

Conspiracy Theories & COVID-19

PHIL 334: Pandemic Ethics



PPE in a Time of Pandemic

Thursday, April 8th

2-3PM Pacific Time

<https://ppe.unc.edu/event/ppe-in-a-time-of-pandemic-collective-action-public-choice-and-the-pandemic/>

Come for the bonus points, stay for the knowledge!

Stephanie Collins (Australian Catholic University) on Collective Action, Public Choice, and the Pandemic.



Review:
Allocating Healthcare
during COVID-19

SOUNDING BOARD

Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources in the Time of Covid-19

Ezekiel J. Emanuel, M.D., Ph.D., Govind Persad, J.D., Ph.D., Ross Upshur, M.D.,
Beatriz Thome, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D., Michael Parker, Ph.D., Aaron Glickman, B.A.,
Cathy Zhang, B.A., Connor Boyle, B.A., Maxwell Smith, Ph.D., and James P. Phillips, M.D.

Covid-19 is officially a pandemic. It is a novel infection with serious clinical manifestations, including death, and it has reached at least 124 countries and territories. Although the ultimate course and

fluenza Plan that modeled the potential health care impact of moderate and severe influenza pandemics. The plan was updated after the 2009 H1N1 outbreak and most recently in 2017.¹ It

Questions about Rationing During COVID-19

Question:

Is there a moral difference between **withholding** care and **withdrawing** care from someone in order to give it to someone else?

Questions about Rationing During COVID-19

Question:

Should we be aiming to maximize the sheer **number of lives saved**, ignoring facts about expected life years and quality of life?

Things That (Might) Matter

- What are the patient's **chances of survival**?
- What is the patient's **life-expectancy** (if they survive)?
- What will the patient's **quality of life** be like (if they survive)?
- How **old** is the patient? (Why might this matter?)
- How much **overall happiness** would be produced?

What **else** might matter?

Questions about Rationing During COVID-19

Question:

Should we prioritize the lives of **healthcare professionals**? What about the police, delivery workers, those involved in the supply chain for food, etc.? What about famous people?

Questions about Rationing During COVID-19

Question:

Should a **lottery** be used rather than some other method (at least in cases of “ties”)?

Questions about Rationing During COVID-19

Question:

Should we prioritize **patients with COVID-19** over other patients requiring similar healthcare resources?

The NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL of MEDICINE

SOUNDING BOARD

Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources in the Time of Covid-19

Ezekiel J. Emanuel, M.D., Ph.D., Govind Persad, J.D., Ph.D., Ross Upshur, M.D.,
Beatriz Thome, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D., Michael Parker, Ph.D., Aaron Glickman, B.A.,
Cathy Zhang, B.A., Connor Boyle, B.A., Maxwell Smith, Ph.D., and James P. Phillips, M.D.

Covid-19 is officially a pandemic. It is a novel infection with serious clinical manifestations, including death, and it has reached at least 124 countries and territories. Although the ultimate course and

fluenza Plan that modeled the potential health care impact of moderate and severe influenza pandemics. The plan was updated after the 2009 H1N1 outbreak and most recently in 2017.¹ It

Table 2. Ethical Values to Guide Rationing of Absolutely Scarce Health Care Resources in a Covid-19 Pandemic.

Ethical Values and Guiding Principles	Application to COVID-19 Pandemic
Maximize benefits	
Save the most lives	Receives the highest priority
Save the most life-years — maximize prognosis	Receives the highest priority
Treat people equally	
First-come, first-served	Should not be used
Random selection	Used for selecting among patients with similar prognosis
Promote and reward instrumental value (benefit to others)	
Retrospective — priority to those who have made relevant contributions	Gives priority to research participants and health care workers when other factors such as maximizing benefits are equal
Prospective — priority to those who are likely to make relevant contributions	Gives priority to health care workers
Give priority to the worst off	
Sickest first	Used when it aligns with maximizing benefits
Youngest first	Used when it aligns with maximizing benefits such as preventing spread of the virus

Conspiracy Theories

What is a conspiracy theory?

What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

It's not easy to give a definition of a **conspiracy theory**.

Examples:

Conspiracy:

Two or more people acting together (in secret) to accomplish some goal.

What are some examples of conspiracy theories?

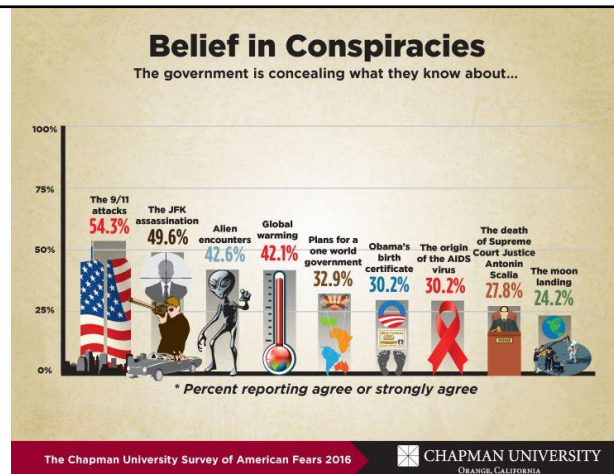
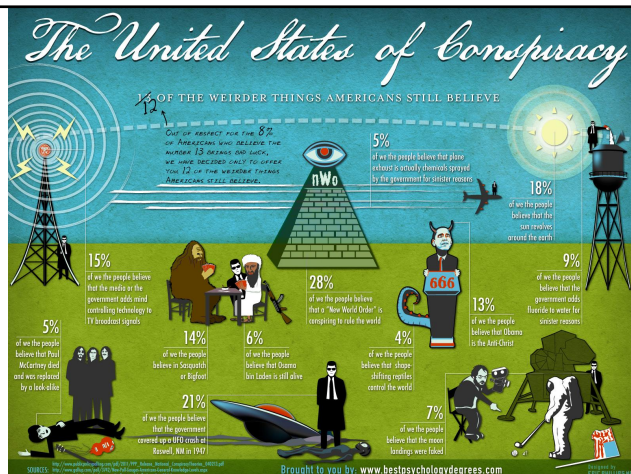
What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

It's not easy to give a definition of a **conspiracy theory**.

Examples:

Conspiracy:

Two or more people acting together (in secret) to accomplish some goal.



What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

It's not easy to give a definition of a **conspiracy theory**.

Conspiracy:

Two or more people acting together (in secret) to accomplish some goal.

Examples:

9/11 Truthers
JFK Assassination
Obama "Birther"
Alien Encounters
Moon Landing
Sandy Hook "Hoax"
...



COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Blaming 5G

This conspiracy theory should be easy to debunk: it is biologically impossible for viruses to spread using the electromagnetic spectrum. The latter are waves/photons, while the former are biological particles composed of proteins and nucleic acids. But that isn't really the point — conspiracy theories are enticing because they often link two things which at first might appear be correlated; in this case, the rapid rollout of 5G networks was taking place at the same time the pandemic hit. Cue a **viral meme linking the two**, avidly promoted by anti-vaccine activists who have long been spreading fears about electromagnetic radiation, egged on **by the Kremlin**.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

Bill Gates as scapegoat

Most conspiracy theories, like the viruses they resemble, constantly mutate and have several variants circulating at any one time. Many of these plots and subplots seem to involve Bill Gates, who became a new target of disinformation after gently criticizing the defunding of the World Health Organization. According to the New York Times, anti-vaxxers, members of QAnon and right-wing pundits have seized on a video of a 2015 Ted talk given by Gates — where he discussed the Ebola outbreak and warned of a new pandemic — to bolster their claims he had foreknowledge of the COVID pandemic or even purposely caused it.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

The virus escaped from a Chinese lab

This one at least has the benefit of being plausible. It is true that the original epicenter of the epidemic, the Chinese city of Wuhan, also hosts a virology institute where researchers have been studying bat coronaviruses for a long time. One of these researchers, Shi Zhengli, a prominent virologist who spent years collecting bat dung samples in caves and was a lead expert on the earlier SARS outbreak, was sufficiently concerned about the prospect that she spent days frantically checking lab records to see if anything had gone wrong. She admits breathing a “sigh of relief” when genetic sequencing showed that the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus did not match any of the viruses sampled and studied in the Wuhan Institute of Virology by her team.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

COVID was created as a biological weapon

A spicier variant is that COVID not only escaped from a lab, but it was intentionally created by Chinese scientists as a biowarfare weapon. According to Pew Research, “nearly three-in-10 Americans believe that COVID-19 was made in a lab,” either intentionally or accidentally (the former is more popular: specifically, 23 percent believe it was developed intentionally, with only 6 percent believing it was an accident).

This theory that the Chinese somehow created the virus is particularly popular on the US political right. It gained mainstream coverage thanks to US Sen. Tom Cotton (Republican, Arkansas) who amplified theories first aired in the Washington Examiner (a highly conservative media outlet) that the Wuhan Institute of Virology “is linked to Beijing’s covert bio-weapons program.”

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

The US military imported COVID into China

The Chinese government responded to the anti-China theories with a conspiracy theory of its own that seeks to turn blame back around onto the United States. This idea was spread initially by Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, who Tweeted “it’s possible that the US military brought the virus to Wuhan.” These comments, according to Voice of America news, “echoed a rumored conspiracy, widely circulated in China, that US military personnel had brought the virus to China during their participation in the 2019 Military World Games in Wuhan last October.” For China, as the Atlantic reported, this conspiracy theory, and an accompanying attempt to rename COVID the “USA virus,” was a transparent “geopolitical ploy” — useful for domestic propaganda but not widely believed internationally.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

GMOs are somehow to blame

Genetically modified crops have been a target of conspiracy theorists for years, so it was hardly a surprise to see **GMOs blamed** in the early stages of the COVID pandemic. In early March, Italian attorney Francesco Billota **penned a bizarre article** for Il Manifesto, falsely claiming that GM crops cause genetic pollution that allows viruses to proliferate due to the resulting environmental “imbalance.” Anti-GMO activists have also tried to blame modern agriculture, which is strange, since the known path of the virus into the human population — as with Ebola, HIV and many others — was through the very ancient practice of people capturing and killing wildlife.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

The pandemic is being manipulated by the ‘deep state’

Some believe that a “deep state” of America’s elite is plotting to undermine the president — and that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the face of the US coronavirus pandemic response — is **a secret member**. Fauci’s expression of disbelief when the deep state was mentioned during a press briefing supposedly gave the game away.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

COVID is a plot by Big Pharma

Many conspiracy theory promoters are in reality clever actors trying to sell quack products. Alex Jones, between rants about hoaxes and the New World Order, urges viewers to buy expensive miracle pills that he claims can cure all known diseases. Dr. Mercola, a quack anti-vax and anti-GMO medic who has been banned from Google due to peddling misinformation, claims that vitamins (and numerous other products he sells) can cure or prevent COVID. NaturalNews, another conspiracist site, sells all manner of pills, potions and prepper gear. These conspiracists depend for their market on getting people to believe that evidence-based (i.e. conventional) medicine doesn’t work and is a plot by big pharmaceutical companies to make us ill. Big Pharma conspiracies are a staple of anti-vaccination narratives, so it is hardly surprising that they have transmuted into the age of the coronavirus.

COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories

COVID death rates are inflated

Another far-right meme is the idea that COVID death rates are being inflated and therefore there is no reason to observe lockdown regulations or other social distancing measures. Prominent in promoting this myth is Dr. Annie Bukacek, whose speech warning that COVID death certificates are being manipulated has been viewed more than a quarter of a million times on YouTube. Bukacek appears in a white lab coat and with a stethoscope around her neck, making her look like an authoritative medical source. Dig a little deeper, however, as **Rolling Stone magazine did**, and it turns out she’s actually a far-right anti-vaccination and anti-abortion activist, previously noted for bringing tiny plastic fetuses into the Montana state legislature. Her insistence that COVID death rates are inflated has, of course, no basis in fact. More likely the current death toll is a serious under-count. To further clarify the issue, the Centers for Disease Control has published information about **excess deaths** associated with COVID-19.

Why Do People Believe Conspiracy Theories?

Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

- (1) Cognitive Biases
[Evolutionarily
Advantageous?]

Intentionality Bias

Things don't just happen by accident

Confirmation Bias:

Only look at the evidence that confirms your view, not the evidence against it

Proportionality Bias:

Big events must have "big" causes

Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

- (1) Cognitive Biases
[Evolutionarily
Advantageous?]



Intentionality Bias

Things don't just happen by accident

Confirmation Bias:

Only look at the evidence that confirms your view, not the evidence against it

Proportionality Bias:

Big events must have "big" causes

Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

- (1) Cognitive Biases
[Evolutionarily
Advantageous?]
- (2) Politically Motivated
Cognition

Conspiracist Mindset, which is linked to political ideology, that disposes you to believe in conspiracy theories.

Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

(1) Cognitive Biases
[Evolutionarily
Advantageous?]

(2) Politically Motivated
Cognition

(3) Epistemic FOMO

FOMO:

Fear of Missing Out

People believe in conspiracy theories
because they'd rather believe falsely
than miss out on having true beliefs.

What Can Be Done?