Evidence-Based Communication Strategies to Improve Social Determinants of Health: Opportunities and Challenges

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Traditional health communication

- Focus has largely been on changing individual behavior, BUT...

- Behaviors and health outcomes are largely shaped by larger social, political, economic environments

- Need different message strategies, may be at odds with a focus on individual behavior
Features of many pop health issues

• Strong sense of personal responsibility for health in public opinion and discourse
Public opinion about factors that very strongly influence health

Source: Robert & Booske, 2011
Features of many pop health issues

• Strong sense of personal responsibility for health in public opinion and discourse

• Powerful industries promoting health-harming products, incredible $ resources to fight regulation
For example...
Features of many pop health issues

• Strong sense of personal responsibility for health in public opinion and discourse

• Powerful industries promoting health-harming products, incredible $ resources to fight regulation

• Wide body of evidence on the influence of the larger social, economic, physical, and built environment
Ecological model of healthy eating

- Home
- Work sites
- School, after school
- Child care
- Neighborhoods and communities
- Restaurants and fast food outlets
- Supermarkets
- Convenience and corner stores

- Access
- Availability
- Barriers
- Opportunities

- Practices
- Legislative, regulatory, or policy actions

- Societal and cultural norms and values
- Food and beverage industry
- Food marketing and media
- Food and agriculture policies
- Economic systems
- Food production and distribution systems
- Government and political structures and policies
- Food assistance programs
- Health care systems
- Land use and transportation

- Cognitions (e.g., attitudes, preferences, knowledge, values)
- Skills and behaviors
- Lifestyle
- Biological (e.g., genes, gender, age)
- Demographics (e.g., income, race/ethnicity)

- Outcome expectations
- Motivations
- Self-efficacy
- Behavioral capability

- Role modeling
- Social support
- Social norms

- Family
- Friends
- Peers

Annu. Rev. Public Health. 29:253–72
Features of many pop health issues

• Strong sense of personal responsibility for health in public opinion and discourse

• Powerful industries promoting health-harming products, incredible $ resources to fight regulation

• Wide body of evidence on the influence of the larger social, economic, physical, and built environment

• Complex mechanisms linking these factors to health outcomes and behaviors
A systems view of obesity’s causes
What are the targeted outcomes of communication?

1. Increase awareness of health disparities
2. Increase belief that disparities are worth addressing
3. Heighten belief that societal forces and actors cause, and are responsible for, poor health and disparities
4. Promote support for policies with potential to improve social determinants and reduce disparities
5. Mobilize action to advocate for social change
Who are the audiences?

Racial Disparities in Life Spans Narrow, but Persist
By SABRINA TAVERNISE
Published: July 18, 2013
The gap in life expectancy between black and white Americans is at its narrowest since the federal government started systematically tracking it in the 1930s, but a difference of nearly four years remains, detailed why in a new report.
Who are the audiences?

Public
- Inclined to agree: Mobilize
- Inclined to disagree: Persuade

Medical and public health workforce
- Mobilize
- Set agendas
- Educate

Decision-makers
- Organizations: Act
- Policymakers: Act
Lessons Learned from Communication Research on Audiences and Outcomes

1. **Education and awareness may not be sufficient**
2. Connect messages to broader values
3. Opposing messengers are a challenge
Lesson 1: Raising awareness is not sufficient

• Priming group differences
Priming group differences

• Public support for government intervention depends on *type of group* difference
  ▫ Economic disparities: greatest support
  ▫ Racial disparities: least support

• Perceptions of the *causes* of group differences matter
  ▫ Behaviors vs. social structure vs. genetics
  ▫ May relate to underlying attitudes about *responsibility* and *fairness*

Sources: Rigby et al. (2009); Lynch & Gollust (2010)
Lesson 1: Raising awareness is not sufficient

- Priming group differences
- Pre-existing awareness and values lead to “biased processing”
Biased processing of SDH messages

Proportion Agreeing "Diabetes Caused by Social and Economic Factors"

Level of Support for Non-Medical Diabetes Prevention Policies
(higher values, more support)

Source: Gollust, Lantz, Ubel; AJPH (2009)
Biased processing of SDH messages

• Focus group insight
  • Without concrete mechanisms for how social determinants operate to produce disparities, people fill in the blanks based on preconceptions or consider data with suspicion

• In response to a chart showing the bivariate association between education and life expectancy:

  “Maybe somebody didn’t go on to school or even didn’t finish high school but they might have gotten a good education at home in terms of how to be a healthy person.”

Source: Lundell, Niederdeppe, & Clarke, 2013
Lesson 1: Raising awareness is not sufficient

• Priming group differences

• Pre-existing awareness and values lead to “biased processing”

• May not be considered relevant
May not be considered relevant

• Abundant evidence about disparities in obesity outcomes among children and adults...

• But no documented presentation of this evidence in 5 years of formal discussion in Minnesota legislature

Source: Gollust et al. AJPH (2014)
Lessons Learned from Communication Research on Audiences and Outcomes

1. Education and awareness may not be sufficient

2. Connect messages to broader values

3. Opposing messengers are a challenge
Lesson 2: Connect messages to broader values

• Acknowledge personal responsibility
  ▫ BUT...

• Proceed with caution
Acknowledge personal responsibility

Source: Gollust & Cappella (2014)
...But proceed with caution (1)

Source: Gollust & Cappella (2014)
...But proceed with caution (2)

Level of Responsibility in Message and Support for Obesity-Reducing Public Policies

Source: Niederdeppe et al., 2014a
...But proceed with caution (3)

- Personal narratives can shift emphasis to individual responsibility
  - Story about individual child increases blame to children for obesity
  - Policymakers counter-argue individual narratives unless combined with broader statistics or a story told about the community

Sources: Barry, Brescoll, Gollust (2013); Niederdeppe et al. (2014b)
Lesson 2: Connect messages to broader values

• Acknowledge personal responsibility
  ▫ BUT...

• Proceed with caution

• Identify novel values related to population health improvement to reach broader coalitions
Identify novel values (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Liberals</th>
<th>Moderates</th>
<th>Conservatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1: responsibility of government</td>
<td>Health care costs**(-)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Military readiness* (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2: responsibility of food and</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Military readiness** (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beverage companies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3: responsibility of schools</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Military* (+)</td>
<td>Military readiness* (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4: responsibility of parents</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 5: responsibility of children</td>
<td>Health* (+)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Magnitude** (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 6: obesity prevention policy support</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Military readiness* (+)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Table entries display the consequence message treatment group that is significantly different from the control group for each outcome, the direction of effect (in parentheses), and the $P$ value of the coefficient. Full regression model results are available in Appendix C (available as a supplement to the online version of this article at http://www.ajph.org).

$P < .05; **P < .01.$

Source: Gollust, Niederdeppe, Barry, 2013
Identify novel values (2)

- Fairness and equal opportunity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of Fairness</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone has an <em>equal chance</em> to begin with</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone is <em>treated equally</em>, no matter what</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone ends up with <em>equal amounts</em> (e.g., same health, same income, same amount of learning)</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everything is happening according to a <em>divine plan</em></td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone has a <em>decent standard of living</em></td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone gets to <em>keep what they have earned</em></td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Frequencies sum to 100 percent; respondents could choose only one definition.*

- Economic security

Source: Lynch and Gollust (2010)
Lesson 3: Opposing messages and messengers are a huge challenge

• It can be useful to anticipate and try to offset counter-arguments from opponents of social change
  • BUT...

• It’s not always good to wake a sleeping giant
  • AND...

• Strategies to neutralize the opposition may not work across all social groups
Tackling opposing counterarguments can be useful...

Source: Niederdeppe, Gollust, & Barry, 2014
Tackling opposing counterarguments can be useful... to a point.

Source: Niederdeppe, Gollust, & Barry, 2014
BUT... It’s not always good to wake a sleeping giant (industry)

Source: Harwood et al., 2005
AND... Strategies to offset opponents may not work across the board

Source: Gollust, Niederdeppe & Barry, 2014
Also need to consider:
Who delivers the message?

- Traditional news
Traditional news

Number and Type of Causes of Type 2 Diabetes in 2005-2006 News Articles Which Mention at Least 1 Cause (N=405)

Source: Gollust and Lantz 2009
Traditional news

- Growing capacity

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The gap in life expectancy between black and white Americans is at its narrowest since the federal government started systematically collecting data on life expectancy nearly four years ago, according to a new report.

Analysis: Ferguson Protests Are About Justice But Also About Health And Economic Disparities
By ROBERT JOINER

The police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the sight of his limp body sprawled for hours in the street have provoked an intense debate that reveals our nation’s deep divisions when it comes to questions of race and justice.
Traditional news

• Growing capacity

• But still relatively uncommon

Challenges in Covering Health Disparities in Local News Media: An Exploratory Analysis Assessing Views of Journalists

Sherrie Flynt Wallington · Kelly D. Blake · Kalahn Taylor-Clark · K. Viswanath
Traditional news

• Growing capacity

• But still relatively uncommon
  ▫ Reporters cite lack of capacity, specialized training, and time; difficulty making the issue relatable

‘I think that any issue that involves race, such as health disparities, there will be opportunities for people or our audiences to turn a deaf ear or say ‘Oh! Here we go going on about this [race] again.”’

‘[I] Have to make health disparities relatable and interesting to people who don’t think it affects them.’

Who delivers the message?

- Traditional news
- Novel messengers
Novel messengers

• Use empirical research to identify who is credible for the audience you want to reach

• Violating expectations of a source can be powerful

• Partisan labels increase policy support when they take an unexpected position on a partisan issue
  
  • E.g., Republican endorsing same-sex marriage
  • E.g., Democrat opposing abortion rights

Source: Bergan (2012)
Novel messengers

Youth speaking to youth

Health Justice Manifesto
**Novel messengers**

"When it comes to children’s health and our national security, retreat is not an option."

"Retreat is Not an Option: Healthier School Meals Protect Our Children and Country"
What we need to know

• Need more work on the messenger

• Need more work on actions vs. opinions/perceptions
  ▫ What are the actions that individuals can take to influence policy?
Direct democracy in CA and other places... but limited results
The policy process is complex...

BUT changes in public sentiment can set the stage for changes in policy

Do you think marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?

Source: Gallup (2012)
We need to invest in research

• We settle for very limited evidence in allocating huge sums of $ for communication strategy

• Effectively communicating population health’s causes and solutions is probably as important as knowing what those causes and solutions are
THANK YOU!

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