

Misinformation and Weaponization: Smallpox Inoculation in the 18th Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the 18th century history of smallpox, the development and practice of smallpox inoculation, and the ways both the disease and its prevention became entangled with misinformation, prejudice, and systems of power. While smallpox was one of the deadliest infectious diseases in human history, responses to its spread were shaped not only by medical knowledge but also by political, religious, social, and racial ideologies. In addition, this paper analyzes how both smallpox and inoculation were weaponized against populations considered racially or politically inferior.

Keywords: Public Health, Medical Anthropology, Smallpox, Inoculation, Infectious Disease, Historical Epidemiology, Vaccination History

1. Introduction

Smallpox in Colonial Boston was not only feared for its appearance and its deadly capabilities, but also for the power attached to it through misinformation, racial tensions, in settings of war, and propaganda. As the disease spread, many colonists feared what the next steps would be, including inoculation, an invention that was supposed to provide immunity to the disease. Inoculation's main goal was to help provide immunity and help colonists receive a smaller strain of the disease but not completely remove smallpox from the area [1]. Many were initially expecting that inoculation would completely stop the spread of smallpox and was some magical solution that was supposed to prevent people from contracting the disease in the first place [2]. Misinformation and "false rumor[s]" spread especially when colonists saw that people were still getting infected with the disease even after being inoculated, therefore coming up with the idea that inoculation might increase the spread of smallpox [2]. Therefore, there were three main concepts of misinformation about inoculation: that it should fully stop the spread of the disease, or on the flip side, increases the spread of the disease, and that it is harmful to the body. As religious figures and influential persons like George Washington and John Adams became more

skeptical of inoculation, many colonists started to fear the disease even more, causing chaotic periods of the epidemic. The disease and inoculation were used as ways to exterminate the Native Americans, further emphasizing the drastic racial motives behind the spread of smallpox. Smallpox and inoculation were also used as a weapon against an enemy, either by terminating the opposing side or spreading the disease to gain more power and influence over land. Therefore, in the eighteenth to early nineteenth century, the introduction of smallpox was not only devastating biologically, but the fear of the disease and efforts of inoculation were exploited in a way that exacerbated the perception of racial and moral inferiority.

2. Body

2.1 Smallpox Epidemic in Colonial Boston

The first major smallpox epidemic among British colonists in Colonial Boston was in 1721, which provoked fear of the disease. The introduction of smallpox was relatively new to colonists as it left noticeably gruesome scars and spread quickly [3]. Smallpox itself had a high death rate among the colonists, reaching up to 10.5 percent in 1721[1]. Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay described smallpox as “filling the churchyards with corpses” while “tormenting with constant fears” of those who had not gotten the disease [3]. The word “tormenting” accurately describes the inescapable fear of smallpox and how the disease was horrifyingly deadly. Macaulay furthered his statement by saying that “the virus had power” amongst the colonists who were both infected and “those who fearfully anticipated infection” [3]. The word “power” invokes fear of the unknown disease and further suggests how colonists viewed smallpox as a powerful weapon that served to harm the body. Smallpox was also notorious for its horrifying appearance of pustules all over the body, which would, in turn, lead to scars that would maim the person for a lifetime. Macaulay continues to name these pustules “hideous traces of power” that would turn a “babe into a changeling”, alienating others from the population [3]. The fact that he refers to the appearance of smallpox as a “trace of power” further exemplifies how smallpox was viewed as a weapon, and the scar as a remnant of battling the disease. This added power to smallpox further diminishes their perceptions of the disease, especially when the resulting appearance causes colonists to become alienated from society as if they had been conquered by an enemy of war.

2.2 Smallpox Inoculation

Additionally, the recent application of inoculation and its uncertain success rate provoked mass fear and increased the perceived power attached to the disease. The practice of inoculation, studied by Zabdiel Boylston, was particularly unnerving due to its large needle and its uncertain success rates [4]. The fact that inoculation did not guarantee subsequent immunity from the

disease disillusioned the colonists, especially when their friends and family were inoculated and still perished [1]. The new science of inoculation was mistrusted by many of the colonists due to its novel appearance and unprecedented methodology [5]. James Moore, a historian from the 18th century, recounts that the colonists thought of the disease as the "Plague" and that inoculation "was probably the real cause of [death]" [6]. Colonists, like James Moore, perceived inoculation negatively, amplifying the fear of inoculation and smallpox itself. The fact that he related smallpox to death is significant since it allows readers to understand how colonists perceived smallpox as a death threat, further enhancing the power attached to the disease. Additionally, in an anti-inoculation letter by *The New England Courant*, they stated that inoculation is a "false" way of countering the disease, using the example of Dr. Emmanuel Timonius's patients who died after they were inoculated [7]. *The New England Courant* was a magazine that colonists would see and formulate opinions based on the information on local news [8]. This anti-inoculation propaganda and misinterpretation of results caused many to further doubt inoculation, emphasizing the opinion that inoculation is powerful but untrustworthy [4]. The newspaper continued by stating that inoculation is a tool that is incapable of completely stopping the spread of smallpox and is harmful when stating that "[inoculations] are capable of infecting their Neighbors to a great Degree" [7]. By spreading misinformation that inoculation does more harm than good, the magazine actively caused people to refrain from inoculation due to its bad reputation. When people still got infected with smallpox after being inoculated, colonists spread misinformation that inoculation increased the chances of smallpox, which caused tensions between anti-inoculation individuals and pro-inoculation supporters [5]. These negative reviews of inoculation altered the perception of many people in Massachusetts, further emphasizing the influence of smallpox over news outlets and papers.

2.3 Smallpox Inoculation and Religion

Further demonizing the disease and inoculation itself, many colonists believed that inoculation went against God's will and his sovereignty over the human body, identifying people who received inoculation as Atheists. In anti-inoculation articles, many colonists believed that inoculation disrupted internal bodily functions that God created, further stating that the act of inoculation is a sign of denouncing your faith [9]. They furthered this argument by stating inoculation is essentially a death wish, an act of suicide, and a form of self-inflicted pain. For example, in 1722, Edmund Massey, a renowned religious figure known for his stance on inoculation, stated that a person who chooses to receive inoculation has "let go of his Integrity" and "renounced that Allegiance" to God and the Lord [10]. The lost "integrity" and "allegiance" referred to Atheism which would have been a form of degradation in Colonial Boston. Massey furthers this argument when stating "let the Atheist" or "Unbeliever" take inoculation, while people who choose to refrain from inoculation "acknowledge" God and refuse to "alter the

Course of Nature” [10]. He critiqued the idea of inoculation through preaching that inoculation disrupts the process of predestination or God’s plan for human life. By refusing to “alter the Course of Nature”, he was fundamentally connecting inoculation to denouncing Christianity, which would influence people who are religious and the community. These religious justifications went against inoculation, and therefore spread mass fear amongst colonists, further exacerbating the power attached to both smallpox and inoculation.

Other religious figures also justified anti-inoculation efforts by referring to scriptures from the Bible. Arguments relying on ideas of predestination were supported by textual references in the Bible. For example, one of the authors (John Williams) in the anti-inoculation newspaper, the *New England Courant*, referred to Daniel 4:35 in the Bible. He wrote how the inhabitants on Earth in the “Army of Heaven” did not “[take] his (God's) hand” and did not ask “what doest thou” to God [11]. Even the army in need did not ask God for the outcome of the war, therefore implying that inoculation is inherently wrong because it also undermines the doctrine of predestination by inserting human desire. Additionally, a poem in the *New England Courant* further supported this idea, stating that a person of true faith “needs not a Physician but that he is sick” [9]. This poem is also significant because it denounces any additional help apart from God to heal a person from the disease, including inoculation. He stated that Satan “smote Job with sore Boils” and became even sicker as Satan gave Job a “Venomous Infusion” [10]. This example of Job and Satan represents Massey's stance on inoculation, where it is a creation of the devil (Satan) and does more harm (Job became sicker after inoculation), further demonizing the power that inoculation holds. According to James Moore, it is evident that these scriptural texts, through anti-inoculation magazines and religious figures, had an immense impact on the general population [6]. James Moore further observed that inoculation is portrayed as a “diabolical invention of Satan” after reviewing such comments from religious figures [6]. Moore adds on by stating that the population “remain in the unalterable belief that whether Inoculation kills or saves, it is sinful” [6]. The word “unalterable” is notable since it portrays that even if colonists were in slight favor of inoculation, it was not forgotten that it was also “sinful”. Therefore, these scriptures had an effect on not only those who were inoculated but also worsened the perception of inoculation in general by degrading it through religious terminology.

2.4 Smallpox as the Enemy

Along with religious reasons, smallpox was seen as a weapon and an enemy that would hijack a person's body, further exacerbating the fear of smallpox. James Moore wrote *The History of Smallpox* in 1815, having been through many of the smallpox epidemics. He recounted not only his opinion and his views on the disease but also the ongoing and past shortcomings of smallpox around the world. It is notable that in his book, he stated that smallpox “attacked” a person, a word mentioned frequently when stating facts about the disease [6]. This is significant as it

shows how smallpox was exacerbated to be perceived as an enemy, further exemplifying the fear of the disease. By stating that the disease is “attacking” someone, it portrays the view of smallpox during the late 18th century and how colonists must have thought about the disease as a disruptive weapon. Additionally, Moore compared infectious diseases with empires, stating “infectious diseases spring up obscurity...but if opposed with judgement, they might like empires, be controlled and would decline and fall” [6]. The fact that Moore compared the disease to empires is notable because it further adds to the idea that smallpox was perceived as a mystical, unknown disease that would conquer and destroy people’s bodies. The idea of “opposing” smallpox is similar to how colonists would oppose enemies or people, further portraying the influence the disease had among the population.

2.5 Weaponization of Smallpox against Native Americans

The perception of smallpox as an enemy or a weapon of war was exemplified when colonists gave smallpox-infected blankets to Native Americans in Fort Pitt, further intensifying the fear and power of the disease. Native Americans were perceived as a weaker force because they were easily affected by smallpox due to little genetic immunity. From images of dead natives lying on top of each other, stricken with smallpox, it was shown that smallpox killed up to 95 percent of the native population in the Americas [3]. Colonists took advantage of the disease and the Native’s vulnerability in 1763, where the British hoped to acquire Fort Pitt against the Natives (specifically the Delaware, Shawnee and Mingo Indians surrounding the Fort) [12]. Henry Bouquet, a soldier, sent a letter to the British commander in chief, Jeffery Amherst, stating “Fort Pitt is in good State of Defense against all attempts from Savages” [12]. The word “savages” is extremely dehumanizing towards the Indians, as the British were inferring that the Natives were below them. This racist remark is important as, later in a letter to Bouquet from Amherst asked to “send the smallpox” among the Native Americans in an effort to “reduce them” [12]. This quote is significant because it represents the desire to eliminate the Native Americans by using the disease as a weapon of war. Not only was their goal to eliminate the natives as an enemy, but because they were “savages”, portraying the racist and dehumanizing reason behind sending the blankets. In response to Amherst's letter, Bouquet stated that he would try to “inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets” as a way to spread the disease and decimate the population [12]. The word “inoculate” is utilized in a negative connotation and is backed up by misinformation that infers inoculation is a way to harm the population. The idea of using smallpox-covered blankets from hospitals is an example of how the disease was weaponized as a way to enhance fear and its power. It was confirmed by soldiers that the blankets were delivered to the Indian tribes, and as a result, caused an outbreak of smallpox at Fort Pitt [3].

After the blankets were given to the Natives near Fort Pitt, smallpox struck hard causing many Native Americans to die. In the summer of 1763, after the smallpox blanket was delivered, a

British post officer named Gershom Hicks reported that smallpox was “raging amongst the Indians” and that last spring “30 or 40 Mingo’s”, Delawares, and Shawnese died and still continued [12]. The quote explicitly states how the smallpox blanket was used to successfully eradicate the native population, further emphasizing the power and control the disease had over the majority of inhabitants. Colonel Andrew from Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains also stated, “Y poor Rascals are Dying very fast with y smallpox...they can make but Little Resistance when Routed must parish great Numbers by y Disordere”[12]. The words “poor Rascals” display the racist ideology of many colonists and the reasoning as to why they decided to use smallpox as a weapon against them. The fact that Andrew stated they can make “Little Resistance” is essentially calling the natives weaker than the colonists since they had been infected. Furthermore, in a 1763 letter from Jeffery Amherst to a commander, he stated, “You do well to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets as well as every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race” [3]. By using the term “inoculate” in order to spread the infection using blankets, the disease is communicated as a powerful, unstoppable force that is solely used for exterminating a population.

Along with the Fort Pitt incident, many believe that smallpox was weaponized against Native Americans during the Seven Years’ War. From 1755-1758, the disease ravaged among the French-allied Potawatomis, where many Indians believed it stemmed from deliberate transmission of smallpox from the British. Specifically in 1757, the Ottawa Indians suffered smallpox after receiving a “showy tin box with the strict injunction not to open the box on their way homeward” [12]. The tin contained nothing but particles and later spread smallpox to the entire tribe. This example of smallpox used as a weapon during the Seven Years' War is significant because smallpox was used as a tool to eliminate the Native Americans yet again [12]. Similar to the blanket scenario, the main purpose was to exterminate the Native population by utilizing smallpox’s power and its deadly impact [12]. Another example was in 1770 when an Ojibwa troop accounted for a smallpox-infected flag that was presented to the Indians as a “token of friendship” [12]. The “token of friendship” caused a massive outbreak of smallpox at Fond du Lac on Lake Superior, where three hundred reportedly died [12]. This example is also significant because the smallpox-infected flag was shown as a symbol of friendship, when it was in fact used to terminate the population. The use of smallpox as a weapon is apparent here, especially when the motive behind it is to get rid of a population that has weaker immunity [3]. Furthermore, during the Seven Years’ War, John Adams wrote a letter to Abigail Adams stating, “The smallpox is ten times more terrible than the Britons, Canadians and Indians together”, further exemplifying the power attached to the disease by comparing the disease with their formative enemies [13]. The fact that he stated that the disease is “ten times more terrible” than all his other enemies in battle is significant since the colonists must have perceived smallpox as a larger and more destructive enemy, exacerbating the fear of the disease.

2.6 Influential Figures and Inoculation Misinformation

When the civilians were in danger of being attacked by the British regiment, influential figures like George Washington and John Adams were at first skeptical about inoculation and enhanced ideas of misinformation. In the beginning, George Washington was “strongly attacked by smallpox” during his trip to Barbados in 1751 before the American Revolution had begun [14]. The quote states that Washington was “attacked” by the disease after he had been inoculated, weakening his perception of inoculation since he believed that inoculation should have the means to stop the disease altogether [14]. This misinformation and negative perception of inoculation spread to people in his surroundings, like John Adams. When John Adams wrote a letter to Abigail Adams, he expressed his negative views on inoculation as he still was infected with smallpox, despite being inoculated. He states, "Don't conclude anything I have written that I think inoculation is a light matter" after stating all of his worsening symptoms of the disease [14]. The quote is significant because it represents how influential people like John Adams had misconceptions about inoculation, such that it would completely stop a person from contracting smallpox. This viewpoint of inoculation was further spread throughout Colonial Boston, where people gained more fear of the disease and the invention in general due to its inability to stop the virus fully in some cases [1]. Furthermore, as the disease continued to be rampant among the colonies, it worsened the opinions of colonists, with many writing that the disease spread “like a contagion into all other colonies” [14]. The disease spreading with the anticipation of the British arriving in Colonial Boston further exacerbated the fear of smallpox, as well as the lives of many colonists in the area.

2.7 Smallpox and Inoculation in the Revolutionary War

During the Revolutionary War, smallpox became a political issue as it was used as a weapon, further escalating the fear of inoculation and the disease. George Washington, now the commander in chief during the war, realized that smallpox and inoculation could be used as a tool to defeat the British. He changed the narrative by referring back to inoculation, leaving his previous misconceptions, and now willing to take the chance and inoculate his army if it meant defeating the British. He wrote that the disease “rages” in Boston and that the British have an advantage since they have much higher rates of inoculation and are more immune to the disease [12]. He furthers this statement by saying that they are using smallpox as a “weapon of defense” against the army since the Continental Army had not yet been inoculated [12]. Due to this predicament, he immediately sent all of his recruits to receive inoculation, despite his previous skepticism [15]. These quotes are significant because smallpox is utilized as a weapon of defense and is one of the main factors of the war. The power added to the disease is surely increased, as many soldiers and commanders were not willing to surrender to the enemy or the disease. Furthermore, a Bill of 1777 during the American Revolution specifically stated that all members

of the community should be inoculated so that they are “free from all Dangers of spreading the Infection” and even placed a penalty for those who object [16]. These penalties and excessive inoculations exacerbated the fear and misinformation that inoculation stops the spread of smallpox but instead results in receiving a milder version of the disease. John Adams continued to write in a letter to Abigail Adams expressing the fear of the British army and how they are impenetrable since they have taken “a large dose of it” and have “stripped off the Clothes of our Men who had the Small Pox” [13]. Inoculation is portrayed as a shield for the British army, especially since they are more immune to the disease, increasing the fear of the disease within the Continental Army. Robert Donkin, a British soldier, portrayed inoculation in a negative connotation by stating, “dip arrows in matter of smallpox” at the Americans “to inoculate them” to “sooner disband these stubborn, ignorant, enthusiastic savages” [12]. This quote is significant because it portrays the disease as a weapon and inoculation as the tool to bring down the Continental Army. By inoculating them, he was convinced that the army would become weaker since the colonists were more susceptible to the disease.

During the American Revolution, the Ethiopian regiment of the Earls of Dunmore (British) was perceived as weak and was used to racially inferiorize the blacks, further providing a negative connotation to both the disease and inoculation. As the Revolutionary War continued, the British, similar to the Continental Army, had one aim: spread smallpox to weaken the enemy. To spread smallpox, the British utilized the Dunmore’s black regiment, since they believed that they were more susceptible to spreading the disease. A Bostonian wrote in 1775 that “The British soldiers try all they can to spread the smallpox”, further increasing the fear of spreading the disease to the Continental Army [12]. By believing the inoculation would help spread the infection on populations that had not experienced smallpox in its largest form (black regiment), they threatened to inoculate and ship “two of those wretches” from the regiment and send them ashore to “spread the infection” [12]. The fact that they decided to inoculate the regiment with the purpose of spreading the disease portrays the perception that inoculation harms and spreads the disease, which is a form of misinformation. This is a prime example of using smallpox inoculation as a weapon, and it is evident that the British believed inoculation would help spread the infection. Furthermore, in July 1781, Gen Alexander Leslie, a British officer, sent “700 Negroes” to come down the river “in the smallpox” where he “shall distribute them to the Rebel Plantations” [12]. The 700 black soldiers who were inoculated were used as a tool for the British to spread the disease, further exacerbating the racial tensions and racist values assigned to African Americans by utilizing them as a tool to take out the enemy. It was later seen that Dunmore’s black regiment had inoculated 4-500 people to spread smallpox on purpose, with reports of many “lying on the road side” [12]. By exposing the Continental Army to smallpox using the dead bodies of black soldiers, it is clear that inoculation was used as a tool to spread

more fear and harm. These soldiers on the road sent a message of fear, the price of inoculation, and the result of the disease on a weaker population.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, smallpox and inoculation were utilized to increase fear through their usage in warfare, religious terminology, and to obliterate populations like Native Americans or African Americans to increase power. The combination of misinformation about inoculation and its benefits proved to influence many colonists in Colonial Boston, causing an uprising and further damage to decisions on inoculation. The power added to the disease and inoculation were also emphasized in terms of warfare, further causing fear amongst many, including the British. These ideas of medical misinformation continue to this day, where society is influenced by many factors other than the effects of the disease itself.

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