

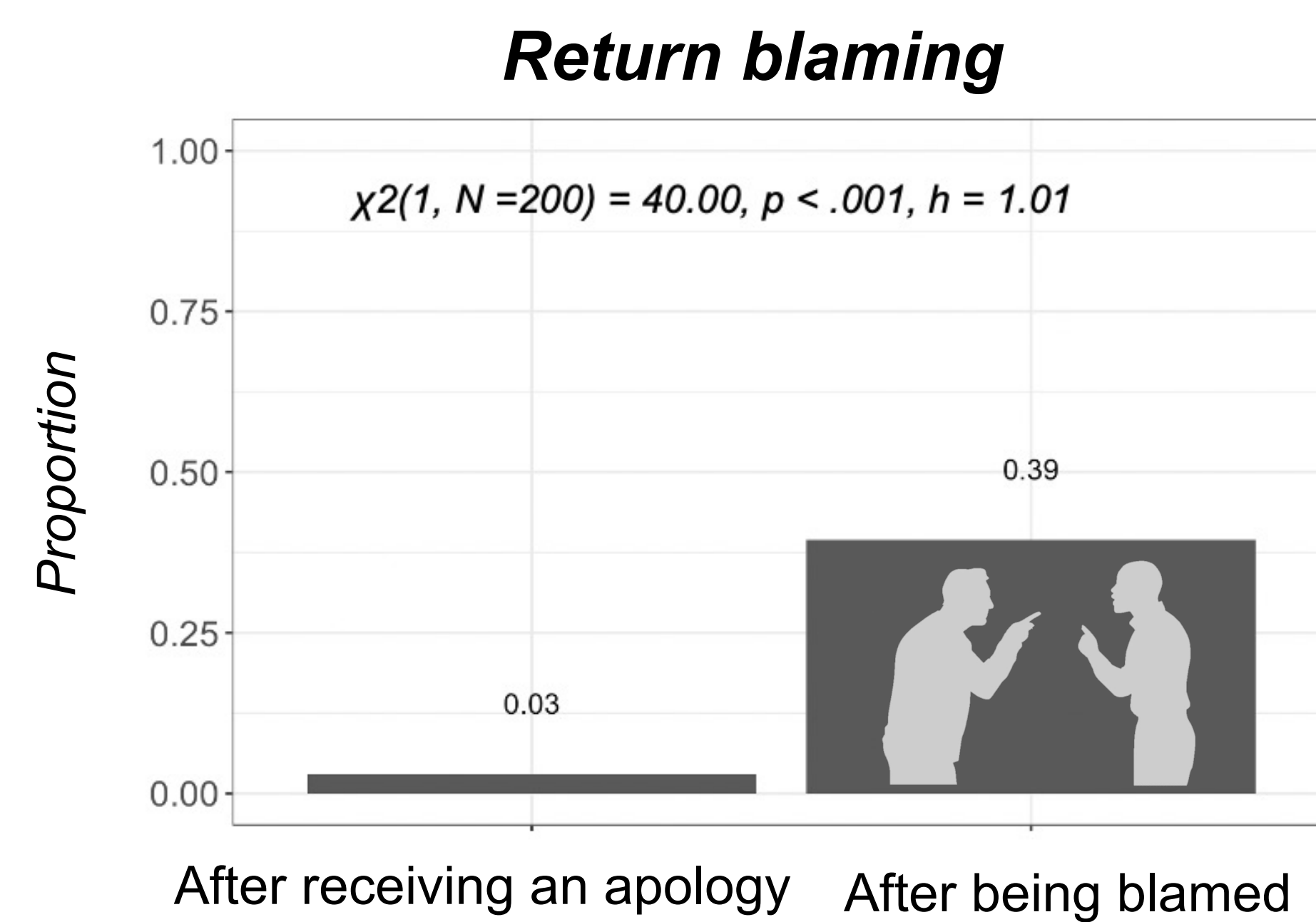


The role of beliefs about relative blame in reconciliation

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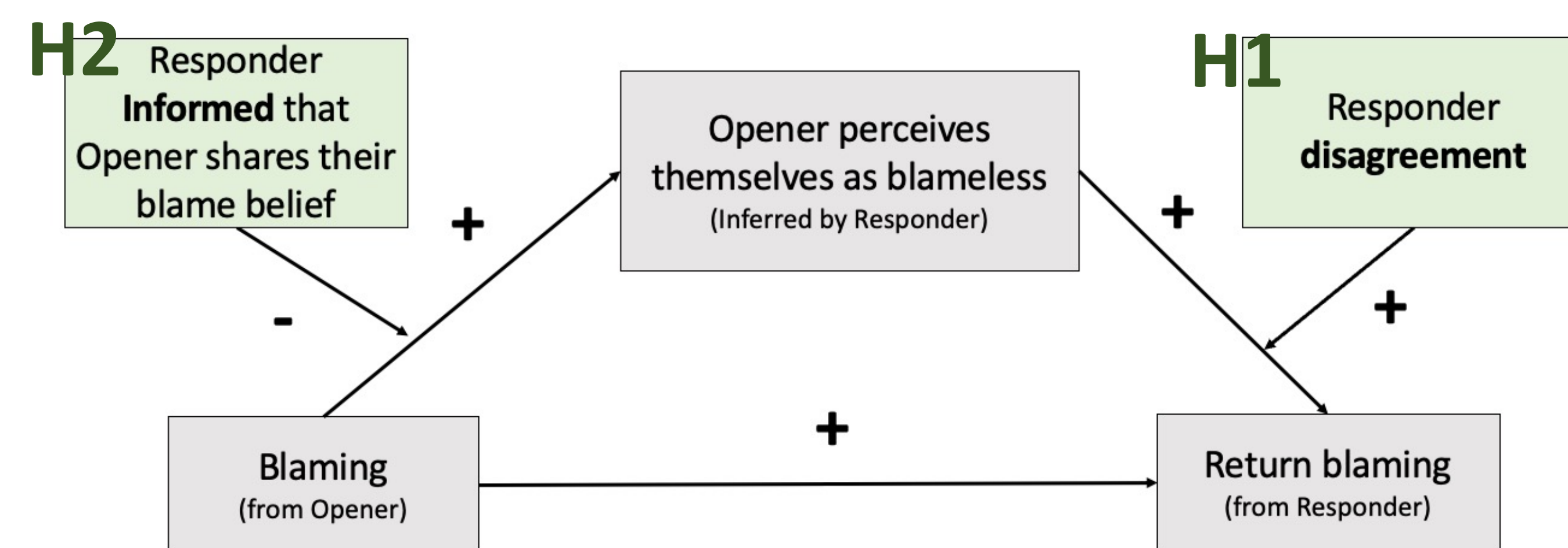
Summary

Reconciling conflicts through apologizing is important for relationships to continue, yet, in pilot studies, we find that starting conversations by **blaming is common**. In an interactive experiment ($N=200$ pairs) where we created real conflicts, we confirmed that this leads to an infamous pattern: **the blame game**, wherein blaming begets blaming.



Is this just reciprocity? We suggest not.

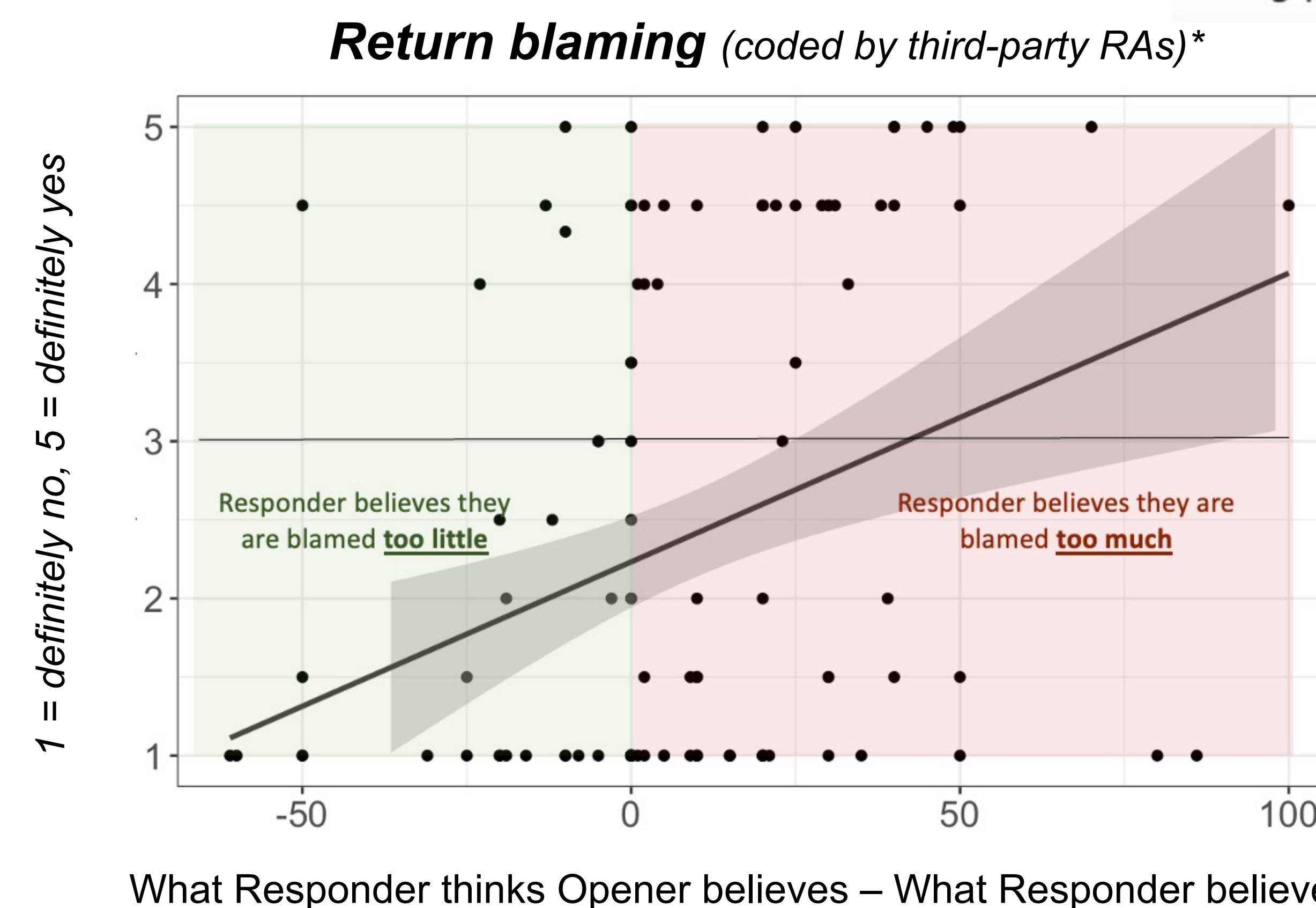
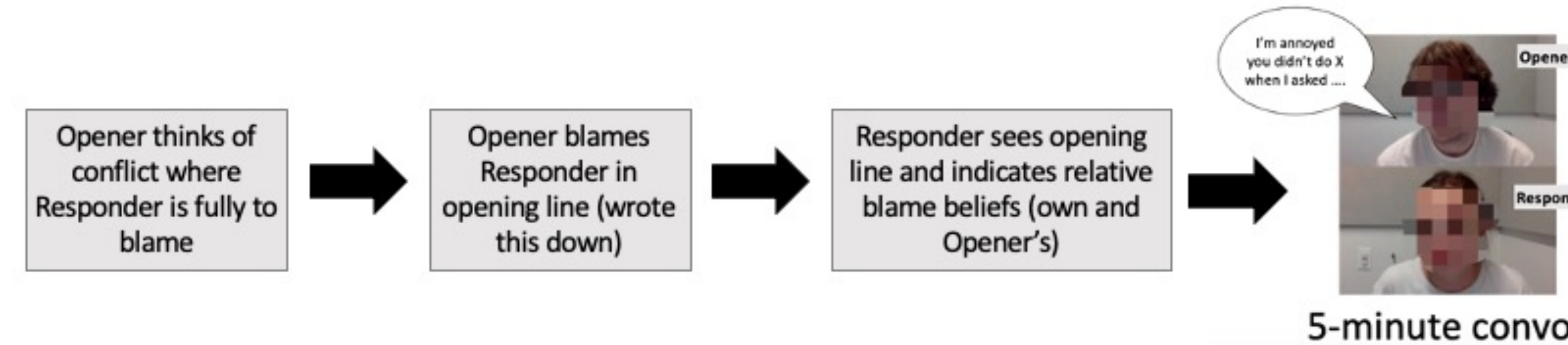
Our Theory: Disputants also have an **informational motive** when discussing conflicts: they are motivated to establish a joint understanding regarding how much relative blame each person deserves. When one (Opener) initiates a conversation by blaming, it suggests to the counterpart (Responder) that the Opener sees themselves as blameless and the Responder as all to blame. Return blaming can serve to correct the Opener's beliefs. **Thus, we predict that the tendency to return blame will be moderated by (H1) how much the Responder disagrees that they deserve all/most of the blame, and (H2) whether the Responder is informed (prior to communication) that the Opener shares their beliefs (despite blaming).**



Contribution: Beyond reciprocity, we find that spirals of blaming in conflict have an unexamined cause: The desire to correct the record on relative blame. This work demonstrates the impact this informational motive has on conflict behaviors and represents a rich area for future investigation.

Finding 1: Return Blaming is Positively Correlated with Responder Disagreement in Real Discussions of Conflict (H1)

Setting: 119 pairs in ongoing relationships have a live conversation on a real conflict over Zoom (recorded). Openers blamed Responders.



Results: The more undeserved blame the Responder believes they are receiving (red area), the more likely they are to return blame (*Spearman's correlation*: $r_s = 0.36, p < .001$).

*Data in the graph show a similar pattern after excluding high-leverage points and when return blaming is coded by the Openers

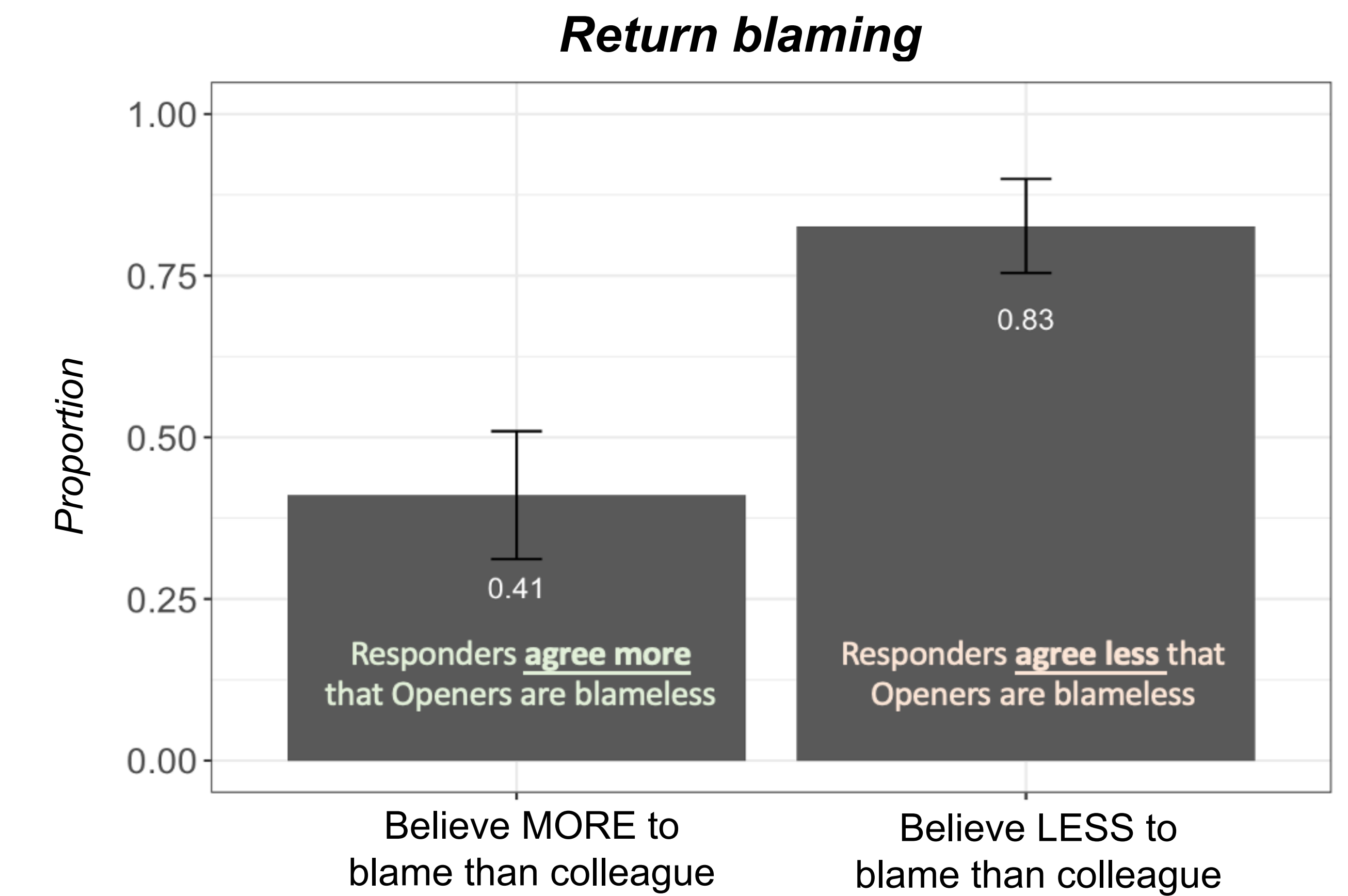
Finding 2: Return Blaming is More Frequent when Responder Disagreement is Manipulated to be Greater (H1)

Setting: Participants imagine a joint failure with a colleague. They are in the role of Responder, and the Opener opens a discussion with them.

IVs: Participants place either MORE or LESS blame on themselves than on the Opener. Opener either opens by **BLAMING** or **APOLOGIZING**.

DV: % who chose the blaming options from 8 pre-formed options (participants could choose one or multiple options.)

Chaudhry, S. J., & Loewenstein, G. (2019). Thanking, apologizing, bragging, and blaming: Responsibility exchange theory and the currency of communication. *Psychological review*, 126(3), 313.
Dufwenberg, M., & Kirchsteiger, G. (2004). A theory of sequential reciprocity. *Games and economic behavior*, 47(2), 268-298.
Echterhoff, G., Higgins, E. T., & Levine, J. M. (2009). Shared reality: Experiencing commonality with others' inner states about the world. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(5), 496-521.
Weingart, L. R., Behfar, K. J., Bendersky, C., Todorova, G., & Jehn, K. A. (2015). The directness and oppositional intensity of conflict expression. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(2), 235-262.

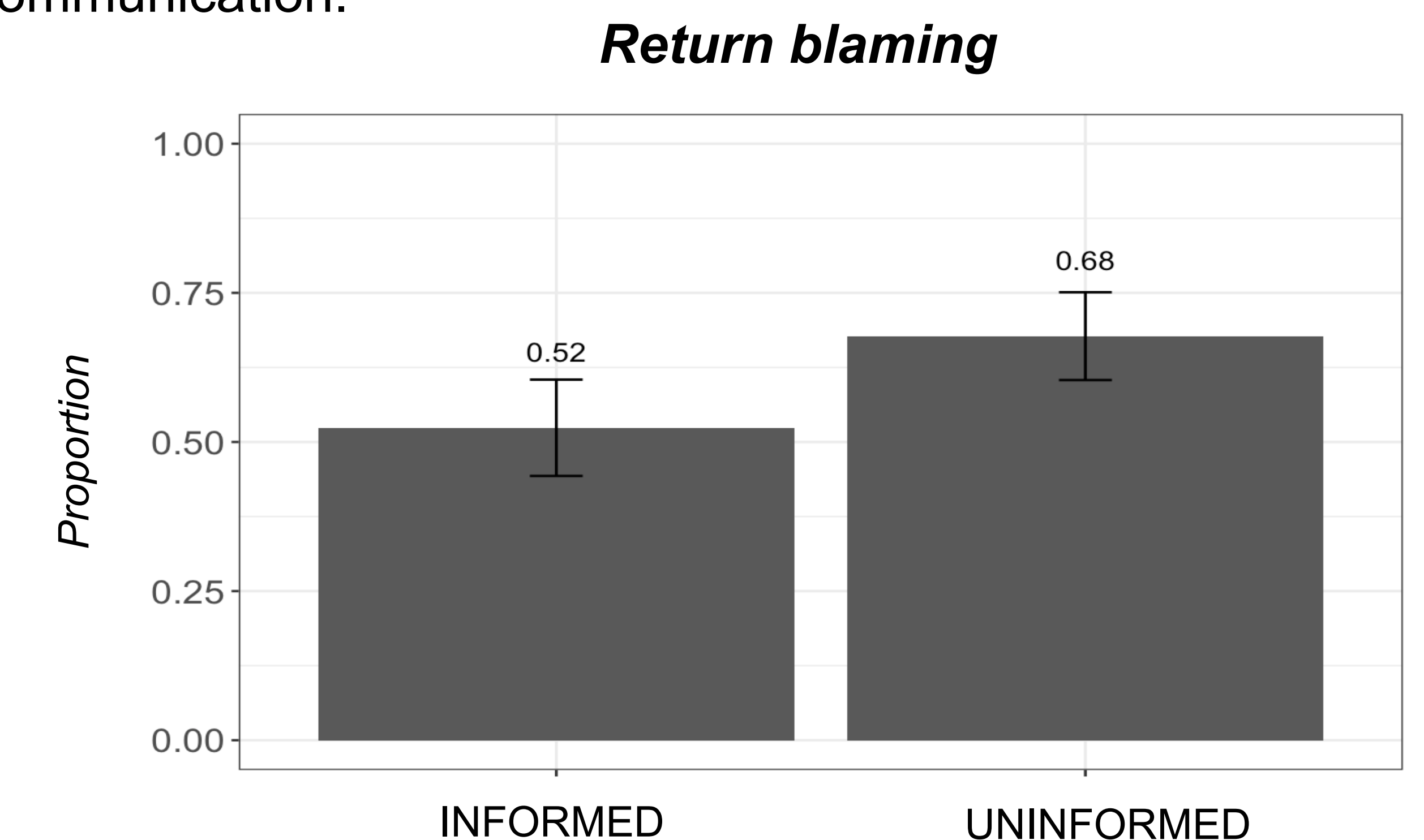


Results: When participants place **LESS** blame on self (and thus disagree more), they are more likely to return blame after being blamed, $\chi^2(1, N=199) = 36.85, p < .001, h = 0.89$ (and less likely to apologize after getting an apology, $\chi^2(1, N=201) = 12.54, p < .001, h = 0.54$).

Finding 3: Return Blaming is Less Frequent When the Responder is Informed that the Opener Shares Their Beliefs (H2)

Setting & DV: Similar to Study 2

IV: Responders are either **INFORMED** or **UNINFORMED** that the Opener shares their beliefs about relative blame, prior to communication.



Results: Participants are less likely to return blame when they are "informed" that the Opener shares their beliefs, $\chi^2(1, N=302) = 7.43, p = .006, h = 0.32$.

For any comments and questions, please contact
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