

The neoliberal roots of modern vaccine hesitancy

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Abstract

Popular resistance to vaccines is not a new phenomenon and has been widely documented by medical historians. The latest iteration of this resistance, however, is popularly referred to as ‘vaccine hesitancy’ and reflects a host of beliefs and social and institutional influences. While it may be tempting to dismiss the views of those who resist vaccines, immunization policies and practice cannot be devised in isolation from the contemporary political and social landscape. Understanding the socio-political meanings that lay people assign to vaccines and the manner in which they communicate these concerns via media is essential for public health practitioners to consider when formulating immunization policy and education praxis. One such meaning that, to date, has received relatively less attention is the socio-political ideology of neoliberalism. We argue that the undercurrent of neoliberal sensibilities expressed in media stories points to another key social factor that must be considered when seeking public health solutions to the growing vaccine hesitancy movement.

KEY WORDS: antivaccination movement; neoliberalism, health care, history of medicine, vaccine hesitancy.

Riassunto

La resistenza popolare ai vaccini non è un fenomeno nuovo ed è stato ampiamente documentato dagli storici della medicina. L'ultimo passaggio di tale resistenza, tuttavia, è stato comunemente denominato come riluttanza ai vaccini e riflette una moltitudine di credenze ed influenze sociali e politico-istituzionali. Mentre si potrebbe essere tentati di liquidare le opinioni di quelli che si oppongono ai vaccini, le politiche e le pratiche relative alla vaccinazione non possono essere concepite fuori dal contesto sociale e politico contemporaneo. La comprensione del significato socio-politico che i laici attribuiscono ai vaccini ed il modo in cui essi comunicano le loro preoccupazioni attraverso i media è essenziale che sia considerato dagli esperti di sanità pubblica al momento della formulazione delle strategie di immunizzazione e di educazione. In tal senso, un significato che, ad oggi, ha ricevuto relativamente poca attenzione è l'ideologia socio-politica del neoliberalismo. Noi sosteniamo che la corrente delle sensibilità neoliberale espresso nelle storie raccontate dai media mette in luce un altro fattore sociale chiave che deve essere considerato quando si cercano soluzioni di sanità pubblica per contrastare il crescente fenomeno della riluttanza verso i vaccini.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Neoliberal sensibilities are an important social factor that must be understood and considered by public health policy makers when seeking to address the phenomenon of 'vaccine hesitancy'.

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INTRODUCTION

Popular resistance to vaccines, especially compulsory vaccines, is not a recent phenomenon; distrust of vaccine ingredients and suspicion of state mandated immunization schedules have a turbulent and well-documented history dating back to the earliest smallpox vaccines [1,2]. Historians studying the origins of anti-vaccination campaigns across a range of geographical contexts and diverse populations have shown that “who[ever] wielded the needle or lancet and whose body was marked governed how vaccination was experienced and the meanings attached to it” [3]. For instance, when the British state imposed compulsory smallpox vaccination during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was met by the working class with an enormous degree of resistance and frequently violence. Poor working and living conditions under early capitalism that appeared to reflect state indifference, meant that people were reacting to more than just the concept of vaccines. Rather, responses reflect(ed) concerns ‘about the role of the state, the rights of the individual, and the health and safety of the body’ [3]. This remains true today, and popular attitudes and perceptions regarding the relationship between the state and mandatory vaccines remains fraught and demands further consideration. While we may want to dismiss the opinions of those who resist vaccines, immunization policies and practice cannot be devised in isolation from the contemporary political and social landscape. Understanding the socio-political meanings that lay people assign to vaccines and the manner in which they communicate these concerns is essential for public health and health practitioners more generally to consider when formulating immunization policy and education praxis.

This purpose of this commentary is to highlight the presence of neoliberal ideology in recent media reportage and to examine its discursive role in promoting the ‘anti-vaccination phenomenon’ and ‘vaccine hesitancy’ in North-America as well as other western nations.

DISCUSSION

The latest iteration of the ‘anti-vaccination’ phenomenon is the ‘vaccine hesitant’ crowd, comprised of individuals who selectively accept, delay, or reject vaccines despite evidence of efficacy or the wide availability of immunization services in North America [4, 5]. Concern over vaccine resistance and hesitancy has risen in the United States and Canada over the last decade, especially in response to recent outbreaks of contagious childhood diseases like measles and pertussis [6]. A variety of social and institutional factors further complicate this phenomenon including erroneous information [7], religious and cultural beliefs [8, 9], support for complementary and alternative medicine [10], and poor relationships between communities and state health agencies and providers [11].

Another contributing factor that, to date, has received relatively less attention is the socio-political ideology of neoliberalism. While the effects of neoliberalism on health care access and service delivery have been analyzed [12], how this ideology has bolstered the contemporary vaccine hesitancy movement has not been well explored beyond uptake of the HPV vaccine [13, 14]. The neoliberal mindset shaping health care policy and practice is comprised of three principles: individualism, decentralization and deregulation, and free market solutions via privatization [15]. We can see these principles increasingly being incorporated into the beliefs and rhetorical arguments espoused by spokespersons of the vaccine hesitancy movement as evidenced in recent mass media coverage of parents who refuse to vaccinate their children. We argue that the undercurrent of neoliberal sensibilities expressed in these stories points to another key factor that must be considered when seeking public health solutions to the growing vaccine hesitancy movement.

Neoliberal rhetoric and vaccine hesitancy in media reportage

In 2015, a highly publicized and widespread measles outbreak in Disneyland, California

[16] led to renewed conversations about children, immunization schedules, the efficacy of mandatory vaccines, and the role of the state. At the root of these discussions were the ways in which people saw/perceived their responsibilities as citizens in relation to the larger body politic. In other words, as a society were we responsible for ensuring each other's mutual well-being through things like mass immunization and herd immunity? And what is the role of the state in protecting this collective? What we are increasingly seeing within these 'debates' is an attitude that privileges individual rights and choices over the collective or social well-being. Significantly, we are seeing the operationalization of neoliberalism in a way that 'emphasize[s] the market, individual rationality, and the responsibility of entrepreneurial subjects' over collective well-being and the stories that appeared in the media reportage were illustrative of this growing phenomenon [17].

Numerous popular media stories in 2015 described the ways in which parents perceived themselves to be solely and ultimately responsible for the welfare of their children—often to the detriment of other children or vulnerable groups (i.e., immunocompromised children). Journalists interviewed several parents whose children had visited Disneyland during the outbreak [18, 19]. Collectively, the perspectives of the parents who chose not to vaccinate their children shared many commonalities and can be summed up in the following ways: 1) several indicated that they 'cared only for their own children', whom they believed would be harmed by vaccination, and 2) several questioned the validity of vaccine research on grounds that 'they (as parents) were better able to care for their children and make better choices than the so-called experts'. In this context, good parenting came to be seen as synonymous with rejecting vaccines and vaccination schedules based on the rational consumption of the appropriate information and protecting the individual bodily integrity of their children from uncalled for state intervention.

One story that is particularly illustrative of

this phenomena is that of Dr. Jack Wolfson, a physician and vocal vaccine critic who chose not to vaccinate his two children. When asked how he would feel if his decision not to vaccinate his children caused another child to either become gravely ill or die, he responded: "*It's not my responsibility to inject my child with chemicals in order for [another child] to be supposedly healthy...I'm not going to sacrifice the well-being of my child. My child is pure...It's not my responsibility to be protecting their child*". When asked if he could live with himself if his unvaccinated child got another child gravely ill, Wolfson responded: "*I could live with myself easily. It's an unfortunate thing that people die, but people die. I'm not going to put my child at risk to save another child*". Finally, he added: "*If a child is so vulnerable like that, they shouldn't be going out into society*" [20]. The interview and follow-ups with Wolfson were widely disseminated by numerous popular and fringe media outlets not to mention being reproduced via countless online posts and reposts.

Several principles of neoliberal ideology are evident in this story: first, the denial of the social contract in favor of individual pursuits and in direct rejection of public health as a collective and worthwhile endeavor. Significantly, this denies the wealth of evidence that during the 20th century the most significant declines in morbidity and mortality were a result of public health initiatives like vaccines and public sanitation, all of which were (are) state funded and collective projects that have enormously benefited society and by extension the individual. Second, it speaks to the dismissal of community welfare in favor of the pursuit of individual prosperity; this is embodied in Wolfson's comments that he shares no responsibility for protecting the health of other children, only his own. He takes it further by implying that the parents of sick or immunocompromised children, are actually at fault for exposing them to potential dangers. Embedded within this conversation is the firm belief that he knows what is best for his children. Third, built into these individualistic understandings of health and the public is the rejection of state authority

(in this case vaccine science and public health policies/practices) in favor of individual autonomy (read as ‘choice’ or parent rights). The rejection of state authority and the evocation of freedom of choice implies that state authority is inherently bad and is contrary to the interests of the individual. Finally, the individual is the rational consumer and is best able to make their own decisions based on available evidence. Within this last theme is an enormous amount of anti-intellectual sentiment that is intimately connected to distrust of the state.

Moving forward

How do we make sense of these sentiments? The core tenets of neoliberalism, which emphasize individualism, deregulation and decentralization, are on display in the perspectives of many vaccine hesitant parents interviewed about the 2015 Disneyland measles outbreak and elsewhere. These neoliberal values inform how particularly vocal anti-vaccine advocates, like Wolfson, articulate and promote their message of resistance to vaccines and vaccination programs. This suggests that public health and social science researchers need to consider socio-political ideology as yet another germane factor shaping the vaccine hesitancy movement. Further, popular media stories matter because they are widely disseminated (more widely than ever due to internet and social media influence) and the information contained in them, regardless of accuracy, can further sow seeds of doubt about vaccine science and the benefit of public health vaccination programs [21, 22]. Notably, such stories often are used as evidence of the fallacy of vaccine science or proof that the state regulation is out of control. This neoliberal packaging of vaccine hesitancy may have purchase power among people who share these socio-political sensibilities and apply them to health care practice and services and we need to be cognizant of this fact. Public health policy makers, in particular, cannot underestimate the appeal of neoliberal discourse and its ability to disarm otherwise sound evidence-based immuniza-

tion policy. Indeed, the landscape of vaccine hesitancy is extremely complex and requires public health practitioners and policy makers to consider the multifaceted social and political factors that drive this phenomenon and always be mindful of Durbach’s [3] cautionary that “who[ever] wield[s] the needle or lancet and whose body is marked” matters.

CONCLUSION

In short, neoliberal sensibilities are an important yet frequently overlooked social factor that must be understood and considered by public health policy makers when seeking to address the phenomenon of ‘vaccine hesitancy’. The examples above illustrate that it is not merely the literal content of media but also the discursive rhetoric that pads and reinforces messages. Public health outreach campaigns must match these efforts by reinforcing the importance of scientific expertise, the harmful history of vaccine-preventable illnesses, and the collective health and civic benefits of vaccines and vaccination schedules in order to combat the individual-centered rhetoric of choice that underpins much of the contemporary anti-vaccination movement.

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