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Posters for public health: WPA posters and national dialogues about health care in the United States

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ABSTRACT

During the same years they were designing the now-famous American travel posters, Work Projects Administration (WPA) designers produced an extensive body of public health posters to communicate a variety of health-related messages to the American public. This article explores the role of the WPA's public health posters in Depression-era health care dialogues in the US. Explicitly, this visual dialogue centered around the need for data-driven personal health choices; expert information about health and disease; and the role of government agencies as representatives of reliable data. Implicitly, the posters also re-enforced existing norms associated with race, gender, and class, framing dialogues that had as much to do with social norms as they did with health care messaging. Drawing on the Library of Congress collection of WPA posters as its sample, this article provides both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the visual messaging strategies employed by WPA poster artists when discussing public health.

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Introduction

Politically charged visual messaging around the topic of public health in the twentieth century has a complex and diverse international history.[1] As the US grapples with issues of universal health care access and improved public health care policy, dialogues about national public health have saturated the media landscape. Unsurprisingly, many contemporary conversations escape historical contextualization. Health care has been part of the national conversation in the US at several key points in time prior to the Affordable Care Act of 2010. On an international scale, such conversation has been even more prevalent throughout the twentieth century, with scholars of visual culture documenting the ways in which visual communication participates in the dialogues surrounding national public health.[2] Visual messages have both shaped and reflected the diverse dialogues in which they participated. While such historical dialogues are in many ways specific to their own places and moments, they also have the capacity to illuminate contemporary conversations by providing rhetorical context.

The public health posters of the Work Projects Administration's (WPA) Federal Art Project provide one opportunity to both quantify and engage critically with historical visual messaging around public health in the US. The roughly 2000 surviving poster designs of the

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WPA represent a small part of a much broader program of activity. The WPA (and, more specifically, the Federal Art Project) was part of the Federal Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which was enacted in 1935 by President Roosevelt and effectively ended when the US entered the Second World War. 1936 was the peak employment year for the WPA's Federal Art Project, with over 5300 artists on payroll. The artists of the Federal Art Project produced about 35,000 unique poster designs and printed about 2 million posters.[3] To investigate the cultural context and ideological messaging strategies of the WPA's public health posters, this article takes as a sample the Library of Congress collection of WPA posters. The Library of Congress collection is the largest in the world, containing 907 posters acquired in the 1940s, shortly after the close of the WPA in 1943. Of the 907 posters in the Library of Congress collection, 92 (10.14%) address themes related to public health, and it is these posters that the following analysis considers.

In comparison to the WPA's travel posters, which are well-known to both popular and scholarly audiences, the other subjects that WPA artists and designers addressed are much less familiar to contemporary viewers. The scholarship surrounding the WPA's travel promotion is well-developed in relationship to both the posters and the written materials, such as the State Guides series. This scholarship suggests two primary ideological goals for the WPA's visual and textual production related to travel. One, the materials sought to build a cohesive and well-defined national landscape that was unique to America and valuable in terms of its cultural context, historical significance, and natural beauty.[4] Two, the materials sought to unify a diverse American public facing a national economic crisis, primarily by contrasting the viewing audience with an array of exotic people groups – such as Native Americans, Latin Americans, African Americans, and recent European immigrants – and their colorful cultural customs.[5] The WPA's public health posters do not fit neatly into either of these narratives, primarily because their pragmatic and ideological goals were so different from those of the travel posters. As the following analysis will reveal, the public health posters addressed a well-defined and largely homogenous audience. They sought to outline clear sources of threat and offer clear methods of resolution within a prescriptive, authoritarian framework predicated on a sense of personal and social responsibility. The representational strategies and visual tropes of the posters supported their ideological and practical messages as they sought to meet these goals.

Addressing homogenous, well-defined audiences

Race, gender, and class are all well-defined variables within the visual messaging of the public health posters. The homogeneity within these categories of representation limits the perceived audience for the posters and assumes a significant level of social conformity within the viewing audience. White, middle-class, nuclear families are the norm (Figure 1), and deviations are pictured as just that – deviant. Broadly speaking, the posters assumed a white viewing audience; supported complementarian gender roles within a nuclear family; and depicted a middle-class standard of living as the norm, with poverty visualized as a situation associated with or even directly caused by negligence, dirtiness, and disorder. The representational strategies used to communicate these messages deserve individual attention.

While the WPA's travel posters often pictured minority populations, the public health posters exclusively pictured white individuals. Of the 92 public health posters in the Library



Figure 1. The normative audience for the WPA's public health posters was the white, middle-class, nuclear family. Posters designed and printed by the Illinois Federal Art Project (left), 1936–39 and the Ohio Federal Art Project for the Cleveland Division of Health (right), 1940. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2–80 and LC-USZC2-1086.

of Congress (LOC) collection, 64 picture humans, and 42 (45.65%) picture individuals who are clearly identifiable as white. The remainder are either partial representations such as a booted foot or figural icons such as male/female pictographs, in which race is entirely obscured. None of the posters identifiably picture persons of color, and only one even mentions persons of color. A poster made for Ohio WPA employees between 1936 and 1940 asked workers to 'stamp out syphilis' by having a blood test; to illustrate the message, a booted foot stomped on the hand-lettered text beneath. City and county health clinics were listed on the poster, and one of these was 'white only' while two were 'colored only.' This is the only poster in the whole sample that does not assume whiteness as normative and inevitable. Nor did any of the WPA's public health posters communicate in a language other than English. A limited range of Spanish-language posters and brochures could be ordered from the New York Maternity Center Association, a non-profit established in 1918. A set of four congenital syphilis posters was available for public display at a price of fifty cents, for instance.[6] But there are no surviving Spanish (or, indeed, non-English) posters produced by the New York City Federal Art Project, which produced 28.26% of the public health posters in the sample. As a major metropolitan area with a large international population, New York City might be expected to require a linguistically diverse range of public health communications. Illinois, Ohio, and New York state are the other WPA branches that were primary contributors to the sample – all locations in which a lack of linguistic diversity during the 1930s is perhaps less surprising. That the materials for and by New York City communicated

only in English is an exclusionary representational choice, speaking to the normative nature of the English-speaking white person as the intended audience for the posters.

Though the public health posters carefully avoided representing minority populations, other WPA posters reflected the culturally institutionalized environment of racial segregation or used racial minorities as symbols of the exotic or the primitive. Multiple examples from a variety of artists demonstrate the ways in which persons of color indicated the presence of prejudice and/or symbolized 'the Other.' John Wagner's 1936–40 'Learn to Swim' poster for the New York City Department of Parks pictured racially segregated swimming classes, with white children and black children all wearing swimsuits, but lined up separately according to skin color. Though there are ways to complicate the reading of the 'Learn to Swim' poster, its composition does indicate a significantly segregated social environment.[7] While representations of African Americans often pointed toward the segregation of the contemporary environment, representations of Native Americans were more commonly used as symbols of America's primitive past. A series of 1939 posters by Louis Siegriest pictured traditional Native American activities such as hunts and dances, and handicrafts such as weaving and pottery, to advertise the Indian Court exhibit at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. By portraying Native Americans as performative actors in spectacles meant for tourists, the series frames Native American culture as the primitive 'Other.' This was a common representational strategy of early to mid-twentieth century tourist imagery depicting indigenous cultures, particularly in the Southwest.[8]

Unlike these examples of WPA posters that pictured persons of color, albeit in stereotypical and limiting ways, the public health posters failed to depict persons of color at all (Figure 2). The public health posters were progressive in some regards, particularly (as a later section will discuss) in relationship to evolving notions of sexual health, but they failed to challenge the racist norms of their time in any way. Indeed, with the one exception that has been noted, they even failed to address the health concerns of non-white viewers *within* a racist, segregated context. Thus the posters imply that public health is a matter of concern only for the white population through their exclusionary representational tactics. They quite literally erase non-white persons from the conversation about health. This visual strategy echoed the racial prejudices of medical practice at the time. Medical research studies that drew conclusions based only on data drawn from largely or exclusively Caucasian male populations were not uncommon, and studies that intentionally, systematically, and deceptively denied treatment to African Americans established patterns of fear and mistrust that continue to impact the medical experiences of minority populations in the twenty-first century US.[9] Framing public health and personal wellness as an exclusively white concern was not a neutral visual practice or a harmless oversight; rather, it was both a reflection and a perpetuation of a dangerously prejudiced system.

In the same way that they failed to address race, the public health posters failed to challenge normative gender roles. Throughout the 92 posters, gender roles are clearly defined, with men as bread-winners and women as keepers of the home (Figure 3). In 12 posters (13.04% of the total), men are pictured in professional contexts: working in factories and hospitals, as drivers and deliver-men, as shop-keepers and manual laborers. Syphilis is a 'menace to industry; don't lose your pay' advises a 1936–40 poster by the Illinois WPA, picturing a man at work in an industrial setting. 'Infection is avoided by immediate first aid on the job!' cautions another poster by the Illinois WPA. The poster shows two workmen, one administering first aid to the other. Only twice are men pictured in a domestic context, and



Figure 2. White patients and white doctors dominate the posters taken at a whole; persons of color are never represented, and languages other than English are never used. Posters designed by Alexander Dux for the New York State Department of Health (left), 1936–39, and the Illinois Federal Art Project, 1936–39. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-5371 and LC-USZC2-5184.

both times they appear alongside women as father figures in middle-class, white, nuclear families. In contrast, women are pictured in what might be a professional context twice (2.17% of the total). Both women might be elementary school teachers, depending on how the viewer reads the image. 'John is not really dull; he may only need his eyes examined,' advises a 1936–37 poster sponsored by Health Officer of the New York town of Hempstead. The poster pictures a boy reading a book, and a woman holding a printed page (perhaps a report card) in front of his book. The woman could be either the boy's teacher or his mother; the context is unclear. In the second ambiguous poster, a young woman holds two report cards, one with an 'A' for grades, the other with an 'A' for habits. 'Good grades and good habits go together; get your [tuberculosis] test now,' the copy reads. The young woman might be either a teacher or a secondary school student; again, the context is open to interpretation. The right of women – particularly married women – to work was called into question during the Depression years, when jobs were scarce and public sentiment consigned women firmly to the home.[10] Yet women certainly participated in the workforce, making up 21.9% of the labor force in the US during the 1930s.[11] The absence of professional women in the WPA's public health posters, then, can be read as a choice – a messaging strategy, rather than a factual reflection of the physical environment.



Figure 3. Clearly defined complementarian gender roles depict men as wage-earners and women as keepers of home and family. Posters designed by E. S. Reid for the Cook County Illinois Public Health Unit, 1936–41 (left) and the Illinois Federal Art Project, 1936–41. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-5237 and LC-USZC2–806.

Though their role as professionals is ambiguous at best, women appear in unambiguously domestic contexts more frequently – seven times, or 7.61% of the total. In their representations of women, the posters highlighted the role that mothers played in the maintenance of public health. The professional literature of the public health professions delivered the same message. World War Two, which saw women entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers, offered an opportunity to reflect nostalgically on the role of the woman in the home. 'Traditionally, the homemaker does much to protect and maintain the health of her family,' wrote the national Director of Community War Services in 1943. He continued:

> She knows the physical needs of her children and any peculiar tendencies which need special attention. She plans meals which will give her family the foods they need for health. When illness occurs, she will be on the lookout for it and make every effort to obtain adequate medical service at once. With life centered in the home, children are protected against activities and contacts which might jeopardize their health.[12]

This homily might well have been describing the narrative content of the WPA's posters for maternal and child health. A 1936–41 poster by E. S. Reid advised viewers that the 'lifelong job' of the mother is 'the constant protection of [her children's] health.' Other posters illuminated the details of maternal responsibility. Proper prenatal care must include a 'balanced diet for the expectant mother,' instructed a 1936–39 poster by the New York State Federal Art Project. Infants and children must be appropriately nurtured; 'no creature in this world



Figure 4. Poverty is represented through visual cues about urban disease, dirtiness, darkness, and derelict buildings. Posters designed by Anthony Velonis (left) and the New York State Federal Art Project (right) for the New York City Housing Authority, 1936–38. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-1132 and LC-USZC2-1019.

[is] so ignorantly nurtured as the average baby,' a 1936–38 poster by Erik Hans Kraus scolds; 'advice at your health bureau.' Mothers are integral to the prevention of disease; 'congenital syphilis is preventable if syphilitic mothers will take adequate treatment,' a 1936–39 poster by Alexander Dux informs expectant mothers. Mothers are key to responsible family meal planning. 'Start the day right with a good breakfast; plan your luncheon wisely; dinner should balance your day's meals,' instructs a 1941–43 poster for the New York City Nutrition Program. The smaller copy on the poster differentiates between the dietary needs of children and adults, and the illustration shows a woman at a dining table. Clearly, the female role is child-care and home maintenance, where gendered health concerns center around pregnancy, child-rearing, and family well-being. Conversely, the male role is employment outside the home, where gendered health concerns center around job-related health and safety.

Class is a somewhat murkier variable, though most posters picture middle-class or working class individuals and families. Modes of dress are the clearest visual cues for class. Manual laborers wear overalls, deliverymen wear uniforms, businessmen wear suits, and clean, tidy children wear gender-appropriate school- or play-clothes. Only the planned housing posters (8.7% of the total) directly address poverty, primarily through visual cues about urban disease, dirtiness, darkness, and derelict buildings (Figure 4). A 1936–38 poster for the New York City Housing Authority portrays the stark contrast between public housing and slums. The left half of the poster has a black background; the words 'rotten living' appear in large white type above an illustration of a barefoot boy playing near a heap of rotting garbage. The right half of the poster is empty and white, with the words 'decent living through planned housing' in large green type near the bottom. The difference is quite literally black and white. 'Planned housing fights disease' claims another poster in the same series. It pictures a black,

amorphous mass awash in microbes being penetrated by the rays of a bright yellow, very geometrical sun. In this poster, the difference between darkness and light is further underscored by the contrast between order and chaos. 'Must we always have this?' asks a third poster in the series, picturing a chaotic urban environment filled with crumbling buildings, cracked windows, empty beer bottles, drunken and disheveled men, stray cats, rotting trash, and what appears to be the corpse of an infant. The appalling illustrations are reversed out of an amorphous black blob, implying both evil and disorder. 'Why not housing?' the poster implores, suggesting that planned public housing will solve the problems being depicted.

The New Deal investment in public housing, epitomized by the United States Housing Act of 1937, emphasized the role that clean, safe, and above all modern housing played in public health. Sympathetic contemporaneous media coverage of the Housing Act highlighted the correlation between substandard housing and poor health:

> [A]reas with high death rates and high sickness rates, especially for diseases dependent on contact infection, approximately coincide with areas of bad housing. General death rates and infant mortality in slums are likely to be twice the city average, tuberculosis and pneumonia rates perhaps four times as high.[13]

The WPA posters devoted to healthy housing communicated much the same message. Urban slums were hotbeds for disease and death, but also for crime, poverty, and filth – both moral and physical. The urban poor were miserable inhabitants of a dirty, dangerous, and disordered wasteland. Planned housing, on the other hand, offered an opportunity for 'decent living.' The visual representation of planned public housing invariably embraced the language of Modernist architecture, curing the chaos of urban poverty through the imposition of uniformity and geometry. The planned housing posters presented viewers with logical, organized, and above all geometric dwellings. These modern structures benefitted from a plentiful supply of natural light and a clean, disease-free environment. By imposing a clean and orderly physical environment, the posters suggest that class differences (and their attendant social ills) can be erased through cleanliness and responsibility.

Distribution, media, and style as strategy

Clearly defining the target audience's race, gender, and class was one strategy to effectively reach the intended audience. Distribution methods, choice of media, and stylistic decisions also played a role in negotiating the relationship between broadcaster and receiver. A quantitative 1939 study revealed that among government agencies, newer agencies were more likely than well-established ones to utilize mass media publicity tools, primarily defined as radio, newspaper, and poster campaigns. In this study, the WPA appeared in the 'most extensively engaged in public media campaigns' category, along with the Rural Electrification Administration, the Farm Security Administration, and the Federal Housing Administration – all New Deal programs.[14] The relative age of the issuing agency influenced how likely that agency was to engage with visual messaging in a broad public context. Thus the WPA, as a young government agency, enthusiastically embraced public media campaigns. Where and how the posters appeared was a topic that received attention, as well. Professional journals advised public health officials as to which messages belonged in which locations. In general, posters were distributed 'primarily to [neighborhood] residents, but also to doctors and dentists, and to schools, welfare and health agencies, stores, industrial plants, banks, motion picture theaters, clubs, and restaurants.'[15] More targeted distribution might be employed



Figure 5. The content of a message influenced its perceived context and audience; thus posters that utilized similar color schemes, design elements, and messaging strategies were deemed 'appropriate' for different venues. Posters designed by the Illinois Federal Art Project for the Chicago Department of Health (left), 1936–41 and the New York City Federal Art Project for the New York City Department of Correction (right), 1936–37. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-5171 and LC-USZC2-1006.

depending on the poster's content. Syphilis posters, a 1941 public health publication advised, should be placed 'in public lavatories, lavatories in beer parlours, and other suitable locations,' while infant and child vaccination posters should be placed 'in schools, town halls, community halls, offices, etc.'[16] Public transit vehicles and stations, museums, libraries, and the windows of local merchants were also specified by WPA literature as likely locations for general-interest public service posters.[17] Thus the content of the message influenced its location and perceived role within the public sphere (Figure 5).

While distribution methods primarily addressed context, production methods influenced the visible stylistic characteristics of the posters. Silkscreen was a cheap and relatively easy production method for the posters, more economical than offset lithography or photographic printing and requiring little in the way of specialized equipment and training. The nature of silkscreen as a medium led to the flat, graphic shapes and simplified compositions shared by most of the posters.[18] In turn, these practical concerns led to an aesthetic differentiation between the WPA public health posters and other visual media of the time that addressed the same topics. Some health publications of the day echoed the photo-journalistic strategies of *Life* magazine covers or the realist illustrations of Norman Rockwell for the *Saturday Evening Post*. *Hygeia*, the American Medical Association's periodical for general readers, used both strategies on their covers throughout the 1930s. Journalistic photographs tended to depict clinical situations and environments – for example, the July 1941 cover



Figure 6. Flat, graphic shapes and Isotype-style icons allowed the WPA's poster artists to simplify their pictorial language, a dual strategy that took advantage of silkscreen's economy of production and attempted visual sophistication and stylistic differentiation. Alex Kallenberg for the US Public Health Service and American Society for Control of Cancer (left), 1936–37 and the New York State Federal Art Project for the Health Bureau (right), 1936–39. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-1009 and LC-USZC2-5353.

pictured a white male draped in anticipation of a physical exam, attentively examining his own foot, with the copy 'Do you have athlete's foot?' running beneath the photo. Pictorial illustrations often depicted outdoor activities and sports – for example, the August 1936 cover that showed a young white woman playing golf. In contrast to such photographic images and realistic illustrations, the WPA posters were flat, graphic, and relatively abstract, though they did retain their figural specificity. Stylistically, the posters combined pictorial American illustration with the graphic abstraction of avant garde European modernism.[19] In many cases they also utilized or referenced the simplified representational language of the Isotype pictorial language system, developed by Otto Neurath in the early 1930s (Figure 6).

The use of Isotype-style icons and illustrations was generally hailed as an aesthetic advancement for government-sponsored design. Isotype-style posters received favorable reviews because of their graphic simplicity, their ability to intuitively communicate factual information and relationships, and their assumed (though of course not actual) universality. By adopting a similarly abstract and simplified visual style, the WPA's public health posters could trade on the associated visual messages of scientific accuracy and visual neutrality.[20] For some American viewers, Isotype also enjoyed an association with a progressive social and political agenda. *Survey Graphic*, published from 1921 until 1952, was a left-leaning political magazine that made extensive use of Isotype-style charts, graphs, and illustrations.

The magazine's 1936 biographical sketch of Neurath called him a 'social showman,' claiming that Neurath's 'little man,' used to symbolize people in visualizations of social statistics, first appeared in the US on the pages of *Survey Graphic* in 1932.[21] With regard to its editorial content during the Depression years, the magazine was closely aligned with New Deal politics. It frequently addressed New Deal initiatives, often publishing work by artists, authors, and officials within the WPA and its affiliated agencies. 'Under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration the Neurath pictograph technique [i.e., Isotype] was introduced in chart-making, and the Works Progress Administration is now carrying on that work,' wrote the Assistant Director of Information for the Resettlement Administration, a short-lived New Deal agency, in 1937. However, he concluded that despite these advances, '[g]overnment poster work in many respects is inadequate and unimaginative and it is only in recent years that layout and design have made any measurable typographic advance,' pointing toward the work of WPA poster artist Lester Beall as an exemplar of 'excellent poster work.'[22]

Unappealing government-sponsored design was doubly unfortunate because it was 'competing for attention with interesting, high-quality commercial publicity releases.'[23] Poorly-produced public health messages had little hope of rivaling the glossy salesmanship of the packaged food industry and the over-the-counter health tonic industry.[24] Even in educational contexts, commercial publications often edged out their government-sponsored competition. Thus when the educational journal the *Grade Teacher* listed resources for teaching healthy food habits to elementary school children, only 26.09% were published by government offices, while 73.91% were 'produced and distributed by food and kitchen appliance manufacturers or producer[s].' The authors went on to note that most of the commercial material 'is factually accurate as far as it goes and all of it is printed and illustrated much more attractively than the government literature. This is probably one of the reasons why the teachers prefer it.'[25] The graphic stylization of the WPA posters can be seen, then, as a dual strategy – one involving both economy of production and an attempt at visual sophistication and stylistic differentiation.

Syphilis and new strategies for pictorializing sexual health

In addition to responding to market trends and pressures, the WPA's public health posters responded to persistent concerns within the medical and 'social hygiene' communities at the time of their production. The most frequently represented subject among the 92 posters in the sample is syphilis. Almost a third (32.61%) of the total posters address syphilis; just over half (55.55%) of the posters addressing disease are syphilis posters. Syphilis was a pressing public health concern during the early twentieth century and one for which effective treatments were beginning to be developed during the WPA period. Time was of the essence for efficacy of treatment, however. As a poster by the New York state Federal Art Project put it, curing syphilis was possible only if those infected 'did not wait too long' to seek treatment. Thomas Parran, the Surgeon General of the US from 1936 until 1948, was particularly committed to efforts to control syphilis. His 1937 book *Shadow on the Land* was a well-received discussion of how frank and scientifically accurate public conversations about sexual health were necessary to controlling the spread of syphilis, and how recent scientific advances had made treatment more effective.[26] It is important to note that the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which denied available treatments to poor African American men and their families while claiming to provide free syphilis treatment from the United States Public Health Service,

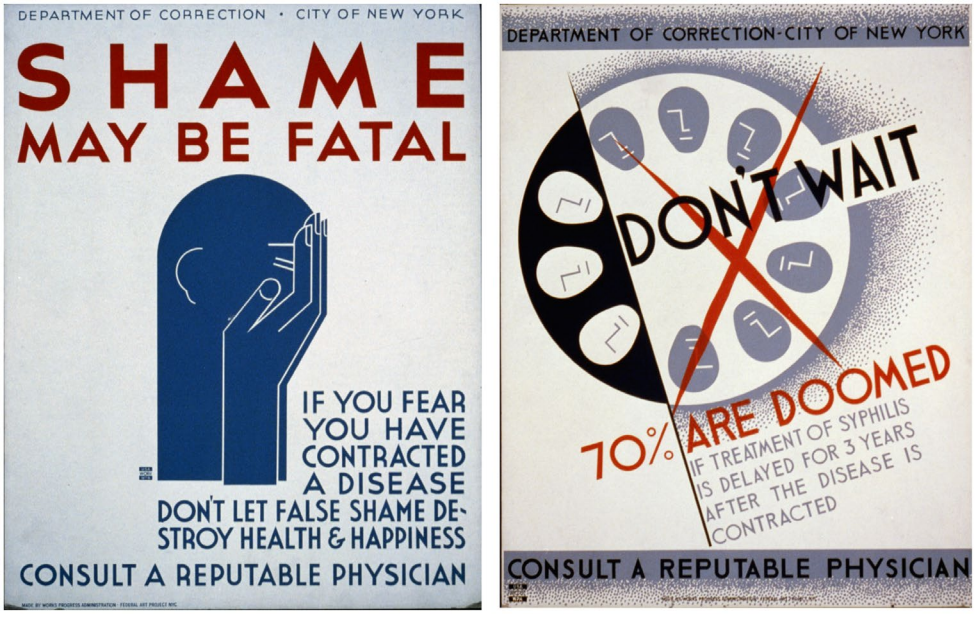

Figure 7. The syphilis posters produced by WPA artists emphasized prompt treatment by medical professionals and encouraged viewers not to let shame or stigma to prevent them from seeking appropriate care administered by trusted medical sources. Posters designed by Foster Humfreville (left) and the New York City Federal Art Project (right) for the New York City Department of Corrections, 1936–37. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-1118 and LC-USZC2-1014.

continued to operate during Parran's time as Surgeon General. Scientific advances in effective treatment were not equally available. Regardless, the syphilis posters produced by WPA artists emphasized prompt treatment by medical professionals and encouraged viewers not to let shame or stigma to prevent them from seeking appropriate medical care (Figure 7).

The WPA's general approach to syphilis contrasted with that of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) only a decade earlier. The ASHA was active in the effort to educate public audiences about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. However, most of their campaigns exhorted young men and women to embrace what they deemed to be morally appropriate attitudes toward sexuality rather than emphasizing the role medical treatment could play in controlling existing cases and preventing new ones. An ASHA poster series produced during the early 1920s combined photographs and illustrations with brief moralizing texts to promote sexual morality. A poster for young men showed athletes jumping hurdles on a track, with text that read, 'The sex instinct in a boy or man makes him want to act, dare, possess, strive. When controlled and directed, it gives energy, endurance, fitness.' A 1922 poster for a young women showed an illustration of a rosy-cheeked girl carrying school-books. The copy read, 'Sex endows the girl with beauty of body, vivacity, and charm of manner. It is the sex or creative impulse which inspires her warmth of affection, her intensity of purpose, her desire to devote herself to the welfare of humanity.' Another poster from the same year showed an illustration of a young mother serving tea to two small children; the copy advised that 'Home-Making [is] a Science. A real home is no accident. Efficient house-keeping increases home comfort. It requires knowledge and skill.' Smaller text advised girls and young women to 'Learn to care for the house (business efficiency); to spend wisely

(budget system); to feed the family (food values); to care for the baby (child hygiene).' The ASHA posters assumed that sexual health would be achieved through the embrace of traditional gender roles and the re-direction of sexual energy into athletic activity for men and the cultivation of nurturing and home-keeping skills for women.[27] Morality, not medical science, would provide the solution to the developing syphilis crisis – a disease which none of the posters mentioned by name, though they were produced in direct response to it.

In their frank approach to sexuality and sexual health, the WPA posters represented a new direction in visualizing prevention and treatment, particularly for stigmatized conditions like syphilis. By encouraging viewing audiences to overcome feelings of 'false shame and fear' in order to seek care from a 'reputable physician,' the posters echoed the emergent advice of public health officials like Surgeon General Thomas Parran. 'The taboo which until recently surrounded popular discussion has made it difficult for public health authorities in the United States to deal effectively with the problem [of syphilis],' Parran wrote in 1937. 'The lingering association of syphilis with sin has meant that it did not receive from public health officials the same sympathetic consideration that other and presumably more benign diseases have received.'[28] The WPA posters uncoupled syphilis from condemnation of sexual sin, reserving moral judgment for those who continued to expose others to the disease through their refusal to seek treatment. 'You must keep up treatments for at least six months to a year following [syphilis] infection,' a 1936–37 New York Department of Corrections poster instructed. Meanwhile, a 1936–39 New York State Department of Health poster advised that 'Congenital syphilis is preventable if syphilitic mothers will take adequate treatment' and a 1936–39 poster from the same agency implored with viewers to 'Stop the spread of syphilis; tell your physician from whom you got it; treatment will benefit them and prevent its spread.' The posters asked the inverse question, as well. 'Whom have you exposed to syphilis?' another New York State Department of Health poster queried. 'Tell your physician; they should be examined; they may need treatment.' For the WPA poster artists, syphilis was an acknowledged health issue within the family unit and community. Instead of vague moralizing, the posters offered specific instructions, advising socially responsible individuals to take personal, medically-oriented action in preventing the spread of the disease.

Reductivist narratives of threat and resolution

As an indicator of how important syphilis was to the public health dialogues of the day, the 32.61% of WPA public health posters about syphilis stand in stark contrast to the 11.96% of total posters about cancer and 9.78% about tuberculosis. In terms of sheer numbers, syphilis was obviously a large concern. However, the rhetorical strategies and visual messaging of the cancer posters are congruous with those of the syphilis posters. In both cases, the posters picture clear sources of threat and clear strategies for resolution. Both sets of posters stress the importance of timely treatment, the responsibility of the individual to seek treatment, the advances made by medical science, and the difference between appropriate medical care and the commercial remedies of 'quacks.' These strategies echoed the professional literature of the period, which framed a need to educate the public, both about available services and about individual responsibility to seek appropriate treatment. 'Public health has developed to the point where it has become apparent that many diseases cannot be controlled without full citizen understanding and participation,' reported the professional journal *Public Health Reports* in 1945. 'Thus, the principal objective of health education today



Figure 8. Regardless of the health concern at hand, viewers were advised to consult trusted sources of official medical information, such as doctors, health clinics, and health bureau publications. Posters designed by Erik Hans Krause for the New York Health Bureau, 1936–38. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-DIG-ppmsca-38336 and LC-DIG-ppmsca-38341.

is the stimulation of public action and individual participation in preventive health activities.'[29] Like the syphilis posters, the cancer posters proclaimed that 'delay is dangerous' and urged viewers to seek scientifically valid treatment from 'a reputable physician.' Likewise, the TB posters stressed the need for testing to prevent the spread of the disease. They also stressed 'the rules of health' – the individual's personal habits in regard to diet, exercise, rest, and cleanliness – and the need to consult reputable medical professionals for accurate advice.

The emphasis on direct threats and clear sources of resolution remains consistent throughout the sample, regardless of the health topic being addressed (Figure 8). At a historical moment when the relationship between disease and medicine was both firmly entrenched in a model of medical authority and increasingly visually abstracted, this is unsurprising.[30] Of the posters, 43.48% explicitly advise viewers to 'consult a reputable physician,' or get 'advice at your health bureau,' or similar language that directly names a health authority as a trusted method for prevention and/or cure. Though disease and its prevention and/or treatment is the most obvious context in which the threat/resolution dialogue plays out, it is not the only context. The same holds true for posters about road safety, food and nutrition, and physical safety – dog bites, fireworks, protective goggles. Sources of threat are clear, and their prescribed methods of resolution are equally unambiguous.



Figure 9. The WPA posters told a familiar story about public health in the US, one in which patriotic, white, middle-class families were clean, happy, and responsive to positive developments in science and medicine. Posters designed by the Illinois Federal Art Project for the Municipal Tuberculosis Sanatorium and Tuberculosis Institute of Chicago (left), 1936–39 and C. Y. Bienvenu for the WPA War Services of Louisiana (right), 1941–43. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, LC-USZC2-5207 and LC-USZC2-5580.

The infallibility of medical science is not the only reductive visual trope at play in the posters, of course. American patriotism figures prominently into the visual language of the sample, a message primarily communicated via color. In all, 30.43% of the posters use a red, white, and blue color scheme. As a whole, the posters also stress the sanctity of home and family. Youth and child welfare and maternal responsibility figure prominently into the cumulative narrative, with 40.22% of the posters addressing one or both of these topics. Cleanliness equals virtue; 15.22% of the posters address cleanliness, often in the context of implying that negative consequences arise from dirtiness. Just over 14% of the posters picture men in work-related contexts and/or dress, emphasizing the traditional masculine gender role and obscuring the national unemployment crisis. From pouring steel to delivering milk, conducting medical exams to selling groceries, the men of the WPA's public health posters are engaged in work. At its peak during the Depression, US unemployment reached above 24%, almost meeting the 25% mark. Yet none of the posters picture unemployment as an explicit health risk, and only 2.17% of the posters show men engaged in the lazy, careless activities of drinking and gambling. Finally, scientific advances and statistical information are portrayed as authoritative sources of knowledge and progress. Of the posters, 19.57% relay statistical information, include symbols of science such as microscopes, germs, and test tubes, or both.

Taken together, these narrative tropes illustrate a familiar story that is indicative of the posters as a whole (Figure 9). According to the posters of the WPA, national public health is a self-evident and uncomplicated story that follows a predictable plotline. Americans love their country and value their home life. Women are keepers of the home while men work professionally to support their families. Cleanliness is next to godliness. And science and medicine point the way to a happier, healthier future. Lived experiences and debates around policy decisions – particularly those surrounding issues of federal funding – reflected a more complicated reality.[31] But the formal and narrative simplicity of the WPA's public health messaging implied a tidy, well-organized scenario of cause and effect. Within this framework, solving socially entrenched health problems was as simple as the uniformly-defined audience following the clearly articulated directions of the appropriate authority figure.

Notes

1. Serlin, *Imagining Illness*; Cartwright, *Screening The Body*.
2. Grant, *Propaganda in Inter-War Britain*; Helfand, *The Picture of Health*; Lewis, *The People's Health*.
3. Carter and DeNoon, *Posters for the People*.
4. Bold, *The WPA Guides*.
5. Pillen, "See America."
6. "Maternal, Infant, and Child Welfare," 601.
7. Gutman, "Race, Place, and Play."
8. Dilworth, *Imagining Indians*.
9. Wasserman, Flannery, and Clair 2007, "Raising the Ivory Tower."
10. Hobbs, "Equality and Difference."
11. US Bureau of Labor Statistics and US Department of Labor, *100 Years of Spending*, 15.
12. Taft, "Public Health and the Family," 145.
13. Wood, "One Third of a Nation," n.p.
14. McCamy, "Variety in Growth," 287–8.
15. Zimand, "Campaign Calendar," 166.
16. Swan, "Public Health Education," 427.
17. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*, 181.
18. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*, 180–81.
19. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*, 177.
20. Lee, "Otto Neurath's Isotype," 167–178; Mitman, "The Color of Money," 40–43."
21. "Social Showman," 618.
22. Mercey, "Modernizing Federal Publicity," 90.
23. Rhodes, "Health Education," 74.
24. Norman and Rorty, "Our 'Civilized' Food Habits"; Dodd, "Conservation of Public Health."
25. Norman and Rorty, "Our 'Civilized' Food Habits," 446–47.
26. Parran, *Shadow on the Land*.
27. Wembridge, "Social Background."
28. Parran, *Shadow on the Land*, 149.
29. Derryberry, "Health Education," 1395.
30. Cooter and Stein, "Visual Imagery and Epidemics," 174–80.
31. Sydenstricker, "Health in the New Deal."

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