

"You try to educate and you try to educate, but then you just hit a wall." COVID-19 related conspiracy theories and their impact on healthcare

Abstract

The paper focuses on the impact of conspiracy theories" (CTs) about the COVID-19 pandemic's origins and health management on the public perception of healthcare stakeholders, e.g. patients, medical professionals, and public health officials. Such impacts have ranged, for instance, from the vilification of public healthcare in general to concrete confrontations between health officials/professionals and patients and/or their relatives (with concomitant mental health issues for the former) and the need for police protection against violent attacks (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10).

The paper first outlines types of COVID-19 related CTs that were propagated in the UK, US and Germany, based on a corpus of print and social media texts. Using cognitive metaphor analysis, it focuses on dehumanizing figurative representations of scientists and health officials/professionals in CT narratives and on their real-world consequences, as reported in the media and analysed in social science research. Specifically, health-officials, scientists and carers are depicted as *traitors* or *deserters* in figurative narratives of the pandemic management as a 'war campaign', which have been linked to the above-named harmful impacts. Whilst the PANDEMIC-AS-WAR metaphor has been amply investigated in the version that casts the virus as the main ENEMY (4, 9, 11), its integration into CTs where the ENEMY participant is viewed as an intra- and/or inter-national "conspiracy") has received much less attention. The paper fills this gap by investigating three research questions:

- a. How does the conceptual integration of a metaphorical narrative into a CT affect their respective discursive structure and function?
- b. Which implicatures are suggested by the CT-metaphor integration?
- c. Can the metaphorical 'enhancement' of a CT be linked to specific attitudinal preferences and, as a consequence, to real-world effects, as claimed in some studies (e.g. (7, 12))?

In conclusion it is argued that the denunciation of CTs as containing isolated factual statements or of figurative surface formulations is not sufficient to counteract their pernicious impact but that instead the conceptual integration of underlying narratives and conceptual metaphors need to be deconstructed. This analysis contributes to a better understanding of how CTs impact public attitudes towards healthcare provision and to constructing communicative and cognitive strategies to counter CTs.

Keywords:

Conceptual Integration
Conspiracy Theory
Healthcare
Metaphor
Narrative

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