

Message Testing Risk and Crisis Communication with Diverse Publics:  
Identifying Appropriate Strategies for Minimizing Exposure  
to Disease and Public Health Hazards

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the question: Are the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication perceived by multicultural publics as an effective strategy for developing crisis messages? A focus group approach with Somali, Hmong, and Native American publics generated overarching themes pertaining to risk and crisis communication. The findings suggest nine best practices were reflected in themes drawn from the focus groups. Five of the practices pertained to elites preparing for potential risk and crisis situations and five applied more specifically to the publics who perceived the messages. The results suggest that risk and crisis messages must be tailored to the publics who receive them.

Key terms: risk and crisis communication, multicultural publics, message testing, Somali, Hmong, Native American

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Several recent accidental or intentional disease and public health hazards have drawn the attention of government, public health professionals, policy makers, and the general public to the issue of food safety due to its impact on consumers, producers, and policymakers at all levels (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Sellnow & Littlefield, 2005). As an example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 76 million cases of foodborne illness occur annually in the United States alone. Of the 76 million cases, approximately 325,000 are so severe that the victim must be hospitalized; and 5,000 people die to foodborne illnesses every year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005). As governmental and community leaders proactively and reactively respond to these public health hazards, their risk and crisis messages have been the focus of considerable study.

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) identify the multidisciplinary focus of crisis research with an extensive review of existing pertinent theoretical frameworks, including: chaos theory, sense making, and organizational learning theory. Because health-related crises put organizations and groups in the public eye, attention in the existing literature has tended to focus on the senders of risk and crisis messages, with less attention given to exploring how risk and crisis messages are received by the public.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, little of the existing research has focused on how multicultural or traditionally underrepresented populations view or respond to a crisis; and even fewer research studies have involved these groups in the process of actually conducting crisis research. This absence has occurred despite the call by Lasker and others to do more collaborative work in

communities with different publics (Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001a, 2001b; Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002).

In the case of research involving risk and crisis communication, 10 best practices have been identified as part of a strategy to improve the way organizations and groups can communicate effectively with the public (Seeger, in press). While these practices may be recognized by scholars and practitioners as best, the transferability and efficacy of these communication components across different cultures has yet to be fully explored. This paper explains the process of using a community-based, participatory research methodology with groups of New Americans<sup>2</sup> and Native Americans; and provides an initial assessment of whether the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication are perceived by representatives of these groups as an effective strategy for developing crisis messages.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study focuses on risk and crisis communication research and the need for the inclusion of a broader understanding of multiple publics who are receiving risk and crisis messages. In addition, as scholars explore message testing with multicultural groups, the literature of community-based participatory research is identified to explain how and why individuals from under-represented groups should contribute to the construction of effective risk and crisis messages.

The emphasis in most of the risk and crisis communication research focuses on the viewpoint of elites<sup>3</sup> in organizations and groups, and how they use “. . . skilled communicators to strategically defend and explain the organization in the face of crisis” (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 66). Numerous studies have defined risk and crisis communication based upon when the messages appear within the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis timeline (Sellnow & Littlefield, 2005). Risk

messages emerge in the pre-crisis stage when, “there is a possibility that people or property could experience adverse consequences” (Lindell & Perry, 2004, p. 1). The purpose of risk messages is to warn the public about a potential crisis and to persuade them to take protective action.

Typically, the focus of the research about risk communication addresses persuasive strategies used during the pre-crisis phase (Covello, 1992; Slovic, 1986). Crisis messages are forthcoming in the crisis stage and respond to a “specific, unexpected, and non-routine event” (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998, p. 233) which “threatens the most fundamental goals of the organization” (Weick, 1988, p. 305). Crisis communication research commonly addresses the issue of image restoration and crisis management, through public relations channels, after a crisis has occurred (Barton, 1993; Benoit, 1997; Heath, 2001).

In contrast to the robust research focusing on the senders of risk and crisis messages, few studies have explored audience perceptions of these messages. Most of what is known about message testing comes from studies of advertising and public relations, emphasizing the importance of involving people in order to discover more effective ways to change attitudes and behaviors (Fink, 1986; Leanna, Ahlbrant, & Murrell, 1992; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; McMahan, Witte, & Meyer, 1998). While scholars suggest that audience analysis be conducted when constructing risk and crisis messages, many regard audience characteristics (ethnicity, economic status, education, family size and status, household structure, information retrieval, language mastery, neighborhood, and technology) as variables affecting the outcomes sought by elites within the organizations and groups preparing the risk and crisis messages, as opposed to factors shaping the construction of the risk or crisis message for multiple publics (Lindell & Perry, 2004; Rowan, 1991; Slovic, 1986; Tierney, 1999).

Audiences often are described as stakeholders or as “key publics” (Heath, 1997, p. 6).

The terms stakeholders and key publics reflect the point of view of organizational or community elites who view these individuals and groups as receivers of their risk and/or crisis messages. In this context, the elites expect that their risk and crisis messages to these stakeholders and key publics create awareness, explain the risk or crisis, gain agreement regarding a specified course of action, and motivate the receivers of the messages to do something (Rowan, 1991). However, the acknowledgment of stakeholders and key publics also suggests a position of privilege for these individuals and groups at the expense of others who are not stakeholders or regarded as key publics. The absence of research in the crisis and risk communication literature focusing on constructing messages for multiple underrepresented publics reveals a weakness in the potential transferability of the 10 best practices across cultural groups.

Excluding multicultural and underrepresented groups from the research process is not unique to risk and crisis communication. Littlefield and Thweatt (2004) identified four barriers complicating the efforts of researchers to learn more about these groups: Difficulty in gaining access to the multicultural populations; ineffectiveness of traditional research methods; lack of trust between researchers and participants; and the inability of researchers to act independently to gain access to the data (p. 77-78).

To address this issue of exclusion, the concept of community-based participatory research (CBPR) has emerged in the public health arena as a way to involve the community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process. As Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (2001) note: “Partners contribute their expertise and share responsibilities and ownership to increase understanding of a given phenomenon” (p. 184). They identify numerous advantages of CBPR: The enhanced “relevance and use of the findings by all

partners involved”; the commitment of “partners with diverse skills, knowledge and expertise in addressing complex problems”; the improved quality and validity of research by “incorporating the local knowledge of the people involved”; the increased possibility of “overcoming distrust of research on the part of communities that have historically been ‘subjects’ of such research”; “the potential to link across the cultural differences that may exist between partners involved”; and the potential to provide “resources for communities involved” (p. 185).

Inclusion of culture as a variable is not new to risk and crisis communication research. However, most scholars have defined culture from the sender-oriented perspective. Chess (2001) identifies culture as a variable that should be taken into account as an organization perceives risk and crisis. Seeger et al. (2003) extended this, suggesting, “as an organization monitors the external environment, it must continually reformulate risk-related messages” (p. 204). Lindell and Perry (2004) offer an alternative perspective, defining culture as, “shared beliefs that encompass both people’s interpretations of the world and their notions of how one deals with (responds to and attempts to influence) that world” (p. 17). Despite this more audience-centered definition, past research in risk and crisis communication provides little insight into the process of *how* multicultural publics perceive risk and crisis messages. As such, the follow research question guides the present study: Are the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication perceived by multicultural publics as an effective strategy for developing crisis messages.

### Method

The National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD) at the University of Minnesota, in conjunction with the Risk+Crisis Communication Project (RCCP) at North Dakota State University, sought to test the effectiveness of the 10 best practices for risk and crisis communication during an simulated intentional food contamination crisis. The project team

identified both general and underrepresented populations for message testing using focus groups. The study received IRB approval from both sponsoring institutions. The discussion of the project involving message testing with the general population is the subject of another study.

### *Instrument*

The focus group questions were written collaboratively by subject-matter experts working with the NCFPD, some of whom helped to generate the 10 best practices. The questions included general probes to learn how the participants viewed the concepts of crisis and risk, as well as more in-depth questions regarding how their specific behaviors might be altered in the event of a crisis. In addition, questions were developed to identify perceptions about the crisis messages and spokespeople used in the video clips.

Professional video production companies produced the videotaped messages. The messages depicted an announcer issuing a statement about an unsubstantiated threat of lettuce being contaminated with anthrax. Each spokesperson taped two messages. The first message was a representation of a poorly-constructed message, one that gave little notice and provided no self-efficacy steps for the public. The second message represented an effective crisis communication message, giving more information, providing self-efficacy steps, and assurance of ongoing investigation and communication.

The first spokesperson in the taped messages was a white male in his early 40s. The second spokesperson was an ethnic female in her late 30s. Both the male and female spokespeople were trained journalists experienced with reading copy from a teleprompter. The third spokesperson was a member of the underrepresented community who delivered the message in the native language. The Somali spokesperson was a television personality having experience in television delivery. The Hmong spokesperson was a recognized personality from

the community. The Native spokesperson was a well-respected spiritual leader in his 70s who read from a teleprompter, but who was not well-versed in television presentation techniques. The same Native spokesperson was used in both Native American communities.

#### *Focus Group Participants*

The underrepresented multicultural populations for this study were drawn from New American and Native American groups. The Somali and Hmong communities in a large Midwestern urban city represented the New American populations from which participants for the study were drawn. The Native American population was represented participants drawn from by two separate Plains Indian Nations.

#### *Project Procedures: Hmong and Somali Populations*

The Somali and Hmong focus groups were administered by representatives from a large Midwestern university. A third-party vendor specializing in culturally-sensitive research was contracted to recruit participants, conduct the focus groups, and pay the participants. In both communities, a cultural agent was used to recruit participants. A cultural agent is defined as a member of the group, in good standing, living in the underrepresented community.

Three focus groups were conducted with each population at the community center within their communities to avoid transportation difficulty. These groups represented consumers (family decision makers who do not own a food-related business), business people (those who own food-related businesses, such as restaurants or grocery stores); and community leaders (religious leaders, television personalities, and community activists). Each group ranged from seven to eight participants. Those participating were paid \$50 in cash and offered a meal.

At the beginning of each focus group, cultural facilitators (speaking the native Somali and Hmong languages) described the project and explained that there was no right or wrong

answers; and that every voice was welcomed to participate. The facilitator explained that participation in the focus group was voluntary, participants were free to leave at any time, and all of the comments they made would be confidential. Participants were asked to contact the cultural facilitator if they wanted a copy of the research findings.

*Project Procedures: Native American Populations*

The Native American groups were administered through a mid-sized Midwestern university. In addition to the standard IRB approval, researchers also worked with a Native American facilitator to draft a set of research resolutions that were presented and approved by the tribal council in each Native American community where the focus groups were conducted. The content of the resolutions allowed each tribe to retain ownership of their respective research findings and mandated that copies of the research findings be sent back to the tribal councils. With this action, the tribes are able to build a “data warehouse” to better serve their communities. In addition, a summary of the research findings was sent to participants so they could realize the efforts of their participation and follow-up with their tribal council, if they chose to do so.

Two sets of focus groups were conducted in each community. Participant groups represented elders in one group, and community members within the age of 20-50 in the other. The focus groups were conducted at locations easily accessible to the participants, avoiding transportation barriers. The participants were paid \$50 in cash and offered a meal.

Instead of hiring a third party to recruit and facilitate the Native American projects, researchers used relationships previously established within Native communities to locate the Native focus group facilitator and the cultural agents within the two communities. The same Native facilitator conducted both sets of focus groups. In each community, the facilitator asked

an elder to open with a prayer; and, being younger than his elders, he apologized for being in front of those groups.

### *Data Collection*

In lieu of videotaping or tape recording the focus groups—a practice that cultural agents suggested could have inhibited discussion within the groups—community-based notetakers trained in the methodology were used. The Somali groups had two Somali notetakers who were fluent in the language and directly translated from the Somali discussions into English notes. The notetakers felt more comfortable with writing English than writing in Somali. The Hmong groups had two notetakers from the Hmong community who recorded the discussion in English. The same notetakers recorded the discussions from all of the groups in each community to maintain consistency among the three sets of focus groups per population. The Native American groups had one Native notetaker and one White notetaker. The same notetakers were used for all four Native focus groups.

Once the notes were compiled, a member of the research team who is also a member of the Somali community processed the Somali group data into a previously established format allowing for comparisons between the different populations being studied. The Hmong facilitator processed the data for that group. A non-Native researcher processed the data for the Native American communities.

### *Message Testing and Use of Spokesperson*

Each group was shown two different crisis messages delivered by three different spokespeople issuing a statement about an unsubstantiated threat of lettuce being contaminated with anthrax. After each video clip, the participants were asked a series of questions designed to solicit opinions about message design and spokesperson representation.

### *Data Analysis*

The first phase of data analysis involved moving inductively through the formatted notes from each focus group to identify emergent themes. Three independent coders completed this process by individually reviewing the complete set of notes for each focus group and listing themes. The themes for all of the focus groups from within a cultural community were compared, with common themes for the cultural group identified.

The second phase of analysis utilized a deductive approach with the focus group comments using the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication as categories. Descriptions of the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication were operationalized through the creation of audience-centered questions. Using the description of each practice and the corresponding questions, the common themes for each cultural group from phase one were reviewed. If the theme reflected one of the 10 best practices (specifically or partially), it was placed under that category. In addition, a notation was made if the theme supported or refuted the practice. After completing the placement of themes for each cultural group under the categories, overarching themes from all three cultural groups within each practice were identified. These overarching themes are reported as results in the present study.

### Results

#### *Operationalization of the 10 Best Practices*

Seeger (2005) outlined the 10 best practices in risk and crisis communication, based upon the research conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Food Protection and Defense and by the North Dakota State University Risk+Crisis Communication Project. To operationalize these practices, subject matter experts created questions to reflect what might be asked by the public (See Table 1).

Table 1

*Audience-Centered Perspective for Best Practices in Risk Communication*

Best Practice	Audience-Centered Perspective
Risk and crisis communication is an ongoing process	<i>“Am I included in the planning of the crisis response?”</i>
Conduct pre-crisis (pre-event) planning	<i>“What things/resources do I/we need to prevent a crisis?”</i>
Foster partnerships with public	<i>“Who/what should I be paying attention to about the crisis?”</i>
Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources	<i>“Who knows the most about how to deal with the crisis?”</i>
Meet the needs of media and remain accessible	<i>“Is the media giving me the information I need to know about the crisis?”</i>
Listen to publics’ concerns and understand audience	<i>“I’m worried about this. What about me/us?”</i>
Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy	<i>“Do the authorities show concern about what happens to me/us?”</i>
Demonstrate honesty, candor, and openness	<i>“Are the authorities telling me/us the truth?”</i>
Accept uncertainty and ambiguity	<i>“The authorities tell me they don’t know everything, but is that possible?” “The spokespeople say they know what is happening, but how can they?”</i>
Provide messages that foster self-efficacy	<i>“What should/can I do?”</i>

*Common Themes*

Overarching themes for all three cultural groups emerged following the synthesis of common themes from each group. The following reporting of the 10 best practices provides a brief description of each practice (developed by the National Center for Food Protection and Defense, along with the corresponding overarching themes identified by the groups.

*Risk and crisis communication is an ongoing process*

This practice calls for the incorporation of risk communication into the policy development process; and the continuous evaluation and updating of crisis plans. No overarching themes in the present study reflected this practice. None of the participants discussed their role in the on-going policy development process. However, all three groups acknowledged different types and degrees of crises and the need for on-going efforts to resolve them.

*Conduct pre-crisis (pre-event) planning*

In this practice, risk areas are identified within the organization; as well how to reduce risk, plan an initial response, and update planning regularly. All three cultural groups acknowledged that crises are preventable. However, none of the themes reflected concern about having the resources necessary to plan for a crisis. The Somali and Native American groups expressed the need to educate the public and to have a crisis plan to follow.

*Foster partnerships with public*

Positive relationships with key publics should be established before a crisis occurs to involve consumer groups, racial and ethnic communities, stakeholders, healthcare professionals, and other publics. None of the cultural groups identified a theme calling for the elites to establish relationships with key publics before a crisis. However, their themes reflected the expectation that they would go to people or agencies with whom they previously had trustworthy experiences. These included established authorities (law enforcement, specialists, elders, clan leaders, health professionals, school officials, fire department, civil defense, etc.).

*Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources*

The identification of subject area experts is essential to developing collaborations and establishing strategic relationships and networks before a crisis. While the cultural groups made

reference to working together with established authorities, and all three cultural groups provided themes suggesting they knew the experts, none of the groups provided themes pertaining to establishing strategic relationships and networks before the crisis. In some cases, experts were those who had eyewitness accounts or previous experience with risk and crisis. All groups perceived the credibility of the individual as very important.

*Meet the needs of media and remain accessible*

Because the media is the primary conduit to the public during times of crisis, providing information in a timely and accurate manner is essential. All three groups provided themes suggesting that they rely on the media. Their themes reflected that as they became more aware of the magnitude of a crisis, they paid more attention to the news, provided that different media outlets (national versus local) did not broadcast conflicting reports. Depending upon the nature of the crisis, local and national media (television, radio, print, Internet) emerged as important sources of information for all three cultural groups.

*Listen to public's concerns and understand audience*

Risk and crisis messages should respond to the public's beliefs, whether or not they are accurate, by monitoring the full range of communication formats (hotlines, letters to the editor, radio talk shows, blogs, etc.). None of the cultural groups specifically identified themes calling for elites to monitor the concerns of the public. However, all three groups expressed the theme that the authorities should pay attention to what might happen if a crisis occurs. All groups mentioned the benefits of communicating to their cultural group in their native language.

*Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy*

Communication style enhances the credibility of the spokesperson and the perceived legitimacy of the message. All three groups reflected this practice in their themes. They noted

their preference to receive information from people who seemed genuinely concerned. They noted the importance of body language and vocal tone in conveying the urgency of the crisis. All groups wanted the communicator to reflect an attitude of seriousness.

*Demonstrate honesty, candor, and openness*

The public must perceive the openness of the spokesperson to provide accurate information or else they will seek information from less accurate sources. The themes from the three groups reflected this practice. All groups mentioned that they would seek information from someone they trusted, rather than from someone who had lied, had hidden agendas, or might have misled them in the past. The credibility of the source, as well as the honesty and willingness to share information were viewed as important.

*Accept uncertainty and ambiguity*

Uncertainty and ambiguity are inherent characteristics of risk and crisis situations, and should be accepted until accurate and reliable information is available. None of the groups expressed a willingness to accept uncertainty and ambiguity. Questions about whether the crisis was real or a hoax suggested the desire for specific information as soon as possible. All three groups wanted facts, not speculation; and messages of risk were unwelcomed. As one participant explained, “if it is serious enough for them to they tell us we have nothing to worry about, it must be something to worry about.”

*Provide messages that foster self-efficacy*

Providing specific information telling people what they can do to reduce their harm helps restore a sense of control over an uncertain and threatening situation. All three groups reflected this practice in their themes. They suggested that once warned, they would take some action to

protect themselves from the crisis. The variety of the actions ranged from cognitive (worry, think about the crisis) to behavioral (throw away contaminated lettuce, tell others, watch news).

### *Summary of Focus Group Findings*

Nine of the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication were identified to some extent in the emergent themes drawn from the comments made by participants from all three cultural groups. Four of these best practices (conduct pre-crisis planning, foster partnerships with the public[s], listen to publics' concerns and understand audience, and collaborate and coordinate with credible sources) were inferred from the emergent themes and five best practices (meet the needs of media and remain accessible; communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy; demonstrate honesty, candor, and openness; provide messages that foster self-efficacy; and accept uncertainty and ambiguity) were explicitly identified. The difference between the inferred versus explicit relationship was based upon whether the theme identified some versus all components of the best practice. The practice of accepting uncertainty and ambiguity was identified, but refuted by all three cultural groups. The best practice identified as understanding that risk and crisis communication is an ongoing process was not mentioned in the themes drawn from the three cultural groups.

### Discussion

Three aspects of the present study merit additional discussion. First, there are similarities in the ways underrepresented multicultural groups view and respond to risk and crisis based upon what could be characterized as *spheres of ethnocentricity*. Second, the findings demonstrate that multicultural underrepresented groups can contribute in meaningful ways to research pertaining to risk and crisis communication. Finally, while the 10 best practices are useful categories for

creating effective risk and crisis communication, there may be some utility in grouping them according to sender versus receiver perspectives.

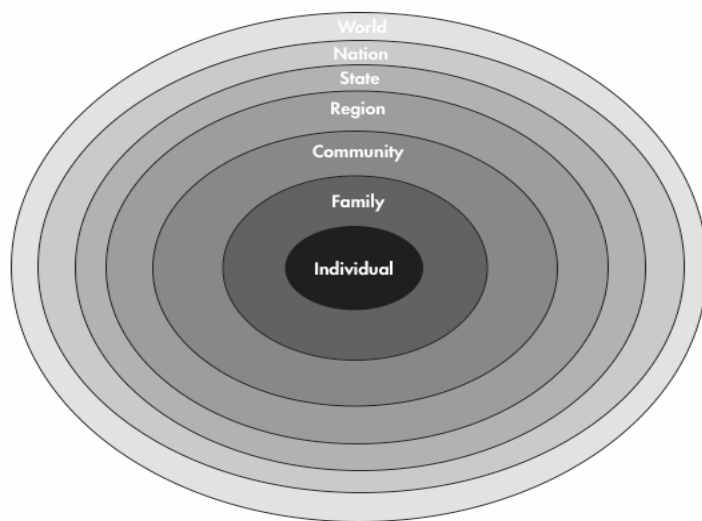
As the researchers reviewed the comments made by the participants about various aspects of what constituted risk and crisis, levels of risk and crisis, and characteristics of effective communication about risk and crisis, an organizing principle emerged described here as *spheres of ethnocentricity*. This is best explained by using the individual as the center of the sphere. Going out in concentric circles would be the family, community, region, state, nation, and world.

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Figure 1

*Spheres of Ethnocentricity*

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The closer to the center of the spheres, the more control the individual has on the strategies available to respond to the crisis. The farther out from the center, less direct control is available about response strategies. These spheres of ethnocentricity affect how much attention will be

paid to the risk or crisis message by the individual or group. If the risk or crisis affects the individual or his/her family, the action taken will reflect the intensity of feeling at that level. If a risk or crisis exists in the world, less intensity may be reflected in the actions of the individual.

In response to the limited research about the effect of ethnicity on perceptions of risk and crisis communication messages, this study extends our understanding through the viewpoint of Somali, Hmong, and Native American cultural groups. Rather than regarding audience characteristics as independent variables affecting whether an organization or group achieves the desired outcome when facing a risk or crisis situation, this study illustrates how an awareness of audience characteristics can make the risk and crisis messages construction more compelling for multicultural under-represented groups. The study also focuses on those not included as stakeholders or key publics due to their status within the community. Through a community-based, participatory research approach, the researchers found multicultural publics eager to engage in discussions about their perceptions regarding risk and crisis communication.

The deductive process of identifying the overarching themes with their corresponding best practices revealed five practices that were explicitly reflected in the themes provided by the focus groups. An examination of these five practices reveals that they are the ones most aligned with the publics who were the receivers of the risk and crisis messages. The five not explicitly mentioned reflect a more sender-oriented perspective (see Table 2). This finding suggests that having one list of 10 best practices may not be the best means by which to characterize effective risk and crisis communication. Instead, the separation of the practices pertaining to the elites who direct risk and crisis communication and related activities, from those practices involving the publics who receive and process the messages, may be useful when further refining the utility of the best practices when constructing messages during pre-crisis or crisis situations.

Table 2

*Identification of 10 Best Practices by Orientation*

Practices Perceived as Pertaining to Elites	Practices Perceived as Pertaining to Publics
Risk and crisis communication is an ongoing process	Meet the needs of media and remain accessible
Conduct pre-crisis (pre-event) planning	Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy
Listen to publics' concerns and understand audience	Demonstrate honesty, candor, and openness
Foster partnerships with public	Accept uncertainty and ambiguity
Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources	Provide messages that foster self-efficacy

Lessons Learned in Communicating Risk and Crisis with Multicultural Populations

*Realize that Perceptions of Risk and Crisis Vary Across Cultures*

Cultural groups respond differently to risk and crisis communication based upon their perceptions and patterned ways of thinking (Lindell & Perry, 2004). These perceptions are influenced by their experiences and ways of thinking. For example, the fight-flight response is a common explanation used by researchers when classifying the response of an individual to a perceived threat or conflict. When faced with a crisis, participants from multicultural populations respond differently. For example, Somali participants said that they flee from a crisis. This is due to their perception of crisis which is equated with death and destruction and based upon the civil war that has plagued their country for the past decade. The Hmong group participants have been in the United States longer and are acculturated to respond more systemically and resolved to confront a crisis. Native Americans were skeptical of warnings about the risk of a crisis, believing that any attempt to minimize a potential crisis was actually a cover-up by the

government about something that was potentially harmful to them. If researchers understand that perceptions of risk and crisis vary, they will be better able to construct messages appropriate to the various underrepresented groups.

*Be Mindful of Spheres of Ethnocentricity*

The position of the individual in the center of the spheres of ethnocentricity determines how risk and crisis is perceived and what responses will be undertaken when confronting risk and crisis situations. The closer the risk or crisis is to the individual sphere, the more directly the individual will perceive and respond. The New Americans and Native Americans in the present study expressed their intention to follow guidelines that would directly affect them within their spheres. As such, elites should be mindful when offering means of self-efficacy. Based upon the findings of this study, members of multicultural groups will be more likely to act when they believe they or their families will be affected. Risk messages will not have the same effect as crisis messages because the risk may not appear to be within the individual's sphere of ethnocentricity.

*Carefully Select Spokespeople*

The attitude of the spokesperson presenting risk and crisis messages is essential to the establishment of trustworthiness. The belief among participants that risk and crisis messages must be conveyed with compassion, concern, and empathy; as well as demonstrate honesty, candor, and openness, suggests that elites should carefully consider who will be presenting the risk and crisis message to the various publics. Based upon the findings, nonverbal aspects of presentation do make a difference. Body language, appropriate dress, eye contact, attitude, and tone of voice were all mentioned as affecting how a risk or crisis message would be perceived. In addition, the use of cultural spokespersons to present risk or crisis messages to their own

communities will be positively regarded if they are able to speak in their native language or on their own terms.

### *Be Mindful of Language*

As academicians, we are trained to use terminology. Often, our penchant for vocabulary interferes with clearly communicating with multicultural groups who traditionally have a lower rate of literacy. Rudd, Comings, and Hyde (2003) advocate attention to literacy levels so all populations can understand the messages, especially in times of crisis. They argue, “Attention to literacy-related issues of language, format, and the structure of a message will enable communicators to broaden their reach and avoid inequities related to access to information” (p. 113). This attention to literacy levels should be part of crafting research questions, crafting messages to be tested, and in any reports submitted back to the population. In this project, one community spokesperson had difficulty in reading the multi-syllabic words in the message. In addition, after reviewing the first video clip, one participant stated, “The first thing I’d do is look up Anthrax.”

### *Use the Media as a Primary Source of Information*

While members of under-represented multicultural populations may prefer to receive information about crises from respected leaders and officials within their communities due to their immediacy, the participants continue to depend upon the media to provide information as crises unfold. As the scope of the crisis moves through the spheres of ethnocentricity, the need for media to provide information increases. For crises in the farthest spheres from the individual, the participants in this study acknowledged their preference for national television sources that were credible and factual to keep them informed. Consistent messages enhanced the credibility of the media and unless media sources presented conflicting messages, the participants would

look for updates to keep them informed. For crises in spheres closer to the individual, newspapers and local radio coverage were identified as preferred sources of information.

### Summary

This paper explored the question: Are the 10 best practices of risk and crisis communication perceived by multicultural publics as an effective strategy for developing crisis messages? The focus group approach sought the intuitive identification of components of the 10 best practices by representatives of multicultural under-represented groups when asked to discuss general questions pertaining to crisis and risk. Based upon our findings, nine best practices were reflected in themes drawn from the focus groups. The findings suggest that the participants in this study explicitly identified five of the practices and made inferences to four additional practices. In addition, five of the practices pertained to elites preparing for potential risk and crisis situations and five applied more specifically to the publics who perceived the messages.

There are advantages to including multiple publics within the process of conducting risk and crisis communication research. Drawing from the work of Glicken (1999), Seeger et al. (2003) suggested three advantages: Including these groups will increase the competence of decision-makers because the public will provide information about matters that concern them; when organizations and groups are held accountable, they will work harder to establish legitimacy with the different publics receiving their crisis messages; and including all groups is proper in a democratic society. The results from this study suggest that risk and crisis messages must be tailored to the publics who will receive them. As such, the lessons learned can provide insight for policymakers when constructing and presenting risk and crisis messages to a wide range of publics.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term public here in the universal sense, acknowledging in our paper that this presumption is erroneous. Despite the fact that a single spokesperson often presents the crisis messages to the public, the authors argue that there are multiple publics that hear and respond to crisis messages.

<sup>2</sup> Immigrants and refugees to the United States are operationally defined as New Americans in this study. Two groups with fairly large populations in a large Midwestern urban center as defined in the 2000 census are Somali and Hmong. These are the two groups constituting the New Americans in this study.

<sup>3</sup> The term elites, represents those who are in positions of leadership to plan and manage the communication and actions during the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages.