

## The Shanker Chronicles – Season 1, Episode 4 – Self-Reg and the Anti-Vax Movement

### Show Notes and Key Points from Dr. Shanker:

- A classic problem they faced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: and for that matter, the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries
- A case where there is a direct clash between the interests/needs of the majority and those of a minority
- The epidemiology is clear enough:
  - vaccines may not make the individual invulnerable to COVID
  - it's hard to say how many boosters we may eventually need – Israel is starting on its fourth COVID-19 vaccine rollout
  - but vaccinated groups do better than unvaccinated: in terms of infection rate, severity of illness, and deaths
- So naturally enough, the majority are exasperated with the minority, who are seen as a threat to the health system in general, and to at-risk populations in particular
- The most striking thing about the anti-vaxxers isn't that they are insisting on their rights: they are **shouting about their rights**. Or worse.
  - Death threats to health care providers? Swarming vaccine providers?
- Dr. Shanker has been reading a very interesting book that's just come out to try to deepen his understanding of the issue:
  - Jonathan M. Berman, *Anti-Vaxxers: How to challenge a misinformed movement* (MIT 2020)
  - Berman's goal: "We should learn how we can individually respond to the doubts or questions of our friends, neighbors, and family members in a way that is compassionate, well informed, and correct."
  - But my personal experience has been that anti-vaxxers do not have "doubts or questions."
  - They have "unshakeable convictions"

- Any attempt to provide information in a “compassionate, well informed, and correct” manner is countered and dismissed, if it doesn’t lead to a heated argument
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- And, from a Self-Reg point of view, that is very interesting
  
- One of the most surprising things that I’ve learned from Berman’s book is that there has been resistance to mandated vaccination programs right from the start
- and what is most interesting, the anti-vaccine movements that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are almost identical to what we’re seeing today

The College of Physicians of Philadelphia published a great piece on this (“History of Anti-Vaccination Movements,”

<https://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/articles/history-anti-vaccination-movements>)

- There was immediate and widespread opposition to Edward Jenner’s discovery of a smallpox vaccine in 1796 (there had been a few precursors of this)
- On May 14, Jenner took fluid from a cowpox blister and scratched it into the skin of an eight-year-old boy
- A single blister rose up on the spot, but the boy soon recovered
- Six weeks later, Jenner inoculated the boy again, this time with smallpox lymph, and no disease developed
- So, Jenner had shown that you could protect a child from smallpox by infecting the child with lymph from a cowpox blister
- Jenner called his treatment “vaccination” in honour of the cow (vacca) from which he had made the vaccine
  
- At the time smallpox was causing the death of approximately 10% of the general population in Britain and 20% in urbanized areas
- You might have thought Jenner’s discovery would have been a cause of widespread celebration, but on the contrary, it was met with intense opposition
  - Some saw the vaccine as “unchristian” insofar as it came from an animal

- Many feared that you would be giving a child the disease, rather than protecting them from it
- A conspiracy theory arose that children who had been vaccinated with “cowpox lymph” were developing horns and udders but the government was keeping this quiet
- Some felt the vaccine was useless: that those who didn’t develop smallpox weren’t going to anyways
- Some felt Jenner had simply misinterpreted the cause of smallpox
- That it violated the basic integrity of the body, which is the true source of health
- Some preferred “natural” remedies
- There were even “pox parties” exposing children to smallpox
- And most important of all, that “it violated their personal liberty, a tension that worsened markedly as the government developed mandatory vaccine policies
- “A person’s body was the last battleground, where individual liberties would face off against the growing authority of the state” (Berman p.30)
- The Vaccination Act of 1853 ordered mandatory vaccination for infants up to 3 months old, and the Act of 1867 extended this age requirement to 14 years, adding penalties for vaccine refusal
- The laws were met with immediate resistance from citizens who demanded the right to control their bodies and those of their children.
- The Anti Vaccination League and the Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League formed in response to the mandatory laws, and numerous anti-vaccination journals sprang up
- Leicester was a hotbed of anti-vaccine activity and the site of anti-vaccine rallies
- The local paper described the details of a rally: *“An escort was formed, preceded by a banner, to escort a young mother and two men, all of whom had resolved to give themselves up to the police and undergo imprisonment in preference to having their children vaccinated...The three were attended by a numerous crowd...three hearty cheers were given for them, which were renewed with increased vigor as they entered the doors of the police cells.”*
- The Leicester Demonstration March of 1885 was one of the most notorious anti-vaccination demonstrations. There, 80,000-100,000 anti-vaccinators led an elaborate march, complete with banners, a child’s coffin, and an effigy of Jenner

- In 1902, following a smallpox outbreak, the board of health of the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, mandated all city residents to be vaccinated against smallpox
  - Henning Jacobson refused vaccination on the grounds that the law violated his right to care for his own body how he knew best
  - The city filed criminal charges against him
  - After losing his court battle locally, Jacobson appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court
- In 1905 the Court found that the state could enact compulsory laws to protect the public in the event of a communicable disease
  - This was the first U.S. Supreme Court case concerning the power of states in public health law
- The victory over smallpox, which was declared by the World Health Assembly in 1980, is one of Public Health's greatest achievements
- Since that time there have been no cases of naturally occurring smallpox
- But there have been equally heated anti-vaccine movements: Polio, DTP, MMR
- In each case we've seen the same behaviours, and the same consequent result
  - For example: In Sweden DPT vaccination rates dropped from 90 percent in 1974 to 12 percent in 1979 because of the anti-vaccine movement, and pertussis outbreaks followed in 1983 and 1985
  - In Ireland vaccination dropped to 30 percent in 1976, and epidemics occurred in 1985 and 1989
  - The worst by far has been the anti-MMR movement sparked by Wakefield's 1998 article in the Lancet, which was shown to be "fatally flawed" and retracted by the journal
  - Wakefield was stripped of his medical license because of his financial ties to the law firm defending clients looking for proof that their children's ASD was caused by MMR
  - But far from "going gently into the night," Wakefield repositioned himself in Texas where he has continued to battle what he sees as a conspiracy being waged against him personally and his findings

- There has been a constant battle fought over this issue over the past 20 years, led by celebrities on the one side and scientists on the other
- Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a “bullet-proof” scientific finding; if there were, it would be metaphysics and not science
- And one of the benefits of these controversies has been the advance in the preparation and delivery of the MMR vaccine
- But sadly, one of the greatest costs of this controversy has been a decline in immunization rates, leading to the worst measles outbreak that the US has seen in 25 years, and a global resurgence of the disease that the WHO has now labelled “a global health threat”
  
- There is a fascinating article by Jena & Worsham (NYT Dec 22 2021) who have been researching how to change attitudes and their finding is that providing more information, more frightening details, even personal experience are all ineffective
- **<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/opinion/vaccine-hesitancy-covid-omicron.html>**
- We can now make the same point about the epidemiological data that we now have on the spread of COVID in the US as we see in the case of measles
- In my last podcast I mentioned how those living in a low-vaccinated states are 4 times more likely to get COVID and 5 times more likely to die
- But as Jena & Worsham pointed out, even the serious threat of cancer was not enough to change behaviour
- The only thing that works, they conclude, are incentives, and what is even more effective, disincentives
- In other words, if society really does have to place itself on a “war footing” against the anti-vaxxers, then it has no choice but to isolate them and punish them – if only to prevent ICUs from crashing
  
- But in Self-Reg, we always ask ‘Why?’. And we ask this non-judgmentally, as clinically as we can
- Is the reason why it is so hard to change the beliefs of anti-vaxxers because beliefs are simply unshakeably strong feelings that something is true?

- Spinoza was fighting exactly this fight: this is not a case of one form of faith (i.e., faith in science) versus another
- Public health officials are not reporting what they *believe*: only, what the preponderance of the data indicates
- Dig a little deeper, however, and a very interesting *reframing* arises

Diethelm & McKee's "Denialism: What Is It and How Should Scientists Respond?"  
*European Journal of Public Health* 19 (2009): 2–4.

There are said to be five common features of Science Denialism:

1. Relying on conspiracy theories to explain a scientific consensus
  2. Using fake experts—people who pretend to have specific expertise but whose views go against established knowledge
  3. Cherry-picking data, or selecting only isolated papers that go against the dominant consensus
  4. Demanding that science deliver impossible results
  5. Using faulty logic
- We mustn't jump to the conclusion that anti-scientism is a sort of confidence trick
  - No doubt there are cases where this is true: especially when it comes to some fraudulent scam or more commonly, politics
  - But the anti-vaxxers are neither being devious nor can we assume that they don't understand the scientific arguments
  - Rather, they are rejecting the data on the grounds that it is not definitive, not "persuasive" enough
  - They don't see themselves subscribing to "conspiracy theories" but rather, paying attention to information that is being suppressed – and, unfortunately, there are enough cases where this was indeed the case
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- The key word in Diethelm & McKee's analysis is *denial*
  - When I read the word "denial" I immediately thought of ego-defences
  - Maybe we aren't dealing with "beliefs" at all here
  - Maybe we are dealing with rationalization, intellectualization, wishful thinking
  - "externalizing" feelings by being furious with health professionals for simply doing their job

- Ego defences, according to the Self-Reg reframing, are limbic modes of dealing with acute stress
- The more we increase that stress, the more entrenched the ego-defense becomes
- We become angry: verbally, if not physically violent
- This is the reason why Jena & Worsham found that reasoned argument, no more how cogent, doesn't work
- Just as is the case with, say, a teenager who will not listen to reason, with the argument going in circles and getting increasingly heated
  
- The point of an ego defence is to repress an intolerable thought or feeling so as to mitigate the huge stress this is causing
- So, what is this huge stress in the anti-vaccination movement?
- The answer may be shame, which, as Panksepp argued, drives rage
- In Panksepp and Biven's terms (*The Archaeology of Mind*, 2012), shame evolved to ensure group cohesion
  - You shame the deviant individual – someone whose behaviour threatens the survival of the group -- in order to force them to conform to the group's demands (just as we do when we are "socializing" a child)
  - Individuals thus have an extremely strong incentive to conform
  - If you don't, you will be forced to the bottom of the social hierarchy, be denied certain rights, or worst of all, as happened to Spinoza, suffer excommunication: a Cherem
- It is not just that the Government is behaving in an authoritarian manner, forcing citizens to submit to public health dictates
- The government is shaming those who refuse to comply
- Just as in the case when this happens to a child – and perhaps, because this did happen when they were a child – shaming causes an acute stress-response
  
- There are various ways of coping with the distress that shame causes:

- Perhaps the individual undergoes a form of reversal: instead of feeling shame, they project themselves as championing a cause
  - This is a way of converting an otherwise overwhelming feeling of shame into a feeling of righteousness
  - They join with a minority group of like-minded individuals experiencing the same distress
  - The obvious objection here is that these individuals don't seem to be displaying any shame
- Leon Seltzer made an interesting point in this regard: *"I regard most shameless behavior as a cover-up for deeper feelings of shame, which the individual is either too scared or too defended to confront."*
  - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/evolution-the-self/200911/shameful-or-shameless-if-you-had-which-would-you-choose>
- I'll return to this idea in my next podcast as I'm not sure this is always the case.
  - But for the moment we can see how, if we are indeed dealing with ego defenses, then we need to be asking: Why is the vaccine so stressful?
  - Those original reactions to the smallpox vaccine give us a powerful clue
    - Fear of catching the disease
    - Fear of side effects
    - Fear of anything foreign being injected into the body
    - Needle phobia
    - Fear of doctors
    - Fear of loss of autonomy
- The problem is, you cannot argue with an ego defence
  - You cannot use reason to show that it is groundless
  - ego defences are a limbic way of suppressing fears so that we can continue to function
  - Force someone to override their ego defence and they become dysregulated
  - Ignore the ego defence and society becomes dysregulated

- The only way to overcome a maladaptive ego defence – such as one that puts you and your loved ones at risk -- is to become aware *that it is an ego defence*
- But this requires precisely the embodied self-awareness that is blocked by feelings of shame
- To escape from this vicious circle, we need to do Self-Reg
  - Reframe your “objections” as a sign of an ego-defense
  - Identify the stresses, such as I’ve just done
  - Reduce those stresses in your life so that you can
  - Experience calm and embodied awareness in what is a deeply unsettling time
    - Become aware of the physical sensations that accompany the thought of having the vaccine
    - The feeling in your stomach, your head, the adrenaline that’s been triggered by your amygdala
  - Restore your connections: especially with those you are close to that have been exasperated with you, your feeling of being a true member of the society, concerned with the welfare of all
- In the meantime, the government must follow what its Public Health officials advise
  - The most beneficial thing Self-Reggers can do is help anti-vaxxers develop a sense of curiosity
  - I am not talking about trying to plant the seed of self-doubt
  - Only nurturing the curiosity that one should feel about any unshakeable conviction
  - Values are another matter!

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