Feedback-Withholding Bias in Online Evaluations: How Anonymity and Remoteness Influence Feedback on Minority Students' Work.

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Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that White evaluators systematically withhold negative feedback from Black students (Harber, 1998, Croft & Schmader, 2012). However, although existence of this "feedback-withholding bias" (Croft & Schmader 2012) has been well documented, much of this research has been conducted in lab situations in the presence of research assistants or other participants. The present study extends the existing body of research by documenting the existence of the feedback-withholding bias (FWB) within a novel context independent of these social threats. Adopting a new online (and hence more anonymous and remote) paradigm, we investigated two competing hypotheses:

1. Replicating past research, participants will provide *less* negative feedback to the Black student, providing evidence for a FWB.
2. The greater anonymity and remoteness of this novel context will enable participants to display their true biases, providing systematically *more* negative feedback to the Black student.

Methods

- 84 participants recruited online
- Instructions:
  - Provide helpful feedback on 3 high school history essays
  - Target feedback to fit students' specific learning needs
- 2 Target essays with attached profile sheets:
  - 1 Black and 1 White student author
  - Essays matched for mediocrity
- 2 orders
  - **Order A:** Black student + Essay A, White student + Essay B
  - **Order B:** Black student + Essay B, White student + Essay A
  - Essay order confounded with instructional differences
    - **Order A:** one-step instruction for accessing the survey
    - **Order B:** specific step-by-step instructions for accessing the survey

Measures

Essay Evaluations
- Highlighting feedback
  - Blue = requires revision
  - Yellow = especially well-written
- Overall quality
  - Student's writing ability, essay clarity and readability
- Score (1-100%)

**Personal Motivations and Ideologies**
- Prejudicial Motivation Scales
  - Internal (IMS) motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998)
  - External (EMS) motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998)
- Racial ideology scales (Ryan et al.; originally adapted from Wolsko et al. (2000))
  - Multicultural ideology (MC)
  - Colourblind ideology (CB)

Results
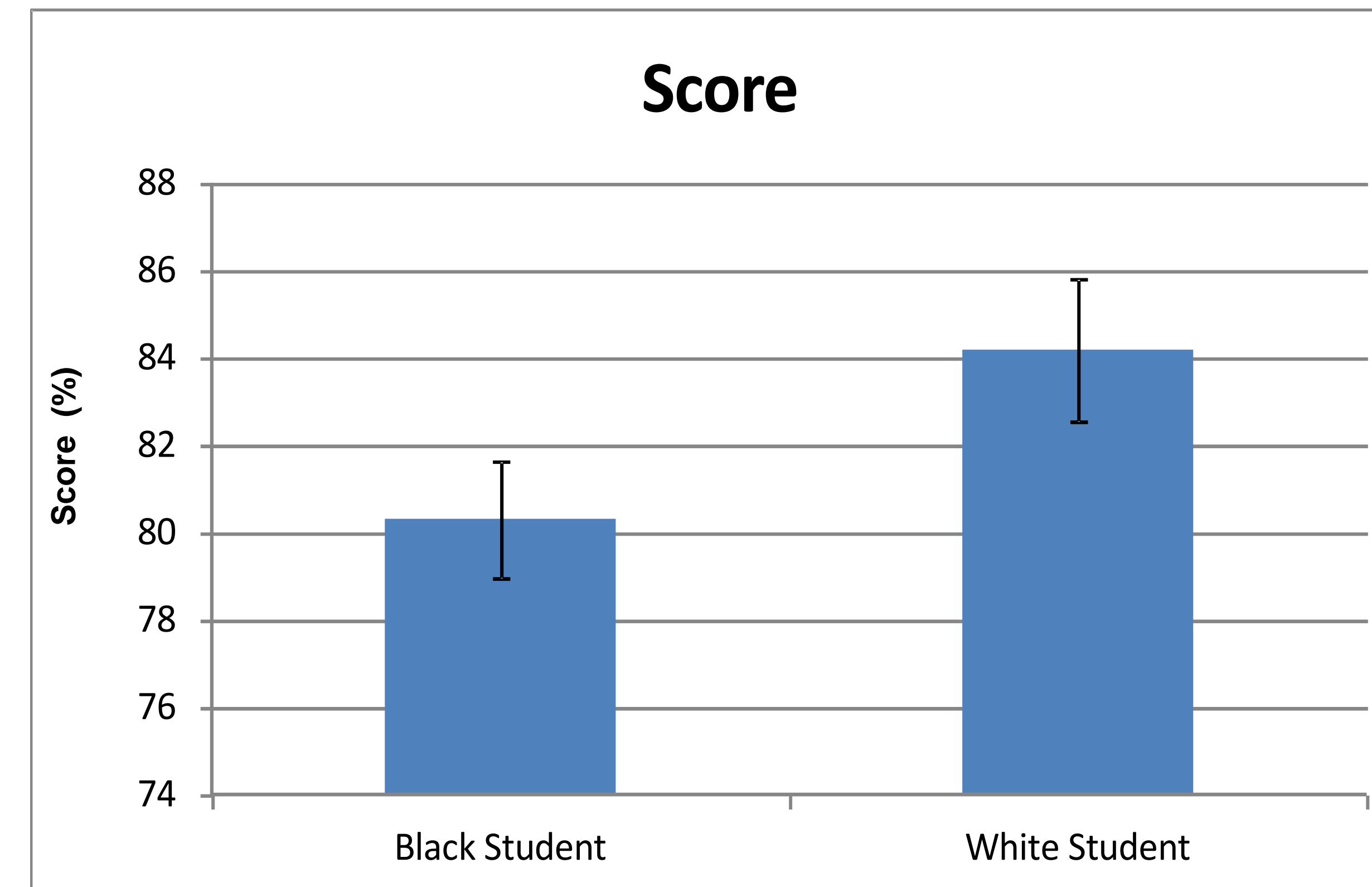
Score

Systematically lower scores given to the Black student than to the White student $F(1, 64) = 5.823$, $p = .02$

No effect on overall quality, or positive feedback, all $ps > .13$
No effect of IMS, EMS, CB, or MC, all $ps > .12$
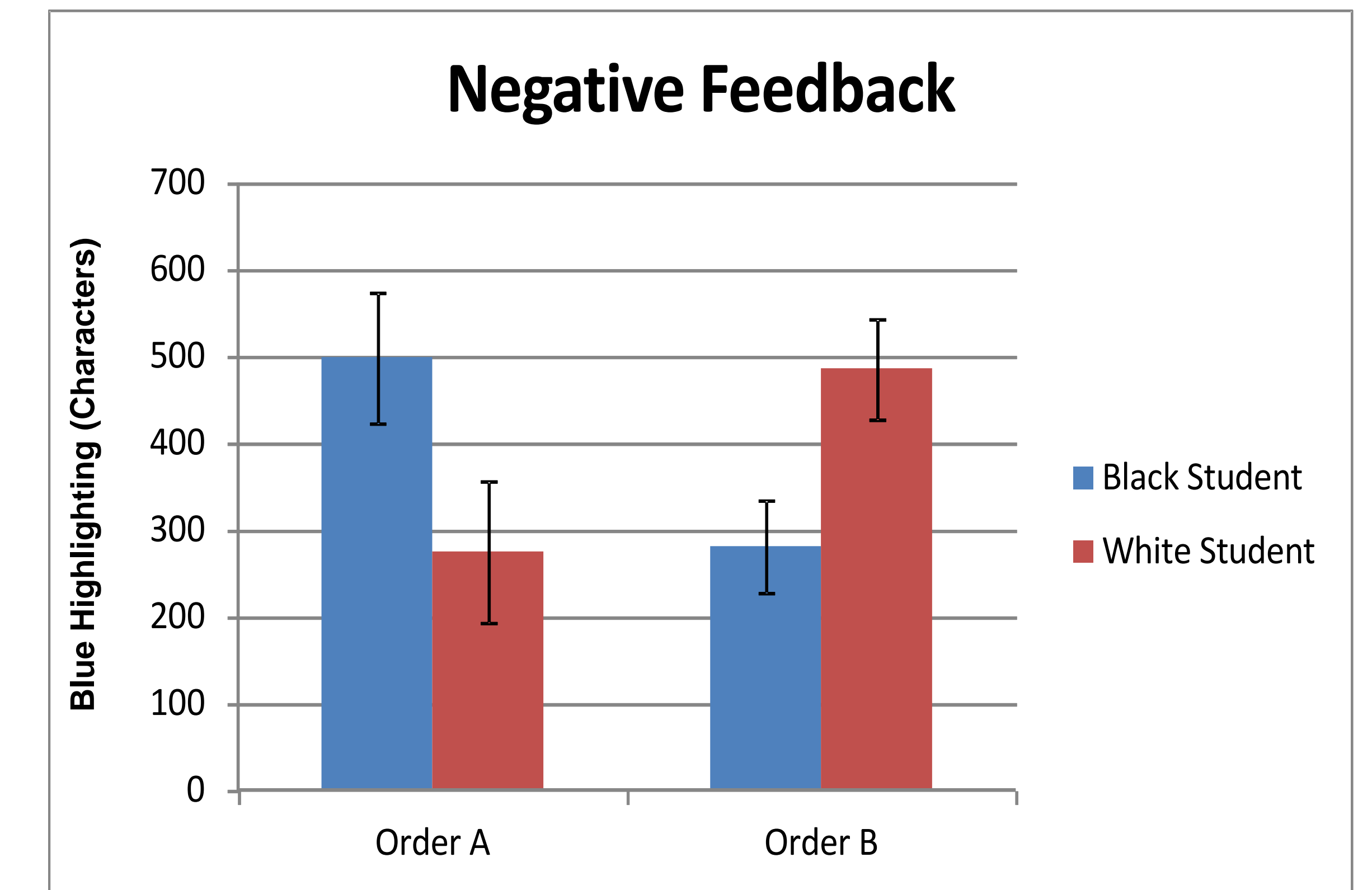
Negative Feedback

Participants in **Order A** (n = 21) gave more negative feedback to the Black student than to the White student, $F(1, 61) = 8.68$, $p = .005$

In **Order B** (n = 42), participants gave less negative feedback to the Black student than to the White student, $F(1, 61) = 14.54$, $p < .001$.

STUDENT PROFILE

Year in school: Grade 12

Age: 17

Sex/gender: Male

Race/Ethnicity: Black/African

What languages are you fluent in? English

Interests/ Hobbies: Basketball, movies, video games

Conclusions

- Discrepancy between score and highlighting results suggests these measures may be conceptually distinct
  - Scoring requires quick, heuristic judgements
  - Highlighting requires more nuanced, conscious evaluations

- FWB in order B suggests that bias can exist in anonymous contexts

- Blatant bias in order A suggests situational or personality variables may moderate direction of feedback biases
  - Instructional differences may exert divergent influences on participants' thinking
  - Potential self-selection effects in order A due to less straightforward instructions

- Racial ideologies and personal motivations appear to be unrelated to the FWB, at least in an online context

- Failure to replicate FWB online suggests situational factors (such as anonymity and remoteness) may moderate the bias

References

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