

Research Note

One message for all? Framing public health messages to recognize diversity

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of framing messages as either a “gain” or a “loss” to encourage eligible women to participate in a population-based program to screen for breast cancer in New Zealand. In the first phase, self-completion questionnaire surveys were distributed to a random sample of 1085 women who had experienced a screening mammogram, which included an invitation to participate in focus group or individual interviews. The data from the survey questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed using SPSS to conduct χ^2 -tests for independence in contingency tables. Qualitative analysis of the survey and focus group interview material was carried out using an interpretive phenomenology approach of hermeneutic analysis [Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences* (J. B. Thompson, Trans., & Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press].

As the first New Zealand study of the screening mammography program to stratify by ethnicity, this research has indicated that some ethnic minority groups respond differently to the mainstream population to framed messages about the desirability of participating in a screening mammogram. Questions which arise from the differing responses to framed communication reflect the crucial importance of recognizing the information needs of diverse populations in any communication strategy, which indicates the important need for future research in this area.

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1. Introduction

Encouraging populations to undertake desirable health behaviors entails far more than simply placing information in the public arena and waiting for all people to respond positively. There is a need to consider how to make the health issue salient enough for target populations to decide to take part. In the following study, the role of communication in encouraging an eligible population to participate in a free, pilot screening mammography program to detect breast cancer in New Zealand women is investigated. The aim was to examine how women responded to recruitment messages from the program. The research included questions which investigated the influence of “framing” health communication as a “gain” or a “loss”.

Gain and loss-framed messages are based on the prospect theory of [Kahneman and Tversky \(1984\)](#), which explains that people will respond differently to messages depending on how the messages are framed, either as a potential benefit or as a risk of losing something. The influence of loss and gain framing in health communication messages has been researched by [Banks et al. \(1995\)](#), [Detweiler, Bedell, Salovey, Pronin, and Rothman \(1999\)](#), [Rothman, Salovey, Antone, Keough, and Martin \(1993\)](#), and more recently, [Schneider, Salovey, and Apanovitch \(2001\)](#). Recognizing the importance of framing persuasive messages may well improve communication within the health sector.

2. Rationale

Ethnic minority groups are projected to continue to increase in numbers in New Zealand. The now-dominant European population is expected to decrease from 79% to 69% of total population by 2021 ([Statistics New Zealand, 2003](#)). However, there is still an under-representation of ethnic minority groups of women undergoing screening mammography in this country ([Ministry of Health, 2002](#)), which mirrors an international trend of the reported lower participation of ethnic minority groups having mammograms in America (e.g., [Selvin & Brett, 2003](#)) and Britain (e.g., [Kernohan, 1996](#)). The propensity for ethnic minority groups such as Māori and Pacific Island women in New Zealand to present later with advanced breast cancer ([Newman et al., 1992](#); [Solomon & Jackson, 1990](#)) indicates a clear need for increased efforts to target these groups.

Is, then, presenting “one message for all” appropriate for diverse populations? Accepting that cultural identity is socially constructed ([Smith & Bond, 1998](#)), and that our orientation and values consistently influence and are also influenced by communication processes ([Martin & Nakayama, 1999](#)), it becomes important to question the way in which members of different ethnic groups respond to communication about participating in a community health intervention such as screening for breast cancer.

3. Method

The questions, which drove the current study related to how effective the recruitment message from the screening program was in encouraging voluntary participation among the eligible population. Although the 32-question survey focused on many potential factors to influence women’s perceived experiences at various stages of the screening process, only the question related to message framing is discussed here. Analysis of the other questions on recruitment of women into the program and their experience during the screening

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