

The Use Of Fear Appeals

Hewgill and Miller recognized that high fear appeals may be less effective than mild fear appeals if they cause subjects to employ defense mechanisms and thereby tune out the message. They reasoned, however, that under some circumstances, high fear appeals are more effective than mild. They thought this effect would occur when the speaker's credibility is high and when the threat is made not to the receiver but to the receiver's family, so they designed a message directing fear toward family members. They hypothesized that, with such a message, high fear appeals would be more effective if the speaker's initial credibility were high and that low fear appeals would be more effective if the speaker's initial credibility were low.

They used the following *methods*. The message was a taped question-and-answer interview in which a speaker advocated community fallout shelters rather than family shelters. All messages contained the same basic content, but, in the high fear conditions, 13 statements concerned physical injury or death to spouse and children. Credibility was manipulated by introducing the speaker either as (1) a professor of nuclear research or (2) a high school sophomore whose information came from a term paper. The four versions of the message (high fear/high credibility, high fear/low credibility, low fear/high credibility, and low fear/low credibility) were presented to 90 members of a PTA group in Flint, Michigan.

Each group was told the researchers were considering using the interview to educate the public on fallout protection and that they needed personal reactions. Subjects filled out scales on concern for family during the message, attitudes to community and fallout shelters, and perceptions of the speaker's competence, trustworthiness, and dynamism. To test treatment validity, the researchers examined levels of anxiety aroused by the message. Overall, the high fear condition led to more anxiety than the low fear condition, but this difference was significant only for the high credibility speaker.

The *results* showed that, for the high credibility speaker, high fear appeals were more effective in producing attitude change than low fear appeals, as hypothesized. No attitude difference between types of appeals was found for the low credibility speaker, but this may have been due to a failure of the experimental induction in this condition. Regardless of this fact, the study was deemed a success in that "it is one of the few reported experimental results in which a highly threatening message was more effective than one posing a limited threat." It appears that source credibility is an important factor in the success of emotional appeals.

Source: Murray A. Hewgill and Gerald R. Miller, "Source Credibility and Response to Fear-Arousing Communications," *Speech Monographs*, 32 (1965), 95-101.