

# Cultural Cognition Project Study Sheds Light on Reactions to HPV Vaccine

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(PhysOrg.com) -- New research conducted by the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale Law School concludes that people's cultural values influence how risky they perceive the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine to be and thus, their views on whether or not the vaccine should be mandatory for elementary school girls.

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HPV is a widespread sexually transmitted disease that causes [cervical cancer](#). The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) has recommended the [HPV vaccine](#) be given to all girls at age 11 or 12, but the recommendation has been mired in controversy and so far, adopted in only one state and the District of Columbia. The Cultural Cognition Project's team of legal scholars, political scientists, and social psychologists used the hotly debated moral and political concerns surrounding the proposal to frame the study, "Who Fears the HPV Vaccine, Who Doesn't, and Why?" The study report was released January 13 by the journal *Law and Human Behavior* and will be published on the journal's website this week in advance of print publication.

Interviews of more than 1,500 U.S. adults reveal that individuals who

favor authority and other traditional values and who are likely to see the HPV vaccine as condoning premarital sex perceive the vaccine as risky. Individuals who strongly support gender equality and government involvement in basic health care are more likely to see the vaccine as low risk and high benefit.

Funded by the National Science Foundation and the Oscar M. Ruebhausen Fund at Yale Law School, the study found that people exposed to balanced information about HPV vaccines—when the information was not attributed to a particular source—tended to harden their views on the vaccine’s riskiness based on prior beliefs, an effect known as “biased assimilation.” But the biggest effect for all subjects was their responsiveness to advocates with whom they had a cultural affinity.

“When views about HPV vaccines, whether positive or negative, came from sources that individuals believed had ‘cultural credibility,’ respondents tended to be more willing to moderate their original, culture-centered viewpoints,” said Dan Kahan, Elizabeth K. Dollard Professor at Yale Law School, who led the study.

“We hypothesized that ‘cultural credibility’ would have an effect,” he added, “but we didn’t expect it to be as large as it turned out to be, or to have a greater effect than ‘biased assimilation.’”

Kahan said the results suggest that the identity of the source “is a more important cognitive cue than the emotional resonances of the information alone.”

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend that anyone with a stake in promoting informed public debate should make an effort to recruit information providers who have diverse cultural outlooks and styles. The key, they say, is to avoid creating or reinforcing any

impression—even a tacit one—that a scientific debate over policy is an “us versus them” dispute.

The study is the most recent in a series Yale Law researchers have conducted with NSF support to test the “cultural cognition thesis,” the idea that individuals, because they can’t easily judge risks when it comes to evaluating complicated or disputed policy issues, rely on beliefs grounded in cultural ideology to help them. Previous findings have shown this effect explains disagreements over the perceived riskiness of such things as private gun ownership and nanotechnology.

Partnering with Dan Kahan on the study were Donald Braman ’05 of George Washington Law School; Geoffrey Cohen of Stanford University; John Gastil of the University of Washington; and Paul Slovic of the Decision Research Institute.

The Cultural Cognition Project is an interdisciplinary group of scholars interested in studying how cultural values shape public risk perceptions and related policy beliefs. For more information, visit [www.culturalcognition.net](http://www.culturalcognition.net).

**More information:** Law and Human Behavior (Advance online publication January 13, 2010), [doi: 10.1007/s10979-009-9201-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10979-009-9201-0)

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