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PERCEPTIONS OF PROGRESS

**Perceiving Progress toward Social Equality:
A Model of Signals and Sense-Making**

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Abstract

How do people evaluate how much social progress has been achieved, and how do these perceptions influence intergroup attitudes? We present a model summarizing the signals and sense-making that arise when people think about progress. We review the signals that shape progress perceptions when people observe individual exemplars of success from, or substantive advances for, negatively stereotyped groups. We also identify three types of stereotype-relevant cognitive schemas that can be disrupted, or exacerbated, as people work to make sense of social progress: bias and perceived threat, beliefs about persisting inequality, and support for further progress. We highlight the complexities of progress – a reversible, fragmented, and sometimes superficial process – that merit further study. We discuss implications for organizations and society.

Word count: 119 words

Perceiving Progress toward Social Equality:

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How much progress has society made toward gender equality? What about racial equality? We know social disparities and inequalities across groups are still very much the norm in society today [1, 2]. Yet, simultaneously, there is evidence of substantive social progress – i.e., progress affecting substantial portions of a stigmatized group, beyond token individuals. In a span of 20 years (1995-2015), the Fortune 500 companies went from token gender representation on boards to 20% women, and from zero women CEOs to 24 [3]. Between 2000 and 2020, the share of African Americans with a 4-year college degree went from under 13% to over 25% [4, 5]. Given these signals of progress, the first goal of this paper is to review the literature on how various informational and environmental cues shape people’s perceptions of progress, and the psychological processes by which they do so.

Our second goal is to review extant research on the consequences of perceptions of progress for intergroup attitudes. We argue that a constructive and interpretive process is set in motion when people perceive evidence of social change for stigmatized groups – one whereby people seek to make sense of the progress that they perceive in light of their existing, stereotyped, schemas of stigmatized groups. We show that this interpretive process has the power to re-shape three types of stereotype-relevant cognitive schemas: intergroup attitudes and perceived intergroup threat, beliefs about persisting inequality, and support for further social progress. Understanding how progress perceptions shape these outcomes can advance the study of social cognition, intergroup relations, and diversity science, as well as offer practical implications.

Individual Exemplars as Signals of Progress: The Role of Person Perception

Social progress initially manifests through counter-stereotypical exemplars of success – individuals whose exceptional and pioneering success contradicts the negative stereotypes

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traditionally attached to their social groups (e.g., Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey). Despite the robust nature of group stereotypes [6, 7], theories of exemplar-based information processing have found in the context of race that exemplars of success shape people's perceptions and judgments of the groups to which they belong. Two competing theoretical perspectives ("enlightened racism" vs. "generalized appraisal") offer seemingly contradictory predictions about the directionality of this influence.

The enlightened racism perspective [8] proposes that people perceive counter-stereotypical exemplars of success as evidence that "anyone can make it." People therefore take counter-stereotypical exemplars of success as a comparison standard against which they evaluate the rest of the group to which these exemplars belong [9, 10]. This comparison, which is necessarily negative for members of the exemplars' groups, reduces perceivers' acknowledgment of structural obstacles – even when exemplars are framed as atypical members of their groups [11]. Thus, people come to form more negative attitudes toward the group as a whole [8, 12]. Cross-sectional research indeed shows that after (vs. before) the election of Barack Obama, US Americans perceived significantly less racial discrimination in society [13] and less need for further racial progress [14]. They also supported policies addressing racial inequality significantly less [14], and exhibited greater animosity toward African Americans [13]. Moreover, experimental research shows that making Barack Obama salient leads people to exhibit greater symbolic racism [12] and implicit racial bias [15], as well as to deny the validity of tests suggesting they may be prone to subtle racial bias [12]. Some research has noted that the type of exemplars that people activate in their minds (e.g., high- vs. low-status exemplars) may reflect a motivation to support narratives of progress as advancing in society [16, 17] – suggesting that the "enlightened racism" model could be, at least in part, motivational in nature.

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In contrast, the generalized appraisal perspective [18, 19, 20] has proposed that seeing counter-stereotypical exemplars of success can improve people's perceptions of the groups to which these exemplars belong. Indeed, exemplars of success evoke positive attitudes and emotions, which can thus extend towards their groups. Evidence among racially diverse samples finds that exposure to well-known and liked African American exemplars can lead people to exhibit lower anti-Black prejudice and implicit stereotyping [19, 21, 22, 23, 24]. Among White Americans, exposure to well-known and liked African American exemplars has also been shown to produce significantly greater awareness of racial discrimination in society – an effect that however disappears when exemplars are described as atypical of their groups [18].

While these two theoretical perspectives may seem to be at odds, we suggest they are complementary. The “enlightened racism” perspective is a *cognition-based* model of intergroup relations, whereby people form judgments about a social group by comparing its collective outcomes to those of individual exemplars of success. In contrast, the “generalized appraisal” tradition represents an *affect-based* model, whereby the affection and admiration that people feel toward well-liked exemplars spreads to the entire group [25]. These theoretical perspectives thus represent two distinct – though complementary – processes through which people update their judgments about outgroups as social progress begins. We look forward to future research exploring the time course of these two processes, and identifying the individual differences (e.g., need for cognition [11]) as well as situational factors that cue people into a more cognitive versus affective approach to evaluating evidence of progress for stigmatized groups. We also look forward to future research investigating the ways in which these two theoretical perspectives explain how women exemplars of success (e.g., Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Kamala Harris) shape people's beliefs about the state of gender equality, both for majority and minority women in society.

Signals of Substantive Progress: The Role of Group Identity and Intergroup Ideologies

As progress advances beyond token individuals, and starts affecting substantial shares of stigmatized groups, how do people perceive and react to this evidence? Research uncovers two insights. First, the same evidence of social progress is interpreted differently across social groups. Second, progress can evoke threat, especially among high-status groups.

Progress Is the Eye of the Beholder. Research has identified two reasons that Black and White Americans differ in their progress perceptions. First, Black Americans perceive racial progress as a gain for their social group, whereas White Americans perceive it as a loss for theirs [26]. Since losses psychologically weigh more than gains [27], White Americans perceive greater social change as having happened for minorities than African Americans do [28]. Second, these groups use different temporal reference points [28, 29, 30]. White Americans evaluate racial progress against the past (where society has come from), whereas minorities assess it relative to an ideal state (where society has yet to get to). Progress seems more radical when contrasting the state of racial equality today with that of the past, and more modest when comparing contemporary racial equality to what it should ideally be [31]. Men similarly compare the current state of gender inequality to the past more than to an ideal state of gender equality, whereas women gauge gender progress based on both reference points [30]. As a result, minorities and women typically perceive less substantive social progress than do Whites and men [28, 30] – even though all groups overestimate (racial) equality in today’s society¹ [32].

Further discrepancies in progress perceptions have been documented as a function of people’s intergroup attitudes and system-legitimizing ideologies. Among Whites, higher (vs.

¹ In the context of race, perceptions of equality at every time point also differ across social groups. All groups overestimate the degree of racial equality in the present, but Whites do so more than African Americans [16]. Whites also overestimate the degree of racial equality in the past, whereas African Americans seem to underestimate it – another source of discrepancy in Whites’ and African Americans’ perceptions of racial progress [32].

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lower) prejudice towards African Americans predicts greater perceptions of progress, through greater anchoring on the past and less on an ideal future [29]. Moreover, higher (vs. lower) social dominance orientation (among White and African Americans, or men and women) predicts overestimating (vs. underestimating) equality between privileged and underprivileged groups [33]. Finally, holding stronger just-world beliefs (among White and African Americans) is associated with greater overestimates of racial economic equality [16; see also 34]. These greater perceptions of progress and equality are in turn associated with more negative attitudes towards policies addressing inequality (e.g., affirmation action; [29, 33, 35]).

Threat. White Americans and men tend to perceive progress for racial minorities and women as threatening [36, 37] – often due to a conceptualization of progress as a zero-sum game [31, 38]. The more White Americans perceive a decrease in anti-Black racism over time, the more they perceive a concomitant increase in anti-White prejudice [39]. These perceptions of anti-White bias are alleviated when White Americans are self-affirmed, suggesting a self-protective function [40, 41]. Similarly, exposure to evidence of racial progress in the form of greater access to economic resources [42] or greater representation [43] leads the majority group to experience greater threat.

Merely perceiving the *possibility* of future progress can also trigger threat. Reading that Whites' representation in the US population is decreasing over time leads Whites to feel a sense of threat to their position as most prototypical Americans [44], and to their resources and status as a group [45, 46, 47]. In turn, this leads White Americans to hold more sympathy for their ingroup [47], exhibit more negative attitudes, emotions, and bias toward minority groups [45, 47], support diversity less but assimilation more [44], prefer less diverse settings [45], and express greater political conservatism [46]. These threat responses are not limited to White Americans. Exposure to evidence of Hispanic population growth within the U.S. also

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leads non-Hispanic minorities to identify as more conservative, and to support more conservative policy positions [48]. Taken together, these findings illustrate how perceptions of progress can induce threat that in turn evokes greater intergroup bias.

While these works showcase that progress perceptions can be subjective and threatening in nature, they also treat progress for any given identity group as a monolithic process. The reality, of course, is more complex. Next, we turn to the most recent development in this literature – research exploring the complexities of social progress, and its implications for intergroup perceptions and judgements.

Progress as Reversible, Fragmented, and Superficial

Research shows that people typically fail to account for the complexities of social progress when forming judgments about the state of society, because they perceive social progress as inevitable, homogenous, and comprehensive in nature [16, 49]. In contrast to this vision, we argue that progress is reversible, fragmented, and sometimes superficial – characteristics that people fail to take into account when they evaluate social progress for stigmatized groups.

A first complexity of social progress is its potentially *reversible* nature. What might first appear as the definite promise of social progress may eventually fail to materialize, or even be followed by backsliding [50]. Yet, cues signaling the promise of progress can generate “sticky” perceptions. For instance, the 2016 US Presidential Election saw the first woman nominated as a major party presidential candidate, which some speculated might even signal the end of sexism in the U.S. (e.g., [51]). Yet, the election subsequently witnessed a raging debate around gender (in which some commentators critiqued Hillary Clinton’s facial expressions, clothes, and stamina), and the victory of a man, Donald Trump, despite revelations of some past crude comments that he had made about women – a signal that the gender status quo might in fact be maintained in US politics (e.g., [52, 53]). Given these

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contradictory cues, how did US Americans come to assess women's standing in society in the wake of the election? The answer is that they focused on different cues depending on the candidate they supported [54]. We found that after the election relative to before, Trump supporters exhibited greater modern sexism² [55], which in turn was associated with less concern with the gender pay gap, greater perceptions of progress towards gender equality, lower perceptions of discrimination against women (but more against men), and greater perceptions of women's representation in top leadership. In contrast, Clinton supporters did not exhibit any significant changes in their understanding of women's standing in society [54] (but see also [58] for evidence of a marginal drop in Clinton supporters' perceptions of gender equality post-election). These findings suggest that moments revealing the reversible nature of social progress can paradoxically shape intergroup attitudes, as if progress had actually happened.

A second complexity of social progress is its *fragmented* nature across domains of inequality (e.g., leadership representation, pay, housework distribution, etc.). Progress in one domain (e.g., representation in top leadership) often coexists with ongoing inequality in others (e.g., gender pay gap; [58]). We found that when people perceive evidence that women's representation in top leadership is now strong (vs. low, or unknown), they interpret this evidence of progress in leadership representation to mean that obstacles to women's advancement in society no longer exist and that women now have full access to equal opportunities in general. This *overgeneralization* of gender progress, in turn, predicts significantly greater attributions of persisting gender inequality to women's personal choices, which in turn is associated with significantly less concern with statistics capturing the persisting inequality that women face in other domains (e.g., unequal pay, unequal access to

² For a discussion of whether the Modern Sexism Scale [55] actually captures sexism, or merely erroneous perceptions that women no longer face (or face less than before) unequal access to opportunities, see [56].

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venture capital in entrepreneurship, unequal distribution of housework, etc.). We note that both men and women, and liberals and conservatives, show this effect equally [58] – suggesting a cognitive bias whereby all groups fail to recognize the fragmented nature of social progress.

Finally, people struggle to recognize a third complexity of social progress – its potentially *superficial* nature. The mere presence (vs. absence) of diversity structures in organizations (e.g., diversity policies, diversity training, diversity awards) leads White Americans and men to judge these organizations as procedurally fairer (even when presented with evidence to the contrary), to report less concern about discrimination, and to exhibit greater backlash towards minorities and women who raise issues of bias [59]. When an organization receives a diversity award, both minority and majority group members also see it as more fair – even when told that it has unfair procedures [60]. Women also perceive organizations with diversity structures as procedurally fairer and less discriminatory, and they support gender discrimination litigation against these companies less [61]. Superficial signals of progress therefore have the power to distort perceptions of fairness among Whites and minorities, and men and women alike.

Together, these findings suggest people fail to recognize the *reversible, fragmented*, and potentially *superficial* nature of social progress, thus coming to form overly optimistic beliefs about persisting inequality, and decreasing their support for further social progress.

Conclusion

Our review showcases how understanding people's perceptions of progress informs the study of social cognition, intergroup relations and diversity science. Of course, it also identifies many questions yet to be answered. The perceptions of many stigmatized groups have yet to be studied in this literature: for instance, how does progress for LGBTQ+ communities, individuals from lower SES backgrounds, or the disabled (whether exemplar-

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based or substantive) affect stereotypes and understandings of their standing in society?

Equally important would be to investigate the consequences of perceptions of progress for individuals at the intersection of several stigmatized identities (e.g., Black women). Further, studying how to create more accurate understandings of social progress as reversible, fragmented, and potentially superficial, as well as how to celebrate progress in one domain of inequality without jeopardizing support for progress in another will be valuable. Finally, distinguishing backsliding from persisting inequality, and investigating its effects on support for future social progress would be fascinating. In sum, understanding both the signals of, and people's sense-making about, progress toward greater equality in society can offer untold insights.

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