Moral Framing in Pandemic Metaphors

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The pandemic as a WAR and a JOURNEY

The COVID-19 pandemic has been seen as War/Combat and also as a Journey.

Unsurprising! Long-Term Human Activities are Journeys across many cultures - and Disease as an opponent in Combat is also a pervasive metaphor.

Since Sontag 1978, some have decried the Combat metaphor for Cancer as stigmatizing "losing" combatants for not fighting hard enough (e.g. Marron et al. 2020); but Semino et al. (2017) have shown that nonetheless it is a metaphor used both by cancer patients and medical professionals.

Why?

One thing the analyses have left out is the moral aspects of the framing.

Cancer: Attributing blame beyond the human scale

Laparle and Sweetser (2018) have argued that the attraction of the Combat metaphor for Cancer - which does not seem replaceable by the also-ubiquitous Journey metaphor - is due to its recognition of the moral framing.

Cancers - and diseases in general - are *amoral.* You can't put blame on cells or viruses.. But a patient whose life is hugely affected, perhaps ended, by cancer, feels a **MORAL** grievance; they did nothing to deserve this damage.

A Journey metaphor does not include such inferences; but a Combat metaphor, where the patient sees Cancer as an unprovoked Attack or Invasion, allows the patient to feel **validation** of their sense of moral grievance.

Cancer: Attributing blame beyond the human scale

A frame of Attack by a Harmful Living Being (Cancer is Stalker, Mugger, Monster, Enemy Army) involves an Attacker doing harm, and an innocent Attacked Person.

In this frame, the victim of the attack has the inalienable right to *grievance* if they did nothing to provoke it.

This **validates** the moral framing which is almost inescapable for the Cancer patient, although not present (for example) in scientific research articles on cancers or viruses.

Morality and Cancer, COVID

COVID shows the same issues of departure from human scale as Cancer; we cannot directly conceptualize the tiny scale of viruses or the immense numerical scale of the pandemic distribution. And it has the same *amoral* character.

But moral judgments immediately emerge. Saving human life is strongly understood as moral: thus, in conventional framings, the general Vaccination frame involves moral values. (This is inherited from historical frames of Smallpox Vaccination, Polio Vaccination, etc.)

The health system administering vaccination is assumed to be doing a highly moral thing in protecting the lives of the vaccinated patients.

Morality and Cancer, COVID

Our data here comes from a database of online North American English, Canadian and U.S.

It is part of the larger MetaNet project, described in the previous paper presented today by Stickles et al.

We find **two types of moral (re)framing:**

- **Validation**: (Having) Cancer is Combat, COVID Vaccine Refusal is Russian Roulette
- **Inversion**: Vaccine Administration is Holocaust

Morality in COVID metaphors: Playing Russian roulette

Numerous examples where this is a metaphor for not getting vaccinated.

- Sometimes it is *playing Russian roulette* with your own life:
  - [Dr.] *Yadegar described being unvaccinated as **playing "Russian roulette" with your life**.* (McAboy 2021)
  - *Mayo Clinic expert: Unvaccinated people are '**playing Russian roulette**' with COVID-19* (Reese Cravey 2022)

- In other examples it is others' lives:
  - [lack of public health protection] *is playing **Russian roulette with these seniors' lives*** (Leck 2021).
  - *Stop playing **Russian roulette with your grandparents** and your aunts and uncles and your mothers and your daddies* (Rush 2021)

Morality in COVID metaphors: Playing Russian roulette

Russian roulette is a prototypically **irresponsible** activity, given the life-or-death stakes. But here the strength of the moral judgment grows with the mapping; given a target where "stakes" are *others'* innocent lives, irresponsibility becomes **deeply immoral**. Refusal to vaccinate is not an irresponsible personal choice but a suicidal activity turned **homicidal**, criminally threatening others' lives. (We have parallel examples which treat failure to impose mask mandates as playing Russian roulette with citizens' lives.)

This metaphor, then, gives a clear moral resolution to the uncertainties involved in debates over the (im)morality of inaction in vaccination. Not getting vaccinated makes you a criminal - a potential murderer.

Morality in COVID metaphors: Playing Russian roulette

We also find government and administrators' **inaction** characterized by this metaphor:

- *By not tracking and mitigating spread, the government has given a deadly virus free rein to live undetected and undisturbed among us. Bluntly, it is **government-approved Russian roulette**.* (Edmonton Journal 2021)
- *Faced with clear-and-present COVID-19 danger, the **Manitoba government continues to spin the cylinder on the pandemic gun** [...] Manitoba continues to use minimal restrictions to combat the most recent wave of COVID-19.* (Lett 2022)

Again, **inaction or failure to act** to protect life is being understood here as irresponsible violent action which could directly endanger life - murderous and criminal.

This **validates** the speaker's apparently intuitive moral judgment that refusal to vaccinate, or government refusal to take protective measures, is deeply morally wrong. (Other framings, such as "my body, my choice" are now backgrounded.)

Frame inversion: Vaccine holocaust

Contrast between metaphoric **VALIDATION** of moral framing in target domain, vs. metaphoric **INVERSION** of moral framing.

Anti-vaccine online discourse frequently frames vaccination as a Holocaust.

- *The **vaccine holocaust** is now beginning to produce mass casualties around the world.* (Adams 2021b)

This involves a radical mapping which treats health professionals giving vaccinations as instruments of a genocidal government, and perpetrators of mass murder.

Frame inversion: Vaccine holocaust

- *People are being lied to, and they're running into the **gas chambers** themselves because of the pathogenic fear.* (Mercola).

- *When the Orange County Board of Supervisors in Southern California announced potential plans to test out a jjab "passport" pilot program, human rights attorney Leigh Dundas stood up and vocally opposed it, calling it "a **second Holocaust**" during a public hearing on the proposal* (Huff 2021)

- *We are witnessing the **vaccine holocaust** accelerate by the day as governments become **genocidal terrorists*** (Adams 2021a)

- *The **COVID holocaust** is over. Six million are dead. Don't deny it! Naturally the "**COVID holocaust revisionists**" are going to question the final tally and the cause of whatever number of deaths actually happened. They will argue that the true total of genuine COVID deaths is considerably less than six million, and that many of the victims didn't die in **gas chambers.*** (Daily News Break)

Frame inversion or Structure Preservation

Metaphor users are typically aware when their choice of Source domain is radically changing, or *inverting*, the moral parameters conventionally associated with the Target domain.

This is rather unusual - normally, metaphoric mappings tend to:

(1)   Preserve affective judgment parameters (part of the Structure Preservation in mappings), thus further validating them.

(2)   Fill out the moral/affective side of the frame (thus, e.g. *validating* subjective experience not present in the scientific Cancer frame).

But the power of metaphoric moral frame-inversion has not been studied, and will certainly be a focus in our project.

The stakes

Moral framing of amoral - and non-human-scale situations is a deep human impulse - and apparently pervasive. In the case of Cancer, it may be extremely helpful to the Patient, for example.

We know that Source frame moral polarity can powerfully influence the moral framing of the metaphorically construed Target frame (cf. Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2013, Thibodeau et al. 2017). Lakoff (2006) points out the unnoticed moral framings in American political discourse: a progressive advocating for *tax relief for the middle class* does not notice that the Relief frame presupposes an ongoing Harm or Burden (thus construing Taxes as a Burden, rather than as Participation in Citizenship).

Online discourse about the COVID pandemic is engaging in **validating**, **reinforcing, strengthening,** and overly **reversing** the conventional moral frames attached to Vaccination and to Public Health Action/Inaction.

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Thank you!