

DAVID NEEQUAYE

SUBTLE INFLUENCE AND INFORMATION DISCLOSURE: HOW PRIMING WORKS IN INTELLIGENCE

In his book *The Black Banners*, Ali Soufan, a former FBI intelligence interviewer, describes an interesting case when he used subtle influence tactics that ultimately led an al-Qaeda operative – Anas al-Mekki – to disclose sensitive information.

Based on the available intelligence, Soufan deduced that al-Mekki valued respect highly. Thus, to facilitate the likelihood that al-Mekki would disclose information, Soufan shrewdly increased al-Mekki's perceptions that he was respected by altering the previously bare interview room to resemble a homely living room.

In addition, Soufan allowed al-Mekki to remain uncuffed during their interview sessions and, when attempting to elicit information, Soufan drew on al-Mekki's need for respect by being firm but friendly and respectful.

PRIMING TO PROMOTE INFORMATION DISCLOSURE

Social psychologists refer to such tactics, where a particular perception or motivation is covertly increased to influence a target's behaviour, as priming.

An emerging body of psychological research suggests that priming motivations, which is likely to promote information disclosure, leads interviewees to share more information in intelligence interviews.

For example, in what interviewees believed was a concentration exercise, an American group of researchers, Dawson, Hartwig and Brimbal, primed trust and feelings of security by instructing the interviewees to reflect on a personal relationship with a confidant. Some other interviewees were not primed. Subsequently, all the interviewees, who possessed information about a mock terror attack, were interviewed about the attack.

The results of the experiment indicated that those interviewees whose feelings of trust and security were previously primed disclosed more information than their counterparts who were not primed.

Similar to Soufan's example, another experiment in the same lab demonstrated that the contextual features of an interview room, like its size and interior design, could be used to prime interviewees' tendencies to be either open and forthcoming with information, or closed and hold back information.

These researchers found that interviewees who were interviewed in a spacious room with open windows were more forthcoming with information compared to those interviewed in an enclosed windowless room.

These research findings are promising because they offer intelligence interviewers the possibility of greater information gain through using various priming tactics to strategically activate interviewees' motivations to share information. However, as with many fledgling scientific studies, the underlying mechanisms that give rise to the influence of priming tactics on information disclosure remain unknown.

Identifying the specific processes and conditions that lead primed interviewees to share information is particularly important, because such knowledge affords interviewers the opportunity to implement priming tactics efficiently and accurately.

HOW DOES PRIMING WORK?

Current theories of priming suggest that in the first instance priming increases the ease with which the primed motivation, for example the intention to offer beneficial assistance to another, comes to an individual's mind. This initial step in the priming process is important because, due to their subtle nature, individuals typically misattribute the ease with which the primed motivation comes to their mind as self- rather than prime-generated.

Furthermore, classic psychological research indicates that individuals are likely to draw on motivations that they can easily remember when making decisions, instead of searching their memories exhaustively. Thus, priming influences behaviour because it increases the mental accessibility of the primed motivation, which in turn leads the primed individual to draw on the previously primed motivation (that they can now easily remember) to behave in a prime-consistent manner. Crucially, however, priming is most likely to influence behaviour in situations that encourage the performance of the prime-congruent behaviour.



Recent research has examined two theoretical assumptions:

- Priming influences disclosure by increasing interviewees' mental accessibility to the primed motivation; hence, predisposing the interviewee to behave in a prime-consistent manner;
- Such predisposition is most likely to increase disclosure when the interviewer uses an interview style that draws on the primed motivation and encourages the interviewee to behave in a prime-consistent manner.

PRIMING HELPFULNESS

Previous research has demonstrated that activating individuals' helpfulness motivations increases their cooperativeness in various domains. Such increased interviewee cooperation fits neatly with the interviewer's task of soliciting information, since a cooperative interviewee is likely to share reliable information.

In my research, participants assumed the role of an informant with information about an impending terrorist attack. Before they were interviewed, in what they believed was an unrelated reflection exercise, half of the participants were primed with helpfulness motivations using a guided imagination and writing task. In line with practical recommendations on goal activation, the participants were instructed to reflect on and write about how they felt right before engaging in a helpful behaviour. The remaining half received no helpfulness prime. After the priming, all the participants' predisposition to be helpful was assessed using an implicit helpfulness mental accessibility measure.

Subsequently, an interviewer solicited information about the attack using an interview style that either drew on the interviewee's helpfulness motivations or consisted of direct

questions. Compared to the unprimed participants, those participants whose helpfulness motivations had been primed disclosed more information when the interviewer used the interview style that sought to draw on helpfulness motivations.

Importantly, however, the results also revealed that irrespective of whether an interviewee was primed or not, the interview style that sought to draw on helpfulness motivations, in contrast to direct questions, was less successful among those participants least predisposed to be helpful.

These findings provide some important information that could be useful to interviewers who intend to add subtle influence tactics such as priming to their interviewing toolkit. First, it is crucial to tailor the priming tactic, such as modifying the interior features of the interview room, to fit some specific disclosure-related characteristic of the interviewee, like the need to feel relevant, in order to effectively predispose them toward disclosing information.

Second, when interacting with the interviewee to elicit information, use an interview style that embodies an interpersonal approach that draws on the primed motivation, as this is most likely to maximise the primed interviewee's disclosure.

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David Neequaye is a final year doctoral candidate in Psychology at the University of Gothenburg. His research focuses on subtle influence tactics in investigative interviewing.