

Understanding Risk and Crisis Messaging and Use of Spokespersons with Native and New American Populations

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Summary Content

The lack of research in the crisis and risk communication literature about cultural groups reveals a weakness in the potential use of the 10 best practices (Seeger, 2006). The purpose of this two-phase project is to better understand how Native and New Americans prefer to receive risk and crisis messaging, and from whom (spokesperson) risk and crisis messaging will be credible, and how this affects the 10 best practices.

We are currently in phase two of this project, working with Native American groups in the upper Midwest to orally survey participants about perceptions of risk and crisis, about preferred learning styles, applicability of the 10 best practices to vulnerable populations, and spokesperson credibility. Phase one, a series of focus groups with Native and New Americans, yielded findings in both how to work with vulnerable populations as researchers, and findings about how to write risk and crisis messaging and from whom the information will be most credible.

Progress has been made from both a research planning and applied research perspectives. When planning research with vulnerable populations, a multicultural research team, a respected cultural agent, and trustworthy, credible methods for recording information are essential.

From a theoretical perspective, initial findings suggest that information that most directly affects an individual or a family is the information that is given the most attention (spheres of ethnocentricity). In addition, contrary to the established risk and crisis literature, initial findings suggest that rather than one designated spokesperson, Native and New Americans tend to believe a credentialed spokesperson from a reputable agency with a preference for a member of their community or ethnocentricity (vicarious credibility). Thus, there is a two-step flow of information with: a) a trusted agent from within the community acquiring information from a primary spokesperson; and b) the community agent serving as spokesperson for the community.

Future plans include replicating this project in other areas and with other vulnerable populations. Plans are currently in place to address the Arab population in Detroit, MI, the African-American community in Little Rock, AK, and the Polynesian-American population in Honolulu, HI.

Findings from phase one have been presented at the International Communication Conference, Central States Communication Conference, and the National Communication

Conference. A guidebook for researchers was published in December 2006. (Available at <http://risk-crisis.ndsu.nodak.edu/>).