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Can People Infer the Valence of a Message Based on the Delay Before the Sender Shares It?

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Introduction

We know from prior research that people physically delay the onset of bad news versus good news. This study was conducted to determine if people tend to infer meaning based on the delay before a message is shared utilizing good or bad news in the form of a high or low IQ test score.

Hypothesis

The longer the messenger waits before sharing the test score, the lower people will infer a test score to be.



Method

Participants listened to two brief audio clips of a woman who was presumably about to share an IQ test score with a test-taker. The first audio clip served as an example to orient participants to the entire process by which the test scorer calculates the score (her computer scoring program makes a "ding" sound), then proceeds to communicate the score with the test-taker. The example clip featured a delay of 4 seconds from "ding" to score disclosure, and participants were told this was an average score of 50 percent. Having heard the example clip, participants would compare a second clip, digitally manipulated to reflect a delay of either 2 seconds or 10 seconds before the test scorer began to reveal the score. The second clip ended abruptly after the scorer began to reveal the score, but before the actual score could be heard. Participants were asked to compare the second clip to the example, then judge whether the score in the second clip was likely higher or lower, relative to the example clip.

Results

N

- 113

Age

- Range: 18-22
- Mean: 19.59
- SD: 1.22

Sex

- Male = 44 (38.9%)
- Female = 69 (61.1%)

Race-Ethnicity

- Caucasian = 93 (82.3%)
- Hispanic = 9 (8%)
- Asian = 7 (6.2%)
- African American = 2 (1.8%)
- Mixed = 2 (1.8%)



Delay

Valence Guess

| | 10 Seconds | 2 Seconds | Total |
|--------|------------|-----------|-------|
| Lower | 28 | 12 | 40 |
| Higher | 18 | 55 | 73 |
| Total | 46 | 67 | |

chi-square = 22.01, $p < .001$, $\phi = .44$

Discussion

Participants who heard a 2-second delay were more likely to guess a higher score, while those who heard a 10-second delay were more likely to guess a lower score.

Our data were consistent with the idea that people can and do infer valence information based on delay, and we believe that knowing this information will be able to improve skills associated with breaking bad news. This is particularly important in professions such as in the medical field, where waiting just a few seconds before breaking bad news to a patient could foreshadow the bad news and ideally help soften the blow. Deliverers of bad news would do well not to rush to share their message, but to take a brief pause and enable the receiver to begin preparing for the message.

Limitations could include the age range of our participants, the lack of diversity in ethnicity, and the small sample size from limited locations.

Future research should determine whether our findings replicate using scenarios with more ecological validity and mundane realism (medical diagnoses, death announcements, etc.).

