Behavioral Science of Disagreement: Building Trust Across Divides

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Founder, Disagreeing Better, LLC

Washington State Hospital Association

Benefits of Engaging with Disagreement

Increased organizational **learning** and forecasting **accuracy**

Encouraging organizational voice improves **loyalty and commitment**

Feeling “heard” promotes **conflict de-escalation**

“When two men in business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.”

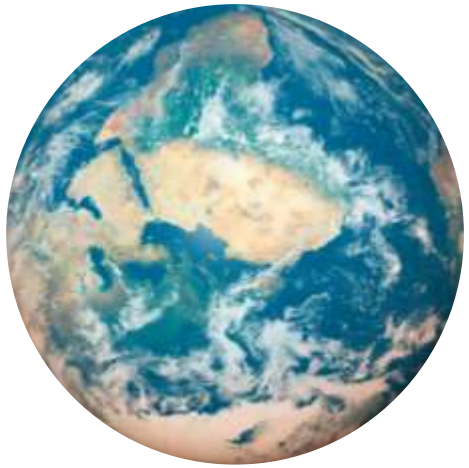
--William Wrigley, Jr.

A PRISON WITH A BED IS STILL A PRISON
A CAGE IS NOT A HOME
#wayfair walkout
Solidarity with Migrant Families

Disney
SPEAK OUT AGAINST FLORIDA'S "DON'T SAY GAY"
Disney
STAND WITH US AGAINST "DON'T SAY GAY"
Disney
STAND WITH US AGAINST "DON'T SAY GAY"
Disney
SPEAK OUT
GAINST
ORIDA'S
'T SAY GAY"

NO JAB
NO JOB
NO CHOICE
BOEING
STOP
THE

- What are the **psychological roots** of conflict?
- What can people do to **disagree better?**



Naïve Realism

Belief in objectivity and accuracy of own views and opinions

"I see the world as it really is"

Expectations that "reasonable others" will agree with me

"Others who 'get it' will see it my way"

Attributions of error, bias, and bad motives to opponents

"If you disagree with me, it's because you don't get it"

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Some subtle points…

- People do recognize that their experiences and identities shape their views
- But they feel that their own experiences and identities help them to see the ***truth***
- Whereas other people's experiences and identities ***distort*** their view of reality
- People are correct in assuming that ideology, self-interest, identity, group dogma, shape other people's views
- **The problem is their failure to realized that similar factors play a role in shaping their own views too**

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The objectivity illusion and voter polarization in the 2016 presidential election

Michael C. Schwalbe[a,1], Geoffrey L. Cohen[a], and Lee D. Ross[a,1]

PNAS
Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America

Trump and Clinton supports rate influence of valid and biasing considerations on their own and their opponents' beliefs.

Normative considerations:

- Careful consideration
- Interest in what's best for the country
- Knowledge of facts/history

Biasing considerations:

- Biased media coverage
- Misinformation
- Propaganda
- Self-interest

0 = Not at All 4 = Very Much

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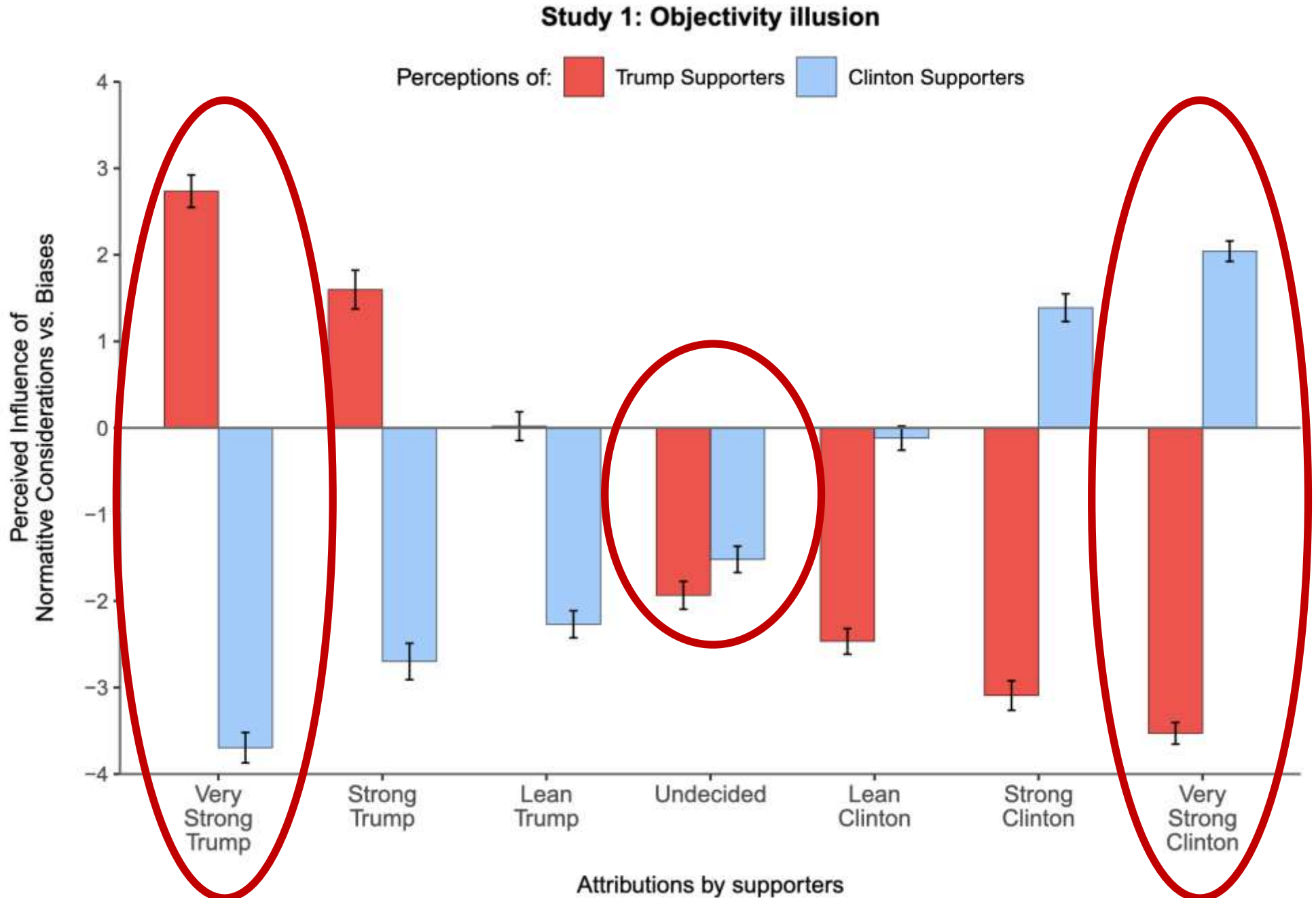
Study 1: Objectivity illusion
Perceptions of:
Trump Supporters
Clinton Supporters
Perceived Influence of Normative Considerations vs. Biases
4
3
2
1
0
−1
−2
−3
−4
Very Strong Trump
Strong Trump
Lean Trump
Undecided
Lean Clinton
Strong Clinton
Very Strong Clinton
Attributions by supporters

- What are the **psychological roots** of conflict?
- What can people do to **disagree better?**

Receptiveness to Opposing Views

The willingness to **access**, **consider**, and **evaluate** supporting and opposing views in a relatively impartial manner.

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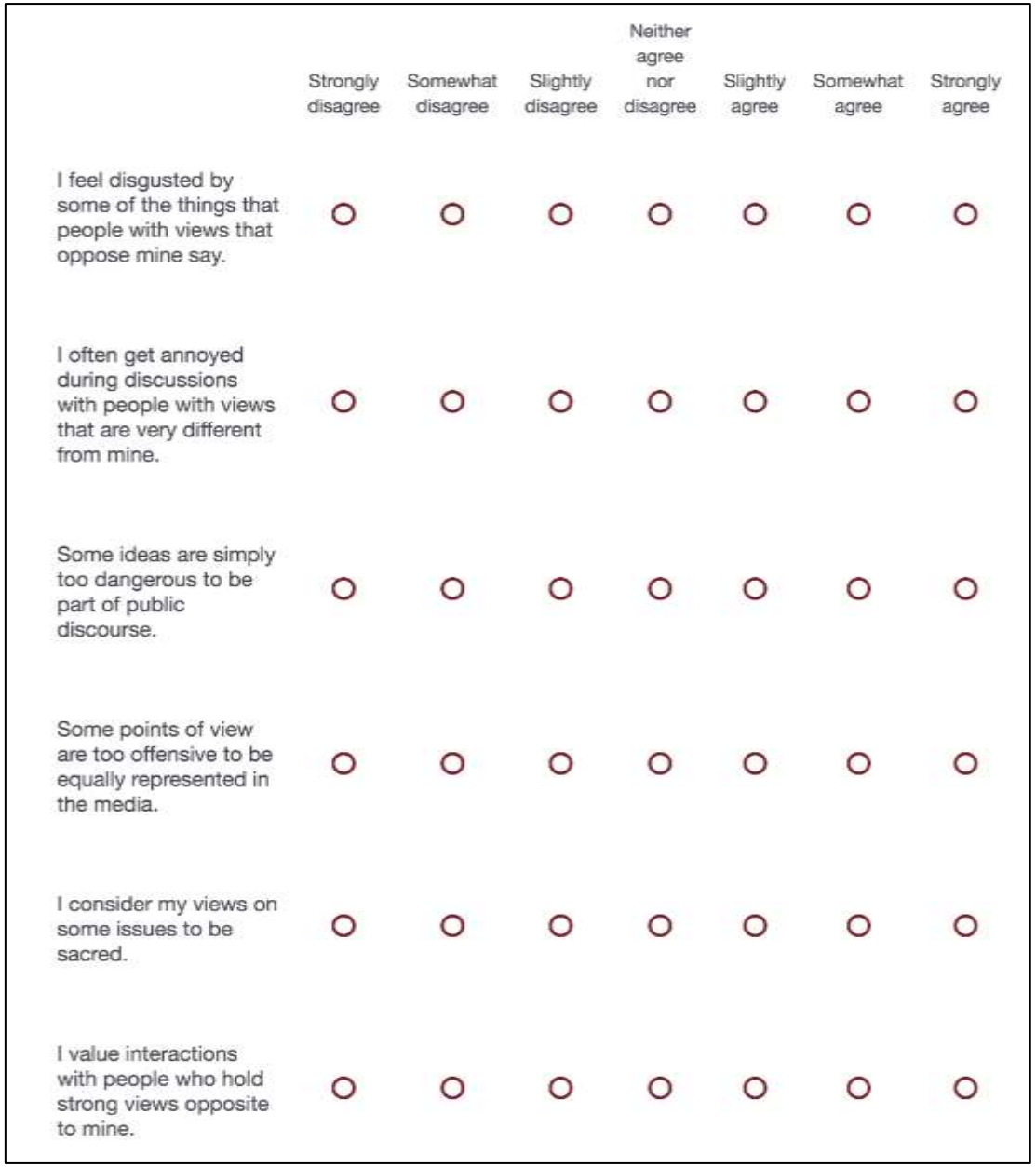
18-item scale

4 components or “factors”



	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I feel disgusted by some of the things that people with views that oppose mine say.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I often get annoyed during discussions with people with views that are very different from mine.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Some ideas are simply too dangerous to be part of public discourse.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Some points of view are too offensive to be equally represented in the media.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I consider my views on some issues to be sacred.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
I value interactions with people who hold strong views opposite to mine.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

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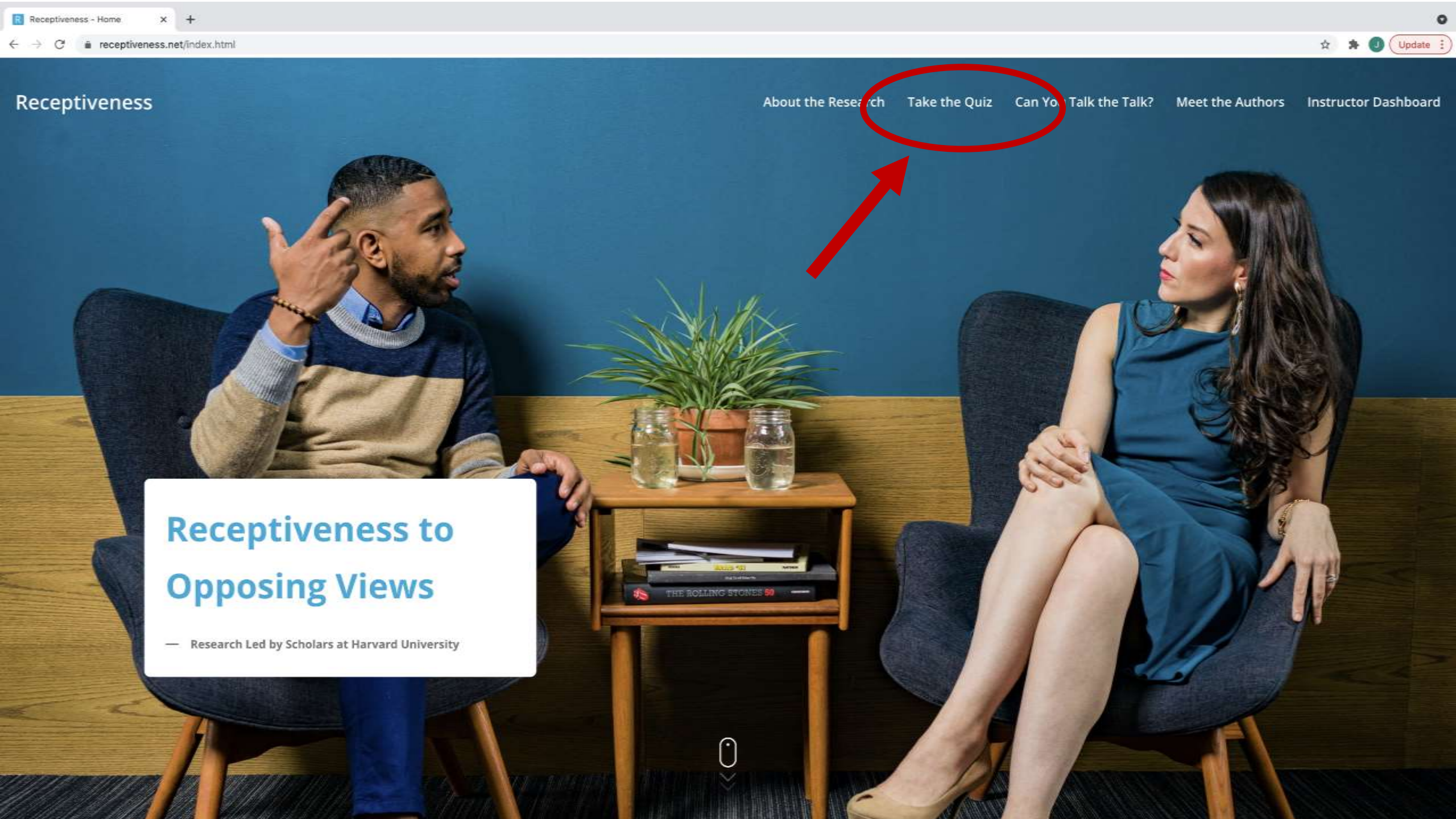
Receptiveness - Home
receptiveness.net/index.html
Update
Receptiveness
About the Research
Take the Quiz
Can You Talk the Talk?
Meet the Authors
Instructor Dashboard
Receptiveness to Opposing Views
— Research Led by Scholars at Harvard University

Receptiveness predicts information processing

People who are more receptive

Expose themselves to more balanced information

Can maintain attention to content they disagree with

Are less biased in evaluating both sides of an issue

Form friendships with ideologically-opposed others

Are more attractive collaborators and colleagues

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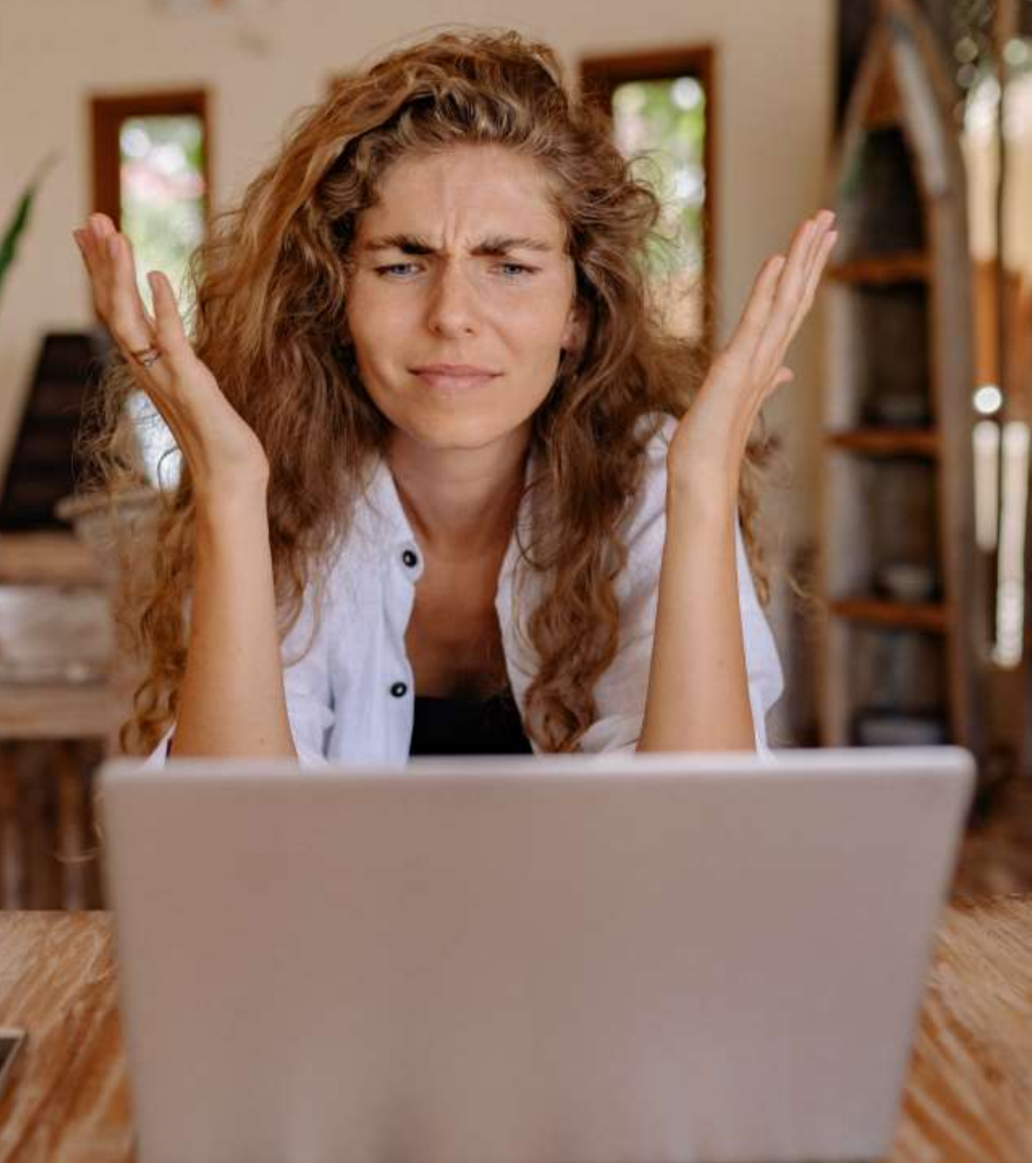

Factor 1: Emotional Equanimity

- Listening to people with views that strongly oppose mine tends to **make me angry.**
- I feel **disgusted** by some of the things that people with views that oppose mine say.
- I often feel **frustrated** when I listen to people with social and political views that oppose mine.
- I often get **annoyed** during discussions with people with views that are very different from mine.

Factor 2: Intellectual Curiosity

- I am **willing** to have conversations with individuals who hold strong views opposite to my own.
- I **like** reading well **thought-out information & arguments** supporting viewpoints opposite to mine.
- I find **listening** to opposing views **informative.**
- I **value interactions** with people who hold strong views opposite to mine.
- I am generally **curious** to find out why other people have different opinions than I do.

Factor 3: Respect Toward Opponents

People who have opinions that are opposite to mine often have views which are too **extreme to be taken seriously.**

People who have views that oppose **mine rarely present compelling arguments.**

Information from people who have strong opinions that oppose mine is often **designed to mislead less-informed listeners.**

People who have views that oppose mine are often **biased** by what would be best for them and their group.

People who have views that oppose mine often base their arguments on **emotion rather than logic.**

Factor 4: Tolerance of taboo issues

- Some points of view are **too offensive** to be equally represented in the media.
- Some issues are just **not up for debate.**
- Some ideas are simply **too dangerous** to be part of public discourse.
- I consider my views on some issues to be **sacred.**

Consider your own score…

Which factors are high or low for you?

How can you increase your receptiveness?

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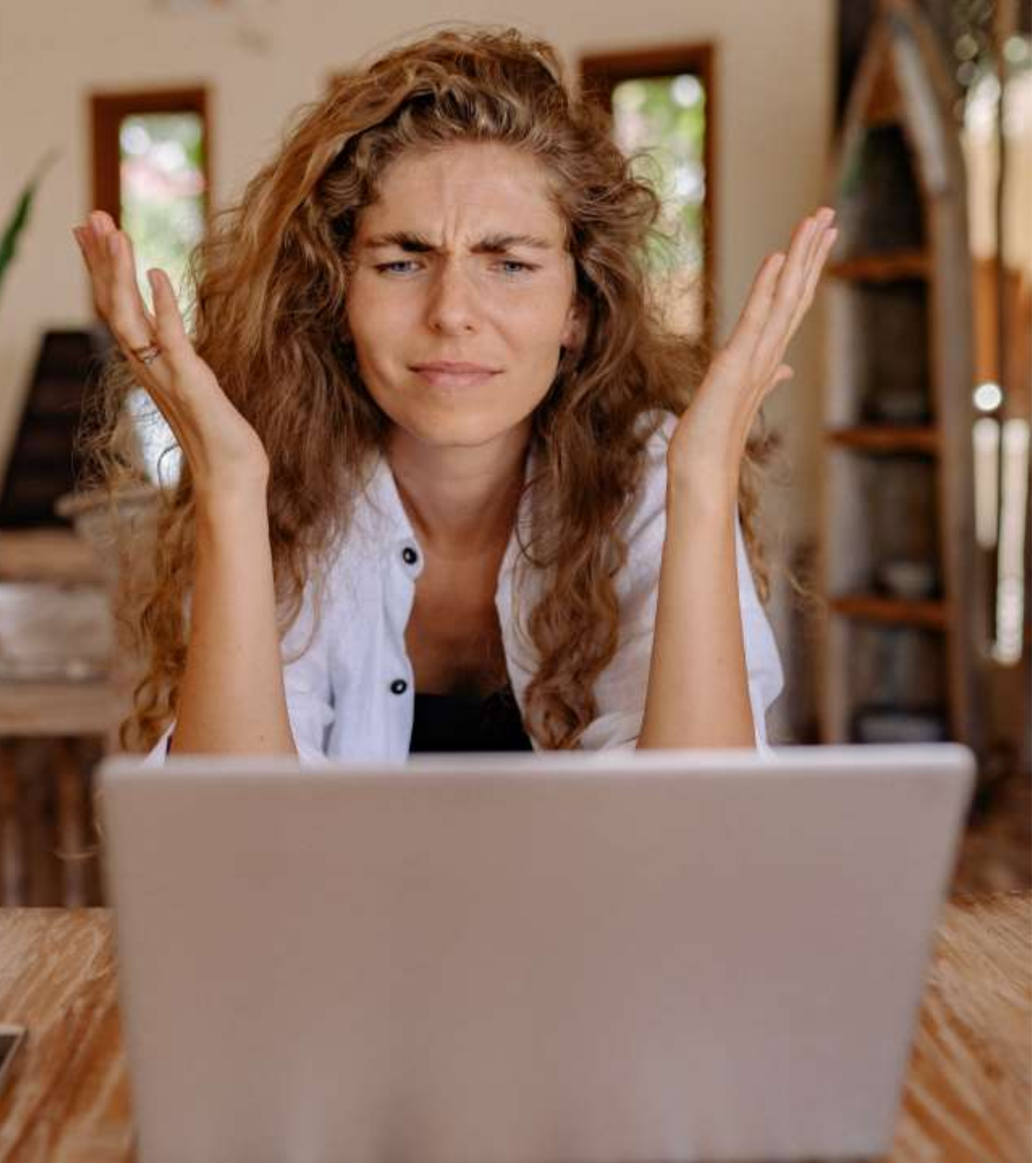

Increasing Emotional Equanimity

Emotional self control takes effort and planning.

If this is your lowest factor, **do not** get into disagreements:

- Tired
- Hungry
- Stressed
- In public

Do:

Plan conversations

Create breaks to cool-off

Increasing Intellectual Curiosity

Focus on the **benefits of understanding**:

- Learning new information
- Making better decisions
- Generating more creative negotiation outcomes

Hone curiosity in low-cost ways:

- Read high-quality information
- Avoid emotional confrontations

Increasing Respect Toward Opponents

- **Consider why** a thoughtful, reasonable, kind person might hold this view
- Explain their views in a way that someone from the other side would agree with
- Remember **people who you trust and admire** who also disagree with you

Increasing Tolerance of Taboo Issues

- Remember that simply talking requires **no attitude change**
- **Study the issue** in a controlled, impersonal manner – reading, watching a documentary, etc.
- Think about **why** a subject is "taboo" for you and what might happen if it were not.

Intermediate take-aways

Receptiveness is a key communication and decision-making skill

- Predicts information processing
- Predicts interpersonal outcomes

As such, it should be:

- Measured
- Trained

- How can receptiveness be **communicated?**
- How does such communication **break down?**

Experiment - Fall 2020

- Strong Biden supporters and Trump supporters debate politics
- Conversation over online chat
- Evaluate partner
- Report own and partner’s goals

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(22:09:44) User 2: Hello
(22:10:37) User 1: i can't believe that more republicans can't see how corrupt and dishonest trump really is.
(22:11:01) User 1: sorry hello
(22:11:11) User 2: How so? Any specifics?
(22:12:05) User 1: he was impeached for his collusion already once
(22:12:45) User 1: He has lied about knowing the details about the corrona virus
(22:14:14) User 1: Right now he has his cronies working on dismantling the only healthcare system we have while our country is in a pandemic
(22:14:53) User 2: I don't believe he lied. He downplayed things because he didn't want there to be a panic. We had been through this type of thing in the past, with SARS, and it didn't end up amounting to anything. I don't fault him for his reaction to the virus in the beginning.
(22:15:53) User 1: He knew on Jan 28th that it was serious and for him to lie to the

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How moral, intelligent, objective, trustworthy and likable is your counterpart?

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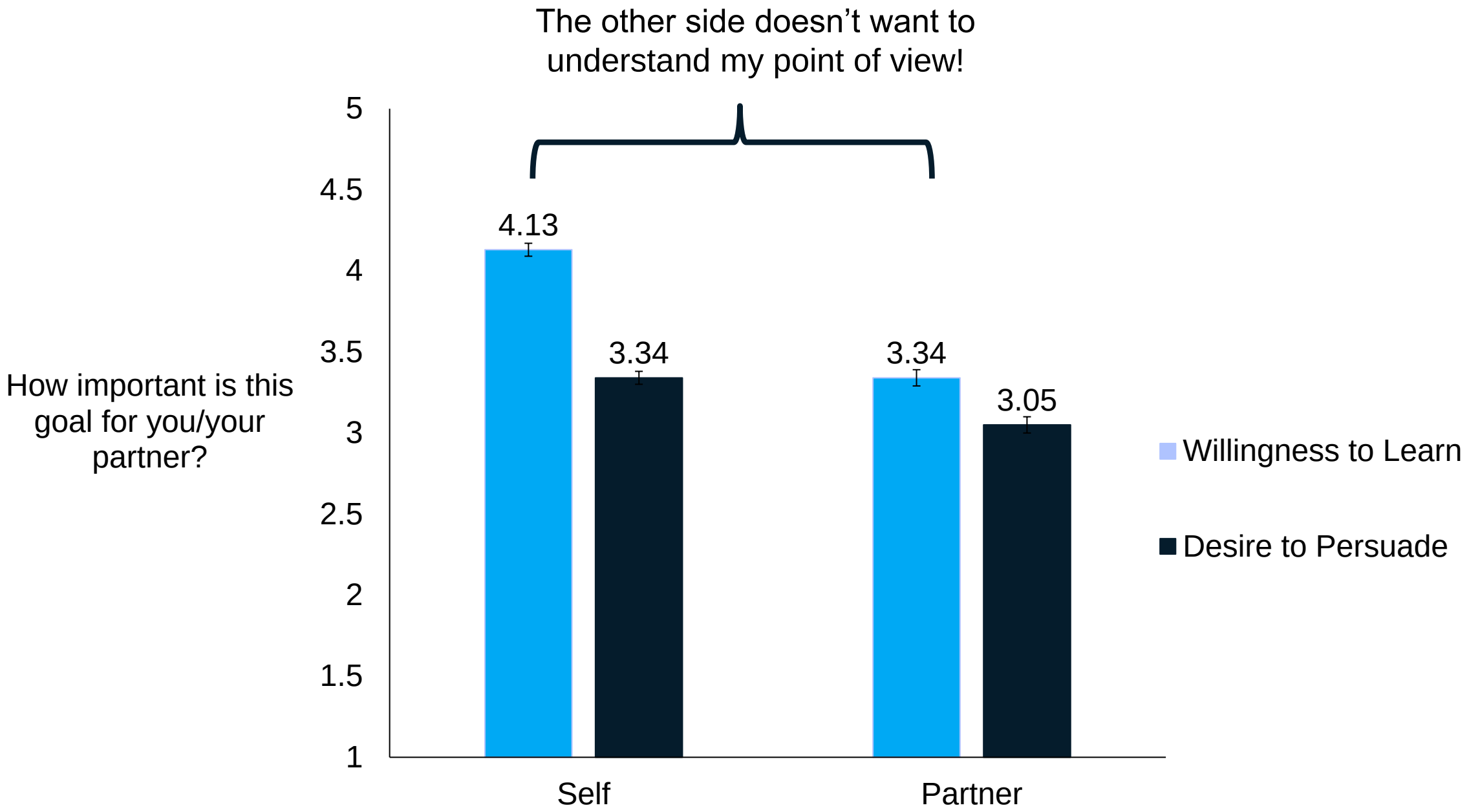
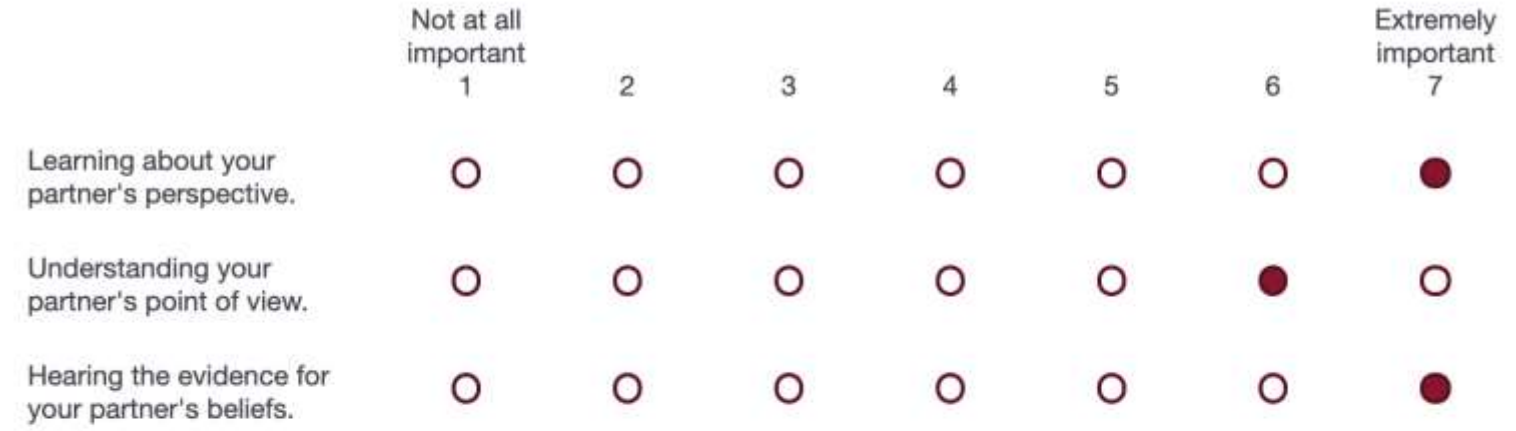

The other side doesn't want to understand my point of view!
How important is this goal for you/your partner?
5
4.5
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
4.13
3.34
3.34
3.05
Self
Partner
Willingness to Learn
Desire to Persuade

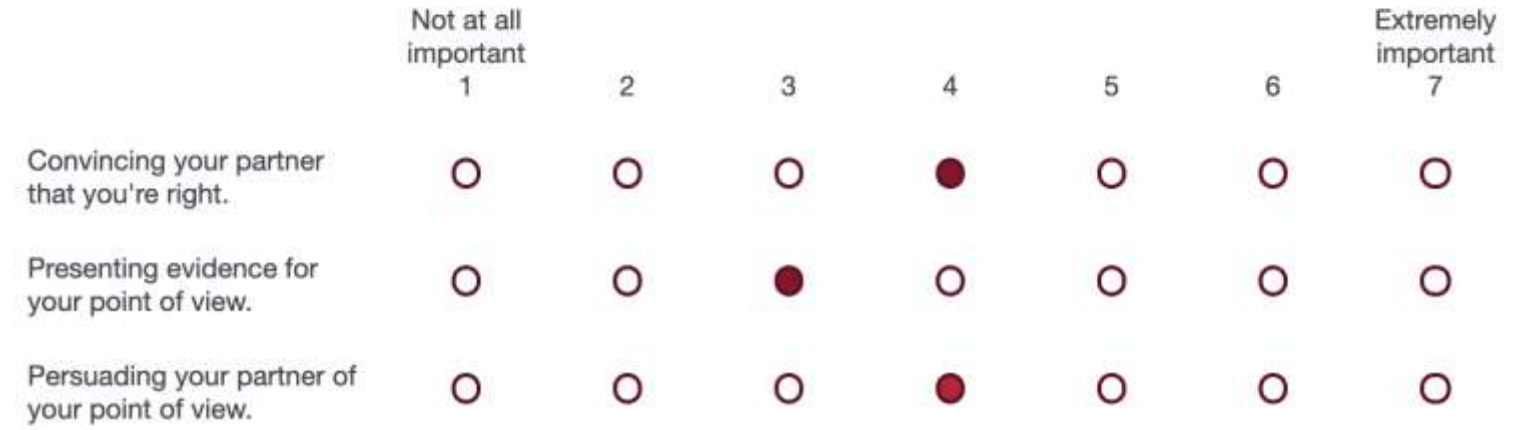
High Willingness to Learn Profile

How important would each of these goals be for you in this conversation?



Think about your goals in this conversation.

How important would each of these goals be for you in this conversation?



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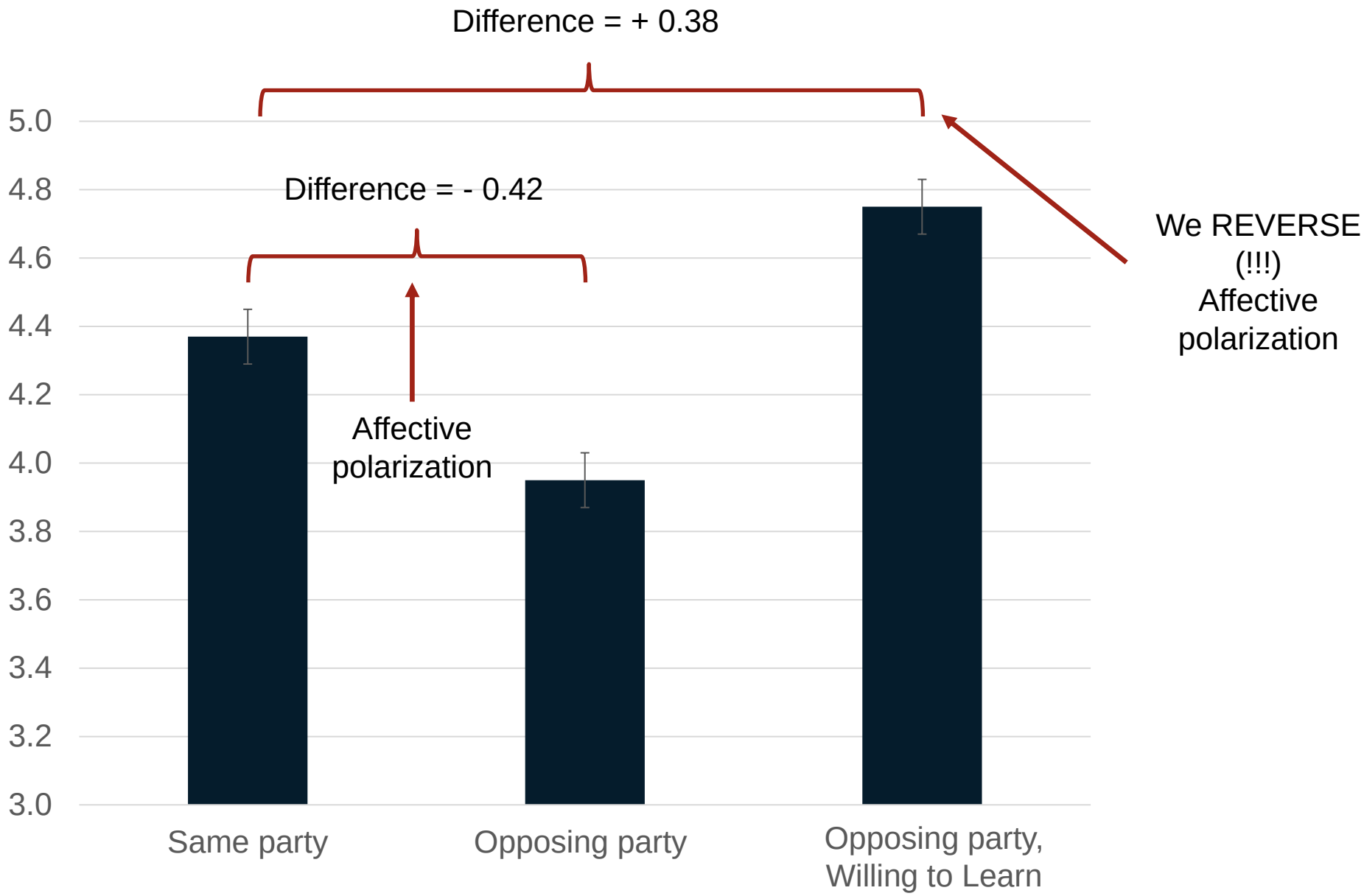
How moral, intelligent, objective, trustworthy, likable is this person?



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- How do we **express** our willingness to learn?
  - Question asking
  - Listening attentively
  - **Stating goals explicitly**
- What **prevents us** from doing so?

Practicing Receptive Communication

258 state and local government leaders

Day 1: Measured receptiveness

Attitudes on controversial issues

Day 2: Paired based on disagreement

20-minute chat interaction

Rate own and partner receptiveness

Rate collaboration intentions

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But…

How is **receptiveness expressed?**

Low correlation between **self-rated** receptiveness and **partner-rated** receptiveness

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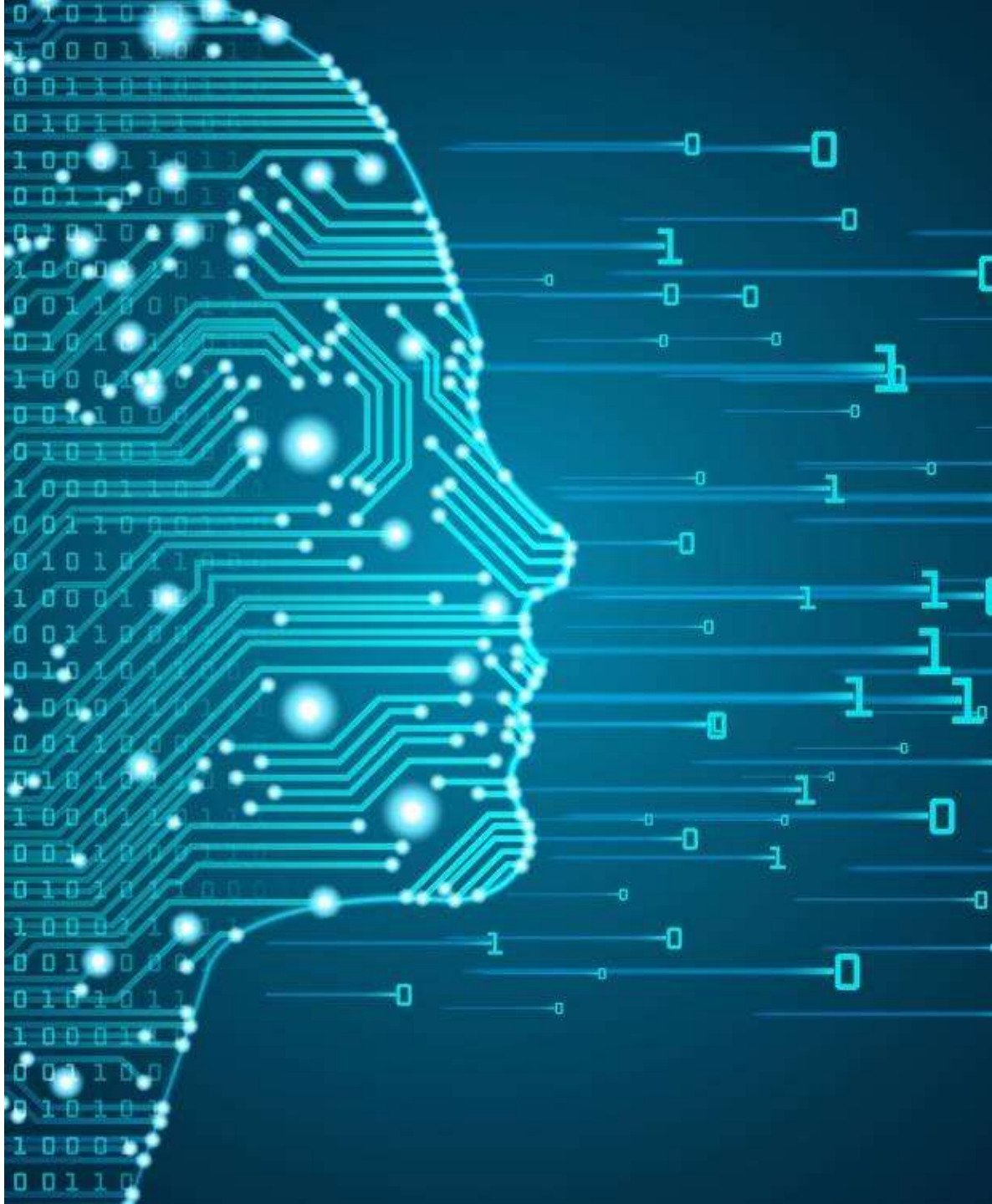
Identifying Markers of Receptiveness using Natural Language Processing (NLP)

Step 1:
Collect text of conversations between pairs of people who disagree (hundreds)

Step 2:
Ask (thousands of) other people to evaluate the receptive-ness of the side they disagree with

Step 3:
Train a machine learning model to identify features of natural language that are **seen** as receptive



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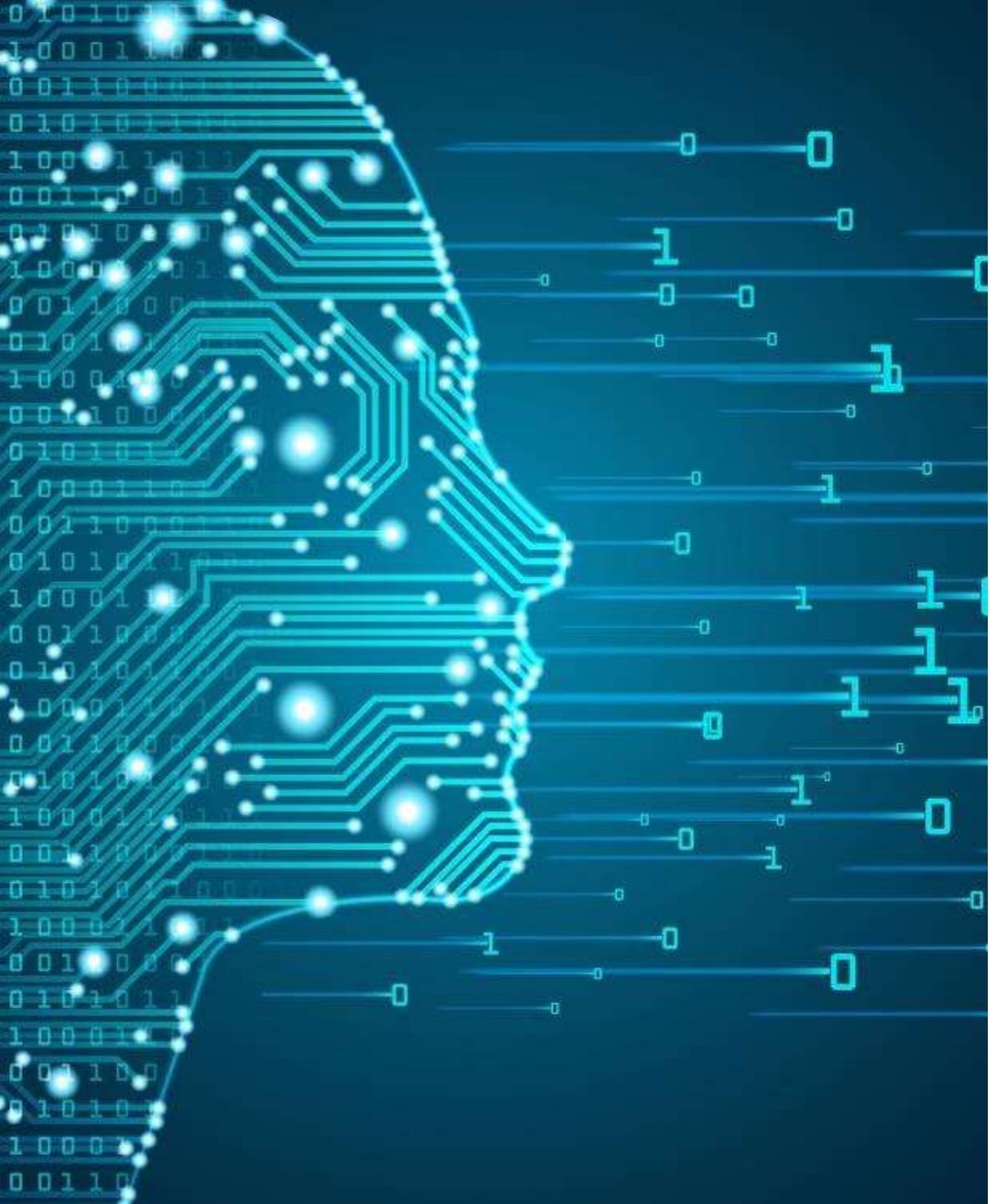

Pretend you are an algorithm…

Receptive Response

(96th percentile)

I understand what you are saying. There probably is some truth to the fact that these issues have been hidden for a long time. However, coming from St. Louis and witnessing the Ferguson riots, I can also see how things can be blown out of proportion and make people feel that it is worse than it is. I agree real problems exist, but possibly sometimes attention is drawn in the wrong places.

Unreceptive Response

(2nd percentile)

Over-reacting to police confrontations, can be deadly to the public in general. When animosity towards the police rises, as it has in Chicago, police do not feel safe, going into the ghetto neighborhoods. Therefore those people, in those neighborhood, literally, have to fend for themselves, because if they need the police and call for their help, the police can't help those in need there, because they will likely be shot at themselves.

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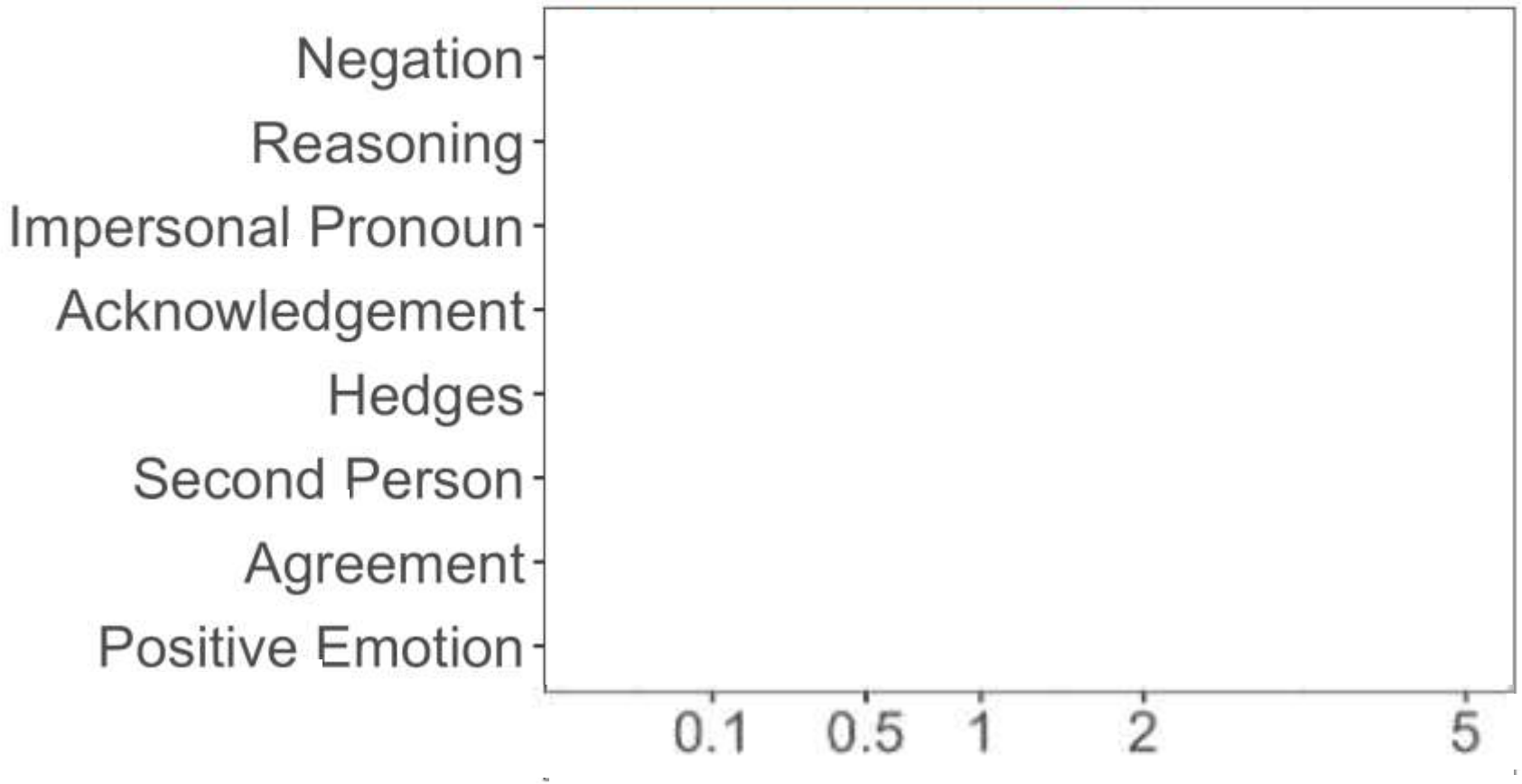
Features of Receptive Language



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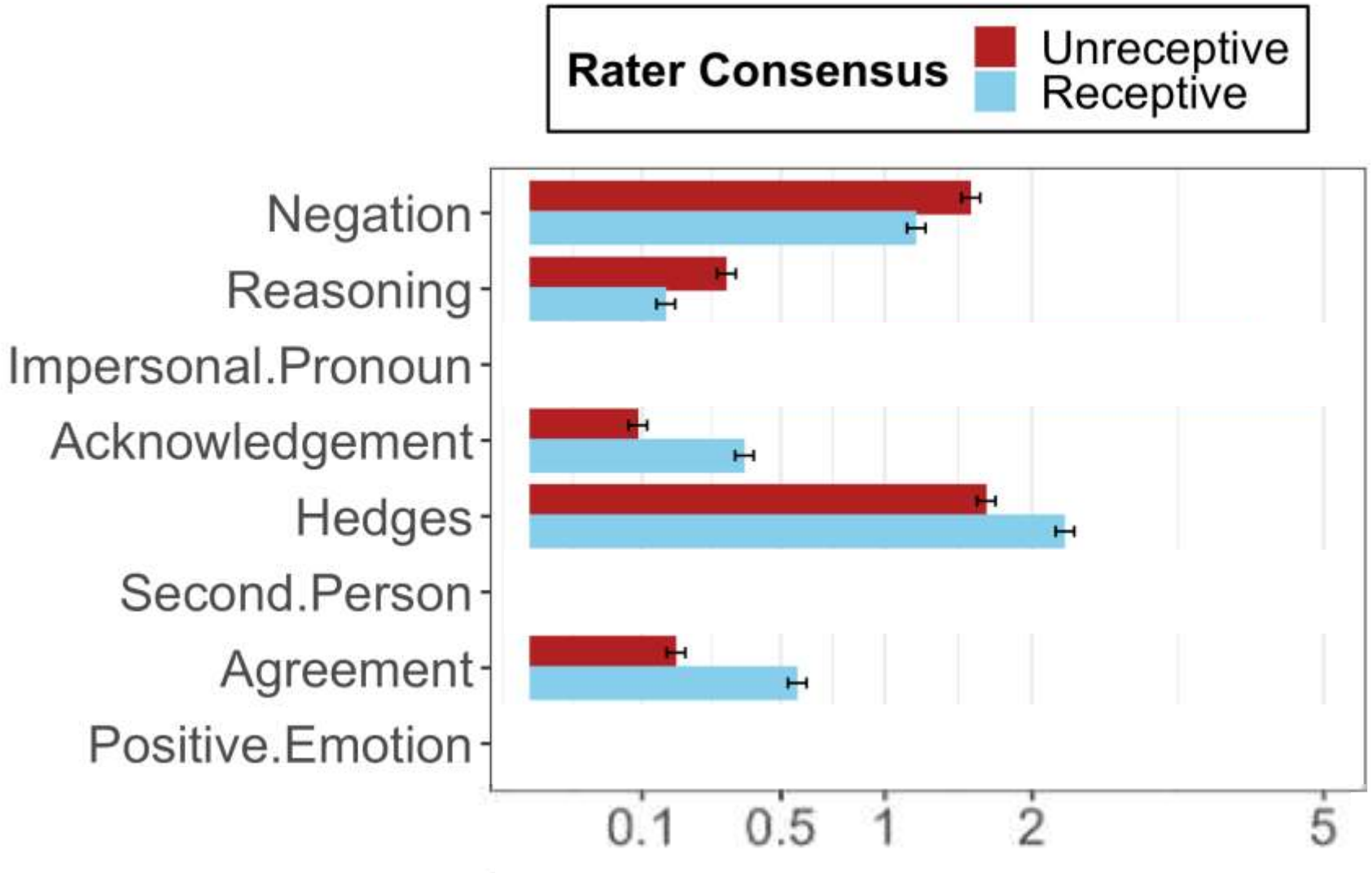

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“Conversational” Receptiveness

(Yeomans, Minson, Collins, Chen & Gino, 2020)

Specific words and phrases that make people **”feel heard”** during active disagreement

Strongly predicts **trust and conflict outcomes**

Easy to **learn** and imitate

Practicing Conversational Receptiveness

H

Hedge your claims

"I think it's possible that…"
"This might happen because…"
"Some people tend to think…"

E

Emphasize agreement

"I think we both want to…"
"I agree with some of what you are saying…"
"We are both concerned with…"

A

Acknowledge other perspectives

"I understand that…"
"I see your point…"
"What I think you are saying is…"

R

Reframe to the positive

"I think it's great when…"
"I really appreciate it when…"
"It would be so wonderful if…"

The Challenge…

Cultivating a receptive mindset and practicing receptive communication in the real world is easier said than done.

How do we put these ideas into practice?

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Break!

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Panelists

Andrew Jones, Confluence Health

Renee Jensen, Snoqualmie Valley Hospital

Scott Graham, Three Rivers Hospital

Florence Chang, MultiCare Health System

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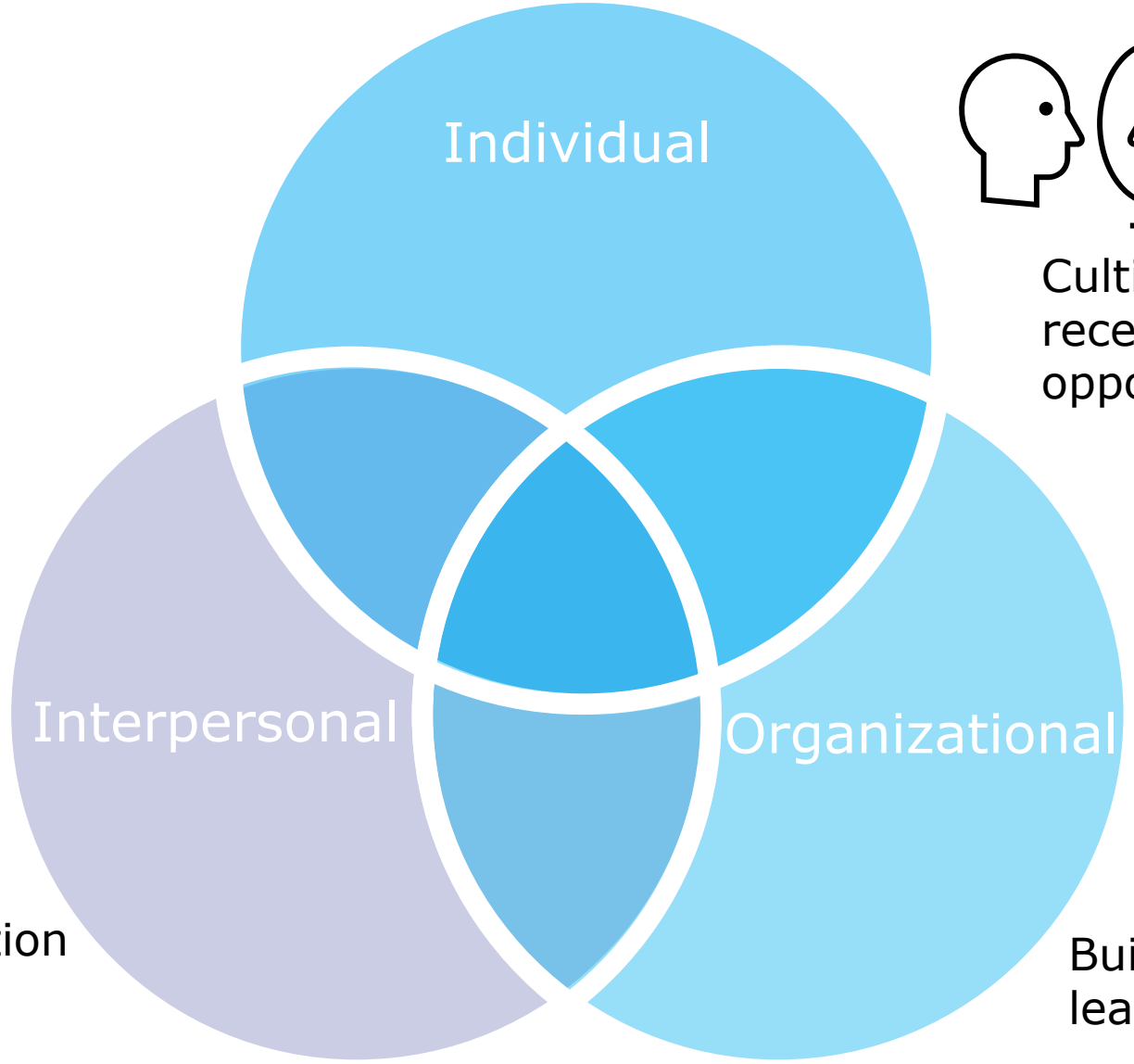
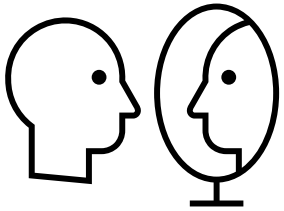
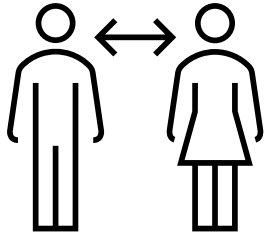
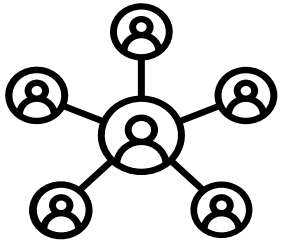




Cultivating receptiveness to opposing views



Practicing receptive communication



Building receptive leadership teams

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Building Capacity for Receptiveness

- Robust approaches to listening and learning
- Increased trust during disagreement
- Decision-making based on all the information
- More sophisticated negotiation strategies
- **LESS DRAMA!**

THANK YOU!

julia_minson@hks.harvard.edu

DisagreeingBetter.com

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