

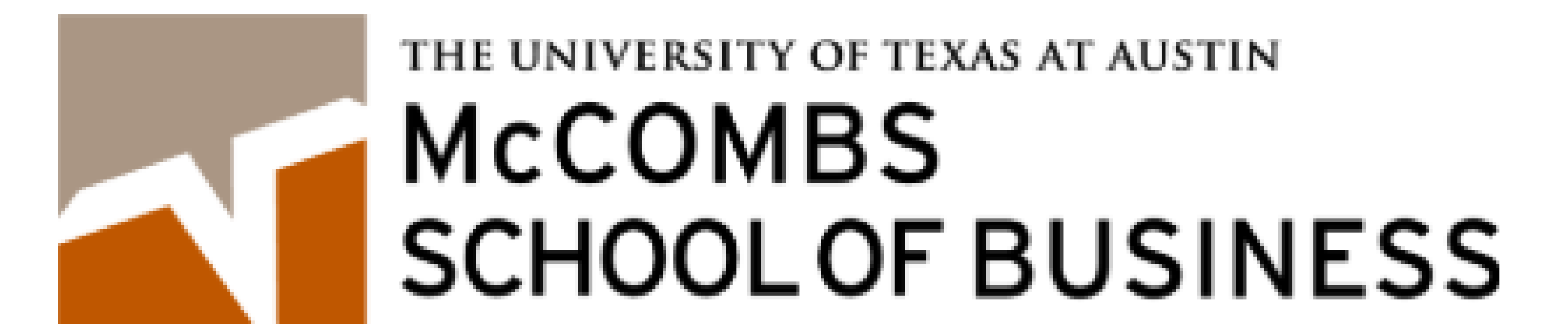
# Digging Deeper: Meaningful Conversations Are Surprisingly Pleasant



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## Abstract

Small talk is ubiquitous, yet three experiments suggest that people's miscalibrated beliefs about deep conversation may act as barriers to self-disclosure. People who discussed deep questions such as, "Can you describe a time you cried in front of another person?" (Experiment 1), as well as people who wrote and discussed their own deep questions (Experiment 2), overestimated experiences of awkwardness but underestimated connectedness and happiness. This occurred in part because people underestimated how much their conversation partner would care about their intimate revelations (Experiment 3). People may connect with others less deeply than would be optimal for their own and others' well-being.

## Background

- People forge strong connections when they engage in deep and meaningful conversations (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997; Collins & Miller, 1994).
- Disclosing meaningful information about oneself often leads one's conversation partner to do the same, and these revelations lead to greater experiences of connectedness and well-being (Holt-Lunstad, 2018).
- We examine barriers that keep people from connecting deeply. Specifically, we predict that deep conversations are less awkward, and more pleasant, than people anticipate, and that people's miscalibrated beliefs act as barriers to self-disclosure.

## Experiment 1: Deep Talk

### Method

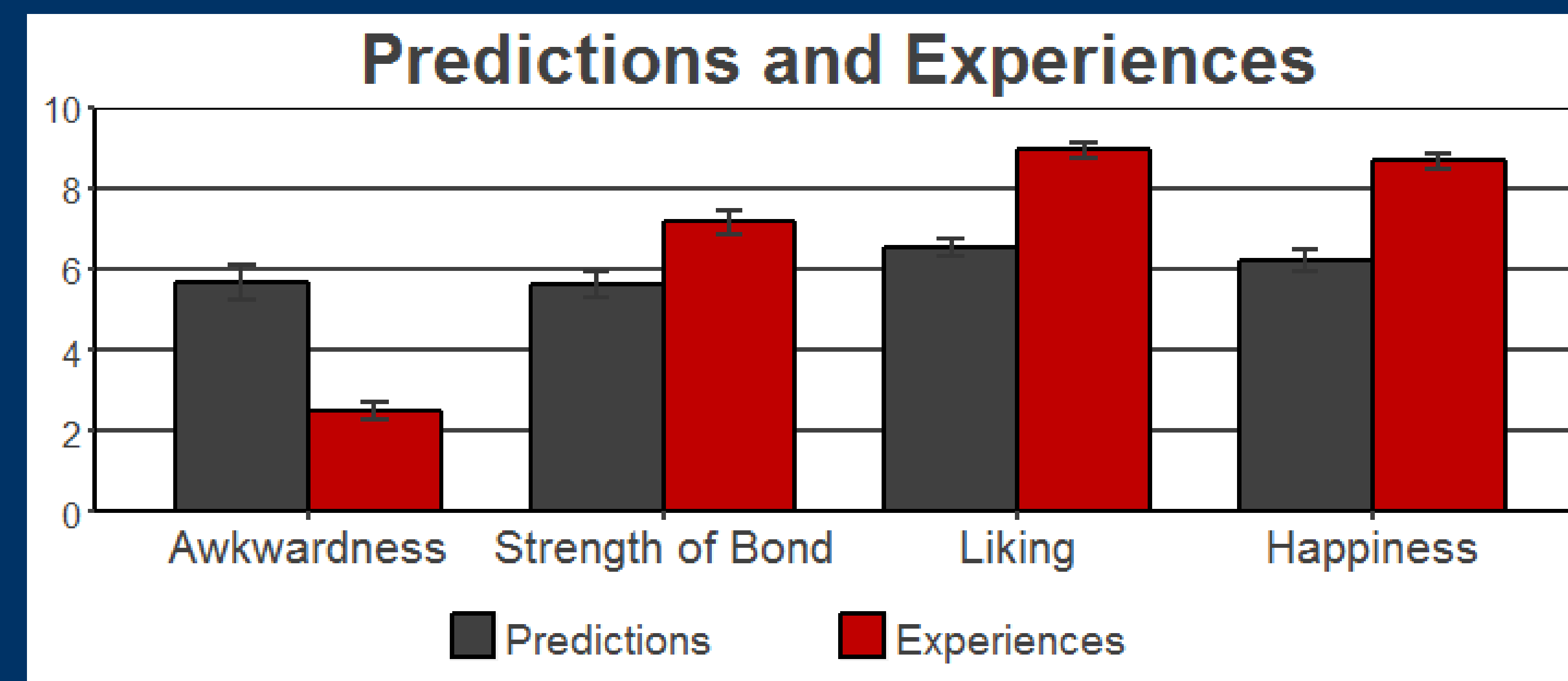
•  $N = 25$  unacquainted pairs of financial services executives read deep questions such as, "For what in your life do you feel most grateful?" and "Can you describe a time you cried in front of another person?" Then they predicted how their conversations would go:

1. How awkward do you think YOU will feel while answering and discussing these questions with your conversation partner? (0 = *Not at all awkward*; 10 = *Very awkward*)
2. After answering and discussing these questions, how strong of a bond do you think YOU will feel with your conversation partner? (0 = *Weak, like a stranger*, 10 = *Strong, like a new friend*)
3. After answering and discussing these questions, how much do you think YOU will like your conversation partner? (0 = *Not at all*; 10 = *Very much*)
4. After answering and discussing these questions, how happy do you think YOU will feel about the conversation with your partner? (0 = *Not happy at all*; 10 = *Extremely happy*)

• After the conversation, participants reported experiences.

## Results

• Deep conversations were less awkward, and more pleasant, than people predicted,  $t_s(24) > 8.71$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ,  $d_s > 1.74$ .



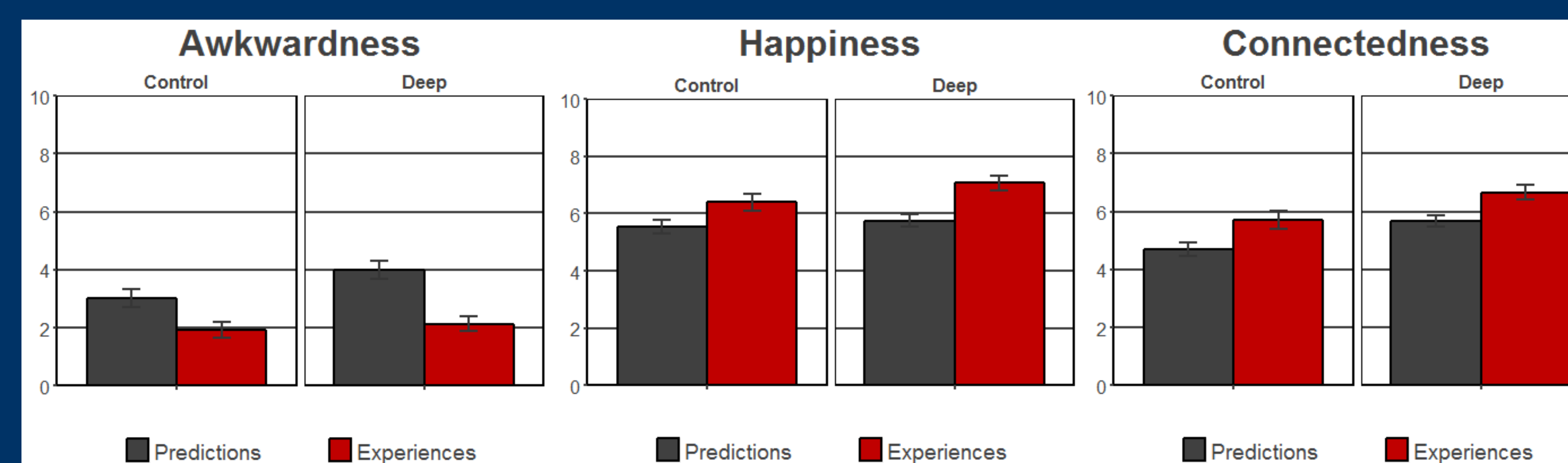
## Experiment 2: Shallow vs. Deep Talk

### Method

- $N = 100$  unacquainted pairs of participants were assigned to generate their own discussion questions.
- *Control* pairs wrote down the kinds of questions they typically ask and answer while getting to know another person. *Deep* pairs wrote down deeper, more personal, and more intimate questions, similar to ones that they might normally discuss with close friends and family.
- Participants predicted how their conversations would go, then they discussed the questions and reported their experiences.

### Results

- Deep pairs reported greater connectedness than control pairs ( $p = .022$ ) and marginally greater happiness ( $p = .088$ ) but no differences in awkwardness ( $p = .552$ ).
- Furthermore, deep pairs overestimated awkwardness,  $t(49) = 6.65$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95%  $CI_{\text{difference}} = [1.30, 2.42]$ ,  $d = 0.94$ .
- People may connect with others less deeply than would be optimal for their own and others' well-being.



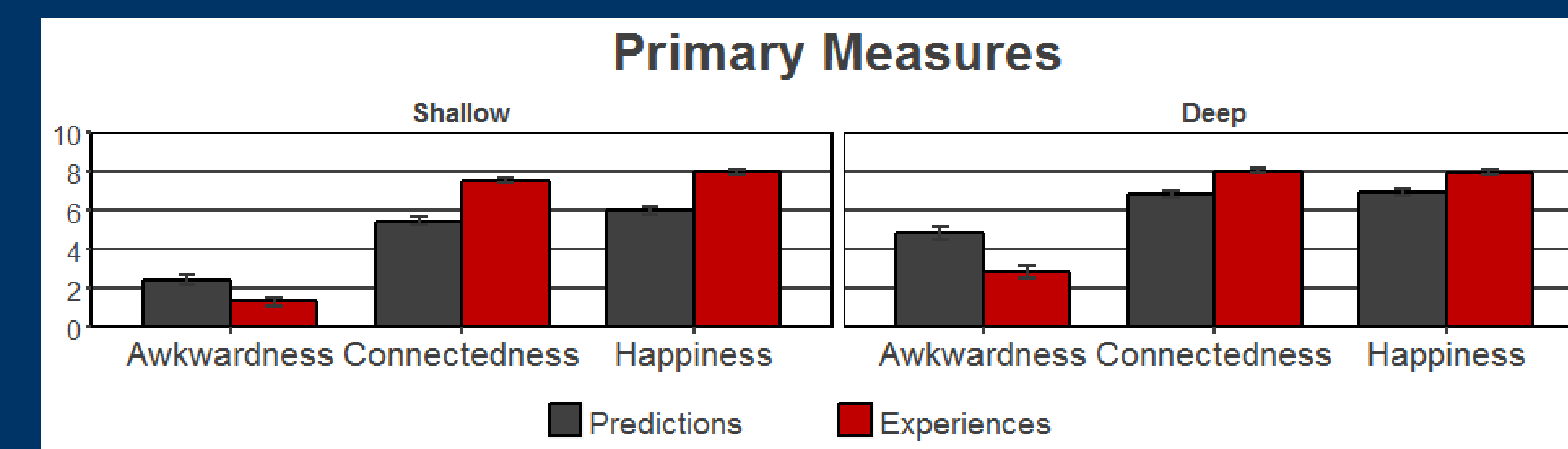
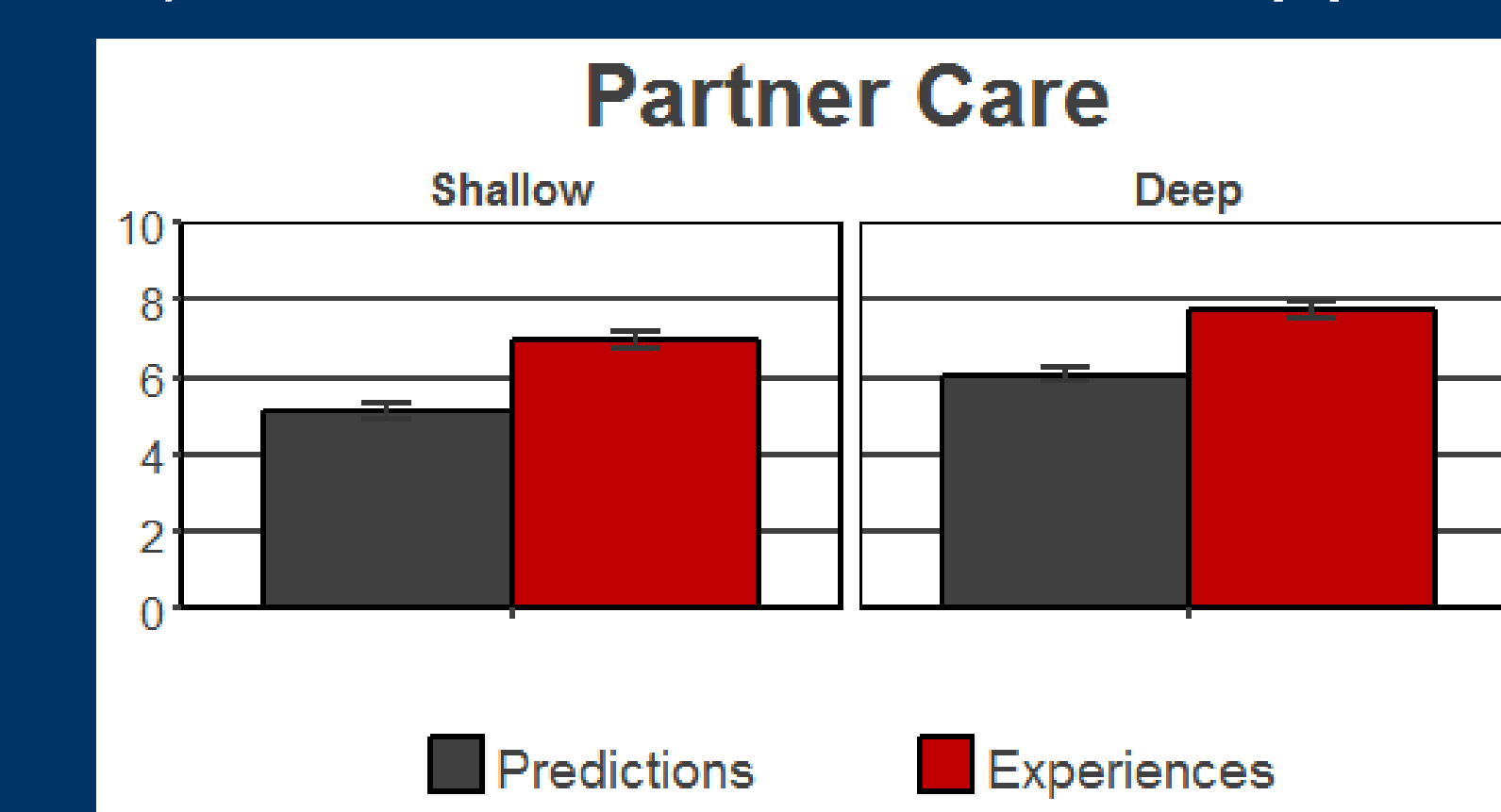
## Experiment 3: Mechanism

### Method

- $N = 103$  unacquainted pairs of MBA students read either shallow (e.g., "What do you think about the weather today?") or deep questions (e.g., "Can you describe a time you cried in front of another person?").
- Before the conversation, they predicted how much their conversation partner would care about one's own responses (0 = *Not at all*; 10 = *Quite a bit*). They also predicted awkwardness, connectedness, and happiness.
- Then participants discussed the questions and reported experiences.

### Results

- Deep pairs overestimated awkwardness ( $p < .001$ ), in part because they underestimated how much their conversation partners would care about what they revealed ( $p < .001$ ).
- Deep pairs reported greater experiences of connectedness than shallow pairs ( $p = .016$ ) but no differences in happiness ( $p = .962$ ).



## General Discussion

- Deep conversations are surprisingly pleasant, in part because others care more about one's disclosures than people anticipate.
- As a result, people's miscalibrated predictions may act as barriers to engaging in deeper and more meaningful conversations.
- People may hold better-calibrated beliefs about friends, family, and acquaintances who have already displayed responsiveness and care.

## References

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