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The Art and Science of Disagreeing: How to Create More Effective Conversations About Opposing Views

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Presenter Symposium

The Art and Science of Disagreeing: How to Create More Effective Conversations About Opposing Views

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Conversational Receptiveness: Improving Engagement with Opposing Views

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“Thank You, Because”: Discussing Differences while Finding Common Ground

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Potential Sponsor Divisions: Organizational Behavior; Conflict Management

OVERVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Disagreement is an unavoidable part of social life. Because no two people possess identical beliefs, knowledge, values, or goals, opposing viewpoints are bound to arise at some point in the pursuit of personal and collective interests in professional organizations (Baron, 1991; Fiol, 1994; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989; Todorova, Bear, & Weingart, 2014), civic spaces (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Milton, 1644/1890; Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015), and personal relationships (Cutrona, 1996; Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Gottman, 1994). A large literature has suggested that engaging with diverse viewpoints can create numerous beneficial outcomes. For instance, it can result in more accurate beliefs (Becker, Porter, & Centola, 2019; Minson, Lieberman & Ross, 2011; Soll & Larrick, 2009; Sunstein & Hastie, 2015; Tost, Gino & Larrick, 2013), superior team performance on complex tasks (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Shi et al., 2019; Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010), and more efficient markets (Levine et al., 2014).

One unfortunate reality, however, is that people often struggle to handle disagreement constructively. An extensive body of research has shown that the presence of contradictory opinions often gives rise to negative affect (Matz & Wood, 2005; Dorison, Minson, & Rogers, 2019; for review, see Hart et al., 2009), biased information processing (Frey, 1986; Hart et al., 2009; Nickerson, 1998), and negative inferences about the other side (Pacilli, Rocco, Pagliaro, & Russo, 2016; Ross & Ward, 1995), including attributing deficient mental capacities to the opposition (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Kennedy & Pronin, 2008; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). These psychological reactions can often lead to either escalated conflicts (McCroskey, & Wheelless, 1976) or complete disengagement and avoidance (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, &

Dowling, 2012; Chen & Rohla, 2018), which keeps people from reaping the benefits of diverse viewpoints and threatens the prosperity of organizations and our society as a whole.

How can people engage with disagreement more effectively? Given that the current literature has documented many challenges and few solutions, this symposium aims to introduce four innovative empirical papers that investigate different psychological barriers to productive disagreement and offer practical solutions to help people create better conversations when opposing viewpoints arise.

Presentations

In the first paper, Dorison, Minson, and Schweitzer raise the intriguing question of why people argue with each other, despite the fact that such conversations are rarely pleasant or effective. One reason they have identified is that, even though people may often be averse to exposure to opposing views, expressing one's own views yields a positive affective experience. However, people systematically underestimate the affective benefits others derive from expressing their opposing opinions, which can in turn lead people to underestimate the probability of conflict escalation. Based on this finding, Dorison, Minson, and Schweitzer tested a novel intervention where they instructed people to ask a debate partner follow-up questions about the bases of that partner's views. Results revealed that question-asking yielded affective benefits similar to those of the counter-arguing approach -- without creating the negative consequences of conflict escalation. This paper extends understanding of the role that emotion plays in decision making during attitude conflict and sheds new light on an important mechanism behind conflict escalation.

The second paper by Schroeder focuses on how the communication medium (e.g., written, spoken, in-person) can affect conversations about disagreement and the humanization of ideological enemies. Across a series of experiments, Schroeder has revealed a stark contrast

between the way people predict the use of different communication media will change their conversations with disagreeing others and the way those media actually do affect their conversations: Although people prefer to write with, rather than speak with, their ideological enemies, in reality, speaking is the medium that enhanced humanization and civility, resulting in more feelings of being understood, less conflict, and more openness to diverse opinions. This paper thus suggests that to reduce conflict, people across the political spectrum should talk with one another instead of engaging online.

In the third paper, Yeomans investigates the language exchanged in disagreement and people's subsequent perception of the speaker and their messages. Focusing on the concept of "conversational receptiveness"—the use of language to communicate one's willingness to thoughtfully engage with opposing views—he first developed an interpretable machine-learning algorithm to identify the linguistic profile of receptiveness. Then he showed that in contentious policy discussions, government executives who were rated as more receptive according to the algorithm and their conversation partners were considered better teammates, advisors, and workplace representatives. Furthermore, using field data from a setting where conflict management is endemic to productivity, he showed that the lack of conversational receptiveness at the beginning of a conversation can predict conflict escalation at the end. Finally, he developed a "receptiveness recipe" intervention based on the algorithm and found that writers who follow the recipe were seen as more desirable partners for future collaboration and wrote more persuasive messages. Overall, Yeomans's research demonstrates that conversational receptiveness is reliably measurable, has meaningful relational consequences, and can be substantially improved using his novel intervention.

In the fourth paper, Zhao, Caruso, and Risen further investigate how people can learn to create agreeable disagreement and find common ground by expressing genuine appreciation to

conversation partners. In an effort to overcome the combative atmosphere where people take a “No, Because” approach to conversations on opposing views and poke holes in one another’s arguments when disagreeing, the authors developed a novel conversational technique called “Thank You, Because”, which instructs people to take a moment to identify and acknowledge the value of the other person’s viewpoint and/or the dialogue before providing their own opinion. Over a series of experiments in both lab and field settings, they tested the impact of the “Thank You, Because” approach among pairs of strangers who engaged in face-to-face conversations about opposing preferences or opinions. Their results show that compared to a “No, Because” approach, the “Thank You, Because” approach created more collaborative and inclusive conversations, more active listening, and more perceived common ground. Furthermore, compared to an “I Hear That” approach, where participants merely aimed to show their partner that they understood their viewpoint accurately, the “Thank You, Because” approach showed unique advantages in eliciting the perception of common ground. This research thus highlights how people can use the expression of affirmation and appreciation to create more constructive and inclusive conversations despite their disagreement.

RELEVANCE TO DIVISIONS

Conflict Management

The topic addressed by this symposium is directly aligned with the Conflict Management division. Each presenter identifies an important psychological barrier to effective communication when opposing viewpoints arise and provides a novel practical solution to help people create better conversations. While all four papers in this symposium examine conversations around disagreement, each focuses on distinct theoretical aspects ranging from affective experiences, communication medium, language, to interpersonal processes. And they showcase a broad range

of research methods researchers can employ to study conflict of opinions, including randomized experiments in both lab and field settings, correlational analyses, and machine learning techniques. Thus, this symposium will provide attendees interested in communication and conflicts with new ideas and methodologies for future research as well as insights into effective interventions to meet a wide variety of communication challenges.

Organizational Behavior

The presentations in this symposium are highly pertinent to the interests of the Organizational Behavior (OB) division, as handling disagreement is an unavoidable part of organizational life. While a large body of literature has documented the benefits of working with diverse teams and ideas, an emerging literature has also demonstrated that such benefits are often challenging to obtain given people's common struggle of having constructive conversations about opposing viewpoints. By focusing on the underlying interpersonal and intergroup processes of conversation about disagreement, our symposium sheds light on important psychological barriers to effective collaboration when individuals hold different values, opinions, and interests. Furthermore, our symposium provides empirically validated practical solutions as to how to create better engagement when different voices arise, which can help organizations create more effective teams and more inclusive environments.

PROPOSED FORMAT OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Length: 90 mins

Minutes 0 – 2: Welcome and introduction

- Presenter: Xuan Zhao

Minutes 3 – 75: Paper presentations (15 minutes each + 3 minutes for audience questions)

- The Unexpected Affective Benefits of Counter-Arguing. *Presented by Charlie Dorison*
- Humanizing Interactions with Ideological Opponents to Enhance Civility. *Presented by Juliana Schroeder*
- Conversational Receptiveness: Improving Engagement with Opposing Views.
Presented by Michael Yeomans
- “Thank You, Because...”: Discussing Differences while Finding Common Ground.
Presented by Xuan Zhao

Minutes 76 – 90: Group discussion

- Taya Cohen (research comments, theoretical implications, and practical implications)
- Audience interaction

PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

The Unexpected Affective Benefits of Counter-Arguing

Charlie Dorison, Julia A. Minson, and Maurice E. Schweitzer

In 2020, humans have more control over how to spend their time than at any point in their history. They can pick from hundreds of different news sources, scroll through thousands of posts on social media, and listen to millions of songs of any genre, all with the click of a button. Yet, despite this veritable deluge of options, they tend to spend a substantial proportion of their time doing something that scholars have long seen as aversive: arguing with their friends, colleagues, and family members.

Why do individuals engage in arguments, given that counterparts are rarely persuaded? In the present research, we predict and find that while exposure to counter-attitudinal information is experienced as aversive (see also Dorison, Minson, & Rogers, 2019), expressing one's own views yields a positive affective experience (Studies 1-3). Importantly, individuals underestimate these affective benefits of responding for others, leading them to underestimate the probability of conflict escalation (Study 2). Finally, we test a novel intervention that yields the positive affective benefits of counter-arguing without the negative consequences of conflict escalation. When people ask their debate partner follow-up questions about the bases of their views, their affect is restored and conflict is avoided (Study 3). Taken together, the present results extend understanding of the role of emotion in decision making during attitude conflict, and may help shed new light on an important mechanism behind conflict escalation.

Study 1 (N = 880, pre-registered)

In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis that counterarguing after exposure to opposing views yields affective benefits. We also benchmark this response strategy against two other self-expression tasks.

All participants were first exposed to an argument on one of two hot-button socio-political issues (police relations with minority suspects or appropriate campus response to sexual assault accusations). Participants were specifically assigned to view arguments that opposed their own expressed stance.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects experimental conditions. In the Control condition, participants reported their affect immediately after reading the argument. In the Counterargument condition, participants first wrote a counterargument to the argument before reporting their affect. In the two Self-expression conditions, participants wrote about either their morning routine or their favorite hobby before reporting their affect (see, e.g., Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). In all conditions, affect measures were drawn from previous work on affective forecasting (e.g., Dorison, Minson, & Rogers, 2019; Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). Results revealed that all three conditions significantly improved positive affect compared to control (all $ps < .001$), suggesting that responding to a counter-attitudinal argument increases affect to a similar extent as other self-expression tasks. This study provides initial evidence that arguments may spiral out of control simply because both parties experience an affective benefit from the act of counterarguing.

Study 2 (N = 1000, pre-registered)

In Study 2, we tested whether individuals systematically under-estimate the affective benefits of responding for disagreeing counterparts. Individuals regularly fail at affective perspective taking (e.g., Campbell et al., 2014; Klein, 2019). It may be the case that failing to recognize that opponents enjoy counterarguing as much as they do, individuals inadvertently create conditions ripe for conflict.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (Focus: Self, Other) x 2 (Response: yes, no) between-subjects design. Affect measures were the same as Study 1.

In the Self conditions, participants read a counter-attitudinal argument. Participants in the Response condition were able to write a counter-argument, whereas participants in the No Response condition were exposed to a disagreeing argument without the chance to respond.

In the Other conditions, participants were exposed to an argument written by an mturker from a previous study who *agreed* with them. Participants in the Response condition were told to imagine that an opposing mturker read the argument and was given the chance to write a counter-argument. Participants in the No Response condition were told to imagine that a disagreeing mturker was exposed to the argument and was not given the chance to write a counterargument.

In the self condition, we replicated our results from Study 1: The experience of engaging with opposing views proved to be significantly less aversive when participants were given the opportunity to respond, despite the fact that participants who responded spent more time thinking about a political topic rife with negative associations ($M_{\text{no response}} = -0.45$ vs. $M_{\text{response}} = 0.25$, $t(296) = 2.97$, $p = .003$).

We next investigated whether individuals could accurately forecast the affective benefits of responding for others. To test this hypothesis, we regressed affect on the opportunity to counterargue (yes, no), attentional focus (self, other), and their interaction. As predicted, we found a significant interaction: $b = .76$, $t = 2.19$, $p = .029$. While individuals in the self condition experienced a significantly more positive experience when counterarguing (as reported above), individuals in the other condition predicted statistically equivalent levels of affect for counterparts who did vs. did not counterargue ($M_{\text{no response}} = -1.40$ vs. $M_{\text{response}} = -1.46$, $p > .81$).

Thus, individuals in the “Other” condition systematically under-estimated the affective benefits of counterarguing, as compared to individuals in the “Self” condition, who had just been exposed to the same set of arguments.

Study 3 (N = 590)

In Study 3, we explored whether question-asking could confer the same affective benefits as counter-arguing. If so, this would suggest that question-asking could serve as an effective conflict de-escalation strategy. Individuals infer that question-asking signals open-mindedness (Chen, Minson & Tormala, 2010). Prior research has identified follow-up questions as particularly relevant because they signal responsiveness in conversation (Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson & Gino, 2017).

We recruited 590 college football fans on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants indicated both their favorite college football team and their team’s biggest rival. On the following page, all participants were then exposed to an argument from a purported fan of the rival team. In the argument, the opposing fan wrote about the reasons why the rival team was a better team than the one endorsed by the participant as their favorite.

After reading the argument from the rival fan, participants were assigned to one of three between-subjects experimental conditions. In the Control condition, participants reported their affect immediately after reading the opposing view. In the Counterargument condition, participants wrote three counterarguments to the rival fan before reporting their affect. Finally, in the Question-asking condition, participants wrote three follow-up questions that they would like to ask the rival fan before reporting their affect. For robustness, we used a new measure of affect: the PANAS scale, which consists of 5 positive and 5 negative items (Watson & Clark, 1988), and 3 items measuring anger.

As in Studies 1-2, counter-arguing yielded a more positive affective experience than simple exposure. Specifically, compared to the control condition, counter-arguing increased total affect and reduced anger ($p < .001$, means for all conditions below).

The key question in Study 3 was whether question-asking would confer similar affective benefits as counterarguing. In terms of general affect, question-asking increased total affect compared to the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = -0.13$ vs. $M_{\text{question-asking}} = -0.02$, $p = .05$), although total affect was not quite as positive as in the counter-arguing condition ($M_{\text{question-asking}} = -0.02$ vs. $M_{\text{counter-arguing}} = 0.12$, $p = .01$). Results revealed an even stronger pattern for anger: question-asking significantly reduced anger compared to the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 0.34$ vs. $M_{\text{question-asking}} = 0.17$, $p = .016$), and was not significantly different from counter-arguing ($M_{\text{question-asking}} = 0.17$ vs. $M_{\text{counter-arguing}} = 0.11$, $p = .23$).

Discussion

Despite the fact that scholars typically conceptualize arguing as an exclusively aversive activity, it remains widespread. Why? The present research suggests that counter-arguing confers affective benefits, and that individuals under-estimate the fact that it will similarly do so for their counterparts. Finally, results reveal a novel intervention that yields similar affective benefits without the negative social consequences: question-asking. Taken together, the present research sheds new light on how to improve conversations around contentious topics and avoid conflict escalation.

Humanizing Interactions with Ideological Opponents to Enhance Civility

Juliana Schroeder

Political intolerance in the United States is at record levels. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2014 members of both political parties were more than twice as likely to report that the other party is a “threat to the nation’s well-being,” compared to 1994. Most Americans (75%) also reported that political intolerance has reached a “crisis level.”¹ Increasingly, people don’t just disagree; they also distrust, dislike, and even despise those who see the world differently. In several studies, when people disagreed with someone, they inferred not only that the other person had deficient opinions but also deficient mental capacities, thereby *dehumanizing* the opposition (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Kennedy & Pronin, 2008; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Animosity for a person’s position becomes contempt for the person.

Exacerbating this problem, some evidence suggests that people are withdrawing from conversations with opposing party members. In 2016, just 6% of Americans reported having “many” close friends from the opposing party and only 8% of individuals reported being in a romantic relationship with an opposing party member.² Moreover, social media may increase ideological “echo chambers” in which people only interact with those who share their opinions.

Some advocates for increasing civil discourse in America have suggested trying to humanize interactions between political opponents, specifically by promoting civil and respectful conversation among people who disagree. For example, Living Room Conversations, founded in 2010, “encourages conversation with those with whom we may not agree... to increase

¹ Pew Research data collected in 2014 (n=10,013): <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/>

understanding and reveal common ground.”² Another example is Pnyka, founded in 2017, a communication platform that “bridges divided communities by using respectful interactions.”³

But how should these conversations be structured to optimize civil discourse? Of particular interest, some organizations host conversations online (e.g., Pnyka) whereas other organizations only host in-person or video-chat conversations (e.g., Living Room Conversations). An important question is whether, and if so how, the communication medium (e.g., written, spoken, in-person) can affect civil discourse.

The Role of Communication Medium in Conversation

Prior research indicates that communication medium can influence three aspects of conversation: 1) how a person expresses (e.g., speaks or writes) his or her own opinion, 2) how a person consumes (e.g., reads or hears) another person’s opinion, and 3) the structure of how opinions get exchanged (e.g., synchronicity). First, considering how the medium influences the way opinions are expressed, communicators tend to express more antagonistic and aggressive opinions online because online interactions are more anonymous and increase disinhibition (e.g., Suler, 2004). However, communicating via text also provides more time to carefully compose one’s thoughts; as a result, communicators write more articulately and intelligently than they speak (Hayes, 1988). Second, considering how the medium influences the way opinions are consumed, hearing a person’s opinions compared to reading the same opinions tends to humanize communicators, making them seem more intelligent (Schroeder & Epley, 2015, 2016; Schroeder, Kardas, & Epley, 2017). Furthermore, hearing (vs. reading) opinions makes observers more accurately infer a communicator’s true thoughts and feelings (Epley & Krueger, 2005; Hall & Schmid Mast, 2007). Interestingly, seeing a communicator in addition to hearing her does not further change assessments, indicating that simply having more information about the

² <https://www.livingroomconversations.org/about-us/>

³ <https://pnyka.com/#about>

communicator does not *necessarily* change impressions. Instead, voice appears to uniquely influence impressions. Third, considering how the medium influences the way opinions are exchanged, speaking is a more synchronous medium than is writing (Daft & Lengel, 1984): words are expressed and consumed more rapidly, and there is more turn-taking and back-channeling (i.e., feedback that conveys understanding; e.g., “uh-huh”). In the data in the current paper, participants speak about three times as quickly as they write, exchange 2.5 as many turns, and engage in 30% more back-channeling.

Hypothesis

Aggregating across this prior literature led us to predict that *speaking* would a more humanizing form of discourse with an opponent that would consequently promotes more civility—reducing conflict, increasing understanding, and increasing openness to opposing attitudes—compared to *writing*.

Prediction Experiments

To test first individuals’ preferences, we conducted two initial experiments ($n = 800$) asking people to predict how having a ten-minute conversation with an ideological opponent via video-chat, phone, or writing (three different communication medium conditions, within-subjects design) would change their assessments of the opponent and their experiences. Participants expected no differences in how they would assess the opponent or change their own attitudes between conditions. But they predicted that the interaction would be more enjoyable, and that that there would be greater understanding and less conflict, when writing compared to talking or video-chatting. Consequently, participants reported a strong preference to write ($M = 80\%$) compared to talk or video-chat ($M = 20\%$ total).

Experience Experiments

We next conducted three experiments ($n = 1,162$ total participants) to test the actual effect of communication medium on humanization and civility. All experiments used a similar procedure in which we randomly assigned participants to have a short conversation (e.g., 10 minutes) with a stranger with whom they strongly disagreed (according to their own self-reported pre-survey opinions) using different communication medium platforms (e.g., video-chat, phone, text conversation). Participants then completed a post-survey reporting how much they humanized their conversation partner, their conversation experiences (e.g., felt understanding and conflict), and their attitudes (so that we could compute attitude change). The three experiments revealed the same pattern of results whereby spoken conversations elicited more humanization of the conversation partner and more civility—more understanding, less conflict, and more openness to the partner’s attitudes—than written conversations. Video-chat and in-person conversations did not affect any of these measures consistently compared to only phone conversations, indicating that the humanizing effect is driven primarily by speaking with, rather than by seeing, one’s interaction partner. Moreover, the effects remained even when participants could see each other in the writing-condition (i.e., interacting across a table via laptops), when they had more time to interact (allowing them to produce statistically the same number of words in the writing-condition as in the speaking-condition), and when participants in both conditions were limited to the same number of turns.

A final experiment strove to understand exactly why speaking is more humanizing than is writing. We hypothesized that the more synchronous nature of speech (versus the written medium) allows participants to feel more understood and have smoother interactions with their conversation partner, which could then enhance civility. To test this possibility, we conducted a 2 (synchronicity: synchronous vs. asynchronous) \times 2 (medium: speaking vs. writing) between-pairs experiment ($n = 406$). In the asynchronous conversations, participants created a written or spoken

statement for one minute, sent it to their partner to read or listen to for one minute, then their partner created their own statement, sent it back, and so on for three total rounds of interaction (12 minutes). In the synchronous conversations, we imposed no time constraints and pairs simply spoke or wrote together for the 12 minutes. Afterwards, as in the prior experiments, pairs completed a survey about their assessments of their partner and the interaction. Results revealed that, in the synchronous conditions, we replicated our prior effects such that speaking was more humanizing and produced more civility than writing, but in the asynchronous conditions, the effect of medium disappeared. Specifically, spoken asynchronous conversations had outcomes that were no statistically different from the written asynchronous and synchronous conversations, but spoken synchronous (vs. asynchronous) conversations produced significantly better outcomes with respect to humanization and civility.

Conclusion

We are living in a time of extraordinary ideological and political dissent in America. In such a time, it is important to understand how to structure conversations such that people from different groups can get along. The current paper examines just one aspect of conversation structure—the communication medium by which it occurs—to test how this aspect affects humanization of, and civility with, ideological enemies. Although individuals in our experiments preferred to write with, rather than speak with, their ideological enemies, we consistently found that speaking was the medium that enhanced humanization and civility (resulting in more feelings of being understood, less conflict, and more openness to diverse opinions). To reduce conflict, people across the political spectrum should talk with one another instead of engaging online.

Conversational Receptiveness: Improving Engagement with Opposing Views

Michael Yeomans

Disagreement is a fundamental feature of social life, in civic spaces (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Milton, 1644/1890; Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015), in professional organizations. (Baron, 1991; Fiol, 1994; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989; Todorova, Bear, & Weingart, 2014), and in personal relationships at home (Cutrona, 1996; Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Gottman, 1994). Opposing viewpoints are often inevitable in the pursuit of more important organizational and interpersonal goals. Furthermore, engagement with disagreeing others can also help us increase the accuracy of our own beliefs (Minson, Lieberman & Ross, 2011; Soll & Larrick, 2009; Sunstein & Hastie, 2015; Tost, Gino & Larrick, 2013).

In practice, however, people still do not seem to handle disagreement well. An extensive body of research has shown that the presence of contradictory opinions gives rise to avoidance (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; Chen & Rohla, 2018), negative affect (Gottman, Levenson, & Woodin, 2001; Wojcieszak, 2012), biased information processing (Frey, 1986; Hart et al., 2009; Nickerson, 1998), negative inferences about the other side (Pacilli, Roccoato, Pagliaro, & Russo, 2016; Ross & Ward, 1995) and conflict (McCroskey, & Wheelless, 1976). The majority of previous research has focused on individuals' attitudes toward conflict counterparts and their willingness to interact with them, but not the contents of those interactions (Weingart et al., 2015). Here we examine whether people can improve these conversations. Specifically, we test whether it is possible to communicate "receptiveness to opposing views" in the course of a conversation between people who disagree (Minson, Chen & Tinsley, 2019). We also test whether communicating in a more receptive manner helps foster co-operative goals between

disagreeing others, such as willingness to work together, interpersonal trust, and conflict de-escalation.

In this research we conduct four studies, and all data, analysis code, stimuli, and preregistrations from each study are available on OSF at <https://bit.ly/2QwyiuL>. In Study 1 we instructed 1,102 participants to write responses to statements written by people with whom they disagree, on one of two controversial issues. A separate group of 1,322 participants read responses from people with opposing viewpoints, and evaluated how receptive the writer had been. We parse the text of the responses into features from the politeness R package (Yeomans, Kantor & Tingley, 2018), and we trained a supervised machine learning algorithm (Friedman, Hastie & Tibshirani, 2010) to determine the distinctive features of receptiveness in natural language.

This model was just as accurate (pairwise accuracy = 66.8%; $p < .001$), as any one human rater (65.2%; $p < .001$). And receptiveness was not captured at all in simpler language benchmarks like sentiment, word count, or moral foundations theory. We found that receptiveness can be communicated with a discrete set of linguistic features (see Figure 1). The model focuses on the structural, domain-general elements of the language (hedges, acknowledgment, negation, reasoning), and the model's accuracy was unaffected when it was trained and tested on different topics (65.2%; $p < .001$). In the next three studies, we exploit the scalability and robustness of the model by estimating receptiveness in the midst of other important conversations in organizational contexts where disagreement naturally arises.

In Study 2, we collected conversations between 238 senior local government officials in an executive education program, who were paired up to discuss controversial policy topics (using a negative assortative matching algorithm to ensure they all disagreed with their partner). After the conversation, participants rated their own and their partner's receptiveness. Partner-rated

receptiveness was associated with a range of positive interpersonal benefits, like trust in judgment and willingness to work together ($r=.289, p<.001$). Furthermore, the receptiveness model from Study 1 predicted these positive interpersonal outcomes ($r=.232, p<.001$), and also showed that partners' receptiveness converge over time, indicating that one of the benefits of receptiveness is that it is reciprocated ($r=.335, p<.001$). However, people could not predict how receptive their partner would rate them ($r=.048, ns$). Our language model confirmed they applied a different set of standards to their own speech than to that of their partner, focusing more on formality (titles, gratitude, etc.) than the features identified in Figure 1.

In Study 3 we extend this result to conversations within globally-distributed organizations where disagreement naturally arises, and where people are free to talk about many different topics, with many different people. In Study 3A we examine receptiveness among 3,303 students in policy-themed massive open online courses at HarvardX (Yeomans et al., 2018). We collect ideology measures and compare them to the contents of the class discussion forums. We find that on average, students were less receptive to students they disagreed with ($r= .099, p < .05$). However, the receptiveness of students' posts predicted the receptiveness of the replies they received from other students who disagreed with them ($r= .226; p<.001$). This result held even after controlling for topic and person fixed effects ($r= .122; p<.001$). This suggests that receptiveness is often returned in kind, suggesting that individual interventions to be more receptive can foster a more receptive dialogue going forward.

In Study 3B, we measure receptiveness during the editorial process of correcting Wikipedia articles. We borrowed a dataset of talk page threads, in which 585 threads ending in personal attacks were each matched to similar thread without an attack (Zhang et al., 2018). We found that editors who were less receptive were more likely to launch a personal attack later on (54.3%; $p<.01$). We also found that editors who were less receptive were more likely to be

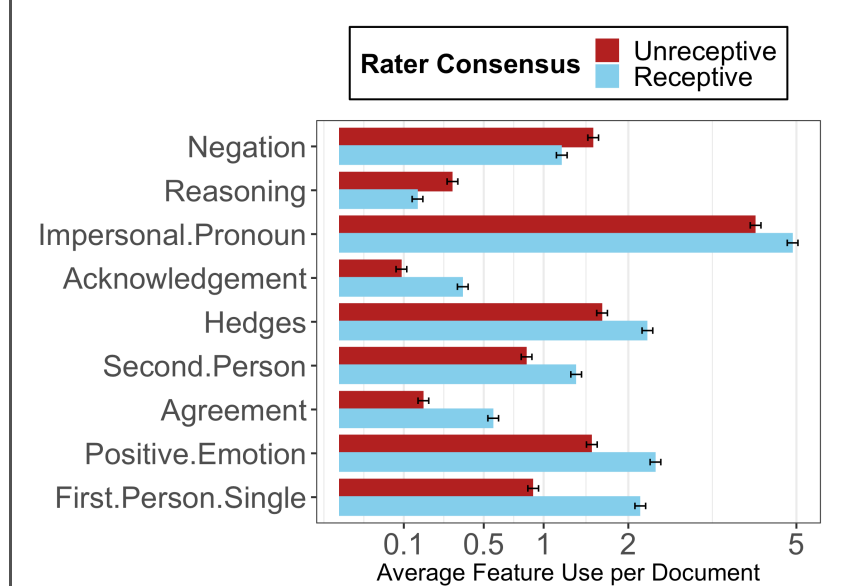
attacked themselves (59.9%; $p < .001$). These results suggest that communicating receptively does not invite counter-arguing, but instead fosters a collaborative dialogue between people who disagree. This result also shows how our model of conversational receptiveness can predict conflict spirals before they start.

In Study 4, we test a short intervention designed to teach conversational receptiveness. We analysed the results of 771 participants who were put through a paradigm similar to study 1, except that half of them were first taught a “receptiveness recipe.” This recipe distilled our algorithm down to four main points - acknowledge others' points, hedge your own claims, do not contradict or explain, and try to find points of agreement with others. These texts were shown to partisan opponents, who then rated participants who saw this recipe as more receptive, and reported greater willingness to collaborate with them in the future. However, writers did not always predict this effect and expressed surprising hesitation to use this conversational strategy.

Our work contributes to a growing body of evidence that shows when people fail to predict how their own behavior will be viewed from other people's perspectives (Vazire, 2010; Sun & Vazire, 2019). Our results also highlight an under-discussed element of recent efforts to improve civic discourse. While academics often recommend more exposure to opposing viewpoints (Mendelberg, 2002; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), our results suggest that the effectiveness of these recommendations will be tempered by the contents of the resulting conversations (see Bail et al., 2019; Paluck, Green & Green, 2018). Simply choosing to engage with opposing views may not lead to greater understanding or co-operation if the language of that engagement is unreceptive. The linguistic behavior that people exhibit in conversation can powerfully affect their partners' perceptions, engagement, and willingness to cooperate with them. Overall, our results suggest that receptiveness is measurable and has meaningful

interpersonal consequences, but can be under-utilized in part because speakers can misjudge their own receptiveness.

Figure 1: Visual summary of conversational receptiveness as trained on Study 1 data. Each bar summarizes linguistic features among the top or bottom tercile of receptiveness, and each datapoint represents a group mean (± 1 SE).



“Thank You, Because...”: Discussing Differences while Finding Common Ground

Xuan Zhao, Heather Caruso, and Jane Risen

Encountering diverging viewpoints is an unavoidable part of social and organizational life. Because no two people hold identical beliefs, knowledge, values, or goals, opposing views are bound to arise at some point when people pursue their personal and collective interests. A large literature has demonstrated that engaging with diverse viewpoints can create numerous benefits, including forming more accurate beliefs (Becker, Porter, & Centola, 2019; Lorenz, Rauhut, Schweitzer, & Helbing, 2011; Minson, Lieberman & Ross, 2011; Shi, Teplitskiy, Duede, & Evans, 2019), creating better team performance (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010), and creating more efficient markets (Levine et al., 2014).

However, people often struggle to handle contradicting viewpoints constructively. For instance, people often experience negative emotions such as anxiety and discomfort when encountering people from a different social group (Stephan, 2014) and make negative inferences about people who hold different preferences or beliefs (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008; Pacilli, Rocco, Pagliaro, & Russo, 2016; Ross & Ward, 1995). These psychological reactions often lead to either argumentation and escalated conflicts (McCroskey, & Wheelless, 1976) or disengagement and avoidance (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; Chen & Rohla, 2018), which can prevent people from reaping the benefits of diverse viewpoints and even threaten the prosperity of organizations and our society. How, then, can people create positive and high-quality engagements when different viewpoints arise?

Different Approaches to Discussing Opposing Viewpoints

When diverging viewpoints are revealed in a conversation, people need to decide—either implicitly or explicitly—how they will respond to the other person’s opposing views. One

common approach people frequently take is the “*No, Because...*” approach: to *find fault* in the other person’s reasoning by dissecting each statement and identifying their incoherent logic or misinformed facts to demonstrate why that position warrants rejection (Paglieri, 2009). While debating the correctness of a viewpoint can be productive and valuable in certain cases—such as discovering scientific truth—this approach rarely applies to disagreement in organizational life or civic society, where one problem might have multiple solutions, and different opinions and preferences are often a product of subjective interpretations rather than objective facts. However, people may easily fall victim to their “naïve realism” and overlook the subjective nature of their own construal of social actions and entities (Ross & Ward, 1995), finding it all too convenient and reasonable to poke holes in each other’s argument. This, in turn, can create frustrated communicators who feel misunderstood and underappreciated, and who therefore may either escalate the conflict or withdraw from the engagement entirely.

To help people overcome such impulsive reactions, recent teaching in active listening techniques has advocated for the practice of restating another person’s opinion to ensure *accurate understanding* before expressing one’s own argument—a modern exemplar of Dale Carnegie’s famous preach: “Seek first to understand, and then to be understood.” By repeating and rephrasing, this technique forces the responder to listen and process their conversation partner’s argument—at least on a shallow level—and demonstrate such processing to the other person. In the current research, we characterize this technique as the “*I Hear That...*” approach. While intuitive and promising, the efficacy of this technique has received little empirical support.

Finally, in search of a conversational technique that would facilitate open conversation and create an inclusive environment where people feel valued and appreciated, we have developed a novel conversation technique—the “*Thank You, Because...*” approach—with improv experts from a professional improvisational theater and school, The Second City in Chicago.

Inspired by the collaborative spirit in improvisational theater (Leonard & Yorton, 2015), this approach encourages people who have different perspectives to identify and acknowledge what they *value or appreciate about hearing another's point of view*. To this end, they may choose to start their response by saying “Thank you, because...” or an equivalent to mention aspects of the other person’s comments that they genuinely value, and then follow with their own argument. Based on recent findings suggesting that receiving affirmation and appreciation can promote more cooperative behaviors and elicit favorable impressions of the other person (Goldstein, Vezich, & Shapiro, 2014; Grant & Gino, 2010; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004), we expected that this approach would create various positive outcomes in conversations about different viewpoints.

Consequences of Talking About Disagreement with Different Approaches

To evaluate whether the “Thank You, Because...” approach can create better conversations than the “No, Because...” and the “I Hear That...” approaches, we consistently measured the following constructs after participants’ short conversations in two experiments:

First, given that people could engage in conflict-escalating competitive behavior or conflict-deescalating cooperative behavior when responding to conflict and disagreement (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008), we examined to what extent different approaches would influence the competitive/collaborative tone of a conversation. Next, we tested to what extent different approaches could influence the quality of listening, which we measured as both a sense of feeling heard and a sense of hearing the other. Given that in many cases, people need to work together to reconcile their disagreement, we further tested to what extent people perceived common ground in between after a short conversation. Considering that people tend to view those whose opinions differ from their own to be unreasonable and unable to see things fairly (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005), we measured to what extent people perceived the other person as reasonable.

Finally, we measured interpersonal closeness to understand how different approaches influenced interpersonal relationship.

Experiments

In Experiment 1, we compared the impact of the “Thank You, Because” approach to the “No, Because” approach in face-to-face conversations. Participants were recruited at either a public workshop or a campus-based laboratory ($N = 186$ in total). After being randomly paired with unacquainted participants at the same event, each participant rated a series of 20 statements on their preference for engaging in a variety of behaviors from “Never” (0) to “Always” (10) and compared their ratings to identify the item with the most diverging ratings. (Examples of statements in Experiment 1 included: “I get a seasonal flu shot.” “I like eating animal organs.”) Next, each dyad was randomly assigned to the “No, Because” or the “Thank You, Because” condition, received a detailed instruction on how to apply their respective approach in a conversation, and engaged in a three-minute conversation about their opposing views.

Our results showed that compared to the “No, Because” approach, where participants poked holes in one another’s arguments, participants using the “Thank You, Because” approach self-reported perceiving the conversations to be more collaborative, feeling more heard and valued, hearing the other better, and perceiving more common ground after the conversations. However, we identified no difference on the interpersonal closeness measures.

In Experiment 2, we aimed to replicate our findings in Experiment 1 with a different type of disagreement—on social norms and public policy. (Examples of statements in Experiment 2 included: “Everyone should get a seasonal flu shot.” “The U.S. showed lower its drinking age.”) Furthermore, we introduced a third condition, the “I Hear That” approach, in order to compare its impact against the “No, Because” and “Thank You, Because” approaches. We again recruited participants at a public workshop or a campus-based lab ($N = 290$ in total) and paired

unacquainted participants for three-minute conversations on the most diverging issue between them. Our results replicated the difference between the “Thank You, Because” and the “No, Because” conditions in Experiment 1. Moreover, we have found that although the “I Hear That” approach achieved similar results on several constructs compared to the “Thank You, Because” approach, the latter shows a unique advantage in eliciting the perception of common ground.

Conclusion

When disagreement arises, the language people use to communicate can make an important difference. Drawing from the wisdom of improvisational theater and behavioral science, our research features a novel technique—the “Thank You, Because...” approach—to help people conduct inclusive conversations about opposing viewpoints. Our experiments reveal that compared to a “No, Because” technique, which encouraged the common conversational instinct of poking holes in one another’s arguments, participants using the “Thank You, Because” technique engaged in more inclusive conversations, felt more heard and valued, and perceived more common ground. Furthermore, compared to a “I Hear That...” technique, where participants aimed to show their partner that they understood their viewpoint accurately, the “Thank You, Because” technique showed unique advantages in eliciting the perception of common ground. Taken together, our findings highlight the value of incorporating affirmation when discussing interpersonal differences, which has the promise to create better social engagement at work and in everyday life.

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