

## **Perceptions of Risk and Crisis Communication Among Vulnerable Populations**

Kimberly Cowden, M.A.  
North Dakota State University

Major Advisors:  
Dr. Robert Littlefield  
Dr. Timothy Sellnow

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 three-phase project is to better understand how vulnerable or disparate populations prefer to receive risk and crisis messaging, from whom (spokesperson) risk and crisis messaging will be credible, and how this affects the 10 best practices.

We are currently in phase three of this project working with Middle Eastern populations in Detroit, MI, African American populations in Little Rock, AR, and Latino populations in Minnesota. Through a series of focus groups and a subsequent pencil and paper survey, participants from each cultural group were asked about preferred learning styles, applicability of the 10 best practices to vulnerable populations, and spokesperson credibility.

Initial findings suggest 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, cultural groups 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.

Phase one and two, a series of focus groups with Native and New Americans and subsequent pencil and paper survey, 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. Future plans include testing crisis messaging for learning styles (Kolb, 1986) applicability. We will be producing messages of a catastrophic, intentional food contamination event using each of Kolb's four learning styles and an additional message that rounds the entire cycle of learning.