



Eliana Fattorini

Contesting Expertise and Constructing Parental Epistemologies: Vaccine Hesitancy and Alternative Expertise in a Free-Vax Association in Italy

Supervisor: Prof. Massimiano Bucchi – Università di Trento

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Discussant Committee: Prof. Cristiano Gori – Università di Trento

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Abstract:

This PhD thesis examines parental vaccine hesitancy as a situated and reflexive form of reasoning, challenging deficit-based interpretations that reduce hesitancy to misinformation, irrationality, or lack of trust. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies, the sociology of science, and the sociology of health, vaccines are conceptualized as socio-technical objects whose meanings and authority are shaped through scientific practices, policy instruments, institutional communication, and parental experience. The study investigates (1) how vaccine-hesitant parents articulate their positions; (2) how biographical, experiential, and affective factors inform vaccination decisions; (3) how these orientations change over time and across contexts; (4) how the COVID-19 pandemic reconfigured decision-making processes; and (5) how parents relate to scientific authority and alternative forms of knowledge. Empirically, the thesis is based on qualitative research conducted in the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy), combining semi-structured interviews and participant observation with organized vaccine-hesitant parents. The findings show that vaccine hesitancy is better understood as a form of engaged and reflexive citizenship involving conditional trust, reflexive vigilance, and sustained epistemic work.