

Ursula Hess¹ and Shlomo Hareli²

¹Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, ²University of Haifa

Perceptions of Truthfulness

Abstract

Two studies tested the impact of emotion expression on the perceived truthfulness of statements regarding an employee's own role in a failure event. Statements that were accompanied by a neutral expression were perceived as more truthful showing the force of normative expectations of emotional restraint for the appraisal of expressions.

Introduction

The goal of this research was to assess whether an employee who expresses emotions when interviewed about his potential role in causing a damaging situation will lead to greater attributions of guilt versus truthfulness.

Appraisal theories of emotion posit that emotions are elicited by the spontaneous and intuitive appraisal of (internal or external) relevant stimulus events according to the perceived nature of the event. People are able to reconstruct appraisal processes consciously after the fact and they can do so for other people's emotions as well. As such, the emotional reactions to an event refers not only to the situation at hand but also to relatively stable characteristics of the person. Specifically, stable traits impact a person's motivational goals, preferences, and resources and hence their emotional reactions – and this information can in turn be deduced from the resulting reaction. Trustworthiness is one such stable characteristic and hence judgments of trustworthiness should in principle be affected by the emotional reaction of a person whose responsibility for a negative event is questioned.

However, organizational rules and norms demand a non emotional stance in most situations. Hence an emotional reaction may conflict with this norm and non normative behaviors are often perceived as suspect.

Methods

Study 1

Design

Context: A software crash which resulted in a substantial loss for a business. Participants received background information that the employee is generally reliable.

Materials: Video in which a technician answers the question: "What in your opinion caused the problem?"

Verbal answers:	Nonverbal behavior
– Accepts guilt	– Shame
– Blames someone else	– Anger
– Don't know	– Neutral

Participants

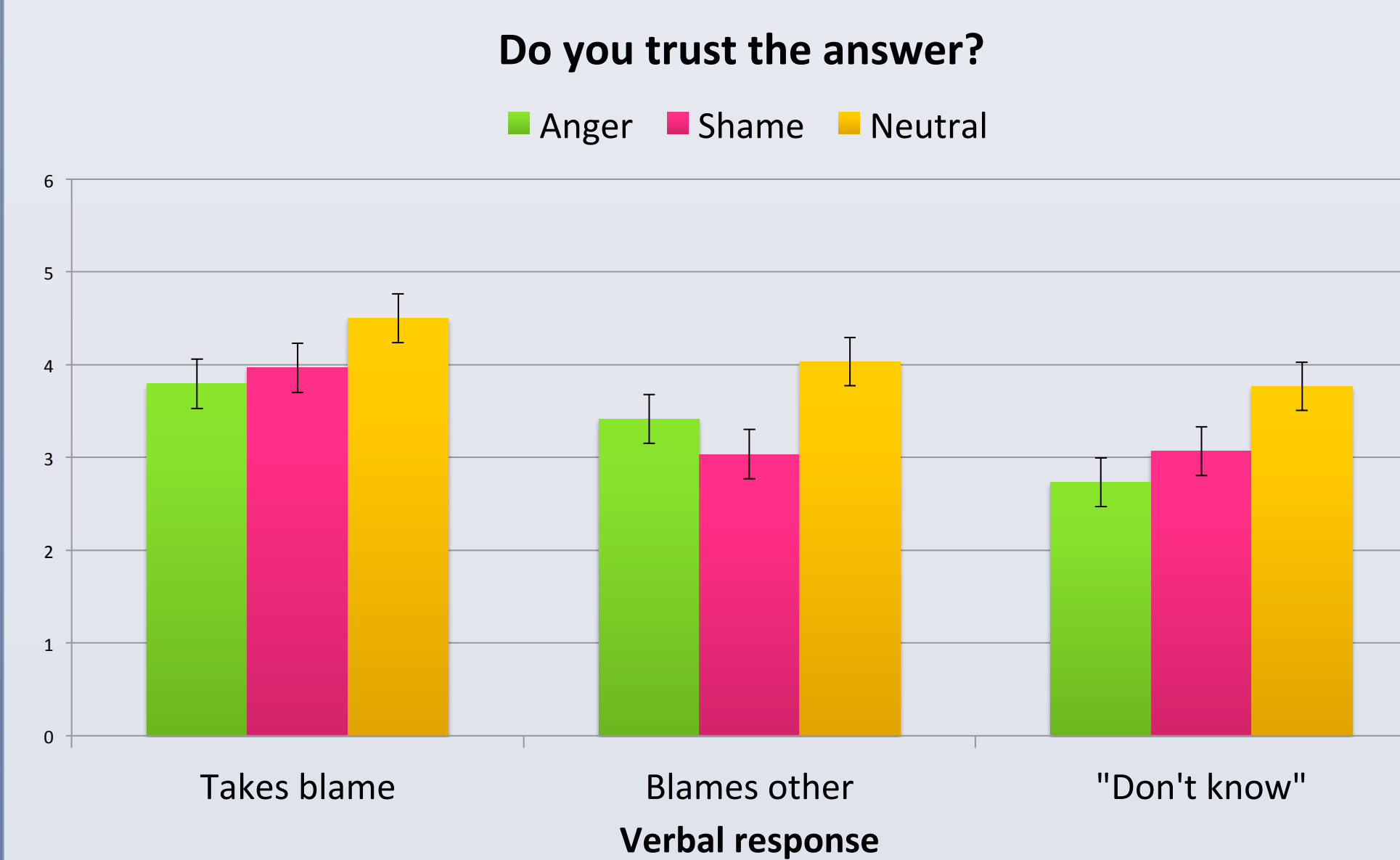
270 (127 men) individuals, mean age 47 years ($SD=10.9$) with business experience

Dependent measures

Do you trust the answer?

Would you promote the person in the future?

Results



Truthfulness

Main effects of answer type, $F(2,258) = 9.08, p < .0001, \mu_p^2 = .07$, and emotion expression, $F(2,258) = 8.53, p < .0001, \mu_p^2 = .06$, emerged.

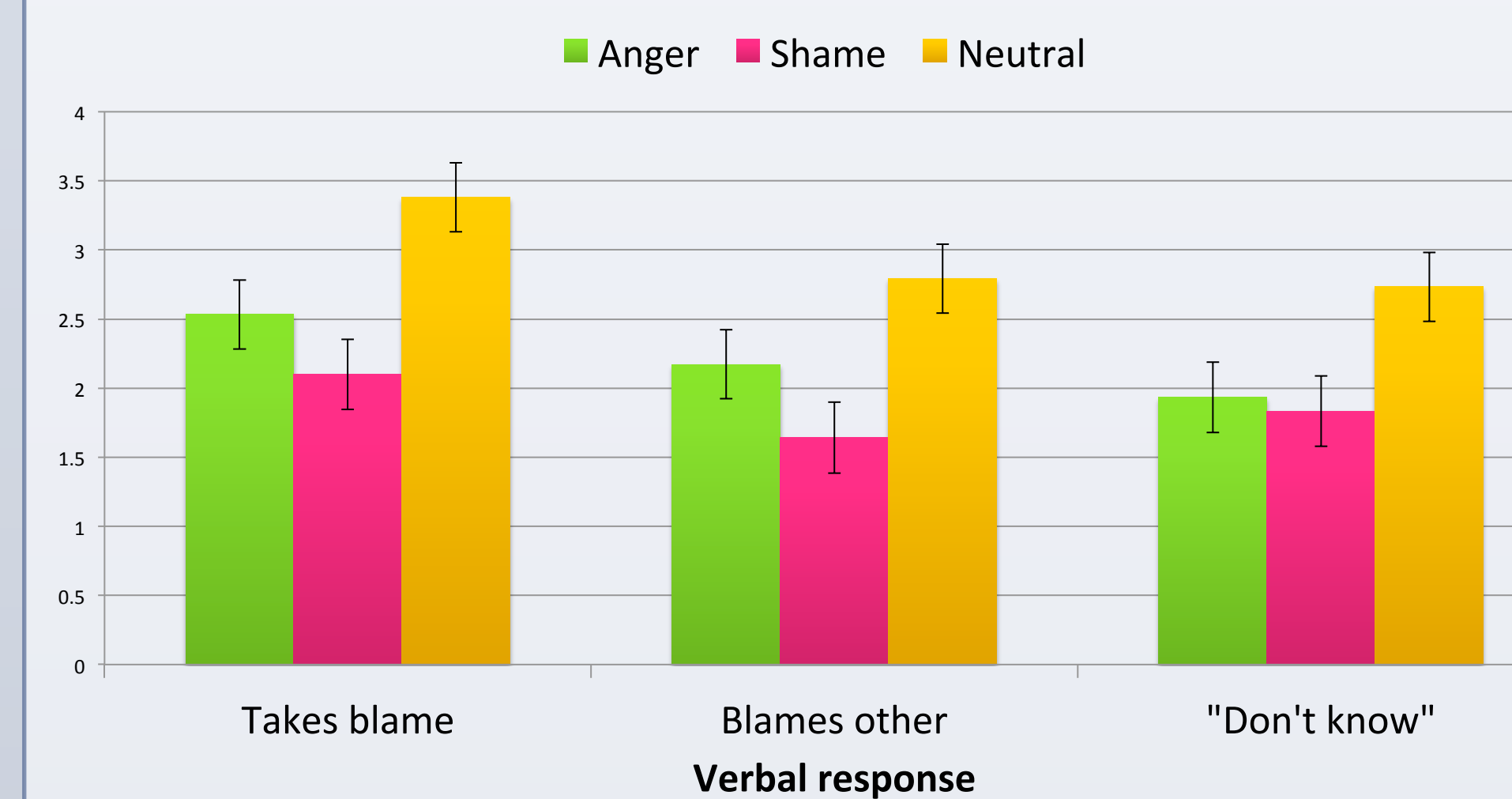
Overall, participants believed the employee more when he did not show any emotion than when he showed either anger or shame for which there was no difference. They also believed the employee more when he took responsibility than when he blamed someone else or gave an ambiguous answer for which there was no difference.

Results

Intentions to promote

Main effects of of emotion, $F(2,256) = 15.14, p < .0001, \mu_p^2 = .11$, and of answer $F(2,256) = 3.75, p = .025, \mu_p^2 = .03$, emerged. The pattern of results was consistent with the perceptions of the employee's truthfulness.

Would you promote this person in the future?



Participants judged the employee as most trustworthy when no emotion was shown. It is possible, however, that because information was given that the person is generally reliable, emotion was seen as a sign of nervousness.

Study 2

Same design, but we varied whether participants received credibility information (corroborating evidence from another witness) or not.

Participants

422 (159 men) individuals, mean age 32years ($SD=11$) with business experience

Results

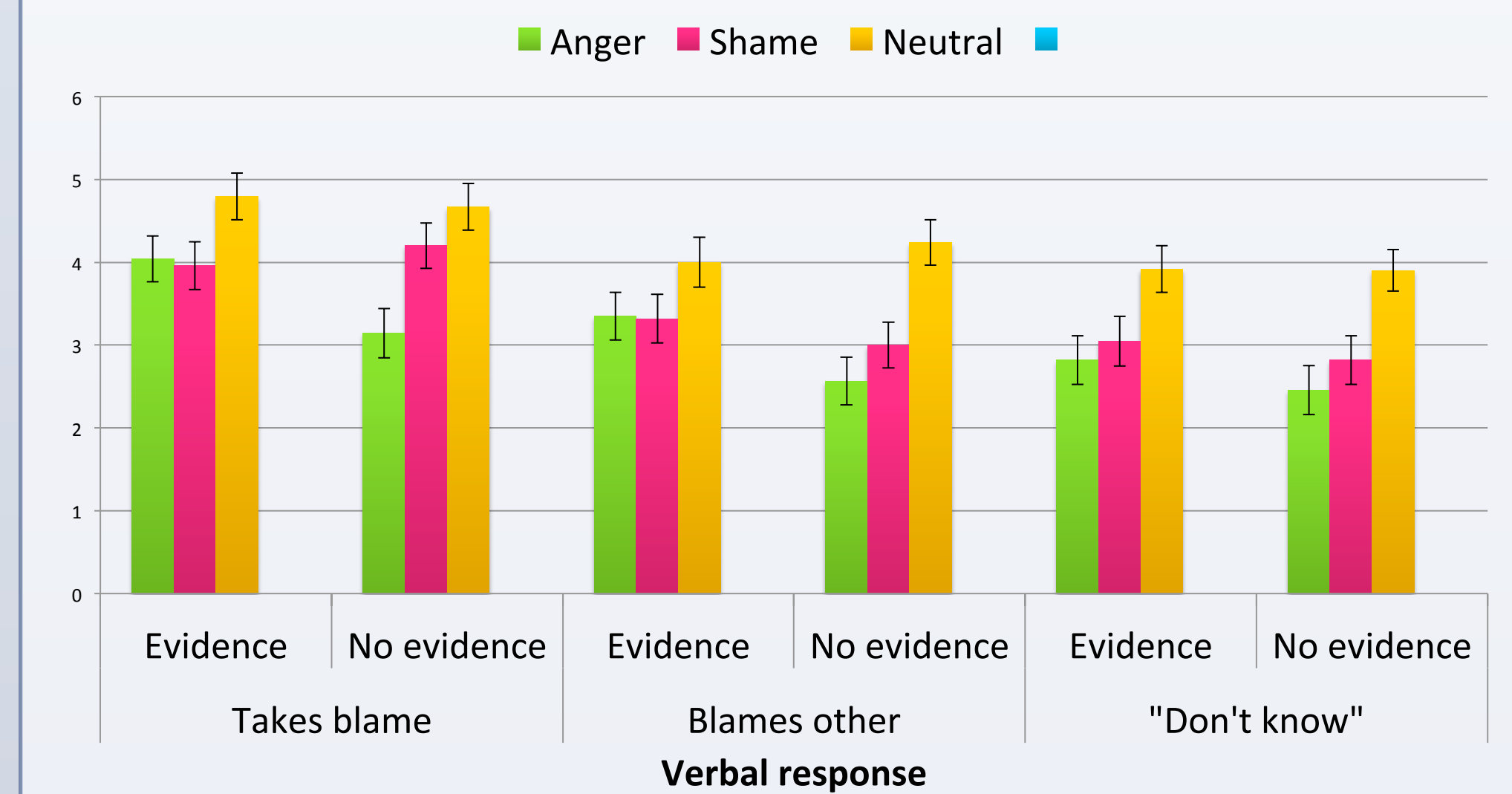
Truthfulness

Main effects of answer type, $F(2,404) = 17.15, p < .0001, \mu_p^2 = .08$, emotion expression, $F(2,404) = 30.20, p < .0001, \mu_p^2 = .13$, and credibility information, $F(1,404) = 5.03, p = .025, \mu_p^2 = .01$, as well as an interaction between emotion and credibility information emerged, $F(2,404) = 3.55, p = .03, \mu_p^2 = .02$. The same pattern of results as for Study 1 was found.

Credibility information only had a moderating effect for anger, such that participants believed the employee even less when he showed anger and no credibility information was given.

Results cont.

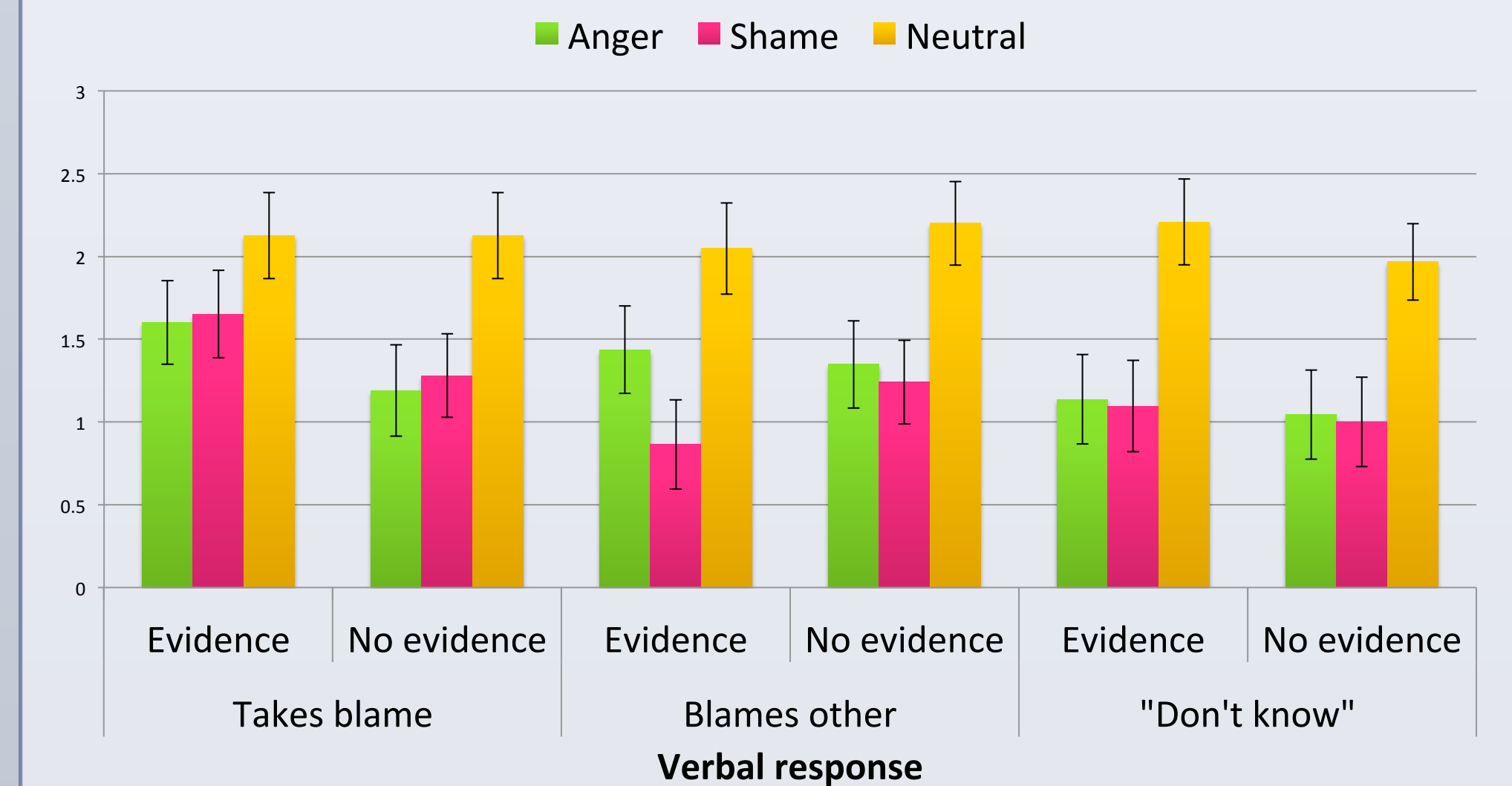
Do you trust the answer?



Intentions to promote

Only a main effect of emotion, $F(2,404) = 22.81, p < .0001, \mu_p^2 = .10$, emerged

Would you promote this person in the future?



Discussion

Overall, the findings from both studies converge to support the notion that in a business context, showing an emotion when interrogated about a failure event is perceived as indicative of lack of truthfulness. The most likely interpretation is that being emotional is seen as a sign of nervousness in the case of shame and maybe a sign of defensiveness in the case of anger. The latter is suggested by the effect of external credibility information when anger is shown.

