

Black Trust in Covid-19 Vaccine Efficacy

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ABSTRACT: This essay offers a philosophical analysis of the increased rates of hesitancy among Black Americans regarding treatment for Covid-19. What all previous literature on the issue (at least from a philosophical perspective) fails to provide consideration of the epistemic dimension of trust. That is, how norms of knowledge shape the formation of trust among a collective group. Thus, in this paper I will include such normative dimensions in a proper epistemic overview of institutional trust among Black people. That is to say that providing inclusion of epistemic normativity (Kauppinen 2018) to this issue of Black trust in government and medicine will expose the grounds for distrust of vaccines and public health which we currently find ourselves grappling with. Such an answer to this question will provide a basis for creating lasting change for all members of minority communities in America.

KEYWORDS: trust; Black trust; institutions; epistemic norms

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed many areas of public governance in crucial need of support. The supply chain industry took a most notable hit during the pandemic meanwhile online services like streaming, shopping, and educational services saw dramatic increases in use. Public health measures were also subject to pandemic-fueled disturbance. In fact, vaccination towards the Covid-19 virus saw some epic struggles throughout the more severe stages of the virus' spread. Dharawat et al. (2022, 6) suggests that social media and misinformation was “highly severe” toward prevention of vaccination, which in turn prolonged the pandemic and increased its general harmfulness. Exploring misinformation and its effects on vaccination exposes another, perhaps greater, public health issue: increased vaccination hesitancy among minority communities.

The issue of disbelief regarding medical procedure efficacy among minority persons is hardly new. Razai et al. (2021) expresses the systemic racism that has been present in instances of unethical healthcare research in Black populations, underrepresentation of minorities in vaccines trials, and how residential segregation and redlining has also played in those issues. This issue affects hundreds of thousands of Americans and requires greater examination. Similar to Razai's insights, many previous writings on this subject from both philosophical and medical views alike pose that issues of systemic racism can easily be considered root causes. Often identifying issues of public health education, access to medical care, health care, and others as primary causal factors of this distrust that minority persons can tend to have in the efficacy of medical products and procedures. What all previous literature on the issue (at least from a philosophical perspective) fails to provide consideration of the epistemic dimension of trust. That is, how norms of knowledge shape the formation of trust among a collective group. Thus, in this paper I will include such normative dimensions in a proper epistemic overview of institutional trust among Black people.

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Issues of public health and vaccination do maintain status as life-or-death situations, however, this will not be a point of focus; rather, to build and maintain the free and virtuous society, which many Americans believe the Founding Fathers had in mind when laying the groundwork for modern society, there must be some understanding of who trusts our current institutions and why. Such an answer to this question will provide a basis for creating lasting change for all members of minority communities in America. In section two, I will develop an understanding of institutional trust from previous literature and briefly apply it to the case of Black Americans. Section three will then make the case that a lack of institutional trust can function as an epistemic norm as defined by Antti Kauppinen. Section four will take both preceding ideas and work to develop solutions to epistemically normal deficits in institutional trust in a deeper analysis of the case of Black Americans and government.

2. Institutions, trust, and trustworthiness

Before any form or mode of institutional trust can be determined to function normatively among a certain demographic, institutional trust must first be understood in and of itself. Especially this form of trust's relation to other forms of trust and to individuals versus institutions versus groups and organizations.

Discourse regarding how trust may or may not exist between people and institutions is not hard to find in literature on the subject. Some have characterized trust as “highly personal attitude,”

where people can trust people but not inanimate objects (Budnik 2018, 222);¹ which leaves something to be desired when approaching institutions. Others have taken this personal approach to trust and applied it to the relationship that may exist between constituents and their representatives in a government system (Mangum 2012).

Further, some have proposed that institutional trust has three conditions: representation, efficacy, and collectively beneficial purpose (Budnik 2018; Mangum 2012; Miller and Hoffman 1998). Representation refers to constituents wishing to seem their own values reflecting in governmental policy. Efficacy, the second condition of institutional trust, adds on to the first in that individuals would like a government that represents their own values to be effective at enforcing those values. The last condition is that an institution must have some sort of collectively beneficial purpose for which it acts, since individuals not only wish for their own welfare, but also that of others (Miller and Hoffmann 1998). This understanding of institutional trust, however, does not consider the history of an institution when considering its trustworthiness. Afterall, does not one consider another's past actions before trusting them? Should not the same be said of institutions? Yes, indeed, it is the case that a fourth condition is required: origin.

My proposed addition to this list of necessary conditions, origin, means more than simply where or how a given institution arises and gains power—one needs to consider the historical treatment of an institution towards specific groups when considering its ability to be trusted. This condition allows the trustor (the one trusting) to evaluate the trustworthiness of the trustee (the one being trusted). Without consideration of history/origin, the trustor would have no proof beyond

¹ Regarding trust and reliance, Budnik (2018, 222) writes: “We can rely on inanimate objects – like we rely regularly on our computers or our mobile phones – but we can only trust other people.” This is because, “on the voluntarist, reliance-based interpretation, trust is a three-place predicate: I trust Bob to do something particularly... Under my account, in contrast, it is reliance that is a three-place relation...” (224).

speculation regarding the trustworthiness of the trustee. Origin and consideration of an institution's history is able to substantiate or disprove the trustworthiness of an institution to an individual.

3. Institutional trust and epistemic normativity

Further understanding of the value of institutional trust's insights into epistemology of groups can be gained from a normative perspective on the matter. When looking to classify a normative occurrence, Kauppinen (2018, 4-5) writes that the *modes of accountability* – ways in which one might be sanctioned for violating a given norm – can determine a norm's class. That is to say, when one violates a social norm, they can expect sanctioning in the form of shunning, ostracism, ridicule, or disassociation; a legal norm results in a fine, loss of privileges, or imprisonment; a moral norm in disapproval, resentment, indignation, contempt, or guilt, and so on (Kauppinen 2018, 5). Later, he proposes that epistemic norms too exist and have associated sanctions for violation; namely, “We could change our attitude of *trust* in [the violator of an epistemic norm].” (6; original emphasis)

The role of a government in society is expansive. Most generally, governments exist to create social, political, and economic order, and to lower transaction costs so that gains from trade are realizable. This is such a broad consideration of the role of government that modern governments have taken on many roles, including overseeing education, public health, transportation, and many financial aspects of society. With each of the many roles that the government plays, trust on the part of constituents is required to maintain effectiveness. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, allow us to focus on the example of public health. The government requires trust on behalf of constituents in order to effectively manage such an event. This is where epistemic norms can be applied. Looking to the modes of accountability regarding governmental

dissemination of public health information, it is easy to see that epistemic trust – how much credence one provides toward the information provided – is the primary sanction for violation of this normative function. This means that when the government violates this norm (perhaps by providing false information or sanctioning events antecedental to the general functions of public health) constituents are likely to make adjustments to the level of epistemic trust that they have in their government.

4. Applying institutional trust and epistemic norms to Black Americans

Finally, the previous ideas of epistemic normativity and institutional trust can be applied to the modern issue of Black trust in Covid-19 vaccine efficacy via government distribution. Razai et al. (2021) and Khubchandani and Macias (2021) observe myriad reports stating that Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy is generally higher in African-Americans and other minority groups, writing, “The overall pooled prevalence of COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy rates for adult Americans across all studies was 26.3%... Across all studies, the overall pooled prevalence of COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy for [African-Americans] was 41.6%” (Khubchandani and Macias 2021). A 15% increase for Black Americans poses an interesting question for analysis: what, if anything, does this say about the relationship between Black Americans and government? One answer to this question is that the increased hesitancy to Covid-19 vaccines is evidence of the erosion of epistemic trust in the U.S. government – considering the heavy promotion of vaccination by the U.S. government.

American history has been far from kind to Black Americans and Black people in America and the medical and public health fields are unfortunately no different. For example, a qualitative study looking to understand HPV vaccination hesitancy among Black men showed that Black

communities displayed greater signs of distrust in medicine and contained numerous interviews of Black mothers who cited examples of the medical community mistreating Black individuals as reason to avoid vaccines – examples like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study² and instances of post-slavery experimentation³ (Evans and Gusmano 2021). Another study found that Black parents were, on average, more skeptical of the effectiveness and side-effects of psychiatric medication when given the option to treat their children (Schnitker 2003). While some have explained these occurrences by the history of improper medical treatment that has faced many in the Black community since the days of slavery (Patterson 2009), I contest that this is a result of degraded levels of epistemic trust in medicine and in government. That is, given historical examples of medical malpractice against Black individuals, for generations Black parents have expressed this decreased epistemic trust to their children and in their own medical choices. As instances of mistreatment and malpractice continued overtime, such was also the case of the decrease of trust – creating a direct, negatively correlated linear relationship over time.

5. Conclusion: Routes to reconciliation

Many are familiar with the platitude “those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it,” however, in this ‘post-Covid’ world it is an important quote for consideration and

² In 1932, the United States Public Health Service Commission Corps engaged in a study called the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male.” This study took 600 Black men (399 with syphilis and 201 without), however, informed consent was never collected. In 1943 when it was discovered the penicillin was an effective treatment for syphilis, the study participants were not offered this treatment and the study was not ended until 1972 after a story was published by the Associated Press and an ad hoc committee was created. The Ad Hoc Advisory Panel concluded that the study was “ethically unjustified” but no administrative action against the researchers was taken (CDC 2022).

³ See Todd Savitt’s work (1982, 332) for a more detailed discussion of how Black Americans have been used for medical experimentation to further the field of medicine because “blacks were particularly easy targets, given their positions as voiceless slaves or ‘free persons of color’ in a society sensitive to and separated by race.”

reflection. Many areas for improvement were shown to be present and pressing issues from 2019 to 2021. One of grave concern was the lack of trust in medical and governmental processes.

This paper has considered Black institutional trust, its normative aspects, and provided a potential explanation for why there is a large gap between overall American hesitancy to Covid-19 vaccines and African-American hesitancy; however, little to nothing has been said on how solutions to this problem can be theorized or actualized. Such is a topic of interest for future work on government, trust, and their relationships. Existing literature suggests that education on both the part of medical professionals and individual Black Americans can help this issue (Evans and Gusmano 2021; Rusoja and Thomas 2021). It is also important to consider misinformation's role in public health education (Dharawat et al. 2022). As the world battles with the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, let not the lessons learned be lost lest they repeat themselves in more dire situations.

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