

Study may explain why people choose not to vaccinate their children

February 11 2015, by Matt McGowan

Two groups of people – those who have greater trust of health-care professionals and possess more knowledge about vaccines and those who are older, more educated and more affluent – are more likely to believe that the benefits of vaccinations outweigh the risks, according to a study by a University of Arkansas political scientist.

"Understanding perceptual differences among the general public holds extremely important practical ramifications because, in many cases, these perceptions translate into individuals' opinions on existing policies, which, in turn, may have a direct bearing on parents' decisions whether to ultimately inoculate their children," said Geoboo Song, assistant professor of political science and public policy in the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences.

Song studies the politics of risk across different policy domains. For this study, he analyzed data from an Internet survey of 1,213 American adults conducted in 2010. He wanted to understand why different people have different perceptions about the benefits and risks of childhood vaccinations.

Currently, all 50 states require children to receive federally recommended vaccinations before entering school, but there are many exceptions to these requirements. Depending on the state, these exemptions may be obtained for medical, religious or philosophical reasons.

There has been some debate among parents and [health care professionals](#) about the legitimacy of these reasons. The opinion that chemicals within vaccinations might cause some disorder in a child receiving a vaccine has been a source of controversy, with the medical and scientific communities questioning its validity.

For the past several years, the United States has experienced a re-emergence of preventable diseases, most notably measles, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced in 2000 had been eradicated domestically. According to the CDC, receiving vaccinations is the most effective way to prevent infectious diseases such as measles, mumps, rubella and pertussis.

Beyond the basic findings related to demographics such as age, income and education level, Song found that cultural predispositions significantly influence individuals' perceptions pertaining to the benefits and risks of vaccines.

Drawing from cultural theory of risk perception, which posits that there are four distinctive cultural types of individuals – hierarchy, individualist, egalitarian and fatalist – who assess risk in ways that conform with their intrinsic values, Song found that strong hierarchies, who tend to place trust in authority figures and experts, generally believe that the benefits of vaccinations outweigh the risks, as many health experts have stated.

People with a strong fatalist tendency – those who feel that they have little control over their lives and that they cannot participate in important decisions that affect them – were inclined to emphasize the risks and downplay the benefits of [vaccinations](#), Song found. Individuals within this group generally focus only on taking care of themselves and those close to them.

"For these folks," Song said, "being infected by a contagious disease

would just be a matter of luck, so they remain reluctant to take any proactive measures, such as immunization, unless they really have to."

Song said the study's findings provide practical implications for immunization policy as government and [health authorities](#) emphasize quality of shared knowledge as a broad policy direction.

"Simply providing scientific facts regarding how great vaccine benefits are, and how trivial the risk, as part of a government vaccine campaign, for instance, would work well for strong hierarchs but not for other cultural types," he said. "People tend to listen to what they want to hear and accept new information only if it is congruent with what they already believe. For people who may be reluctant to vaccinate their children, health authorities should try to convey culturally nuanced narratives with accessible language."

Song's study, "Understanding Public Perceptions of Benefits and Risks of Childhood Vaccinations in the United States," was published in 2014 in *Risk Analysis*.

More information: Song, G. (2014), "Understanding Public Perceptions of Benefits and Risks of Childhood Vaccinations in the United States." *Risk Analysis*, 34: 541–555. doi: 10.1111/risa.12114

Provided by University of Arkansas

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