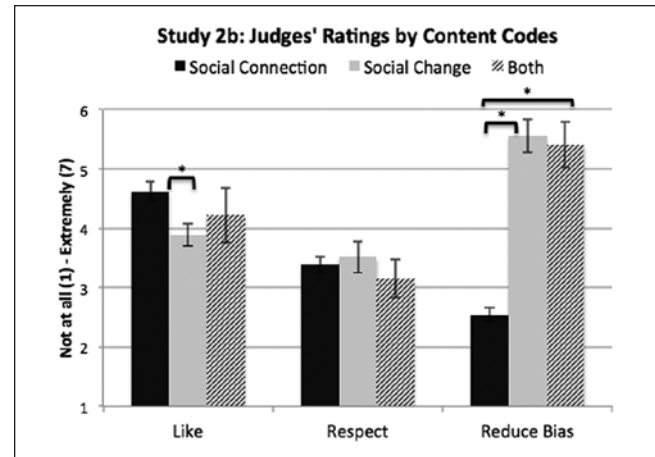
Figure 2. Judges' ratings of how much intergroup support messages communicated a sense of liking, respect, and social change in Study 2b.
Note. Judges rated messages coded as social connection as communicating more liking than those coded as social change. No differences were found in judges' ratings of respect. Messages coded as social change or both were rated as communicating that bias can be reduced to a greater degree than messages coded as social connection. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

significantly different from those coded communicating social change, $p = .72$ (see Figure 2).

Study 3

Studies 1 to 2a document that social connection themes are more prevalent than social change themes in majority group members' messages of support. Moreover, judges' ratings of the 179 messages generated in Study 2a illustrate that those messages categorized as containing social connection content communicate a greater sense of liking while those messages categorized as containing social change content communicate a greater sense that prejudice against the targeted group can change. Judges perceived no differences in how much of a sense of respect the two types of messages communicated.

While the goal of these messages was to exhibit support for LGBTQ youth targeted by prejudice, Studies 1 to 2 provide little insight into their effectiveness. We expected all messages to be rated as comforting overall given that they are expressions of intergroup support. However, based on work discussed above (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2012), we hypothesized that social connection messages would be less successful than social change messages in achieving the goal of these communications, which was to provide a sense of comfort to members of the group targeted by bias.

Method

Participants. Thirty self-identified lesbian and gay undergraduates (15 male, 15 female; $M_{age} = 27.4$, $SD_{age} = 3.8$)[5]

who were enrolled in a national subject pool participated for pay.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to read either a more social change–oriented or more social connection–oriented message. Participants then rated how comforting the message was (five items, e.g., "this message is comforting," α = .6) on scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) and were debriefed.

Materials. To manipulate the message that participants read but keep the content authentic, we selected phrases from one of the videotaped messages in Study 1a (Burns, 2010) that was coded as containing all three key messages. To maintain the overarching goal of the message across conditions, we included an expression of comfort in both sets of text, for example, "I know that the people in your household or in your school may not understand you . . . but I want you to know that it gets better." In the social change condition, the passage of text ended with a message communicating that bias can be reduced, that is, "the attitudes of society will change," while in the social connection condition the passage ended with the message that others will be accepting, that is, "You will never have to deal with those jerks again if you don't want to. You will find and you will make new friends who will understand you." The speaker's sexual orientation was not stated in the study materials.

We pilot tested these manipulations with a sample of 58 heterosexual undergraduates (19 males, 35 females, 4 unreported), who participated for course credit. Participants read one of the two manipulations and indicated the degree to which it communicated various themes. The manipulations were rated as equal on expressing the themes of "life gets better over time" and "bias against LGBTQ youth is harmful," (*p*s > .3). However, the social change manipulation was rated as expressing the themes of "people who express bias against LGBTQ youth can change," and "society's attitudes toward LGBTQ youth can change," significantly more than the social connection condition (*p*s < .05). In contrast, the social connection manipulation was rated as expressing the theme that "LGBTQ youth can find others who will not express bias against them," significantly more than the social change condition (*p* < .01).

Results

The messages were overall rated as comforting (i.e., ratings were significantly above the midpoint of the scale), $t(29) = 21.18$, $p < .01$, indicating that we were successful in maintaining the overarching goal of exposing participants to supportive content. However, participants in the social change condition, $M = 5.91$, $SD = .32$, found this message significantly more comforting than those in the social connection condition, $M = 5.59$, $SD = .52$, $t(28) = 2.04$, $p = .05$, $d = .74$. These results indicate that social change content

provided added comfort to members of groups targeted by bias, above and beyond the positive effects of social connection messages.

Study 4

The results of Study 3 illustrate that those targeted by bias distinguish between social change versus social connection messages, finding a social change message more comforting than a social connection message. These results provide support for our hypothesis that social change messages might be particularly meaningful to targets of bias. In Study 4, we examined whether both targets of bias (Study 4a) and those who are not targeted (Study 4b) respond to these messages in the same manner. We hypothesized that only those to whom these messages are directed (i.e., targets of bias) would rate the social change message as more comforting than the social connection message. We expected those not targeted by bias to not distinguish between the two messages and instead to view both messages as equally comforting.

Method

Participants. For both Study 4a and 4b, we first recruited undergraduate participants at a private, west-coast university and then adults in a matching age range through www.mTurk. com. For the on-campus participants, we approached individuals near eateries, dormitories, and student and community centers, and asked them to participate in a short online survey on an iPad, for which they would be entered into a drawing for one of five $10 amazon.com gift cards. For the online participants, we invited mTurk workers to complete a pre-screening questionnaire in which they indicated their age and sexual orientation. From that sample, all who identified as LGBTQ and a random selection of those who identified as heterosexual were invited to complete a short study for $0.50 if their age range matched that of our undergraduate sample (i.e., 18-30 years of age). We restricted the age range so that our participant pool was similar to the target audience of the messages that were presented (i.e., LGBTQ youth).

For Study 4a, 81 participants who identified as LGBQ responded. Of these, 10 were excluded because they failed to complete the study in good faith.[6] Thus, 71 LGBQ respondents were included in the final sample (42 males, 27 females, 2 unreported; 8 African Americans, 6 East and South Asian Americans, 36 European Americans, 13 Latino Americans, 1 Native American, 5 mixed/multiracial individuals, and 2 unreported; $M_{age} = 20.58$, $SD_{age} = 1.62$).

For Study 4b, 137 participants who identified as heterosexual responded. Of these, 7 were excluded because they failed to complete the study in good faith.[6] Thus, 130 heterosexual participants were included in the final sample (60 males, 69 females, 1 unreported; 16 African Americans, 22 East and South Asian Americans, 57 European Americans, 20 Latino Americans, 2 Native American, 12 mixed/

multiracial individuals, and 1 unreported; M_{age} = 20.62, SD_{age} = 2.33).

In addition, five participants who did not report sexual orientation on their survey were excluded.

Procedure. The procedure was the same across studies 4a and 4b. As in Study 3, participants were randomly assigned to read either a social change or social connection message using the manipulations described above. Participants then rated how comforting the message was on a four-item scale (α = .74) and were debriefed. This scale included all but one item used in Study 3. This item was excluded because it referred to the experiences of LGBTQ individuals directly and therefore heterosexual participants' ratings on this item would not have been interpretable.

Results

Study 4a. Replicating Study 3 with a larger sample and providing additional support for our hypothesis, an independent samples *t* test confirmed that LGBQ participants rated the social change message (M = 5.25, SD = .95) as significantly more comforting than the social connection message (M = 4.7, SD = 1.33), $t(69)$ = −2.02, p = .047, d = .49. Although the predicted differences were found, we should also note that overall LGBQ participants rated both messages as comforting, significantly above the midpoint of the scale (one sample *t* test, $t(70)$ = 6.97, p < .001).

Study 4b. An independent samples *t* test found no differences between heterosexual participants' ratings of the social change message (M = 4.90, SD = .98) and the social connection message (M = 5.04, SD = .87), $t(128)$ = .81, p = .42. Overall, both messages were viewed as significantly comforting by heterosexuals (one sample *t* test, $t(129)$ = 11.88, p < .001; see Figure 3).

Comparing Studies 4a and 4b

We followed the meta-analytic significance testing procedure outlined by Rosenthal and Rosnow (1991)[7] to compare the results of Studies 4a and 4b. This analysis yielded a Z of 1.98 and associated *p* values of .024 (one-tailed) or .048 (two-tailed). These *p* values indicate that the results of Studies 4a and 4b can be considered significantly different from one another, supporting the conclusion that gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants responded differently to the social connection versus social change messages, while heterosexual participants did not.

General Discussion

The present research begins to explore the under-studied questions of how people not targeted by bias communicate positive intergroup attitudes, and how effective those messages are
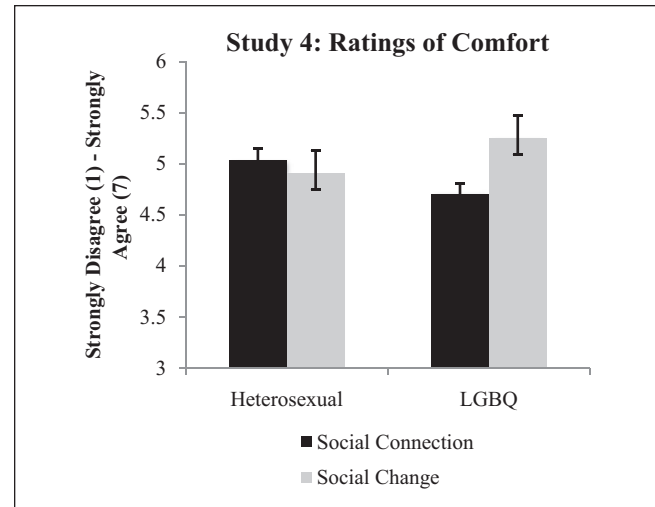
Figure 3. Ratings of social connection versus social change messages by heterosexual and LGBQ participants in Study 4a-4b.
Note. LGBQ participants rated the social connection message as less comforting than the social change message while heterosexual participants did not distinguish between the two. Error bars represent standard errors of the means.

among people who are targeted by bias. A content coding of naturalistic online communications (Study 1) and messages from undergraduates (Study 2a) reveal that when communicating intergroup support, social connection messages are more common than messages about social change. Majority group members focused more on contradicting the social rejection inherent in prejudice with an emphasis on social connection and liking, rather than addressing the fact that social change is possible and prejudice can be reduced. We had predicted this pattern based on a body of extant research showing that majority versus minority group membership is associated with a differential focus on positive social relations versus agency and empowerment. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual judges perceived these messages accordingly, rating the pool of social connection messages as communicating more of a sense of liking and less of a sense that bias against their groups can be changed, as compared with the pool of social change messages (Study 2b).

Together these findings highlight a paradox: The express purpose of these messages was to contradict prevalent bias against LGBTQ youth, and yet the frequency of positive messages explicitly calling for bias to be reduced was relatively low. This raises the possibility that, because they often lack clear social change content, majority group members' messages of intergroup support might function to largely maintain the status quo in society. In this way, the present research extends previous work illustrating that majority group members' interactions with minorities may, perhaps unintentionally, contribute to legitimizing the extant social system to the detriment of those in lower status positions (Jost & Kay, 2005; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, &

Mosso, 2005; Madera et al., 2009). Given that messages about change may empower targets to express themselves in the face of bias when both social costs and potential risks are low (Rattan & Dweck, 2010), the low frequency of social change-oriented messages may lead to particularly negative downstream consequences.

Studies 3 and 4 revealed that, despite their relatively greater concentration, supportive messages communicating only social connection content are less comforting to those targeted by bias than supportive messages communicating social change content. The results from Study 4 shed additional light on these findings: We hypothesized and found that only stigmatized group members would exhibit this pattern. We should note that heterosexual participants perceived no differences in how comforting social connection versus social change messages were. This result suggests that, despite the bias in what is spontaneously produced by members of non-stigmatized groups, when these individuals take an audience perspective they can recognize the positive elements of both messages. Thus, it may not be that members of non-stigmatized groups undervalue social change messages. Instead, it may simply be that the idea of social connection is so much more salient than social change when individuals who are not targeted by prejudice construct spontaneous positive intergroup messages. Future research might examine whether an informational intervention, alone, might be effective in helping majority group members to focus more on the empowerment of stigmatized groups insofar as this is a desired outcome in the continuing development of intergroup relations.

These findings extend the literature documenting the differing perspectives of high- and low-status group members when it comes to intergroup interactions (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2012). Moreover, decades of research in psychology has documented the difficultly people have in taking on others' perspectives when they are in conflict (Ross & Ward, 1996), and the present work suggests that similar processes may be at play even in harmonious contexts. Given that it may be a rare occurrence for individuals to traverse intergroup boundaries to express support (Kawakami et al., 2009), it is especially important for future research to explore how to bridge this gap in perspective so that members of both groups can communicate more effectively.

It is critical to emphasize that all messages of support were experienced as comforting by LGBQ participants; our research speaks primarily to the question of what may be necessary to construct the most optimal messages. We should note that as a function of the research question (Studies 1-2) and in the interest of experimental control (Studies 3-4), it was necessary to separate the different messages under investigation. However, this may be both unnecessary and sub-optimal in the real world. Though initial, findings in Study 2b suggest that messages containing both themes communicate equally high levels of liking, respect, and efficacy

about changing bias as either message alone. Additional analyses of the youtube videos coded in Study 1 reveal that almost all of the small number of videos coded as containing social change content also contained social connection content (although, as noted, this was less common in Study 2a). Thus, the recommendation to those who seek to draw practical applications for constructing an optimal message of intergroup support from our findings may be to emphasize the need to add social change themes (rather than subtract social connection themes) to the statements of support that more naturally arise among members of groups not targeted by prejudice. Furthermore, an integration of both social connection and social change messages may also contribute to theoretical understandings. Research suggests that emphasizing positive intergroup relations can have an ironic negative consequence, reducing disadvantaged group members' engagement with collective action on behalf of their group (Becker, Wright, Lubensky, & Shou, 2013; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). These findings showcase a longstanding question in the social change literature: whether more positive intergroup relations necessarily come at the cost of stigmatized group members' engagement with their group and with collective action (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010). The results of Study 2b present one possible answer: non-targets' positive intergroup statements that integrated social connection and social change themes communicated liking, respect, and the sense that bias can change. Future research should more fully investigate whether integrated social connection and change messages engender both of these positive consequences, benefitting intergroup relations and supporting collective action.

An additional question is whether the "optimal" message may vary based on individuals' specific stigmatized status. We found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual judges provided highly reliable responses to statements of support (Study 2b), suggesting that they interpreted them the same way. In addition, the patterns in Studies 3 to 4 are consistent across lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning participants although these studies lack the power to empirically test for significant differences across these groups. Together, this suggests that members of different sexual orientation minority groups may respond similarly to messages of support from non-targets. However, these questions demand further research with larger samples of each sub-population. In addition to differences between different sexual orientation minorities, future research should also investigate whether those who conceal their stigmatized status respond differently to messages of intergroup support than those who are out (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013).

Research on intergroup relations has largely focused on the dynamics of negative intergroup attitudes and their consequences, but these do not represent the whole landscape of relations in our increasingly diverse and connected social world. To date, relatively little research has examined the content and consequences of majority group members'

positive intergroup communications, other than to indicate that this occurs only rarely (Kawakami et al., 2009). However, with advances in online social interaction platforms, opportunities for majority group members to exhibit their attitudes have increased and therefore merit investigation. It might be that majority group members who hold egalitarian attitudes are more willing to identify and address bias in an online forum than in an in-person one because they are less concerned about backlash or questions about their authenticity. Understanding what motivates majority group members to express their positive intergroup attitudes online, but not necessarily in person, is another important research question for future work to address.

Together, these studies also highlight how useful it can be to integrate online social media into our methodological toolbox. By taking advantage of publicly available online videos, we were able to explore the intergroup attitudes that majority group members were willing to exhibit publicly, described in their own terms, when they wanted to exhibit them. To be sure, these communications may come from a restricted range of individuals who have access to the internet and video-recording equipment and who choose to post their videos publicly. However, we found similar patterns in messages from undergraduates (Study 2a). The added benefit of using a naturalistic data set is that it provides unparalleled insight into the prevalence of these messages and their real-world incidence: Approximately 5.9 million more page views contained social connection compared with social change content. In the context of the present findings, this suggests that some proportion of those 5.9 million users who experience expressions of bias and bullying in their daily lives could have been more comforted, had they been exposed to social change content.

To date, estimates suggest that over 50,000 people have contributed videotaped messages to the It Gets Better Project, and these videos have been viewed over 50 million times (It Gets Better, 2012). Some have called this a social movement and likened it to previous historical efforts to argue for greater equality in society. The present research illustrates how a social psychological perspective can contribute meaningfully to increase the efficacy of such broad-scale community efforts, if desired. Future research could extend the present work to examine whether interventions that include social change content buffer LGBTQ individuals against some of the negative physiological and psychological outcomes associated with experiencing bias (Gibbons et al., 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1999; Townsend, Major, Gangi, & Mendes, 2011; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Although bias against sexual minorities pervades all levels of society, we should note that the LGBTQ participants in the present research were college undergraduate-aged, rather than the teenage audience who may experience bias and bullying most acutely. Future research should also directly examine whether younger members of this stigmatized group exhibit a similar pattern of results. Issues of bias and bullying

do not only affect those who are (or are presumed to be) LGBTQ. Indeed, the issue of bias and bullying in schools has gained national attention, as evidenced by the first ever White House Conference on the Prevention of Bullying, held in March of 2011. Given this broader context, it would also be fruitful for future research to examine the degree to which members of different groups that are stigmatized (e.g., racial, religious) would perceive non-targets' messages of support that include social change content as more comforting than those that include social connection content. A related question worthy of future research would be whether social change messages afford greater comfort than social connection messages in other domains outside of intergroup relations.

The present studies examine the dynamics of positive intergroup support in the U.S., a cultural context that has been characterized as focusing on individual agency and independence from others (Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). These overarching U.S. American cultural values may have contributed to LGBTQ participants' preference for social change messages. This also raises the question of whether the more interdependent social connection message might be more effective than social change messages in other cultural contexts that place a higher value on interdependence, or among sub-populations in the United States who hold more interdependent models of self (e.g., East Asian LGBTQ individuals). At the same time, it is notable that the interdependent social connection message was more often communicated and perceived as equally comforting among those who were not targeted by prejudice. Future research should investigate how broader cultural orientations toward independence or interdependence may influence both what is communicated in positive intergroup support and how such messages are received.

To our knowledge, virtually no research has examined how members of stigmatized groups respond to messages of support from those who are not targeted by prejudice. However, given the reality of social, material, and physical threats faced by targets of bias in some contexts, social action on the part of people not targeted by prejudice stemming from their positive intergroup attitudes may become increasingly significant. Thus, understanding how to make such communications as effective as possible in providing support to members of stigmatized groups is key. The present research represents a first step in beginning to understand how these positive intergroup attitudes are expressed and their consequences for targets of prejudice.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Because communion and agency generally focus on the products of individual action or in-person interactions, rather than more general arguments against the expression and prevalence of prejudice, these constructs do not fit precisely with the current research. Instead, two related dimensions (i.e., social connection vs. social change) were chosen.
2. This is not to say that these individuals could never be targeted by prejudice, just that they were not targeted by prejudice against LGBTQ youth in the present context. Moreover, content coding found that only four videos mentioned current experiences of bias, and removing these from the data set left the results essentially unchanged.
3. These videos ranged from 21 seconds to just under 15 minutes in length and the content was largely unstructured. Therefore, for the sake of brevity, we summarize the types of statements included in each categorization and include illustrative examples in Study 2a. Length of statement was unrelated to the content coding, $ps > .33$.
4. On average, participants wrote 61.24 words in the 3-minute time frame. Statement length did not vary by content code, $p = .40$.
5. Participants' race/ethnicity was not recorded.
6. Participants were excluded for representing extreme outliers (i.e., more than 2 standard deviations above or below) on survey time or the time they took to read the manipulation.
7. This meta-analytic technique was more appropriate than a 2×2 ANOVA to compare Studies 4a and 4b given difference in cell sizes for sexual orientation minorities and heterosexuals across the two studies.

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