



Rethinking the antivaccine movement concept: A case study of public criticism of the swine flu vaccine's safety in France



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ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss the definition of “the Antivaccine Movement” using the case of the French controversy over the safety of the 2009 pandemic flu vaccine. I show that the group of main actors who criticized the vaccine's safety is heterogeneous. This heterogeneity can be found in the type of arguments mobilized to question the vaccine's safety and in these actors' likelihood of being involved in any vaccine-related controversies. I show that only a minority of these actors rejected vaccination in general and mobilized against all vaccination campaigns. Most of these actors only occasionally mobilized against a given vaccine or vaccination campaign and they did so to promote a political or cultural agenda that went beyond the vaccine itself. Using these results, I argue that in order to better understand how vaccine-related controversies emerge and why some activists devote time and resources to spread vaccine-critical arguments, social scientists should use three distinct concepts to refer to vaccine criticism: The Antivaccine Movement, the Marginally Antivaccine Movements and the Occasionally Vaccine Critical Movements. To do so would enable social scientists and public health experts to better understand the different ways in which vaccination can become politicized and the evolution of this politicization.

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1. Introduction

In the past few years, research on attitudes towards vaccination has made considerable progress. This is largely due to a theoretical reworking of the main concept used to understand this phenomenon. Social scientists have shifted from an analysis based on the traditional concept of “vaccine resistance” (or “vaccine refusal”) to an analysis based on the concept of “vaccine hesitancy” (Dubé et al., 2013; Larson et al., 2014; Peretti-Watel et al., 2015; Yaqub et al., 2014). This shift has enabled recognition, description and investigation of a much larger spectrum of vaccine-related attitudes than the simple and often very ideological attitudes that constitute “vaccine refusal” or “vaccine resistance”. It has drawn attention to important phenomena such as delayed injections, vaccine selection, questioning of medical authority, difficulties in making an informed decision, etc. Recognizing the existence and the importance of vaccine-specific doubts and of conditional forms of vaccine

refusal has helped to identify the social conditions which favor the emergence of skeptical attitudes towards vaccination (Peretti-Watel et al., 2014; Yaqub et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, research on organized and public criticism of vaccines has not been submitted to a similar theoretical reworking. “The Antivaccine Movement”, understood as a social movement and composed of “antivaccine groups” and “antivaccine activists”, is often designated by scientists as the main cause for all forms of vaccine hesitancy or radical refusal (Ackermann et al., 2004; C. Betsch, 2011; Cornelia Betsch et al., 2012; Gangarosa et al., 1998; J. A. Leask and Chapman, 1998; Poland and Jacobson, 2011; Spier, 2001; Zylberman, 2013). In much the same way as the concept of “vaccine refusal”, this concept has helped understand the similarities between some contemporary forms of organized vaccine resistance and those that emerged during the 19th century at the inception of large-scale vaccination programs (Bertrand and Torny, 2004; Fressoz, 2007, 2012; Poland and Jacobson, 2011; Wolfe and Sharp, 2002). But it has also drawn a lot of criticism for the implicit assumptions it carries. These criticisms were already summarized ten years ago by Stuart Blume and by Melissa Leach and James Fairhead (Blume, 2006; Leach and Fairhead, 2007). The

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concept of “the Antivaccine Movement”: 1) is mainly used to stigmatize non-compliers and therefore contributes to polarizing opinions on this subject; 2) all forms of vaccine criticism tend to be lumped together with traditional vaccine resistance which is automatically identified as the cause for declining vaccination rates (without empirical evidence to back this claim); 3) vaccine criticism is mostly understood as focused on vaccines when, in many cases, vaccine critics also mobilize against a wide range of non-vaccine related issues. These arguments, and especially 2), were also brought forward by Robert Johnston and Pru Hobson-West who both focused on the differences between the various groups that are usually included in the catchall category that has become “the Antivaccine Movement” (Hobson-West, 2007; Johnston, 2004). The study of “antivaccine” websites constitutes a recent example of how this “catchall” use of the concept has hindered scholarly advances. Most studies lump all vaccine-critical groups together and treat the variety of arguments they find on these websites as differences in “rhetorical strategies” rather than as fundamental differences between the actors behind these websites (Bean, 2011; Davies et al., 2002; Kata, 2010; Nasir, 2000; Wolfe et al., 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2005). Approximately ten years ago, these five authors questioned whether the concept of “the Antivaccine Movement” was best suited to understand the multifaceted contemporary forms of vaccine criticism and called for a more precise, and therefore more heuristic, definition of this concept. These studies show the need to question our spontaneous use of the concept and the phenomena it is intended to describe.

Almost ten years after the publication of these articles we are still waiting for the unfolding of a debate similar to the one on vaccine hesitancy. The crucial yet undebated questions are: What qualifies the actions of a group or of an individual as “antivaccine” and warrants their being included in “the Antivaccine Movement”? Should all forms of vaccine criticism be called “antivaccine”? How can this concept help social scientists better understand the emergence of public vaccine criticism?

In this article, I aim to further this debate through the study of the actors (nonprofits, activists, bloggers, public figures, political parties, companies, etc.) involved in a specific vaccine-related event: the controversy that arose in 2009 in France over the safety of the pandemic A (H1N1)v flu vaccine, also known as “swine flu”. Much like in other high income countries, vaccine-related controversies and large-scale vaccine critical mobilizations have multiplied in France since the beginning of the 1990s. The controversy over the safety of pandemic vaccines comes after the precedent of the 1994–1998 hepatitis B campaign which was accused of generating Multiple Sclerosis and was largely covered by the media between 1998 and 2002. It was also followed by more recent and ongoing controversies: over the use of aluminum as an adjuvant (since 2010), and over the efficacy and safety of the HPV vaccine Gardasil (since 2011). The controversy in 2009 over the safety of the pandemic flu vaccine constitutes a perfect case to study contemporary forms of vaccine criticism. Indeed, because of the position of this event in the recent history of vaccine criticism in France, such a case study helps shed light on the elements of continuity and discontinuity in the recent succession of vaccine-related mobilizations. Also, this was the largest of these French vaccine-related controversies, in terms of media coverage and, more importantly, of the numbers of actors involved. Such a case study therefore helps reveal the variety of actors potentially involved in vaccine-criticism.

I will show that there are strong differences between the various actors who mobilized to denounce the 2009 pandemic flu vaccine’s supposed lack of safety. Underlining these differences helps to sharpen our understanding of how vaccines become politicized. These differences pertain to three parameters: a) the propensity of each actor to mobilize against any given vaccine, b) the cause they

try to defend through these mobilizations and, c) their specific concerns about vaccines. More specifically, I will show that, much as for individual vaccine hesitancy, many vaccine critical actors only have issues with a limited number of vaccines and not with the principle of vaccination.

Taking into account the fact that some actors do not criticize vaccination in general poses crucial issues regarding the use of the concept of the “Antivaccine Movement”. I will argue that the concept of “the Antivaccine Movement” should be used in the plural and restricted to actors who criticize all forms of vaccination. This usage would incite analysts to take an interest in the ways actors representing a variety of social movements include the principle of vaccination or specific vaccination campaigns in their wider political or cultural agendas. In order to develop this argument, I will first expose these theoretical issues and the premises on which my argument will be based.

2. Concept: uses and constraints of “the Antivaccine Movement”

Why do we need the concept of “the Antivaccine Movement”? What should we use it for? I will adopt the most common use of this concept in the literature on vaccine criticism (to explain the emergence of vaccine criticism and the spread of vaccine-defiant attitudes) and make the premises of this approach to the concept explicit.

Most academic references to “the Antivaccine Movement” serve one main purpose: explaining the decline of vaccination coverage and the diffusion of public vaccine criticism (see for instance, Gangarosa et al., 1998; Kata, 2010; Larson et al., 2014; J. Leask, Chapman, Hawe and Burgess, 2006; Poland and Jacobson, 2011; Wolfe and Sharp, 2002). I accept that this is the primary agenda for this concept. It follows that (*Premise n°1*) the main criteria for evaluating whether a given definition of “the Antivaccine Movement” is relevant would be its explanatory power. Does this definition help explain why some vaccine-related controversies arise and why some people refuse some injections?

The existing academic literature also suggests a more precise delimitation of “the Antivaccine Movement”. Indeed, when referring to “the Antivaccine Movement” as a cause for declining vaccination rates and public controversies, most analysts make reference to organized groups or networks of activists who spread vaccine critical arguments (Bean, 2011; Cornelia Betsch et al., 2012; Blume, 2006; Davies et al., 2002; Nadja Durbach, 2004; Hobson-West, 2007; Kata, 2010; Nasir, 2000; Poland and Jacobson, 2011; Wolfe and Sharp, 2002). This means that (*Premise n°2*) the concept of “the Antivaccine Movement” links the spread of vaccine-related arguments and attitudes to the actions of a specific set of actors who are its’ cause. To use “the Antivaccine Movement” in an explanatory manner, therefore, means pointing a finger towards the phenomenon of some groups and individuals taking an interest in vaccines and devoting part of their resources to spread their opinion.

This brings me to a third important premise of my approach. This general use found in the academic literature promotes an understanding of “the Antivaccine Movement” as a “social movement” in its sociological sense. The sociological definition of what a “social movement” is has been stable for a long time even if explicit definitions can vary, as James Jasper notes in his contribution to the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology: “Although scholarly definitions vary, common usage portrays social movements as sustained and intentional efforts to foster or retard social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities” (Jasper, 2007). Other scholars have underlined more explicitly the importance of a common culture being shared by the actors of a

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