

Hannah Alpert-Abrams
August 12, 2014
Rhetoric 309k

Popular Article Analysis

Kennedy, R. F. Jr. (2005, Jun 30-Jul 14). Deadly Immunity. *Rolling Stone*, 977-978, 57-66. Retrieved from LexisNexis.com.

In a controversial 2005 article published in *Rolling Stone*, Robert F. Kennedy argues that there is a dangerous link between thimerosal, a kind of mercury used as a preservative in vaccinations, and autism. An environmental journalist with a long history studying mercury pollution, Kennedy uses extensive scientific research as a persuasive element in making his case.

Although Kennedy refers frequently to scientific studies that back up his point, he couches these studies in dramatic language in order to evoke emotions of fear. He describes studies as “disturbing” and describes findings as “frightening” (1). The effect of this language is to produce an atmosphere of fear which persuades the reader that vaccination is a dangerous idea. When Dr. Richard Johnston is quoted as saying “My gut feeling? ... Forgive this personal comment – I do not want my grandson to get a thimerosal-containing vaccine until we know better what is going on” (1) he reveals a key persuasive strategy: to allow gut feelings to trump scientific fact.

Alongside the strategy of fear, Kennedy uses the language of excess to create a feeling of scientific certainty which does not necessarily match the data. In order for scientific research to be accepted by the community, it must meet high methodological standards and be replicated many times. Kennedy implies replication by writing of a “staggering number” of studies (1) and “truckloads of studies” (3). The result appears to be an overwhelming scientific consensus about the effect of thimerosal and vaccinations, creating an emotional reaction that simulates scientific truth.

This emotional strategy contrasts with Kennedy’s approach to those who argue vaccines are safe. Rather than using emotional language to describe these studies, Kennedy provides only minimal information about them, emphasizing instead efforts by the government to cover the studies up. In the case of the Institute of Medicine study, for example, he describes in detail how the researchers undermined the scientific method by determining the outcome before they began the study (2). He describes the study as an effort to “whitewash the risks of thimerosal.” This rhetorical strategy persuades us that the study is illegitimate without ever examining the study itself.

Kennedy uses the emotional strategies of fear and excess to create the feeling of scientific certainty around the dangers of thimerosal, while couching opposing studies in language that debunks its authenticity. This strategy persuades us that he is on the side of science, when in fact Kennedy’s position is on the fringe of the scientific community.