# To blame or to apologize?
Resolving a conflict requires negotiating over a shared reality

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SUMMARY

Motivation: Blaming is common in conflict conversations, even for relationships people want to maintain (see below).
Is blaming constructive for resolving conflicts?

How do people naturally open a conflict conversation?
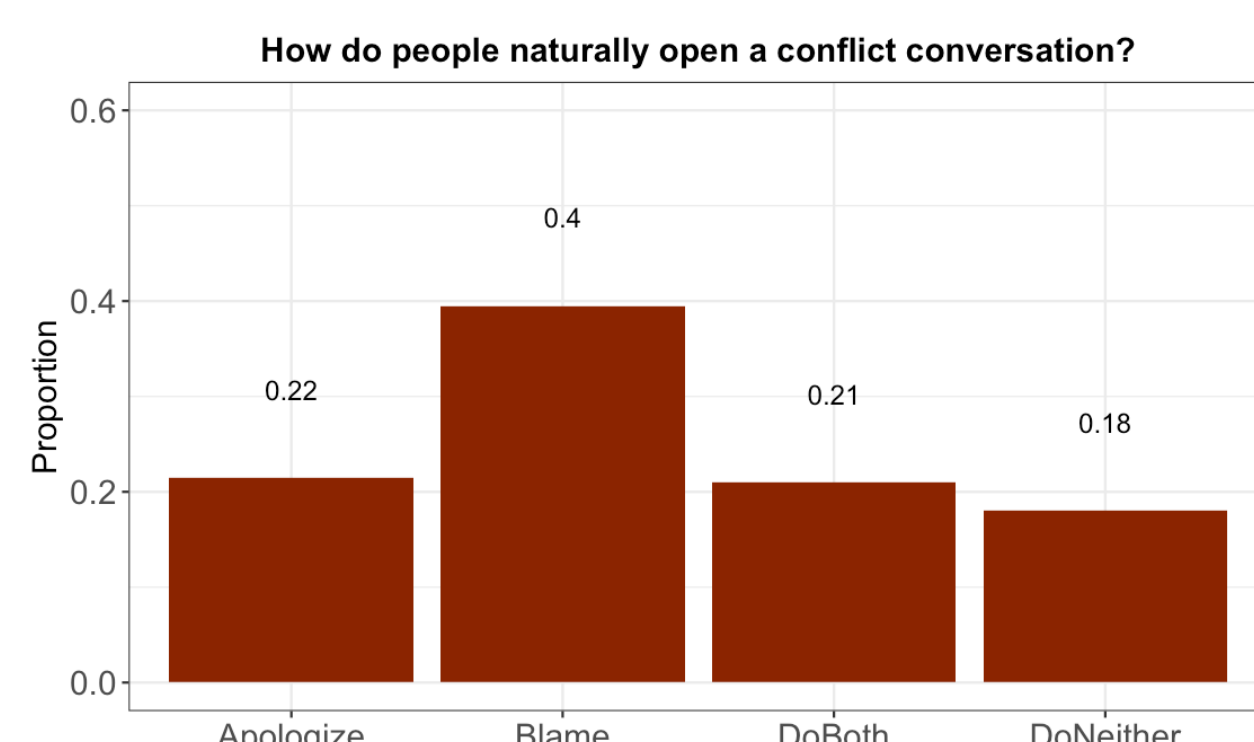
In a pilot, we asked people to recall an unresolved conflict and write down what they would say to the counterpart when opening a conflict conversation.

Divergent Hypotheses from the Literature

- Compliance: Blaming may elicit apologizing since showing negative emotions (e.g., anger) facilitates compliance and cooperative behaviors (Steinel et al., 2008; Van Kleef et al., 2006).

- Reciprocity: Blaming may result in return blaming and a negative conflict spiral since people tend to reciprocate counterpart's behavior (Brett et al., 1998; Weingart et al., 2015).

Our Theory: Whether blaming elicits apologizing or return blaming <u>depends</u> on whether the listener agrees with what blaming implies about the **relative blame distribution** (i.e., how much blame each person deserves). Conversation results in a **shared reality,** and people want it to be a reality they agree with.

Different sequences of communications imply different relative blame distributions:
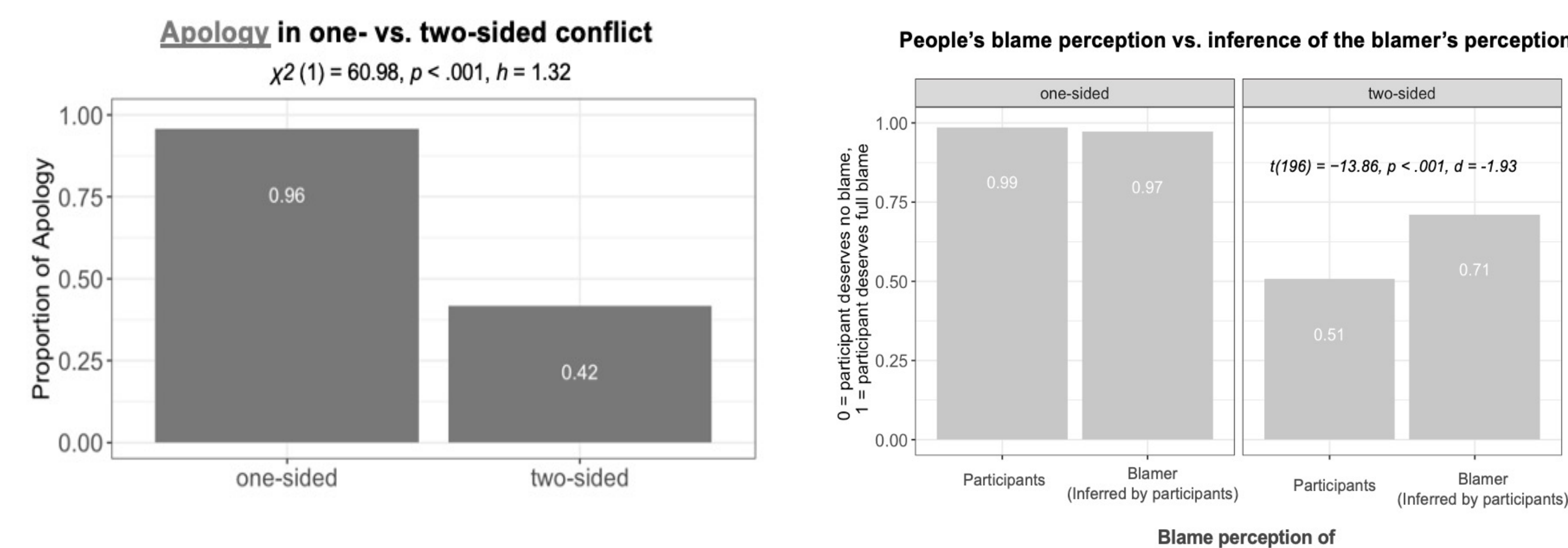
- <u>Apologizing after blaming:</u> The apologizer is to blame.

- <u>Blaming after blaming:</u> Both people are to blame.

- <u>Apologizing after apologizing:</u> Both people are to blame.

> **Hypothesis: Listeners will choose the response that conveys the reality they agree with.**

Contribution: This account reconciles two divergent accounts of how conflicts evolve by calling on insights from the social cognition literature on shared reality and responsibility division (Chaudhry & Loewenstein, 2019; Echterhoff et al., 2009; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).
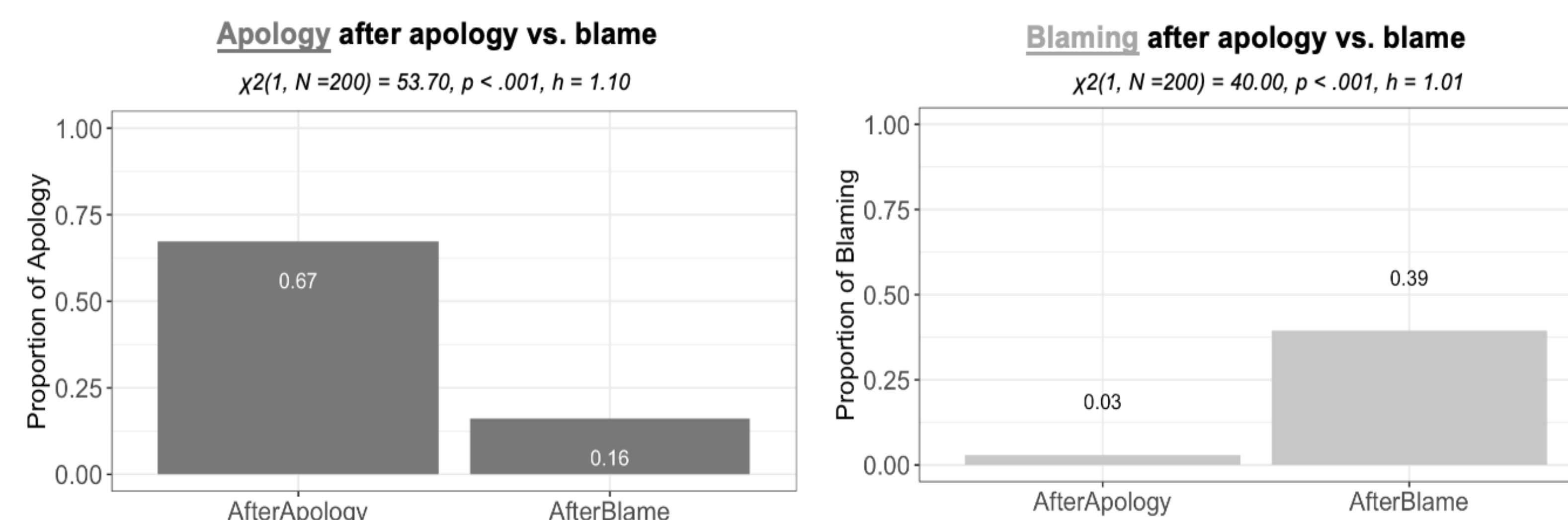
FINDINGS

Study 1: Blaming elicits fewer apologies in two-sided conflicts* (vs. one-sided conflicts; left) as people infer the blamer to hold an incorrect blame belief (right).
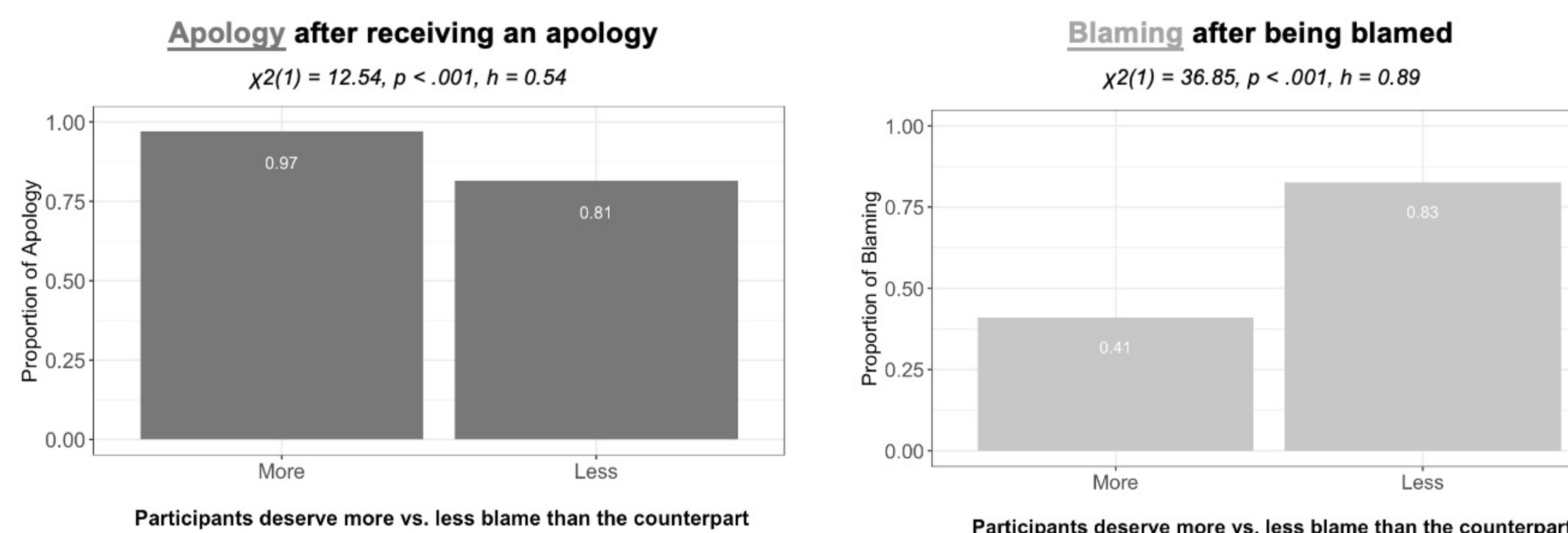

Apology in one- vs. two-sided conflict
$\chi2 (1) = 60.98, p < .001, h = 1.32$

People's blame perception vs. inference of the blamer's perception
$t(196) = -13.86, p < .001, d = -1.93$

*****Two-sided conflict:** both people are at fault; **One-sided conflict:** one person is at fault.

Study 2: In two-sided conflicts, blaming leads to return blaming (right), while apologizing elicits return apologizing (left).

Apology after apology vs. blame
$\chi2(1, N =200) = 53.70, p < .001, h = 1.10$

Blaming after apology vs. blame
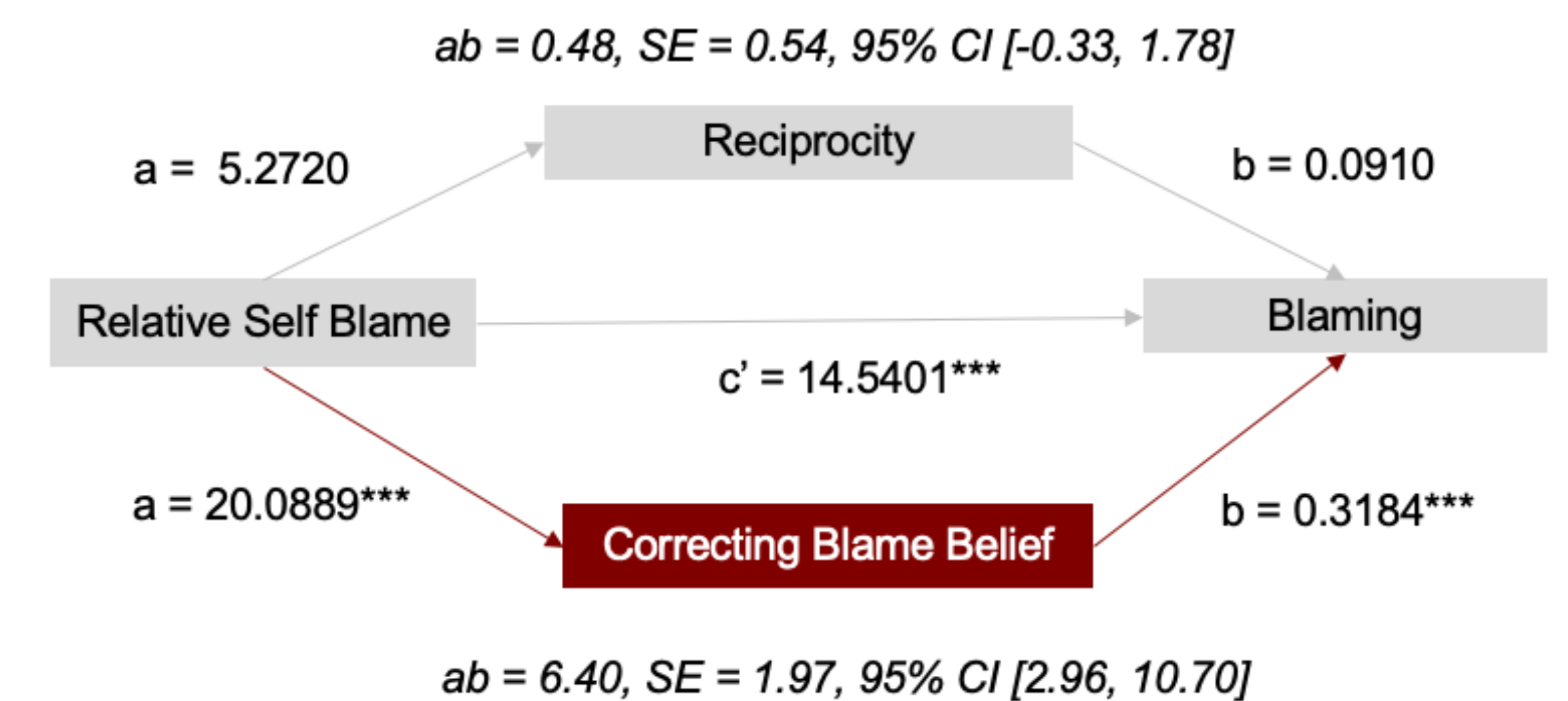$\chi2(1, N =200) = 40.00, p < .001, h = 1.01$

Study 3: Beyond reciprocity: Relative blame perceptions impact the extent to which one reciprocates their counterpart's blaming (right) and apology (left).

Apology after receiving an apology
$\chi2(1) = 12.54, p < .001, h = 0.54$

Blaming after being blamed
$\chi2(1) = 36.85, p < .001, h = 0.89$

Participants deserve more vs. less blame than the counterpart

For any comments and questions, please contact
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Study 3 cont.: The motive to correct the counterpart's relative blame belief rather than the motive to reciprocate mediates the effect of blaming (see below) and the effect of apologizing.

$ab = 0.48, SE = 0.54, 95\% CI [-0.33, 1.78]$
a = 5.2720 | Reciprocity | b = 0.0910
Relative Self Blame | Blaming
c' = 14.5401***
a = 20.0889*** | Correcting Blame Belief | b = 0.3184***
$ab = 6.40, SE = 1.97, 95\% CI [2.96, 10.70]$

METHODS

DVs for all studies: % of participants apologizing or blaming in their response.

Study 1 (Scenario Study, N = 400):
- Participants imagine themselves in a scenario about a project failure.
- IVs: One person vs. both persons did something wrong; Counterpart starts a conversation by blaming vs. prompt

Study 2 (Behavioral Study, N = 200 pairs):
- Two Prolific workers play an incentivized game and lose. Afterward, the pair sent each other messages in real time.
- IVs: One starts a conversation by blaming vs. apologizing

Study 3 (Scenario Study, N = 400):
- Participants imagine themselves in a scenario about a project failure.
- IVs: Participants are less vs. more to blame than the counterpart; Counterpart starts a conversation by blaming vs. apologizing.

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