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Authors

Befrits-Terpstra, Daniel

Andersson, Elias Lars Gustaf

Sloman, Steven

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The Contagious Sense of Understanding Effect: Really a Contagious Sense of Incomprehension

Daniel Befrits-Terpstra (daniel.befrits-terpstra@brown.edu)*, Elias Andersson* & Steven A. Sloman

Department of Cognitive and Psychological Sciences, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

* Equal contributors

Abstract

The community of knowledge hypothesis holds that people estimate their level of understanding by relying on the perceived knowledge of others. Prior work describes a “contagious sense of understanding,” in which self-assessed understanding increases when experts are believed to understand an issue. However, because prior studies examined only two conditions, experts understanding or not understanding, the effect’s direction remains unclear as it lacks a baseline without information about others’ knowledge levels. Across three experiments (N = 1080), a neutral condition was added while replicating the paradigm. Across all experiments, self-rated understanding was lower in the expert-not-understanding condition compared to both the neutral and expert-understanding conditions, with no difference between the latter two, for both public policy proposals and novel scientific phenomena. Thus, the effect reflects decreases in perceived understanding when experts lack understanding, not increases when expert understanding is explicit, suggesting a contagious sense of incomprehension rather than a contagious sense of understanding.

Keywords: Community of knowledge; contagious sense of understanding; illusion of explanatory depth; meta-cognitive confidence, attitude formation.

Introduction

Knowledge is often thought of as an individual possession, amassed during a lifetime and bound within the cognition of one person. Yet much of what we know is in fact distributed across our social network, and retrieval of information can be a cooperative process among individuals. The term Community of Knowledge refers to the phenomenon where individuals typically possess limited detailed knowledge themselves yet frequently overestimate their understanding by relying on the presumed knowledge of others within their community (R.A. Wilson & Keil 1998). Through this mechanism, an individual’s sense of understanding is shaped by the collective knowledge of the community, particularly that of recognized experts (Rabb et al., 2023).

Sloman and Rabb (2016) conducted four experiments concluding that participants’ self-assessments of understanding of scientific issues increased when they believed experts understood those issues, compared to when experts were described as not understanding them. This was interpreted as meaning that people’s confidence in their own knowledge increases because they treat experts’ understanding as if it were their own. A contagious sense of understanding was later observed in follow-up studies, demonstrating that the effect generalizes to contexts such as public policy, experimentally increasing participants’ confidence in their knowledge of

politicized issues using the same methodology (Sloman & Rabb, 2020). As overconfidence in public policy issues has been linked to extreme and anti-establishment oriented political attitudes, these results have important implications for how people form beliefs, develop attitudes, and shape societal outcomes (Light et al., 2022; Rabb et al., 2023; Van Prooijen et al., 2019).

Previous experiments examined the contagious sense of understanding by having participants rate their understanding of issues while manipulating whether experts were described as knowing or not knowing the explanation of them.

In all previous experiments the two conditions were formed as follows:

- a) A description of an issue paired with a statement that experts in the corresponding field **understand the issue in question well**.
- b) A description of an issue paired with a statement that experts in the corresponding field **are unable to explain the issue in question**.

Using this methodology, participants in the expert understanding condition rated their understanding significantly higher on a 7-point Likert scale than those in the expert non-understanding condition for the same issues. The difference was interpreted as reflecting increased metacognitive confidence among participants exposed to statements indicating strong expert understanding. However, this is not the only possible explanation, as the effect could equally reflect a decrease in self-rated understanding when experts were described as not understanding the issue, relative to participants’ original baseline judgments about their knowledge.

In Sloman and Rabb (2016), the experiments also included control measures designed to test alternative explanations for the observed effect. One alternative hypothesis was that the effect might stem from inferences about understandability. If an issue is perceived as well understood by others, participants may conclude that it is, in principle, easy to understand. Conversely, if experts in a field do not understand an issue, it may be seen as inherently more difficult, leading participants to assign lower personal understanding accordingly.

To examine this possibility, participants were asked to rate how understandable in principle they believed the issues were, and these ratings were compared across the two conditions of expert understanding. In addition, a second independent variable with two levels was introduced, presenting the issues as either easy or hard to understand in combination

with one of the expert-understanding conditions. If the previously observed increase in self-rated understanding were driven by inferences about understandability, this manipulation should have eliminated the effect in conditions when statements about understandability conflicted with statements about expert understanding. However, because the statements about understandability did not significantly alter the pattern of individuals' self-rated understanding in these conditions this suggest that the effect cannot be explained simply by judgments about how easy or difficult the material is to understand in principle. Instead, they provide further support for the contagious sense of understanding account.

The Current Experiments

In the experiments reported here, we replicate the methodology used to examine the contagious sense of understanding while introducing a third expert understanding condition to serve as a baseline. In this condition, the expert knowledge level is presented as neither high nor low. The condition in which experts are described as knowledgeable is referred to as the positive community of knowledge condition (positive CK), the baseline condition as neutral CK, and the condition in which experts are described as not understanding the issue as the negative CK condition. Adding the neutral condition makes it possible to determine the direction of change in participants' self-rated confidence across three scenarios.

If the mean self-rated understanding among participants in the neutral CK condition is similar to that of the negative CK condition, the difference between the negative and positive CK conditions can be attributed primarily to an increase in participants' self-rated understanding when experts are perceived as understanding it. This scenario would align with the interpretation of the data in previous experiments.

If the mean self-rated understanding among participants in the neutral CK condition falls between that of the negative and positive CK conditions, the difference between the two can be understood as reflecting both an increase in confidence in the positive CK condition and a decrease in confidence in the negative CK condition.

If the mean self-rated understanding among participants in the neutral CK condition is similar to that of the positive CK condition, the difference between the negative and positive CK conditions can be attributed primarily to a decrease in participants' confidence when experts are perceived as not understanding the issue.

Experiment 1

Four hundred thirty-eight U.S. residents were recruited via the online research platform Prolific and participated in return for a small payment. Fifty-five participants were excluded following screening for automated bots, disengagement, or prior participation in similar studies. The final sample consisted of 383 participants (192 female, 183 male, and 7 identifying with other gender identities; mean age = 43.3 years, SD = 11.6). The sample size was determined based on prior studies using similar materials (Rabb et al., 2020;

Sloman & Rabb, 2016), which reported small-to-medium effect sizes.

Participants read four brief descriptions of U.S. public policy proposals presented via Qualtrics and rated their understanding of each proposal on a 7-point scale with the order of items randomized across participants.

Table 1: The item structure used in Experiment 1

Positive CK	Neutral CK	Negative CK
<i>A group of legislators began discussing a plan to merge grade schools and high schools for centralized learning. The bill was reviewed by a group of educational strategy experts from the policy institute, Federal Learning Initiative. The Federal Learning Initiative is known for its political neutrality and balanced consultation to both Republicans and Democrats.</i>	<i>A group of legislators are discussing a plan to merge grade schools and high schools for centralized learning. The bill was reviewed by a group of educational strategy experts from the policy institute, Federal Learning Initiative. The Federal Learning Initiative is known for its political neutrality and balanced consultation to both Republicans and Democrats.</i>	<i>A group of legislators began discussing a plan to merge grade schools and high schools for centralized learning. The bill was reviewed by a group of educational strategy experts from the policy institute, Federal Learning Initiative. The Federal Learning Initiative is known for its political neutrality and balanced consultation to both Republicans and Democrats.</i>
<i>The educational strategy experts examined their plan and fully understand how it will affect student's learning efficiency. In an interview with a local media outlet, they described the plan and provided a full explanation of its effects.</i>	<i>How well do you understand how the merger will affect learning efficacy?</i>	<i>The educational strategy experts examined their plan but do not fully understand how it will affect student's learning efficiency. In an interview with a local media outlet, they were able to describe the plan but were unable to provide a full explanation of its effects.</i>

Instructions adapted from Rozenblit and Keil (2002) were used to demonstrate how the rating scale reflected different levels of knowledge, by presenting examples corresponding

to levels 1, 4, and 7 of understanding of a crossbow's causal mechanisms. The items were written to match the style and structure of those used by Rabb et al. (2020) and described public policy issues accompanied by information about the level of expert knowledge regarding the issue. A between-subjects design was used where participants were randomly assigned to one of three CK conditions: positive CK, neutral CK, or negative CK. In the positive CK condition, participants were informed that relevant experts had reviewed the policy proposal and fully understood its effects, providing a complete explanation. In the neutral CK condition, participants were informed that experts had reviewed the proposal, with no additional information provided regarding their level of understanding. In the negative CK condition, participants were informed that experts had reviewed the proposal but did not fully understand its effects and were unable to provide a complete explanation.

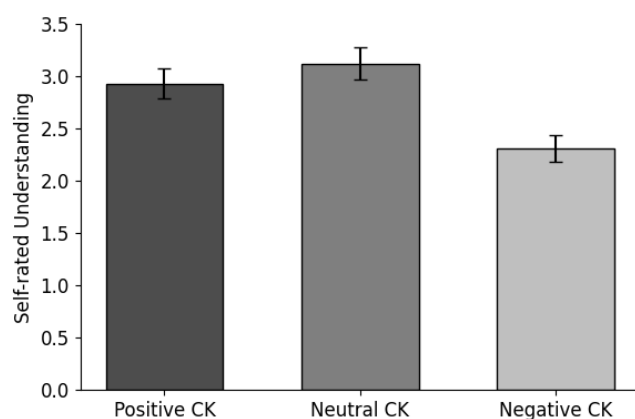
Results

Mean ratings of understanding were, Positive CK condition = 2.93 $CI:(2.79, 3.07)$, Neutral CK condition = 3.12, $CI:(2.97, 3.28)$ and Negative CK condition = 2.31, $CI:(2.18, 2.44)$. A one-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of the CK variable on rated understanding, $F(2, 1529) = 34.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .043$. When conducting post hoc tests with a Bonferroni correction participants rated their understanding significantly higher in the Positive CK condition compared to the Negative CK condition, mean difference = 0.62, $SE = 0.103, t(1529) = 6.05, p < .001, d = 0.38$. Ratings in the Neutral CK condition were significantly higher than the Negative CK condition, mean difference = 0.81, $SE = 0.102, t(1529) = 7.92, p < .001, d = 0.49$. There was no significant difference between the Positive and Neutral CK condition, mean difference = $-0.19, SE = 0.103, t(1529) = -1.84, p = .070, d = -0.12$. This pattern was consistent across items when comparing conditions, with mean responses as follows: Abortion (Positive = 3.25, Neutral = 3.59, Negative = 2.60), Education merger (Positive = 2.94, Neutral = 3.25, Negative = 2.29), Environmental reform (Positive = 2.51, Neutral = 2.49, Negative = 1.83), and Gun attachments (Positive = 3.01, Neutral = 3.14, Negative = 2.52).

Participants rated their understanding of the policies lowest when they were informed that experts did not understand the effects of the proposal. No differences in ratings were observed between the conditions in which experts were described as understanding the proposal and conditions in which no information about expert understanding was provided. These findings suggest that the contagious sense of understanding effect may be negative in direction, consisting of participants decreasing their self-rated understanding in response to expert incomprehension rather than increasing it in response to expert understanding. However, multiple confounds complicate any definitive conclusion regarding its negative direction. Firstly, as the presented information regards public policy, the neutral condition may implicitly invite positive inferences about expert knowledge in the neutral CK condition, as one might assume that policy proposals are

informed by at least some understanding of their anticipated consequences. It is unlikely that a policy would be proposed in the absence of any expert consideration of its effects, which may lead participants to infer a baseline level of expert understanding even when none is explicitly stated. Secondly, displaying the items between-subjects is more vulnerable to individual differences compared to a within-subjects design. Directly contrasting the neutral CK and positive CK conditions within the same participant could also influence how they rate their understanding. We therefore replicated Experiment 1 using a within-subjects design even though this increases the risk of participants guessing the purpose of the study and adapting their answers in response.

Figure 1: Results from Experiment 1: Mean Ratings of Understanding across all items



Experiment 2

Unless otherwise noted, recruitment procedures, study platform, rating scale, and data quality screening measures were identical to those used in Experiment 1. A total of 373 participants were recruited. After screening for bot-activity, disengagement, and previous participation, data were collected from 345 participants (170 female, 166 male, 9 identifying as other; mean age = 42.4 years, $SD = 11.3$). The subject matter of the items was changed to novel scientific phenomena (e.g., glowing rocks, helium clouds) adapted from Sloman and Rabb (2016). Participants read three brief descriptions of novel scientific phenomena and rated their understanding of each one on a 7-point scale. The study employed a within-subjects design in which each participant was exposed to all three CK conditions. Items were randomly assigned to the positive, neutral, or negative CK conditions and presented in random order. In the positive and negative CK conditions, the descriptions stated that scientists had either fully explained the phenomenon and understood how it works or had not yet explained it and did not yet understand its underlying mechanisms. In the neutral CK condition, the discovery of the phenomenon was described without reference to expert understanding of its causal mechanisms. Additionally, descriptive information was added with the aim of obscuring the question

of expert understanding. Attention and engagement checks were included throughout the study.

Table 2: The item structure used in Experiment 2

Positive CK	Neutral CK	Negative CK
<i>A May 19, 2025 study in the journal Geology reported the discovery of a new rock that scientists have thoroughly explained. The rock is similar to calcite, yet it glows in the absence of a light source. The authors of the study, Rittenour, Clark, and Xu, fully understand how it works; they provided a description of the remarkable appearance of the mineral and outlined future experiments.</i>	<i>A May 19, 2025 study in the journal Geology reported the discovery of a new rock. The rock is similar to calcite, yet it glows in the absence of a light source. The rock was discovered in a cave in the Basque country in northern Spain and gained local recognition. The rarity of the rock has garnered speculations of the market value and sparked discussions on the ethicality of extracting rare rocks from their sites of discovery.</i>	<i>A May 19, 2025 study in the journal Geology reported the discovery of a new rock that scientists have not yet explained. The rock is similar to calcite, yet it glows in the absence of a light source. The authors of the study, Rittenour, Clark, and Xu, do not yet understand how it works; they provided a description of the remarkable appearance of the mineral and outlined future experiments.</i>

Results

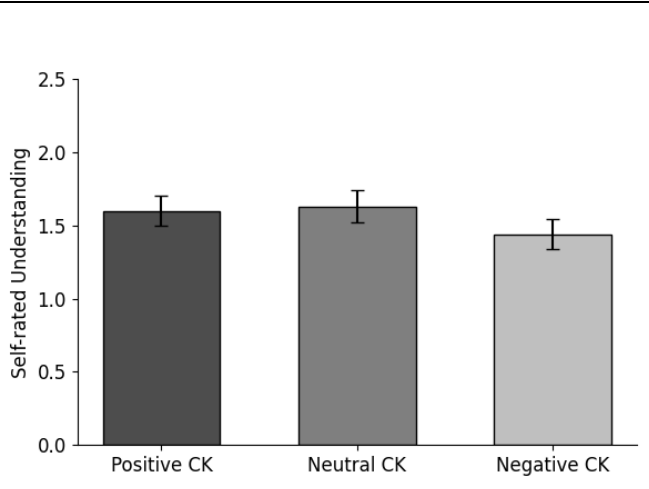
Mean ratings of understanding were; Positive CK = 1.60, 95% CI (1.50, 1.71), Neutral CK = 1.63, 95% CI (1.52, 1.74), and Negative CK = 1.44, 95% CI (1.33, 1.54). A linear mixed-effects model with CK condition as fixed effects and participant as a random intercept indicated a significant effect of CK condition on rated understanding, $F(2, 684) = 6.86$, $p = .001$. Model fit was Marginal $R^2 = .007$, LRT $\chi^2(2) = 13.62$, $p = .001$, and when accounting for participant variance as a random effect the model fit was Conditional $R^2 = .468$, LRT $\chi^2(3) = 209.94$, $p < .001$. Post hoc tests with a Holm correction showed that participants rated their understanding significantly lower in the Negative CK condition than in both the Neutral CK condition, $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.056$, 95% CI $(-0.30, -0.08)$, $t(684) = -3.41$, $p = .002$, and the Positive CK condition, $b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.056$, 95% CI $(-0.28, -0.06)$, $t(684) = -2.95$, $p = .007$. There was no difference between the Neutral and Positive CK conditions, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.056$, 95% CI $(-0.08, 0.14)$, $t(684) = 0.47$, $p = .642$. When looking at individual means there is no systematic difference between the Positive and Neutral CK conditions, but responses are

consistently lower in the Negative CK condition: Glowing Rocks (Positive = 1.70, Neutral = 1.95, Negative = 1.66), Helium Clouds (Positive = 1.40, Neutral = 1.37, Negative = 1.38), and Ice Crystals (Positive = 1.71, Neutral = 1.58, Negative = 1.27).

These results further indicate that presenting expert understanding does not lead to higher ratings of participant understanding compared to when no information about the knowledge of others is provided. Notably, this pattern remained even when participants were exposed to all conditions, allowing for direct contrasts between them within-subjects.

However, the source describing the discovery of the phenomenon was a scientific journal, which may itself serve as a cue to expert understanding of the issue in question. Such cues may be sufficient to support elevated levels of perceived individual understanding if there is a contagious sense of understanding effect, even in the absence of explicit statements about expert explanation. To address this possibility, altering the source of the descriptions from a scientific journal to a platform where understanding is not a prerequisite is warranted

Figure 2: Results from Experiment 2: Mean Ratings of Understanding across all items



Experiment 3

Unless otherwise noted, recruitment procedures, study platform, rating scale, and data quality screening measures were identical to those used in Experiment 1. A total of 373 participants were recruited. After screening for bots, disengagement and previous participation, data was collected from 352 participants (173 female, 172 male, and 7 identifying as other; mean age = 41.2 years, $SD = 11.7$). Participants read four brief descriptions of novel scientific phenomena adapted from Sloman and Rabb (2016) and rated their understanding of each phenomenon on a 7-point scale. To address the possibility that the scientific journal source inflated perceived expert understanding in the neutral CK condition in previous experiments, Experiment 3 changed the source of the

descriptions from a scientific journal to a newspaper in all items. Through this design, expert understanding was presented by referring to interviewed researchers presenting their understanding of a scientific phenomenon, whereas the Neutral CK condition contained no reference to the scientific community.

The Negative CK condition was also removed from Experiment 3, as sufficient data indicated a significant and consistent difference between it and the other conditions in Experiments 1 and 2.

The study employed a between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to either a positive or neutral CK condition. Item order was randomized across participants, and attention and engagement checks were included throughout the study. In the positive CK condition, descriptions stated that scientists had explained the phenomenon and fully understood how it worked. As in Experiment 2, the Neutral CK descriptions included contextual information about the discovery that did not relate to causal explanations or expert understanding.

Table 3: The item structure used in Experiment 3

Positive CK	Neutral CK
<i>The newspaper, The World Observer recently reported the discovery of a new rock studied by researchers in the article, The Self-luminescent Rocks of the Basque country, May 19, 2025. The rock is similar to calcite, yet it glows in the absence of a light source and was thoroughly explained by the interviewed researchers. They fully understand how it works, and went on to provide a complete explanation of the underlying process behind the remarkable appearance of the mineral.</i>	<i>The newspaper, The World Observer reported the discovery of a new rock in the article, The Self-luminescent Rocks of the Basque country, May 19, 2025. The rock is similar to calcite, yet it glows in the absence of a light source. The rock which quickly gained local recognition due to its appearance and rarity has garnered speculations of the market value as well as discussions on the ethicality of extracting rare rocks from their sites of discovery.</i>

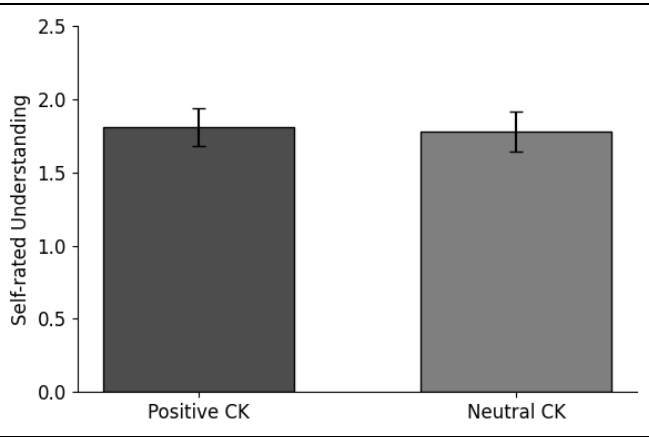
Results

Mean ratings of understanding across CK conditions were: Neutral CK = 1.78, 95% CI (1.64, 1.91), and Positive CK = 1.81, 95% CI (1.68, 1.94). Due to violations of normality and heterogeneity of variance differences of rated understanding between CK conditions were compared using Welch’s independent samples t-test. No difference was observed between the mean ratings in the Positive and Neutral CK conditions, $t(346.12) = 0.48, p = .63$, mean difference = 0.03, 95% CI (−0.10, 0.16), $d = 0.05$. Item-level comparisons showed a similar pattern. No individual items (Glowing

Rocks, Ice Crystals, or Flying Fish showed a significant difference between CK conditions (All $ps > .68$). In the Helium Clouds Item, rated understanding was slightly higher in the Positive CK condition, $M = 1.57, 95\% CI (1.41, 1.73)$ than in the Neutral CK condition, $M = 1.39, 95\% CI (1.24, 1.54)$. However, this difference was not significant, $t(343.21)$.

These results further support the notion that there is no difference in self-reported understanding when participants are told that experts understand an issue compared to when no information about expert knowledge is provided. Conversely, the neutral baseline in Experiment 3 may still be associated with an elevated sense of understanding if newspapers are interpreted as conveying expert authority, thereby allowing for an indirect inference of understanding. However, this represents the closest approximation to a neutral baseline under the constraints of this paradigm while still maintaining ecological validity in how understanding is communicated through the design.

Figure 3: Results from Experiment 3: Mean values of rated understanding across all items



Discussion

Across the three experiments, a consistent difference in self-reported understanding was observed between the positive CK and negative CK conditions, replicating the basic pattern reported in earlier work. Crucially, however, the inclusion of a neutral CK condition substantially altered how this contrast should be interpreted. The neutral CK condition differed consistently from the Negative CK condition, but in no experiment did it differ from the Positive CK condition. This indicates that the overall effect is driven not by an increase in perceived understanding when experts are described as knowledgeable, but by a decrease when experts are described as lacking understanding.

These findings challenge earlier interpretations that emphasized an inflation of confidence in one’s knowledge through perceived high levels of expert understanding of the same issue. Describing experts as competent did not meaningfully elevate participants’ self-assessed understanding above the neutral baseline, whereas describing experts as

unable to explain the phenomenon in question reliably lowered it.

The current results refine the Community of Knowledge account. Rather than assimilating expert understanding to elevate one's own perceived knowledge, individuals appear to use information about experts not understanding as a cue to downgrade their own epistemic standing on specific issues. In other words, the boundary between personal understanding and the understanding of our community is still not distinct, but relying on the community to gauge one's own understanding appears to reduce it rather than elevate it.

Why Does Expert Incomprehension Lower Perceived Understanding?

One explanation addressed in previous studies that is especially interesting in the light of these findings is that presenting expert incomprehension of an issue simply makes people interpret it as inherently harder to understand. However, this interpretation is unlikely to be true. Prior work directly tested and rejected an understandability account, showing that perceived difficulty alone could not explain these effects (Sloman & Rabb, 2016). Instead, the findings indicate that references to expert ambiguity or inability to understand undermine self-perceived understanding independently of the perceived objective comprehensibility of the issue.

A plausible explanation draws on the illusion of explanatory depth paradigm, which shows that people tend to overestimate their understanding until they are prompted to reflect on their knowledge level and, if applicable, explain the causal mechanisms behind certain issues (Rozenblit & Keil, 2002). When asked to explain how things work, individuals typically realize their knowledge is shallower than assumed, leading to lower self-assessments of understanding. This effect has been demonstrated across a wide spectrum of domains such as historical events and psychiatric disorders (Gaviria et al., 2017; Zeveney & Marsh, 2016).

From this perspective, claims that experts do not understand an issue may function as a cue for self-reflection, prompting individuals to reassess the depth of their own knowledge and thereby lowering their perceived understanding. This interpretation aligns with the findings of Sloman and Vives (2022), who showed that asking people to explain public policy issues reduced perceived understanding and hence led to more moderate attitudes. If this framework applies to the current findings, the results carry important implications for science and political communication. Emphasizing expert uncertainty, disagreement, or lack of understanding is often accurate and normatively appropriate, particularly in areas of ambiguous scientific consensus. This emphasis may reduce individuals' confidence in their own knowledge and potentially in related domains as well. Such effects are particularly consequential in politically salient and bipartisan contexts, where perceived expert incomprehension may shape the degree of extremity in people's attitudes on politicized issues. Hence, whether the differences in the participants' self-assessed knowledge reflect an increase when experts understand an issue, or a decrease when the experts

do not, carries important implications. If people's sense of understanding can be effectively reduced by presenting expert inability to understand, then framing information in this way could be used deliberately to temper inflated perceptions of understanding.

Additionally, from this standpoint, the risk of inflating people's sense of understanding by communicating that experts understand an issue is not a problem, as the positive CK and neutral CK conditions do not differ significantly in any of the experiments reported in this paper.

Future research should therefore examine how these effects vary across ideological orientations. This is especially critical given evidence that overestimations of knowledge in political domains are associated with more extreme attitudes and contribute to polarization (Light et al., 2022). Understanding how the perception that experts in politicized fields do not understand issues interacts with self-assessed knowledge may be central to developing communication strategies that preserve intellectual humility without discouraging engagement or inadvertently intensifying political polarization.

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