

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Pandemic and the Ethics of Care

By Sabariah Hussin

SYNOPSIS

States and agencies have responded in different ways to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In view of the dynamic evolution of this virus, the Ethics of Care (EoC) theory can be applied to manage the effect of this crisis on cross-sections of populations.

COMMENTARY

HEALTHCARE systems around the world are taking a beating from a global pandemic that appears to be in its second wave. Not confined only to health systems, this somewhat dystopian reality is reflected also in unprecedented levels of unemployment, worldwide travel bans and restrictions and a global economic standstill.

Organisations scramble to restructure their operations to include remote workforces. While there are companies that have risen to the technological challenges, there are those that struggle to keep afloat while others have inevitably succumbed to the virus crisis. Individuals too have not been spared. The pandemic has forced people into their homes, cutting down social interaction to the bare minimum as workplaces, schools, places of worship and recreation close their doors.

Hard Care and Soft Care

Despite the numerous pitfalls and uncertainty surrounding the production of a safe and effective vaccine, individuals, organisations, agencies and governments are working tirelessly and often in tandem to provide care to those affected. While the notion of

care in the context of COVID-19 conjures to mind the administering of medical care, this is but part of a larger all-encompassing social landscape badly in need of the ethics of care.

It can be argued that care is an innate human need. However, in times of crisis, it is not always readily available. Everyone cares but may not necessarily be able to exercise care in its true sense. Daniel Engster, a care theorist, defines care as “everything we do directly to help individuals satisfy their minimal developmental and biological needs”.

This care will help to maintain people’s basic capabilities and avoid or alleviate pain and sufferings. Hence, they can survive, develop and function in society and pursue some conception of good life, he says. There are two approaches to care – ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ care. Care as an action is ‘hard’, and the virtues that complement are the ‘soft’ care. These virtues are elemental to exercise care successfully.

From a “care” perspective, this crisis has brought out humanity’s most commendable behaviour towards others. Populations have benefitted from additional funding, care packages, public health measures, volunteerism, and many stimuli extended during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Special measures and support packages have been formulated and rolled-out swiftly by individuals, communities, agencies and states to help citizens, residents and countries battle the coronavirus.

What Does Care Mean in a Pandemic Scenario?

Despite the extensive support, there are those who still feel that the assistance rendered is insufficient. What then is the missing component? As much as we give aid as a show of care, it cannot be a mere functional act. There needs to be a balanced combination of reason for caring that may be grounded on logic and emotive motivations to care such as sympathy and compassion.

Further to this, care can only be achieved when it is acting according to the virtues of caring. Care theorists generally agree that attentiveness, responsiveness and respect are core virtues and constitutive of caring.

The virtue of attentiveness means noticing when another person is in need and responding appropriately while anticipating additional needs. Responsiveness is about engaging with others to discern the precise nature of their needs and monitoring their responses to our care that is, ensuring that they are receiving the care they need.

The virtue of respect is about treating people in ways that do not degrade them in their own eyes or in the eyes of others. Care is about alleviating pain and suffering by ensuring that the needs of individuals are attended to. In short, care is purposeful and all encompassing.

Obligations to Care

In Singapore, communities and the state endeavour to care for their population through a multi-faceted approach. Community groups have joined forces to launch online platforms to help low-income families, provide financial assistance or groceries, and temporary employment to those in need.

Religious leaders across the different faiths have pledged to uphold their commitment to maintain solidarity while modifying their religious traditions and practices to prevent the spread of the virus. The government has unveiled four stimulus packages; aptly named Unity, Resilience, Solidarity and Fortitude totalling up to US\$65.4 billion or S\$92.9 billion to provide support workers and businesses.

Care underpins not only our physical, emotional and mental well-being as individuals but also our social, environmental and economic wellbeing as a population.

The breadth of care includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible, says Joan Tronto, a US professor of political science. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we interweave in a complex, life sustaining web, he adds.

In light of the human devastation caused by COVID-19, the ethics of care should be advocated, broadened and considered by private and public-run agencies when formulating policies, drawing up regulations and implementing practices such that there is strengthening of social connectedness in spite of the imposition of physical distance that appear to separate us.

Sabariah Hussin is an alumna of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is currently pursuing PhD in the department of Religion at Rice University, Houston, United States. This is part of an RSIS Series.
