Talking to Strangers:
Why you don't do it, and why you should

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Negative → Positive

Negative → Positive

Need to belong

- Fundamental need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)
  - Lack of belonging has negative impact on health, adjustment and well-being
    - Elevated blood pressure
    - Alienation
    - Aggression

Need to belong

- "First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people"
- "Second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare"

Daily weak tie interactions

- 6 daily measures
  - Counted all interactions with clickers
  - Reported # interactions, well-being (online survey)

Daily weak tie interactions

- Weak tie interactions matter
  - People with higher average # of weak tie interactions reported
    - Greater happiness
    - Greater belonging
  - On days when people interacted with more weak ties than usual
    - Greater happiness
    - Greater belonging

Talking to the barista

Efficient
Make your interaction with the cashier as efficient as possible – have your money ready, and avoid unnecessary conversation

Social
Have a genuine interaction with the cashier – smile, make eye contact to establish a connection, and have a brief conversation

Sandstrom & Dunn (2014), SPPS

Talking to the barista

Sandstrom & Dunn (2014), SPPS
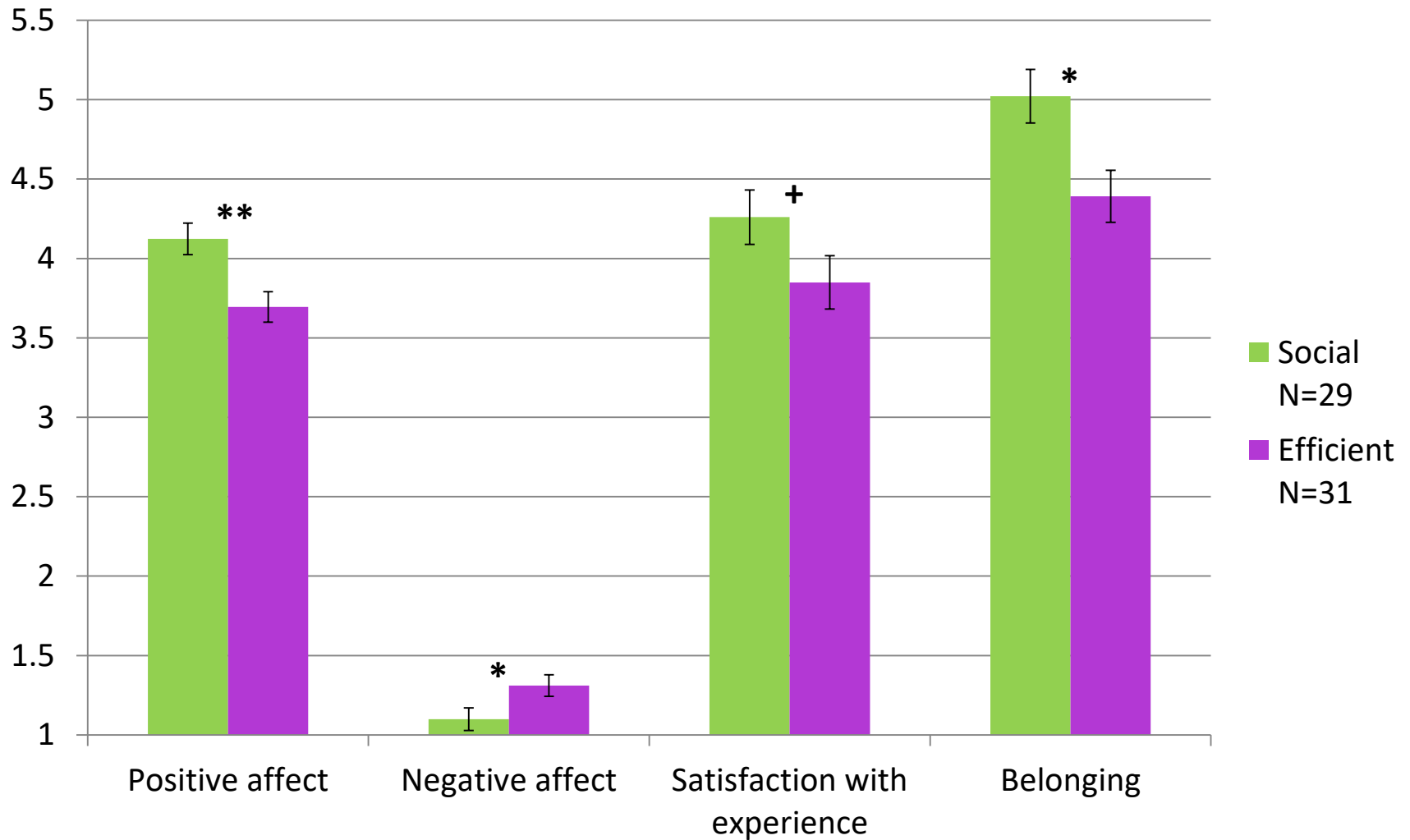
The New York Times

SundayReview | OPINION

Hello, Stranger

By ELIZABETH W. DUNN and MICHAEL NORTON   APRIL 25, 2014

If you've ever been on a subway or public bus, you know the rules. Don't make eye contact, stay as far away from other people as the space allows, and for the love of God, don't talk to anyone. But what if the rules are wrong?

talk to me

flickr

What's the idea? | Why talk? | Stories | Get started! | Events | Who are we?

Sat 16th July is Talk to me Day 2016!

Organise your own event on Talk to me Day

Read our new report It's Good to Talk

Fear categories

- Fears involving the self
  - Fears about how they will behave
  - Fears about how they will feel
- Fears involving the partner
  - Fears about how their partner will behave
  - Fears about how their partner will perceive them
- Fears involving the conversation
  - Fears about the mechanics of having a conversation
  - Fears about how the conversation will go

Fear categories
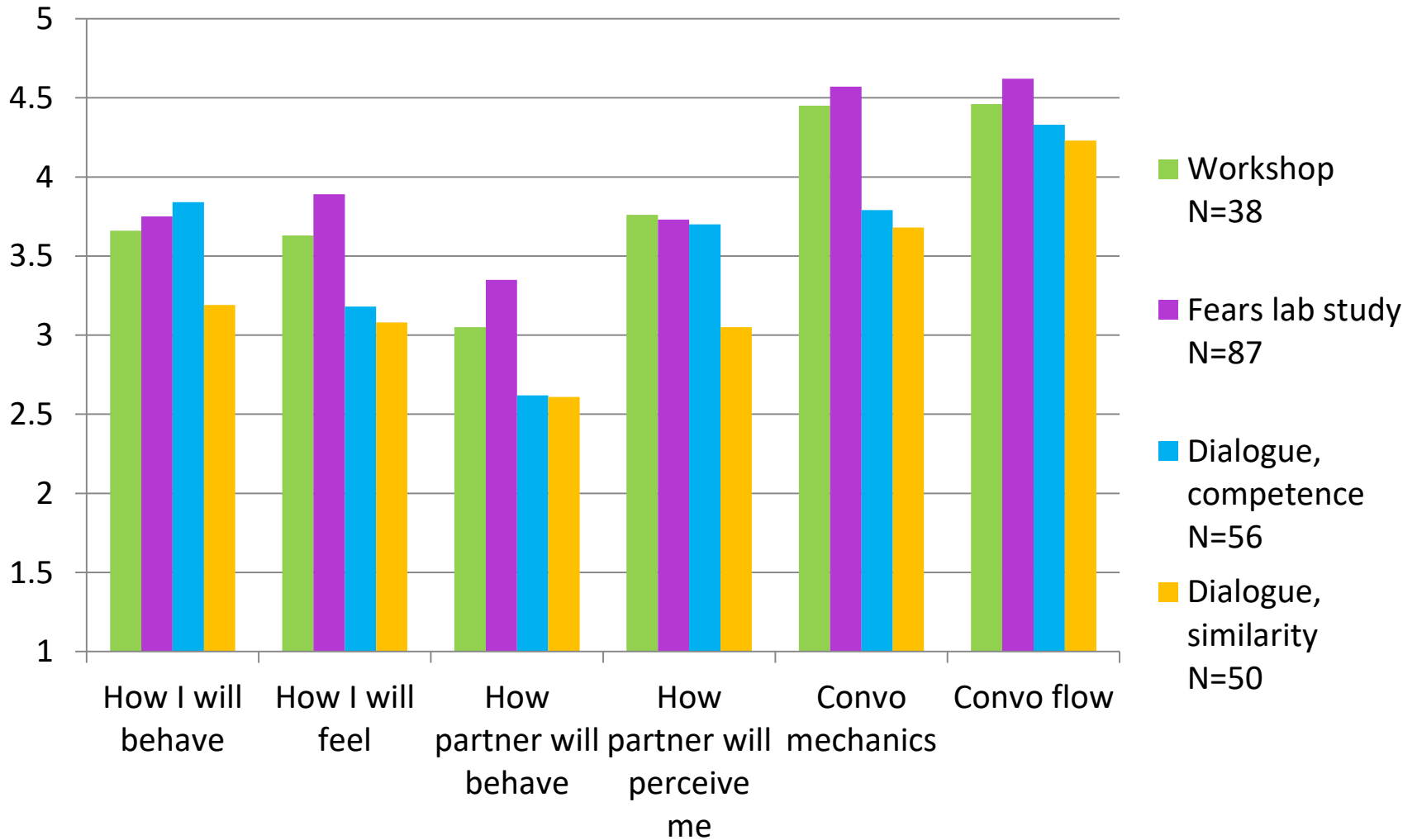
Individual differences

- Interaction anxiety
- Neuroticism

- Social curiosity
- Openness
- Conscientiousness
- Extraversion

Top 5 Fears

1. Conversation will be awkward/mechanical/ forced
2. They will feel awkward/embarrassed/ nervous/self-conscious
3. They don't know how to keep a conversation going
4. Their partner will talk too little
5. They will talk too little

Next steps

- Understand how common these fears are across different situations:
  - Talking to a similar stranger
  - Talking to a stranger who is a different ethnicity
  - Talking to a stranger who is a wheelchair user
  - Talking to a friend who has been diagnosed with cancer
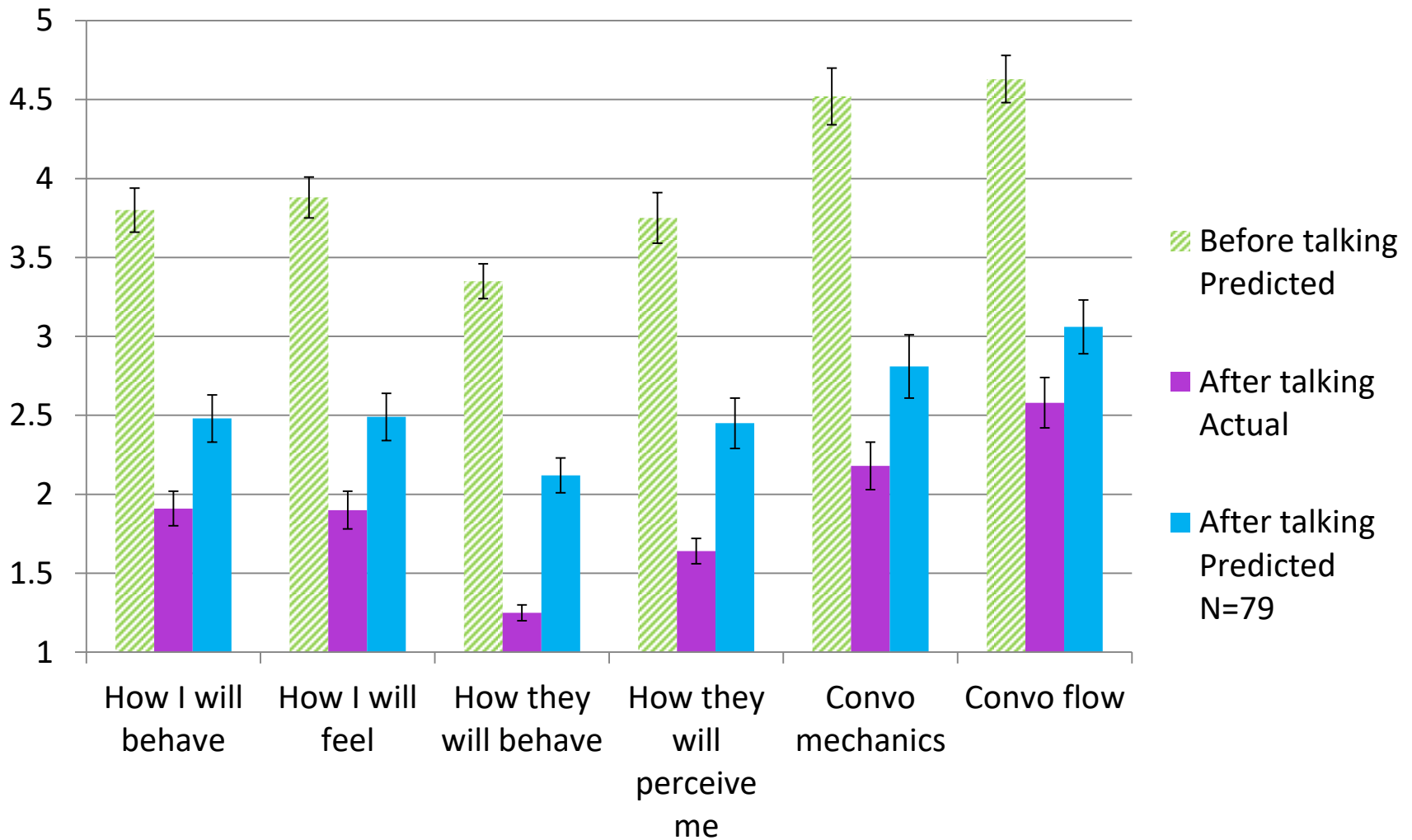 - Talking to a friend who has lost their spouse
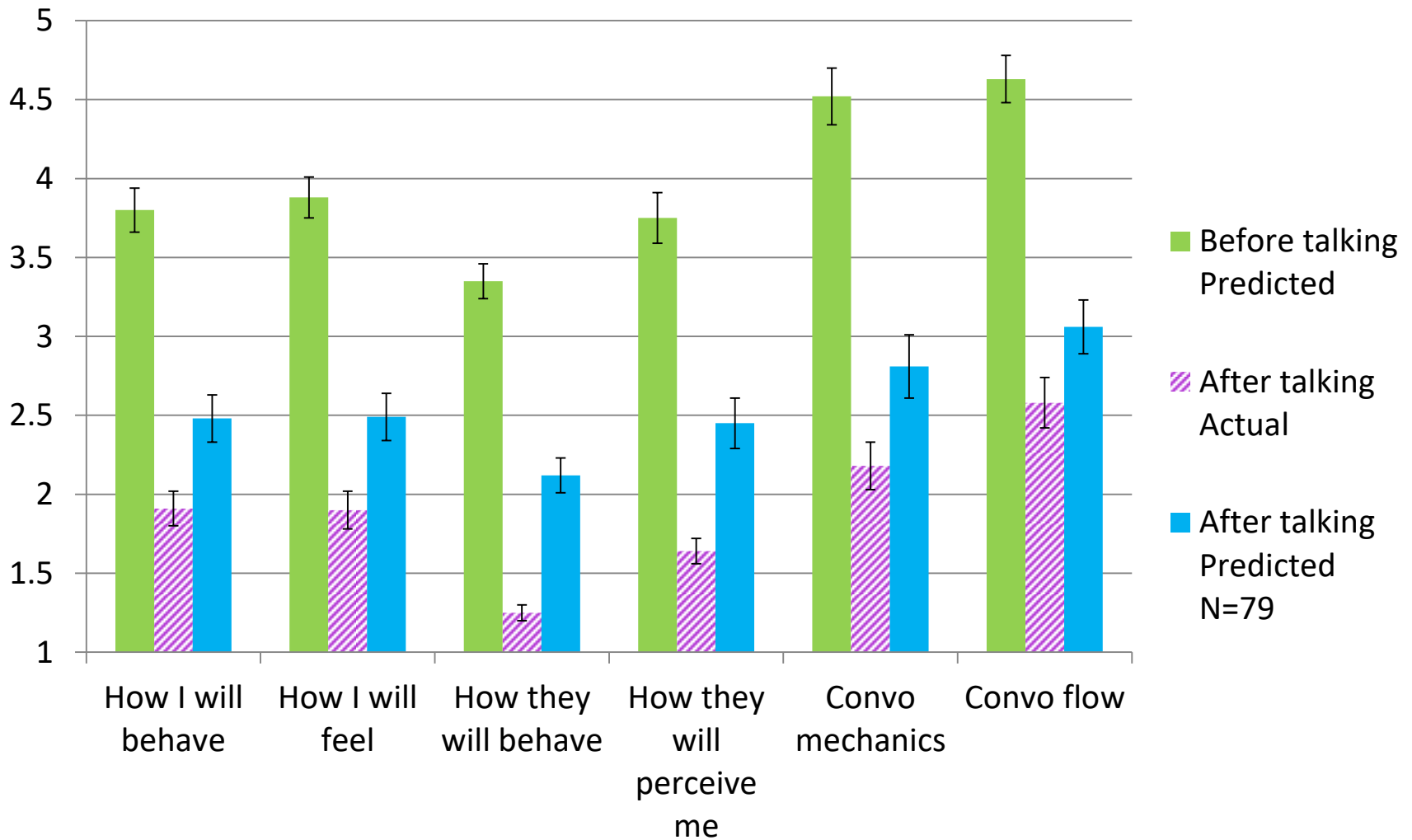
Are their fears accurate?
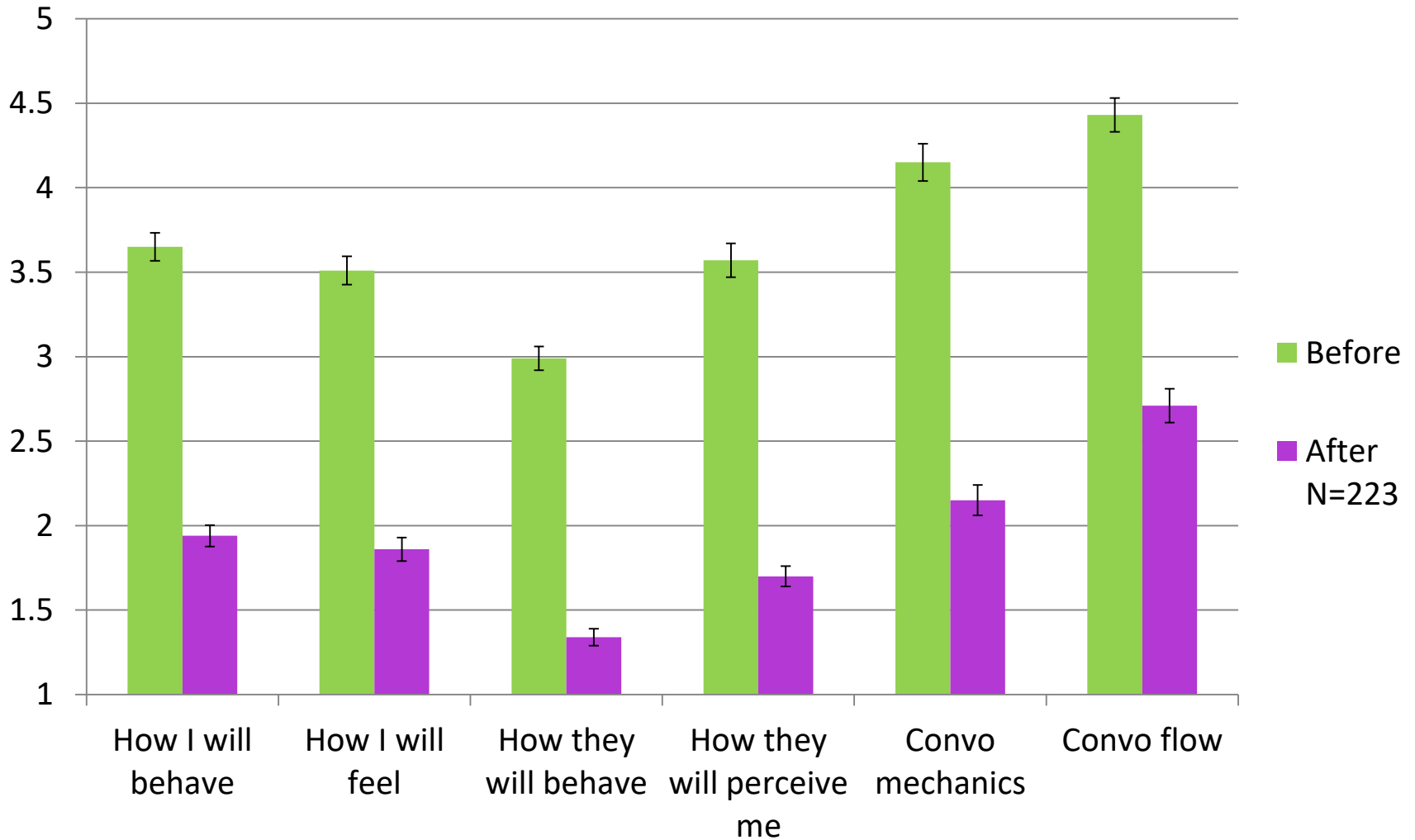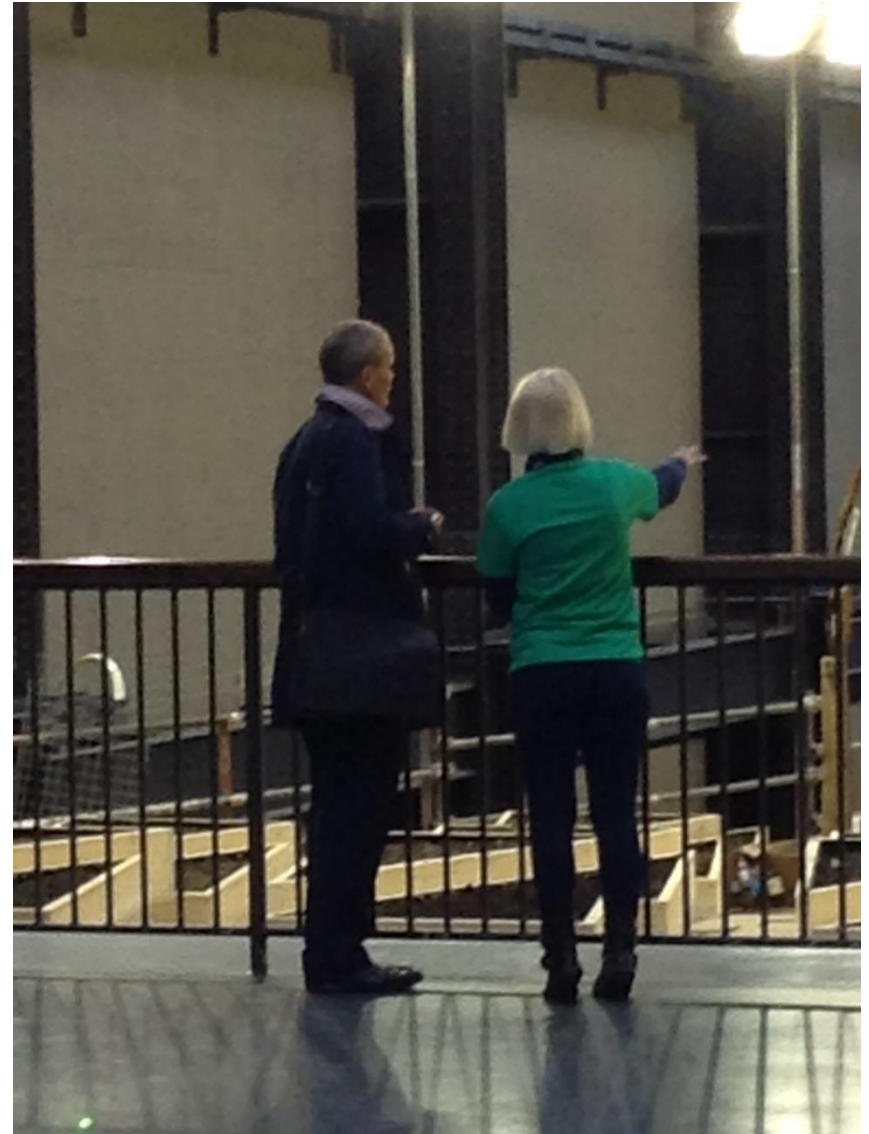
Do their fears decrease?
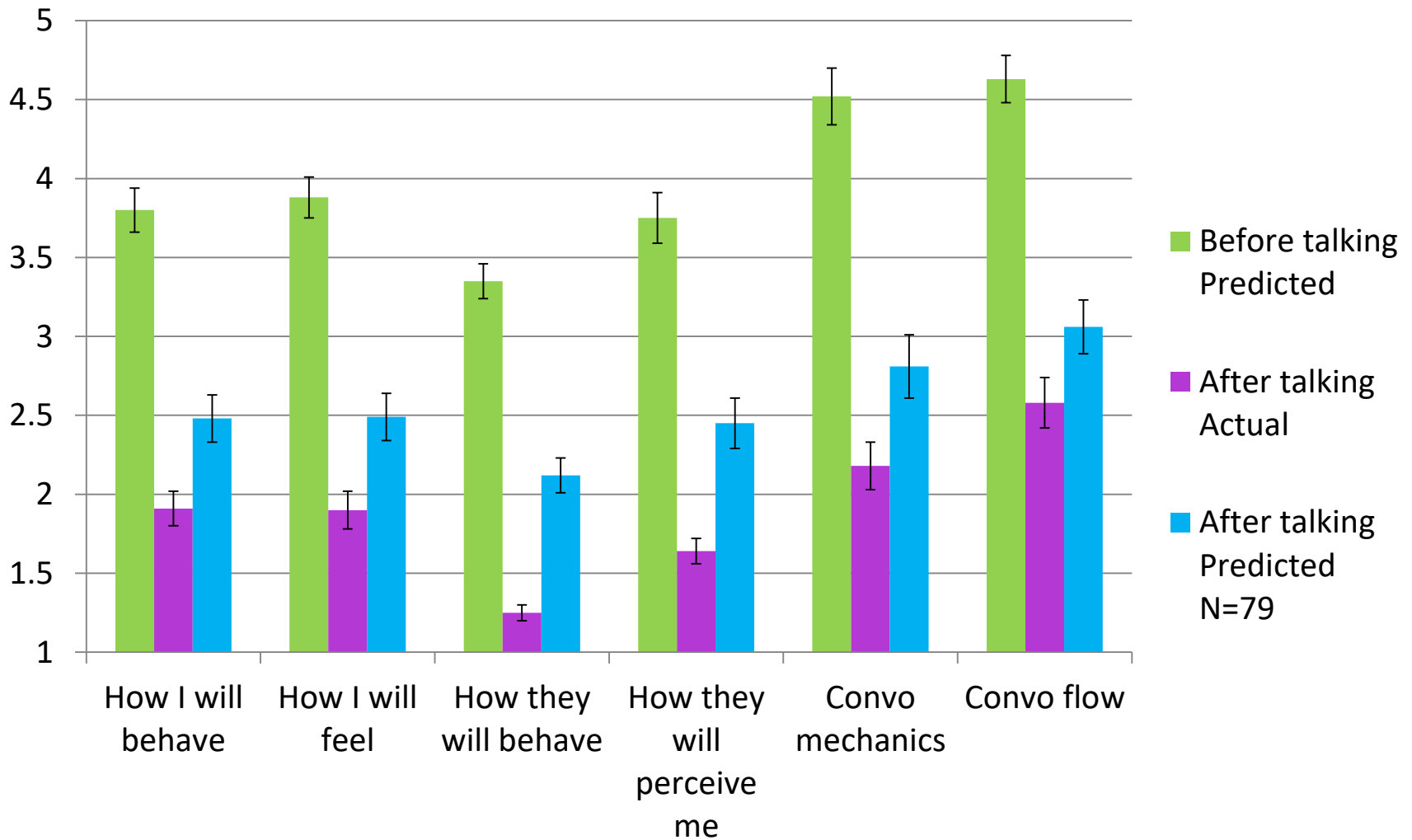
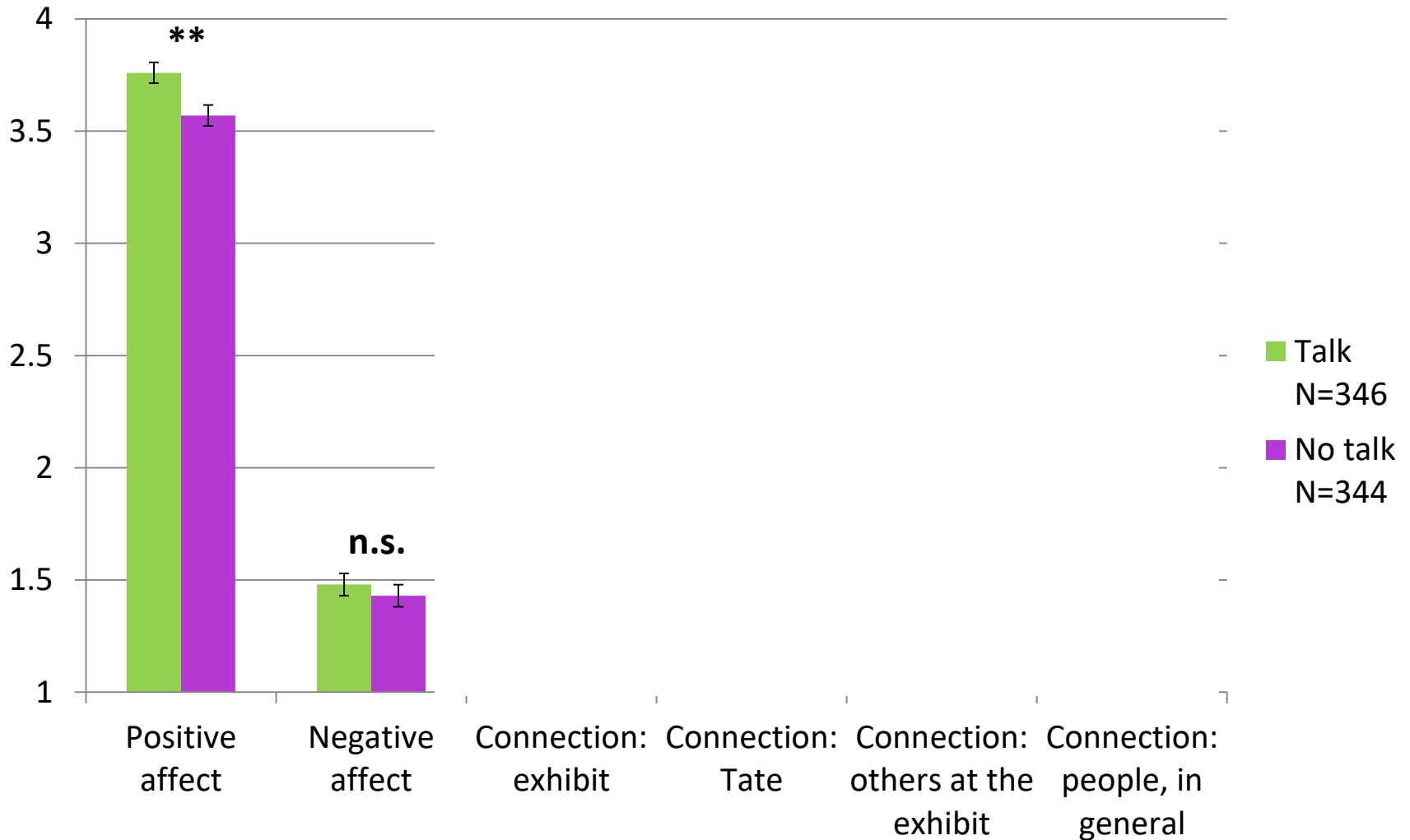# Do their fears decrease?
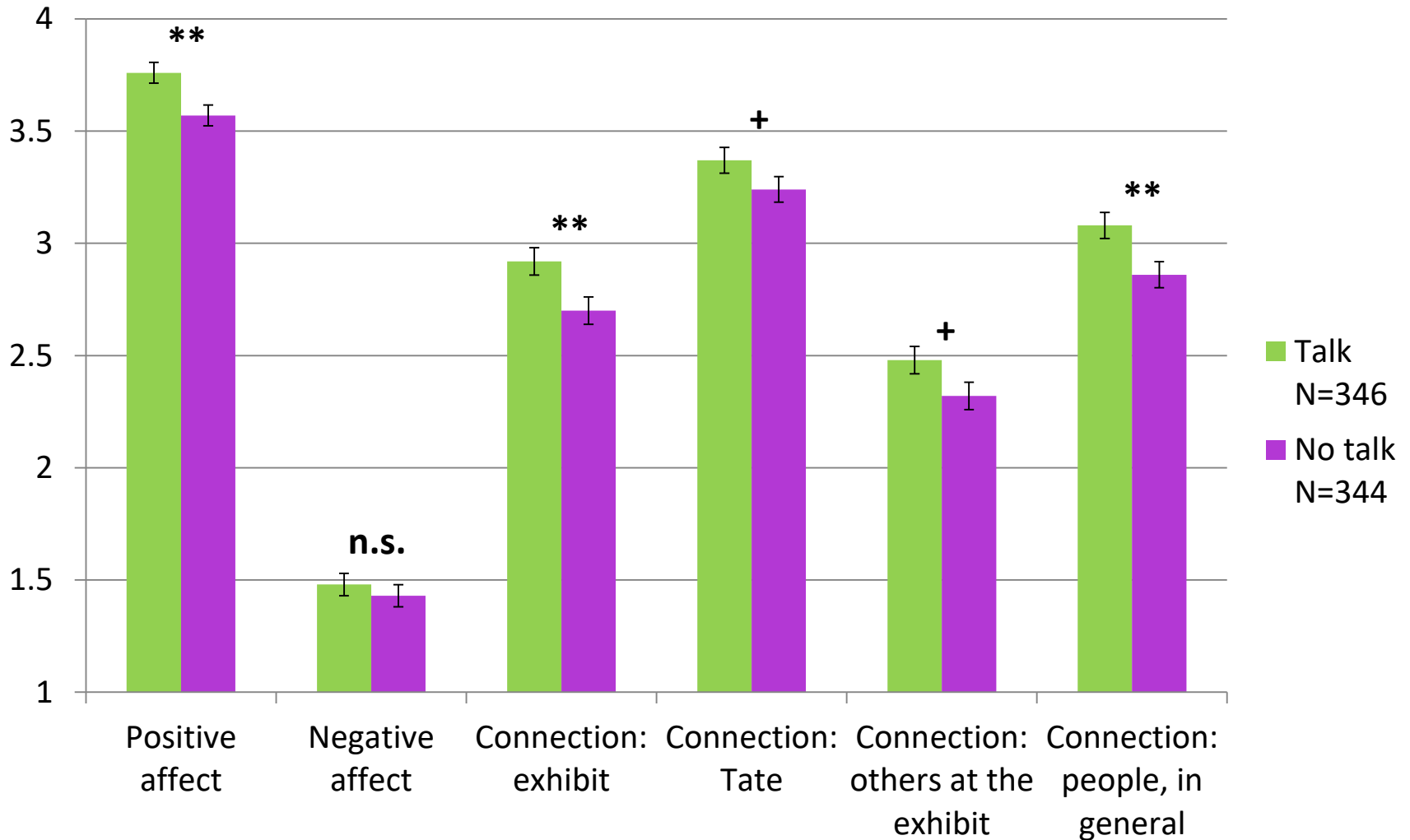
Do their fears decrease?

Talking at an art exhibit

Talking at an art exhibit

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Babs

TALKING POINT

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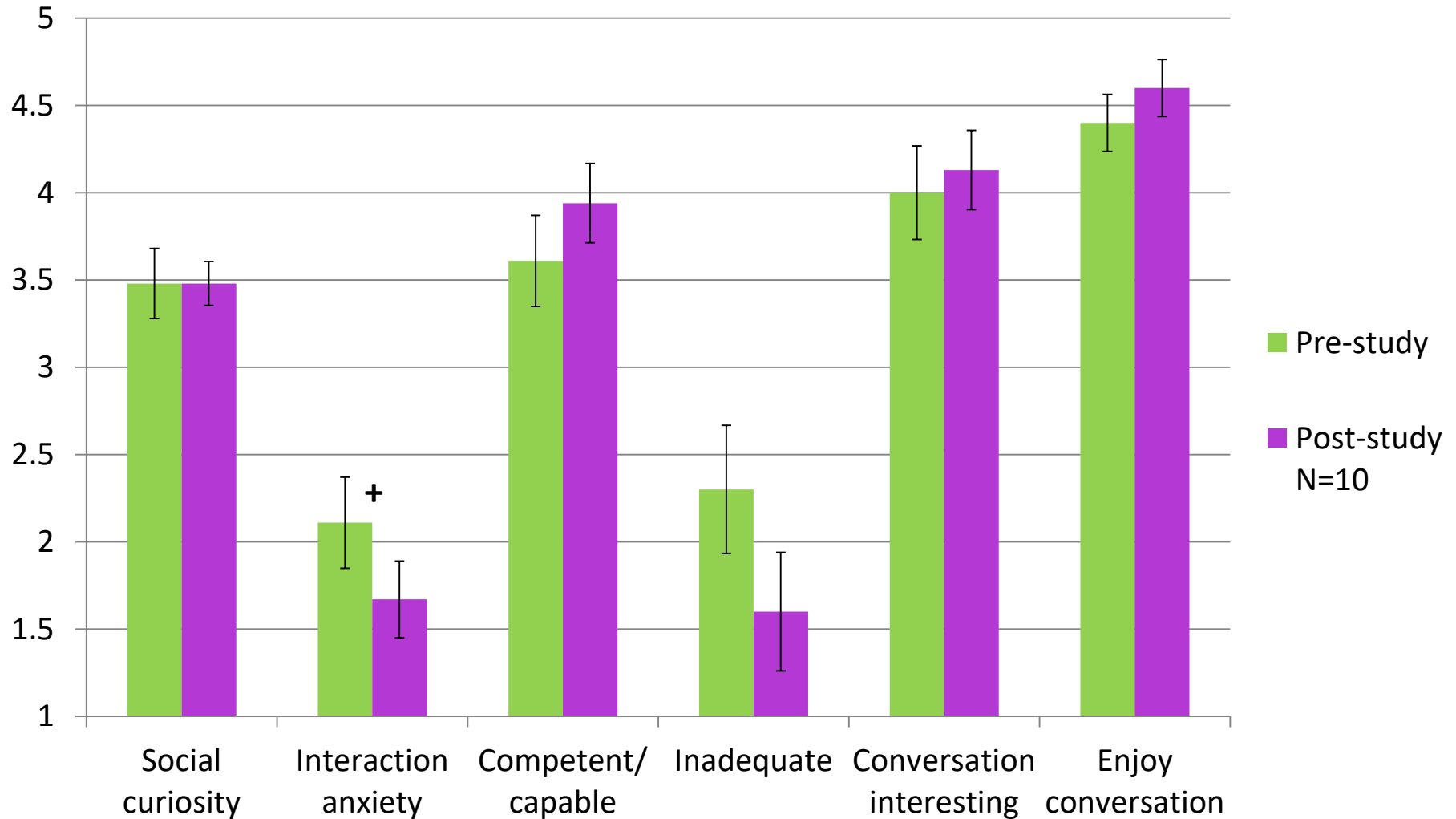
Talking at an art exhibit

Talking at an art exhibit

Talking at an art exhibit: Volunteers

- Time 1 survey: before training
  - Personality: social curiosity, interaction anxiety
  - Expectations about conversations
- Time 2 survey: after study ended
  - Personality: social curiosity, interaction anxiety
  - Reflections about conversations

Talking at an art exhibit: Volunteers

# Talking at an art exhibit: Volunteers
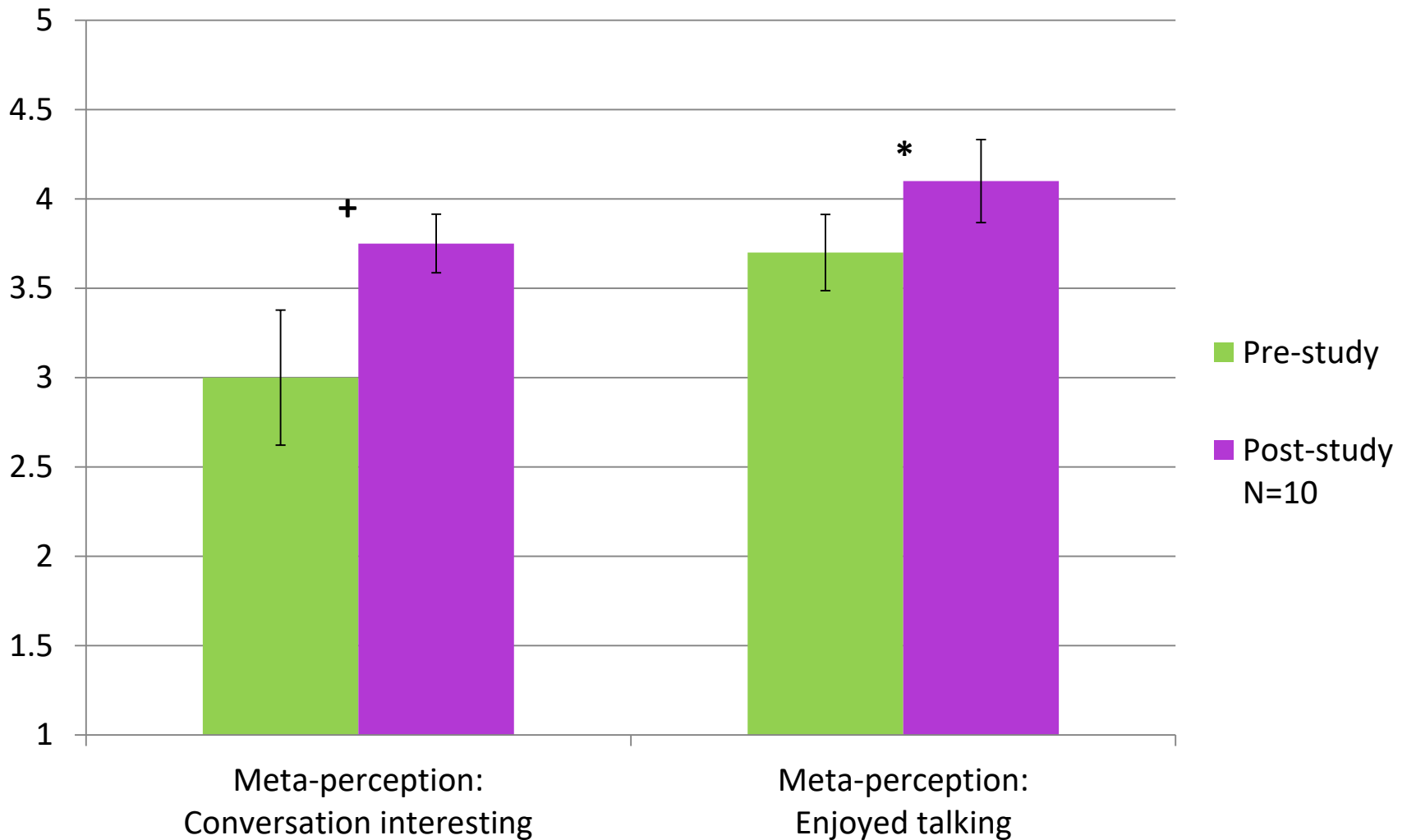
Next steps

- British Academy small research grant
- Use a scavenger hunt app to gamify talking to strangers
- Test whether people's fears decrease over time (and remain lower)

Counteracting fears

- Field study asking people to talk to a stranger
- Before the interaction, do an intervention that targets fear
- Test whether the intervention:
  - Reduces worries before the interaction
  - Increases enjoyment of the interaction

Counteracting fears
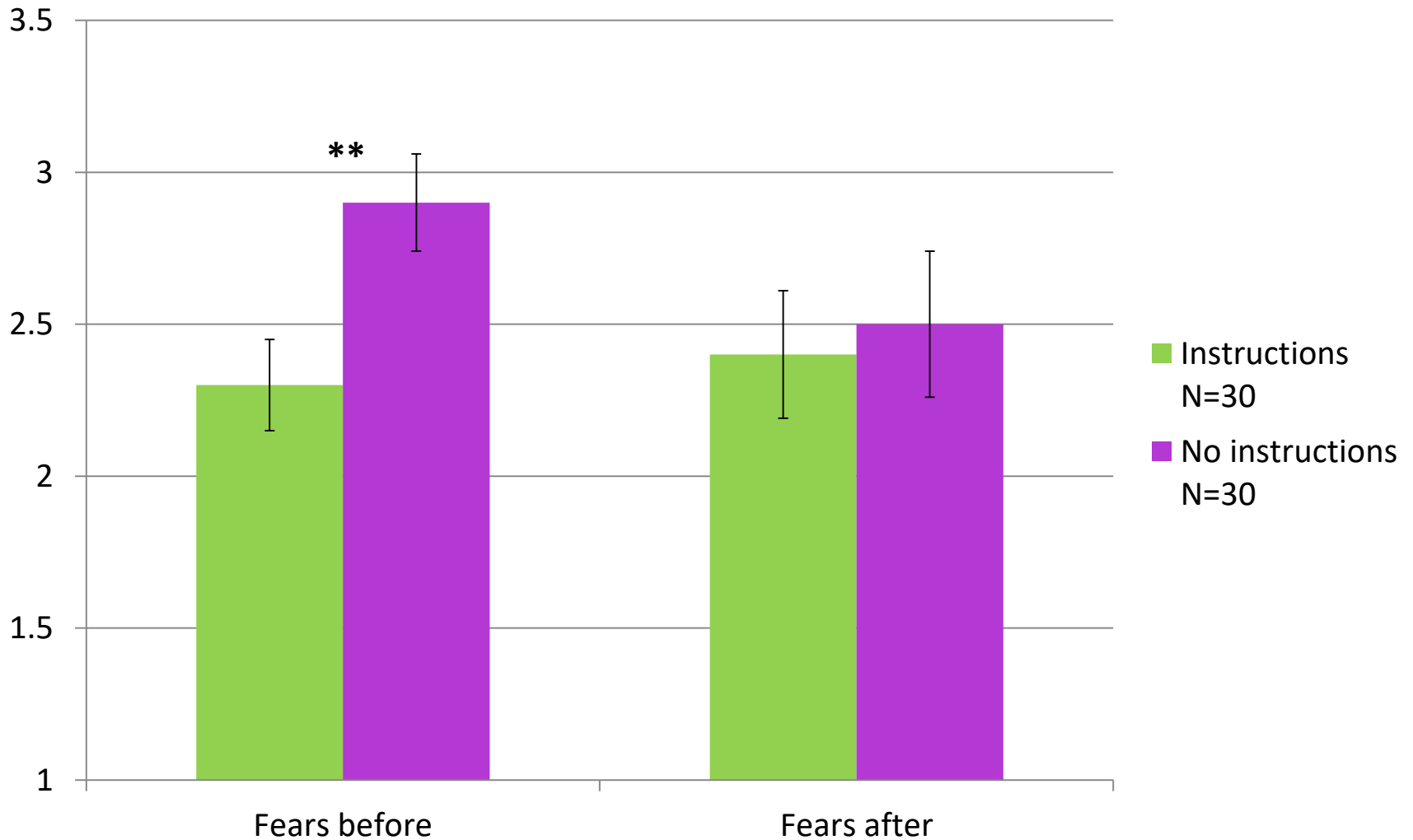
Next steps

- Are people less worried before an interaction, and do they enjoy an interaction more, when:

    - They are asked to approach someone similar vs. dissimilar (undergrad project)

    - They are prompted to notice something distinctive about the person vs. not (Masters project)

    - They are provided with social support vs. not (Masters project)

Acts of Kindness

Acts of Kindness

Acts of Kindness

- Make someone feel welcome

- Put someone at ease

- Listen to someone

- Show someone that they matter

Next steps

- Provide a selfish or a prosocial motivation for talking to strangers
  - Test whether it reduces fears/improves expectations before talking to a stranger
  - Test whether it changes the experience of talking to a stranger (e.g., more enjoyable?)
  - Test whether it makes people more likely to talk to strangers

Acknowledgements

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Starbucks	Liz Dunn Too many research assistants to mention!
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	Lots of fantastic undergraduate volunteers via the Research Experience Scheme

Thank you!

I'd love to talk about:
- ways to apply this research
- research that you'd like to see done
- collaboration ideas etc.