

What's Meant vs. Heard When Communicating Busyness?

Maria Giulia Trupia, Cassie Mogilner Holmes, and Isabelle Engeler

SUMMARY

Stressing from having too much to do and not enough time to do it, people often lament their busyness to others. But, what do busy people express and what is heard when they share,

“I am busy”?

While research suggests that busyness is associated with **stress** (e.g., Etkin, Evangelidis, & Aaker, 2015), recent findings suggest that busyness may instead be intended and perceived as conveying **self-importance** (Kim, Wadhwa, & Chattopadhyay, 2019). Highlighting one's importance might be perceived as an attempt to signal one's **social status** (Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2017) and therefore this may prove to be **interpersonally costly** (Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015).

We find that, although people say they are busy to express their feelings of stress, **receivers think that expressers feel more self-important than they actually do and infer that they are higher in social status than they actually are.** These misperceptions are **interpersonally costly** (Studies 1-2) but can be reduced by emphasizing the **emotional strain of busyness** (Study 3).

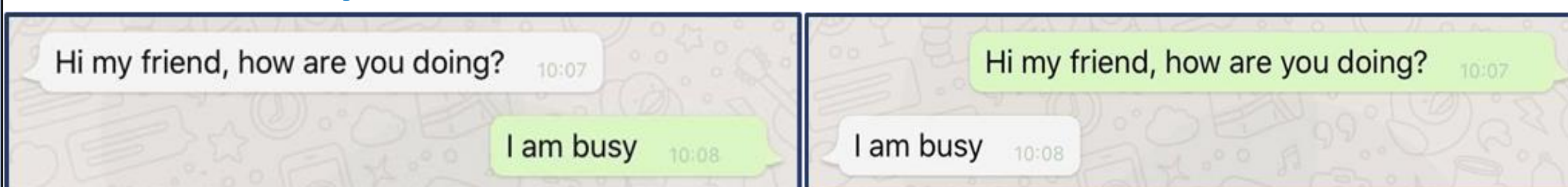
STUDY 1

Main Effect (N=497 MTurk)

2 (person, between) x 2 (expression, within) mixed design

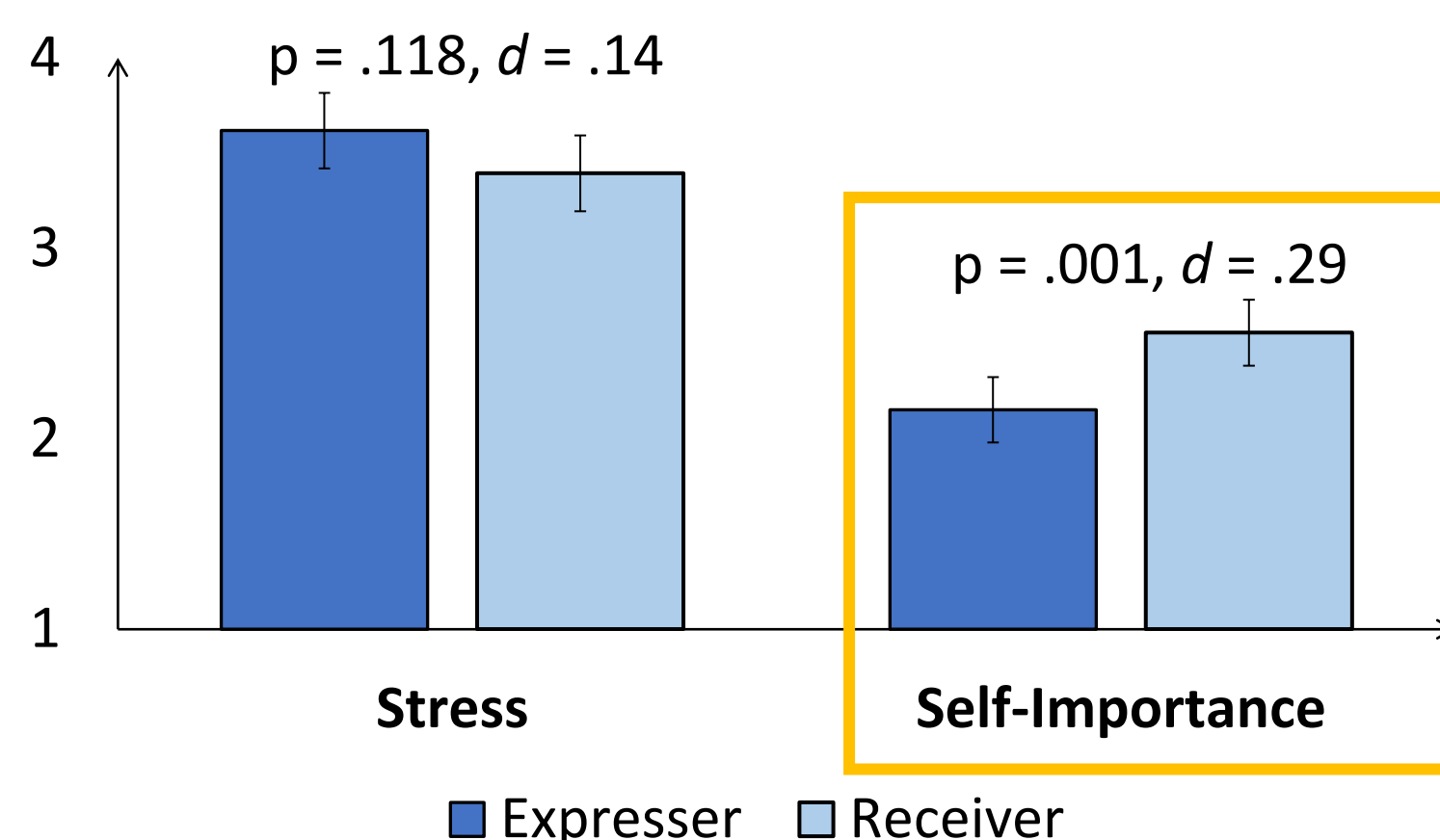
Expresser

Receiver



Measures (1-7): Stress (I am stressed / worried / anxious; $\alpha=.85$); **Self-Importance** (I am superior / bragging / important; $\alpha=.79$)

Control Variable: Current Busyness (Zauberman and Lynch 2005)



STUDY 2

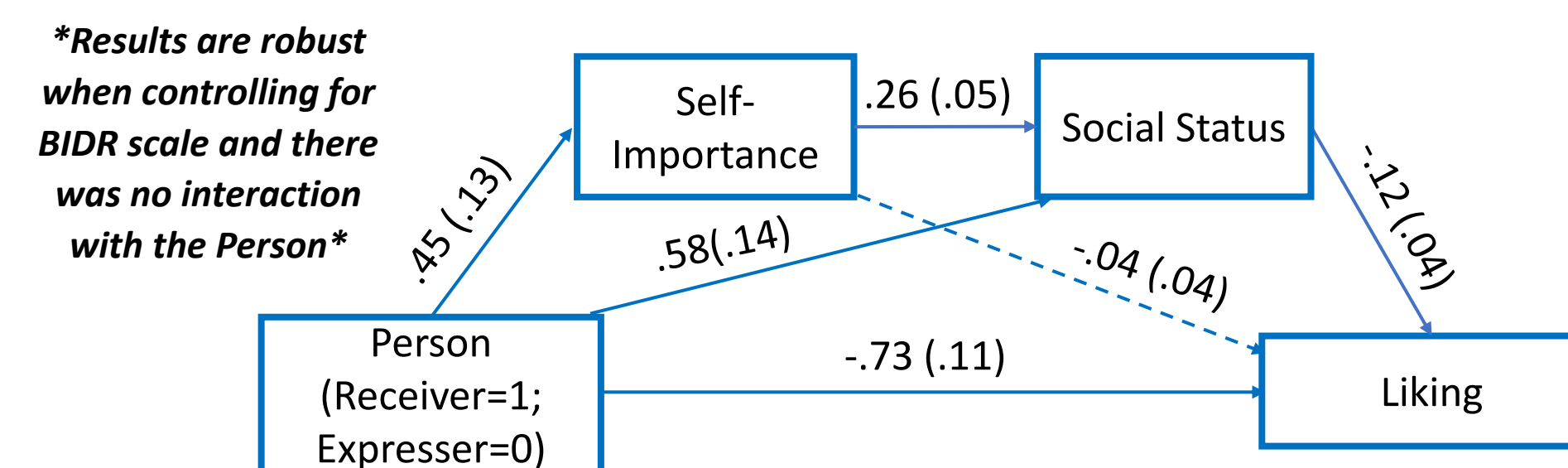
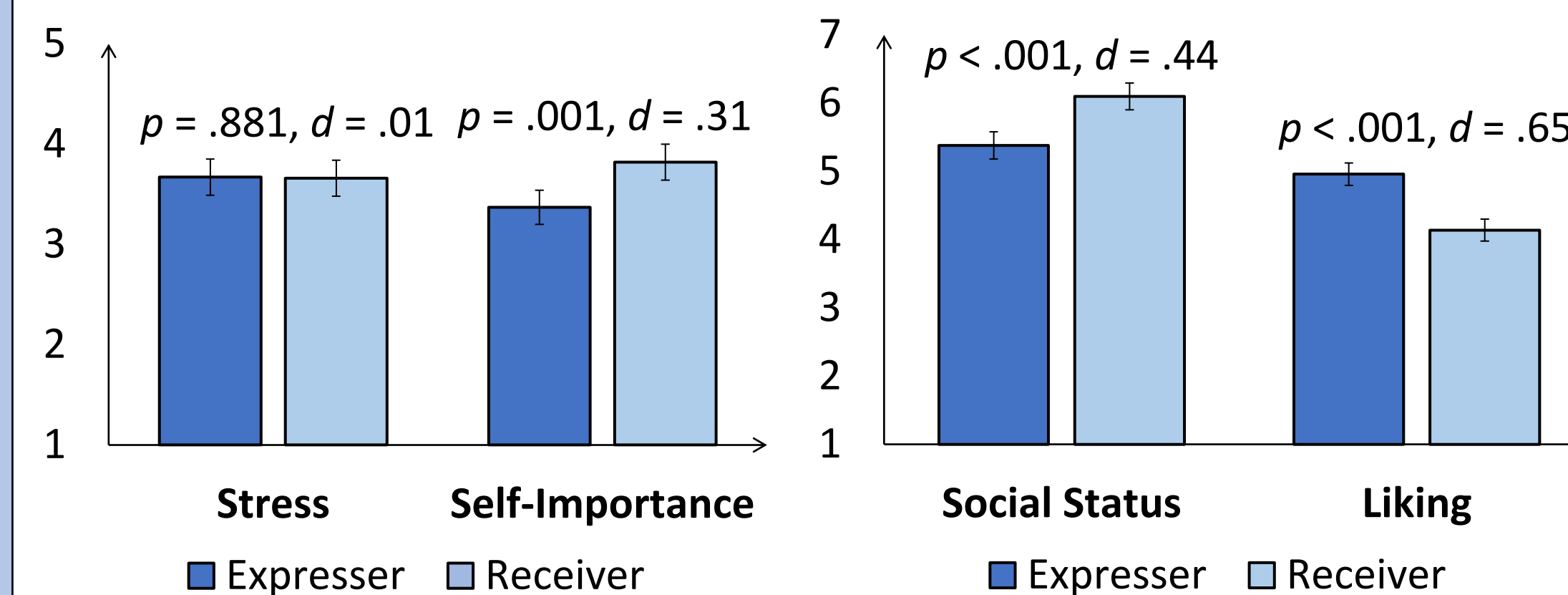
Process & Interpersonal Costs (N=501 MTurk)

2 (person, between) x 2 (expression, within) mixed design

Expresser [Receiver]: Imagine that you are having a conversation with a friend about how you both are doing, and you [they] tell them [you] how you've [they've] been really busy.

Measures: Stress (I am stressed / worried / anxious; $\alpha=.83$); **Self-Importance** (I am an important person / I am an indispensable person to others/ my life has important meaning; $\alpha=.85$); **Liking** (2 items; $\alpha=.87$) –all above (1-7); **Social Status** (ladder 10 rungs; Bellezza et al., 2017)

Control Variable: Current Busyness; BIDR scale (Paulhus 1991)



STUDY 3 Part 1

Identify Alternative Expressions of Busyness (N=89 MBA Students)

Expresser: How would you tell someone, “I am busy,” making it clear that it is NOT your goal to impress them? *89 sentences; 77 direct statements

Two independent coders (inter-coder level of agreement 88%)

EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE

I'm overwhelmed with everything going on
I'm feeling overwhelmed with the amount of things I have to do

FACTUAL DISCLOSURE

I've got a lot going on
I am overcommitted at the moment

Exploratory Analyses (N=1,278 MTurk)

Randomly evaluated 6 out of 78 statements (including “I am busy”)

Measures: Self-Importance ($\alpha=.89$) as Study 1

Compared to “I am busy”...

EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE statements reduced self-importance to a **significant greater extent** than the **FACTUAL DISCLOSURE** statements ($p < .001$, $d = .28$)

STUDY 3 Part 2

Manipulating Emotional vs. Factual Expressions of Busyness (N=151 MBA Students)

Expresser: Imagine that you are having a conversation with a friend about how you both are doing, and they tell you [statement]

Three **within-subjects** conditions

EMOTIONAL

I am busy.
I feel overwhelmed.

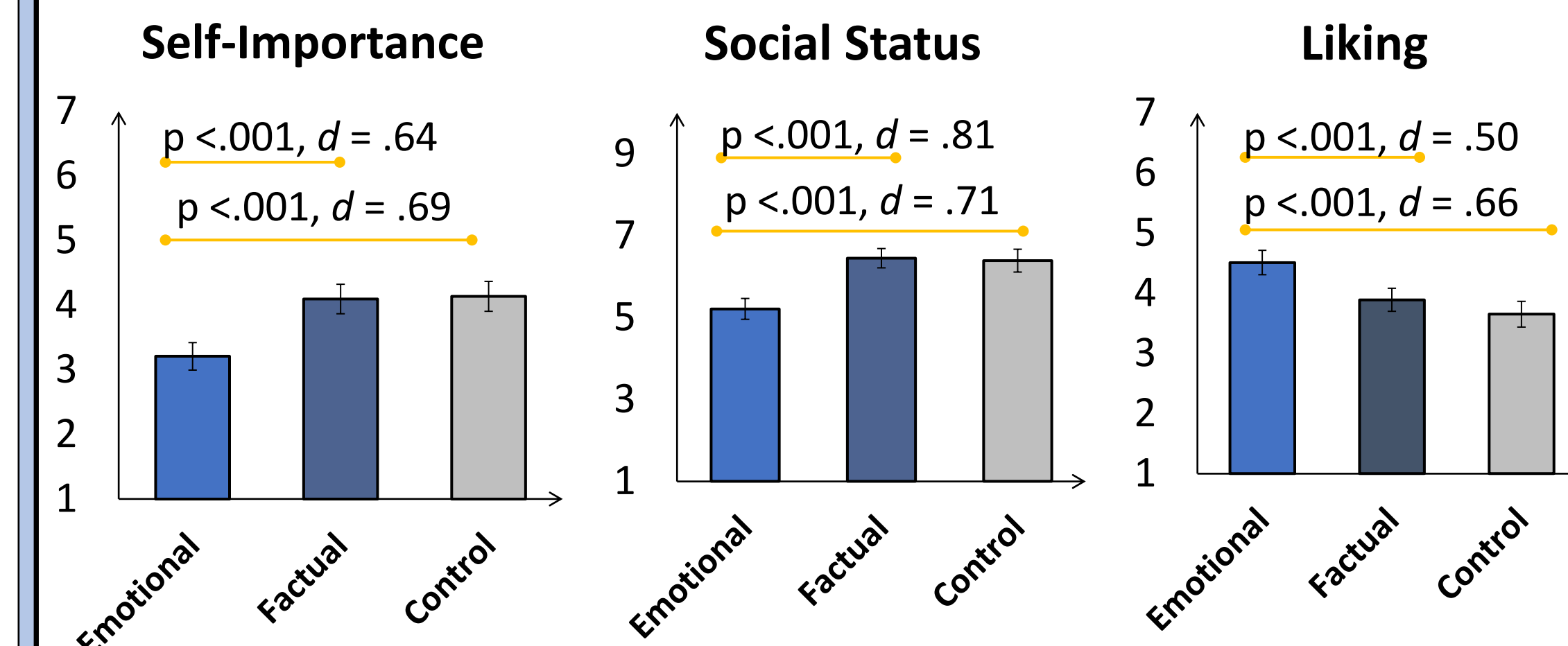
FACTUAL

I am busy.
I have a lot to do.

CONTROL

I am busy.

Measures: Stress ($\alpha=.86$); **Self-Importance** ($\alpha=.88$); **Liking** ($\alpha=.92$); **Social Status** as Study 2



KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

1. We identified another cost of time poverty – an **interpersonal cost**
2. This is because when people say they are busy, others **over-perceive how important they feel** and infer they are higher in **social status** than they actually are
3. We offer a simple strategy to alleviate this cost: **Emphasizing emotional strain of busyness**, not to-dos, reduces this misperception

References

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