

TESTING NORMATIVE MESSAGES TO PROMOTE INTENTIONS TO GET TESTED FOR HIV

AMONG LATINOS

RATIONALE

It has been argued that the change in perceptions of the severity of having the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), due to Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART), has increased people's likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behavior, which increases the probability of HIV transmission through sexual contact (Klitzman et al., 2007). The personal consequences of having HIV are considerable, because HIV introduces feelings of shame and isolation resulting from the social stigmatization of the disease; and the associated stigma places the individuals at risk of financial, social and psychological consequences (e.g. Wolfe et al., 2006). Thus, understanding the appropriate ways to influence individuals' decisions to engage in HIV testing, as a behavior to prevent the transmission of HIV, is essential.

Evidence to date suggests that there are several predictors of HIV testing. Among its main predictors are people's perceptions of risk, education, age, job status and having unprotected sex. Similarly, other major predictors are the fear and stigma associated with the thought of HIV, the lack of confidentiality in the testing centers and the feeling of fatalism. In this context, motivating HIV testing among populations at risk can clearly be challenging.

The limited scientific evidence about the message appeals that can be used to motivate people to get tested indicates that messages communicating the positive consequences of testing (using either gain- or loss-framed messages) can be effective at persuading individuals to get tested for HIV (Apanovitch et al., 2003). However, there seems to be almost no scientific knowledge about what could work best to promote HIV testing among the Latino population, which is a growing segment of the U.S. population. The percent of individuals with Hispanic/Latino origin is expected to be 15% of the U.S. population by 2010—after being 9% in 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006)—and they constituted the third largest group in the estimated number of HIV diagnosis during 2007—after African Americans and Whites (CDC, 2009).

Overall, it is known that normative messages can activate normative considerations by making perceptions of norms more salient in the mind of the individual and, as a consequence, the individual uses this normative information to make behavioral decisions (Cialdini et al., 1990; Shultz et al., 2007).

The convergence of the Theory for the Prediction of Behavior (TPB) and research guided by Priming Theory in health communications (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003) constitutes an opportunity to explain the nature of the effect of normative messages on behavior. In light of the TPB, a normative message can impact behavior through persuasion: a message impacts salient normative beliefs, which in turn increase perceived normative pressure, which in turn increase intentions, which are a consistent predictor of behavior. In light of Priming Theory in the context of the TPB, a normative message can impact behavior through priming: a message moderates the association between perceptions of norms and intentions to engage in a behavior. My dissertation work is proposed to test these theoretical explanations using normative messages intended to shape decisions to engage in HIV testing among Latinos in the United States.

RESEARCH AGENDA

My dissertation work involves a sequence of three studies. Study 1 has been completed.

Study 1

Guided by the Theory for the Prediction of Behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), Study 1—which was a cross-sectional, survey-based study with 192 Latinos living in North Philadelphia—indicated that intentions to get tested for HIV in the next three months are mainly predicted by attitudes and, to a lesser extent, perceived normative pressure. Study 1 also revealed that parents, children, siblings, partners and friends are the important referents that exert normative influence among this population when they form intentions to get a test. Study 1 finally revealed that features of personal networks—specifically, perceived similarity and identification with members of one's personal network—increased perceived norms to get an HIV test.

Study 2

Conclusions from Study 1 are used to develop Study 2, which is conceived as an opportunity to develop and assess the effect of normative messages in a sample of Latinos. This study involves three phases and will run over a period of three months. Phase one will include a set of one-hour, in-depth interviews with 40 participants. These interviews will collect quantitative and qualitative information. This information will help (1) refine the survey instruments to be used in Study 3 and (2) develop appropriate normative messages. Phases two and three will test the effect of potential normative messages on perceptions of norms in regards to getting tested for HIV using two experiments. Each phase will rely on a within-subjects experiment with 60 participants each and will assess the best candidates for the normative messages to be used in Study 3. Each phase will test a different set of messages. The total number of participants in Study 2 will be 160, who will be recruited in North Philadelphia, through Congreso de Latinos Unidos—a community based non-profit organization serving the community of North Philadelphia. I have established a research partnership with this organization to conduct studies 1 and 2.

Study 3

Conclusions from Study 2 will be used to conduct Study 3. This last study will be a between-subjects experiment with a larger sample of Latinos from the United States, who will be recruited using the services of Survey Sampling International (SSI). Study 3 will be used to test persuasion and priming effects of normative messages on intentions to get tested for HIV.

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