

Homeopathy relies on false scientific appearances to convince its users

According to a study by two researchers from the Autonomous University of Madrid, one of the main reasons for people's trust in alternative therapies is that the general public does not distinguish them from science. Consumers of homeopathy and acupuncture tend to be women with a medium-high socioeconomic level and higher education.

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The scientific appearance of homeopathic products makes the general public believe they are based on scientific evidence / Pixabay

In 2018, the [9th FECYT Survey on the Social Perception of Science](#) revealed that one in five Spaniards has at some time used **pseudo-scientific remedies**, such as **homeopathy**, the **laying on of hands** (Reiki) or **acupuncture**.

For the survey, 5,200 interviews were carried out in all autonomous communities, with questions being asked about scientific knowledge and opinion on science and alternative therapies.

Two researchers from the Autonomous University of Madrid have now

published an analysis of these data in *Health Communication* magazine in order to collect the factors that determine trust in these pseudo-therapies, complemented by qualitative interviews.

One of the main conclusions of the study is that “trust in alternative therapies is not incompatible with a knowledge of and interest in science,” as **Josep Lobera**, a co-author of the study, tells SINC. To reach this conclusion, the answers of respondents who were in favour of pseudo-therapies were cross-referenced with those expressing trust in science and scientific knowledge. The authors discovered that in many cases these two factors coincided.

“There is no contradiction among the general public between a strong belief in science and a lot of trust in homeopathy,” explains Lobera. “We can observe that, contrary to what happens with superstitious beliefs such as horoscopes, most people who trust homeopathy or acupuncture don't see it as different from conventional medicine.”

According to sociologists, this shows a confusion among the general public about what has and does not have scientific validation, as well as a lack of knowledge of “what is meant by something not having any.”



'Farmacia de la Estrella' in Buenos Aires. / Estrella Herrera

Medicinal appearance

Based on these results, the researchers propose that this confusion may be due to its **scientific appearance**. “They are sold in pharmacies in boxes that look like medicines, with leaflets, posology, etc. This, together with a moderate **scientific culture** among the Spanish general public, is one of the main factors that make people trust them,” states the researcher.

These data contradict the most common interpretations of trust in alternative therapies, which are believed to be based on anti-science attitudes.

According to Lobera, “among the general public, the use of homeopathy is not based on a rejection of science. This may be the case with a minority that generates an alternative construction to scientific knowledge, but the study shows that this is not so with the general Spanish population.”

The survey also breaks down the data by gender, age, educational and economic level, which made it possible to confirm that users of homeopathy and acupuncture usually have higher education. “According to the data, university studies protect you from trust in superstitions, but not from trust in pseudo-therapies,” he explains.

Users, more specifically, tend to be of **women**, which the researchers believe is due to the “caring role traditionally associated with them in society,” and of a medium-high socio-economic level.

In addition, the model confirms what had already been taken into account in other works regarding the influence of **conspiracy theories** against pharmaceutical companies. “Many people who rely on alternative therapies have a discourse of distrust in major drug companies. They believe there is a concealment of positive results,” says Lobera.

“What’s interesting,” he continues, “is that homeopathy producers are also major pharma corporations.”

Because of all this, the researchers believe that the solution to this confusion lies in more scientific information and culture. “It’s important to carry out

campaigns that bring up the fact that there are certain products being sold in pharmacies that haven't undergone a scientific validation process, as there's still a part the population that don't know this and are unaware of the importance of these validation processes," concludes Lobera.

Reference:

Lobera, J.; Rogero-Garc'a, J. (2020). "Scientific Appearance and Homeopathy. Determinants of Trust in complementary and alternative medicine". [Health Communication](#).

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