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# Before Breaking Bad News: Relationships Among Topic, Reasons for Sharing, Messenger Concerns, and the Reluctance to Share the News

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Before Breaking Bad News: Relationships Among Topic, Reasons for Sharing, Messenger  
Concerns, and the Reluctance to Share the News

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### Abstract

Messengers are reluctant to reveal bad news, and this reluctance can hamper effective communication. With this investigation, we explore linkages among the topic of the news, messengers' reasons for sharing, messenger concerns about sharing, the locus of the news, and whether these variables associate systematically with messenger reluctance to share the news. Retrospective self-reports ( $N = 330$ ) revealed that bad news occurred in reliable topic categories, which in turn related to reasons for sharing, how extreme the news was perceived to be, and the concerns messengers had before sharing the bad news. Messengers reported more reluctance to share the news when they were also the locus of the news than when they were not, and they felt reluctance was greater when the topic was seen as more extreme. Theoretical implications and limitations are discussed.

*Keywords:* bad news, breaking bad news, MUM effect, undesirable messages

### Before Breaking Bad News: Relationships Among Topic, Reasons for Sharing, Messenger Concerns, and the Reluctance to Share the News

People are generally uncomfortable and reluctant to deliver bad news relative to good news (e.g., Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, & Messersmith, 2011; Bond & Anderson, 1987; Buckman, 1984; Dibble, 2014; Dibble & Levine, 2010, 2013; Tesser & Rosen, 1975; Weenig, Wilke, & ter Mors, 2014). This discomfort with breaking bad news can lead messengers to modify the bad news to make it seem less negative (Brown & Levinson, 1987), to delay the onset of the message (Bond & Anderson, 1987; Dibble & Levine, 2010), or to withhold the bad news altogether (Tesser & Rosen, 1975). However, bad news messages often contain information that is important to the recipient and distorting or omitting certain information may leave the recipient less able to plan, make decisions, and adequately respond. For instance, failing college students need to know their grade status if they are to take corrective action. Likewise, employees who are underperforming require timely feedback to benefit both the employee and the organization. A messenger's discomfort with sharing bad news, therefore, may conflict with a recipient's need for complete information, which creates a potentially troublesome communication situation. Thus, understanding factors that contribute to people's hesitation to share bad news is important to identify ways of improving the bad news delivery process and avoid unnecessary miscommunication or non-communication of bad news.

### **Bad News**

*Bad news* is a message containing information that is assumed to be previously unknown to a receiver, anticipated to be personally relevant to the receiver, and is perceived by the messenger to be negatively valenced by the receiver (Dibble, 2012). Since Tesser and Rosen's (1975) early work on the MUM effect (keeping *Mum* about *Undesirable Messages*) and its

potentially detrimental consequences for bad news delivery situations, research on the reluctance to share bad news has revealed at least two additional important theoretic insights. First, various types of bad news occur with regularity within specific contexts. For example, Wagoner and Waldron (1999) classified negative feedback messages from supervisors to subordinates according to four topic categories (denied requests, broken rules, termination, and external circumstances). Second, researchers have suggested that messengers' hesitation to share bad news is motivated by concerns about the self (e.g., self-presentation), the other (e.g., hurting the recipient's emotions), and/or the relationship between messenger and recipient (e.g., damage to the relationship) (Bond & Anderson, 1987; Buckman, 1984; Dibble & Levine, 2010, 2013; Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012; Tesser & Rosen, 1975; Uysal & Oner-Ozkan, 2007; Weenig et al., 2014). The next step is to search for links between the typologies and concerns (i.e., situational/contextual variables) previously identified and the consequences of those kinds of bad news sharing situations. We extend this further by examining additional factors such as the messenger's reasons for sharing the bad news, the locus of the news, and the relationship between the messenger and the recipient. In this way, we hope to illuminate more of the mechanisms underlying bad news disclosures. Identifying these mechanisms is important for theory building as well as to support practical interventions that can assist those who break bad news on a routine basis (e.g., health care providers, law enforcement officers, educators, supervisors).

Bad news messages can vary according to their values on an array of underlying dimensions that have to do with the nature of the bad news itself. For example, all bad news messages convey negative information (i.e., the *valence* is negative by definition), but the *extremity* of a message refers to the degree of positivity (in the case of good news) or negativity

(as with bad news; see, for example, Heath, 1996; Sweeny & Shepperd, 2007); that is, just as there are gradations of good news, there are gradations of bad news (Dibble & Levine, 2010, 2013; Fallowfield & Jenkins, 2004). Next, some messengers relay bad news about events for which they are directly responsible, whereas other messengers are not responsible for the bad news event. The root stimulus or event responsible for bringing about any negative consequences implied by the bad news message is the *locus* of the bad news (Dibble, 2012). The negative consequences could be localized in one or a combination of four possibilities: messenger, recipient, a third party, or some other external event. To illustrate, some messengers deliver bad news about events for which they themselves are responsible (e.g., “*I am choosing to break up with you*”); some messengers deliver bad news about events for which the recipient is responsible (e.g., “*You fell short of the grade necessary for passing the class*”); other messengers deliver bad news about events created by a third party (e.g., a lawyer to a client: “*The judge said you have to serve some time in jail*”), and some messengers deliver bad news about events attributable to some external situation (e.g., “*The hurricane destroyed your mom’s house*”). In the preceding examples, the locus of the bad news is the messenger, the recipient, the judge, and the hurricane, respectively. It is useful to note that messengers are not necessarily also the locus of the bad news, although they sometimes can be. Treating the locus and messenger as separate aspects is useful for research purposes and also fits lay intuition; indeed, the meaning of the folk expression “Don’t kill the messenger” requires recognition that the messenger does not necessarily have to be the one responsible for the bad outcomes.

Finally, other factors related to the *relationship* between the messenger and the recipient (e.g., acquaintance, significant other, superior) are also likely to influence the messenger’s expectations prior to sharing bad news, by way of the differential *concerns* implied (Brown &

Levinson, 1987; Buckman, 1984; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Dibble, 2014). For example, messengers who do not know the recipient well might be highly concerned about self-presentation and politeness because, without personal knowledge of the recipient, messengers are left with little more than basic politeness norms to guide their movements. In contrast, messengers who are close friends with the recipient with whom trust has been developed can afford to use less formal politeness and might even get away with teasing and other forms of intentional embarrassment as a means by which to signal the strength of the relationship in spite of the bad news (see Dibble & Levine, 2013; Kowalski, Howerton, & McKenzie, 2001; Sharkey, 1993).

### **Research Propositions**

This research explores the reluctance associated with delivering bad news and the concerns that drive that reluctance. Specifically, we seek to identify topics of bad news that messengers deliver, determine the extent to which these topics can be differentiated based on the bad news dimensions established by previous research, and identify messenger-reported concerns associated with various topics of bad news. As mentioned above, at least one study has classified topics of bad news within supervisor—subordinate communication (Wagoner & Waldron, 1999). We connect to this earlier work by exploring whether more general topics of bad news might be identified, and we extend this research by exploring messengers' reasons for sharing the bad news. Because little empirical work has investigated these issues together, we pose the following research questions.

- RQ1:      What topics of bad news messages do messengers recall sharing with others?
- RQ2:      When faced with delivering bad news, what reasons do respondents give for giving the bad news?

By definition, bad news that is more extreme is more negative. The MUM effect holds that the more negative the bad news, the more reluctance messengers experience (Rosen & Tesser, 1970; Tesser & Rosen, 1975), and evidence abounds for this effect (e.g., Dibble & Levine, 2010, 2013; Dibble et al., 2015). As a result, we predict the following.

H1: Perceived extremity and reluctance will be positively related.

A major contribution of the current research is to explore combinations of various dimensions within bad news delivery situations. As we noted above, Wagoner and Waldron (1999) identified naturally occurring types of bad news within the supervisor—subordinate context. We take inspiration from their research and extend it by looking for naturally occurring types of bad news that may be more general than within the supervisor—subordinate setting. In addition, Wagoner and Waldron focused mainly on events that occur *during* bad news delivery. Although they coded the topic of the supervisors' bad news, Wagoner and Waldron did not assess other “upstream” variables that might have influenced their supervisors' experiences of bad news delivery. Reasons for sharing the news, the locus of the bad news, perceived extremity, and felt reluctance could combine with the topic of the news to change the experience of the messenger *before* the delivery of the news. Because these variables have not yet been examined, we ask the following research question:

RQ3a-d: In what ways do (a) reasons for sharing the bad news, (b) locus of the bad news, (c) perceived extremity, and (d) perceived reluctance vary according to the topic of the bad news?

Bad news about an event for which one is responsible (i.e., messenger is the locus) should be more difficult to share than bad news for which one is not responsible because of the increased potential to be blamed for the bad news. In other words, most deliverers of bad news



expect to hurt the recipient in general, but messengers-as-loci might realize they are particularly open to blame, which could exacerbate the face-threatening nature of the disclosure (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, all else being equal, messengers who double as the locus of the bad news should report greater reluctance to share that news than messengers who are not also the locus of the bad news.

H2: Messengers who report being the locus of the bad news will report greater reluctance to share the news than messengers who are not also the locus of the bad news.

Messengers convey bad news about a certain topic, for certain reasons, and those messengers may or may not be responsible for the necessity of the impending conversation. Because not all bad news is created equal, we should expect messengers to harbor different concerns prior to delivering the bad news. As we noted earlier, Buckman (1984) classified some of these concerns within the physician—patient context. However, physician concerns may or may not generalize to other contexts. For example, because they possess more medical expertise than do their patients, physicians are often concerned that patients will expect them to know more than they actually do, and this concern will drive physicians' reluctance to share the bad news. We wonder whether this concern compares to situations not restricted to physician—patient settings, and we wonder further what other concerns may or may not emerge when we cast a wider net. In the current study, we explore whether more general concerns, which are not restricted to a single relationship context, can be identified, as well as whether the concerns vary according to the topic of the bad news.

RQ4: When faced with delivering bad news, what concerns do messengers anticipate?

RQ5: How do messengers' concerns vary according to the topic of the bad news?

Finally, this study also extends research on the MUM effect. The MUM effect holds that people are hesitant to share bad news even when it is in the recipient's best interest to have the information (Rosen & Tesser, 1970; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). This hesitation can be behavioral (e.g., delaying the onset of the bad news message, omitting portions of the message) and/or psychological (e.g., felt reluctance). Evidence also suggests that messengers experience psychological reluctance differently depending on whether the recipient is a stranger or a friend (e.g., Weenig et al., 2014). All else being equal, messengers may feel more reluctance when sharing bad news with strangers because uncertainty may be greater about how the recipient will react. Messengers are left with little more than general politeness norms to guide their delivery. Because friends are less uncertain about each other's behaviors and tendencies, messengers may feel less reluctance when sharing with a friend. Interestingly, Dibble and Levine (2013) tested this logic. Although they found that messengers-as-friends (but never messengers-as-strangers), at times, would tease the recipient in the course of delivering news of a low test score, they found no statistically significant effect for relationship closeness on temporal delay before sharing the news. Unfortunately, the lack of convergence between the behavioral data from Dibble and Levine and the self-report data from Weenig et al. weakens the grounds for a clear prediction. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ6: To what extent does the reluctance reported by messengers differ based on the relationship between the messenger and recipient?

### **Method**

The current study is largely exploratory. As a starting point, and consistent with other exploratory research (e.g., Aune, Metts, & Ebesu Hubbard, 1998; Wagoner & Waldron, 1999),

we gathered retrospective accounts of natural instances of bad news delivery, determined whether types of bad news could be identified, identified the extent to which any bad news types that emerged could be differentiated based on dimensions underlying the bad news (e.g., extremity, locus, reasons, concerns), and probed for associations among combinations of these dimensions. We employed a self-report design in which participants provided open-ended accounts of their bad news-sharing experiences, and the research was IRB approved.

### **Participants & Procedures**

Participants ( $N = 330$ ; 177 women, 148 men, 5 respondents did not indicate sex,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.9$  years, age range 17-66 years,  $SD = 5.74$ , 7 respondents did not indicate age) were recruited from various undergraduate communication courses at a culturally diverse university (ethnic/cultural backgrounds: Multi-ethnic/cultural [38.5], Asian [37.6%], EuroAmerican [8.5%], African American [4.5%], European [3.0%], Hispanic [1.8%], Pacific Islander [1.5%], Other [3.0%], not reported [2.4%]), and they received course credit for their participation. Participants were free to report on a bad news situation of their choosing and were thus provided with the following instruction: “Think back to a time when you had to share bad news with someone. Now, *place yourself back to the time before you actually shared this bad news* and answer the following questions,” which included a combination of open- and closed-ended items.

Participants typically completed the questionnaire within 15 minutes.

### **Coding Procedure for Categorical Variables**

Responses to open-ended questions were coded for the five variables of interest: Relationship, Locus of Bad News, Topic, Reasons, and Concerns. The categories for Relationship and Locus were straightforward. Relationship ( $n = 339$ ) was broken into four categories: acquaintance/friend (24.8%); family, best friend, significant other (67.6%);

professional (e.g., boss/subordinate, teacher/student, coworker; 6.2%); other (1.5%). Locus of bad news ( $n = 330$ ) identified who caused the bad news event; with whom did the bad news originate: the messenger (e.g., I want to breakup, I had an accident; 55.8%), the recipient of the bad news (e.g., telling a person she/he broke a rule/law, evaluating a person's performance; 4.2%), or a third person (e.g., giving a diagnosis, gossiping; 39.4%), and two were uncodable (0.6%). The Topic, Reasons, and Concerns categories were generated inductively using content analysis. The second author and an undergraduate assistant together began the creation of thematic categories for the three categories using twenty randomly selected questionnaires. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The undergraduate assistant then independently coded an additional 20 questionnaires, which were then independently coded by the second author. An 86% agreement was reached; disagreements were discussed and clarified. The student independently coded the remaining questionnaires. Because the original number of categories within each variable was unmanageable, the categories within each of the three variables were collapsed based on similarity of themes. The second author then randomly coded fifteen percent of the questionnaires coded by the assistant to establish intercoder reliability (minus the 40 questionnaires used for training and initial agreement; however, these were included in subsequent statistical analyses). Intercoder reliability was computed using Scott's  $\pi$  (1955), which adjusts for chance agreement. Intercoder reliability for the variables Relationship, Locus, and Topic was not necessary because the coders had 100% agreement on these variable categories.  $\pi$  values for the remaining variables were .88 for Reasons (91.0% agreement) and .89 for Concerns (93% agreement). For the variables that did not achieve 100% agreement, disagreements were resolved through discussion and only the post-resolution data were subjected to the analyses that follow.

### Measurement of Continuous Variables

Perceived extremity and reluctance were measured using dedicated sets of Likert items constructed for this study, both featured a 7-step response set anchored by 1 (not at all) and 7 (very much). Higher numbers reflected greater levels of the variable.

**Extremity.** Extremity was measured with four items: “In your mind, how bad did you think the news would be to the receiver?”, “In your mind, how serious did you think the news would be to the receiver?”, “In your mind, how extreme did you think the news would be to the receiver?”, and “In your mind, how painful did you think the news would be to the receiver?”. Exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring revealed these items to form a single dimension that accounted for 78.57% of the variance, and these items were internally consistent (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

**Reluctance.** Reluctance was measured using five items: “To what extent did you feel reluctant to share this bad news?”, “To what extent did you feel uneasy about sharing this bad news?”, “To what extent were you hesitant to share this bad news?”, “To what extent were you afraid to share this bad news?”, and “To what extent did you feel like you wanted to stall before sharing this bad news?”. Exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring revealed these items also to be unidimensional (accounting for 70.96% of the variance), and the items were internally consistent (Cronbach’s alpha = .89).

### Results

RQ1 asked what topics of bad news messengers report sharing with others. Four topics emerged from the data: physical well-being, severing of relationships, disapprovals or disappointments, and external circumstances/problematic situations (see Appendix A for descriptions of the topics). A goodness-of-fit chi-square showed that respondents reported

sharing bad news about disapprovals or disappointments more than would be expected by chance and was by far the most widely reported. Severing of relationships and external circumstances/problematic situations were reported less often than would be expected by chance,  $\chi^2(3) = 234.39, p < .001, n = 330$  (see Table 1).

RQ2 asked the reasons for giving bad news. We identified three primary reasons for sharing bad news: messenger oriented reasons, recipient oriented reasons, and practicality (to accomplish a task). Two reasons were uncodable (see Appendix B for a description of the reasons). A total of 464 reasons for sharing bad news were reported; 70.7% of respondents reported a single reason, 27.6% reported two reasons, and 1.7% reported three reasons.

The cases where multiple responses emerged raised challenges for traditional statistical methods because we did not wish to violate assumptions of independence of responses. Following Sharkey, decision rules needed to be established to address the multiple responses (Sharkey, 1992; Sharkey, Kim, & Diggs, 2001; Sharkey, Park, & Kim, 2004; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990). A number of respondents reported a combination of reasons. To preserve as much data as possible and maintain the integrity of the data, Sharkey suggested adding additional categories to represent these combinations of categories (Sharkey, 1992; Sharkey et al. 2004). Thus, we added three new categories, one for each *combination* of reasons taken two at a time (e.g., messenger/recipient, messenger/practicality, recipient/practicality). For the small number of respondents ( $n = 8$ ) who listed three reasons, we took the first two reasons and discarded the third reason (see Sharkey, 1992). Here, we were able to combine the reasons while avoiding adding cells/categories with extremely low cell counts. The decision to combine responses gave us a clearer understanding of how people make the choice to deliver bad news to a recipient; some people have more than one reason for giving bad news. A goodness-of-fit chi-square

revealed that respondents reported that there were more recipient oriented reasons and more practical reasons and fewer messenger oriented reasons (including messenger/recipient and messenger/practicality) for giving bad news than would be expected by chance,  $\chi^2(5) = 84.5, p < .001, n = 328$  (See Table 1).

Regarding H1, we inspected the bivariate correlation to test our prediction that reluctance would be positively related to perceived extremity. As predicted, the more extreme the bad news, the more reluctance messengers reported,  $r = .37, p$  (two-tailed)  $< .01, n = 328$ . Thus, H1 was supported.

RQ3 addressed four related questions, each essentially asking whether a particular variable covaried with the topic of the bad news being shared. RQ3a asked whether the reasons for sharing the bad news vary according to the topic. A cross tabulation analysis revealed a significant association between reasons and topic,  $\chi^2(15) = 46.28, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .22, n = 328$ . In particular, adjusted standardized residuals showed that when a person had to provide bad news about a relationship being severed, practicality was the reason given more than would be expected by chance, while recipient-oriented reasons were given less than would be expected. Also, when problematic external circumstances constituted the topic of the bad news, respondents claimed, more than would be assumed by chance, the reason for delivering the bad news was messenger-oriented. Last, when physical well-being was the topic of bad news, respondents stated, more than expected, the reason for providing the bad news was recipient-oriented and not practical or a combination of messenger oriented and practical reasons (see Table 2).

RQ3b asked whether the locus of the news was associated with the topic of the bad news. A chi-square test revealed a significant association between topic and locus,  $\chi^2(6) = 145.35, p <$

.001, Cramer's  $V = .47$ ,  $N = 328$ . The adjusted standardized residuals suggested that when the topic was physical well-being, the locus of the bad news was more likely to be a third party, whereas the locus was less likely than expected to be the messenger or the recipient. By contrast, disapprovals/disappointments as well as relationships severed were more likely than expected to have the messenger as the locus of the bad news, and third parties less likely than expected to be the locus of the bad news (see Table 2).

RQ3c asked whether certain topics influenced the perceived extremity of the news. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect for topic on extremity,  $F(3, 324) = 6.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons revealed that bad news about severing a relationship or physical well-being were viewed as generally more extreme than disapprovals/disappointments or bad news due to external circumstances (see Table 3).

Finally, RQ3d addressed whether perceived reluctance varied as a function of the topic of the bad news. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect for topic,  $F(3, 326) = 6.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons showed the greatest reluctances to be associated with severing a relationship and disapprovals/disappointments, with the least reluctances associated with external circumstances and physical well-being (see Table 3).

We predicted messengers who reported being the locus of the bad news would report greater reluctance than messengers who were not the locus of the bad news (H2). A planned contrast tested whether messenger-as-locus triggered greater reluctance than the two groups where messenger was not the locus (e.g., receiver-as-locus, third person-as-locus). Consistent with our prediction, reluctance was greater when the messenger was the locus of the bad news ( $M_{\text{messenger-as-locus}} = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ,  $n = 184$ ), compared to when the messenger was not also the locus ( $M_{\text{receiver-as-locus}} = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ,  $n = 14$ ;  $M_{\text{third person-as-locus}} = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ,  $n = 130$ ),



$t(325) = 4.08, p < .01, r = .22$ . Thus, H2 was supported. Post-hoc comparisons showed that reluctance did not differ between receiver-as-locus or third person-as-locus.

RQ4 asked what concerns messengers had regarding the bad news they had to deliver. Five categories of concerns were identified: reaction of the receiver, impact on messenger, delivery, collateral damage/consequences of the bad news, and no concerns (21 responses were not codable (see Appendix C for descriptions of respondents' concerns). As with the reasons for sharing bad news, some respondents reported multiple concerns. A total of 351 concerns were reported; 87.2% of respondents reported a single concern, 12.0% reported two concerns, and 0.9% reported three concerns. Once again, to avoid violating the assumption of independence of responses and to retain as much of the data for the "concerns" variable as possible, we combined repetitive combinations of concerns. A number of participants were concerned with both the recipient's reaction and collateral damage before delivering bad news ( $n = 31$ ). Following Sharkey's multiple response decision rules (Sharkey, 1992; Sharkey et al., 2004), we combined these two concerns and formed a sixth concern category (i.e., reaction/collateral damage). For those participants who listed three concerns ( $n = 3$ ), each person listed concern for recipient's reaction, collateral damage, and some third concern; we retained the combination of recipient reaction and collateral damage and discarded the additional concern (see Sharkey, 1992). Viewing concerns reported (minus the three discarded concerns), a goodness-of-fit chi-square revealed that respondents reported that they were concerned with the receiver's reaction far more than would be expected by chance and less likely to be concerned with the impact on the messenger, the delivery of the message, and the combination of concern for reaction of receiver and collateral damage. Additionally, fewer participants than expected by chance reported having no concerns,  $\chi^2(5) = 73.41, p < .001, n = 306$  (see Table 1).

RQ5 asked whether the messenger's concerns about sharing the bad news were associated with the topic of the bad news. A cross tabulation analysis revealed a significant association between concerns and topic,  $\chi^2(12) = 34.74, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .20, n = 306$ . When the topic was physical well-being, messengers, more than expected by chance, reported having no concerns about sharing the bad news as well as concerns about the reaction of the recipient; messengers were less concerned than expected about any collateral damage/consequences of sharing the bad news. By contrast, when the topic was disapprovals/disappointments, messengers reported being more concerned about the impact on themselves and about collateral damage or the combination of collateral damage and the reaction of the recipient; interestingly, messengers were less concerned about the recipient's reaction singularly, or they had no concerns about sharing disapprovals/disappointments (see Table 2).

Finally, we questioned (RQ6) whether the reluctance reported by messengers would differ based on the nature of the messenger's relationship with the receiver. For statistical analysis, to avoid violating the assumption of independence of responses, whenever participants provided more than one relationship, we chose to combine them into a fourth category, "mixed relationships." Mean reluctance ratings by relationship were as follows: family member, best friend, or significant other ( $M = 4.67, SD = 1.68, n = 222$ ); acquaintance/friend ( $M = 4.25, SD = 1.61, n = 69$ ); professional ( $M = 3.90, SD = 1.39, n = 14$ ); and mixed relationships ( $M = 3.27, SD = 1.57, n = 15$ ). Because they were small in number ( $n = 3$ ), we excluded from this analysis cases where participants reported the sole relationship as "other." A one-way ANOVA using reluctance as the dependent variable and relationship as the predictor indicated that an association existed,  $F(3, 319) = 4.71, p = .003, \eta^2 = .043, power = .90$ . Hence, reluctance varied based on the relationship the messenger had with the recipient. Tukey's HSD post-hoc

comparisons indicated that mean reluctances differed between family/best friend/significant other and mixed relationships ( $p = .009$ ), but no other means differed significantly. Nonetheless, the raw means arrayed such that the greater reluctances appeared to accompany the closer relationships.

### **Discussion**

Although people will describe many kinds of negative information as bad news, not all bad news is created equal. As our data suggest, bad news can be organized according to various dimensions, and some of these dimensions seem to vary systematically with one another. Identifying patterns of systematic variation is an important step to help messengers recognize the ramifications of the bad news they are about to deliver and to help them adjust accordingly. In this way, we hope messengers can lessen the barriers associated with delivering bad news and, thereby, facilitate more effective communication with recipients.

Our data revealed four broad topics of bad news: physical well-being, severing of relationships, disapprovals or disappointments, and external circumstances/problematic situations. Although bad news varies, it does seem that the bad news topics people recall sharing can be organized reliably into patterns. This is consistent with Wagoner and Waldron (1999) who found topical regularity in bad news messages conveyed by supervisors to employees. Moreover, Wagoner and Waldron's topics of poor performance, broken rules, and external circumstances seemed similar to our topics of disapprovals/disappointments and external circumstances. Given that our categories were derived inductively from our data, and given that we let respondents choose from any past bad news sharing experience, to see some overlap suggests that these categories (or categories like these) may generalize to a wider range of contexts.

Regardless of the context in which bad news is presented, all messengers have their reasons, or motivations, for providing the bad news. We are not surprised, then, that respondents reported a variety of reasons for sharing their bad news, and because people may have multiple goals for any single communication situation (Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989), some of our respondents reported more than one reason. Messengers' reasons for providing bad news seemed to associate with the topic of the bad news (RQ3a). For instance, bad news about severing a relationship (e.g., romantic breakup or a business firing) tended to be shared for practicality (an instrumental task) over recipient-centered reasons. By comparison, when the bad news was about an external and/or problematic circumstance like a disaster, murder, or third-party rumor, the reason tended to be more messenger-focused. These findings highlight the flexible nature of communication goals in general, but also the flexibility of goals within the same context (sharing bad news). That is, to know the reason(s) a messenger communicates a piece of bad news requires knowing more than the simple fact that the news is bad. People must also consider aspects like the topic of the news to learn clues to the reason(s) for that news to be shared.

We also found the locus of the bad news varies according to topic (RQ3b). Bad news about physical well-being was generally localized in some third party. That is, these issues were typically not brought about by the messengers or the receivers themselves but by another individual who was injured or who passed away. Many of our participants indicated a health care practitioner or law enforcement officer passed along the bad news to the messenger (participant) who then relayed the bad news to the recipient. This finding has practical implications for those who routinely deliver bad news. For example, health care providers experience anxiety when having to deliver bad news to a client, and this anxiety drives much of

the reluctance to share the news (Merker, Hanson, & Poston, 2010). Consistent with this finding, our data also showed that messengers feel more reluctance when they themselves are the locus (H2). Thus, perhaps teaching health care practitioners to be mindful that physical health issues in general are localized outside the messenger might promote self-talk that the practitioner can use to prepare for the interaction and mitigate some of the anxiety by way of reduced reluctance. This strategy should be enhanced to the extent that non-medical professionals are also mindful that the messenger did not cause the health issue.

By contrast, when the bad news message concerned a disappointment/disapproval or the severing of a relationship, it frequently amounted to the messenger being disappointed in or wanting to end one's relationship with the recipient. That is, the messenger was the locus. These findings might help somewhat to smooth a difficult communication encounter in that messengers might be encouraged to prepare receivers regarding the topic of their eventual conversation. If people do tend to attribute disappointments to their messengers, then messengers can provide a kind of warning before delivering the actual bad news by priming recipients with the basic topic. Indeed, some authors have suggested that messengers give recipients a bit of warning before breaking the news (see Bies, 2012). In this way, recipients might prepare for the encounter, which may promote more effective communication for both themselves and the messenger.

Bad news clearly varies in its extremity (i.e., how bad it is; Dibble & Levine, 2010). Our data mapped topics of bad news according to their extremity to reveal that severed relationships and physical well-being issues were seen as more extreme than disapprovals/disappointments or external circumstances (RQ3c). Perhaps this finding has to do with the relative (real or potential) permanence of each topic. That is, severing a relationship and physical problems can be

potentially final. By contrast, most disappointments are minor in comparison because there may be opportunities to rectify the disappointments. We would expect situations perceived as being more final or permanent to be more extreme than situations in which there could be an opportunity for restitution and repair. Alternatively or in addition, severed relationships and physical well-being issues might signal more emotional investment, which may contribute to the perception that they are more extreme. Indeed, messengers who face delivering bad news commonly fear unleashing emotional reactions in recipients (e.g., Buckman, 1984) and having their own mood worsened (e.g., Dibble, 2014). Future research should continue to identify the role of emotions in the bad news delivery process as well as what influences messengers' appraisal of the extremity of the news.

Interestingly, the results we observed regarding extremity did not replicate perfectly when mapping topics according to the reluctance they generated in messengers (RQ3d). Of the two topics perceived as most extreme (severed relationships, physical well-being), only severed relationships also generated higher reluctance, whereas disapprovals/disappointments generated reluctance without being perceived as extreme. That is, although reluctance and extremity were positively correlated (H1), they did not map the same onto our topics. Perhaps whatever causes the extremity of a bad news topic is not entirely the same device that causes the reluctance messengers experience when attempting to share the bad news. For example, whereas the topic drove the perceived extremity, perhaps the concerns about sharing the bad news drove the psychological reluctance felt by the messenger. If extremity and reluctance do indeed follow separate (if overlapping) mechanisms, then future research on these mechanisms and/or possible moderators should help messengers to make more accurate appraisals of bad news sharing situations and thus maximize desired communication outcomes.

We also found that messengers reported various concerns about the bad news they had to share (RQ4): reaction of the receiver, impact on the messenger, the messenger's delivery, and collateral damage/consequences of the bad news, as well as a combination of these concerns. Further, respondents reported that when they needed to discuss the topic of physical well-being, they were more likely than expected to have no concerns or were concerned with the possible reaction of the recipient and were less likely than expected to be concerned about any collateral damage/consequences or collateral damage along with the reaction of the recipient (RQ5). Given that messengers viewed physical well-being issues to be located primarily in a third party and not in the messenger, it is not surprising that this topic does not trigger concerns about the self-presentation of the messenger. However, messengers may be concerned about how the recipient might react to the news that a third party passed away or was injured. This is consistent with reports of physicians being concerned about the reaction of the patient (e.g., Buckman, 1984).

Additionally, we discovered that when the topic of bad news was disapproval/disappointment, the messengers were concerned with the impact the information may have on themselves, collateral damage, or a combination of reaction of the recipient and collateral damage. Messengers were less likely than expected to be concerned about the reaction of the recipient. Indeed, early MUM effect experiments suggested the messenger's hesitation to share bad news is, to some extent, driven by self-presentation concerns (e.g., Bond & Anderson, 1987; Uysal & Oner-Ozkan, 2007). That is, messengers present a public display of hesitation because they do not want to look bad to the recipient. Such concerns should be heightened in situations in which messengers have to admit their own wrongdoing. Additionally, some messengers were worried about how the disapproval/disappointment message may damage the

relationship they have with the recipient. Depending on the severity of the disapproval/disappointment message, messengers may fear damaging the recipient's face, which could result in long-lasting negative relational consequences (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Finally, although the effects were not strong, we did find that messengers were more reluctant to share the bad news with a family member or significant other than with a recipient for whom more than one label applied (e.g., friend or professional contact). Moreover, the raw means trended such that the closer the relationship, the greater the reluctance. Regarding the first finding, perhaps having more than one way to relate to a recipient somehow buffers the messenger's reluctance in a way similar to how groups might buffer the stress experienced by an individual (e.g., Bertucci, Conte, Johnson, & Johnson, 2010). If this is true, messengers who have multiple ties to the recipient might be better bearers of bad news in that they might experience the lowest reluctance (hence more optimal communication). Of course, our data permit speculation only, but we hope follow-up research will examine this idea.

At the same time, if greater reluctances accompany closer relationships, then our data appear to conflict with prior studies. For example, Weenig et al. (2014) found that messengers were less reluctant to share rumored bad news with a close friend than with a stranger, and Dibble and Levine (2013) also observed that messengers hesitated longer when the recipient was a stranger versus a friend (though their difference was not statistically significant). Again, most of the means we observed did not differ significantly, but the issue raises interesting prospects for future research. In particular, moderators might be uncovered that determine the association between messenger-recipient relationship and messenger reluctance. We hasten to add that a replication of our work would do well to include a dedicated measure of relationship closeness, intimacy, familiarity, or a similar construct.



## Limitations & Conclusion

We sought to obtain accounts of real cases where people shared bad news with somebody else. We aimed to explore whether the nuances of bad news situations that researchers previously identified would co-occur in patterned ways that might enable greater prediction and organization of the bad news delivery process. Nevertheless, we encountered various limitations. First, we relied on retrospective self-reports instead of observing actual bad news delivery behavior, and these reports are always subject to various artifacts such as recall problems and selective reporting biases. Second, we relied on a student sample. Although our data returned a variety of bad news topics that ranged in extremity, we would not claim to generalize to bad news contexts using other populations (e.g., physicians, military, clergy). Like the supervisors who shared bad news with their employees (Wagoner & Waldron, 1999), we found that college students' recollections of bad news delivery could be categorized reliably into recurring topics. Nonetheless, we hope future research can determine the extent to which these categorical schemes generalize.

Delivering bad news is difficult, and our study corroborates prior research (e.g., Buckman, 1984) that holds messengers manifest this difficulty through the reluctance they feel and concerns they have about the task that lies before them. Despite the limitations that come with exploratory studies using a university student sample, our data suggest some interesting theoretical avenues that we hope can be used eventually to inform practical initiatives and improve the bad news delivery process for messengers and recipients both. We are encouraged by this preliminary step to identify relationships among the constellation of factors that operate as a messenger faces delivering bad news to some recipient. Knowing the topic of the bad news can give clues about the messenger's reasons for sharing the news, the locus of the bad news,

and some initial concerns that might be running through the messenger's mind. As research continues in this area, a finer-grained picture will emerge to help messengers appraise the situations in which they find themselves so as to limit unnecessary discomfort and miscommunication while simultaneously strategizing to protect their own and the recipient's face in addition to the relationship they have with the recipient.

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## Appendix A

## Bad News Topics

Physical Well-being	The death of or dying of people or animals close to the recipient; illnesses, injuries
Relationship Severed	Firings and breakups
Disapprovals/Disappointments	Relationship transgressions (lying, betrayal, cheating), unexpected/unwanted pregnancy, arrest, rule violations, bad grades, lost scholarships, mistakes, accidents, disapproval of another's actions or relationships
External Circumstances/ Problematic Situations	News reports of disasters or murders, rumors, someone or animal stuck in a tree, 3 <sup>rd</sup> party talking badly about another person

## Appendix B

## Messenger's Reasons for Giving Bad News

Messenger-Oriented	Accept responsibility for one's actions, to be honest, help self (e.g., relieve guilt, move on, lessen consequences), justice, retaliation
Recipient-Oriented	Recipient had a right to know, recipient would find out anyway, care about the recipient, to protect or stand up for recipient, to avoid future repercussions, to save the recipient's life, recipient had no idea
Practicality	Accomplish practical/instrumental tasks, gain assistance from a 3 <sup>rd</sup> party, to get something done, no one else would, comply with a request



## Appendix C

## Messenger's Concerns Before Giving Bad News

Reaction of Receiver	Recipient not able to cope with info, how person would handle info, recipient may react negatively (e.g., cry, sad), may perceive messenger in a negative light, person may not understand or misinterpret info, person may think messenger is lying, blame messenger, person may blame self or not care, person may question messenger
Impact on the Messenger	Would not be able to replace lover, friend, job; messenger may feel embarrassment, sadness, disappointment; recipient may make messenger do something he/she doesn't want to do; messenger may be physically hurt; messenger may get into trouble
Delivery of Message	How to bring up topic, someone else would provide info, messenger's info may be wrong, how to be sensitive
Collateral Damage/ Consequences	May damage relationship with recipient or a 3 <sup>rd</sup> party, aftermath, costs, damage, others would worry about messenger, damage another's relationship, not able to follow through on what recipient wanted messenger to do

Running head: BEFORE BREAKING BAD NEWS

Table 1

Conditional Proportions of Topics of Bad News, Reasons for Sharing Bad News, and Concerns About Sharing Bad News

Conditional proportions of bad news topics						<i>n</i>
Topics of Bad News	Physical well-being	Severing relationships	Disapprovals or disappointments	External or problematic situations		
	-.25	-.11***	.59***	-.05***		330
Conditional proportions of reasons for sharing bad news						
Reasons	Messenger	Recipient	Practicality			
	Oriented	Oriented				
	-.22***	.42***	.36			464
Conditional proportions of reasons for sharing bad news (with additional combined categories)						
Reasons	Messenger	Recipient	Practicality	Messenger /	Messenger /	Recipient /
	Oriented	Oriented		Recipient	Practicality	Practicality
	-12.2***	31.1***	24.1***	-11.6***	-5.8***	-15.2
						328
Conditional proportions of messenger's concerns						
Concerns	Reaction of Recipient	Impact on the Messenger	Delivery of the Message	Collateral Damage	No Concerns	
	.58.4***	-.07*	-.05	.24.2***	-6.3*	351
Conditional proportions of messenger's concerns (with additional combined category)						
Concerns	Reaction of Recipient	Impact on the Messenger	Delivery of the Message	Collateral Damage	No Concerns	Reaction/
						Collateral Damage
	55.6***	-5.9***	-5.2***	-16.0	-10.1***	-7.2***
						306

*Note:* Minus signs denote negative deviations from expected frequencies; all others have positive deviations. Conditional proportions are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (based on adjusted standardized residuals)

Table 2

Conditional Proportions of Topic by the Concerns of the Messenger, Reasons for Sharing Bad News, and Locus of Bad News

		Topic of Bad News				n
		Physical Well-Being	Relationship Severed	Disapproval / Disappointment	External Circumstances	
Reasons for Sharing News						
	Messenger Oriented	-.20	-.08	-.58	.15**	40
	Recipient Oriented	.34**	-.02***	-.57	.07	102
	Practical	-.15*	.23***	.60	-.03	79
	Messenger + Recipient	-.24	-.05	.71	-.00	38
	Messenger + Practical	-.05*	.21	.74	-.00	19
	Recipient + Practical	.30	.14	-.52	-.04	50
Locus of Bad News						
	Messenger	-.03***	.16***	.78***	-.03	184
	Receiver	-.00*	.21	.71	.07	14
	Third Person	.59***	-.02***	-.32***	.08	130
Concerns of the Messenger						
	Reaction of Receiver	.29*	.14	-.30**	-.04	170
	Impact on Messenger	-.11	-.06	.83*	-.00	18
	Delivery of the Message	.38	-.06	-.44	.13	16
	Collateral Damage	-.06**	.12	.76*	.06	49
	Reaction of Receiver & Collateral Damage	-.03**	-.03	.90***	-.03	31
	No Concerns	.50**	-.05	-.36**	.09	22

*Note:* Minus signs denote negative deviations from expected frequencies; all others have positive deviations. Conditional proportions are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (based on adjusted standardized residuals)

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Outcomes Based on Topic of Bad News

Topic	Extremity	Reluctance
Relationships severed	6.05 <sub>ab</sub> (0.97)	5.06 <sub>b</sub> (1.53)
Physical well-being	5.87 <sub>ad</sub> (1.40)	3.87 <sub>a</sub> (1.59)
Disapprovals/ disappointments	5.31 <sub>c</sub> (1.45)	4.65 <sub>b</sub> (1.65)
External circumstances	4.94 <sub>cd</sub> (0.88)	4.07 <sub>ab</sub> (1.75)

*Note.*  $Ns = 327-330$ . Outcomes measured on a 1-7 Likert scale where higher values indicate more of the variable. For any column, means sharing a subscript do not differ at  $p < .05$ .