Actor Network Theory, Irrational Health Beliefs, & Health Myths: Dead-Wrong Assumptions in the Diabetes Network

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Background

IHBs
- Irrational health beliefs (IHBs) refer to the illogical opinions, attitudes and thoughts about health that lack empirical support and pragmatism.\(^1\)
- IHBs and health myths may impede an individual’s ability to seek health information, seek medical care, adhere to medical treatments or even make reasonable health-care decisions.\(^2\)

Diabetes
- Diabetes is a chronic condition characterized by the body’s inability to properly control blood sugar levels.
- Minorities are more prone to developing diabetes.
- Hispanics have the highest prevalence of diabetes.\(^3\)

Theory
- Activity Theory is generally concerned with culturally mediated and socially situated activities. Looks at the big picture and explains why.
- Actor Network Theory is concerned with the interaction between actors and the networks and helps explain the moment-by-moment translations and mechanisms of persuasion. It helps answer how.

Research Questions
This research project was specifically designed to explore the health belief “diabetes is curable.”

RQ1: How is information about the curability of diabetes spread?
RQ2: What are the main intermediaries and mediators in the process?

Methods
- Identified and categorized existing networks
- Identified and categorized the main actors and switchers disseminating information about IHBs
- Conducted a Google search using the term *diabetes is curable.* Used the URLs from the search results to determine the source of the information (social webpage, health webpage, media webpage, etc.).

English Sample
*Diabetes is curable*
Results: 59,800
Relevant Non-repeated: 391
Randomly Selected: 40

Spanish Sample
*La diabetes se cura.*
Results: 70,500
Relevant Non-repeated: 259
Randomly Selected: 40

Data Collection and Analysis
Grounded Theory & Content Analysis
Line by Line
Made Connections
Conceptualized
Identified Key Words
Categorized
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Findings
Blog Network: Claim introduced by a single blogger – supported or rejected by participants.
Forum Network: Claim is introduced by participants – supported or rejected by other participants.
Healthcare Network: Claim is usually dismissed by this network. Provide scientifically sound information and educate.
Commercial Network: Information about the curability of diabetes in this network was generally spread through the “voices,” opinions and beliefs of professionals perceived as experts in healthcare.
Media Outlet Network: Disseminated information about diabetes in the form of news content, advertisements, and even radio programing.
Family/Social Network: Comments made by individuals through those networks.
Academic/Government: Disseminated information through academic reports. No opportunity for response or comments.

Discussion
RQ1: How is information about the curability of diabetes spread?

Problematization: Individuals find diabetes a major problem and search for information and assistance.
Interessement: The individual’s desire to hear that there is a cure may cause a person to disassociate from other agents and their beliefs.

RQ2: What/Who are the main intermediaries and mediators in the process?

Intermediaries: Individuals with low health literacy, no power, cannot influence the claim, cannot be ignored.
Mediators: Bloggers, businesses, organizations, participants who reject the claim, anyone who has the power to spread or stop the spread of the IHB.

Activity Theory/WHY:
Subjects: Low-health literacy, little ability to understand the outcomes, individuals who are not thinking about how their actions affect others.
Labor Division: Individuals of low SES, generally less educated and more vulnerable to claims, lack scientific understanding, the educated take advantage of them.
Rules: Generally individuals are not going to make claims that will hurt others. This rule is ignored online.
Community: Social context is different for the Hispanic community. Hispanic participants are more willing to try alternative medicines. They want to believe in the claim.
Mediation: Online information is mediated through the existing networks. These networks may become significant for individuals who need family or peer support for gathering and applying information.
Enrollment: Individuals who make the claims try to recruit others in their effort, especially people who have a commercial interest in the claim.

References