The Social Representation of Covid-19: How Collective Opinion Influences Individual Behaviour

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to argue that people's decision to not get vaccinated against COVID-19 – more commonly known as Coronavirus – in Romania is strongly enforced by distrust in what we would call scientific knowledge and an abnormal propensity towards mythical knowledge, regarded by many as nonscientific knowledge. In the following pages, I will present some of the psycho-social arguments regarding the motives of one's choice of beliefs, the social representations that follow these motives and why the social representations that disregard scientific knowledge tend to have serious consequences on the society.*
Keywords: *coid-19, social representations, Romania, scientific knowledge, mythical knowledge*

I. Introduction

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There is an old saying that became borderline cliché – *knowledge is power*. Naturally, people have the predisposition of seeking power, therefore, of seeking knowledge but this *quest* for knowledge is taking people on a tainted path in the sense that the responsibility of analyzing and sorting the information is given to the subject/individual. This situation starts to become troublesome when people choose to internalize only the knowledge that is coherent to their belief system – like believing that praying to God would be more effective than wearing the seatbelt in case of a car crash, that the global warming is a hoax so one can pollute as much as he likes without being subject to any consequences or that one should ignore public elections and not participate in the subsumed voting processes because they are meaningless. There are obviously many examples where people's actions based mostly on non-scientific knowledge have less than desired consequences on the whole society.

I will now address to the question of what we would define as *scientific knowledge* as opposed to other types that we would characterize as mythological, non-scientific or even *popular* knowledge – more in the sense of *folklore*. Intuitively, *scientific knowledge* is the knowledge produced via the scientific research done by well-trained scientists in their respective fields. It is noteworthy to mention that what we would define as *scientific truth* is almost every time endorsed by a built consensus in the academic community. Needless to say, scientific

knowledge represents the foundation of our current society and the locomotive of the last two or three centuries of human progress. On the other hand, *mythological knowledge* is a more volatile entity in this discussion. Most simply put, *mythological knowledge* is an alternative form of knowledge which people internalize in order to satisfy certain needs and/or because of a certain deficit of either *rationality* or *knowledge* – sometimes even both, according to Levy. (Levy, 2017)

As I mentioned previously, *mythological knowledge* can take many forms – myths, alternative narratives, otherworldly beliefs, superstitions and, very commonly these recent times, conspiracy theories. Furthermore, I would like to discuss briefly the motives of one orbiting around this kind of beliefs.

II. The psychology behind one's beliefs

From a psychological perspective, according to Douglas, we can identify three types of motives that would determine individuals to pursue this kind of knowledge, those being *epistemic, social and existential motives*. (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017) The epistemic motives are derived from the human's need of pursuing causal explanations, usually for events, in order to achieve a *stable, accurate, and internally consistent understanding of the world.* (Heider, 1958) Scientific knowledge usually offers *empirically warranted (vs. speculative), parsimonious (vs. complex) and falsifiable explanations* which are stronger if we take reference the normative standards of causal explanations. (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017) Opposed to scientific knowledge, mythological knowledge provides *broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction.* (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017)

Regarding the existential motives, people have the need of feeling safe and in somewhat control of the environment they live in, both as autonomous individuals and as members of collectives. (Tetlock, 2002) We can assume that people would turn to the alternative narratives of mythological knowledge when they feel that these needs are threatened. In the case of people who lack an instrumental sense of control, they might be offered some compensatory one by alternative narratives in the sense that they get the opportunity to reject the official narrative, hence they possess an alternative account. (Goertzel, 1994) There is also the case when alternative narratives are able to make people feel safe in the form of *cheater detection* – individuals are given the capability of recognizing the threat of dangerous and untrustworthy entities, threat which can be reduced or neutralized. (Bost & Prunier, 2013) There are many studies regarding existential motives and the reasons people may turn to alternative explanations of events such as social anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013), powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999), lack of sociopolitical control or lack of psychological empowerment (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013). Finally, social motives refer to the people's *desire to belong and maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group*. (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017) Mythological knowledge – considered as an alternative for scientific knowledge – gives individuals the option of an alternative narrative which *valorizes the self and the in-group by allowing blame for negative outcomes to be attributed to others.* This being said, it is more than plausible that mythological knowledge can be particularly appealing to people who find the positive image of their self on in-group endangered. (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016) These type of believes may be

recruited as a defense mechanism, to relieve the self or a group from a sense of responsibility and/or culpability for their disadvantaged position or lack of action in certain regards. The *disadvantaged position* is a trait that can have many roots, but the most common are the experiences of ostracism – people believing in superstitions or conspiracy theories as part of the effort to make sense out of their existence (Graeupner & Coman, 2017); people that belong to groups that have a low status because of their ethnicity, (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999); people that have low income (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Narcissism – an inflated view of oneself that requires external validation – is also coherent to the defensive motivation of individuals.

III. The social aspect of mythological knowledge – Social representations

One's psychological motives aren't enough to understand his behavior in the society he coexists with other individuals. We can say that these motives are the core for social representations that are based rather on non-scientific types of knowledge. Serge Moscovici offers a very good example on how people that come from different socio-economic backgrounds react differently to medical problems. He reminisces about the populations of Spanish origin in the south-vest of the United States that possess no more than four registers of classifying and interpreting diseases; firstly, there was the medieval folklore knowledge of diseases; secondly, there was the culture of the indigenous tribes; thirdly, there was the folk-inspired English medicine both in rural and urban environments; only lastly, we have what we would call *medical science*. (Moscovici, 1997) These being said, people then had the choice of one of these four alternatives of trying to cure a disease. But this choice wasn't a free one, it was dependent on one's economic status and the severity of the disease he was afflicted by. Therefore, we can identify the social-dependent circumstances in which people let themselves be driven by collective representations or by scientific knowledge. (Moscovici, 1997)

The social and intelectual traits of representations in societies where science, technology and philosphy are present get influenced by them – by building as if it was it's extensions but also in opposition to them. Even Durkheim said that *the value we attribute to science depends on the idea we want to draw, collectively, about its nature and the role it plays in our life – that is, it expresses a state of opinion. Everything is established on opinion when we discuss social life, even science.* (Durkheim, 1995) As it stands, on one hand, an opinion is a socially valued formula on which an individual adheres to, on the other hand, it can be regarded as a stand regarding a controversial problem of society. Opinion is usually described as unstable, referring to particular points of interest (specific) – as the moment when attitudes and stereotypes are formed in one's conscience. In a more general sense, the notion of opinion implies firstly, the reaction of individuals regarding an external object that is independent of the social actor, its intent and loopholes; secondly, a direct connection towards behavior – the judgment is centered on the object or stimulus, and it can be interpreted as an anticipation of one's behavior. Therefore, an opinion – just like an attitude – is important from the answer's point of view and as the *preparation for an action*, a miniature conduct; hence, we can predict how an individual would act from what he says**.** (Moscovici, 1997)

The concept of *image* doesn't stray too far from the one of *opinion* regarding its based presuppositions. It has been used to designate a more complex and coherent organization of judg-

ments and assessment. We can define an *image* as an internal reflection of an external reality – a copy in accordance with the spirit of what is outside of it. Kenneth Boulding has a similar point of inquiry, considering that the individual carries in his memory a collection of images about the world under all aspects. These images can intertwine between each other and are coherent with one's visual experiences. At the same time, their independence from another is varying, in the way that we can foresee the structure of the source images by analyzing the other images but also in the sense that modifying certain images creates disequilibrium, which results in a tendency of modifying other images. (Boulding, 1956) Returning to the concept of social representation, we consider that there is no rift between the external universe and the individual's universe (or the group's), that the subject and object are not heterogeneous in their common field. That is, the object exists in an active context, which is continuously changing, because it is partially conceived by a person or a group as an extension of their behavior and it exist for them only by the means and methods that allow its understanding.

Opinions, regardless if they are specific to the individual or to a group, must be considered both under the aspect of the communication act and the expressive one. Images and opinions are usually specified, studied, thought about only in the sense that they identify the position, the value hierarchy, of an individual or group. Essentially, if we sample a piece of *symbolic substance* created by individuals or groups, we will notice that by changing their standpoints, they tend to influence and model each other. (Moscovici, 1997) Following the example of racial or social prejudice, these behaviors almost never occur isolatedly – they are cropped around systems, certain types of language registers that refer to both the biological and social natures of men and one's relations with the world. These type of systems are generally inappropriate, transmitted through generations and social classes – people that fall under the prejudices being more or less constrained to comply to the patterns, that being the *rational* thing to do.[1] (Moscovici, 1997)

Any type of knowledge has specific practice and spirit that are definitive for itself. It also assumes a special role to the knowledgeable subject. Each of us plays his role differently when the question of practicing a profession in art, engineering, science and the creation of social representations. For the last of these examples, every individual has its own observations as reference, and especially the proof that accumulates around current events: the launch of a new satellite, the announcement of a new medical discovery, the speech of an important public figure, an experience they lived, a book they read etc. The vast majority of these observations and *scientific proof* come from the ones that organized and inventoried them in the context of their interests. Journalists, scientists, engineers, politicians are continuously providing us reports about their work, as public policies, military operations, scientific experiments or technical breakthroughs. However, these reports are not reachable for us, it can be impossible to understand their *jargon*, to understand their content and to relate them to the information and firsthand experiences of our close environment. Therefore, the reports build a *world of discourse* on the foundation of carefully selected information that is in accordance with the explicit rules that we and our problems stand as their subject. At the same time, these reports should be close to us in the way that their content is of interest for us; the observations of what we would call *specialists* interfere with our own. Even though their jargon and elaborate terms are sometimes afar from our understanding and the events they are describing are not in proximity to our direct experiences, they guide our gaze and questions on the matter. (Moscovici, 1997)

We can be sure that some events happen and certain objects exist even though, most of the time we lack the criterion to prove their material existence. A very good example is offered by Moscovici; he describes the situation where an individual is looking for a satellite on the night sky, being sure that there is one out there and he can find it. With all these being said, without any precise pointers, he can take for a satellite a very bright star, a plane that travels at very high altitude or any other meteorological or optic object. If he thinks about alien societies that live on other planets, he will perceive it as a vehicle that lands on Earth. Projecting one's desires as reality is just a way of interpreting visions as reality. (Moscovici, 1997) There is a temptation to be encyclopedic, that is, to build a sole system (of knowledge). Each and one of us have the same behavior regarding the *reports* I mentioned earlier and information generally, we summarize, crop, classify with the purpose of blending all of it in the same universe. The reason is not the advancement of knowledge but to be *up to date*, to not be considered *ignorant* in a collectivity. Even more, we are not required to exhibit a professional's caution, nothing prohibits us from reuniting the most disjointed elements, to include or exclude them from a logical class in accordance with the social, scientific or practical rules available to us. This is how social representations are being built.

One term that Moscovici uses and is more accurate than we'd think at first is *amateur scientist*. Similarly to past centuries' *curious individuals* and *virtuosos* whom populated academies, universities, philosophic societies, individuals try to emulate these behaviors by keeping in touch with popular new ideas or theories and trying to answer the great number of questions that revolve around them. There is no concept or notion that goes into use with instructions for use, nor an experience that is presented to us alongside the method to practice it; therefore, people use them as they see fit. The important thing for the individual is to be able to integrate them into a coherent *painting* of reality or to *smuggle* them into a lingo that allows him to talk about what everyone is talking about. People have a constant concern to fill their knowledge gaps, to reduce the distance between what they know, on one hand, and what they observe, on the other; in other words, they feel the need to fill the gap within a body of knowledge with informational *stuffing* from another – for example, the one of science with the one of religion or the one of a certain discipline with the prejudice of the ones who practice it. There is no doubt that these *amateur scientists* – all of us being one in a field or another – populate the conversational world with their documentarian's habits, being self-taught and encyclopedic, most of the time remaining prisoners of prejudice, already existing insights or jargon that they don't have a good grasp on; in the end, we can only see what is obvious. (Moscovici, 1997)

IV. The social representations of Covid-19

It is safe to say that people still have this drive to gain knowledge and a better understanding of the environment they live in. The main factor that has changed since Moscovici wrote his book is people's access to knowledge and information but also the quantity and quality of information. Nowadays, most of the people who are part of our society have access to internet, social media and low-quality journalism. There is a huge difference from where people used to look up for knowledge a few decades ago and where they are doing it now. The number of publications grew and the quality of them went down but the most important element was the shift to social media. People prefer going through their *newsfeed* rather than reading genuine scientific articles in well-established publications. From here things start going down-

hill. The internet can host the most nonsense of knowledge than can reach gullible people who have a hard time distinguishing scientific information from alternative narratives and sometimes absurd conspiracy theories. Some beliefs can be considered, indeed, harmless but others can have severe negative effects on society as a whole. There is a huge difference in believing that spiders are common insects[2] and that the COVID-19 vaccines' purpose is to implant people with microchips chips that act as a kill switch if they go rioting.[3]

It is pretty obvious by now that the Romanian people have a lack of trust in modern medical science and its resolve on the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent statistics show that only around 30% of the population has been fully vaccinated compared to the European average of about 70%. This being said, it is safe to assume that the average social representation regarding the whole pandemic situation and especially the urgency of getting vaccinated differs quite a lot in the Romanian society compared to the Western Europe – don't get me wrong, this situation is not specific only to the Romanian society, but to Eastern European ones generally. If we are to look up a map of Europe with the percentage of people that got fully vaccinated, we can see that there is a decreasing of the numbers as we stray further from western societies towards Central Europe and Eastern Europe – the numbers drop gradually as we travel east, along the meridians.[4]

It is quite a difficult task to say for sure what are the decisive factors which determine such difference in the collective thinking of western societies of ours, but I will try to give some educated *guesses* on the matter. Firstly, the Romanian society is very traditional, in more senses than one. According to the *National Institute of Statistics'* study from 2018, about half of the country's population lives in rural areas – 46.2 to be precise – while the European average is around 27.45%. These numbers don't tell the whole story though. While there is no huge discrepancy as the standards of living go between urban and rural areas in the west, we can't say the same thing for Romania, which has a well-known urban-rural cleavage regarding the standards of living. It is safe to say that the average socio-economic status of Romanians is lower than the one of westerners. This lowered status translates also into poorer education, the propensity towards a lower understanding of science and it's rejection in favor of the things that are closer to their universe and understanding – tradition, folklore, myths and pieces of knowledge that are coherent to their belief system. We shouldn't generalize that only people with low social-economic hesitate to get vaccinated, even the so-called *political elite* is insidiously refusing the vaccine. Even as I am writing this paper, politicians fail to agree on terms regarding the measures they should take regarding the poor state of the vaccination in the country and the sanitary crisis. The conservative nature of the two big political parties (*Partidul Social Democrat* and *Partidul Național Liberal)* translated into an inefficient vaccination campaign, in which the political elite was almost silent on the matter and only a few individuals were vocal about the benefits of vaccination. Their reluctance was seized by the populace and internalized as an incentive to avoid getting vaccinated. In the absence of a determined positioning of the two main political parties, there was a public deliberation gap that was filled, unfortunately, by the very vocal *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR)*. The representatives of this populist party engaged in a full-fledged campaign against vaccinations and sanitary measures that were meant to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. Their discourse spread immensly via media, especially social media, mostly beacuse it was resonant with many individuals' belief and there weren't other strong positionings on the matter to counteract them. We can't say for sure how many people became mighty anti-vaxxers beacuse of their discourse,

but we can assume that more than *some* belittled the idea of getting a vaccine. The closest thing to a real pro-vaccine positioning was USR's *(Uniunea Salvați România)* but it reached mostly to their electorate, being a lot less vocal than AUR and in the same time, the values they promote are further away from the one's of the classical parties' electorate, as opposed to the values of AUR.

One would argue that the vaccination problem is rather medical than political, so the ones responsible for this issues are the doctors, physicians and the medical scientist rather than politicians, but I disagree. Firstly, the scale of the Covid-19 outburst made it so governments had to interfere in order to reduce its harming effects on the general populace; secondly, as I stated earlier, politicians have involved themselves in different public campaigns to encourage the people in what they would categorize as *pro-social behavior*. Regarding the responsibility of doctors, there are people who blame them for not being the s*pearhead* of the pro-vaccine positionings in public discourse but I tend to categorise this critique as lacking substance for a few reasons. Firstly, romanians have already shown a noticeable lack of trust in the public medical system, as 60.1% of repondents of a survey say that they don't trust the system of public hospitals in the country[5] and this was even before the pandemic started. This is another reason why we can consider our society *traditional*, as people tend to reject treating their illnesses in hospitals and postpone medical appointments as much as possible. Based on this, it is hard to imagine that more people would have got vaccinated earlier if the doctors had a more noticeable public discourse. Arguebly, even the doctors – who are medical scientists in a sense – could have been reluctant towards the Covid-19 vaccines for the reason of being *raised* in our *conservative* society, but this would be hard to prove.

Secondly, building on Moscovici's argument on the *amateur scientist's* concept, medical scientists' attempt to inform regular people on the benefits of vaccination can be *sabotaged* in quite a few ways. The most basic problem is the language barrier – the jargon. In order to explain the vaccine's effects on one's body, doctors have to engage into a discussion using medical terms that can be difficult to understand for the average educated-citizen. This situation holds another trap, namely, in their attempt to simplify explications, medical scientists could give hollow explications that would lose meaning and offer less convincing arguments; also, in the case of *denialists*, arguing against them using their own phrasing would *frame* the discussion in conspirative terms. (Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer, Brophy, Lloyd, & Marriott, 2015) Another problem consists on the knowledge needed to understand the science put into the vaccine. Even though one can partially understand medical jargon, serious medical knowledge is necessary for people to fully understand how the vaccines affects the body and helps it develop less severe forms of disease – especially if we look at the Pfizer, BioNTech or Moderna which use relatively new vaccine technology (RNA based) to build a better immunity against disease. This being said, people will have a hard time grasping this knowledge and will resort to alternative explanations that are closer to their understanding and belief system, ultimately making them think against vaccination.

V. Ending notes

The main conclusion of this article is that the average social representation about the Covid-19 situation in Romania is one that discourages most individuals from getting vaccinated. This is caused by the conservative and traditional nature of the society and the sources of knowl-

edge that people consider *valid*. The average individual's belief system is dominated by mythical knowledge, which can take the form of myths, alternative narratives, otherworldly beliefs, superstitions and conspiracy theories, as I previously stated. It is safe to say that when enough people boycott the alternative offered by scientific knowledge, there are consequences to be suffered. People's inability to include scientific findings – that are even backed up by a scientific consensus – in their social representation had led to a less than optimal percentage of the population to get vaccinated and to a sanitary crisis that led to thousands of lives to be lost due to the shortage of resources.

Notes

[1] Moscovici refers to Hegel 's statement that *what is rational, it's real,* this happening because *the real* has been processed in order to be in accordance with *the rational.*

[2] Spiders are arachnids, creatures with two body segments, eight legs, no wings or antennae and are not able to chew. Many people think that spiders are insects but they are mistaken since insects have six legs and three main body parts. Most insects also have wings, so spiders are not insects, they are Arachnids.

[3] This is only one of many conspiracy theories that form the body of the social representation of the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines.

[4] See https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID_WRL

[5] See https://www.statista.com/statistics/1103725/trust-in-the-romanian-medical-system/

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