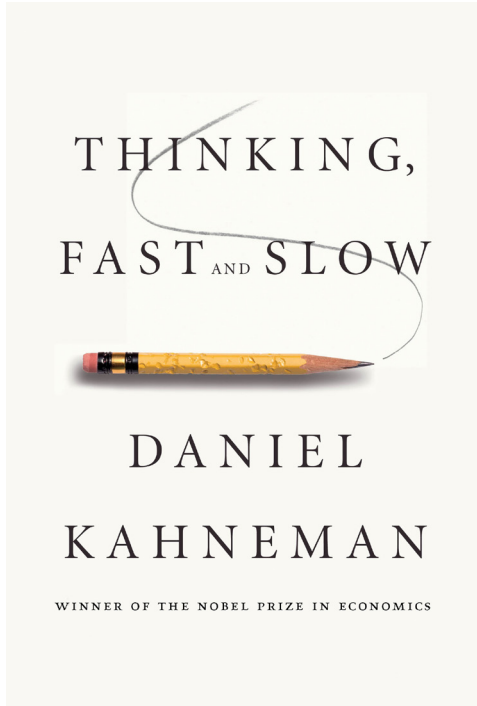




PSYCHOLOGICAL PRIMER

An Introduction to Useful Theories
for Strategic Communication



The following summary of several key psychological insights is not meant to be exhaustive—there are dozens of useful theories and hundreds of studies to explore. This primer is intended to orient you to relevant theories, and arm you with basic vocabulary and ideas to explore the use of psychology in your work.

These ideas are adapted from a number of studies, and draw significantly from *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, by Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman.

AFFECT

Liking Someone or Something Colors Our Judgments About Them

“(J)udgments and decisions are guided directly by feelings of liking and disliking, with little deliberation or reasoning.”

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

People are more apt to make positive judgments about people (and products, organizations, etc.) if they *like* them. They will ascribe all sorts of positive attributes to someone or something they feel good about.

For example, voters are more likely to consider a politician they like to be trustworthy and competent—even though their emotional response to the candidate’s personality has nothing to do with his or her honesty and competence.

This tendency is often called the “halo affect.” It is extremely important in work on social issues, because it is fundamental in shaping people’s responses and judgments to other people. Descriptions and images of the people involved in a cause must encourage the audience to like them.

Activating the halo affect can be accomplished through narratives and images of people who appeal to the audience. They may be people just like them, people they aspire to be like and/or people whose values and personalities they admire.



This photo of a boy in a poor township in South Africa, which accompanies our brand message for the Ford Foundation, encourages liking and respect.

AGENCY

We Make Sense of Situations by Creating Stories of Actors With Agency

“The mind...appears to have a special aptitude for the construction and interpretation of stories about active agents, who have personalities, habits, and abilities.”

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

“A sentence is understood more easily if it describes what an agent does than if it describes what something is...”

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

Our minds are hard-wired to make sense of the world through creating narratives featuring actors with agency, whose actions are intentional.

We are wired to see causality and intention in a situation, even when it isn't there. This is why we can be quick to place blame when something goes wrong, even if no one is really at fault. It's why leaders get credit or blame for things they don't actually control, like the President's approval rating being tied to the country's economic performance.

It is one of the reasons narrative is such a powerful tool for persuasion. Putting people in the picture, as protagonists in a story, facilitates understanding and belief.

For example, the message R&D team at Hattaway Communications was asked to reframe the national debate about the 2009 financial crisis, because political leaders and commentators were blaming the collapse of financial institutions on people who got mortgages they couldn't afford.

We changed the story to blame the crisis on financial speculators who tricked people into unsafe loans and hid the risk from investors. This made it easy for people to wrap their heads around a complex situation—and support reforms to protect consumers from the bad actors in the financial system.

It's important to attach personal attributes or personality traits to the actor or protagonist: “Your mind is ready and even eager to identify agents, assign them personality traits and specific intentions, and view their actions as expressing individual propensities.”

Ascribing intentions to the protagonist shapes people's judgments, in positive or negative ways. So, in our narrative about the economic crisis, the “fast-talking mortgage brokers” and “Wall Street speculators” were “looking to get rich quick.”

ASSOCIATION

Words and Images Activate Networks of Ideas and Feelings

“(I)deas that have been evoked trigger many other ideas, in a spreading cascade of activity in your brain.”

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

“Association” lies at the heart of how we create psychological effects through communication. Words and images activate associations in people’s minds. Striving to make sense of things, our brains immediately draw connections between ideas, experiences and feelings stored in memory.

The associations we activate with language and visuals will heavily influence how people judge and react to our messages. We must be aware of the powerful “priming effect” of words when testing and selecting language: The first word a person sees or hears will create associations that color their responses to anything that follows.

For example, a study on priming effects found that introducing the idea of money primes “individualism: a reluctance to be involved with others, to depend on others, or to accept demands from others.” This insight has profound implications for messages about taxes, government spending, income inequality and related issues. Talking about or showing images of money—such as saying the “rich should pay their fair share” in taxes—may make people *less* likely to support policies that “spread the wealth.”

Images can have powerful priming effects. A study of voting patterns on school funding ballot measures found that “exposing people to images of classrooms and school lockers also increased the tendency of participants to support a school initiative.”

The first step in message R&D is to understand the connections people draw immediately upon hearing or seeing a message or image. We also need to elicit the narratives they have constructed in their heads to make sense of a cause or situation. We can then explore narratives, metaphors, language and images that activate the appropriate associations.

AVAILABILITY

People Attach More Importance to Issues They Readily Remember

“People tend to assess the relative importance of issues by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory—and this is largely determined by the extent of coverage in the media.”

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

People’s judgments are often influenced by ideas and information that they easily recall from memory. They attach importance to issues that are “top of mind,” judging them to be more meaningful than issues they don’t recall immediately. News coverage, social media conversations and stories in entertainment media are powerful ways to keep causes top of mind.

Of course, issues that are prominent in news and social media are not necessarily more important than issues that get less buzz and visibility. Think of hunger and poverty in poor countries, which affects billions of people but gets infrequent media attention—and is not likely to be on the mind of most Americans. Consistent, frequent repetition of messages and images through advertising and marketing are important tools to keep issues on the public agenda.

Also, as noted in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, “public interest is most easily aroused by dramatic events and by celebrities.” This speaks to the value of creating media-worthy events and deploying famous people to raise the visibility of causes and campaigns.

FAMILIARITY

Ideas that Sound Familiar are More Likely to be Regarded as Truthful

“A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth.”

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW

When faced with new situations or information, we tend to make instant judgments about them based on their resemblance to something we have previously seen, heard or experienced.

So, if a fact or assertion “sounds familiar,” we’re more likely to trust the information, even if it’s not true. The impression of familiarity is extremely powerful in influencing people’s judgments of information as true or false.

Frequent repetition of an idea makes it feel familiar. You don’t even have to repeat a complete idea or sentence to create this effect; simply repeating a word or phrase will increase its familiarity, and imbue the idea it is attached to with a sense of truth.

So the old adage is true: “If you repeat a lie often enough, people will start to believe it.” This dynamic shows the power of frequency in message delivery, through advertising, social media and news media. Training messengers for a cause to repeat messages and ideas consistently will enhance the persuasive power of the message.

This also suggests the importance of *not* repeating bad information or arguments, even when refuting them. The source of the “bad” idea and the logic of the argument against it are likely to be forgotten—but the gist of the falsehood will feel familiar to people, and they will be more likely to believe it.

Psychological studies show this dynamic applies to people, as well as ideas. Many people find it harder to understand and trust others whose culture or background are unfamiliar to them. Familiarity through repeated exposures to others makes us feel safe, and “form(s) the basis for social organization and cohesion.” Making audiences more familiar with others through interactions, advertising or entertainment programs can help build trust.