Opinion Science

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Persuasion via Emotion with Robin Nabi

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Andy Luttrell:
We encounter messages like these every day—messages that try to persuade us to think a certain way or take some kind of action. Like, it's why this podcast exists—to understand how this stuff works. But the examples you just heard all take a particular approach to the persuasion puzzle—evoking emotion. Messages designed to make you feel angry…

Announcer:
Very angry.

Andy Luttrell:
…excited…

Announcer:
It's called Joy-Pop!

Andy Luttrell:
…afraid…

Announcer:
A new computer virus could destroy everything.

Andy Luttrell:
…or guilty.

Announcer:
You didn't really send that computer virus to your mother, did you?

Andy Luttrell:
But do these approaches work? Are we actually moved to take action when we see images of suffering animals and hear the somber sound of Sarah McLachlan in an ASPCA commercial? Do political candidates' attempts to stoke fear and outrage actually galvanize their supporters or is it really mostly about whose policies are more sound?

This has been a question that social scientists have grappled with for ages. And actually, even forget about social scientists for a minute and let's go back to Greece in the 4th century BCE when Aristotle was doing his thing. His treatise on rhetoric is a classic and maybe one of the most foundational writings on persuasion that we have.

And Aristotle's premise was that a persuasive speech can make three types of appeals. One is "ethos." This is persuasion that happens because the speaker seems to have strong character—they're credible. Aristotle thought ethos could be "the most powerful form of persuasion."

But what he thought the most legitimate form of persuasion was "logos." These are arguments rooted in logical reasoning. The idea is that we can get to the truth through a strictly rational process of induction and deduction.

The final item in the toolkit of rhetoric, though, is what Aristotle called "pathos." This when a speaker puts "the audience in the right frame of mind by appealing to the audience's emotions." And even though he had developed a pretty thorough account of pathos, he also argued that these emotional appeals should not be used to meddle with people's opinions. Stick to the facts—playing on emotions is not the path to truth!

Now, our understanding of emotion has come a long way in the last several hundred years, and psychologists have recently suggested that following our feelings isn't as irrational as we sometimes believe. But a careful dose of opinion science can help us get to the bottom of one thing—are emotional appeals actually persuasive in the first place?

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And today I'm super excited to share my conversation with Robin Nabi. She's a professor of Communication at the University of California-Santa Barbara where she studies the role of emotion in persuasion—particularly in health communication. She co-edited SAGE Handbook of Media Processes and Effects, her work has gotten awards from the International Communication Association, and also…she was darn pleasant to talk to. I had a really great time meeting her. In our conversation, we talk about what emotions even are, how feelings

like guilt and fear and mirth do and do not persuade us, and how we can also be persuaded by how different emotional experiences unfold over time. It was super fun, so let's jump in!

Andy Luttrell:
In looking at the background of your work, it sort of looks like the interest in emotion has been there kind of from the beginning. Is that true? Was the emotion sort of at the heart of your research program as a grad student and it has continued to inform what you do?

Robin Nabi:
It has. It has. I started in graduate school because I was interested in visuals and persuasion. I started in political communication context, working on a presidential campaign in the primaries, and we were focus grouping advertisements, and there was so much attention on how the candidate was portrayed in terms of imagery, and I thought this was really fascinating. So, I went to graduate school thinking I'm going to study persuasion and visuals, and I dug into the literature and found that there's very little at the time, in the '90s, and what I was finding was referring to emotion. So, I thought, "I guess I need to understand emotion," and I was hooked, so I've just stayed there.

I haven't really gotten back to the visual part, but the area of emotion is just fascinating.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, because my question was gonna be where did the interest come from, and did it seem like a compromise or did it seem like oh no, actually this emotion stuff is part of that visual world? It's not always expressed visually, but it is at the core of why the visual stuff was interesting.

Robin Nabi:
I would say it didn't feel like a compromise for long. I think initially it felt like, "Okay, I need to take a step back to go forward." But once I started looking at that literature, it became clear how fundamental emotions are to how we think, what we do, who we interact with, the behaviors that we do or don't do. It to me was such a central element to human behavior that, like I said, I was hooked. And looking at the persuasion and emotion literature, it felt like there was a lot left to do given the emphasis on fear, and a little bit of work on guilt, some work on humor, hardly anything on positive emotions, so it felt like a space where there was an opportunity to make a contribution.

Andy Luttrell:
And to put you on the spot to define something that it's taken us hundreds of years to get to, if we want to know what is an emotion exactly, what are you actually talking about that emotions are important? And maybe you can contrast it. The simple way to do it would be to contrast it with like how people often think about persuasion.

Robin Nabi:
That's a good question. I teach an emotion and communication class and I begin with there's no one clear definition of an emotion. You know, it's a motivational state that's associated with physiological arousal kind of captures the essence of what emotions are. We identify a number of characteristics of an emotion that are shared, whether positive or negative. Things like at its core, that there's thought and physiological arousal associated with each emotion, so those are central, and then we can think about the subjective feeling state, or kind of what we're experiencing and

what we are aware of. The facial expression that's associated with it, the motor expression or some outward behavior that we might see. Facial expression. Did I say that already? I'm sorry.

So, the cognitive, the physiological, the subjective feeling state, the motor expression or facial expression, the intention to act, and typically there's an objective target that we're responding to. So, again, take those criteria and say, "Okay, fear has that, anger has that, happiness has that, love has." So, again, there's no one right or clear definition of emotion, but I think what most people would be surprised about is that there's a cognitive element that's central to the emotional experience.

Andy Luttrell:
Which means what, exactly? That there's a cognitive element?

Robin Nabi:
So, there's a few different perspectives on emotion, and one that we use very heavily in communication is an appraisal perspective, which basically says that the thoughts that we have about our environment as it relates to our goals leads to our emotional experiences. So, if you are crossing a street, and you step into the crosswalk, and you look up and there's a car that's bearing down on you, very quickly you recognize that there is an imminent physical threat, and it's coming from you realizing, "I have the goal of survival and that car is counter to that goal." So, it's goal incongruent, "And I don't know if I'm gonna get out of this, and I don't know what the future holds for me," and that's where fear comes from.

Sometimes we are consciously aware that we have these thought patterns, but typically they're an automatic assessment, the cognitive assessment of what's happening in the environment that when we feel fear, it's because we're looking at the world in that way.

Andy Luttrell:
It's kind of like emotions don't strike us. They're sort of the product of the way that we're engaging with the situation we're in, and assessing it, and evaluating it, and making sense of it. Emotion is sort of like the feeling that bubbles up from that mental process, not so much like, "I'm struck by an emotion out of nowhere."

Robin Nabi:
Exactly. Exactly. So, going back to the point, most people think, "Oh, they become aware of that subjective feeling state." They are suddenly angry, or they're suddenly afraid, or they're suddenly feeling envious, and not being aware of the fact that it's from their perspective of how they're thinking about the world, so any intervention, for example with anxiety, or anger management, the goal is start becoming aware of how you're thinking about the situation. So, the two of us might be in the same situation of being on a roller coaster and you might be excited and I'm terrified, because I'm seeing it as a threat and you're seeing it as something that's going to be exhilarating.

Andy Luttrell:
And so, if we pull this into the world of persuasion, what does it mean that emotion could be part of the persuasion process? At what point would we say, "Oh, here's where emotion can fit in?"

Robin Nabi:
I would argue that you can see it fitting into every step of the process, right? So, if we think about this from a McGuire standpoint, right? Where we've got these steps, and perhaps the first one might be attention to a message. Well, something that's dramatic, and vivid, and emotional is more likely to get your attention than something that is not those things. So, if we consider a persuasive message has no effect if it's never seen, then emotion could be that message characteristic, right? Or the content generates an emotion that leads the audience to orient towards one message over another. So, it can just open the door to that possibility of persuasion.

Then, depending on what cognitive resources we still have available based on the intensity of our emotional arousal, that can influence how much we have leftover to actually engage with the content, the arguments that are being made. So, if we feel anger, anger as an approach emotion, we engage with our environment when we feel angry, we may be more inclined to find something relevant to that anger. So, when you think about the times… You seem like such an easygoing guy, but when you're angry, people ruminate, right? They're thinking about like, "Oh, when that person said this thing," and they're really engaged with that, so if this message contains information that's relevant to the topic of their anger, they may expend more cognitive effort processing that message than they would have another message.

Conversely, if someone is worried, very worried, afraid, then that may disrupt their cognitive engagement so that they would process more peripherally. So, not only can emotion influence what messages we see, but also how we engage with those messages. And then finally, if we go thinking about recall, we remember emotional things. Think about the advertisement that you remember and they're typically the ones that were funny, or the ones that were surprising, or the ones that were particularly gruesome or scary. Those are the ones we remember. I mean, we've seen thousands and thousands of ads, but the ones we remember are the ones that generate emotion, just like with any memory. We remember what's more emotional.

So, to me, it is a thread that runs through the entire process of persuasion.

Andy Luttrell:
I think my sense is assuming I'm feeling this emotion, all these things will happen. The thing that strikes me as somewhat tricky about the communication research on emotion and persuasion is there's kind of a tendency, or not a tendency, but there's an allure to calling it an emotional message. But a message can't feel emotion. That's where I often get stuck, like we talk about emotion as a quality that messages have, like this is an emotional message as compared to a non-emotional message. But that can't be, so what is it that's actually in these messages that we'd say, "This puts them in the domain of talking about emotion-based persuasion?"

Robin Nabi:
That's a great question and that is an issue, particularly with fear appeals, right? So, we call it a fear appeal, but it's just content that contains threatening information, so really when we think about what does the message have and where is the audience, the message contains information that's likely to be appraised as threatening, as offensive, as presenting the possibility of something positive in the future which could relate to hope. So, we have the themes of the emotion represented in the content, and then the assumption is that audiences, if they perceive those themes, will

therefore feel the emotion associated with that. With fear, the essence of fear is imminent physical harm, so if you put into a message someone who is texting and driving and they get into a car accident, you see the link between physical harm and that behavior, and as an audience member recognizing that, then you're more likely to feel fear than any other emotion.

Andy Luttrell:
Okay, so fear gets us started, so that's very helpful. So, the message contains content that would evoke this emotion, and we know that there are certain things that we can pretty reliably expect are the kind of features that are gonna make people feel a certain emotion, right? And that's the specificity of it too sometimes, right? It's fear. Not just generally it makes me feel bad, but it makes me afraid, and I know the kinds of things that will make people… put them into that state of fear. So, I thought what might be fun to do is to do a little bit of a discrete emotion speed round.

Robin Nabi:
Okay.

Andy Luttrell:
Not so much speed round in that you have to be very quick to answer, but if we could just sort of pop through different emotions just to kind of survey the breadth of work. Because the problem is the people have been studying this for a long time to different degrees. We know different amounts of things. But just to kind of give a flavor of what research in communication and persuasion would look like about emotion, I think this would get us there. So, if we start with fear, you already sort of unpacked the kinds of information that would generate fear, but what is sort of the state of the science in terms of is that an effective persuasion tool to put people into the state of fear? I'm necessarily simplifying it. I know that I'm doing it.

Robin Nabi:
Yeah. The meta-analyses on fear and persuasion say the more fear audiences feel, the more persuaded they are. It doesn't mean that every fear appeal works, every attempted fear appeal works, and that it doesn't sometimes backfire and have the exact opposite effect, but generally speaking, overall, the relationship is around a correlation of 0.2.

Andy Luttrell:
Which isn't huge, which suggests that there's sort of a push and pull, so do we know anything about when fear is especially impactful and when it's probably not gonna do much?

Robin Nabi:
Yes. And this is about 70 years of research that's been focusing on fear appeals, and the takeaway of this is that messages that evoke fear by presenting content that suggests a severe threat to which people are susceptible, that will generate fear, and that efficacy to act on protecting oneself is important to translating that fear into protecting the action. So, if I am a smoker and I'm told as a smoker you are susceptible to lung cancer, and that's a really awful thing, and it could kill you, okay, I now feel fear. But if you quit and you feel like you're able to quit, then in five years, your lungs will recover, and you'll be okay. So, that's the essence of the typical structure of an effective fear appeal.

The issue is the efficacy information, is are there actions that you can take that will help protect you, and are you actually able to do it? So, people went, "I know I should quit. I just don't feel like I'm able to." So, for someone in that situation, they may see a fear appeal, but because they don't feel able to quit, then they still need to deal with the fear that they're experiencing, so they might do something like, "Oh, that's an exaggeration," or, "You know, my grandfather smoked for 70 years and he died of something completely different," and, "Ah, they're just exaggerating." So, once the fear is aroused, we need to do something with it. It's like when you're hungry, you need to eat, right? It's not quite that extreme in terms of survival, but we do have this need and motivation to address this threat, and if we can do it by accepting the message, great. But there are other ways that we can resolve that fear through denial and denigrating the source, and other sorts of cognitive gymnastics to help ourselves feel better without actually protecting ourselves in the real world.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, so I think maybe an interesting analogy there to the hunger point is like if I want you to eat healthy food, the best thing I could do is make you hungry and then present you with healthy food options, right? You'd go like, "Oh. Perfect. I can use this to fill this need I have," and ooh, I accomplished my goal. I got you to eat healthy food. But if I forget to think forward to step two, and I don't have that healthy food available, and all that's around you is junk, this whole thing backfires because I made you hungry and then you go like, "Well, I need to eat," and so I'll just sort of grab what's around me and you go, "Oh, no, no, no, no. I didn't… This wasn't where I saw this going because I didn't think far enough ahead to know that I had to present you with the thing that would be the adaptive solution to this need state that you're in." That's kind of what you're saying with the fear thing, right? Like if I present you with a method for-

Robin Nabi:
I love that. Sorry. I love that analogy, Andy. I think that's fantastic, and I may just use that in my classes moving forward.

Andy Luttrell:
Perfect.

Robin Nabi:
Those who create fear appeals oftentimes don't know the literature and they focus on the fear. They go, "Okay, we're gonna make people feel this. We're gonna scare them." And we're really good at scaring people. That part's the easy part. It's how do you harness this, right? So that the behavior is in line with what your goals are. And that's exactly it. That's the presenting the healthy food and saying, "Go this way. Go left, not right."

Andy Luttrell:
Perfect. Okay. Super. All right, number two is guilt. In what ways can messages induce guilt and is that an effective strategy?

Robin Nabi:
I'm gonna answer the second part first. It can be and it might not be. It depends. The context. I suspect I'm gonna say that a lot during our speed round, but guilt comes from perceiving that we

have violated an internalized norm or moral code, so you feel guilty when you lie to someone. Not that you would, right? But it's because you believe you shouldn't lie to someone, so if you tell a fib, or you lie, you feel a little pang of guilt. It's because you violated that internalized moral code. So, we don't like feeling that way. When we feel guilt, our motivation is to make amends and to repair, but sometimes we can repair our sense of self by doing something other than complying with a message.

So, we see guilt used a lot in interpersonal contexts. We see it in families. We see it in marriages or dating relationships. And it can work, right? There's a lot of research on compliance in interpersonal communication, both in relationships, as well as between strangers, and it tends to work best when there's some relational obligation that you have with that person, because most of us know that when we're on the receiving end of the guilt trip, it feels terrible. And we don't like it. It's pretty toxic to a relationship. But when we're in a relationship of a couple years, in a family, where you really can't escape one another, then it tends to work. But if you are in a relationship where… A new relationship. You've been dating someone two weeks and they're like, "Oh, you didn't text. I was expecting it. I was so worried about you." You're like, "It's a little bit much. You're just making me feel bad about a little mistake."

So, it can be very… It can backfire, right? In both interpersonal and media. But the research on interpersonal compliance gaming and guilt suggests that there is a positive relationship between the amount of guilt and the amount of compliance, and that relationship is about a 0.26 or so correlation. So, in the same ballpark as fear. Maybe a little bit stronger.

But what's interesting is that in media messages, it's the exact opposite, that the relationship is about a negative 0.26 or negative 0.28, so the more guilt that a message tries to evoke, the more likely it is to backfire. And when you think about particularly ads asking for donations, where they say, "You're at home. You're comfortable in your house. You have enough food. You have enough water. Think about fill in the blank." I mean, right now there's in Ukraine people suffering tremendously, right? And so, we could use compassion. We could use sympathy. But if we use guilt, I'd say, "All right. Well, I could donate," but just like with fear, we want to get rid of it quickly. Even more so with guilt. We want to get rid of it quickly, so we'll try to resolve it ASAP. The easiest way to resolve it is let me go online, let me find a reputable place to make a donation, let me get out my credit card and I'm gonna make a donation. Or is the easiest thing to do say, "You know what? I give my money to these other organizations, or I donated before, or I need my money because I've got a lot of bills and inflation is happening." And so, we justify or rationalize.

So, our goal is to repair, but sometimes we repair by denying, by rejecting the source. A big issue that comes up with guilt is that we feel angry, that if you tried to make me feel guilty for being late for this call, for example, I might think, "I don't know you. How dare you make me feel like I'm a terrible person because I was a few minutes late?" So, that anger leads me to then reject any request that you make of me. So, when you see an ad, or a story, or some appeal that's using guilt, you might feel manipulated. And as a result, get angry, and then how do you get back at that person? I'm gonna reject your message.

Andy Luttrell:
It reminds me so much, it seems like reactance fits so well into the guilt story, where… You know, reactance being this thing where you go, "You're trying to corner me and make me do something, but I'm a person with my own free will and I resent you for putting me in the corner," and then the whole thing shatters because people then are trying to reassert their own ability to make their own choices. And it seems like that would come into play a lot with guilt appeals more than maybe these other kind of emotional appeals.

Robin Nabi:
Absolutely. It can appear in multiple contexts, but in guilt it seems the most salient, and in fact, some research has shown that the stronger the guilt appeal is, it's almost like this curvilinear relationship. The more intense the effort is to evoke guilt, at a certain point guilt starts to become lower and anger gets higher, so you see a linear relationship with anger for the strength of the guilt appeal, but a curvilinear relationship in the amount of guilt that's evoked based on the strength of these guilt appeals.

There was a time when scholars thought reactance couldn't be measured, couldn't actually be assessed. It's a motivational state. Can't really measure it. And then Jim Dillard in the discipline of communication worked on maybe we really can measure this, and in essence identified both cognition and the emotion of anger as being central to the experience of reactance. So, when you said, "Oh, reactance and anger," yes, they go together.

Andy Luttrell:
And that transitions us into anger specifically. Is anger an emotion that can be levied in a persuasive way?

Robin Nabi:
It can and there hasn't been as much work on anger, although we did a meta-analysis pretty recently on anger and persuasion. The first issue to consider is whether the anger is relevant to the decision at hand or not. So, for example, if I feel anger in response to a message, but it's really coming from reactance to feeling manipulated, that anger is going to be counterproductive. But with anger, we feel demeaned, right? So, you feel angry when someone cuts you off in traffic because you're like, "That was my space. I was going. You think you're better than me. You're ahead of me." And so, our goal that's set by that anger is to get back at that person, to reestablish yourself and your autonomy, and to protect your territory.

So, with anger, if I want to mobilize a group of people to act and I make them angry and say, "You're being mistreated. This organization isn't respecting you. This political candidate thinks that they can get away with X or Y. We need to stand up. We need to fight for this." And so, anger can be wonderful at mobilizing groups of people to take action.

Andy Luttrell:
When it's tied to what we're taking action toward.

Robin Nabi:
Exactly. Exactly. So, what we want, and this is an issue with anger appeals, is what is the target of the anger? Why is this person angry? Typically, with emotion and persuasion work, we measure the emotions. When you were exposed to this message, how much did you feel fear, anger, sadness, et cetera? But with anger in particular, it's important to know what the target is. Because if I'm angry because I felt like you were manipulating me or I'm angry at the political candidate, or maybe I'm angry at the news organization because they're… So, depending on the target, that's who I'm gonna want to go after and that's typically not measured in many anger and persuasion studies.

I'll also a little coda here which is just to highlight the relevance, there's a good amount of research that focuses on people who are in an angry state before they get the persuasive message, and now they get a message that's unrelated to the topic of their anger, so that's an issue because if I'm angry and you give me information that's on that topic, okay, I might soak that up. But if it's unrelated, it's actually a distraction because I'm ruminating and thinking about, "Okay, how can I deal with this problem?" Wait, you're giving me a message over here? I don't have the energy and bandwidth for that. I'm focused over here.

So, you'll see in the literature this kind of discrepancy. Does anger lead to closer attention or less close? Well, again, it depends. If the topic of the message is relevant to the anger that the audience is feeling, then they may really attend to it carefully. Otherwise, it just becomes noise to them.

Andy Luttrell:
Okay, final emotion on our list is humor, which gets wrapped up in emotions. That's why I included it in there, but it has its own… We talked to Danna Young for this podcast.

Robin Nabi:
Oh, you did. Great.

Andy Luttrell:
A year or so ago, so we've already covered humor a little bit, but as a reminder, what does humor have to do with persuasion?

Robin Nabi:
Well, I will say humor is linked to the emotion of amusement, and there've been a few meta-analyses on humor and persuasion. It's interesting because most… A lot of the work on advertising is proprietary, so we don't really know what these organizations might know, but in terms of the academic literature, the meta-analyses suggest that it can work. However, it may not actually affect behaviors as much. So, it could influence things like attention to a message, liking of a message, it could actually negatively affect the perception of a source because they might not be taken as seriously, so there could be some credibility issues there. People tend to recall things that are funny and that can be beneficial. They may even intend to purchase a product, but the effects on actual behavior have been more mixed.

So, again, it all depends on context. One issue that I think is really critical with humor, and I mentioned this earlier, is issues of selective exposure which haven't been tested. So,

overwhelmingly all of this research, regardless of the emotion, is done in a lab where we bring people in, or they're doing an online study, and we say, "Okay, read this message. What were your emotions? And what are your intentions?" And maybe we follow up on behaviors later. But if the real value of something like humor appeal is getting your attention in the first place, then it may be that humor could be more persuasive than its non-humorous counterpart simply because it gets attention.

But the research comparing humorous to non-humorous versions of the same message suggests it's heavily dependent on many contextual variables. In terms of things like behavior at that end.

Andy Luttrell:
My gripe with that research is that the humorous appeals aren't always especially funny.

Robin Nabi:
Not only that, but oftentimes, and thank you for reminding me of this point, that like with anger, it depends on what the humor is associated with. If the point that you're trying to get your audience to understand is wrapped in with humor, people are gonna remember that. But if the humor is an aside, it's gonna be a distraction. So, how the humor is embedded in the message is important. So, this all comes down to message construction. We could have a funny message and we could measure how amused the audience was, but we really need to look at where was the humor? Was it related to what I really wanted you to remember? Or was it ancillary to that point?

Andy Luttrell:
So, those are all of my emotions on the speed round, but your points about humor and anger are kind of general thoughts that I was having too, which is what is the target of these emotions? And I often have this struggle with fear appeals specifically. It has always been the part where I have a hard time wrapping my head around what is the persuasive thing fear is doing? Because that's sort of the… By calling it a fear appeal, makes it seem like fear is being persuasive. But it's often… It's not a fear attached to the premise. I mean, I think about persuasion as attitude change, first and foremost, and so sort of it's like what is the attitude I'm trying to change, what's the opinion I'm trying to update, and I'm not really making you afraid in a way that that fear is about the issue itself, right?

So, for a health appeal, so I say I want people to wear masks when they go outside, right? During the pandemic. The fear that I would inject is not about masks. It's about the virus, right? So, I sort of make you afraid generally and then offer up the actual topic of my message as an antidote to that fear. And so, that's always why it sort of strikes me as funny to call it a fear appeal, because I'm not making you afraid… I'm not trying to convince you that COVID is bad. That's not my goal. If it was, then fear would be a great way to do it. My goal is actually to convince you that masks are good, and so that's why it's like the fear actually is kind of not directly relevant to the topic of my message. It's just the foundation upon which I can argue for the goodness of my premise. I don't know if that makes sense.

Robin Nabi:
It does. I would say that if the goal from a public health standpoint is to stop the spread of a virus that can kill people or make them very sick, then the fear is relevant because there is something

out there that people are susceptible to based on their behaviors of engaging with others when this virus is circulating, and maybe they're not worried enough about the potential threat to their health or to other people's health that they're not engaging in behavior that can help protect their health and other people's health. So, recognizing really what that fear is doing, and I agree with you that calling it a fear appeal maybe isn't the best language, but a threat appeal, saying there is a threat out there that you're not aware of, maybe you don't realize that smoking can cause the kinds of effects that it can. Maybe you're not aware of it, but if I make you aware of it, you'll be sufficiently concerned that you will then engage in protective behavior.

My goal isn't really to get you to wear… Yes, my goal is to get you to wear a mask, but really my goal is to protect your health. And the mask is that efficacious response that I put in for the ultimate goal of protecting health. So, any anti-smoking campaign or anti-drug campaign, or healthy eating, whatever it might be, the goal ultimately is to encourage people to engage in behaviors that will keep them healthy. And if they're doing something that is threatening to that, I want to bring their awareness to that threat to hopefully motivate them to change their behavior. Does that make sense?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. In that way, it kind of syncs up with gain/loss frames, which are super common it seems in health communication, right? So, gain/loss frames being either do this thing in order to prevent this bad stuff from happening to you or do this thing because it'll bring all these wonderful benefits to your life. And it seems like a fear appeal, quote unquote, is like a special case of a loss frame. To say like, "Let me make sure you know what could happen to you," that's just to start out our argumentative premise, and then introduce you to sort of the thing that's going to help you prevent those bad things. As opposed to a game frame, which just kind of ignores the possibility that there's bad stuff out there and just says like, "Oh, just start doing this and nice things will happen."

I mean, is there much crossover there with the gain/loss frame and fear appeals?

Robin Nabi:
There is, but not as directly as I think you expressed it. I think the way you expressed it, I was nodding the whole time you were, because like yes, exactly, that loss-framed messages map onto fear appeals because you're focusing on, "Hey, if you do this behavior, here's the bad thing that will happen." And then we provide that solution. But if you stop doing that or you do this other thing, then you'll be protected, and all will be well.

So, I wouldn't say that every loss frame is necessarily a fear appeal, but all fear appeals are focusing on something that you have to lose, particularly related to your health.

Andy Luttrell:
So, that kind of moves us I think into the notion that messages are not necessarily one and done emotions, that if I present you with a message, it's not that I uniformly make you afraid, or I uniformly make you feel angry in this moment. But as we've kind of been seeing in a few of these cases, it's really sort of an unfolding of an emotional experience that changes as we process the message, which brings us to some newer perspectives that you brought to this. And I'm just curious kind of like at what point did it occur to you that we'd been a little misguided in referring to these

messages with uniform emotional labels when really they might be something a little more nuanced than that?

Robin Nabi:
I'm trying to remember when I first had the thought, but it was definitely a number of years before I actually published something on it, because these ideas take a little bit of time. But I think just the realization that we're looking at fear, but the other emotions are being evoked at the same time. There was an article in the '90s that measured a bunch of different emotions and found that fear appeals evoked more than fear. They evoked fear, and anger, and some other happiness sometimes even, and so there'd been this sort of idea that multiple emotions existed and kind of co-occurred. I think the guilt literature, where we see, "Oh, look, there's guilt and then there's anger. That's interesting."

So, it was kind of percolating in a few different ways, and then I became interested in the emotion of hope. I don't know if I just got tired of studying fear, but hope has become really fascinating to me as a persuasive tool, and when you look at a fear appeal, it's pretty clear that the first part is threat based and should evoke fear. The second part is efficacy based and no one was saying what the emotion was that would be associated with that. And when we think about our own lives, as events unfold, our emotions shift. So, it only makes sense that as messages unfold, our emotions would shift. We experience this in public service announcements, in TV shows, and we experience this. That's just normal in our lives. And yet when we're exposing ourselves to these messages, we're looking at them at this monolithic, "It is fear." So, I think that at some point it just kind of all came together to start looking at what happens when you look at different parts of a message and what emotions are likely associated with those different pieces.

There's an interesting public service announcement. It was a Canadian one and it's a melanoma awareness ad called Dear 16-year-old Me. So, you can look this up. It went viral. Over 10 million viewers. But I think that might have been the moment things crystallized for me in part, because it begins with humor and they say a couple of funny things about, "Dear 16-year-old Me, don't get that perm. It's not a good look on you." That sort of thing. And it's just different people who are saying something to their 16-year-old self. And then eventually they go, "Dear 16-year-old Me, this is where they'll take the cancer out," and each person shows a part of their body where the cancer has been removed, so they're all melanoma survivors.

And they go into just different bits as they rotate among these various speakers of what their experience was like, and it really gets upsetting. Then there's a really sad story of a woman whose husband passed away from melanoma. And then it switches to a doctor saying, "But this isn't about fear. This isn't about being afraid. This is something you can see right on your skin, and you can do something about it." And by the end, they're all smiling. And I just remember seeing that and thinking like, "This is fascinating to me from an emotion standpoint because they're so clearly taking you on this emotional journey." And I started becoming interested in how did those transitions between emotions facilitate persuasion.

Andy Luttrell:
It's interesting, because it seems like it links to your interest in narratives also, right? Because what is a good narrative? A story that is one note, one emotion, is not a good story. But a story that

has… That's what a story is, is you're on this emotional journey and there are ups, and there are downs, and there's sort of a change over time, and so so much of I think the narrative persuasion ethos is just like, "Well, we know that stories are captivating, so why can't we just use them for some persuasive outcome?" And in some ways, the insight kind of then runs the other direction, which is like, "Well, if stories can do this, what are kind of the essential features of a story?" And it's that you go on this sort of changing journey.

And so, in a situation like that, where it sounds like it's an advertisement that starts off with humor, transitions into fear maybe, sadness, and ends on hope, why would that journey be anything special from a persuasion perspective?

Robin Nabi:
If we imagine that emotions do different things in terms of how we engage with them cognitively, maybe we're not in the mood for something sad, but sure, something funny, that sounds good. So, when I'm trying to get through the clutter of everything that's out there on the internet and in the world, maybe that little bit of humor in the beginning, "Oh, this might be entertaining. I think I'll watch this." So, the humor might be a great thing to get our attention. Maybe it's not the best, the idea of focusing on the perm that you didn't get or did get. That's not relevant to the content but it's enough to get your attention.

Sadness is associated with being more contemplative, so if I want you to really hear what I'm saying and to think about it, then having someone be in a state of sadness, or at least touching someone else's sadness in that way, hearing those sad stories, they might really stop and take that in and sit with that for a little bit.

Fear, on the other hand, might not do that for us. We just want to know, "What do I do? What do I do? Wear a mask? Okay. I'll do that." They're not really engaging. So, if I really want you to think about this so it can have more long-term effects, then sadness might really be wonderful for that. We don't like to feel sad. We don't want to feel sad for too long, especially when we thought something was gonna be funny, so if I transition into hope, oh, who doesn't like to feel hope? The only thing bad about hope is not having it according to Lazarus. This is something that uplifts us, and inspires us, and motivates us, so if we only had humor, maybe it wouldn't be relevant enough for something this serious. It might even be offensive because it seems like we're making fun of it. It might be perfect for that piece of the persuasion process and getting attention.

So, what I would argue is that different emotions have different benefits or gifts that they can give us. And if we can sequence them in light of what we're trying to accomplish and who our audience is, we may increase the likelihood that our message is gonna be heard and understood as we intended and have more long-lasting impact. I can't emphasize enough how much the fact that the overwhelming majority of emotion and persuasion research… In fact, persuasion research broadly takes place in the lab, not a competitive media environment where we're fighting to get attention to our messages. And so, once we take it out of the lab, it's great that we can understand the processes that each emotion might induce in audiences cognitively, but in the real world, we really need to think about how do we get attention.

And so, that, I think starting with attention, and then with comprehension, through change, and recall, and action, that how do these different emotions aid at each step seems like a valuable next step for emotion and persuasion research.

Andy Luttrell:
It strikes me too; it's reminding me of the comment I was making about fear appeals. And what I like about this emotion flow idea, that this is about a journey, is it does sort of highlight that it almost seems like maybe hope is maybe the most proximal emotion, like what the fear is doing is just sort of setting up phase two, which is the emotion that actually sort of motivates this attitude change or behavioral commitment in the same way that the ad you're talking about, like ultimately we need to get people to hope. But we can't get them there unless we reel them in with humor, anchor them at sadness, and then, only then, does it make any sense to have that ultimate push, the persuasive push, which is that sort of hope push.

Robin Nabi:
The interesting thing about fear and hope is they're two sides of the same coin in a lot of ways, right? You oftentimes feel hope when what we're experiencing in our lives isn't positive. So, I might be worried that I'm going to lose my job, but I hope I don't, right? But I don't need hope if my job is secure, so the hope exists when there's worry, so it's like the fear part of a fear appeal allows the efficacy part of a fear appeal to elevate our experiences of hope, if that makes sense. So, with efficacy, and this is going back to thinking about what is the emotion associated with that second part of a fear appeal efficacy, when… Self-efficacy is basically the idea that I believe I can do something. I have confidence that I can take an action. But just because I have confidence doesn't mean that I'm gonna do it.

I could be confident that I can parallel park, but it doesn't mean that I'm gonna do it, right? It's just I think I can. But if I'm hopeful, that's the motivation to actually do something. So, I know I could not eat Thin Mints. My daughter's a Girl Scout. We've got Thin Mints everywhere. It's like I believe I can, but just because I believe it doesn't mean I'm gonna act on it. The hope is the thing that allows us to act, we would argue. So, we have some data that shows controlling on every other variable in a fear appeal, hope explains additional variance in the outcome.

And we found some interaction between hope and self-efficacy, so it's like the two work together. Because this is… Emotions are fleeting. They're generally pretty fleeting, right? So, what we would hope is that the emotions that we evoke in the context of these messages lead to enough engagement with a message that the content of the message sticks with us. So, the emotion is that tool that helps it stick, but you want audiences to engage, right? So, if I just had feelings of hope but there was no efficacy there, the hope will fade. It's the efficacy that can lead to more long-term, tomorrow, next week, next month I'm still thinking about wearing sunscreen to protect myself.

So, there's again, this emotion, these other cognitive constructs. They're intertwined with one another. If we look at just the emotion, that may be that spark that fades quickly. If we look at just the thought, it may be there, but there's no motivation to act on them. So, putting them together is where the magic happens.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, where the magic happens sounds like a reasonable place to wrap up, so thank you so much for taking the time to walk us through what emotions do for persuasion. This was all super interesting.

Robin Nabi:
Oh, this was my pleasure, honestly Andy. Thank you.

Andy Luttrell:
Alrighty, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thanks so much to Robin Nabi for taking the time to be on the show. We had like the most incompatible schedules as we were trying to set this up, and I'm so glad we made it work. Check out the show notes or the webpage for this episode for links to Robin's website and the research she talked about today.

While you're futzing around on the Internet, maybe you could leave a quick review of the show? May I suggest "Five stars"? Make sure you're subscribed to the podcast—some exciting stuff is around the corner. Next week you'll hear from Elliot Morris, a data journalist and election forecaster for The Economist, and after that a special summer series on communicating social science to the world! Stay tuned.

Oh also—shoutout to voiceover artist Marck Wilder who recorded the fake emotional advertisements at the top of the show. I was so excited about how those came out.

Announcer:
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