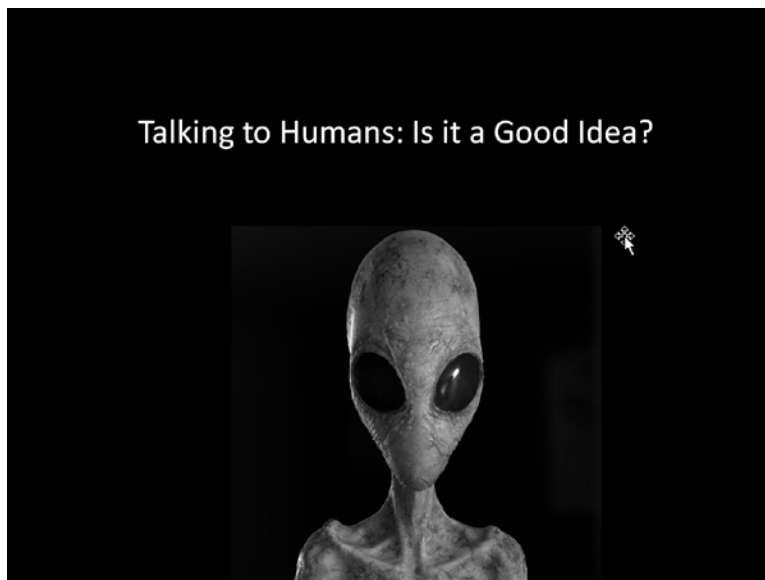
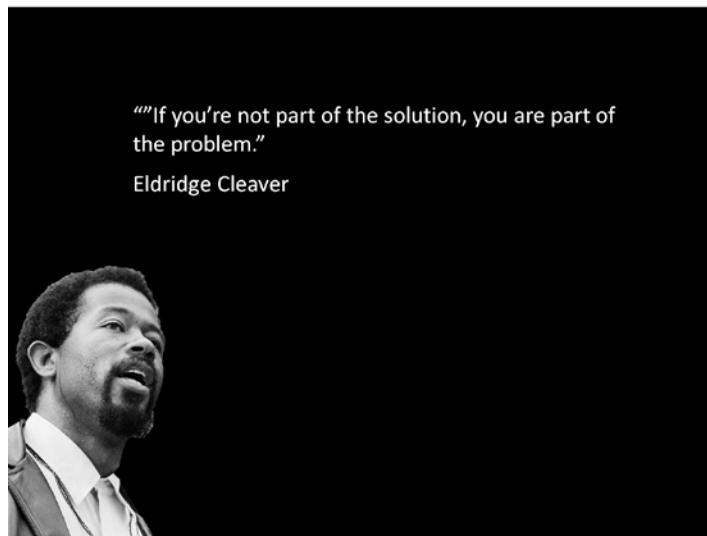


Talk delivered by Daniel Gilbert at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in San Diego, CA on 1/30/16.

My advisor once told me that you'll know you have slipped into your dotage when people start inviting you to give talks that don't include data and instead ask you to talk about "the field" or even worse to "provide historical perspective" on something. So given that I am at the age where I am not quite ready for mothballs but I can kind of smell them from here, you'll understand that I was a little reluctant when Kathleen asked me to stand up and blabber for 18 minutes about the development of our profession rather than the developments in my lab. But then she told me the specific topic and I instantly said yes because this is -- without any exaggeration -- the single weirdest thing anyone has ever asked me to talk about. I mean, think about it: Hundreds of incredibly smart scientists are gathered here today having a discussion that could basically be called "Talking to Humans: Is It a Good Idea?" Really? Are we really wondering this? Is this what's on our mind? Is this a question? Is there really a debate about this?

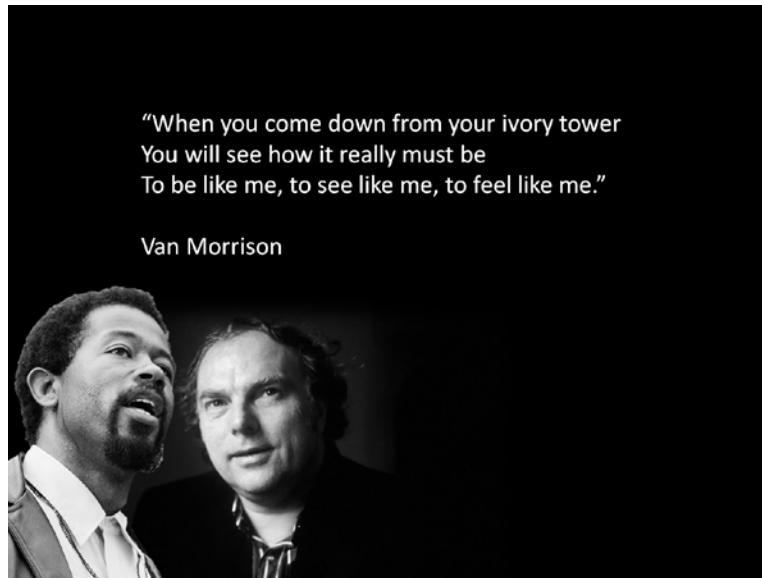


Well yes, as it turns out, there is, so allow me to weigh in: talking to the humans is not a good idea—it is a great idea, an utterly brilliant idea. In fact, it isn't even an idea. It is a duty, an obligation, a moral imperative, and the reason we don't all do it all the time is the same reason why most people don't do all the things they should. So let me say first why I think we should do it and then why I think we don't.



One reason to talk to humans is that it is good for them. With apologies to Captains from Kirk to Picard, the prime directive is bullshit. We are here to interfere with the development of civilization on this planet. It is our job. The people of this planet have entrusted us with two hugely important tasks—first, to spend some of our time initiating their children into the society of educated adults, and second, to spend the rest of our time finding out the truth about their hearts and minds and lives. And the humans have agreed that if we just do these two things, we never have to actually work! No, really. They will give us everything we need—food and shelter and weekends in San Diego—and all we have to do is find stuff out. I mean, Finder Outer? Who gets a job like Finder Outer?

We do. This is a seriously excellent arrangement—for us. But what about for them? If we find stuff out but don't tell the humans about it, are we keeping our end of the bargain? I don't think so, and that's a shame because the humans are in real trouble. Their planet is a freaking mess. They have a huge list of problems, all of which threaten their health and their happiness, and some of which threaten the continued existence of their species. And if you look at that list, you instantly notice something interesting about it: Almost all of the problems they face are behavioral. Every other animal on their planet is primarily threatened by events it can't control, but humans are unique because they are threatened only by events they can control – by their choices of what to eat, of how much to drive, or whether to carpet bomb people who don't agree with them. Hunger isn't an agricultural problem and climate change isn't a meteorological problem, these and others are behavioral problems that evaporate the moment people decide to act differently. So why don't they just decide to act differently? Ah, now that's a question about which we finder outers have something important to say.



So talking to humans can be good for the humans. But it can also be good for us. Why? Well first, if we don't keep our end of the bargain, at some point the humans are going to notice. We can't expect them to continue to support what we do when they don't understand the value of what we do, and they're not going to understand that if we don't explain it to them. When congress threatens to cut our field's funding or even dismantle our science directorates, we all get huffy and ask "How could they?" But the fact that our leaders mainly don't not know how valuable we are is *our* fault, not theirs. Psychology saves money and lives and costs almost nothing, and the fact that some congressmen don't know this is a failure of education that can only be blamed on the educators who often have better things to do than to talk to the humans.

But there is another way that talking to humans is good for us. If you study humans then talking to them obviously gives you information about the validity of your ideas. Humans tell us whether our ideas are true – and in essence, that's all that collecting data really amounts to. But they can do something even better: they can tell us if our ideas are important.

One thing you may have noticed about finder-outers is that they can very easily get lost. We find something out and to understand it we have to find another thing out, and pretty soon the chain of things we are finding out about leads us to some place that is so far from Earth that no human could possibly care about it. We start with problems that everyone cares about, but then one thing leads to another, one idea and one question lead to the next, and pretty soon we have wandered so far from where we started that we are lost in space, and the things we are worrying about are of no concern to anyone who didn't get lost with us.

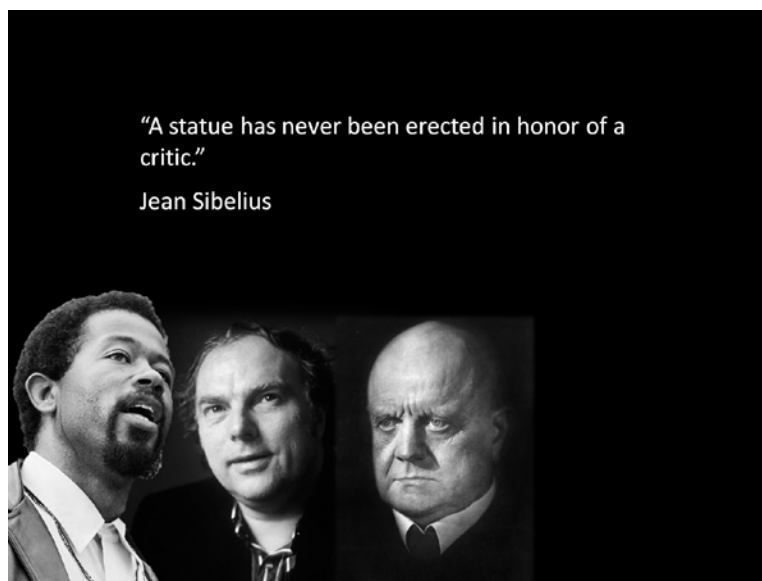
Talking to humans keeps this from happening because humans have three talents: they can laugh, they can roll their eyes, and they can fall asleep. When you talk to them, they will use these talents to help you discover that what you are saying may well be supported by data, but it is of the utmost insignificance because you have somehow become that guy who decided to spend a week rearranging his sock drawer so that from front-to-back they go from athletic socks to dress socks, and from right-to-left they go from black socks to white socks, which therefore puts the casual grey socks

right smack in the middle of the drawer—exactly where the theory predicted they would be! Yes, this can be done, and yes, ordered socks are nicer than unordered socks, but really, in the end, is this something that a grown up should be spending their time on?

When you talk to humans about your work they quickly let you know if you are just rearranging your sock drawer. If you can't make your work *sound* interesting to them then it *isn't* interesting. If what you are studying doesn't *seem* important to them then it *isn't* important. Now, you may say, "Wait a minute. What about all those scientific geniuses throughout history who have labored away for decades in obscurity and then produced some stunning idea or discovery that changed the world? No ordinary humans thought a Swiss patent clerk named Einstein was doing something important when he was spending his lunch hour making notes about what would happen if he could ride on a light beam. Doesn't that show that the humans don't always know what matters?"

Okay, fine. If all the humans say that what you are doing doesn't matter, there is a chance that you are right and they are wrong. But that chance can be estimated by dividing the number of Einsteins by the number of non-Einsteins. As Einstein would have said, "Do the math." Humans are sounding boards and talking to them is the best way to find out whether you are doing anything a human should care about.

So if I am right and there are countless benefits to talking to humans, then why aren't we all doing it? Why aren't we all giving talks to the rotary club and writing books and magazine articles, appearing on TV and radio shows, blogging and podcasting and tweeting and more? Well, it could be that we are busy or lazy, but my experience suggests that there is another much more powerful reason and that's that we're afraid—and we're afraid of two related but distinct things.

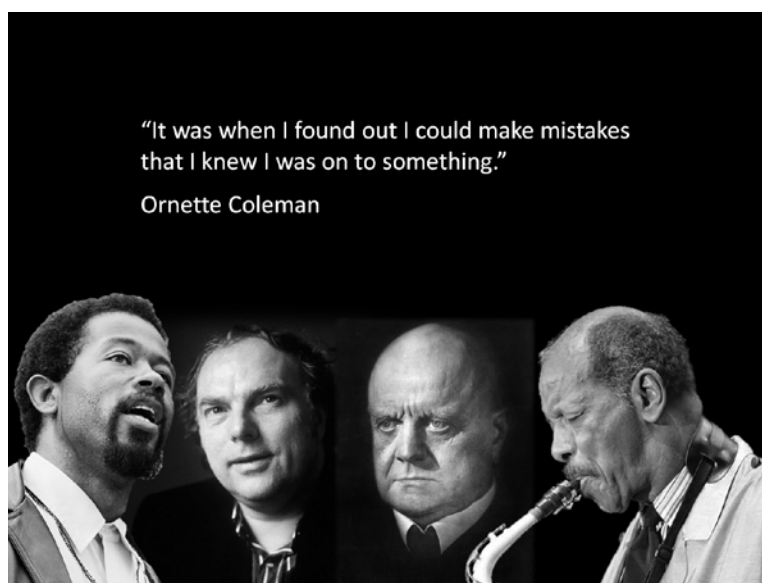


First, we are afraid that if we talk to the humans and the humans actually listen, then the other finder-outers won't admire us. We've all been standing around in a group when someone mentions Malcolm Gladwell's newest book and people start shaking their heads and smirking, and we know we don't ever want to be the person they are shaking and smirking about. We know that the problem with Malcolm is that he

simplifies things, he gets stuff wrong, and yet millions of humans listen to him anyway. But we also know that simplifying is what we do every day when we teach, and getting stuff wrong is what we do every day when we research, and that what *really* distinguishes us from Malcolm is that everyone listens to him and no one listens to us. And that is what all the smirking is about.

We are worried that our fellow finder-outers will not be nice to us if we find a way to talk to millions of humans because we academics have an odd view of ourselves. We see ourselves as morally pure seekers of truth who aren't afflicted by the base desires for adulation, power, or wealth that corrupt the rest of humankind. This self-view isn't all that surprising given our historical roots. Almost all of us work at universities, but until very recently, a university was a place where high-born gentlemen retired to think deep thoughts, free from the everyday carnal concerns of low-born men, and women, and brown people, who were down there getting their hands all soiled with things like money. Universities have changed, but our past still echoes in our present. When I decided to do TV commercials to encourage Americans to save for retirement, some fellow academics said things like "Can you believe he is doing a *commercial*?" pronouncing that word like they were holding a poopy diaper at arm's length because commerce, as we all know, is a dirty business that should be left to the...well, humans. Never mind that universities charge their customers tuition and pay their workers salaries. Oh no, that doesn't mean they are engaged in commerce. They are not *businesses*! No, they are temples—temples to the Gods of reason and truth—and we are the priests, guarding the illuminated manuscripts that the humans are too ignorant to understand.

You get the point. We all know people like this. And in our worst moments, we all *are* people like this: elitist, self-satisfied, pejorative, and small. The question is whether we want this side of ourselves to be the rule by which we conduct our professional lives. I suggest the answer is no. Talking to humans is a good thing—for them and for us—and if doing it occasionally makes our friends smirk, then let the smirking commence.



Now, I said that we don't talk to the humans because we are afraid of *two* things—one of which is what the other finder-outers will say about us. The second fear is a little bit less craven but just as disconcerting—and that's our fear of simply being wrong.

As scientists, we know that most problems are infinitely complex and most answers are partial at best. And so one of the things we've been trained to do is to approach nature with intellectual humility, and to advertise that humility to each other with cautious language. So the humans say things like "The moon sure looks beautiful tonight" we say things like "It appears that there may be circumstances under which the moon's beauty is potentially elevated relative to some but not necessarily all other celestial objects, though more research is needed." We speak to each other in hedges, hems, and haws because modesty is a virtue -- in academia and everywhere else except politics -- and so we have developed our own humble-bragging code that allows us to send each other secret messages whose real meaning is "I know something important" but that sound like "Oh don't mind me."

The problem is that this secret code is a secret to the humans, who naively think that "Don't mind me" means they shouldn't mind you. When a human knows something important they have the odd habit of saying "I know something important." They don't hedge or hem or haw because unlike us, they are not deathly afraid of being wrong. The humans know being wrong is bad, of course, but they also know that failing to be right can be just as bad, and so they try to balance these risks by speaking up when they have something reasonable to contribute to the conversation and not otherwise. We, on the other hand, are so afraid of being wrong about something that we are willing to shut up and be right about nothing.

That's too bad. Because there is a great public conversation going on about all the things that matter most, about our lives here together, about our future, about the moral and practical issues of our times. And as finder outers we automatically get a seat at the table – the world wants to know what smart people who understand the scientific method believe about almost anything. And yet, our fear of being wrong often leads us to pass, to stay quiet, to let others who know far less than we do take our turns while we do further analysis of this complicated problem. What we don't seem to realize is that the world doesn't have the luxury of waiting for complete answers before it takes action. Do we know exactly how to arrange the food in the school cafeteria so that kids will eat better, or exactly how to arrange the kids in the schools so they will get along better, or exactly how to arrange the schools in the city so they will function better? No. But they all need to be in some arrangement and they all need to be in it today. The world can't stop while we search for the certainty that finder outers are trained to think they must have before opening their mouths.

When we refuse to share our flawed and partial knowledge with the world, it has to solve problems without any knowledge at all. Now, that may be better for *our* identities and *our* reputations because if you don't offer any suggestions then you can't offer bad ones. But William James once said "When you have to make a choice and don't make it, that is in itself a choice" and if we are so afraid of being wrong that we opt out of the public conversation – then we have made a choice: We've chosen not to risk being part of the problem, and so we have guaranteed that we will not be part of the solution.



So let me conclude by returning to the question that we came together today to puzzle about: Should we talk to the humans? Yes. It is good for them and it is good for us, and the only reason we even ask this question is that we are afraid of what can happen when we leave the ivory tower and take our rightful places in the big, troubled, uncertain, and impure world. The customs of our academic tribe have led us to worry more about how we look than about how we are, more about the consequences of being wrong than about the consequences of being silent. But social psychologists know better than anyone that customs can change. And they have to. We all became finder outers because we wanted to discover truths that will outlast us. But they only outlast us if we give them away to the people who need them most.