

The Other Side of Life at Camp Dix: Postcards, Inoculation, and Inoculation Theory

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Abstract

In addition to documenting travel adventures and extending holiday greetings to friends and family, postcards can also function as health communication. This investigation turns to a unique type of health-themed postcard: a vintage postcard that portrays medical vaccination titled “Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation.” The rhetorical analysis, guided by inoculation theory (a theory of resistance to influence), explores how vaccination is portrayed and how challenges to vaccination (e.g., concerns about side effects) are addressed, finding that components of inoculation theory are reflected in the postcard, especially when considering both sides of the postcard (front and back).

Keywords: epistolary communication, vaccines, health communication

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Postcards are diverse—in topic, in style, in illustration, in function, in purpose, and so on. Although one might think first of the conventional tourist postcards (in the vein of wish-you-were-here missives), postcards also feature such diverse topics and themes as depictions of family life (Wall, 2007); Santa Claus in Thailand (Cohen, 2007); wedding cakes (O'Hagan, 2022); insects (Miller & Miller, 2022) and more. Subjects range from obscure to what one postcard scholar calls “stupefying banality” (Van Laar, 2010, p. 194). As Ali and Henin (2021) put it: “Nearly all objects, nations, celebrities, events and places have been documented in a postcard” (p. 335), and Fraser (1980) notes that “the list of [postcard] subjects could be extended almost indefinitely” (p. 39). Clearly, there is more to the postcard than updating friends and family on travel adventures.

The wide range of visual representation makes the postcard a useful means to study place (Bassett, 2021; Combs, 2021; Hurt & Payne, 2019), making this historic media “a special source of visual evidence” (Arreola, 2001, p. 505). Additionally, we can turn to postcards for everyday communicative functions, much like contemporary texts and e-mail messages (Carlson, 2009). Finally, some scholars encourage academics to approach postcards as a form of soft news (e.g., Carlson, 2009), building off a concept introduced by Baum (2002) to describe less conventional yet nonetheless influential sources of information, like television talk shows.

Postcards can also function as health communication, from specific health topics (e.g., influenza vaccination reminders; Larson et al., 1982) to reflections of the state of health care in general (see Hook, 2005). This investigation turns to a unique type of health postcard: a vintage postcard that portrays medical vaccination (see also Compton, 2022). The approach of this rhetorical analysis is based on the work of Baxter and Jack (2008), which involves close readings of the text guided by research questions. The questions guiding the current analysis are:

1. What is being said or shown about medical inoculation on the “Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation” postcard?
2. Are challenges to medical inoculation mentioned or portrayed on the “Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation” postcard, and if so, how?

In addition to exploring these research questions, this analysis will also consider both sides of the postcard, offering a look at the front, illustrated portrayal of medical vaccination, and also, a look at the other side, which includes text that describes the benefits—and drawbacks—of vaccination. This look at “the other side” allows for a fuller understanding of vaccination messaging on the “Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation” postcard. Finally, inoculation theory (see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964), a theory of resistance to influence, guides both the formation of the research questions and the analysis of findings.

Postcards

Postcards hit peak popularity in the United States between 1905 and the start of World War I (Mendelson, 2001), and more than 600 million postcards were sent in 1907-1908 alone (Ryan, 1982). “By the beginning of the twentieth century the picture postcard was a major communication medium and art form” (Holt & Holt, 2014). Topics and styles of postcards varied, including picture postcards, comical postcards, business postcards, and more (Staff, 1979).

One type of postcard is the military postcard. Military postcards can portray individual soldiers or soldiers with their families, farewell moments, homecoming (or dreams of homecoming), wounded soldiers, military cemeteries, and more (Kürti, 2004). Other military cards feature more unusual topics, including vaccinations (Compton, 2022). Military postcards can also function as what Kürti (2004) calls “propaganda postcards” (p. 57; and see Fraser, 1980). He writes:

Interesting are the propaganda postcards and the somewhat idiosyncratic cards produced by the soldiers themselves in the frontline actually in the trenches. The propaganda postcards

ostensibly identify themes promulgated by the state (governments) and bureaucratic organisations to offer shorthand visual justification for the regime's involvement in the war. Lane (2015) points out that many World War I photographs for postcards were posed. (p. 57)

Regardless of intent—propaganda or otherwise—military postcards were popular. As Holt and Holt (2014) put it: “The soldiers liked the postcards. They were colorful and the pictures could often speak better for them than they could for themselves” (p. 10). The postcard—this seemingly simple yet multi-modal medium—held a lot of appeal for servicepersons.

Postcard scholars have studied military postcards. For example, Croatt (2013) analyzed photo postcards of the United States Navy (1913-1945), finding three core themes: powerful, competent, and happy. Holt and Holt (2014) organize First World War picture postcards by themes including propaganda, the men, the machines, the war at sea, the war in the air, humour, women at war, and cards from the Queen's collection. And yet, despite insights from existing military postcard research, scholarship in this area remains limited. Some have pointed out that this is the case with postcard research in general; as Carlson (2009) observed: “[C]ards as objects have not been the subject of much broader inquiry, even within the realm of communication” (p. 212).

Before turning attention to the focus of this present analysis—the “Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation” postcard—we will next consider inoculation theory, which informed the research questions explored in this study as well as the analysis of findings.

Inoculation Theory

Inoculation theory explains how a position—an attitude, a value, a belief, and so on—can be made more resistant to persuasive attacks (see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964). The analogic name of this theory also explains how it works: just as a body can be made more resistant to future viral attacks through controlled exposure to weakened forms of the viral threat (e.g., a conventional

influenza vaccine), one's mind can be made more resistant to future persuasive attacks through controlled exposure to weakened forms of the persuasive threat (e.g., a two-sided message, raising and refuting counterattitudinal arguments; see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964). The key to inoculation theory messaging is that it raises the possibility of encountering counterarguments to that point that inoculation message recipients recognize the vulnerability of their position (called *threat* in inoculation research; see Compton, 2021) and is motivated to generate additional reasons for holding their position in preparation for the attack (see Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1964). An inoculation message raises the idea that a position is vulnerable (threat), and then shows examples of the types of counterarguments that may be used in an attempt to change one's mind as well as ways to refute these arguments (preemptive refutation, or refutational preemption). It is important to note that inoculation messages confer resistance to a range of counterarguments, beyond those preemptively raised and refuted in the inoculation message (see Banas & Rains, 2010; McGuire, 1964). This is the premise of inoculation theory: to resist strong challenges, it is helpful to "practice" defending against weaker challenges. This approach works in medicine (vaccination) and in communication.

Because of its established utility as a messaging strategy and its ability to confer resistance to a range of future persuasive challenges, inoculation theory has guided messaging campaigns across contexts and issues, including health (see Compton, Jackson, & Dimmock, 2016, for a review), politics (see Compton & Ivanov, 2013, for a review), and public relations (see Compton, Wigley, & Samoilenko, 2021, for a review).

The current investigation looks at a topic that crosses conventional inoculation context areas. It is, of course, a health topic, featuring the medical process of inoculation. But it is also a military topic, an area that has seen less attention from an inoculation theory perspective. What we know of inoculation in a military context is mostly focused on civilian support for military (e.g., Pfau

et al., 2006, 2008) or inoculation to combat violent extremism (e.g., Braddock, 2022) or recover from acts of terrorism (e.g., Ivanov et al., 2016).

Another way this current investigation departs from conventional inoculation theory research is that it takes a rhetorical analytic approach. Most inoculation theory research is experimental; participants in an experimental (inoculation) condition are compared to those in a control (no inoculation) condition after exposure to an attack message (see, for example, Clayton et al., 2023). More recently, scholars have used inoculation theory as the basis for rhetorical analysis. Veil and Kent (2008), for example, analyzed Tylenol's responsible dosing advertising campaign through the lens of inoculation theory. For other examples, Compton and colleagues have conducted inoculation theory-based rhetorical analyses on medical vaccination rhetoric, including a religious pamphlet promoting smallpox vaccination (Compton & Kaylor, 2013); a children's television program's portrayal of influenza vaccination (Compton & Mason, 2021); anti-vaccination religious rhetoric (Compton, 2019); an anti-vaccination poem (Compton & Kaylor, 2022); a speech about inoculation given to medical students (Compton, 2018); and the preface to testimony about inoculation delivered to Parliament (Compton, 2023).

The current investigation extends existing work with inoculation theory and health communication, from a rhetorical perspective. A point of departure, however, is that the mode of messaging in this case is a postcard: "Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation."

"Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation"

Frontside: Description

"Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation" postcard shows a line of servicemembers receiving inoculations (see Illustration 1). One man, positioned at the forefront, is administering the inoculation with what appears to be a syringe, but might also be a lancet. The photographic image captures the moment when one soldier is receiving the inoculation; the inoculatee is looking at the

injection site, as is the inoculator. The soldier next in line looks straightforward toward the camera with a slight smile. The man behind him (#3 in line) is also facing the camera with a neutral to positive facial expression. The next man (#4) is looking to his left, and the next (#5) looks toward the camera with a neutral expression. The next person (#6) is looking at the first man in line, receiving his inoculation, with a smile on his face. The next man (#7) also is looking toward the front of the line, with a neutral facial expression. Behind him are two men (#8 and #9) looking toward the camera, each with neutral expressions. The next man (#10) has his left arm extended, while another man (#11) points to the man's (#10) exposed bicep, perhaps showing him where the inoculation will be administered. Another man stands behind #10 and #11, looking toward the camera. Finally, the last man in line stands slightly off to the side. He is one of the few men shown that does not have his shirt sleeve rolled up in anticipation of the inoculation. He looks toward the camera with a slight smile.

An in-picture caption reads "Copy by Underwood & Underwood NY" on the bottom righthand side and "CENSORED" on the bottom lefthand side. Below the picture in the white border, a caption reads: "LIFE AT CAMP DIX, N. J., INOCULATION."

Frontside: Analysis

One of the striking features of the front of the postcard, "Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation," is the number of people in the illustration. Fourteen servicepeople are shown, with most revealing their full faces and facing the viewer, making the tableau particularly personable. No one looks visibly upset or angry; instead, facial expressions range from pleasant to pleasantly neutral. It is also of note that the servicepeople are in a line. This structure communicates order and a sense of inevitability, as each wait in turn for the injection. The process is portrayed as ordered, calm, and pleasant.

The eye is drawn to the first person in line, foregrounded in the image. This person is the one receiving the vaccine in the moment of the picture, and both the inoculatee and inoculator are focused on the injection site (upper arm). Their eye directness focuses the viewer's eye, highlighting the act of inoculation. Of note, too, is that the person receiving the inoculation appears calm, neutral if not pleasant.

Text on the frontside is minimal, but what is there is noteworthy. First, the primary caption offers a sense of place: Camp Dix, New Jersey. Further, the primary caption communicates that inoculation is part of "life" at Camp Dix, which communicates the naturalness of the procedure and, at the same time, subtly connects inoculation with life. "Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation" could be read as inoculation supporting life at Camp Dix, literally.

Backside: Description

Much of the backside of "Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation" is conventional. There is a place marked for a postage stamp ("PLACE STAMP HERE") and the text, "POST CARD." The backside is divided, with one space for an address (marked, "THIS SPACE FOR ADDRESS ONLY") and the other side for a message (marked, "THIS SPACE FOR WRITING MESSAGES"). Near the bottom of the card is a trademark of YMCA, with the notation "CAMP DIX" and the slogan "WITH THE COLORS."

The most substantive text, however, is a message under the heading, "LIFE AT CAMP DIX." It reads:

Inoculation means vexation for a few weeks but the petty disturbances are far overshadowed by the great good done by the injection of the few million "bugs" that ward off disease.

("Life at Camp Dix" postcard, n.d.)

It is a short statement but reflects several inoculation components, as explored next.

Backside: Analysis

First, the main statement raises a potential challenge to vaccine acceptance: “Inoculation means vexation for a few weeks...” We can assume that “vexation” in this usage refers to the side effects of vaccines, and side effects of the smallpox vaccine in particular. To put a finer point on it: the use of the term “vexation” suggests negative side effects; smallpox vaccination has also been linked to a few positive side effects, called paraspecific side effects, including healthier skin and a blanket of protection against other infectious diseases (see Mayr, 2004).

Serious adverse negative side effects of smallpox vaccines were rare; “Excellent screening and educational activities implemented by both the DoD (Department of Defense) and the DHHS (Department of Health and Human Services) prevented serious adverse events” (Poland, Grabenstein, & Neff, 2005, p. 2081). Nevertheless, there are some risks, and research finds that “[s]mallpox vaccine is less safe than other vaccines routinely used today” (Belongia & Naleway, 2003, p. 89). Adverse effects include satellite lesions, fever, muscle aches, regional lymphadenopathy, fatigue, headache, nausea, rashes, and soreness at injection site (Belongia & Naleway, 2003).

The challenge to the act of inoculation, then, is mentioned in the first few words of the postcard text. Of note, these challenges are not framed as possibilities, but instead, as a foregone conclusion: “Inoculation means vexation...” This stands in contrast to how challenges are usually framed in conventional inoculation messages. In conventional inoculation message, the challenges (e.g., counterarguments) are often raised as “People will try to tell you...” In this case, the challenge is simply announced. Instead of “People will try to tell you that there are side effects of smallpox vaccination,” the message is: *there are significant side effects of small pox vaccination*. It is also of note that this phrase of “inoculation means vexation for a few weeks” is not a conventional argument: it is a

statement of fact, of acknowledging challenges of vaccination. Nevertheless, one can discern the underlying counterargument: vaccinations are risky.

The refutation, then, does not address whether the challenges will occur, but instead, chips away at perceptions of the severity of the challenge(s). The postcard text characterizes the aftereffects of smallpox inoculation as “petty annoyances,” which suggests less severe consequences than phrases like “adverse side effects.”

This type of refutation is quite general, grouping the side effects under a rubric of “petty annoyances.” Then again, so is the type of “counterargument” represented in the card: “vexation for a few weeks.”

Discussion

That there is a postcard image of a line of servicepeople receiving vaccinations is, of itself, notable. As Van Laar (2010) puts it, “The importance of the subject is such a strong assumption about postcards that it can work powerfully in the other direction—a postcard of something *makes* the thing important, *confers* importance” (p. 195, emphases in original). It is also of note that of the scholarship that has explored military picture postcards, there has been comparatively little attention to military healthcare in general and vaccination in particular. Consider, for example, that one of the most expansive collections of military picture postcards, Holt and Holt’s (2014) *Till the Boys Come Home*, does not contain a single vaccination image. The health images that are included in Holt and Holt’s collection are limited to injury recovery (e.g., “Prince George wounded,” Holt & Holt, 2014, p. 74; “Are we downhearted at Beaufort Hospital? No!” Holt & Holt, 2014, p. 69; “R. A. O. B. Second Motor Ambulance,” Holt & Holt, 2014, p. 246; “In Hospital—Recovering,” Holt & Holt, 2014, p. 549)—a reactive as opposed to preemptive healthcare regimen. In some ways, these features mirrors work in persuasion in general: most look at how to change a position, while (conventional) inoculation looks at how to protect a position from change (Compton, 2013).

It is also of note that challenges to vaccination are even mentioned on the postcard. Consider, for example, that many postcards mentioning or illustrating vaccination do not include mentions of side effects. Instead, the typical vaccination postcard tableau features people calmly giving and receiving injections (see, for example, Illustration 3). Mentioning these challenges, however, has implications, which are articulated by predictions of inoculation theory. Raising and refuting challenges confers resistance to subsequent challenges, so mentioning the unpleasant side effects of vaccination, followed by a refutation or rationale for enduring these side effects, confers resistance to side effect deterrence in the future.

As another point of comparison, we can turn to how vaccination side effects are addressed—or not—in contemporary vaccination messaging. For example, consider that patients shared their Covid-19 vaccination experiences on social media, and when they did, about 50% included mentions of side effects (Lentzen et al., 2022). That some sources of vaccination messaging are hesitant to mention side effects is unsurprising. Concerns about side effects are one of the most common reasons for Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy (Cao, Ramirez, & Alvarez, 2021). Nevertheless, by raising these concerns and addressing them, preemptively, inoculation messaging can inoculate against future, similar challenges.

It is also apt that inoculation theory is reflected on both sides of the postcard, since the conventional format of an inoculation message is a two-sided message (i.e., a message that gives “both sides” to an argument). One could also envision a postcard-based inoculation message introducing the threat component on the frontside of a postcard and refutational preemption on the back, or a raised counterargument on the frontside and its refutation on the back. This simple medium is well positioned as an inoculation messaging mode. Furthermore, senders are meant to write on postcards, so we could also imagine handwritten text that magnifies—or contradicts—any printed text message on the card. Consider, for example, if the card studied in this present analysis,

“Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation,” were to have a handwritten note in addition to the printed statement. The note might act as a reinforcement to the refutation of the counter position (e.g., “The shot didn’t bother me at all”) or a contradiction of the refutation (e.g., “It was a lot worse than a petty annoyance!”). With the latter, could the inoculation effect “backfire,” reinforcing the counter position more than the position?

Conclusions

Postcards are an under-researched mode of communication—even in the discipline of communication (Carlson, 2009). “[P]ostcards are rarely used as the object of study, generally being dismissed as ephemeral, commercial, and unscientific social jetsam” (Carlson, 2009, p. 215). At the same time, postcard studies have seen growth in other areas, particularly in the past 25 years (Mendelson & Prochaska, 2010). Communication scholars are well positioned to lead research in this area. Political communication scholars could explore political postcards, health communication scholars could study health postcards, sport communication scholars could analyze sport postcards, and so on.

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Illustration 1. Frontside of Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation. YMCA. Underwood & Underwood NY. No date.



LIFE AT CAMP DIX, N. J. INOCULATION.

Illustration 2. Backside of Life at Camp Dix, N. J. Inoculation. YMCA. Underwood & Underwood NY. No date.

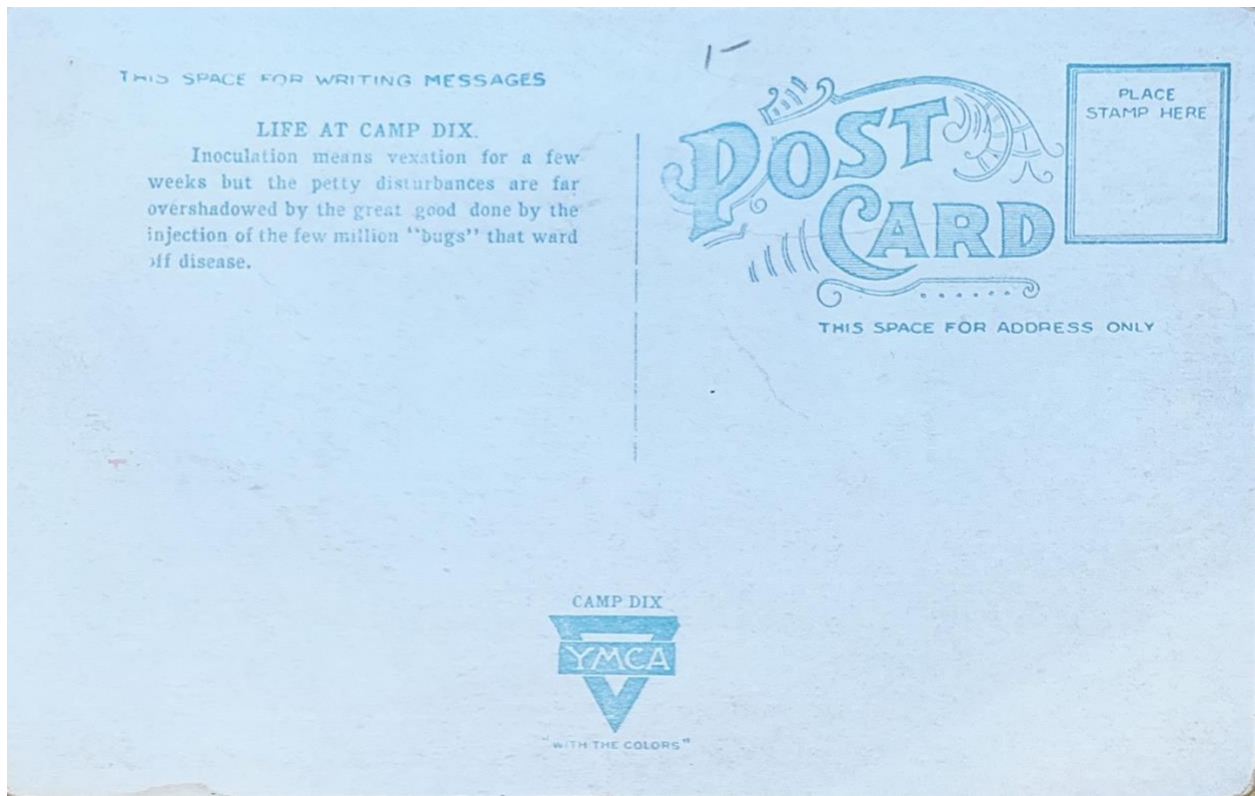


Illustration 3. W. Morgan's "SHOTS" (A. D. Steinbach & Sons, Inc. of New Haven, Connecticut, USA; 1940s era)

