The Power of Language

Public Health and Clinical Perspectives on How the Way We Talk About Refugees, Immigrants and Migrants Shapes Health Outcomes

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About NRC-RIM

The National Resource Center for Refugees, Immigrants and Migrants
History

- Funded by CDC, housed at University of Minnesota
- Established in Oct. 2020 as part of COVID-19 response
- Work with organizations serving RIM communities that are disproportionately impacted by health inequities
Goals

- **Strengthen partnerships** between health departments + communities
- **Support health departments + CBOs** that work with refugees, immigrants, + migrants
- **Reduce health disparities** + improve health equity
Using Politically Correct Language
Tools You Can Use:

Source: Diversity Style Guide
Using Affirming Language

**Biological**: Avoid terms related to “biological sex.” When necessary, you can refer to someone’s assigned sex at birth.

**Manong**: Manong is a term of respect that precedes the first name of older Filipino men; *manang* for older Filipina women.

**Latinx**: A gender-neutral word, increasingly used instead of Latino and/or Latina. Be aware that many people who identify as Latino/a or Hispanic are not familiar with the term Latinx.
Connecting language to health outcomes

The Language We Use  Health Outcomes
Agenda

- Rhetoric around RIM communities
- Language choice and:
  - Public opinion
  - Personal bias
- Language use as a structural determinant of health
- Best Practices
- Q&A
Rhetoric Around RIM Communities
Rhetoric: Think-Pair-Share

What images come to mind when you hear the following words:

Refugee  Immigrant  Migrant  Expat
Refugee
The Lexicon of Global Migration

- Émigré
- Global Nomad
- Expat
- Immigrant
- Asylum-seeker
- Migrant

Source: @KarlReMarks
How language choice influences public opinion
How language choice influences public opinion

Percentage of people who are supporting of accepting immigrants or refugees, globally

Source: Pew Research Center | People around the world express more support for taking in refugees than immigrants
How language choice influences public opinion

Vulnerable Refugee

Vulnerable Immigrant

Source: Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move
Portrayal of Immigrants in the Media

Source: Frontiers | Are You What You Read? Predicting Implicit Attitudes to Immigration Based on Linguistic Distributional Cues From Newspaper Readership
Connecting language choice and bias
“Studies have shown that changing how people talk changes how they think.”

-Dr. Lera Boroditsky
Connecting Language Choice and Bias

Source: Scientific American | How Language Shapes Thought
Connecting Language Choice and Bias

Source: Scientific American | How Language Shapes Thought
Arabic-Hebrew bilinguals showed more positive implicit attitudes toward Jewish people when tested in Hebrew than when tested in Arabic.
Language can shift responsibility

"Refugee patients disproportionately have poor health outcomes."

"Refugee patients disproportionately face health inequities."

Criticizes patients

Criticizes systems
Language can shift responsibility

“Speakers of languages other than English were more likely to delay their vaccine.”

“Speakers of languages other than English were more likely to experience delays to vaccination.”

Criticizes patients

Criticizes systems
Language and structural determinants of health
Factors that influence health

Structural determinants of health are more influential than health behaviors or genes/biology.

Source: Minnesota Department of Health | Public health in Minnesota
Language as a Structural Determinant of Health

- Plain language
- Translation
- Interpretation
- Cultural relevance
- Humanizing patients
- Dignity + respect
- Meaningful connections
How language choice influences public opinion

Vulnerable Refugee

Vulnerable Immigrant
How language choice influences public opinion

Community

Population
Shifting your language

Illiterate

Oral Tradition
## Shifting your language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common phrase</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>Oral Tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>Speak languages other than English</td>
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<tr>
<td>At high-risk for</td>
<td>Disproportionately experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard-to-reach</td>
<td>Benefit from innovative approaches</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Language can shape public health work

“Our collective well-being is in our hands.”

“To disclose symptoms is an act of love.”
Language can create successful partnerships

Mothers x Mothers
Clinical Medicine

- Health inequities are well established
- Many theories exist as to why: patient, health system, clinician
- Personal and collective biases affect how we care for patients

What narratives and language shape the provision of care?
| 01 | Questioning Credibility | “He claims that nicotine patches don’t work for him” |
| 02 | Disapproval | “She is adamant that she cannot perform any kind of exercise due to pain and will not change her diet” |
| 03 | Stereotyping | “States the lesion ‘busted open’” |
| 04 | Difficult Patient | “She persevered on the fact that ‘a lot of stuff is going on at home with my family’ and ‘you wouldn’t understand’” |
| 05 | Unilateral Decisions | “I impressed upon her the importance of...” |
Language in Notes: Positive Categories

01. Compliment
   "Mr. [Patient] is charming, pleasant and kind"

02. Approval
   "I provided much deserved praise and encouraged her to continue her trajectory"

03. Self Disclosure
   "I am happy to continue coordinating her care"

04. Minimizing Blame
   "She has not been taking iron because it makes her constipated"

05. Personalize
   "She is a songwriter and enjoys walks with her dog Scout"

06. Bilateral decision making
   "She stated even if it was positive, she would not want further testing. She will think about this and let me know if she wishes to proceed"
The Hidden Curriculum: Patients with Limited English Proficiency

Bias is informed by language and has real-world consequences:

- Lower quality healthcare
- Higher adverse events
- Environment and culture: values efficiency over effective communication

49%

Proportion of U.S. medical students who reported being exposed to negative comments about Black patients by attending or resident physicians

Source: NEJM | Tackling Implicit Bias in Health Care
Immigrants and refugees have the wisdom, expertise, and desire to influence health systems to serve their communities better.
Humanize patients and improve health outcomes

- Know yourself
- Know your field
- Innovate your practice
- Eliminate stigmatizing words
Key Takeaways
1

Language has a powerful influence on how we think about and value people.
Changing *the words we use* has policy, public health and clinical implications.
Immigrants and refugees have complex identities and diverse experiences, all of which are *stories worth telling.*
How to Reach Us

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nrcrim@umn.edu
www.nrcrim.org
Download this presentation
Sources

- Addressing Bias and Stigma in the Language We Use With Persons With Opioid Use Disorder
- Are You What You Read? Predicting Implicit Attitudes to Immigration Based on Linguistic Distributional Cues From Newspaper Readership
- Expat identities: loaded words for movers abroad
- How We Label and React to People on the Move
- How Language Shapes Thought
- Lexicon of Global Migration
- ‘Migrants’? ‘Refugees’? Terminology Is Contested, Powerful, and Evolving
- Negative Patient Descriptors: Documenting Racial Bias In The Electronic Health Record
- People around the world express more support for taking in refugees than immigrants
- Physician Use of Stigmatizing Language in Patient Medical Records
- Public Health in Minnesota
- Social Determinants of Health
- Tackling Implicit Bias in Healthcare
- Through the Veil of Language: Exploring the Hidden Curriculum for the Care of Patients With Limited English Proficiency
- Twelve Tips for Teaching Implicit Bias Recognition and Management
- Why are white people expats when the rest of us are immigrants?
- Why the language we use to talk about refugees matters so much
Tools

- AME: Person-First Language
- APA: Bias Free Language
- CDC: Health Equity Style Guide
- Contact Tracing Campaign
- Diversity Style Guide
- Immigration Glossary
- Mothers x Mothers
- Project Implicit
- UnBIASED