Manipulating risk perceptions: Examining the utility of exemplars for altering perceptions of HIV related risk.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that varying the extent to which participants identify with the exemplar in an HIV test promotion message can systematically alter risk perceptions with reference to HIV transmission, thus increasing intentions to receive . Theoretically, there are at least two reasons to believe that varying similarity of the exemplar will systematically alter personal risk assessments. First, according to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), the likelihood that vicarious learning will occur is at least in part a function of the extent to which the observer is able to identify with the behavioral model. Identification has been proposed to be a function of perceived similarity with the behavior model. Perceived similarity can be a function of race, gender, age, other cultural markers and/or experiences (Kalichman, Kelly, Hunter, Murphey & Tyler, 1993). For example, imagine a young lady who is exposed to a message, which is delivered by a model with whom she identifies (in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, ect), describing how she was infected with the virus and the consequences of HIV-antibody testing (or, of not receiving testing). That young lady may be persuaded that she too is at risk for HIV transmission, to a greater extent than the person who was exposed to the dissimilar model with whom she is unable to identify.

It is also plausible that additional mechanisms are at work in the relationship between identification with a model and behavior. Zillman (2006) argues that exemplifications of events are capable of heightening risk perceptions because exemplars influence perceptions of the frequency of event occurrence (via the quantification heuristic). Beliefs about the likelihood of occurrence for oneself and others are an extension of perceptions of the frequency of event occurrence. People make judgments

about the likelihood of event occurrence on the basis of exemplar representations (via the representativeness heuristic) and these exemplar-based judgments are made regardless of the sample size of exemplars. Consequently, "the assessment of others' risk is applied to self whenever assessing persons believe exogenous and endogenous conditions to be parallel…. If others' risk and personal risk share neither exogenous nor endogenous conditions, the assessment of personal risk does not follow that of others' risks and must be expected to be independent of each other" (2006, p. S231). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that increased perceived similarity with a model, in terms of gender, sexual orientation and race will increase the extent to which an observer identifies with the exemplar. Consequently, to the extent that (at least some) endogenous and exogenous conditions are parallel on several salient dimensions, the risk experienced by the exemplar should be applicable to participants, relative to a dissimilar exemplar. Provided that an individual has engaged in risky sexual behaviors in the past, exposure to an exemplar that is perceived as similar should make those past behaviors salient and result in acknowledgement of some risk of testing positive.

This experiment utilizes a 1x 3 between subjects design. Participants will be exposed to a similar exemplar, a dissimilar exemplar or a control message with no exemplar. Each message promotes HIV antibody testing and is framed in terms of losses. This study was developed under the supervision of Dr. Joseph Cappella. This study will function as the pilot study for my dissertation research.