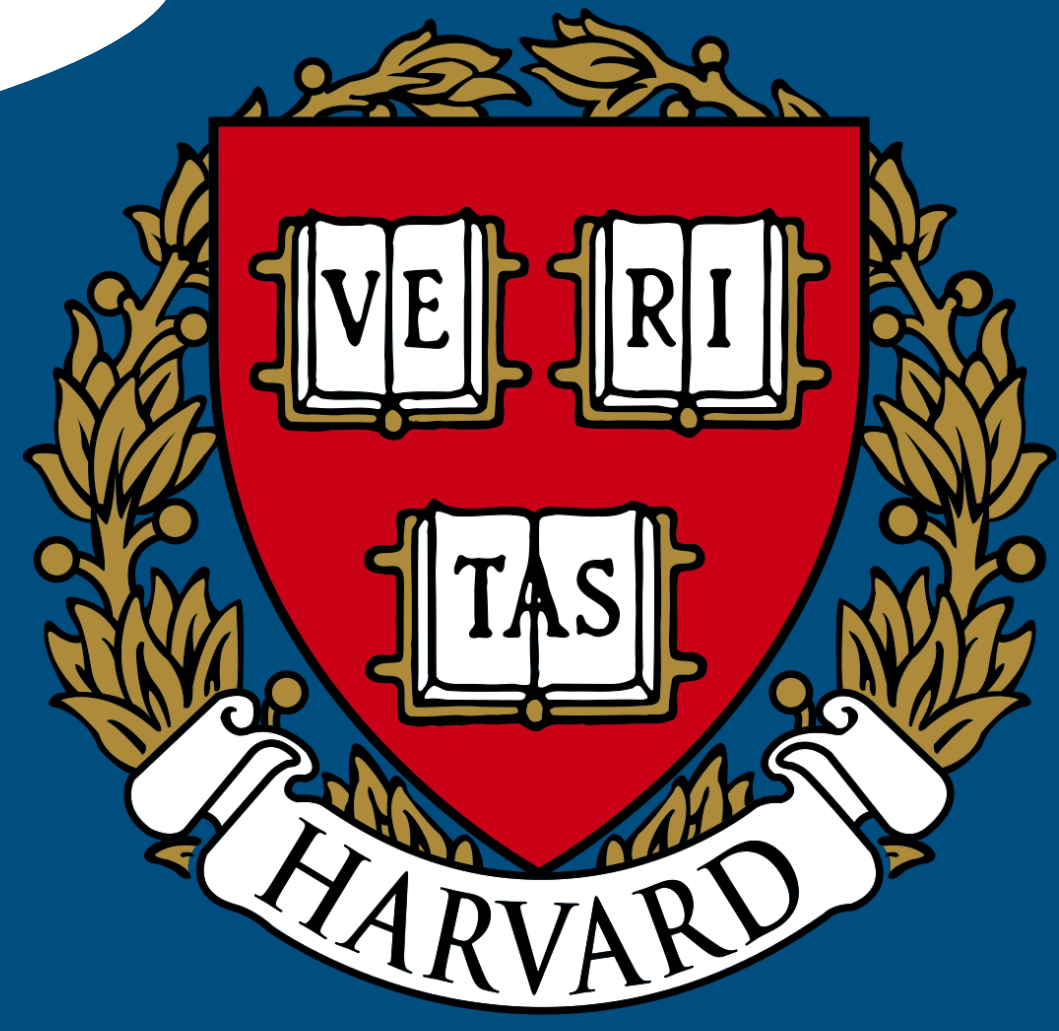


# Nobody Knows When to Stop Talking



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## Background

Humans spend much of their days talking to other humans. It's reasonable to expect that these conversations end when one or both people want them to end. We hypothesize, however, that they don't. Instead, it's possible that a combination of misperceptions and mutually exclusive desires conspire to prevent people from leaving conversations when they actually want to leave.

## Method

133 pairs of participants talked about whatever they wanted for between 1 and 45 minutes. Participants chose when to end the conversation. Afterward, participants reported if and when they first felt ready for the conversation to end, and guessed if and when their partner felt the same way.

## Results

### 1. Almost nobody left the conversation when they wanted.

Almost half of participants wanted to leave before the conversation ended, and almost half never wanted to leave. Only 15% reported feeling ready for the conversation to end when it actually ended.



Fig. 1. Participants color-coded to represent when they wanted to leave the conversation. Each square represents one participant.

On average, conversations lasted 27 minutes. Participants' average desired lengths differed from their actual lengths by 46% of their conversation lengths.

## Results (cont.)

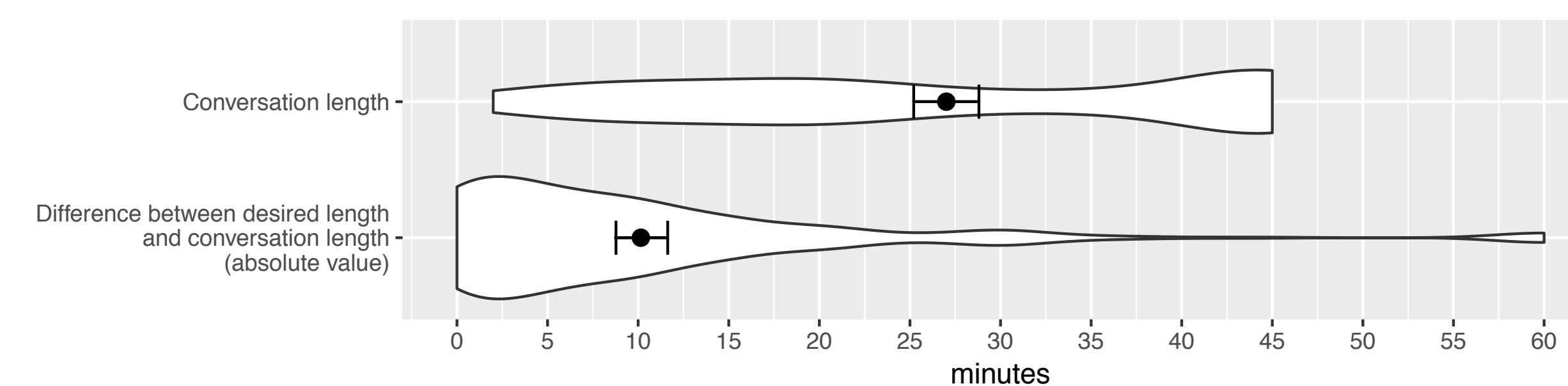


Fig. 2. Conversation lengths and the absolute value of the difference between desired length and conversation length, in minutes. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

### 2. Why didn't people leave when they wanted? One reason: half the time, partners didn't want the same thing.

In 51% of conversations, partners had conflicting desires; there was no mutually acceptable ending point. For example, in 27% of conversations, one participant wanted to leave earlier, and the other never wanted to leave.

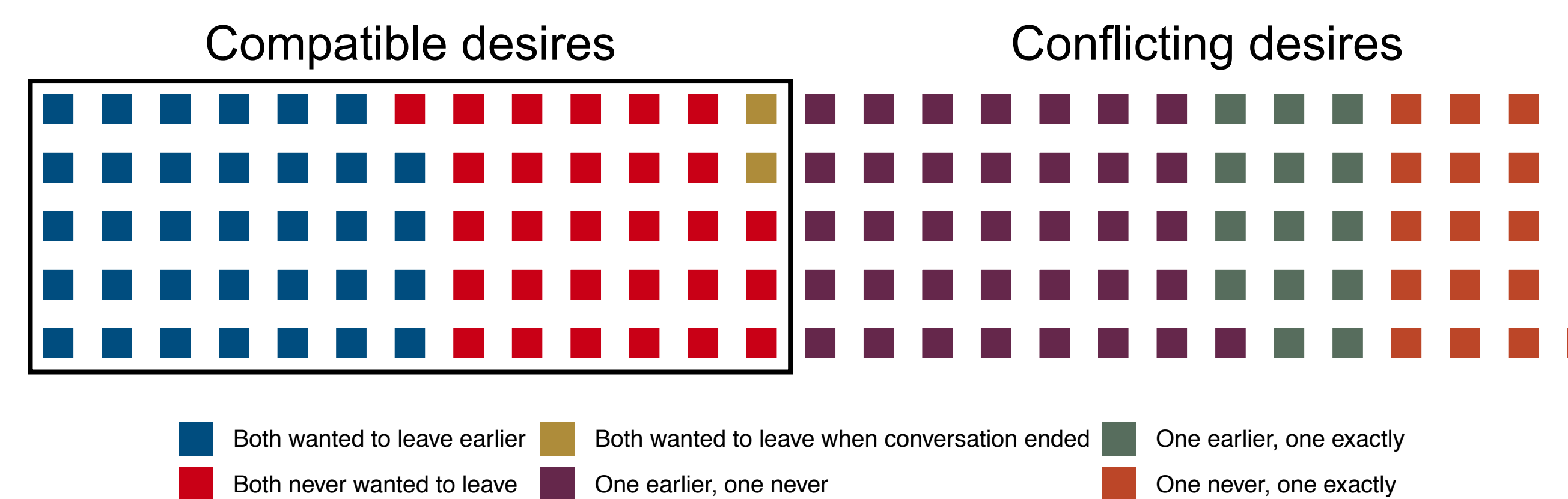


Fig. 3. Conversations color-coded to represent when each participant wanted to leave. Each square represents one conversation. Compatible desires = both participants wanted to leave at the same time relative to the end of the conversation. Conflicting desires = participants did not want to leave at the same time relative to the end of the conversation.

### 3. Another reason people didn't leave when they wanted: they had no idea when their partners wanted to leave.

When guessing whether or not their partner ever wanted to leave, participants were right only 63% of the time. However, they did not consistently over- or underestimate when their partners wanted to leave; they missed equally in both directions. Their guesses were off by 61% of their conversation length, on average.

## Results (cont.)

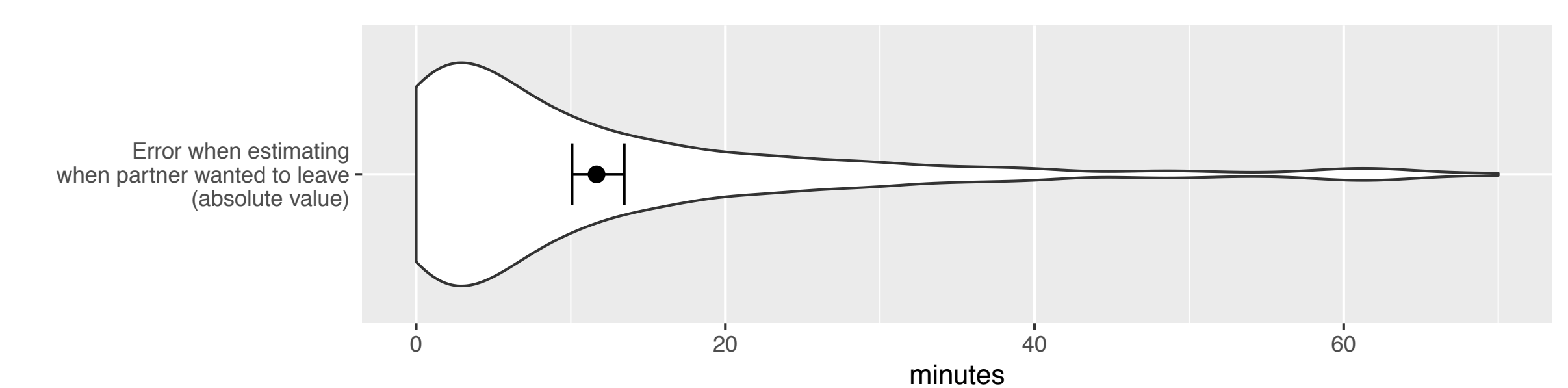


Fig. 4. Accuracy of participants' estimates for when their partners wanted to leave. Error is calculated as the absolute value of the difference between each participants' guess for when their partner wanted to leave, minus when their partner actually wanted to leave. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

### 4. Participants thought they were well-coordinated. They weren't.

Participants thought there were 6 minutes between when they wanted to leave and when their partner wanted to leave. In fact, there were 13 minutes between those points, on average.

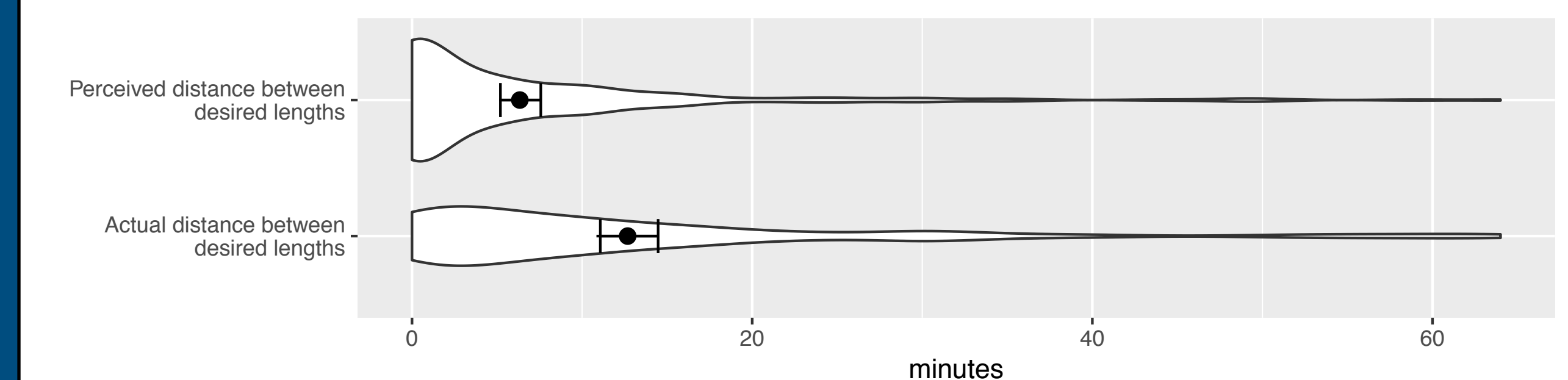


Fig. 5. Participants' perceived and actual distances between desired ending points, in minutes. Perceived distance is the absolute value of the difference between when Participant A wanted to leave, and when she thought Participant B wanted to leave. Actual distance is the absolute value between when Participant A and Participant B actually wanted to leave. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

## Conclusions, limitations, future directions

- Almost nobody left the conversation when they wanted.
- This is likely both because participants often wanted different things, and because they had little idea of what their partners wanted.
- Participants may have been inaccurate because they used a faulty heuristic: they anchored on their own desired length and insufficiently adjusted when guessing their partner's desired length.
- These results are limited to young people (18-32) meeting each other for the first time in a lab setting.
- We are currently expanding this research to conversations between friends in naturalistic settings.