

# The Power of Language

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**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



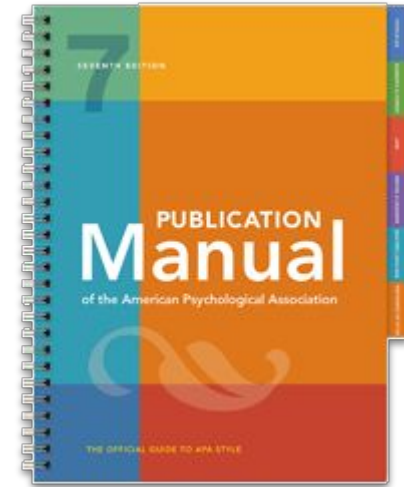
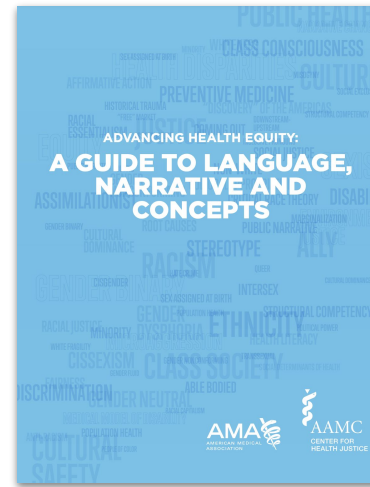
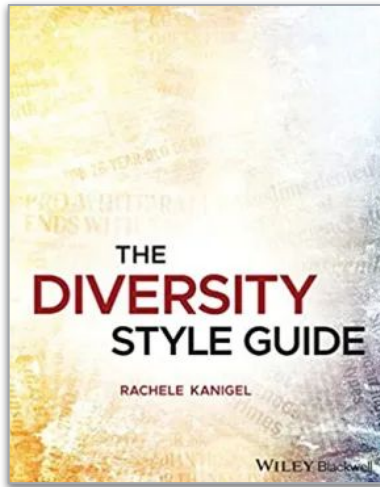
## >> Goals

- **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

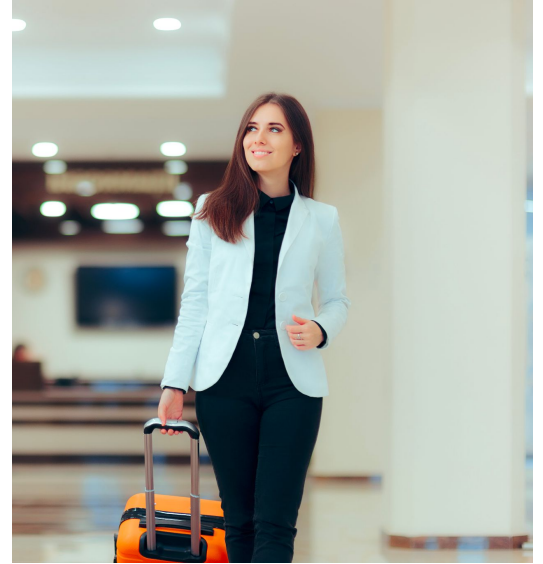
Expatriate













*Source: FT | Expat identities: loaded words for movers abroad*



# >> The Lexicon of Global Migration



Émigré



Global Nomad



Expat



Immigrant



Asylum-seeker



Migrant



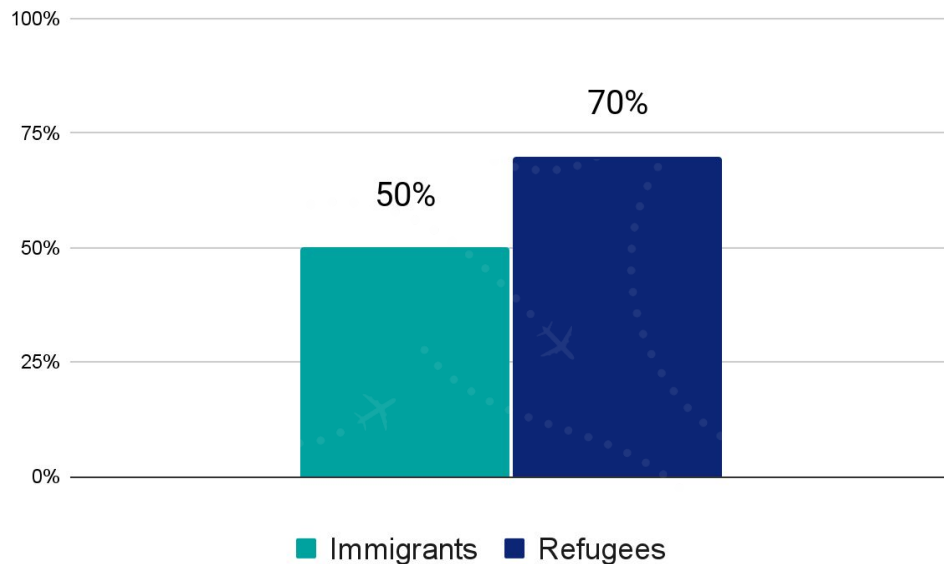
Source: @KarlreMarks



## »» 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

[illegible]

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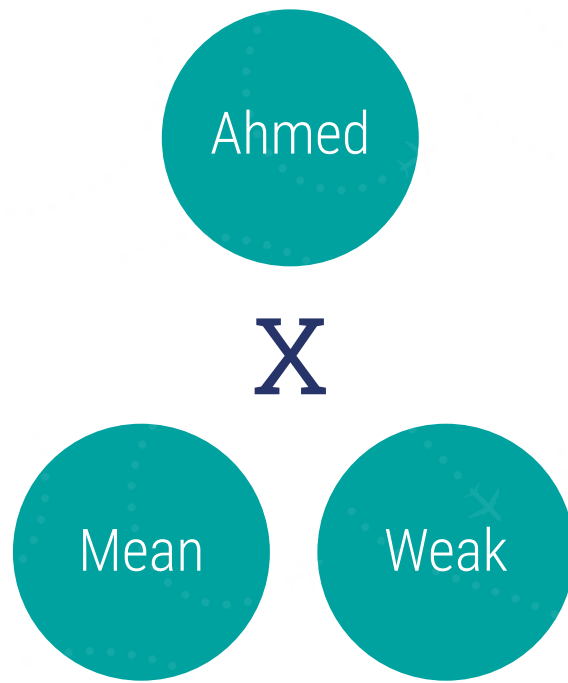
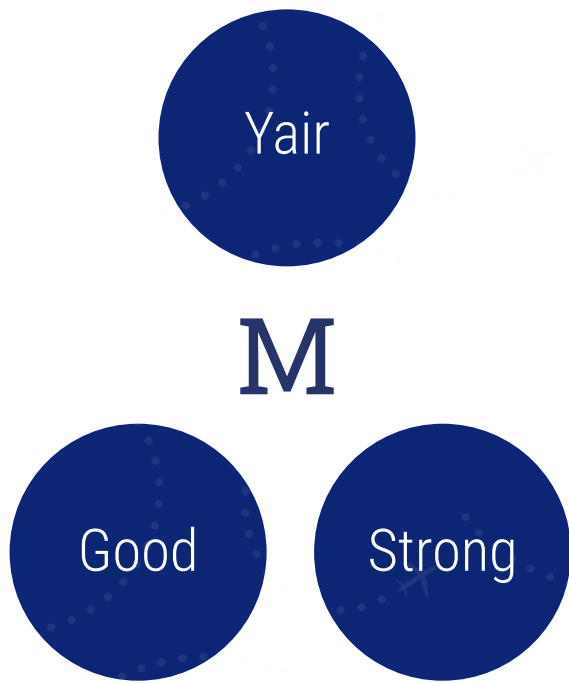
## » Connecting language choice and bias

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“Studies have shown that  
changing how people talk  
changes how they think.”

*-Dr. Lera Boroditsky*

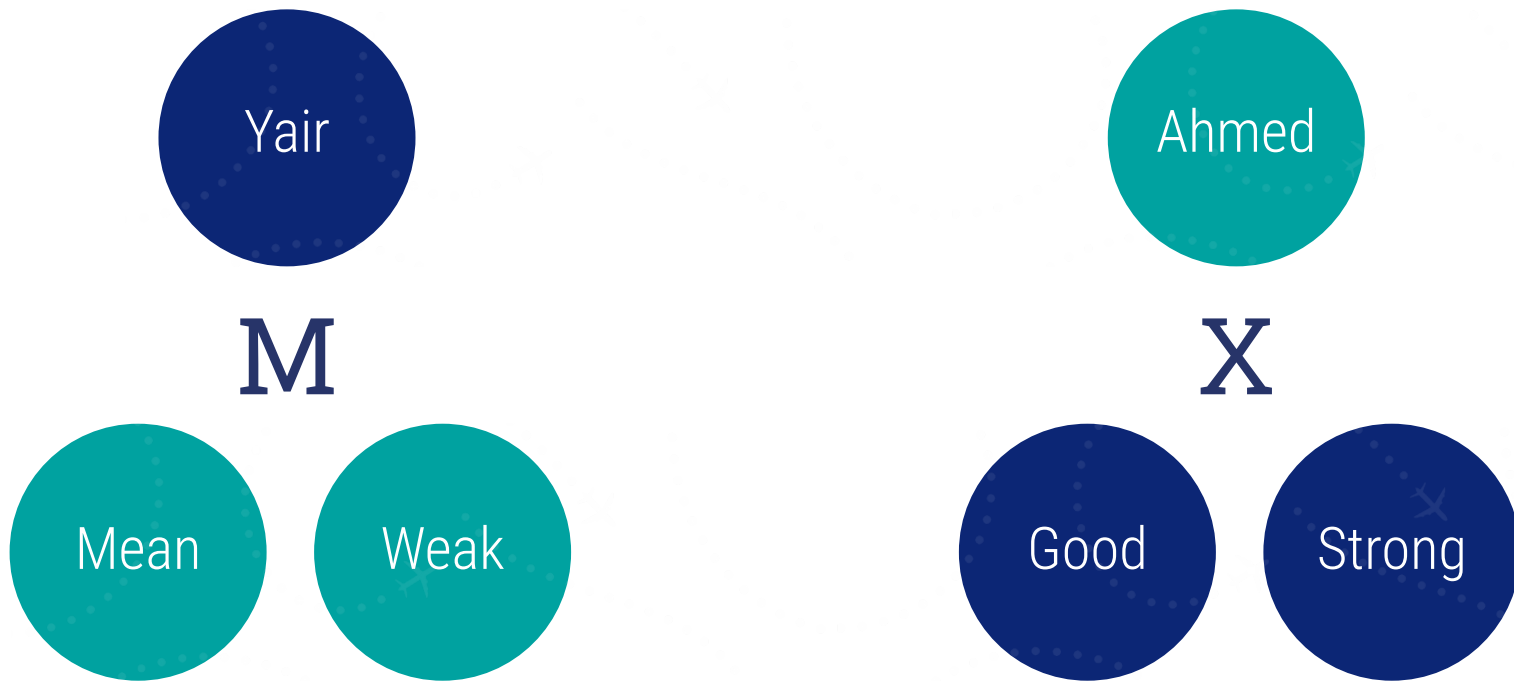
## >> Connecting Language Choice and Bias



*Source: Scientific American | How Language Shapes Thought*



## >> Connecting Language Choice and Bias



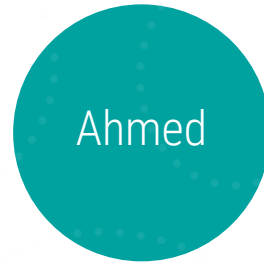
*Source: Scientific American | How Language Shapes Thought*

## » Language Choice and Bias



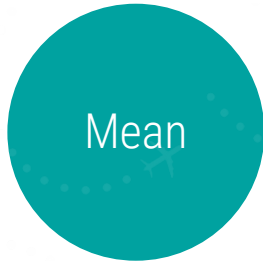
Yair

M



Ahmed

X



Mean



Weak



Good



Strong

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**

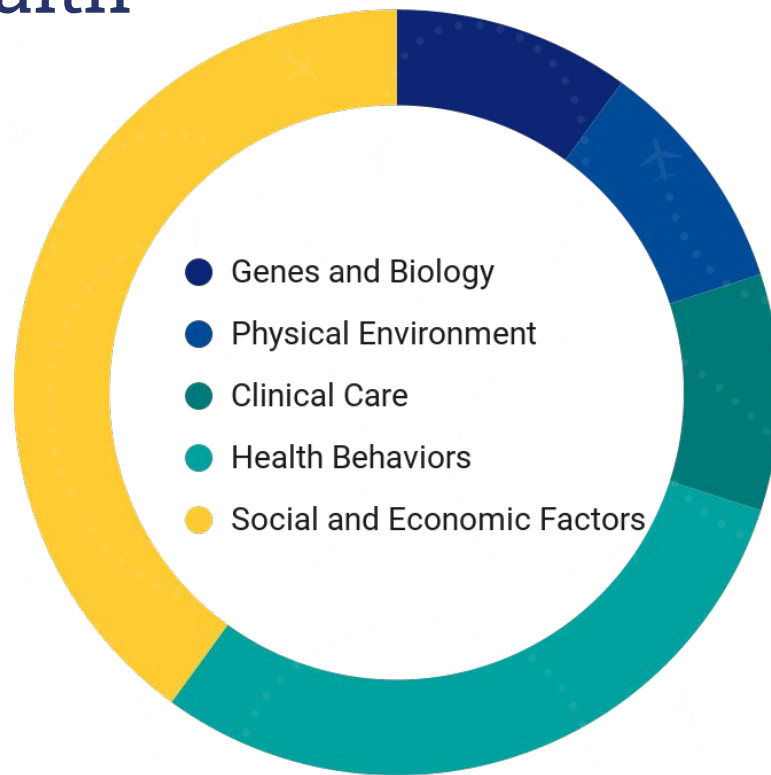
**Criticizes systems**



## » 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



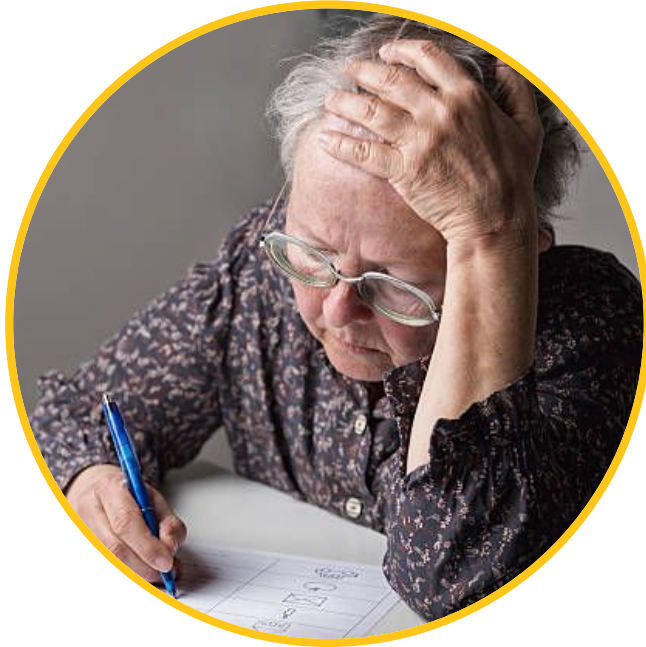
Community



Population



## » Shifting your language



Illiterate



Oral Tradition

# » Shifting your language

Common phrase	Alternative
Population	Community
Individual	Person
Illiterate	Oral Tradition
Limited English Proficiency	Speak languages other than English
At high-risk for	Disproportionately experience
Hard-to-reach	Benefit from innovative approaches

## >> 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



## >> 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?



# >> Stigmatizing Language in Notes: Negatives

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..."

Source: Jama Network Open | Physician Use of Stigmatizing Language in Patient Medical Records

# Language in Notes: Positive Categories



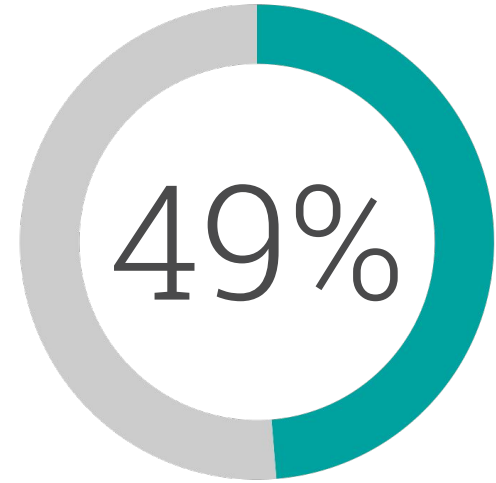
01	Compliment	"Mr. [Patient] is charming, pleasant and kind"
02	Approval	"I provided much deserved praise and encouraged her to continue her trajectory"
03	Self Disclosure	"I am happy to continue coordinating her care"
04	Minimizing Blame	"She has not been taking iron because it makes her constipated"
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"

Source: Jama Network Open | Physician Use of Stigmatizing Language in Patient Medical Records

# » 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



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*



## »» Solutions

# » Telling a Patient's Whole Story

Immigrants and refugees have the wisdom, expertise, and desire to influence health systems to serve their communities better.



Mother      Essential  
Worker  
Student      Neighbor  
Refugee      Muslim  
Business owner      Friend  
Community      Woman  
Builder  
Artist

# >> 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.



# 2

Changing ***the words we use*** has policy, public health and clinical implications.

# 3

Immigrants and refugees have complex identities and diverse experiences, all of which are ***stories worth telling.***

## >> How to Reach Us



@nrc\_rim



@nrcrim



@nrcrim



nrcrim@umn.edu



[www.nrcrim.org](http://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](#)
- [Expatriates: 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

- [AMA: Advancing Health Equity: A Guide to Language, Narrative and Concepts](#)
- [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](#)