

The Bell Curve of Intolerance



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1. Introduction

Generalizations

- Often, members of an oppressed group use generalizations when identifying their oppressors
- For example:
 - A black man might identify “white people” as his oppressors
 - But not all white people are racist
 - And not all white people who *are* racist are *equally* racist
- Generalizations can be a useful verbal shorthand for activists
 - But we have to see beyond generalizations to do a deeper analysis
 - Otherwise:
 - We will not be able to develop good strategies to combat oppression
 - We may accidentally offend people who don’t oppress us

Getting beyond generalizations

- This chapter describes a bell curve model for intolerance:
 - Helps us to get beyond generalizations commonly used in activism
- Note: this chapter does not provide any insights:
 - It just *describes* the bell curve model without saying why it is useful
 - Later chapters discuss insights provided by this bell curve model

2. The bell curve model

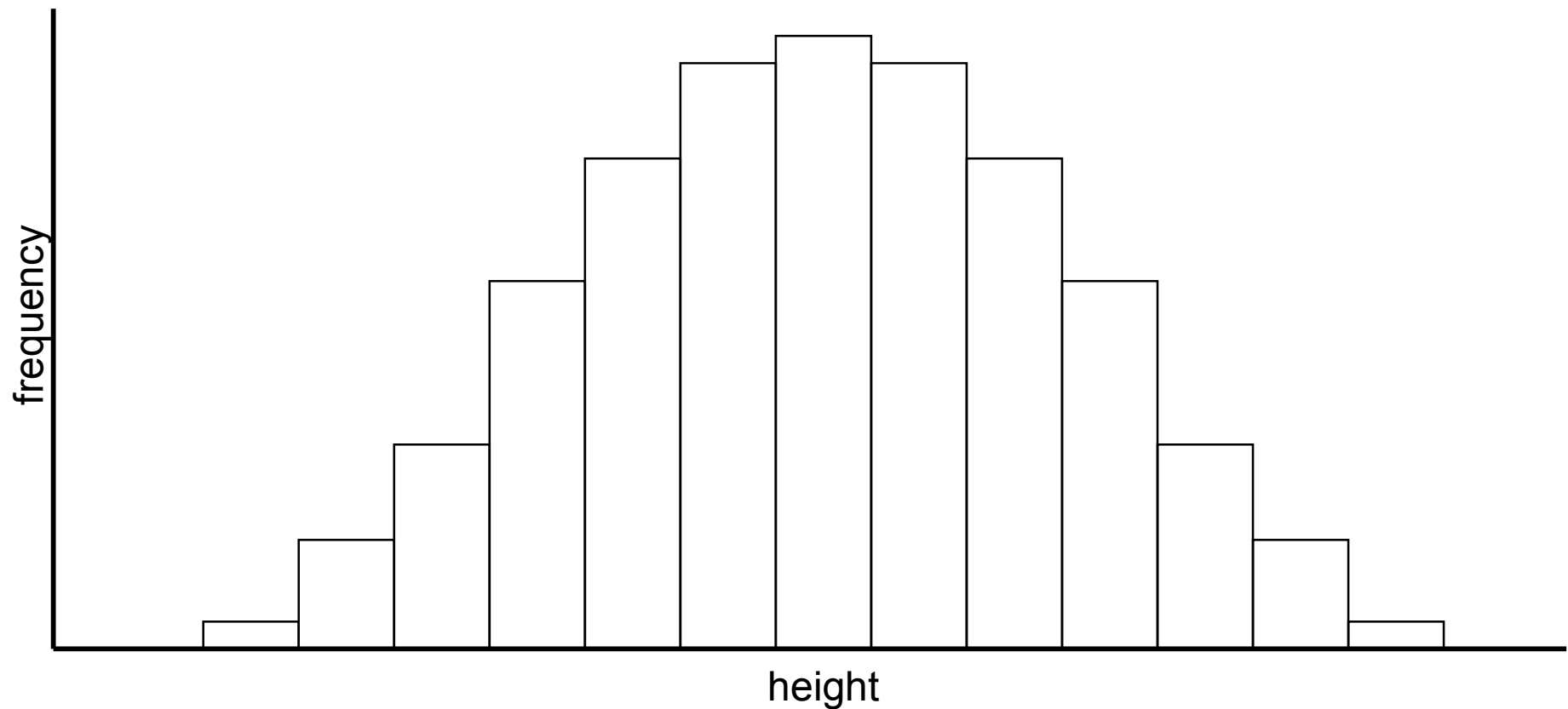
Measuring random variation

- Experiment:
 - Measure the height of, say, 1000 adult men picked at random
 - Show the results as a bar chart
- The result probably looks like the bar chart on the next slide

Measuring random variation (cont')

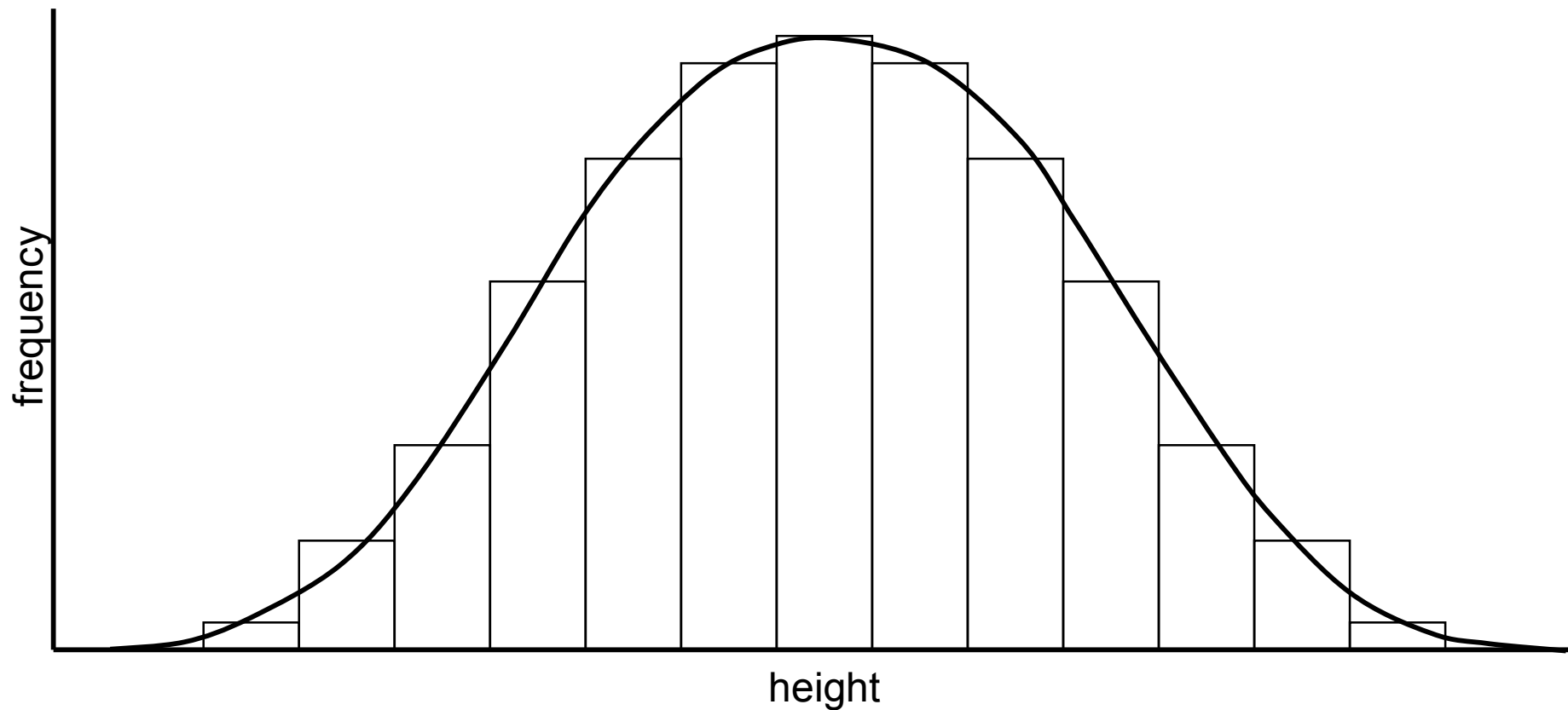
■ Observations:

- Most people are close to average height
- A smaller number of people are very tall or very short



A bell curve

- The bar chart actually looks like a bell
 - Hence the name “bell curve”
 - Also known as “normal distribution” or “Gaussian distribution”

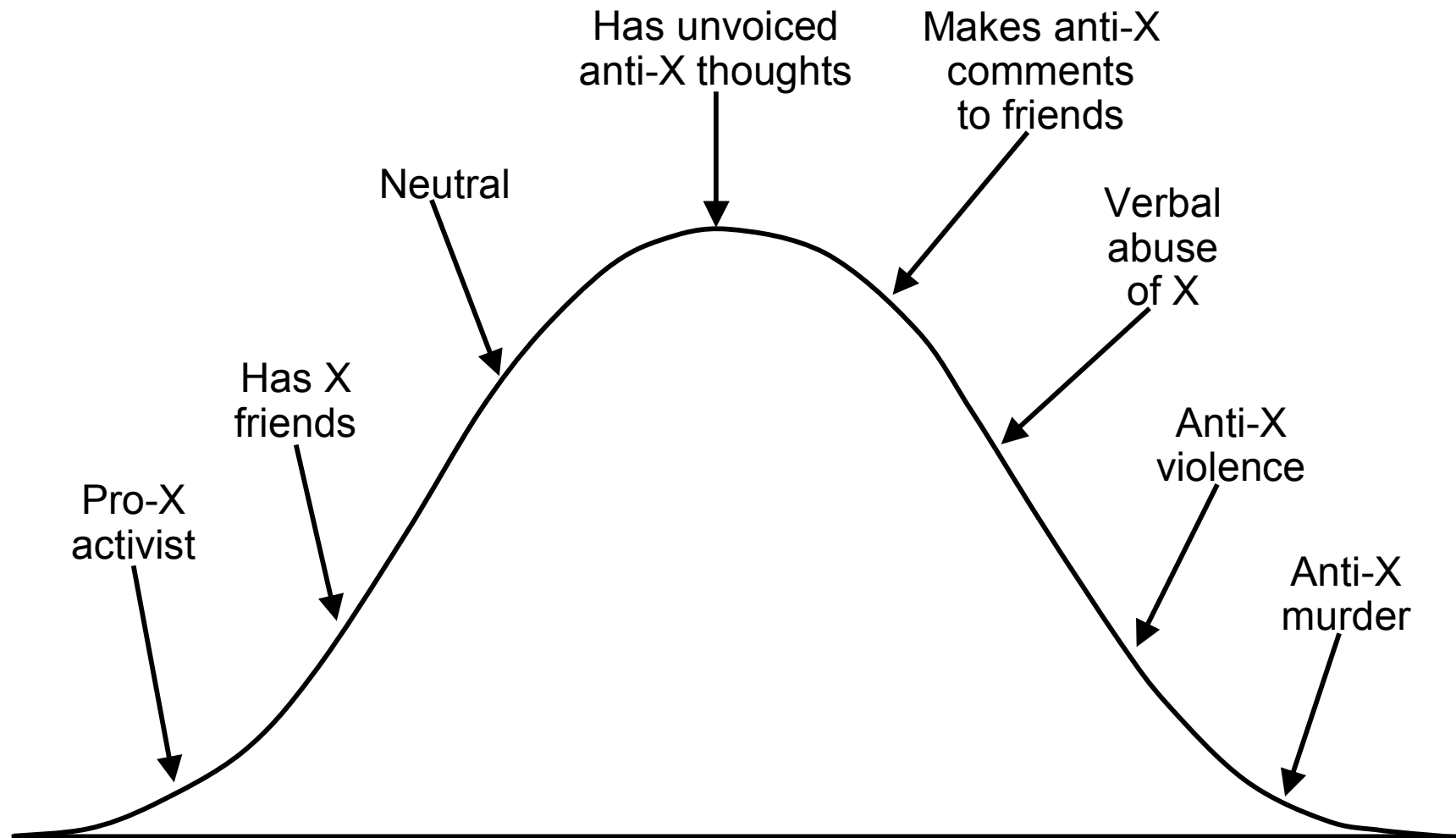


Importance of the bell curve

- Bell curve distributions occur widely in nature
 - Height, weight, chest-size of populations, survival times for diseases...
 - Many uses in mathematics, physics, social sciences, ...
- Do levels of intolerance follow a bell curve distribution?
 - If so, could this provide any insights into intolerance?
- The next slide shows a bell curve distribution:
 - “X” denotes an oppressed group
(a different religion or race, homosexuality, ...)
 - Bell curve shows the distribution of non-X intolerance for X people

Bell curve of intolerance

- Comments are on the following slides



Extremists

- The extreme right of the curve denotes increasing hate
 - Anti-X “extremists” probably believe they are doing a good thing:
 - “Most people just moan about the X problem. I’m going to *do something* about it.”
 - “I’m doing what the public wants (but are too scared to do)”
 - “It’s a dirty job but somebody’s got to do it.”
- The extreme left of the curve denotes increasing love
 - Not necessarily romantic love, but friendship and caring
 - Is love really such an extreme?
 - Yes, because love is the opposite of hate
 - Yes, according to people at the middle or on the right of the curve.
 - Historical examples from USA:
 - A white person with black friends might be called “nigger lover”
 - A white person campaigning for black rights might be socially shunned, harassed or even killed

Neutral people and the lack of scale

■ “Neutral”:

- Means “I don’t dislike X people but I don’t don’t know any either”
- Is *not* in the centre of the bell curve because the “average” person has anti-X feelings
 - At least in a society that oppresses X people

■ The bell curve is *not* drawn to scale:

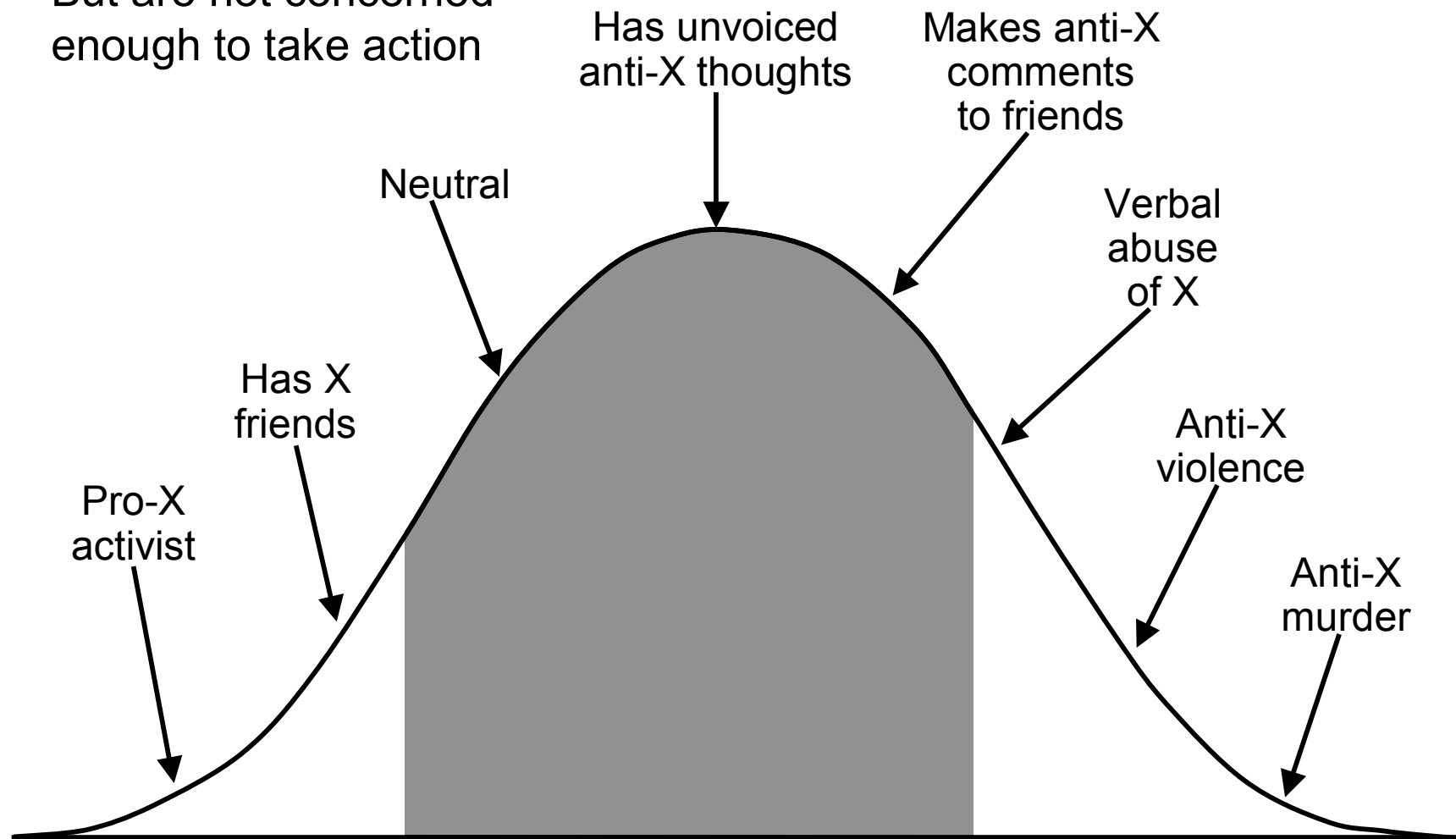
- The scale shown slide implies:
 - About 8% of non-X population commit anti-X violence
 - About 2% of non-X population commit anti-X murder
- In reality, levels of anti-X violence and murder are (hopefully) much less

■ Reason for the deliberate lack of scale:

- It would be difficult to see “extremists” if they are shown at, say, 0.1%
- Levels of anti-X intolerance might change over time
(Example: there is less racism in USA today than 100 years ago)

The apathetic majority

- Most people near the centre of the bell curve:
 - Might think, or talk to friends and family, about X people
 - But are not concerned enough to take action



Is the bell curve accurate?

- Bell curves are often used to do mathematical predictions:
 - For such uses, it is important to verify that the data fit a bell curve
- There is no statistical data on levels of intolerance to know that a bell curve model is appropriate:
 - This flaw means we should not try to use the bell curve for mathematical predictions
- However, the bell curve model *can* still be useful:
 - It provides a more elaborate way to reason about, say, racism than the simplistic view of “You are racist or you are not racist”
 - The next few chapters discuss some insights that we can get from the bell curve model of intolerance

3. Summary

Summary of the bell curve model

- Summary of the bell curve model:
 - Increasing love towards the left extreme
 - Increasing hate towards the right extreme
 - Neutral is to the left of centre
 - Because the model is for a group that faces widespread intolerance
 - Large apathetic majority:
 - Might stay silent or make comments to friends
 - But don't care enough to do anything
 - Not drawn to scale:
 - It would be difficult to see “extremists” if they are shown at, say, 0.1%
 - Levels of anti-X intolerance might change over time
- The next few chapters discuss some insights we can get from the bell curve model