

Exaggerating the Reputational Costs of Revealing Secrets



Michael Kardas, Amit Kumar, Nicholas Epley
University of Chicago, Booth School of Business

Abstract

From anxiety to infidelity, people conceal secrets from others. 3 experiments suggest that people overestimate the reputational costs of revealing their secrets. Across five scenarios, revealers overestimated how severely they would be evaluated by recipients after revealing their secrets (Experiment 1), in both weak and strong relationships (Experiment 3). In the lab, participants who lied during a discussion and then concealed this information overestimated how negatively they would be seen after revealing their lie (Experiment 2). Secrecy diminishes well-being (Pennebaker, 1989). People may keep more secrets than would be optimal for well-being because they overestimate reputational costs of disclosing them.

Introduction

- People conceal, on average, about 5 secrets from other individuals (Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017) and doing so elevates stress and diminishes well-being (Pennebaker, 1989).
- People's decisions to conceal versus reveal their secrets are likely guided, in part, by their expectations about how they would be judged by others after revealing them.
- We hypothesize that people overestimate how negatively they would be judged after revealing these secrets to other individuals.
- Therefore, people may be more secretive than would be optimal for their own well-being.

Experiment 1: Scenarios

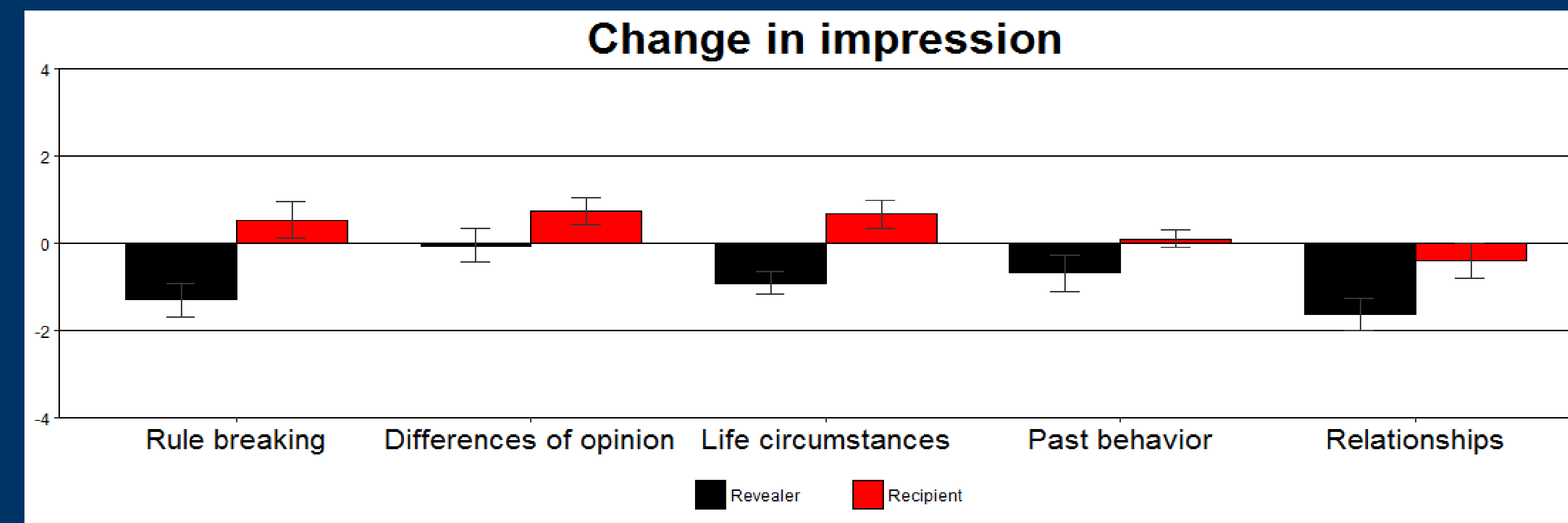
Method

- $N = 180$ participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk read one of five scenarios from the perspective of the "revealer" or the "recipient".
- For example, the revealer's "rule-breaking" scenario read:
 - "You live with several roommates, including your friend ABC. You are generally a very responsible person and you think about the consequences of your actions before you act, especially when your actions may affect other people. But last month you snuck food out of ABC's cabinets almost every night."
- Revealers predicted how they would be judged after revealing their secrets to recipients, whereas recipients reported how they would actually judge revealers. The revealer measures were:

- (1) How do you think revealing this secret would influence ABC's impression of you? (-4 = *They'd think much less of me*; +4 = *They'd think much more of me*)
- (2) How long do you think it would take for ABC to forgive you: for ABC's feelings about you to return to normal? (1 = *Immediately*; 9 = *Never*)
- (3) To what extent would you rather conceal or reveal this secret to ABC? (1 = *Completely conceal*; 9 = *Completely reveal*)

Results

- Revealers overestimated how negatively they would be judged, $F_s(1, 191) > 14.66$, $p_s < .001$, $\eta_p^2s > .071$.



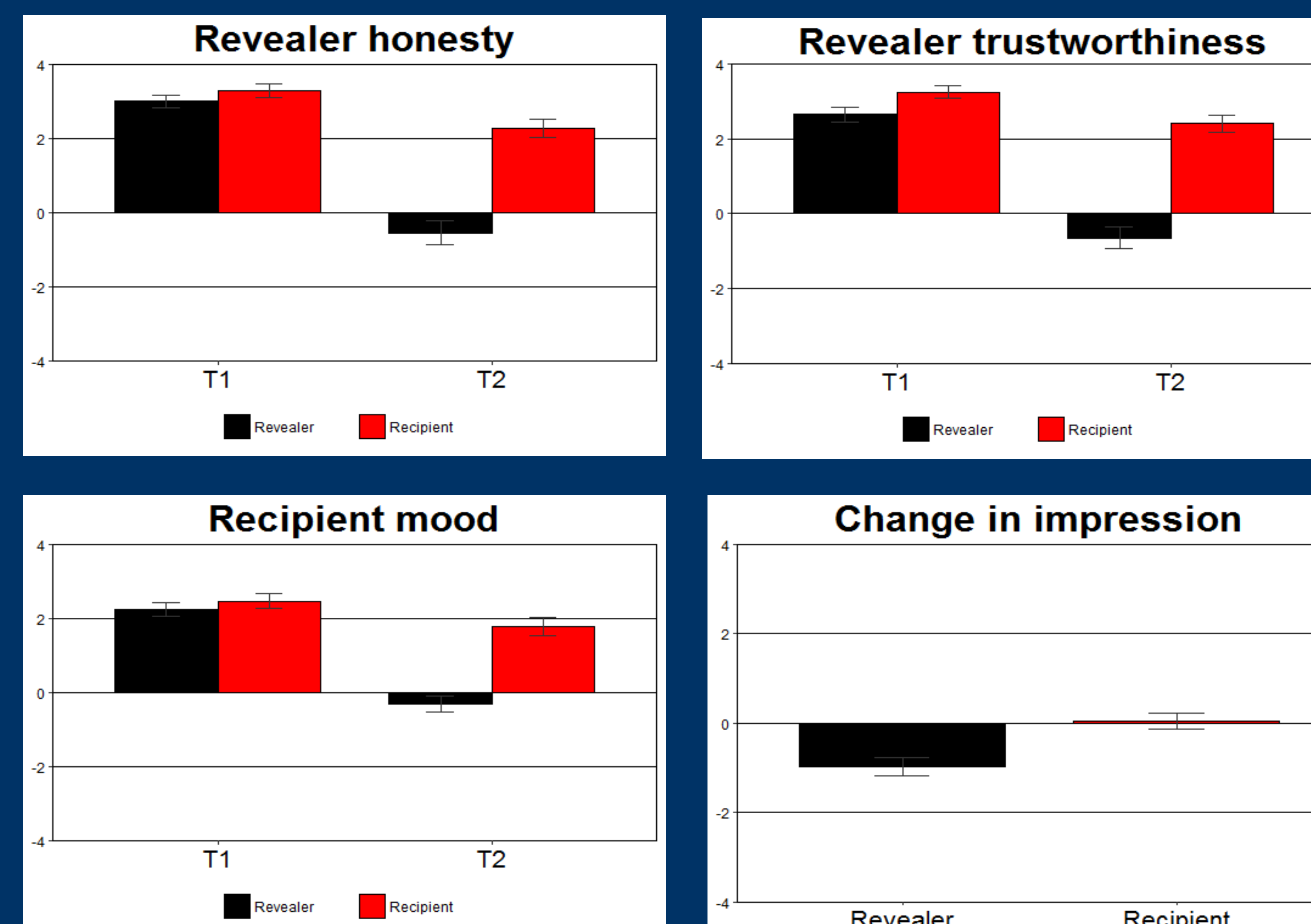
Experiment 2: Fast-Friends

Method

- $N = 50$ pairs of participants discussed 5 "fast-friends" questions (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997).
- The "revealer" was instructed to lie while answering the question, "Can you describe a time you cried in front of another person?" and to conceal from the recipient the secret that he/she had lied.
- Revealers predicted how revealing this lie would affect recipients' impressions of them. Then revealers actually disclosed the lie and recipients reported their actual impressions of the revealer.

Results

- Revealers overestimated how severely they would be judged after revealing the lie to recipients, $t_s(49) > 3.29$, $p_s < .002$, $d_s > 0.47$.



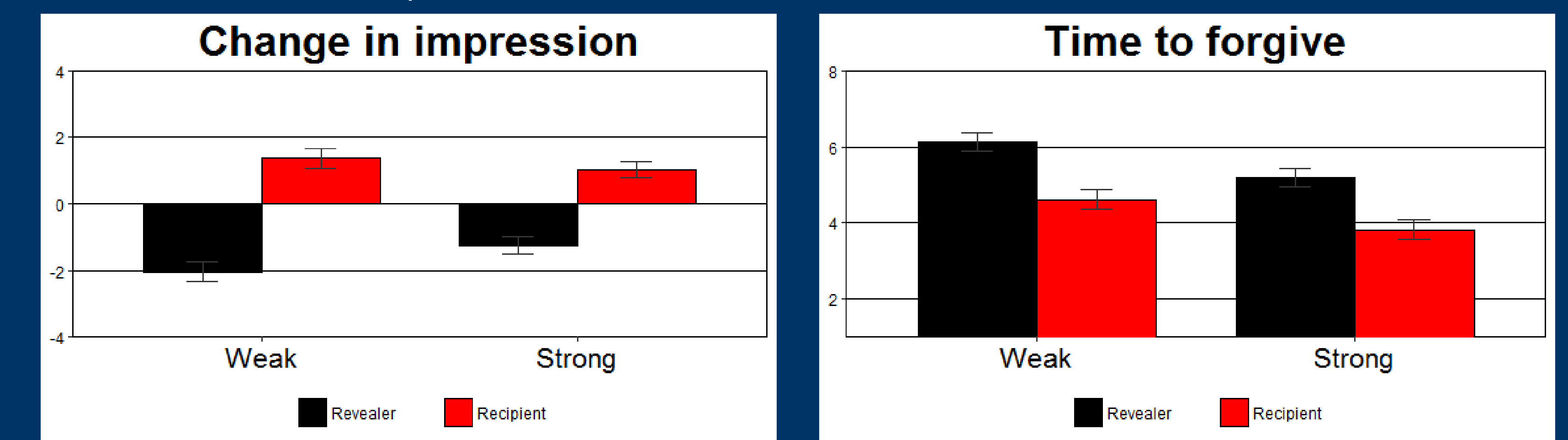
Experiment 3: Relationship Strength

Method

- $N = 197$ participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk read scenarios in a 2 (Role: revealer, recipient) x 2 (Relationship strength: high, low) design.
- High-strength scenarios depicted a strong, enduring relationship whereas low-strength scenarios depicted weak, recent relationship.
- Revealers predicted how they would be judged after revealing their secrets to recipients, whereas recipients reported how they would actually judge revealers.

Results

- Across both low-strength and high-strength relationships, revealers overestimated how negatively they would be judged, $F_s(1, 195) > 33.92$, $p_s < .001$, $\eta_p^2s > .148$.



General Discussion

Theoretical Implications

- People tend to overestimate how harshly they are judged for their mishaps and blunders (Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001), and our studies extends these findings to the domain of secrecy.
- People may keep secrets not because they misunderstand the emotional costs of concealing them, but rather, in part because they misunderstand the reputational costs of revealing them.

Practical Implications

- People may be more secretive than would be optimal for their own well-being.
- At times, people may be seen *more* positively after revealing their secrets because the content of a minor transgression may be outweighed by the sincerity that the revealer conveys by disclosing it.

References

- Pennebaker, J. W. (1989). Confession, inhibition, and disease. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 22, 211-244.
- Slepian, M. L., Chun, J. S., & Mason, M. F. (2017). The experience of secrecy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication, May 8, 2017. doi:10.1037/pspa0000085
- Savitsky, K., Epley, N., & Gilovich, T. (2001). Do others judge us as harshly as we think? Overestimating the impact of our failures, shortcomings, and mishaps. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 44.