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Don't Tell Me Again

By Richard Morin

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You might remember Hitler's Big Lie Theory: Tell people something is true often enough and they'll come to believe it.

Now, a team of psychologists say their experiments have revealed a new twist to that perverse postulation: Repeatedly tell older people that something is false and a few days later they'll think it is true -- a phenomenon that makes senior citizens particularly susceptible to misleading marketing campaigns, these researchers claim.

"The key result highlights an extremely undesirable . . . side effect of the warnings: The more often older adults were told that a claim was false, the more likely they were to remember it erroneously as true after a three-day delay," reported Norbert Schwarz and Carolyn Yoon of the University of Michigan, Ian Skurnik of the University of Toronto and Denise C. Park of the University of Illinois in the March issue of the Journal of Consumer Research.

Their study involved 32 men and women who were 25 years old or younger and an equal number of adults older than 70. All participants were screened to make sure they were free of any serious medical disorders or mental impairments. Then they were shown statements about medical claims that were immediately identified as being true or false; researchers called this the "study" phase of the experiment.

Some statements and cues as to their accuracy appeared only once; others appeared three times. A half-hour later, the participants were tested to see if they could correctly identify the statements as true or false. Three days later, they were tested again.

Of course, both groups were more successful at remembering which statements were true when tested 30 minutes after the study phase. Three days later, both groups made more mistakes. But what was particularly interesting to the researchers was the difference that repetition had on the two age groups.

As might be expected, the younger adults were more likely to correctly remember both true and false statements if they saw the statement and accompanying cue more than once in the study phase of the experiment. Repetition, in other words, strengthened the young participants' memories.

Not so for the older participants. Far from improving their memories, repetition of the false information made them more likely to identify a false statement as true than if they saw it only once. In all, the older crowd incorrectly identified 40 percent of the false claims as being true after repeatedly seeing the statements and cues, compared to 28 percent after one viewing.

And to add to the mystery, older people were more likely to correctly recall that a statement was true after the longer delay -- it was the false ones they mixed up.

The Look-Alike Vote

Are people more inclined to vote for candidates who look like them? Your Unconventional Wiz never thought to ask. But four researchers at Stanford University did -- and then devised a clever way to find out.

Their preliminary conclusions: Men were significantly more likely to support a candidate who resembled them. But among women, just the opposite was true, though that result may have as much to do with the vagaries of the test as with the actual preferences of female voters, reported Jeremy N. Bailenson, Philip Garland, Shanto Iyengar and Nick Yee of Stanford's communications department.

The study team tested 72 undergraduates, who were divided into groups and seated in front of a computer monitor where each was shown a photograph of a fictitious Democratic candidate named "Tom Steele." Half the respondents saw a photo that had not been altered in any way.

The other half saw a computer-generated version that had been "morphed" with a photo of the student to produce an image that contained 40 percent of the participant's facial characteristics.

That's so cool was the Wiz's reaction (although when he glanced at the two altered photos published in the study, he thought they looked a whole lot more like the undiluted Tom Steele than like either of the students whose facial features had been morphed into the original).

But no matter. The researchers found that the men who viewed the digitally blended photo were significantly more likely to say in a follow-up survey that they would vote for Steele. Guys also rated the Mini-me Steele as smarter, more sincere and more hard-working, and better-looking -- exactly what the researchers had predicted would happen.

Most women, however, preferred the unretouched Steele and gave their morph an emphatic thumbs down. That contradicted the researchers' theory that people like people who are most like them. They were puzzled. Perhaps, these scientists speculated, seeing female characteristics blended into a man's face unconsciously primed the women to think of gender differences and then to "punish" Steele for being a man.

Then again, there might be a simpler explanation: Perhaps seeing the face of someone who is 60 percent male and 40 percent female creeped them out. "It simply may be more difficult to achieve a realistic morph between genders than within genders," the researchers suggested in their working paper, which is posted on the Web site of Stanford's political communication lab.

Another Reason to Turn Off the TV

Rochelle Newman has this advice for parents eagerly awaiting their baby's first words: Quiet, please!

That's because noisy environments can interfere with language development in infants younger than 13 months, said Newman, a cognitive psychologist and director of the University of Maryland's Language Perception and Development Laboratories.

Newman found that babies, during their first year, find it hard to distinguish between voices in even mildly noisy rooms, much less amid the cacophony of sounds that fill many homes or day-care facilities. Basically, all that well-intentioned cribside chatter by parents gets drowned out by background noise.

Newman developed a series of individualized audio recordings and played them in her lab to each of 100 infants. In one recording, an unfamiliar female voice repeatedly called the child's name, while in the background other voices created a potential distraction. The second version differed only in that the female voice called out someone else's name.

Both versions were played for each infant while researchers measured how long the babies paid attention. Newman also varied the loudness of the background noise in the recordings.

She found that at about 5 months, a significantly greater number of children listened longer to their own names than to other names -- but only when the background noise was minimal. "The five-month-olds could separate the streams of conversation and focus on the voice calling to them if the background was at a level you might find in a romantic restaurant with soft and intimate conversations," Newman said in a statement announcing the results of the study. "But at that age the kids couldn't isolate the foreground voice if the noise level nearly doubled -- what you might hear in a crowded fast food restaurant."

However, by 13 months, babies had far less difficulty picking their names out amid background clamor -- just in time for their first trip to McDonald's.

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