

# What may this mean? How cultural mindsets influence conversational inferences

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A black and white portrait of Angus Campbell, an elderly man with a receding hairline, wearing a dark suit and tie. He is looking slightly to his left with a thoughtful expression.

# Researcher's hope

Angus Campbell, 1981

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- Respondents understand the question as intended
- Know what they do
- Know what they believe
- Can report on it “with candor and accuracy”

# All about candor?

- They know it, but don't want to tell
  - Desirability and acquiescence
  - Underreporting/overreporting
  - Interviewer effects
  - Etc.
- They don't know it, but fake it
  - Fictitious issues
  - DK, filter effects
  - Non-attitudes



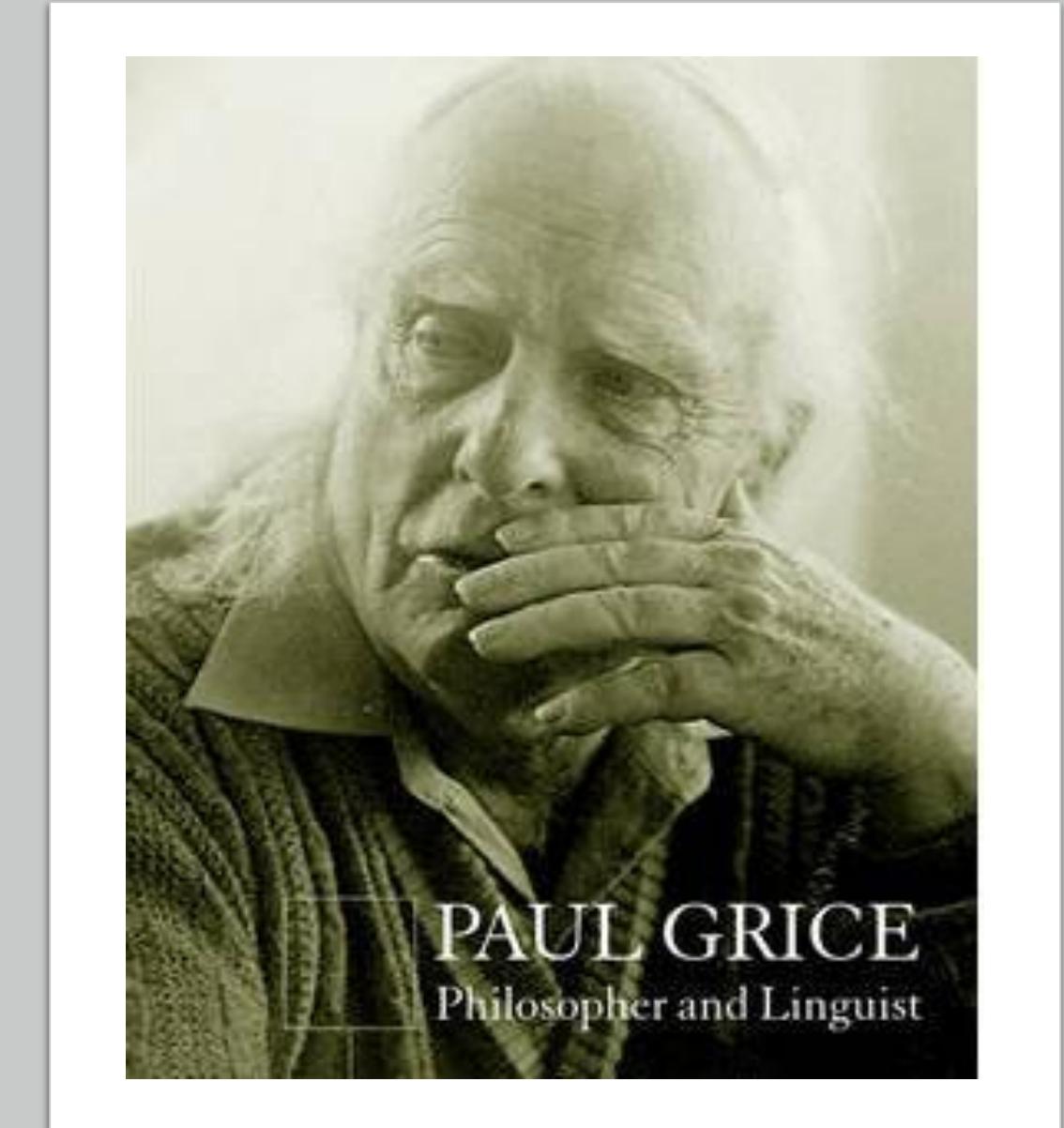
## CASM lessons

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- Questions ambiguous
- Mundane behaviors poorly remembered
- Opinion may not be accessible
- Many answers are judgments formed on the spot
- Relevant to the current context

# Speaker meaning, not words

- Listeners assume that the speaker tries to be **informative, truthful, relevant, and clear.**
- Licenses inferences of **speaker meaning** that go beyond the **semantic meaning** of the utterance.
  - Letterhead
  - Preceding questions
  - Scale formats
  - Etc.



Sam Gill, 1947

"Do you favor or  
oppose the  
Metallic Metal  
Act?"

70% gave answer

"Fear of  
appearing  
uninformed"

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Violates all  
conversational norms

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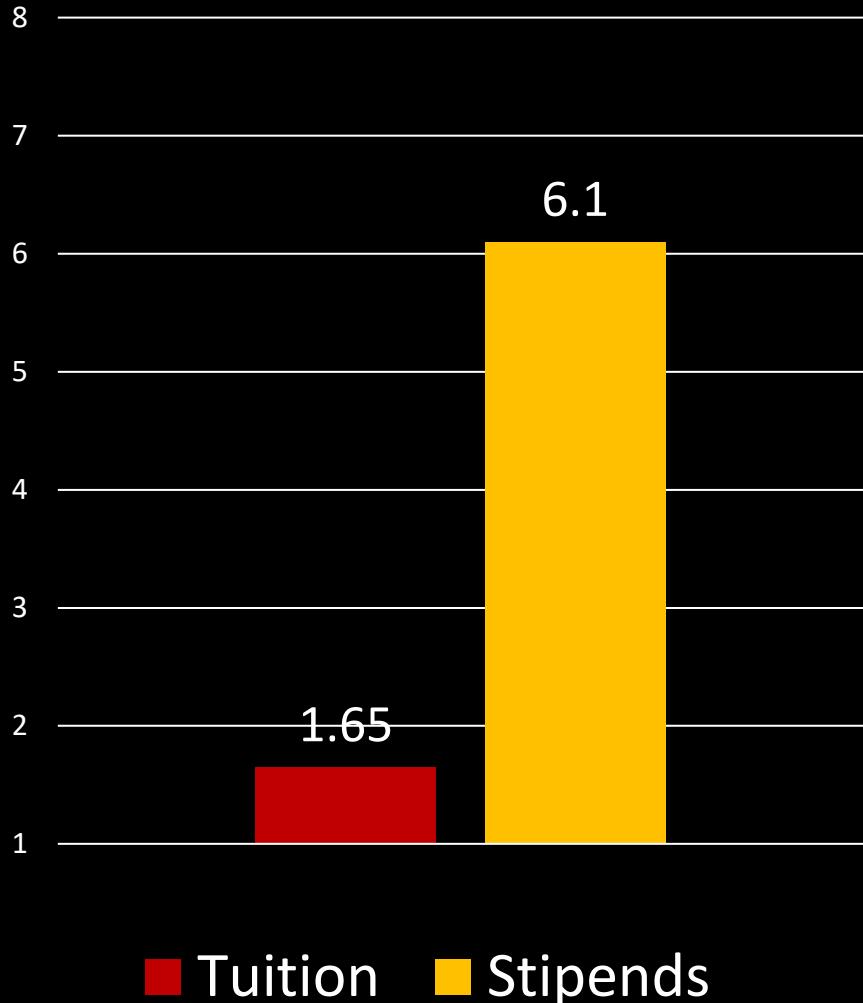
Respondents don't  
assume so

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Try their best to make  
sense of the question

# “Educational contribution”

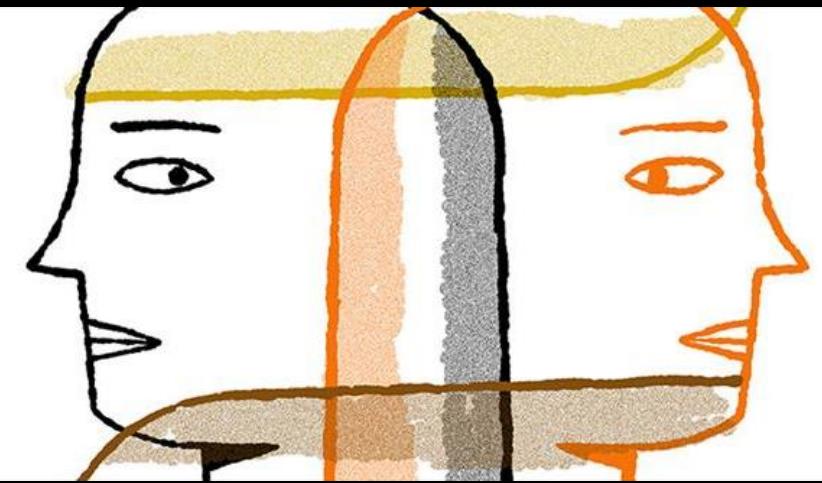
Strack, Schwarz, & Wänke, *Social Cognition*, 1991



- German students' support for an “educational contribution”
- Context: Estimate...
  - ...tuition in U.S.
  - ...stipends in Sweden

# Fictitious claims in surveys and news

Cultural differences in meaning making



# What is culture?

- The human made part of the environment.
- The set of meanings that a group in a time and place come to hold. These meanings
  - facilitate smooth social coordination,
  - clarify group boundaries,
  - and provide a space for innovation.
- Culture includes
  - A set of everyday practices
  - A core theme (e.g., individualism, collectivism, or honor)
  - The capacity to use and understand each of these themes.

# Collectivistic mindsets

Oyserman, 2017 *Annual Review of Psychology*;

Oyserman & Lee, 2008 *Psychological Bulletin*;

Schwarz, Oyserman, & Peytcheva, 2010 *Survey Methods in Multinational, Multiregional, and Multicultural Contexts*.

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Collectivistic cultures are more sensitive to conversational context than individualistic cultures

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This increases pragmatic differences in interpretation

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The effects of temporary inductions of collectivistic/ individualistic mindsets parallel cultural differences

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Such context effects cannot be captured with translation and back-translation of individual questions

# Triggering collectivistic thinking improves perspective- taking

- Primed using autobiographical recall or circling pronouns
- Effects perspective-taking skill



Wolgast & Oyserman, 2020  
*Culture and Brain*

# When situations unfold as culturally expected

Mourey, Lam, & Oyserman, 2015; Lin, Arieli, & Oyserman, 2019

- People's implicit predictions match their observations
- Thinking feels "easy"
- People experience a sense of psychological inherence
- Things are as they should be
  - preserves associative, gut-based reasoning,
  - can increase gullibility, vulnerability to culturally-fluent, identity-congruent, but mis- and dis- informative claims



# Seeing meaning where none exists

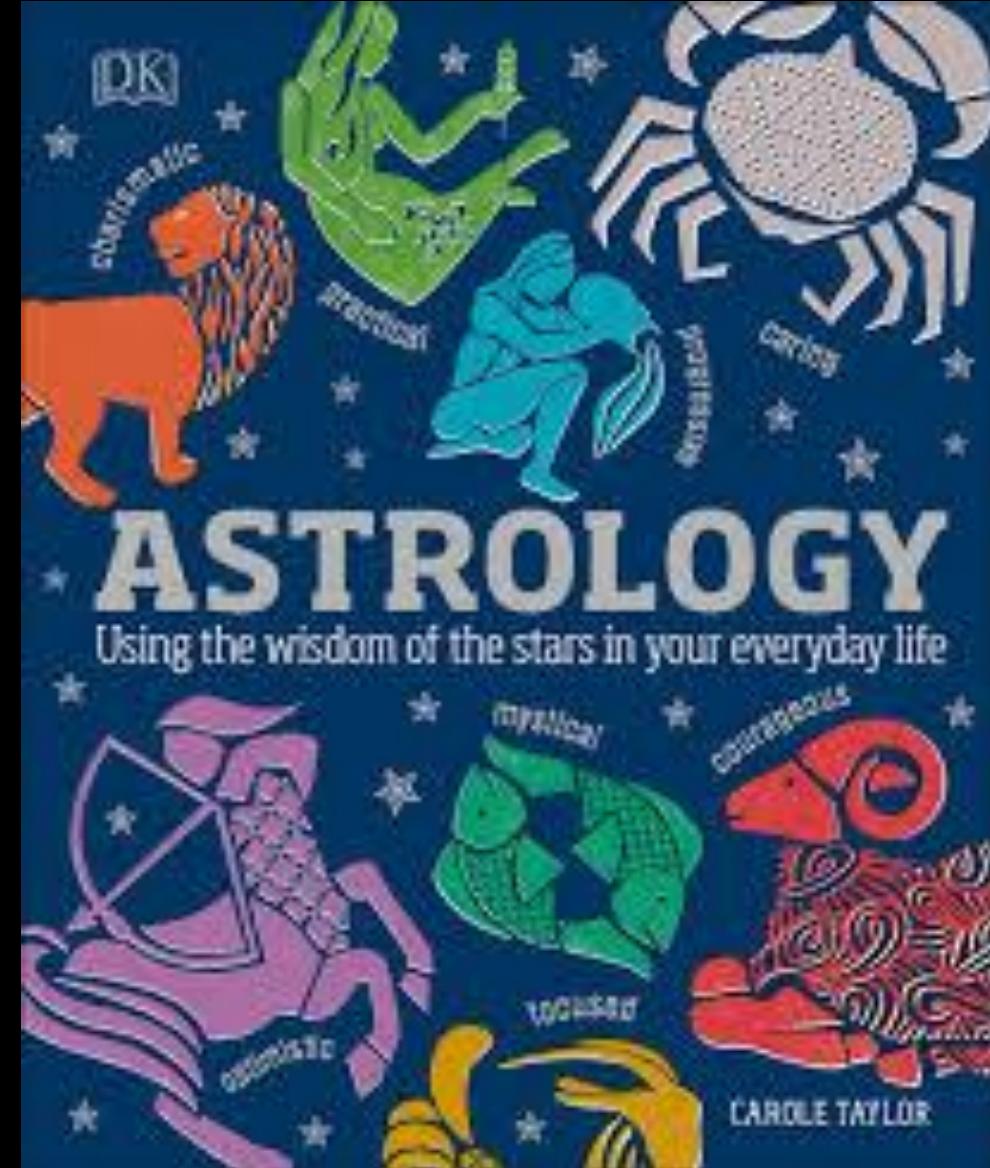
Lin, Zhang, & Oyserman,  
2021 *Journal of Personality  
and Social Psychology*

- Collectivism is associated with finding meaning in meaningless statements
  - pseudo-science, dis-information
- Not just agreeableness or yea-saying
- Country-level comparisons
- Measured at the individual level
- Primed experience of oneself as endorsing collectivistic values

GSS “Would you say astrology is”...

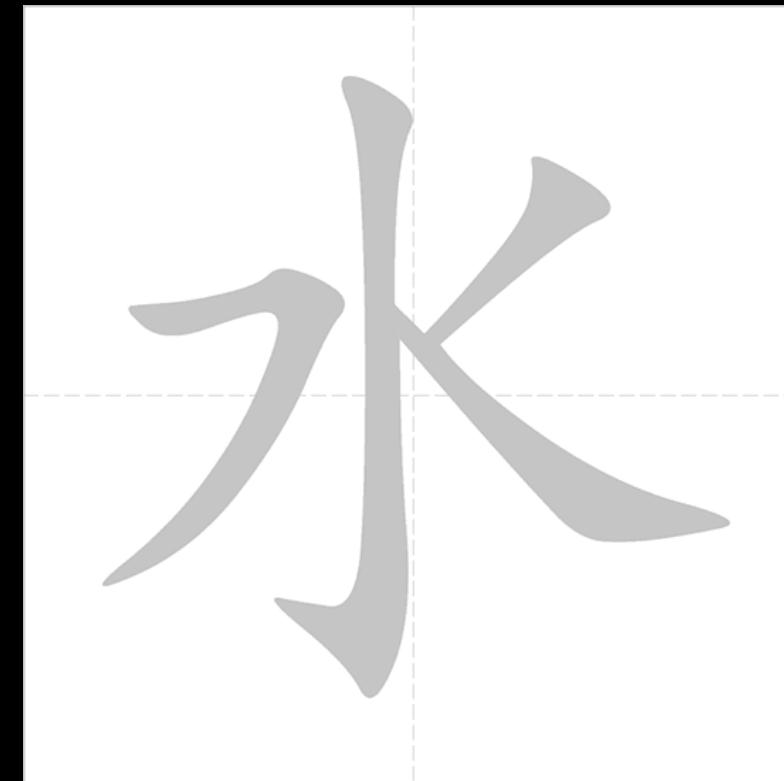
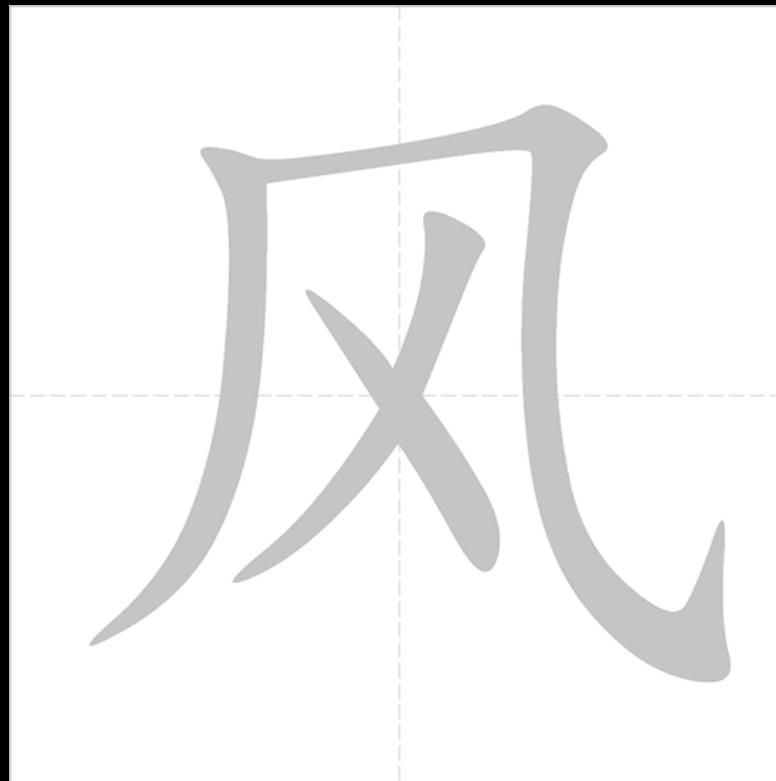
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- Not at all scientific
  - Sort of scientific
  - Very scientific
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- People higher in collectivism say it is more scientific



“Fortune-telling, palm reading, and Feng Shui can explain a lot of things and...I believe them”

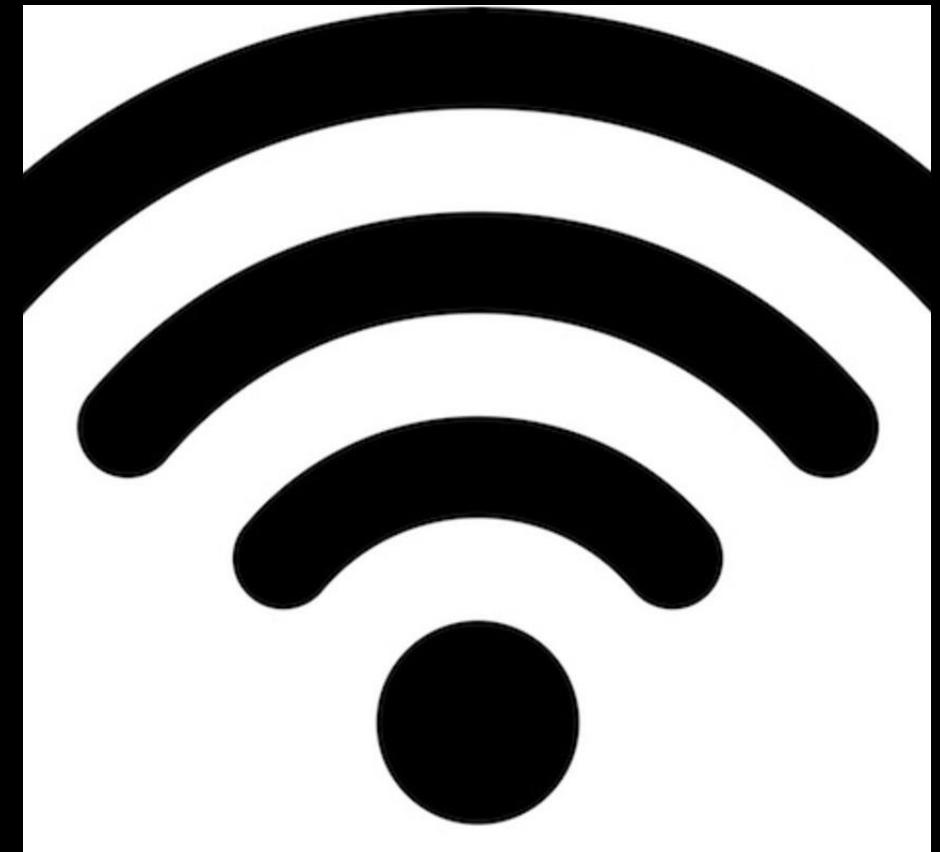
people higher in collectivism are more likely to agree



# Here is a claim:

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- “Wi-Fi can unknowingly kill sperm and induce sperm DNA damage. Radiation emitted from Wi-Fi sources is the cause of sperm count reduction.”
- People read this claim
- Or claim + debunking.



Debunking  
did not  
change this

- Collectivism increased belief
- whether people heard only the claim
- or the claim plus debunking of it after the claim was presented.

# What about non-probatative news claims?

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The New York Times

## *In Coronavirus, China Weighs Benefits of Buffalo Horn and Other Remedies*

A third of Americans surveyed engaged in risky cleaning behaviors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some have even gargled with bleach.



By [Jen Christensen](#), CNN

① Updated 3:04 PM ET, Fri June 5, 2020

Science | Health

**Coronavirus: Alternative Remedies Include Cow Poop,  
Kimchi, And Many More**

# Novel, fabricated but culturally fluent “news” articles



喝茶可显著提升人体抵抗新型病毒的能力

Drinking red tea boosts our body's ability to fight the new viruses

# Existing culturally fluent but fake “news”



## **Coronavirus survives and spreads faster in snow**

While viruses diminish faster under the sun, they spread and thrive in snow and never go away.

# Temporary induction of collectivistic mindset

- Increases active processing for meaning
- Shift from no explanation for the statement
  - “It sounds like an attempt to be poetic but comes across as nonsensical.”
- To one or more explanations
  - “I imagined that it meant love is vast and expanding, easy to get lost in.”

# Driven by seeking common ground

- Effect of collectivism only observed for human sources.
- Disappears when message is presented as randomly generated.

# In the age of misinformation

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- Collectivism may be a double-edged sword
- Increases accuracy of perspective-taking
- Increases efforts to find meaning
- Increases confirmatory interpretations



Thank you!

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