"WHY WON'T YOU LISTEN TO ME?!"

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE OF CONVERSATION

Prof. Julia Minson

Harvard Kennedy School

CONVERSATION

"Turn-by-turn natural language communication between two or more people."

Conversation is:

- Ubiquitous
- Complex
- Fraught

LET'S CONSIDER A SIMPLE CONVERSATION

PollEv.com/juliaminson

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYkwLpMqDMA

	Collaborative (gain for both)	Individual (gain for self)
Informational (belief change is required)	• Share/seek information • Coordinate future behavior • Share/seek advice • Brainstorm Ideas • Make decisions	• Conceal Information/Deceive • Assign blame/Claim credit • Persuade • Extract concessions • Learning
Non-Informational (belief change is not required)	• Enjoyment/Amusement • Social connection • Reminiscing • Honesty • Benevolence • Help the other person	• Fill time/avoid boredom • Express emotions • Regulate emotions • Make a good impression • Remember the conversation

COMMON CHALLENGES:

1. People fail to explicitly consider their conversational goals

- Don't recognize that conversations have goals at all
- Consider some goals, but not all
- Our own goals can conflict with each other
- Goals can also change mid-conversation

2. We forget that others also have a rich constellation of conversational goals

- They may conflict with our own

REFLECTION:

How would your "unsuccessful" conversation have gone differently if you had thought hard about your own goals and/or your counterpart's goals?

BACK TO HARRY AND SALLY…

IMAGINE THEY
MET IN 2021…

AND THE
CONVERSATION
CONTINUED
LIKE THIS:

Harry: So, here's a dark topic. All this COVID stuff… I mean I get it, nobody wants it, but also things turn out the way they do, ya know? I mean, I bet you are one of those people that ran to get the vaccine. I bet you also sanitize your hands every five seconds and have a cute mask with kittens on it.

Me? I say, whatever happens happens. Life is too short to worry about masking, and sanitizing, and whether that shot will make you grow gills. I mean, we might die in a horrible car crash right now. What's the point of worrying about it?! I wanna live man!!

Sure you don't want a grape?

The voice inside Sally's head:

OMG!!! Is this guy serious?! Is he totally nuts?! Does he really believe that the vaccine will make him grow gills?

Does he not care about anyone but himself? He sure seems like a selfish ass…

Should I make him get out of my car right now? Will he murder me if I try?

I can't stand people who say weird stuff and you can't even tell if they are serious! Why can't everyone just be normal?!

Maybe if I just explain the facts to him…

WHAT WILL SALLY SAY?

WHAT ARE PEOPLE'S GOALS IN CONFLICT?

- To persuade the other side
- To provide evidence for their views
- To learn about why others believe what they do
- To avoid conflict
- To preserve the relationship
- To make the other side look bad
- To get out of the situation as soon as possible
- To impress observers
- To show caring/interest/validation
- Etc.

CONFLICT MAKES GOAL ATTAINMENT HARDER

Lack of **actual** engagement with the opposing view:

- We believe that partisans are further apart than is actually the case
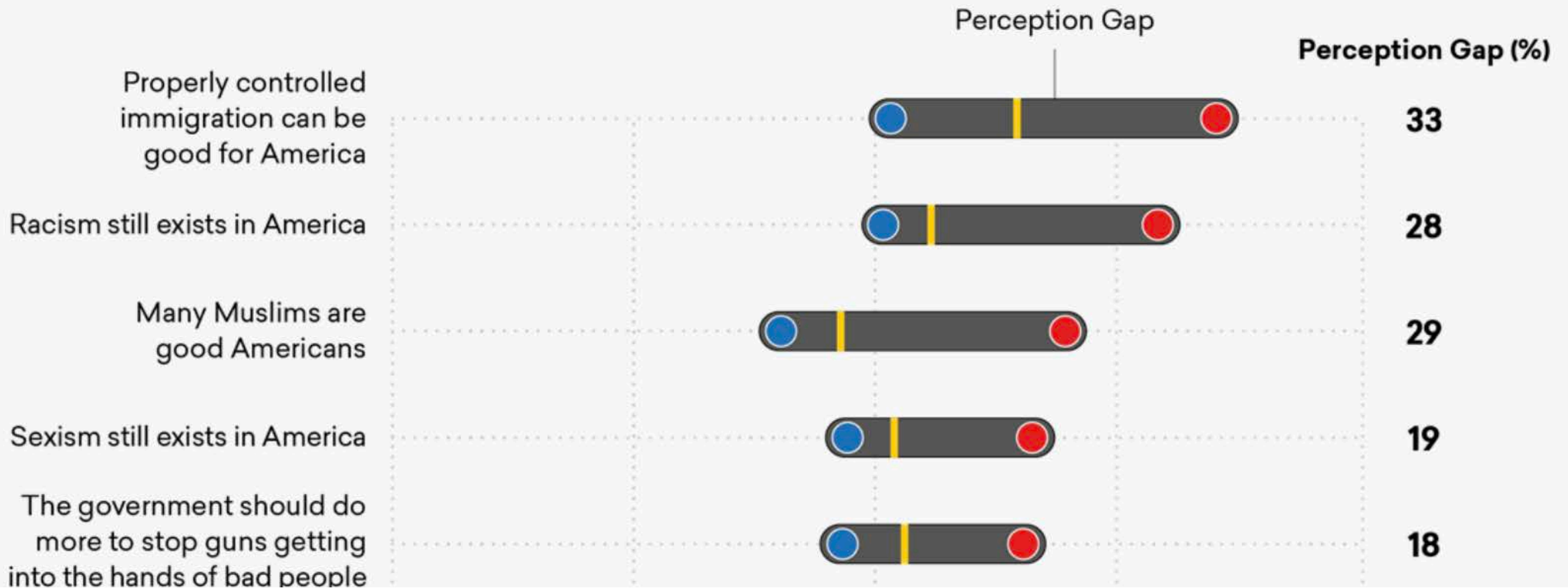- We avoid engaging with the other side and their arguments

Failure to **signal** your engagement:
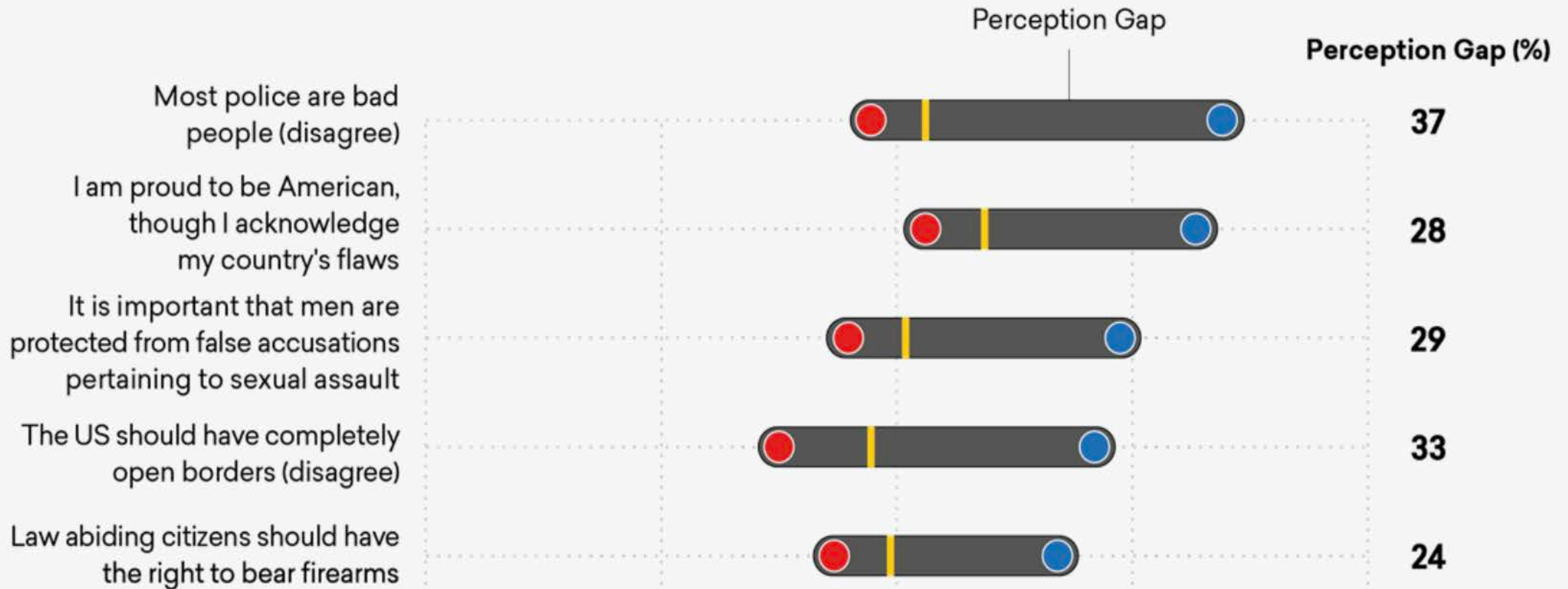
- Too busy arguing
- Saying the wrong things

PEOPLE OVERESTIMATE DISAGREEMENT

● Democrats' Actual Views
| Independents' Estimates
● Republicans' Estimates

Perception Gap

Perception Gap (%)

Most police are bad people (disagree) — **37**

I am proud to be American, though I acknowledge my country's flaws — **28**

It is important that men are protected from false accusations pertaining to sexual assault — **29**

The US should have completely open borders (disagree) — **33**

Law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms — **24**

moreincommon.com

PEOPLE OVERESTIMATE HOW UNPLEASANT LISTENING TO THE OTHER SIDE WILL BE

- Research participants think about watching 2-minute-long videos of Senators Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz

- 200 Liberals + 200 Conservatives

  - Some **forecast** how they would feel

  - Some **watch** the video and report how they felt

MEASURING EMOTIONS (AFFECT)

How much would you feel each of the following:

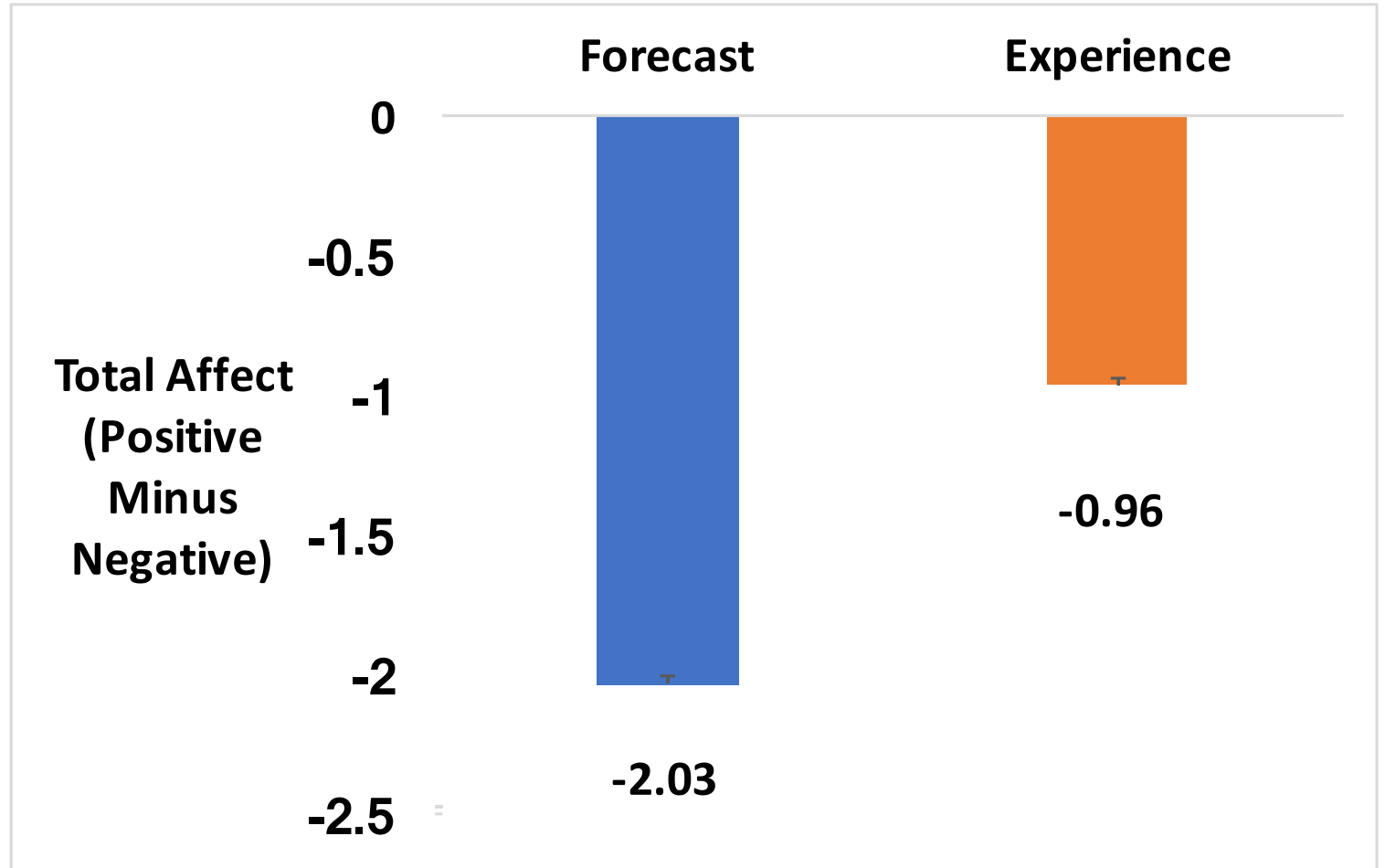- Enthusiastic, Relaxed, Happy, Excited, Cheerful

- Annoyed, Resentful, Nervous, Angry, Afraid

0 = Not at all

8 = More than ever in my life

PEOPLE EXPECT OPPOSING VIEWS TO BE MORE PAINFUL THAN THEY ARE

THIS HAPPENS BECAUSE PEOPLE EXAGGERATE LEVEL OF DISAGREEMENT

DISAGREEMENT MAKES GOAL ATTAINMENT HARDER

Lack of **actual** engagement:

- We believe that partisans are further apart than is actually the case "Perception gap"
- We avoid engaging with the other side and their arguments "Selective exposure"

Failure to **signal** engagement:

- Too busy arguing
- Saying the wrong things

SHOWING LISTENING: CONVERSATIONAL RECEPTIVENESS

Words and phrases that make the other side feel like you are truly engaged with their perspective


1. Most people want to have thoughtful, informative, warm conversations about important issues
2. "Feeling heard" dramatically de-escalates conflict
3. The problem is that most people don't know how to make their partners feel heard!

IDENTIFYING MARKERS OF RECEPTIVENESS USING NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING
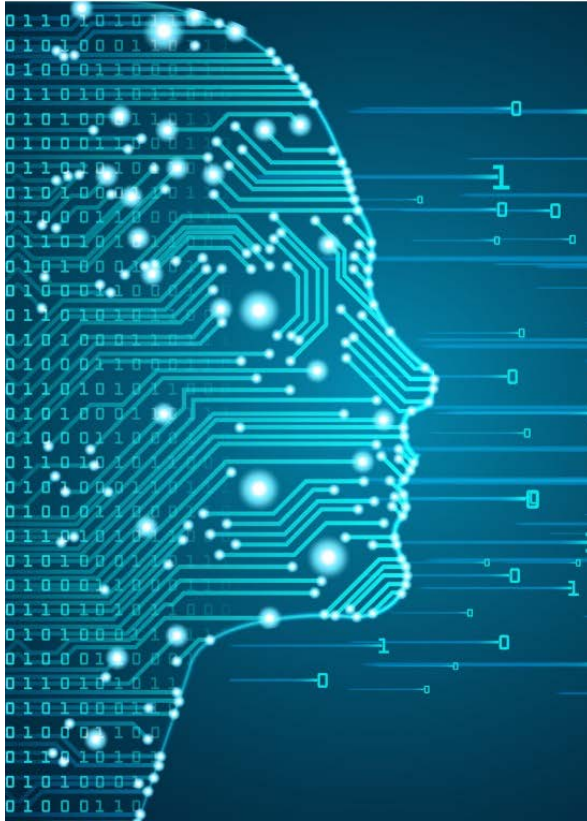
- **Step 1:**

- Collect conversations between two people who disagree

- **Step 2:**

- Ask other people to evaluate the receptiveness of the side they disagree with

- **Step 3:**

- Train a machine learning model to identify features of natural language that are **seen** as receptive
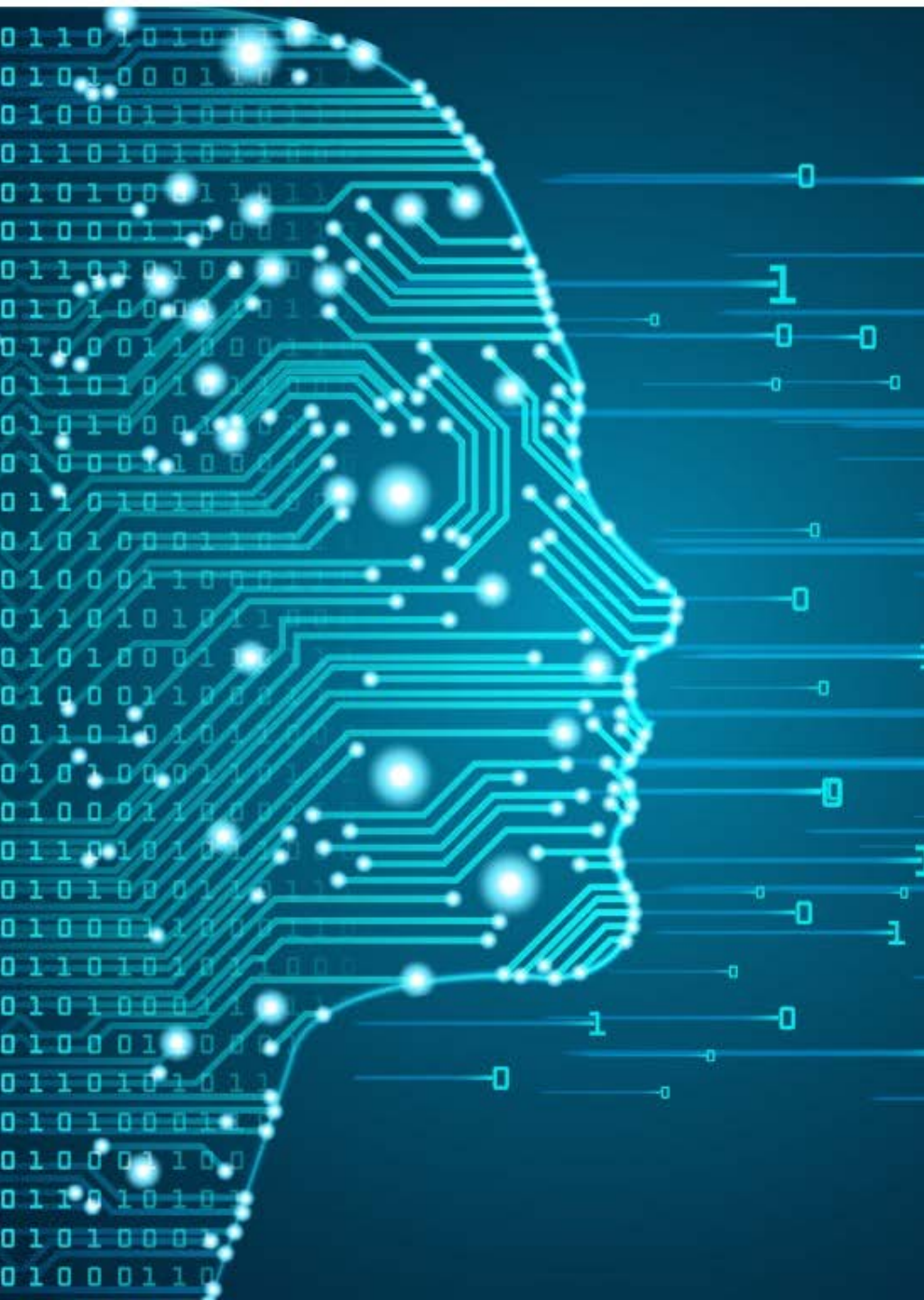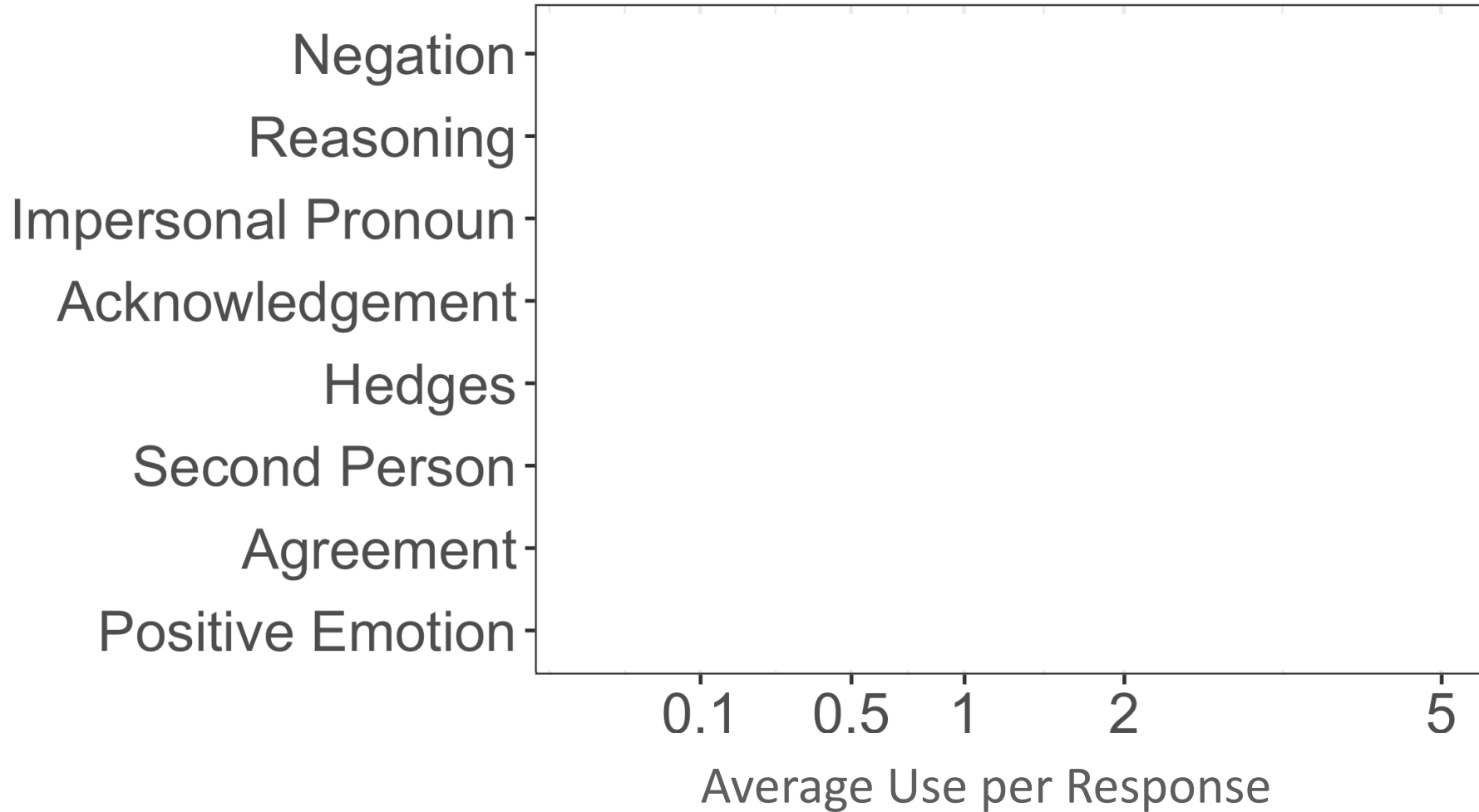
PRETEND YOU ARE AN ALGORITHM...

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.

FEATURES OF RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE
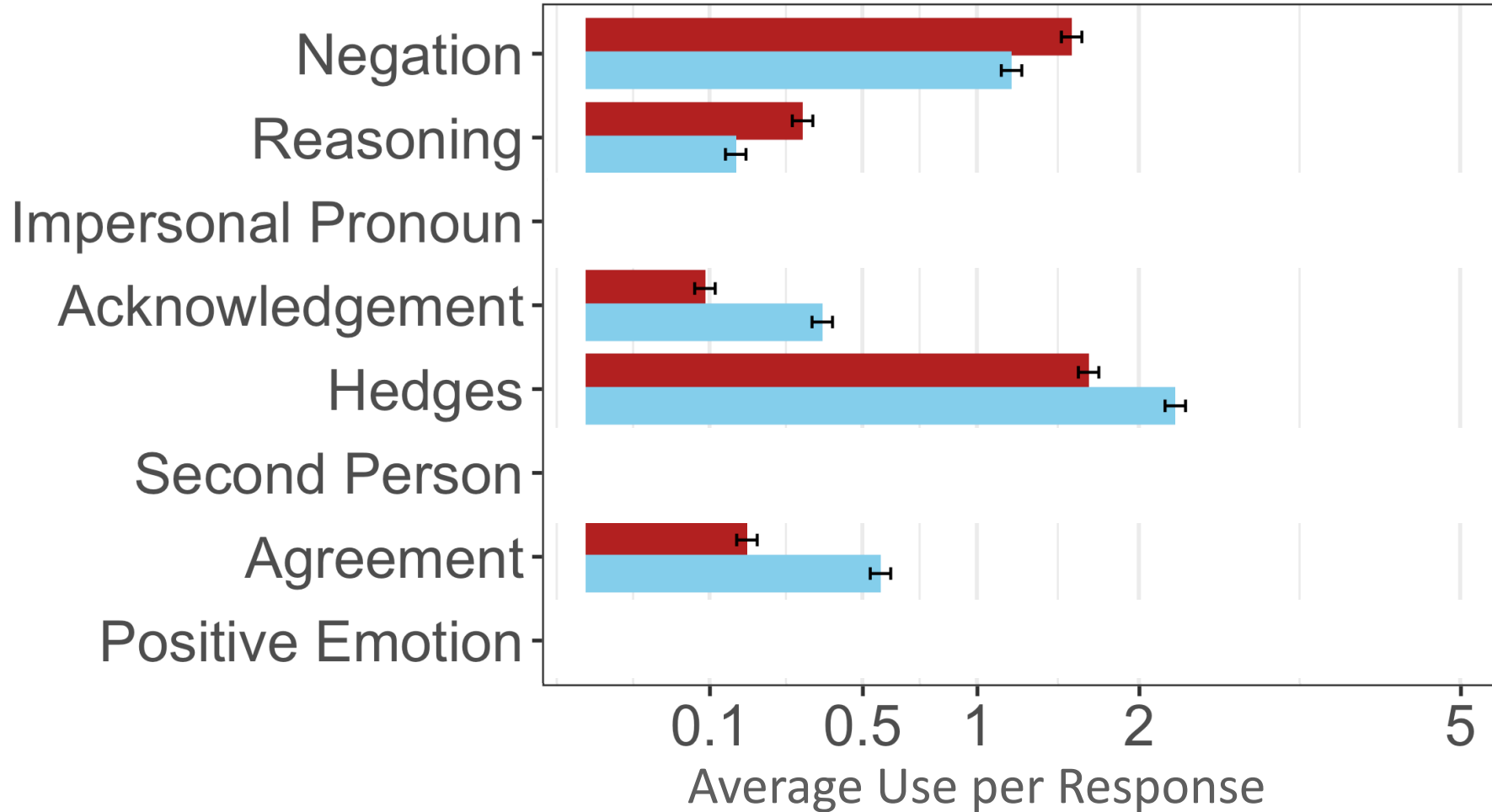
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PRACTICING CONVERSATIONAL RECEPTIVENESS: "HEAR"

Hedge your claims

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

Emphasize agreement

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

Acknowledge other perspectives

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

Reframe to the positive

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

FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH ON CONVERSATIONAL RECEPTIVENESS

- When you instruct people to sound more receptive, they use the wrong cues
  - Politeness and formality instead of engagement

- When we train people to use conversational receptiveness cues, they easily learn to use them

- Using conversational receptiveness is more persuasive than using straight argumentation

- People imitate conversational receptiveness –

If I am receptive to you, it makes you more receptive to me!

WHY DOES CONVERSATIONAL RECEPTIVENESS WORK?

- Feeling heard powerfully de-escalates conflict and improves willingness to interact in the future

- People don't know the words to use to make their counterpart feel heard
    - Listening is an internal mental process, not externally visible
    - "Active listening" – is a therapeutic/mediation skill that takes years to master
    - Conflict introduces stress and complicates our goals

Having the right words for these situations on the tip of your tongue prevents unforced errors

THANK YOU!

julia_minson@hks.harvard.edu

juliaminson.com

receptiveness.net