



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Receptiveness to Other Opinions with Julia Minson

February 14th, 2022

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Andy Luttrell:

StoryCorps is an independent non-profit organization with a mission to record and share the stories from the diverse American population. They've presented so many beautiful human stories over the years, and since 2018, their One Small Step program has brought people together with different political views to have conversations about their lives—not to have heated debates.

I'm going to play a clip of one of these conversations—between a woman who would describe herself as a liberal and her father, who's been voting Republican since 1980. They had gotten into an all too familiar rhythm of arguing about politics, getting worked up about their differences, and avoiding the topic altogether.

But when they take a moment to breathe and see each other as people, something remarkable happens.

Jenn Stanley [StoryCorps Clip]:

We've gotten to this point where we're together and we're fighting about politics.

Peter Stanley [StoryCorps Clip]:

And those would be the times when I hear you say, I can't even talk to you, dad. And if you're going to get so angry and flip out about it, then you know what, I'd rather you didn't talk to me.

Jenn Stanley [StoryCorps Clip]:

But see, this is what drives me crazy though. You start these conversations.

Peter Stanley [StoryCorps Clip]:

I ask questions. What do you think about this? And what do you think about that? It's me trying to glean information from somebody who is significantly more educated than I am and whose opinions I trust.

Jenn Stanley [StoryCorps Clip]:

I'm really surprised to hear you say that. I had no idea that you were genuinely interested in what I had to say. I thought that you wanted to tell me how I was wrong and also make a joke about how I was silly.

Peter Stanley [StoryCorps Clip]:

I would never feel that way about you. I have nothing but respect for you. I don't agree with you all the time. I don't agree with you most of the time, but that's okay. The important thing in our relationship is that you have your own beliefs and that I respect you for your beliefs. You will raise to be a sensitive caring person. And that's exactly who you are.

There are times when we'll just never see eye to eye with another person. We're locked in a stand-still as far as agreeing with each other goes. But can't we still be considerate of what they have to say? Willing to hear another person out or at least compassionately tolerate the fact that we're going to have differences of opinion?

We don't need to change our minds about everything, but we can take the time to listen. And as we'll see, new research in psychology gives us a glimpse into the impact of being receptive. What happens when we approach these kinds of conversations this way, and how are we guided by our assumptions of other people's receptiveness?

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. This week I'm excited to talk to Julia Minson. She's an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of government, and she's spent years trying to get to the bottom of what it means to be receptive to other people's opinions and how that drives discourse. This episode is pretty neat because you'll also get to see how messy the research process really is. Julia shares how it took a series of winding roads and false starts before she and her colleagues started to really figure out what they were dealing with.

And speaking of her colleagues, I want to give you a heads up now that at some point Julia mentions a research paper she wrote with "Zak"—that's Zak Tormala who has the fine distinction of being a past guest on this show. Go back to episode 14 to get Zak's whole deal. But stick with Julia and me here in the meantime while we sort out what it means to be receptive and even how you yourself can get better at showing that you are indeed receptive.

Andy Luttrell:

So, maybe to start, one of the things that I think is interesting is that you distinguish between disagreement and attitude conflict, so when is it that disagreement becomes conflict in this approach?

Julia Minson:

We really wanted to sort of revive this term that I think initially appeared in Chip Judd's work in the '70s, attitude conflict. So, I really like this idea of attitude conflict because a lot of the times when people talk about conflict, they talk about conflict over resources, really, right? Or sort of a history of past harm, right? So, normally when we think about conflict, we think about armed conflict, and then, of course, like game theorists get into it, but there's always some resource. Whereas attitude conflict, we kind of talk about it as like the resource at stake is the contents of somebody's mind.

It's not that I just disagree with you, and you believe X, and I believe Y, and I think you're wrong, but I'm sort of okay with you being wrong. This is like, "I'm not okay with you being wrong and I need to change your beliefs." And so, once I feel like your beliefs are not okay for you to hold and I need to change them, that's when we're calling it attitude conflict.

Andy Luttrell:

So, what is that catapults a disagreement into conflict?

Julia Minson:

Yeah, so in that paper, we kind of lay out a little model where we say, “Look, there’s really three things, three factors, that turn a disagreement into attitude conflict.” One that is perhaps obvious is importance, right? Sort of the consequentiality or sort of the importance of the issue to what it will impact in the world. So, for example, I’m okay disagreeing with you about flossing. I’m less okay disagreeing with you about COVID-19 vaccines. I might be right about flossing, and I might be right about vaccines, but I care much more that you agree with me about vaccines than I care whether you agree with me about flossing, right? Because the consequences are different.

But the other piece that also distinguishes flossing and vaccines is the extent to which our behavior is interrelated. So, if you don’t floss, it has no impact on me, whereas if you don’t get vaccinated, then it does have impact on me. So, all of a sudden your attitude impacts me, so that’s sort of the second factor.

And then the third factor is something we’re calling evidentiary balance, but it’s essentially the idea that I feel like there’s overwhelming evidence on my side of the issue. And so, to the extent that there’s overwhelming evidence or I believe there’s overwhelming evidence, then I’m not okay with other people believing different things. So, this is sort of the distinction between matters of taste versus matters of fact. If it’s a matter of taste, then I’m like, “You know what? Nobody can possibly have any evidence. I prefer dark chocolate. You prefer milk chocolate. And I think you’re nuts, but that’s okay.”

And then some matters of fact, people recognize that there’s evidence on both sides. People say, “Well, this is really complicated. You could make an argument this way and you can make an argument that way.” But to the extent that I perceive the evidence as being really unbalanced, then I’m not okay with it. So, it’s those three things. It’s importance, interdependence, and balance of evidence.

Andy Luttrell:

Is it that all of those need to be in place? Like I am right about an important thing and the fact that you’re wrong affects me? Or is it enough that just one of those is there, like it’s important. Your behavior doesn’t affect me. I may not be absolutely right. But because it’s important, I feel like I’m in conflict with you because we disagree. Or do all three of them need to be there?

Julia Minson:

This is, to be clear for the academics listening to this, this is a theory paper. So, I welcome folks to go and test that question. My sense is that it’s additive, so some people are going to get... Some people in some situations are gonna get very excited about a disagreement because the issue is important, and for others in other situations, you’re gonna really require all three. But I think as you start stacking them, that’s when you get to sort of like really hot attitude conflicts, right? So, you could imagine that, again, flossing, couldn’t care less. Vaccines, I care more because it’s important, but somebody in a different country getting vaccinated or not getting vaccinated has

absolutely no personal impact on me. You could tell some story about how it could have impact in the long term, but really it doesn't.

Whereas if I have a spouse who's an antivaxxer, then it's like we're interdependent, the issue is super important, the balance of evidence is on my side, and then I go completely crazy.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, so this is what makes things a conflict. Again, in theory, in principle, based on what seems reasonable. But like why would we care that a disagreement becomes a conflict? What are the implications for how people do or do not talk about their opinions?

Julia Minson:

Yeah. Well, you know, why do we as researchers care? Or why do we as humans care?

Andy Luttrell:

Well, I guess I'm asking you as someone who goes like, "This is really worth digging into," like why? Basically, what I'm asking is like what are the consequences of this being a conflict? Why would we pay any special attention? Unless you just say like, "Oh. Well, at the end of the day nothing looks different if we call it a conflict versus a disagreement," which I don't think is what you're saying. But what, now that we're in conflict, what happens?

Julia Minson:

Now we're in conflict. Yeah. What does it look like? Well, you know, I think one of the things that I have always found incredibly interesting and what has really motivated a lot of my work is this issue of rationally sort of normally speaking kind of all information is good. Information is a resource and knowing what other people think is basically and fundamentally useful. And even though those people are just like completely out there in la la land, it's still good to know what they think, right?

The fact that they hold some crazy opinions that maybe they hold very strongly is not of personal harm to me, at least... The fact that they hold them might be of personal harm, but certainly knowing the details of it is not, right? And so, economists would say information is a good and the more of it you have, the better. And in particular, information that you disagree with is like the best kind, because you already have a lot of the information that you agree with, right? That's not adding anything.

And yet we have sort of a mountain of research on selective exposure and other related phenomena where people work very, very hard to avoid information that they disagree with. And when they're sort of compelled to engage with that information, you get all kinds of negative affect, so in some sense they're right to avoid it because it's unpleasant to engage with it, but then you get to this question of why. Why is it so unpleasant? And so, this distinction between disagreement and conflict, disagreement and attitude conflict, is really that when I disagree with you when those three factors aren't present, it doesn't bother me to disagree with you. So, I don't get the sort of negative arousal, and I don't do a second thing which I think is very important. I don't make negative attributions about you as a person because I happen to disagree with you.

So, kind of like the psychological experience of attitude conflict is negative affect and negative attributions about the person who disagrees with me. They're dumb, they're uninformed, they're biased, they're evil, they are just pandering to their group. They're pandering to the media. They're doing whatever. But a good, reasonable human can't possibly believe these things, right?

And so, then of course the consequence of this is one, I don't want to talk to you, and then when I talk to you, it's not a productive conversation, which I think is a large cause of the mess we're in right now as a country.

Andy Luttrell:

So, the hope would be that we could have those productive conversations even when disagreements might ordinarily rise to the level of conflict. My impression is that what your research has really been interested in is like, "Okay, these conflicts happen. They're happening constantly. What kind of people and what kind of situations make these conflicts less intense?" How could we encourage people to hear others out? Who are the kinds of people who go, "Oh, this might have ordinarily been a conflict, but I'm gonna lean in. I'm gonna listen to what this person has to say." So, what I'm getting at is the construct of receptiveness that you've spent plenty of time looking into. And so, what is receptiveness and why... What drew you to sort of explore this as a feature of people in situations?

Julia Minson:

Yeah, so when we started working on it, I was a PhD student at Stanford and Frances Chen was my classmate, and we really started talking about it initially in the context of education. So, Frances is Asian American, and she kind of made this point of like, "You know, kids in Asian cultures are taught to listen to their teachers and take in what they say, and think about it, and process it, and then kids in North America are taught to push back, and be argumentative, and be analytical, and find holes in their teachers' argument, and isn't that weird?" And I said, "Yeah, Frances, that's totally weird." But I think there's a much more interesting implication of this, which is conflict, that there's sort of this mindset where you come across information you disagree with and you say, "Huh. Let me think about that. Let me noodle on it. Let me truly understand where this person is coming from and spend some time with this thought in my mind." And then I can take it or leave it, right?

Which is different than sort of this knee jerk response of, "Here's an opposing view. Let me immediately counter argue it and reject it." And so, we started thinking about what is this mindset and how does this thing work? And so, my PhD advisor was Lee Ross, who was doing at that time a tremendous amount of work on naïve realism and doing a lot of it sort of thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And the hallmark, of course, of that conflict is that some of the fundamental issues that the parties disagree on, they're never going to sort of change their mind. The Israelis are never going to say, "Here, take all the land back. We changed our mind. You've made a really solid argument."

Andy Luttrell:

You know what?

Julia Minson:

You can have it back now. Right. And so, we kind of were around that work a lot, and it was sort of this paradigmatic example of there are some situations where the parties will never change their mind. But they have to function together, and so can you have conversations? Can you have negotiations? Can you have relationships where you are thoughtful, and respectful, and understanding of the other perspective without actually changing your mind? And at that time, this was like the... 2006, 2007 when we started thinking about this stuff, and the American political situation was quaint and polite compared to the current standard. So, a lot of people sort of didn't care. They were like, "Oh, receptiveness, go talk to some attitude change people. They know all about attitude change and this is no different than attitude change."

And so, the first paper we published was Frances and me and Zak and the paper was about the effect of asking questions. Can we induce sort of receptiveness by getting people to ask questions and by having them receive questions from the other side? And we had all these vague ideas about receptiveness, and the construct, and what it means, and this mindset, and Zak said, "This is all too vague, and this is gonna be a short paper about asking questions. This is not gonna be a paper about receptiveness." And then after that came out, we're like, "Okay, but now let's study receptiveness."

Andy Luttrell:

So, did you find in that early stuff, was attitude change the outcome? How did... So, the idea was this was about attitude change and changing minds. How did that evolve once you started to design the studies and see the data?

Julia Minson:

So, for us it was not about attitude change and changing minds. For Frances and I, it was really always about understanding situations where people were not going to change their mind, and can we move sort of other variables that were still important in this context? So, one of the... To me, the two big categories of outcomes that I think really matter in the space is willingness to interact in the future, so like will I talk to this person in the future, am I willing to work with them, am I willing to negotiate with them, do I want to hear their opinion on other things, right? So, that building of a future relationship.

And then also evaluations of the other party, right? So, this is where it comes back to Lee Ross and the naïve realism work, right? So, a lot of that work is about the kind of negative beliefs we hold about somebody just because they happen to disagree with us. Sort of like knowing nothing else about a person, they must be less moral and less intelligent and have kind of more negative intentions just because they disagree. And so, to me, the goal of receptiveness has always been to think about how can we impact those two things in the absence of attitude change? But that's... You know, it's taken a while to get that kind of clarity about it.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, it seems like there has been clarity over time. That's the good news. And one of the things that I find interesting is you sort of also break down different stages in the process of coming to see other positions on an issue, evaluating the things that people are saying, and how receptiveness is really sort of doing particular things at each stage of this process of engaging with ideas that you

yourself don't currently hold. So, can you give us a sense of like what are those stages that matter and how is receptiveness intervening and improving maybe how those stages unfold?

Julia Minson:

Yeah. Absolutely. So, one of the things that I've always really enjoyed about the work is... You know, I mean in some sense, I come from a very traditional social psychology department, right? Stanford, sort of Claude Steele, and Hazel Markus, and sort of that entire tradition, but I've also done a lot of work in the judgment decision making space. And I like kind of the precision that the judgment decision making tradition brings to a lot of experiments, right?

And so, a lot of the work that we think about in terms of how people process opposing views has that kind of JDM flavor to it, where you say, "Okay, how do you process views on your side? How do you process views on the other side?" And generally, there's sort of a massive gap, right? And there are a bunch of phenomena that all have this flavor of looking at how you engage with your side, how you engage with the other side, showing that the two things are different, and obviously this can't be sort of normative because half the world is ignoring information on one side and the other half of the world is ignoring information on the other side.

And so, if you look at this literature, it's kind of like a lot of individual biases, right? So, people study selective exposure, which is willingness to sort of expose yourself to information, and it's like, "Oh, people expose themselves to information on my side, but not on the other side." And then people study selective attention and then people study biased evaluation, and then biased assimilation, and so there's lots of biases that all have this related flavor of I treat my side differently than the other side. But then, you know, if you talk to people in kind of attitude change world that doesn't deal with conflict, they're very clear that there's a sequence of things that happens when you are about to change somebody's attitude, right? And that sequence involves you have to be exposed to the information and then you have to attend to the information, and then you evaluate the information, and then you do or don't change your mind, right?

And we can sort of talk about deep processing versus shallow processing, but that's basically the idea. And so, when we started thinking about receptiveness, we thought, "Okay, well, is it enough to just expose yourself to the information?" Well, that doesn't seem right, right? Because I can expose myself to the information and not be paying attention to it at all because I think the whole thing is terrible. Or I could expose myself to the information and I could think very deeply about it, and sort of an example of that would be like a lawyer studying an opposing argument, right? I'm exposed to it, I'm thinking about it, but I'm not still really receptive because the entire time my prior is how do I counter argue this?

So, then there has to be this other thing where I'm exposed to it, I've thought about it, and now I'm going to evaluate it using the same yardstick as if it's coming from my side. And then all of that sort of is a precursor to me deciding to change my mind or not. So, in our kind of conceptualization of receptiveness, we really kind of... We took all these biases and said, "Okay, you can actually arrange them in order on this attitude formation continuum," and so what receptiveness really is is having less of each of these biases, right? Being a little bit more even handed in how we expose ourselves to information, how much attention we pay to it, and how we evaluate it.

Andy Luttrell:

And one of the ways that you've looked at receptiveness is as a trait, like there are receptive people and there are people who are reasonably low on receptiveness, and do you have a sense in terms of validating that approach to figuring out who's receptive and who's not, do we have a sense of who tends to be receptive and who tends not to be receptive? Just kind of as a personality trait? If we stick there as our level of analysis.

Julia Minson:

Yeah. No, great question, so the reason... It's really funny. The reason we started developing a scale, and I do not recommend this as a career move, by the way, is because we started out trying to manipulate receptiveness. As dyed in the wool social psychologists we said, "We think there's a construct. We think it could be affected by these manipulations. And so, once we get our results we're going to be confident that the inferred underlying construct exists." And we did a few things that we thought would sensibly manipulate receptiveness, and you know, we got funky results. Then we published another paper a couple years after that on eye contact and receptiveness, and the original hypothesis was that eye contact was going to increase receptiveness because eye contact is something that's usually used in affiliative settings, right? It increases bonding between mothers and babies, and it increases attraction, and we thought, "Ah, eye contact. That's gonna do the thing."

And then we ran a very careful eye contact study and got exactly the opposite of what we predicted. And then we ran another one and replicated our opposite result. And then we started reading about eye contact and realized that a lot of what we thought of initially was eye contact in affiliative settings, but in the animal literature there's... When animals are about to fight, they stare at each other, right? So, eye contact has actually a totally different effect depending on what is the context you're doing it in. And so, we realized that of course, attitude conflict was much more like about to fight than mothers gazing at their babies.

But that was yet another experience of we ran these very, very hard to run studies and realized that we didn't understand receptiveness very well. So, we took a big step back and said, "Let's talk about the construct." And at that point, Frances was already at UBC, and I was at Harvard, and she flew out to Boston, and we spent like a week sitting in my office arguing about what receptiveness is, and that's how we started developing this scale, because then we thought, "Okay, we decided that this is what it is. But now we need to measure, because next time we manipulate something that again gives us weird results, we need to know that we're measuring the thing we think we're measuring."

And then it turned out that scale development is incredibly hard. And so, like five years later we had a scale.

Andy Luttrell:

So, you did the work. You guys put in the elbow grease to validate this scale. And so, now we have it. Now we have a way to know who's receptive, who's not receptive, and what sort of insights have come out of that? Now that we go like, "Okay, forget about all these interventions that didn't actually do what we thought they would do. Now we know this person's receptive, this person's not receptive as far as we can assess using this personality inventory." What do we learn?

Julia Minson:

So, a couple things that I think are interesting. So, one of the things we sort of tried hard to do, and this is now the last few years, is to have a scale that is not politically biased. So, for example, liberals love to claim that they're more receptive than conservatives, because it's sort of part of our big tent ethos. Turns out that's not really true. There are lots of issues on which liberals are just as unready to hear out the other side as conservatives are, and so I like having a scale that sort of like doesn't reflect my own political biases.

We do find that there is a correlation with age, so as people get older, they're perhaps not surprisingly less interested in other people's ideas that they really disagree with. And we do find that the scale predicts the things that we expect it to predict. In other words, people who are higher in receptiveness are more willing to read information from the opposite side of the aisle. We know that it has stability over time, so we gave the scale to a large group of voters right before the 2016 election and then we followed up with them right after President Trump's inauguration, and we found that Clinton voters who were higher on receptiveness were more likely to have seen the inauguration and had sort of more engagement with the news around it, so watched news on both sides and had kind of more even-handed evaluations of the inauguration speech. So, we see predictive value in the world.

So, one of the things that I think is interesting about this particular scale is that if you look at the individual items, there's a subset of items that deals with emotion. And there are a lot of scales in this kind of space, right? So, things like actively open-minded thinking, for example, or like various measures of intellectual humility, that are very cognitive in how they approach this issue of considering both sides, and we were surprised, honestly, at how much variance was predicted by affect. So, items asking about I get really angry when I have to listen to people who disagree with me, I'm disgusted by the ideas on the other side, so people can have this intellectual appreciation for it's good to know what the other side thinks, but a lot of the action is on the affective reaction, which I think is important to kind of bring affect into this whole conversation.

Andy Luttrell:

So, even moving beyond the individual difference part, the fact that maybe I tend to be more receptive or not, the sort of new wave of this is to think about like, well, even if I'm a person who tends to be receptive, I'm also engaged in a back and forth when I'm doing the thing I need to be receptive about. I'm sort of engaging with this other person's level of receptiveness. And so, it's interesting I think that people are sensitive to the receptiveness of another person, or at least are attentive to what they think the receptiveness of another person is. So, where did that start to enter the picture here in terms of like, okay, now it's not just me as a receptive person. It's whether I think you're gonna be open to what I have to say.

Julia Minson:

Yeah. Yeah. You know, and so this is... I love this question because of course, this first of all brings us closer to the current work, but also I think it's important to think about how research, it all comes out in a nice little package when you see it in print, right? But really what I'm telling you about is the story of the years of thinking about it, and getting it wrong, and trying different things, and really then figuring it out. And this idea of the importance of the counterpart's receptiveness, really like the centrality of the counterpart's receptiveness, came out of two different

mispredictions, if you will, or... I wouldn't call them failures, because they're not failures now that they've led to what I think is a really important insight, but at the time, they sure felt like it.

So, the first was this thing that I already mentioned, that we tried manipulating receptiveness many, many, many different ways, and it is hard. It is hard to get people to be more receptive. We tried things before we had the scale, we tried things after we had the scale. Manipulating receptiveness is hard. And that was sort of the quest for a long time. And then the other piece that really kept me up at night for a long time was, okay, well, you have receptiveness in your head, right? We figured out how to measure it. We know that you sort of process information differently if you're more receptive. But I came at this work from an interest in conflict and I always thought, "Well, you know, there's two people in a conflict. And if the other person can't tell that you're being receptive, then sort of who cares, right?"

You're processing information differently, but is it really going to affect conflict outcomes? And you know, I was certain that it would. I was like, "You're more receptive. Things are gonna be better." Like Israel, Palestine, here we come. And so, we ran a study that, again, took forever. So, at the Harvard Kennedy School where I am now, we do a lot of executive education courses for folks at sort of different level of government who can come for a week, or two weeks, or three weeks, and kind of sharpen their skills or update their knowledge and whatever. And I teach in a lot of these programs, and sometimes the program directors let me collect data.

And so, we had this program for leaders in state and local government, so this is like fire chiefs, and police chiefs, and the CFO of a city, sort of that level of people. And so, these are like grownups, these are not college sophomores, who are very well politically informed and have thoughtful policy opinions, and so we would bring them to the lab and have them do an online discussion about a hot button policy issue. So, marijuana legalization, Black Lives Matter, unions in the public sector, so things that were sort of like very real to these people. And then we had them do the receptiveness scale and then evaluate their own receptiveness in this particular conversation and evaluate their counterpart's receptiveness.

And then we asked them a bunch of questions about evaluating your counterpart, and do you want to work with this person, and do you think they have good judgment, et cetera. And so, I was positive that one's own receptiveness would improve counterpart evaluations. If I'm being receptive, then you should like me better. And that's not what we found. We found a vanishingly low correlation between my own kind of self-valued receptiveness and my partner's evaluations of my receptiveness. What we did find very robustly, though, was one, that perceptions of partner receptiveness were super predictive of my desire to work with this person in the future. So, if I think you're receptive, I want to work with you. But that seems to be largely unrelated to whether you think you're being receptive. So, something is being lost in translation.

And then the other thing that we found that was sort of fascinating and a total surprise was that we randomly assigned people to talk to each other, so their initial levels of receptiveness were randomly assigned, but by the end of the conversation my perception of your receptiveness was substantially correlated with your perception of my receptiveness. And what this had to mean was that we were impacting each other. Like that somehow, by the end of the thing, our receptivenesses converged, right?

So, we had this data, and it took years to collect, because these are not very big classes, and because the discussion was online, we had all the transcripts, and so we spent all this time trying to figure out, well, what is it that receptive people are doing or not doing to communicate their receptiveness? And so, ultimately what this resulted in was writing an NLP algorithm in collaboration with Mike Yeomans, who... He was a postdoc at Harvard and he's now at Imperial College London, and he is really a brilliant computational linguist, and has the combination of being good at computational linguistics but also being a really good social psychologist and getting people.

And so, we ran more studies where we collected more conversation data and wrote an algorithm that captures what people perceive as being receptive, right? So, instead of looking at receptiveness in your head, the algorithm captures what is receptive linguistic behavior. And then, once you have that, you can start saying, "Okay. Well, if this is what's seen as receptive, what are people doing wrong when they think they're being receptive but they're not actually being evaluated as such?" And so, we started getting a pretty good handle on the fact that there's really a disconnect between what is perceived as receptive versus what people enact when they think they're doing it.

Andy Luttrell:

And also, just to be clear, NLP is natural language processing, right? So, you're looking at the words that people are using, the language they're using to have these conversations, and are there patterns to those words that are reliably associated with how receptive they seem, right?

Julia Minson:

Yes. That's exactly right. So, what the algorithm does is it literally pulls out words and phrases that are correlated with third-party evaluations of receptiveness. And so, the good news about it is that once you have natural language process algorithm, first of all, you can process massive amounts of data very quickly. And then you can pull out the words and phrases that are the most predictive and say, "Well, can we teach people to do this stuff?" And it turns out that we can, and it turns out that when you experimentally manipulate conversational receptiveness, when we teach people to use the words and phrases that are sort of perceived as receptive, you get all of those benefits that we saw with our state and local government leaders. They're seen as more trustworthy. They're seen as more objective. People want to work with them despite the fact that you still disagree on the key issue.

And the answer to sort of the puzzle of, well, why is it that receptiveness in your head doesn't immediately come out in behavior is that I think people have the wrong lay theory about it. They basically do politeness. So, when I'm trying to be receptive to somebody I disagree with, I'm very formal and very polite, and I try hard not to yell at them, which is different than showing them that I'm truly engaged with their perspective.

Andy Luttrell:

I wondered if you could, having developed this training, give me and people listening a quick version of this training. So, if I'm a receptive person and I want to make sure that that's coming across, what are the kinds of things that I ought to be doing and saying to make sure that I'm showing you I want this to go smoothly?

Julia Minson:

Yes. Absolutely. So, we've recently actually been training students at the Harvard Kennedy School, and in order to make life easier we made up an acronym. So, the acronym is I hear you, and HEAR is really the key word, so the H stands for hedging, so instead of making absolute claims, you hedge your claims with words like sometimes, and occasionally, and in certain situations, right? So, instead of saying, "Unvaccinated people spread COVID and kill people in their community," you might say, "Sometimes if you're unvaccinated you might spread COVID," right? So, same idea, but you're basically just saying it's not quite as... You don't make a claim that's totally absolute, right? And sort of demonstrating some intellectual humility and a recognition that you don't know 100% of the facts 100% of the time.

The E stands for emphasizing agreement, and that one is sometimes a little bit controversial because it's agreement about other things sort of in the conversation. It's not like compromising or reaching agreement on the focal thing, right? So, I agree with you that the last couple of years have been really hard, or I agree with you that we need to consider both the well-being of school children and the well-being of teachers, right? So, you can be having an argument about a specific policy but still agree on general underlying values, or sort of like other things that acknowledge that both of you are decent humans.

The A stands for acknowledging the other person's perspective. Acknowledgment in this case means lending some of your own airtime to saying, "I really heard you." So, it's saying things like, "I understand you said blah, blah, blah," or, "It seems to me that your position is something, something, something," right? So, instead of jumping in and saying, "I have to contradict this horrible thing you said right now so it doesn't float around the universe an extra possible second," it's taking the time to say, "I really heard you."

And then the R is reframing to the positive, which is basically saying the same message but using positive emotion words, right? Or sort of like more positive language and avoiding negative language, so instead of saying, "I can't stand it when people interrupt me," you say, "I really appreciate it when people hear me out." So, same message, which is please don't interrupt me, but it's phrased in positive terms. So, HEAR, hedging, emphasizing agreement, acknowledgement, and reframing to the positive.

Andy Luttrell:

Nice. I had no idea there was already an acronym for it, which that makes it very nice to do. So, the last thing before we wrap up, the thought that came to mind when you're referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as sort of a prototypical version of how these things might exist in the world. It reminded me of some other arguments out there that we ought not to be so deferential. If we want to make social change, we need a conflict mindset. We need to engage in these kinds of conflict behaviors if we're gonna actually make change. So, this all sounds great, and if what we want is sort of good, civil discourse that sort of allows people to coexist with different ideas, perceptiveness sounds great. But are there times where you might say receptiveness is not the thing we always have to strive for? Are there times when we might say no, this is not the primary interest in the moment?

Julia Minson:

So, I think that's a really good question that brings up I think this broader point that my colleague at HBS, Allison Wood Brooks, talks about a lot, which is that people don't often consider their conversational goals. People just go into a conversation, and they start talking, right? And then sometimes they might start yelling, but they often have no idea how they got there. And so, the question is like what's your goal in this conversation? There are a lot of goals that receptiveness is good for, so building the relationship with the other side, actually learning the facts of what they believe, either because you want to have a more positive relationship or because you want to have ammunition to counter argue in the future, but understanding is the first step to both of those things.

Quite often, where I think sort of being very unreceptive works is if you are trying to whip up support on your own side. So, if you are making a speech to your own constituency and you're trying to get them riled up, then lack of receptiveness, having a very one-sided message is the right thing to do. But if you are speaking to a mixed audience, which is what happens most of the time, then it's sort of wise to consider the consequences for your own side and the consequences for the other side who you might eventually have to interact with. So, there are situations where we are about to go to war with the other side, and maybe in the short term we really don't care how they feel about us, but most of the time, either in the short term or in the long term, how they perceive us matters. Matters for our own goals, right?

If you are sort of completely self-centeredly focused on your own goals, most of the time those goals require some minimal level of cooperation from the other side. And so, then you kind of want to think about how your words are going to impact that likely cooperation.

Andy Luttrell:

Nice. Yeah. Good things to keep in mind. Well, thanks for taking the time to talk about receptiveness. This has been I think a fairly receptive conversation. And looking forward to new stuff that's coming out in that line of work.

Julia Minson:

Thanks so much, Andy. Appreciate it.

Andy Luttrell:

Alright that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Big thanks to Julia Minson for talking receptiveness. And I really loved that idea that we don't usually consider what our goals are in a conversation. Check out the show notes for a link to Julia's website and the research we've been talking about.

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