

# SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION ABOUT UNVACCINATED INDIVIDUALS IN GERMANY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**ABSTRACT:** *The German government struggled with the question of what to do to mitigate the COVID-related crisis. Since vaccines had become available for all, the focus turned to unvaccinated individuals. This paper investigates public communication about unvaccinated people and the possible social consequences of the latter. For this purpose, selected statements of politicians and medical/scientific representatives are analyzed. Some representatives put the responsibility for the ongoing pandemic on unvaccinated people. They were pictured as supporters of conspiracy theories or as individuals that lacked cognitive or social competences. In order to persuade them to be vaccinated, several measures were suggested. To enhance the persuasion, political communication sometimes seemed to simplify or even neglect scientific knowledge. Finally, it is critically discussed what it could mean for society and the handling of the crisis if the described social representations of unvaccinated people reflected, at least to some extent, public understanding; this includes stigmatization, scapegoating and fragmentation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *COVID-19, public communication, social representations, unvaccinated individuals, scapegoating, social fragmentation, Germany*

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the first cases of COVID-19 occurred in Wuhan, the virus spread around the world. Scientists, politicians and the public attempted to understand the virus and the risks it caused, along with debating how to end the pandemic.

After about two and a half years of the pandemic, about 28.5 million infections were detected in Germany, which reflected an infection rate of about 34% of the total population of 83 million people. More than 141,000 people died with or because of the virus (Ritchie et al. 2022). The German government decided on various measures to overcome the crises, such as lockdowns and hygiene measures. Since January 2021, it put great emphasis on vaccinations. By April 7, 2022, about three-quarters of the population were fully vaccinated, and 68% were boosted. The Robert Koch Institute<sup>2</sup> claimed that the number of vaccinated individuals could be 5 or 10% higher than this because of problems with reporting the data to public authorities (BMG 2022). The seven-day rolling average of daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people was 1,076 (Ritchie et al. 2022).

Politicians recurrently complained about the low vaccination rate. In the beginning, the question was *what* caused the problem; then, it seems that the focus shifted to *who* caused it. The spotlight then turned to unvaccinated people. The German government and the public discussed the need for compulsory vaccination against COVID-19. An attempt to enact such a law failed in April 2022 because it did not receive the necessary votes in the German Bundestag. Some politicians, like the Federal Minister of Health, Karl Lauterbach, explained he was very disappointed about this (Zimmermann 2022). Until the time of writing, vaccination against COVID-19 has been mandatory for the staff of the healthcare sector.

This paper addresses the communication of politicians and other representatives as the “role of communication in a pandemic emergency is crucial because it contributes to the spread of collective interpretations of the crisis that drive community responses” (De Rosa et al. 2021:13). People exposed to great uncertainty tend to cope by calling for strong authorities and leaders (Schwarz 2021). Therefore, public understanding of COVID-19 and ways of overcoming it may be strongly influenced by the statements or narratives of authorities and leaders. They can disseminate scientific knowledge, restore security, reduce cognitive dissonance and help orient people who feel helpless.

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2 The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) is “continuously monitoring the situation, evaluating all available information, estimating the risk for the population in Germany, providing health professionals with recommendations and gives an overview of its own COVID-19 research.” It operates according to the instructions of the Federal Ministry of Health (RKI 2022).

Against this background, this paper focuses on three questions:

- What was the underlying narrative about unvaccinated people during the pandemic? How were they socially represented?
- Which measures were proposed to handle the latter problem?
- What social consequences occurred?

For this purpose, we refer to statements on unvaccinated people by members of two selected groups: politicians and representatives of the medical/scientific system. Both are in power; both can be opinion leaders, partly because they are involved in decision-making, enacting laws or advising. They can be perceived as authorities (political or scientific experts) whose importance rises during crises. They disseminate statements by themselves, and there are (social) media reports about them. Justo and others (2020) emphasize how the digital world fosters the dissemination of scientific information, thereby popularizing knowledge involved in the construction of social representations. This is not only the case for the statements of scientists but also for political representatives. As a result, this communication process can contribute to the social representations of unvaccinated people. Wagner (1994:200) describes social representations as “structured mental – i.e. cognitive, evaluative and symbolic – content about socially relevant phenomena, which takes the form of images or metaphors, and which is consciously shared with other members of a social group. In the collective view, social representations are seen as a public process of creation, elaboration, diffusion and change of shared knowledge in the everyday discourse of social groups (...).” The process of communication “shapes and transforms our representations” (Moscovici 1993:8). Changes or crises evoke the genesis or modification of social representations, recreating reality (Flick 1991). Due to the mechanism of anchoring – e.g., emotional, thematic or anchoring via basic antinomies (Höjjer 2011) – something new is linked to existing content. Further, objectification makes it more concrete. Moscovici (2011:454) emphasizes that “everything in a social representation is ordered around a figurative kernel that in a sense ‘underlies’ all the images, notions or judgements that a group or society has generated over time.”

With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pizzaro and colleagues (2020) emphasize that social representations can result from and lead to risk perceptions about the pandemic. Rateau and colleagues (2021) point to attempts to fill in missing information with the content of public communication. Here, people often tend to refer to positions shared by the majority.

Social representations affect not only perception and communication but also how people act.

## METHOD

This paper analyses the statements of the following representatives:

- of the political system: Frank Walter Steinmeier, Federal President; Angela Merkel, former Chancellor; Olaf Scholz, Chancellor<sup>3</sup>; Jens Spahn, former Federal Minister of Health; Karl Lauterbach, Federal Minister of Health; Christian Lindner, former Chair of the FDP, now Federal Minister of Economics; Robert Habeck, former Co-Chair of the Green Party, recent Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action; and Annalena Baerbock, former Co-Chair of the Green Party and recent Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs;
- of the medical/scientific system: Lothar Wieler, President of the Robert-Koch-Institute; Gernot Marx, President of DIVI<sup>4</sup>; Klaus Reinhardt, President of German Medical Association<sup>5</sup>; Andreas Gassen, Chair of the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians; Frank Ulrich Montgomery, Chair of the World Medical Association; Christian Drosten, one of the leading virologists and member of the advising board of the government; and Alena Buyx, Chair of the German Ethical Council.<sup>6</sup>

The statements that are analyzed cover a period from June 16, 2021 to February 16, 2022. In June 2021, vaccines were no longer restricted, but it was possible to offer them to everybody. On June 16, 2021, the vaccination rate exceeded 50%; hence the majority had received at least one dose (Statista 2022). The search involved collecting data over eight months, which is ample time to reconstruct public communication. It was carried out using Google News for reports on COVID-19, vaccinations, and the name of the representative(s). For each representative, the first ten pages of results, thus 100 search results, were screened. Only articles that contributed to answering the research questions were included in the analysis. Qualitative content analysis was used, as described by Mayring (2019). The first step is summarizing the content. The second step, explication, is necessary if the text is difficult to understand. This was not the case for the press releases used for this paper. The third step assigns the content

<sup>3</sup> Due to elections in September 2021, the government changed.

<sup>4</sup> DIVI is a scientific association, the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine. Together with the Robert-Koch-Institute, they monitor ICU capacity.

<sup>5</sup> The German Medical Association is the central organisation in the system of medical self-administration.

<sup>6</sup> Members of the German Ethics Council are nominated by the government and the Federal Parliament and appointed by the Federal President.

to a category. The content analysis used two main categories: (1) attributes addressed to unvaccinated people and (2) measures proposed to increase the vaccination rate. The first category was subdivided into three facets, and the second into four, which emerged from the analysis. If several media outlets reported on the same issue, which was quite often the case, only one example was used. All statements quoted here were translated by the author. The number of findings was not used in the analysis.

## RESULTS

### *The “problem group” of unvaccinated individuals*

When COVID-19 vaccines were approved and became available to everyone, politicians, scientists, and the public had high hopes that they would end the pandemic. Probably incited by this, unvaccinated individuals received more attention. The slogan “the pandemic of the unvaccinated” had already been circulating for some time, as proclaimed by Spahn, the former Federal Minister of Health (DW 2021). Although medical experts like the virologist Drosten criticized this statement later (ZEIT 2021), some still used to it – e.g., Montgomery, Chair of the World Medical Association, who explained: “The unvaccinated are the drivers of infection” (Reichmuth 2021), and later Chancellor Scholz: “The infection process affecting us all today stems from the unvaccinated” (Berliner Zeitung 2021). Merkel commented on this, too: “The fact that two or three million Germans over 60 are not vaccinated yet saddens me because it could make a difference, for them and for the whole of society” (DPA 2021f). These examples reflect the thematic and emotional anchoring of the pandemic: the reason for the prolonged pandemic was claimed to be unvaccinated people, especially due to their non-compliance.

The analysis reveals three narratives concerning how the latter are socially represented:

- sympathy for conspiracy theories,
- lacking cognitive competences,
- lacking social competences.

## Agreement with conspiracy theories

When COVID-19 occurred in Germany, the search for understanding also produced conspiracy theories (Lamberty–Imhoff 2021). After the first phase of denial (as if the pandemic were only China’s problem) and then of shock (it spread throughout Germany as well), the government implemented a number of measures, such as lockdowns, physical distancing and others. Later in the pandemic, protests occurred against the COVID-19 policy of the government. Protest was linked to the attributes and labelling of protestors with terms such as “Querdenker”<sup>7</sup> and “tinfoil hat-wearers.” Montgomery urged people not to be impressed by “screamers on the unvaccinated side” (NTV 2021). Instead, it was stated that society should enforce the law and mass strolls<sup>8</sup> should be forbidden (WELT 2022).

These statements can be understood as a combination of emotional anchoring and objectification, portraying unvaccinated individuals as protestors who make much noise, support absurd positions, and look strange, wearing tinfoil hats. Golindano Acevedo and Pitters (2021) also identified the attribution of “Querdenker” to people who criticized COVID-19 measures. For the former, this attribution reflects failed and aggressive communication.

In contrast, Scholz stressed that he was the chancellor of vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. In addition, he declared that most German citizens had been vaccinated already, many others would decide to do it, and most of the remaining unvaccinated individuals would not be radical (Bölkübası–Schmid 2021; DW 2021a).

## Lacking cognitive competences

Some statements about unvaccinated individuals included the complaint that they lacked information or had the wrong expectations or flawed reasoning, which kept them from arriving at the “right” conclusions.

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7 “Querdenker” is a “follower, sympathizer of the political Querdenker-movement, which is addressed particularly against government measures to handle the corona pandemic, against vaccinations, etc. (and also spreads conspiracy stories)” (Duden 2022).

8 Protestors repeatedly neglected rules and regulations, e.g., regarding masks and distancing. Sometimes demonstrations revealed forms of radicalization and escalated with casualties on the side of the police and the protestors. Subsequently, not all demonstrations were authorised. However, people found an alternative way to express their protest by organizing so-called “strolls.” This became a kind of alternative means of demonstrating against the government’s COVID-19 prevention measures, often arranged via social media.

Montgomery said unvaccinated people were wrong if they expected a COVID-19 vaccine to provide 100% protection (NTV 2021). Nonetheless, if someone refused the vaccine, they lacked reason (NTV 2021a). The Federal President, Steinmeier, said everyone should be able to know how to end the pandemic (Tagesschau 2021). The virologist Drosten called people with vaccination hesitancy “ignorant” and unreasonable (T-Online 2022). In an earlier statement, he implicitly hinted that the poor education level in Germany had caused the low vaccination rate: “The vaccination rate among the elderly is significantly different to in Denmark, for example. I think you can generalize that a bit: in the very adherent societies in Scandinavia, there is a very high level of information and education, many people simply understand what vaccination is good for, and there is less hesitation about vaccination. There is a very high vaccination rate, especially for people over 60. In Germany, we are not there at all” (Euronews 2021).

This led to the representation of unvaccinated people as having a low education or being unable to assess risks and benefits and draw logical conclusions. Probably to emphasize their irrationality, Lauterbach (2021) rhetorically excluded the risk of side effects of the vaccines and alluded to their lifesaving effects: “[...] it’s about why a minority of society doesn’t want a side-effect-free vaccine, even though it’s free and can save their lives and those of many others.”

### **Lacking social competences, such as empathy and solidarity**

Several statements of Steinmeier referred (implicitly) to a lack of social solidarity among unvaccinated people. Even ahead of the vaccination campaign that started on December 27, 2020, he described vaccination against COVID-19 as an “act of solidarity” (DW 2020). For Scholz, too, “vaccination is [...] a matter of solidarity, that we protect each other” (Von Buttlar et al. 2021). Baerbock explained the following when she was not yet the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs but the Co-Chair of the Green Party: “Vaccination means solidarity with children and the chronically ill” (Hackenbruch et al. 2021). For Wieler, President of the RKI, vaccination was a moral duty (Tagesspiegel 2021); for Spahn, it was a “civic responsibility” (ZDF 2021); and for Steinmeier, it was necessary so Germany would not be ruined: “I beg you again: get vaccinated! It’s about your health, and it’s about the future of your country!” (Tagesschau 2021).

Sometimes, narratives addressed the positive outcomes of solidarity: In his Christmas Speech, Steinmeier (2021) pointed out the individual and social benefits of vaccinations: “We can protect ourselves and others! I am glad that the vast majority have recognized the opportunity that lies in vaccination. How

much severe suffering, how many deaths have been prevented by vaccinations already.”

Others also referred to a similar narrative but pointed to those responsible for the problem. According to Scholz, the “current problems” existed because of the “large group that has not been vaccinated despite all recommendations” (Von Buttler et al. 2021). Spahn fulminated: “I would like to take these people to an ICU and ask them in view of the suffering: what else must happen that you finally understand?” (ZDF 2021). For Montgomery, refusing a vaccination against COVID-19 was equal to playing with one’s own life and the lives of others (Wolf 2021).

This discourse often involved the contrast between ‘reasonable’ and ‘responsible’ vaccinated and ‘irresponsible’ unvaccinated individuals. Thus, it offered anchoring via basic antinomies. Steinmeier stressed the figures: “These weeks, they often talk about the majority and the minority. The figures are clear: each day, the nationwide number of citizens who are vaccinated is umpteen times – I stress, umpteen times – greater than the number of those who protest against it or provocatively violate coronavirus rules. The vast majority of the reasonable people in our country show responsibility for others!” (Steinmeier 2022). Scholz explained that, in the end, an unvaccinated minority could not be allowed to drive the whole country into another lockdown. Therefore, he demanded that everyone get vaccinated (Haferkamp 2021). Before he was chancellor, he put forward the argument for the need for reciprocity: “50 million have now been vaccinated twice. We were all the guinea pigs for those who have waited so far. That is why I say as one of those 50 million – it went well! Please join us!” (Tagesspiegel 2021a). Lauterbach also asked unvaccinated individuals to be vaccinated because “many of us make big sacrifices to protect you” (Tagesschau 2022). Montgomery went even further and complained about the “tyranny of the unvaccinated;” i.e., of those who would be responsible for the fact that the majority of immunized people had to endure COVID-19 prevention measures (Menke 2021). Responses thus involved portraying unvaccinated individuals as ignorant and irresponsible egoists, taking but not giving, or tyrants based on their emotional anchoring and objectification.

### ***What to do with the “problem group”? Consequences and proposed sanctions***

The selected politicians and representatives of the medical system described the consequences for unvaccinated individuals and suggested related measures.

Buyx regretted that too many people did not get vaccinated (Lackerbauer



2021) and concluded, “The we-are-all-together-for-each-other [position] is now very, very difficult for us. [...] I’ve been peddling solidarity for months. But at some point, you have to accept that there are certain people you simply won’t reach with that narrative” (Rappsilber 2021).

What consequences should unvaccinated individuals have to face, according to the public discourse?

### **Unvaccinated people will get COVID-19, fall ill or die**

First, it was pointed out that there would be no escape for unvaccinated individuals. Although Drosten emphasized that COVID-19 was not the “pandemic of the unvaccinated” (DPA 2021), he shortly declared later that it was the “illness of the unvaccinated” (RND 2021). Everyone who was unvaccinated would undoubtedly get it (DPA 2021a). Then, it would not only be possible that the Omicron mutation would lead to a less severe course of the disease but perhaps a more severe one (DPA 2021b). Unvaccinated people would have to accept the risk of damaging their lungs soon (T-online 2022). Scholz envisioned a similar scenario: “Very, very many of those who are not vaccinated will become infected. And many of those who will become infected will become ill. Some of those who fall ill will fight for their lives in ICUs of our hospitals” (Haferkamp 2021). Some representatives, such as the former and recent Federal Minister of Health Spahn and Lauterbach, employed the sentence that “unvaccinated individuals will be immunized by a vaccine, recovered or dead by March” (ZDF 2021a; NTV 2021b). While it was proposed that all unvaccinated individuals would catch COVID-19 soon, Lauterbach labelled this way of becoming immunized a “dirty vaccination” that he refused as an alternative to vaccination (Ärztezeitung 2022). Maybe this comment was addressed to the so-called “Leberkäs-Parties,” which were social gatherings of people who intended to get infected in order to qualify for ‘recovered’ status.

Montgomery supposed that: “We have become too careless. We do not vaccinate enough, and we allow people everything again,” and he concluded that strict punishment and harshness would be needed because it had not been possible to persuade unvaccinated individuals during the last months (NTV 2021).

### **Unequal rights of vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals**

Recurrently, statements demanded that fully vaccinated and non-vaccinated people should receive differentiated treatment. Montgomery explained that he

was “a little proud that I initiated that” (Eberhard 2022). Rights which had been restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic should only be reinstated for those who were fully vaccinated; all others should still be deprived of liberties (RND 2021a).

Some wished to enhance the pressure on the unvaccinated. The central starting point was to exclude the unvaccinated from public life as much as possible: “But these people will experience increasing exclusion. They are a small, albeit noisy, minority. They will simply no longer be able to fly; they will no longer be able to travel by train; they will no longer be able to visit restaurants, cinemas or theatres. Perhaps some of them will start thinking after all” (NTV 2021a). Others said they would endorse exclusion from treatment in hospitals, e.g., by including vaccination status in triage decisions (Gehrke 2021).

Spahn was menacing: “Be prepared for 2G<sup>9</sup>, vaccinated or recovered and boosted from a certain time on. This will be effective for the whole year 2022. If you would like to do anything else other than go to the city hall or a supermarket, you will have to be vaccinated” (DPA 2021e).

### **Financial burdens and exclusion from the job market**

In the winter of 2021, the federal government decided on another lockdown focused on unvaccinated individuals. Merkel explained: “A group that is clearly the minority, the unvaccinated, is responsible for most of the infections. We need to respond to this. (...) Those who were responsible, the vaccinated, shall have opportunities which the others do not have” (Die Bundesregierung 2021). One of the first financial proposals was expecting unvaccinated people to have to take generally PCR tests, which they would have to pay for themselves (DPA 2021c). Then, it was decided to exclude unvaccinated staff from a scheme allowing employees to continue to receive their wages in the case of an officially ordered quarantine (Die Bundesregierung 2021a). Spahn explained: “In the end, taxpayers have to finance the payment of the wage continuation scheme for those who could have got vaccinated. (...) It is hard to understand why other people should pay if someone did not decide to have an available, free-of-charge vaccination” (Lemkemeyer 2021). Others suggested imposing higher health insurance tariffs for the insured unvaccinated (Hofmeier–Klapsa 2021) or letting unvaccinated individuals (partly) pay the costs of COVID-19 therapies themselves (Jung 2022). In the case of partial or general mandatory vaccination, unvaccinated people could ultimately be excluded from the job market. They could also be ruled out of receiving unemployment compensation for some time (Spiegel 2022).

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<sup>9</sup> 2G stands for: either vaccinated (“geimpft”) or recovered (“genesen”).

## **Mandatory vaccination**

The final device for intensifying pressure would have been legally mandating vaccination against COVID-19. Yet Spahn, who criticized unvaccinated individuals on several occasions, did not support this measure because of its potential to enhance fragmentation and tension (ZDF 2021). In contrast to this, Baerbock was in favour of it (Jäkel 2022). Lauterbach stated that he did not like to blame people who had not been immunized with a vaccine (WELT 2022a), but he strongly supported mandatory vaccination for all (differently from in July 2021, when he declared partial or general mandatory vaccination not to be sensible (RTL 2021)). He stated that “in Germany, it is not enough to jar the unvaccinated individuals’ nerves; you must do more” (Focus 2022). He denied that this was coercion and explained: “No one will be vaccinated against his will. Even compulsory vaccination means that you will finally get vaccinated voluntarily” (Mielke 2022). In the end, “compulsory vaccination will bring freedom” (Albrecht et al. 2022). He asked everyone to fight for general mandatory vaccination (Tagesschau 2022a).

In contrast, Reinhardt, President of the German Medical Association, claimed he was against more pressure and financial sanctions but relied on communication and support (DPA 2021d). At the same time, he favoured compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 for all – but without force (Schmidt 2021). Gassen, Chair of the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians, disapproved of the idea of higher fees for health insurance (NTV 2021c) and explained that unvaccinated adults had different risks depending on their age and health status (Mendgen–Szent-Ivanyi 2021). Thus, it should be accepted “that people can decide not to have the jab” (DTS 2021).

## **DISCUSSION**

Finally, we should like to point to some notable findings and consider the potential social consequences.

### ***Simplification or neglect of scientific knowledge***

It is obvious that representatives tried to persuade people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Some statements were rather bold and simple, neglecting or simplifying scientific knowledge.

The first example was the rhetorical hiding of side effects when vaccines were declared side-effect-free. Even in August 2021, when Lauterbach tweeted this comment, the possibility of side effects of COVID-19 vaccines was already known – e.g. from first-approval studies by pharmaceutical companies or due to data collection about suspected side effects by the Paul Ehrlich Institute (PEI 2021).

This strategic means of simplification was also confirmed by another example – that of so-called traditional vaccines. The vaccine by Novavax was discussed in (social) media as a “traditional” vaccine. Lauterbach, who was confronted with the argument that this vaccine did not contain an inactivated virus, replied the following on Twitter on November 24, 2021: “True. But because so many unvaccinated people only want inactivated vaccines, for whatever reason, soon-to-be-available Novavax is labelled as such.” Following this, he spoke of it as a “quasi-inactivated vaccine” (Durach 2022).

Simplifying or omitting scientific knowledge could have resulted from attempts to achieve politically defined goals. This form of political communication could meet people’s preferences for definite information and orientation. However, people’s remaining trust could have been lost when they got the impression that they were not being told the truth or manipulated. Language may have aggravated this, too, as demonstrated by a study by Mogambi Moinani and Nasambu Barasa (2021). Referring to Kenya, the authors show how political communication arouses feelings of hatred if measures are perceived as punitive and insensitive. In turn, this affects trust and confidence in the political system. Moreover, people may respond with negative emotions if they interpret such simplified communication as a sign of how they are socially represented – e.g., as unable to understand more elaborate information. Maybe this could explain – at least partly – why political trust, which was relatively high at the beginning of the pandemic in Germany (Eitze et al. 2021), decreased and is particularly low among unvaccinated people (COSMO 2022).

### ***The risk of stigmatizing and social fragmentation***

Many of the attributes ascribed to unvaccinated individuals mentioned above were negatively connoted and associated with a risk of stigmatization. Similarly, Jaspal and Nerlich (2022) analyzed social representations of COVID-19 sceptics in their study and mainly found negative, denigrating, and sometimes even demonizing hegemonic representations. From their point of view, this could have involved a collective attempt to manage the pandemic. However, this could have negative social consequences.

Statements hinted that people who refused vaccination might believe in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, scepticism and distrust can help individuals ‘understand’ the inexplicable, identify someone to blame, and restore security (Krings et al. 2021). It is interesting that data collected by Forsa (2021) confirmed this tendency to be stronger among unvaccinated than vaccinated individuals. However, conspiracy theories were shared among vaccinated individuals to a smaller extent, too. The polarisation of both groups, as suggested by some representatives’ statements, reflects social reality only partially. On the one hand, some vaccinated individuals also sought reassurance in conspiracy theories. On the other hand, unvaccinated individuals may have come up with an informed decision based on an individual risk-benefit-assessment, which was – at least from the individual point of view – reasonable. The COSMO project (COSMO 2021; 2022a) demonstrated that the acceptance of a vaccination essentially depended on its perceived effectiveness. Unvaccinated individuals were mainly afraid of side effects; some even dreaded death caused by vaccination. Similar findings were revealed in a survey by Forsa (2021). The study asserted that 74% considered the vaccines insufficiently tested, and 67% thought they had experienced too much external pressure – they preferred to decide for themselves. For 63%, it was important that vaccination did not lead to sterile immunization, which meant that vaccinated persons could still catch COVID-19 and infect others. Sixty-three per cent were afraid of side effects or long-term consequences, and 37% were convinced that the government would not change COVID-19 measures even if the vaccination rate increased. Compared to this, only a minority lacked information (16%), 6% thought they did not need to be vaccinated because so many others had been (free-rider effect), and 5% generally refused vaccinations. Only 1% did not want to make the effort. We conclude from these data that the decisions of people not to be vaccinated may have been associated with conspiracies, but there are other reasons too. Only representatives of the medical system mentioned this.

The analysis has revealed that representatives often differentiated between the in-group and out-group or the majority and minority. The statements offered anchoring via basic antinomies. This could have enhanced pressure by addressing the social motive of inclusion, the need to ideally belong to the majority and share its beliefs. This strategy is quite risky as it can aggravate the rift between both groups and lead to social disruption. Referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, Krings and colleagues (2021:199) explained that: “The pandemic also accentuates existing fractures, inequalities and prejudices in society, and fuels populism and associated tribalism – people retreat into identity silos that provide solace in the face of chaos but also identify and vilify outgroups and further polarize society.” Böhm and Betsch (2022) consider the

prosocial aspect of vaccinations a powerful instrument for improving vaccine uptake. However, if both groups increasingly drifted apart, the success of a strategy that insisted on solidarity could be limited, and this could affect not only vaccination but also other measures. Above all, members of the minority may have developed strong cohesion within their own group. They could satisfy their social motives without joining the majority – for them, the out-group.

Henkel et al. (2022:231) showed that vaccination status even “explains substantial variance in a range of polarizing attitudes and behaviors, indicating its importance for increasing conflicts between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.” People adapted to deploying the category of having or not having a vaccination certificate, and this categorisation may have affected their self-esteem. Twenty-three per cent of the respondents of the unvaccinated group felt discriminated against, and 82% described the public debate about vaccination as unfair, arrogant and preachy. As described above, shared social representations can enable communication – but dissenting social representations may impede it.

### *Unvaccinated individuals as scapegoats*

Plagues and pandemics often provoke social processes that create scapegoats (Ricciardi 2020). Perhaps scapegoating stemmed from the hope associated with the vaccinations. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Federal Ministry of Health declared that herd immunity could be achieved through vaccination (Tagesschau 2021a). However, even in the summer of 2021, the data hinted that herd immunity was unlikely. The virologist Streeck said that COVID-19 vaccines were only produced to save vaccinated individuals. It would have been a misunderstanding to believe that others could be protected, too, or that herd immunity could be achieved (Habich 2021). However, the discussion about herd immunity was heated. The Federal Ministry of Health now proclaims the possibility of “community protection” through vaccines (BMG 2022a). The representation that vaccination was the key to ending the pandemic was so strong that it increased the risk that unvaccinated individuals would serve as scapegoats. By creating scapegoats, the contingency seems to have become more bearable as the unbearable element (such as the COVID-19 virus) may be replaced by something (allegedly) bearable, such as a group. This group is interchangeable.

Results published by Dollmann and Kogan (2021), who carried out a study on COVID-19-associated discrimination among 3,517 individuals during the initial phase of the pandemic, describe how it was especially the Asian minority that experienced discrimination in Germany. This subgroup was not known to be a victim of discrimination before the pandemic. A reason for this is probably the

information that the virus was detected in Asia first. Hence, at the beginning of the pandemic, Asian people might have been the scapegoats for some time, later to be replaced by another group, like unvaccinated individuals. Establishing the social representations of a group responsible for suffering and grief is probably convenient and can help cope with crises (Pizzaro et al. 2020; Wagner–Hayes 2005), but it can be associated with negative social consequences.

For example, individuals may be marked as heroes, villains, and victims, which were stable forms of objectification during the pandemic (De Rosa et al. 2021). Martikainen and Sakki (2021), who carried out an analysis of 4,506 COVID-19-related photographs of people published in the two largest Finnish newspapers, identified a tendency to depict youth as carefree villains, adults as heroes, and elderly people as victims. The social representation of young people as careless may result in stigmatisation. The analysis underlying this paper suggests that some of the statements seemed to contribute to establishing scapegoats instead of preventing them. In our study, the villains were the unvaccinated individuals, and the heroes made the rules or obeyed requirements. Various victims were described: it was not only unvaccinated individuals who could be affected by a severe or lethal course of the disease, but others too: children who were forced to look after unvaccinated individuals, vulnerable groups who might get COVID-19 despite their vaccinations, everyone was a victim in the case of a lockdown, and finally, the national economy could suffer.

### ***Non-intended effects and the risk that the strategy would not work***

The main political interest was stopping the pandemic; therefore, the communication strategy aimed to persuade people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. In doing so, political communication contributed to the emergence of social representations. These were sometimes so dominant that other aspects faded away. At first, persuasion might not work so well if the identified problem was not as crucial as expected or if other factors were not taken into account sufficiently. For example, if vaccines were not able to stimulate sterile immunization nor eradicate the virus, compulsory vaccination would not have been guaranteed to end the pandemic. Finally, non-intended effects such as reactions could occur, especially due to the negative social representations of the minority. It may be that the cited statements were supposed to motivate people to decide to have the vaccination because they wanted to prove they were not supporters of conspiracy theories and did not have deficient cognitive or social competences. Yet the former may also have caused resistance. Attempts to increase communicative or structural pressure may have motivated individuals

to seek to evade that pressure. The COSMO project provided data confirming this. Seventy-six per cent of unvaccinated individuals would have tried to avoid mandatory vaccination by all means – irrespective of potential sanctions (Henkel et al. 2022).

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

For this analysis, data were collected from a search in Google News. Of course, these results represent only a part of the media resonance. Nevertheless, the results can depict public communication about unvaccinated individuals to some extent. This might be especially the case for mobile users who obtain information from the Google News app or internet users who read Google News there. The latter hits included many of the established newspapers and items of TV news. Using other forms of data collection, such as comparing new and traditional media, would be an interesting approach for further research.

It was not included in the analysis in which media the statements occurred, whether they were correctly reproduced, nor how they were dispersed among the spheres of social networks. Analyzing this could reveal echo-chamber and filter-bubble effects (Messingschlager–Holtz 2020) that can lead to a limited exchange of diverse information. Further, other sources of information (e.g., contacts with friends, colleagues or information provided by other institutions) could enlighten us about other actors active in the process of forming social representations.

The selection of only a few representatives has limitations, too. If statements by more representatives had been included, this could have enlarged the picture. For example, members of the AfD party, which was and is in opposition and is known to be against mandatory vaccination, would have added a different point of view. The group of medical/scientific experts is also heterogeneous. Moreover, questioning laypeople about their views of the role of unvaccinated people or measures could reveal other, possibly diverse, perceptions.

Following Völklein and Howarth (2005), the analysis of public communication about unvaccinated individuals raised questions about motives and ideologies and whether social representations reflect power or influence: “In the practice of social life, representations are never neutral but constantly permeated by power relations” (ibid. 446). This is important because crises make the genesis of social representations more likely, and individuals tend to follow leaders even more. Besides, social representations are “meta-knowledge, which implies that what people assume relevant others know, think, or value is part of their



own interpretative grid and that collective behavior can often be influenced more powerfully at the level of meta-representations than of intimate beliefs” (Elcheroth et al. 2011:729). Focusing on political ideologies and authoritarian attitudes would be another promising approach to deepen further analyses.

Persuasion through public communication is not deterministic but depends on social dynamics and individual perceptions. At this point, the analysis emphasized another important factor: emotions, as described by Joffe (2002), who pointed out the relevance of the emotional valence of social representations. The study presented in this paper addresses the importance of the emotions of individuals with regard to their need for orientation and their influence on perception and communication. Due to the pandemic’s emotional qualities, emotional anchoring might have been particularly powerful in the genesis of social representations about unvaccinated individuals.

Another finding of this paper is the close connection between social representations and the wish to modify or punish deviant behavior. The analysis revealed an underlying narrative: a notable number of citizens needed to be told what to do and how to behave. This contrasted with the presumptive social representations of citizens in other European countries, where governments relied more on recommendations and responsibility but not on strict rules, laws or punishment. Maybe the social representations of unvaccinated individuals mirror a weaker tolerance of uncertainty and a preference for control. According to the COVID-stringency index, Germany implemented very strict measures compared to other countries during some phases of the pandemic (Mathieu et al. 2022).

Social representations can serve as legitimation for punishment. With regard to racism, Moscovici (2011) noted that prejudices focus on dualities and “that the expression that links these relationships between majorities and minorities is persecution” (ibid. 453). Although the statements analyzed in this paper did not go that far, other forms of sanctions were discussed. Crises can generate or strengthen social conformity (Schwarz 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a public concern, hegemonic social representations have prevailed and increased the “pressure to conform, creating a collective ethos of social rejection of anyone who behaves or thinks differently” (Páez–Pérez 2020:1.2). This can produce unanimity, and it may be associated with a generalized absence of criticism (Pizzaro et al. 2020). Finally, scientific knowledge may partly be replaced by the social understanding of the majority.

According to Apostolidis and colleagues (2020:3.10): “Our reactions to the threat tell us not only about the virus and the likely risks it poses to us but above all about ourselves, our systems of thought, our relationships with each other, our values and principles governing social functioning, our conditions of

existence.” Focusing on the statements of the chosen representatives responsible for COVID-19 measures or in central positions in the medical/scientific system allows us to identify limited but important insights.

It remains an unanswered question what the described understanding of unvaccinated people and the envisaged measures will mean for the future. Maybe vaccination status will become irrelevant if the pandemic becomes endemic and COVID-19 develops into something resembling an ‘ordinary’ flu, as some virologists expect. Perhaps the social representation of unvaccinated people will be modified or fade away because the aim of having compulsory vaccination for COVID-19 in Germany has been given up for now. Another open question is whether the way that parts of society communicated about unvaccinated people reverberates and causes social fragmentation. Crises can cause fear and tension, with two possible outcomes: they can enhance solidarity or intensify polarisation (Stjernswärd–Glasdam 2021). In this process, it should be taken into account that attribution can make a significant difference: If the public understanding of the reason for a crisis is assigned to an external factor, such as a virus, this may foster solidarity, while social problems may be expected if the ‘foe’ is perceived to be a scapegoat group.

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