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**“WHY WON’T YOU  
LISTEN TO ME?!”**

**BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE  
OF DISAGREEMENT**

Julia A. Minson

Harvard Kennedy School

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THOSE WHO COMPROMISE  
WORKPLACE SAFETY  
FOR A LACK OF  
**BAD PRESS**  
WILL GET NEITHER

WORKER'S  
RIGHTS  
ARE  
WOMEN'S  
RIGHTS

Believe  
Women

NOT OK  
Google

I CAN'T  
BELIEVE I  
HAVE TO PROTEST  
THIS SHIT.

Google Men  
Stand with  
Google Women



**RE-OPEN  
CHURCHES**

**RE-OPEN  
AMERICA**

**DON'T LET  
THE MASK  
SILENCE  
YOU**

2020  Trump Again!

TASTES  
LIKE  
SOCIALISM

IS THIS  
ABOUT THE  
VIRUS  
OR  
E...

**WE  
NEED  
TO  
WORK**

**RE-OPEN  
MA...**

2020  Trump

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# RECEPTIVENESS TO OPPOSING VIEWS

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









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# 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 their evaluation of both sides of an issue

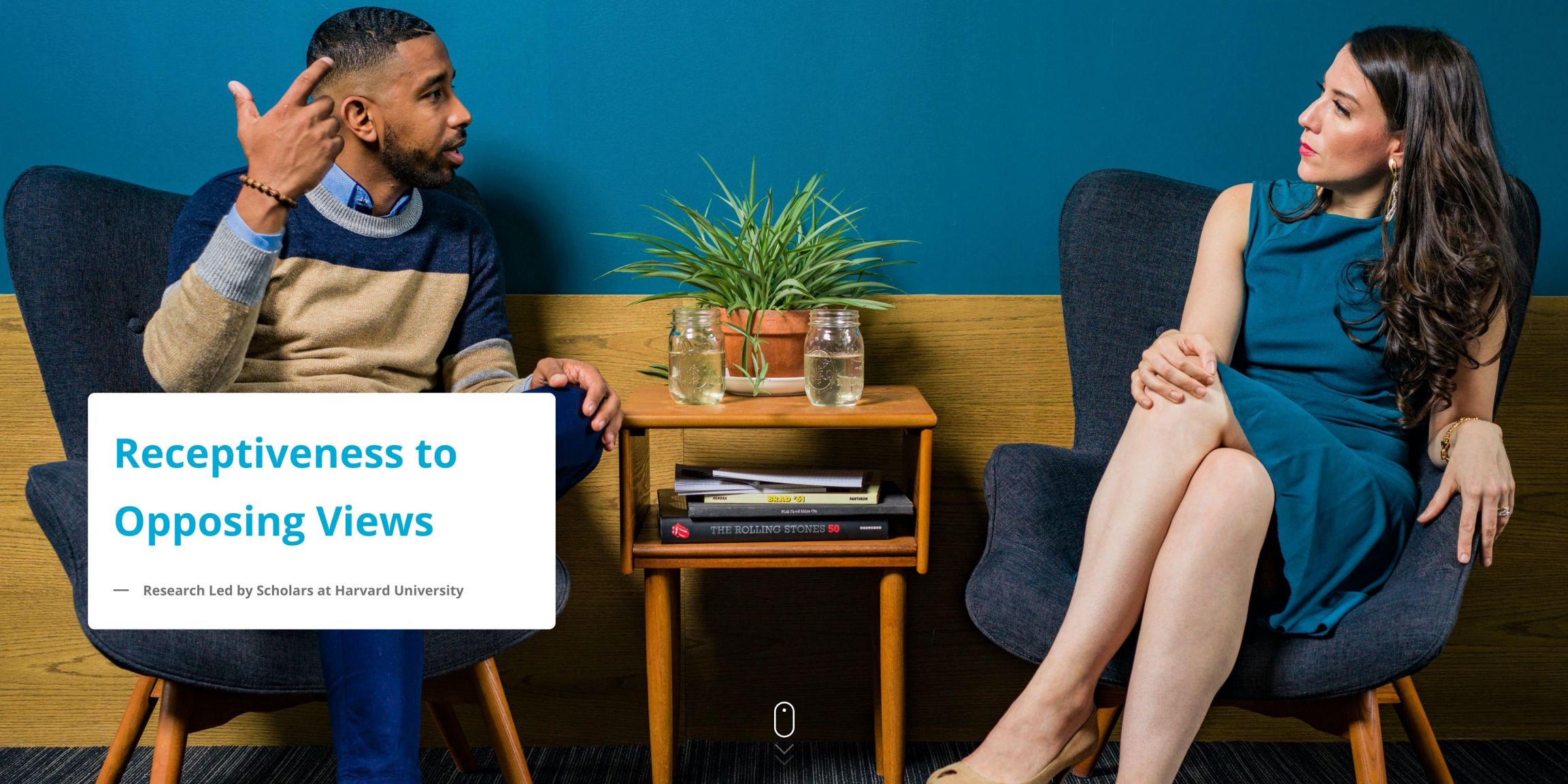
## Receptiveness is stable over time

## Predicts behavior outside of the lab

[Receptiveness.net](http://Receptiveness.net)

# 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





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## CONSEQUENCES OF PERCEIVED RECEPTIVENESS

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





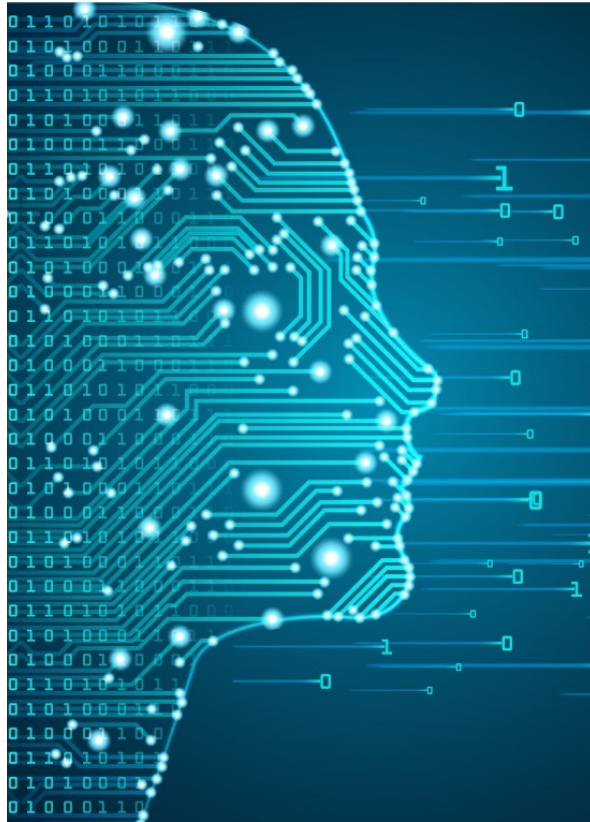
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BUT...

- 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



## Step 1:

Collect text of conversations between two people who disagree

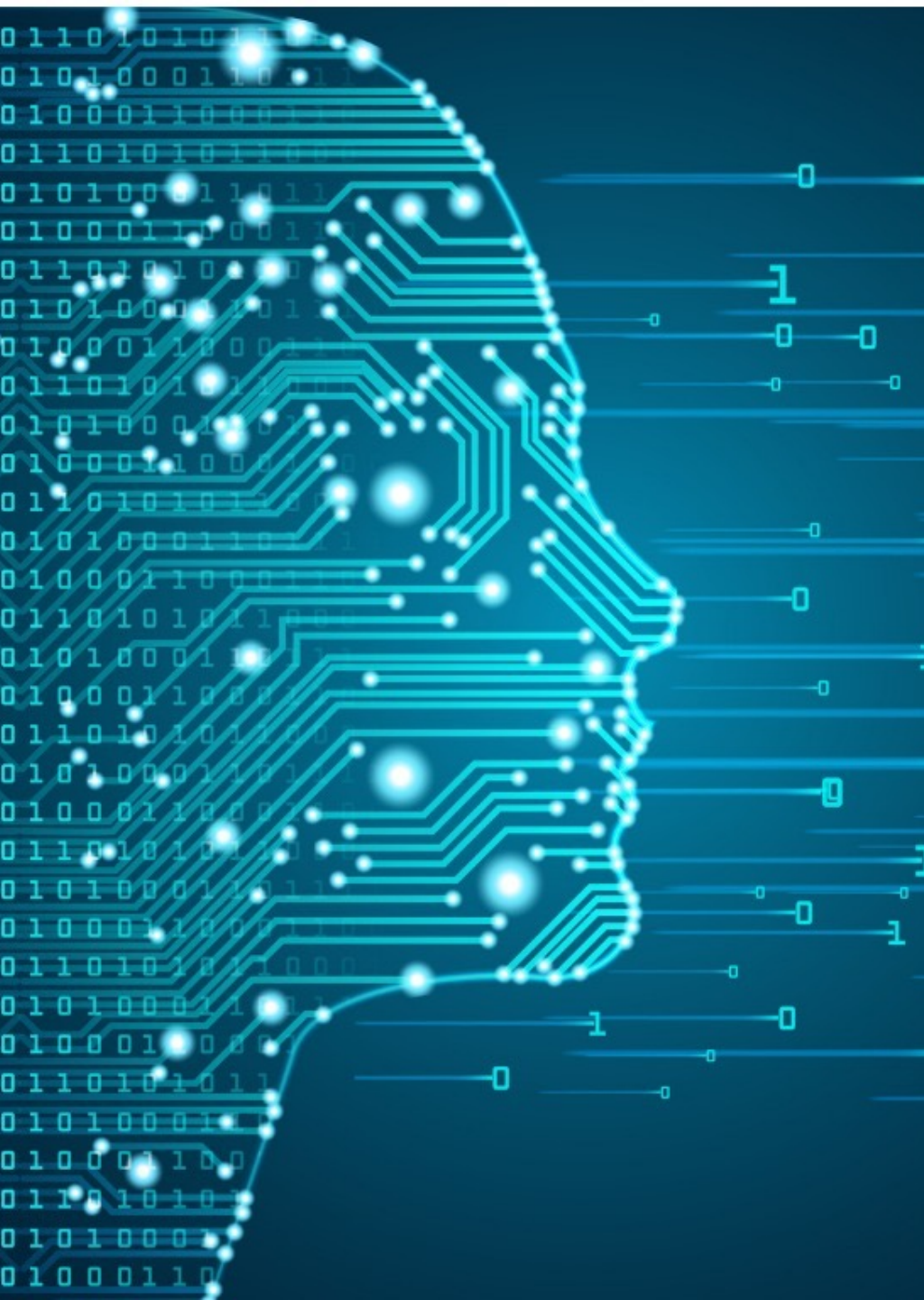
## Step 2:

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

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**PRETEND YOU ARE  
AN ALGORITHM...**

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## Receptive Response *(96th percentile)*

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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.

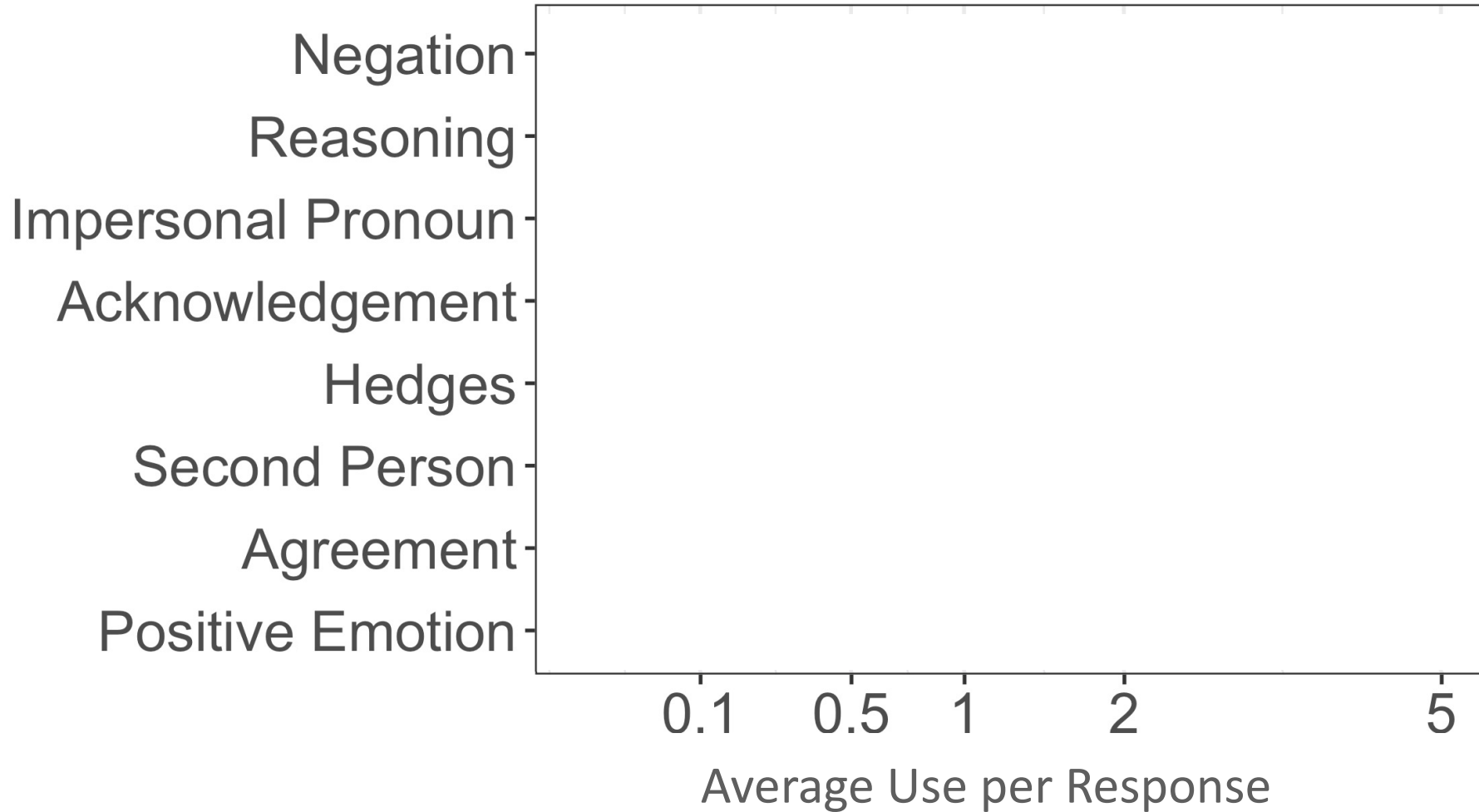
## Unreceptive Response *(2nd percentile)*

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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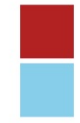


# FEATURES OF RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE

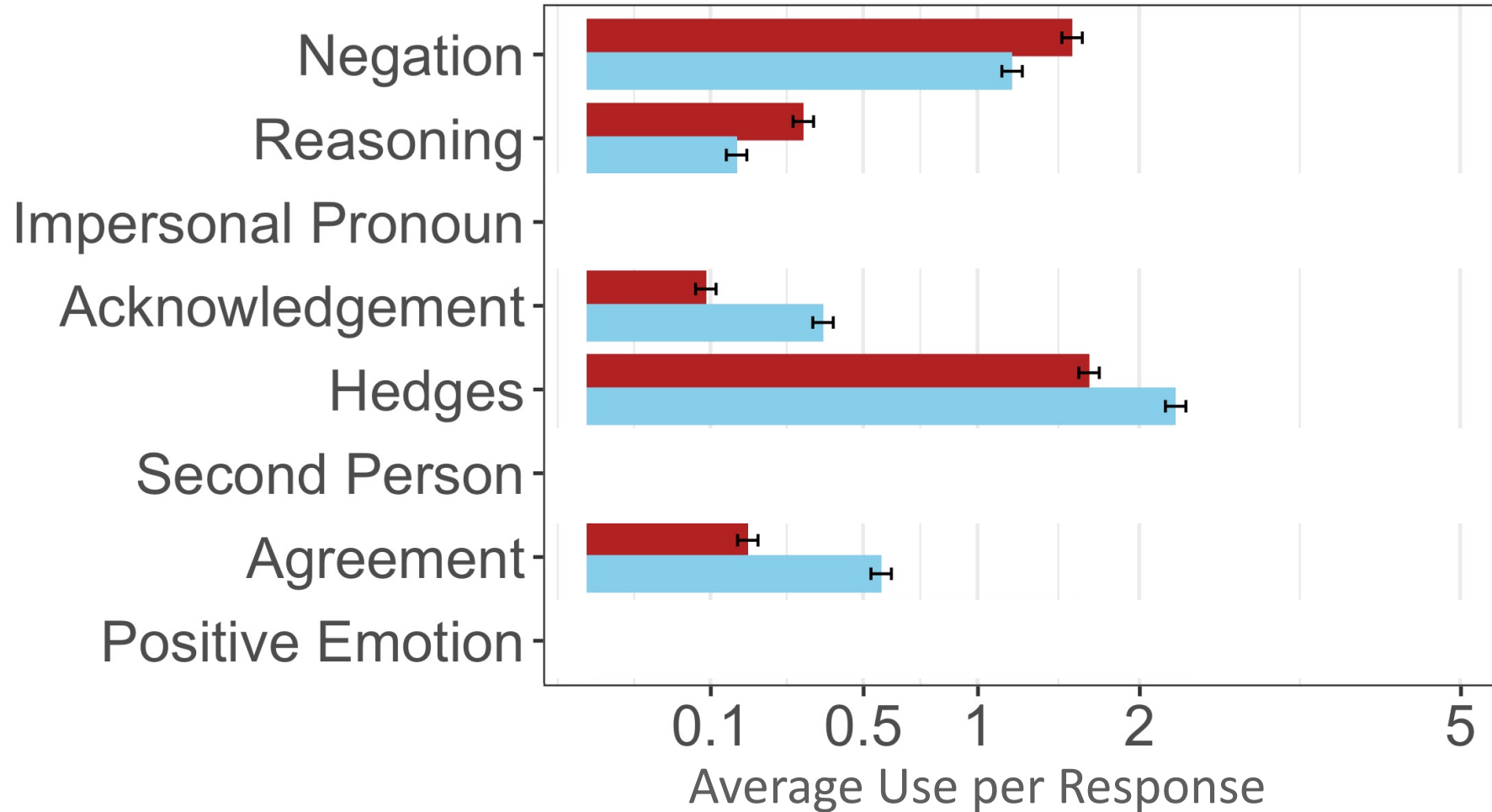


# FEATURES OF RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE

**Rater Consensus**



Unreceptive  
Receptive



## Receptive Response *(96th percentile)*

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**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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# “CONVERSATIONAL” RECEPTIVENESS

(YEOMANS, MINSON, COLLINS, CHEN & GINO, 2020)

- Specific words and phrases that make people “feel heard” during active disagreement
- **Strongly** predicts conflict outcomes
- Algorithmic measure has high consensus with human raters
- Can be applied to large bodies of text

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# FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH

- 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 receptive to me!**

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# WHY DOES CONVERSATIONAL RECEPTIVENESS IMPROVE CONFLICT OUTCOMES?

- Feeling heard powerfully de-escalates conflict and improves willingness to interact in the future
- People don't know how 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

**Having the right words prevents unforced errors**

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## 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...”

# PRACTICING CONVERSATIONAL RECEPTIVENESS: “HEAR”





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# THANK YOU!

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