
Disasters Revised

1. Assessment and Utility of Ethical, Legal, Political, and Social Issues in the Recent Pandemic

Disaster is a topic that connects social sciences, medicine, ethics, geophysics, as well as other sciences and disciplines. However, besides the benefits of preventing and mitigating disaster's effects, this wide range of various sciences also contributes with their various methodologies and accounts. One of the most intriguing issues arises from the epistemological and ethical differences in defining basic concepts in disaster studies. Disasters can be natural or the result of an inadvertent or intentional human act. Such events kill or injure a significant number of people, or disrupt life in a society. Though not always unpredictable, they come with an unexpected impact and shock (Zack, 2023). However, to revise the concept or a part of it, it would be necessary to return and remind readers of the first reactions to and social concerns over the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which caused COVID-19 and the Coronavirus Pandemic. Considering the general perspective on disaster as an event that is opposed to normal time or everyday life, opens the space for revising concepts due to the generalization of what is meant by normality. Some social group's everyday life could be comprehended as catastrophic with less chance to improve in a shorter time, e.g., those who are homeless, people with vulnerable jobs, discriminated and marginal groups, etc. Disaster also questions the legitimacy of a political system, due to poor preparation plans, or using the disaster to transform short-term paternalism into an authoritarian grip on people's everyday lives (Mitrović & Mitrović, 2023).

The epidemic began in the city of Wuhan in China in late 2019, and spread worldwide in early 2020, reaching Europe in Spring 2020. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization

declared COVID-19 a pandemic. During the Coronavirus pandemic, we were exposed to national and global reports covering the numbers of people tested, infected, killed, and cured. We were receiving different forecasts about the course and effects of the infection. In the very beginning, we witnessed different national scenarios and models, which all exposed different levels of national preparedness, as well as the lack of global response to such disasters.

In the first weeks and months of the pandemic (Spring 2020), two approaches dominated. The first approach amounted to the idea of letting nature take its course. Just as societies adapt to other illnesses, people would develop immunity against this disease. However, the great and rapid progression in the number of the infected and dead questioned this approach. It promised to counteract the virus very rapidly with only minor negative socio-economic side-effects. Yet, this was obviously horrendous for those most vulnerable to the virus.

The second approach opposed such a hands-off strategy. Instead, it proposed measures to restrict movement for different categories of the population, in order to minimize social contact. Unfortunately, this approach had significant negative socio-economic effects, as we indeed witnessed. Still, this was embraced as the first response by the states that maintained strong systems of primary care and institutes of public health, which included former socialist societies.

The experience showed that, before COVID-19 vaccines were introduced, both ways had their ups and downs, and involved certain misuse, due to the controlling mechanism in the case of restriction of movement, or the devastating effects that ignoring the virus had for the most vulnerable.

However, what went under the radar as a kind of latent danger causing cumulative damage, was the daily intertwining of the terms crisis and disaster in everyday, public, and scientific forms of speech.

In the scientific sense, disaster is an event (or series of events) that injures, or kills a significant number of people or, otherwise severely disrupts their daily lives in a society. Disasters can be natural, or the result of an inadvertent or intentional human act, but they are usually time framed, and with recognizable phases.

At the same time, crises may be ongoing, which leads a society to the state of collective stress, i.e., living in precarious conditions with no perspective of improving. The terms conflict and crisis are defined in opposition to disaster, yet they both imply a certain institutionalized risk of a disaster. While disasters are typically characterized by prosocial behaviors, conflicts and crises are usually framed by the various interests of opposing actors who are responsible for the conflicts and often deepen them (Barton, 2005).

More particularly, pandemic is a disaster that can cause different crises: crises in the health care, social, political, economic, and other systems. Pandemics can also lead to psychological and other, more personal, crises. Hence, although the concepts of crisis and disaster share some similarities, they are not the same, and should not be treated as such.

In addition to the deceptive intertwining of these concepts, and with its constant and circular repetition, it was globally accepted that after this pandemic, nothing would be the same. In economic, political, and social terms, the world became different. This volume brings one perspective on these changes.

These changes represent a similarity between disaster and crisis. However, this is shared by any disturbance in a relatively stable state, which needs to be removed so that the original state may be restored. Similarly, our efforts to overcome the disaster – including our technology-based efforts, such as the use of tracking technology or AI – may be explained in terms of our intention to revert our socio-economic system back to its prior “normal” state. But one question is why should we revert our system back to what used to be normal? What may be the effect of such efforts for traditional communities, or those who live in communities that are more or less closed?

Some of the chapters raise the question of whether the situation could ever be the same as before. It is questionable, for instance, whether patients, having recovered from an injury, or a serious illness, are truly the same as before, or whether they just have the impression that they have returned to their previous “ideal” state of health (Frank, 2013).

It is precisely the lack of response to these issues that leads to crises in many spheres of life, whereas the disease itself, the

current pandemic, is not a crisis in the strict sense of the term, but rather a disaster. One of the aims of this volume has been to reduce the disaster risk, by dealing with the post-disaster recovery through chapters which examine the pandemic consequences, either through the most appropriate ethical accounts, or new recommendations. Specific protocols have even been developed for dealing with the pandemic. This knowledge should be used in potential future disasters, so as to avoid facing more crises than strictly necessary. Considering the challenge trials, debates on mandatory vs. compulsory vaccination, vaccine hesitancy and rejection this volume offers fresh insights into the ethical approaches which could or should be applied in a next pandemic.

The latest pandemic officially ended in May 2023. It resulted in more than 770 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and almost 7 million deaths. Since then, the coronavirus has not been a major health or security threat on either the local or the global level. However, it is a risk that we all have to live with, and a major threat for those being infected and especially for the vulnerable individuals and groups. Accordingly, COVID-19 as a disaster, has had its own specific characteristics which are already the subject of research, and while the distinction between the concepts of crisis and disaster may appear as only a minor aspect, it may also very well be considered a necessary step in understanding and addressing future challenges, and become beneficial in the battle with potential pandemics and crises. Some of the chapters from this volume imply that the distinction between disaster and crisis is the key to understanding (not only) the recent pandemic, and proceed further to defend this conceptual thesis and examine its practical implications from sociological, political, ethical, and medical points of view. From the various national responses presented, based on various ethical accounts and epistemological distinctions (Mitrović, 2020), more critical existential issues arise that prove to be highly important in researching susceptibility, vulnerability, and resilience of various social groups (Mitrović, 2015) and global populations.

This volume aims to contribute to elucidating some of these basic features of the groups in disasters, in different social contexts, as well as from the perspectives of different disciplines.

Such orientation opens the door to decreasing vulnerability and susceptibility, and enhancing resilience.

Susceptibility means “the state of being susceptible” or “easily affected.” In the natural hazard terms, susceptibility is related to spatial aspects of the hazard. It refers to the tendency of an area to undergo the effects of a certain hazardous process (e.g., floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, subsidence, etc.), without taking into account either the moment of occurrence, or potential victims and economic losses (Domínguez-Cuesta, 2013). Susceptibility linked to slope instabilities, for instance, indicates the tendency of an area to breakdown. According to Brabb (1984), susceptibility is the probability of an event happening in a specific zone, depending on the correlation of the instability-determining factors with the distribution of past movements.

Considering that the same disaster does not have the same effect on different social groups or countries with various grade of vulnerability and susceptibility (Mitrović, 2015), we have used the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study applied in different contexts, fields, and countries. The readers will be introduced to such examples through the perspective of shifting political discourses and ambivalent, or even reversed political ideologies of various political organizations and social groups. The impact of a pandemic on various groups on the existential level is analyzed through bioethical, social, and perspective of human rights. Such an approach opens the door to redefining the concept of disaster, and applying a new and transdisciplinary approach to all aspects of disasters. For example, communication must be socially adequate and relevant to the situation. Preparedness needs to include not only self-sustainability but often exchangeability based on solidarity which includes obliteration of social apathy, as well as calls for action in acceptance of the lessons learned from the previous disaster (Mitrović & Zack, 2018). Listening to and applying the voices of the community can result in avoiding or mitigating unpopular mandatory measures that characterized the recent pandemic. Practically, this implies timely reacting to the burnout syndromes of caregivers, while permanently working on equal social distribution and promotion of the vaccines.

This edited volume brings together an international and multidisciplinary collection of essays that examine the ethical,

political, and legal issues that arose during COVID-19 and the lessons that can be learned with implications for future disasters. Presented chapters explore issues from a broad conceptual base, but also address specific problems, cases and events. The contributions in this multidisciplinary volume are based on a variety of methodologies, including philosophical and legal analyses, empirical investigations, scoping reviews and national case studies with the topic of human rights in specific contexts.

COVID-19 has raised a number of ethical issues, many of which lie at the interface between public health ethics and clinical ethics. As the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the resulting disease, COVID-19, became more widely known, governments and public health authorities made decisions with ethical, political and legal components. Various types of restrictions were introduced, raising ethical questions about the balance between public and individual welfare. The information used to make these decisions raised ethical issues for the news media and social media. The different impacts of COVID-19 on various populations raised issues of justice and equity. Research into the virus, the disease and the restrictions and interventions to prevent and treat the disease raised further ethical issues. Once vaccines were available, their limited availability raised questions of distributive justice. At each stage of the pandemic, various resources were scarce and had to be allocated according to principles of triage and fairness. The chapters explore these and other related ethical challenges which were triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to ethical decisions, political decisions affect the daily lives of the population and, in critical times, may even be of existential importance for some individuals and groups. In parallel with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which caused the outbreak, and shortly thereafter the pandemic of the COVID-19 infection, different political versions of COVID-19 began to spread, mainly represented by intertwining terms such as disaster and crisis. Pandemics are usually defined as disasters, but in most political expressions, COVID-19 was described as a crisis, which is ongoing by definition, so the term has perhaps been misused in this case to justify the pre-pandemic discrimination in the unequal distribution of existential practices such as medical triage, equal access to

medical equipment, or hesitancy in some medical recommendations. There were clear cases of age being used as a proxy to decide on life-saving procedures, as well as of tired health workers, using some everyday stereotypes in their professional work.

There have also been issues with quarantine, the legitimacy of the state of emergency in some pandemic phases, mandatory vaccination and hesitancy, and the public response to all of these. All of the policy issues during a pandemic raise general societal concerns about the legitimacy of the system in critical situations such as disasters, as well as post-crisis. An objective approach to the elements of disaster and crisis in COVID-19 should serve as a bellwether for future political action in similar situations.

The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UNESCO, 2005) and national constitutions should be guarantors of the service of public health and well-being (including autonomy) during a pandemic. However, some governments, or even state presidents have been overtaking judiciary roles and became the arbiters of public measures to contain the pandemic. Their attitudes have ranged from negating the pandemic to using lockdowns, AI, and surveillance, in order to restrict personal freedoms under the laws applied in public health emergencies.

2. Contributions

Chapters of this volume are interdisciplinary contributions that address multiple areas, such as the relationship between ethics and politics, or questions of legal ethics. Chapters address the dilemmas of how emergencies were handled in different countries (e.g., Serbia, Israel, Brazil, USA, EU); how vulnerable groups (disabled, African-Americans, Roma, and other people of color, homeless, prisoners, and older people) were treated in various national frameworks; what kind of discrimination they faced, and what kind of racism was dominant during the pandemic; which measures should have been taken to eliminate such discrimination, and how we could achieve the global aim of best preparation for saving as many lives as possible; what ethical accounts should be used in future vaccine trials and mandatory vaccination; and how political polarization has influenced the population's resilience and relevant

crises. In other words, what kind of lessons have been learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to improve ethical decision-making in disasters and manage and alleviate the potential crises caused by a catastrophic event?

2.1. From Social and Ethical Perspective in COVID-19 to Disaster Studies

In their co-authored contribution “A Scoping Review of Ethical Arguments About COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates”, Zia Haider, Annie Silleck, and Dónal O’Mathúna start from the well-known fact that vaccination is among the most successful public health interventions ever introduced, and it has led to the reduction and elimination of some diseases. However the authors argue that, despite that, for some people its effectiveness and safety remains controversial, and especially in the case of COVID-19 vaccines. Such controversy intensifies when public health authorities, employers or governments make, or consider making, vaccines mandatory. Opinions were divided over whether any COVID-19 vaccination mandate would be ethical. The authors undertook a scoping review of the ethical arguments for and against mandatory vaccination policies, in order to identify the primary ethical arguments raised on both sides of this ethical debate. The authors concluded that the ethical arguments on both sides of the issue should be openly and transparently discussed by all stakeholders. If mandates are deemed necessary, they should be supported by the ethical concerns and limitations about informed consent, right to refuse, freedom of belief and religion, liberty and freedom, as well as vaccine safety. They emphasize that, before imposing mandates, authorities have obligations to provide accurate information about the risks and benefits of a disease and its vaccines, to encourage as many people as possible to get vaccinated, and ensure that the vaccines are easily obtained and distributed in an equitable manner.

In his contribution “Ethical Challenges and Hesitancy Associated with (Mandatory) Vaccination against COVID-19,” Miroslav Radenković starts with the WHO’s classification of COVID-19 as a pandemic and strongly advises that the global populace be shielded from the further spread of SARS-CoV-2 through fundamental

preventive measures, as well as through widespread vaccination, even if it may be mandatory for some populations. His chapter implies that mandatory vaccination increases compliance with vaccination agendas. At the global level, in the case of COVID-19, such a measure has been deemed ethically justified if the threat to public health was assessed to be serious, the population's confidence in its efficacy and safety was high, and the anticipated utility was superior to alternatives, but also if the penalties for noncompliance were balanced. Unfortunately, it has been discovered that in certain cases, unsubstantiated data and medically misconstrued information on vaccine efficacy, duration of protection, and probable adverse effects were the most important reasons for the COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy.

Considering relevant experiences with COVID-19, further analysis of (mandatory) vaccination hesitancy is still more than required, with the careful consideration of basic ethical principles that might give us some rational future directions concerning this highly sensitive issue.

In their contribution "Research Ethics Issues in Basic and Clinical Studies during the COVID-19 Pandemics" Zoran Todorović and Dragan Hrnčić analyze many issues concerning research ethics that the COVID-19 pandemic has opened. Initially, the focus of the investigation is directed at the origin of the virus, opening the question of moral and other responsibility for the emergence of the pandemic. The safety of medicines and vaccines has become a question for experts and the general public, and ongoing clinical trials have not removed distrust. The standards for conducting clinical trials for drugs in development were relaxed, even according to the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the European Medicines Agency, which created doubts about the balance between their reliability and the speed of their implementation. Redefining bioethical principles in public health research proved necessary, and easing measures against COVID-19 only softened the public debate. However, some research ethics issues still need to be resolved. Conducting both basic and clinical studies unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic was also affected during this period, facing a lack of funding, changes in infrastructure and resources, and a sudden need to refocus the research. Discussions

on ethical issues related to allocating available resources and the urgent need to terminate some ongoing research studies should be addressed in contemporary scientific literature. On the other hand, the demand for rapid knowledge production in order to secure prompt reactions from various health system stakeholders resulted in questions about the peer-review process. That opened some ethical issues related to responsible publication practice, emphasizing the role of research ethics at every single step of the COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 biomedical, basic, and clinical studies.

In the contribution titled “Detecting Resilience Issues among Marginal Groups as a Bioethical Goal”, Veselin Mitrović assumes that bioethical judgments impact actual medical and political practice, which, in turn, impacts the living conditions of marginalized groups. In this chapter, the author analyzes the resilience of marginalized social groups in two ways: 1) through a normative aspect of bioethics concerning moral judgments and their justification, and 2) through an empirical aspect, concerning the actual living conditions and changes of marginalized groups.

The author hypothesized that resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic is not closely related to the pre-existing medical issues of a group. Alternatively, structurally deep-rooted racial, social, and economic conditions significantly reduce a group’s resilience. The main concern is converting the miserable survival of the most endangered, marginalized, and discriminated groups into an acceptable one. However, the recent pandemic of COVID-19 has put even more pressure on vulnerable groups, thus weakening their resilience even more.

The chapter deals with the nature of being marginal before the pandemic and the ways in which racism and discrimination lower the resilience of marginal groups, i.e., making them even more vulnerable in the case of a disaster and endangering their survival in the mid- and long-terms. Consequently, the author assumes that the general request for the normalization of the everyday lives of the majority makes COVID-19 an ongoing disaster, i.e., a longstanding crisis for the discriminated and marginal groups. The author concludes that avoiding such an outcome is in the holistic picture of the pandemic an important issue that many bioethicists and clinicians must accept.

In her contribution “Rethinking Human Security in the Post-COVID-19 World – Lessons Learned from the Human-centric Approach to Health Security,” Slađana Ćurčić uses the case of the recent COVID-19 pandemic as an example of a health-security nexus. She posits that the pandemic is a health threat, but leaves space for various approaches to health security we may choose. The main aim of her contribution is to analyze COVID-19 as a health threat through the human-centric approach to health security, and to consider the relevance of this approach in the post-COVID-19 context. The research question is: what is the special value of this approach in conceptualizing COVID-19, as well as future health security threats, both in terms of theoretical contributions and practical strategies and policy solutions? The methodology used here was an academic literature review and secondary data analysis relevant to assessing the state of human security, like the Human Development Index. The theoretical and practical implications of the human security analysis of COVID-19 are discussed as a relevant factor of the health security field. In addition to the lessons that we have learned from COVID-19 that human security should be prioritized at the policy level, simultaneously with state security, the author concludes that rethinking the human security concept in the post-COVID-19 context could contribute both to clarifying the human-centered approach to health security and redefining the concept of health security itself.

2.2. Discourses and Concepts of Law and Politics in COVID-19

In his contribution “Constructivism in Times of Political Crisis,” Michael Buckley, analyzes the impacts of human-induced risks such as those in the COVID-19 pandemic. Reimagining the liberal tradition to account for these risks will require a concept of social resilience to fortify existing conceptions of social stability. His chapter argues that a leading account of stability – an overlapping consensus – is not resilient under stress. It explains how human-induced hazards contribute to a process of pernicious polarization, and how pernicious polarization illuminates a process by which consensus breaks down and begins to reverse itself. He concludes that

a complete account of what must transpire for a society to absorb, withstand, anticipate, or recover from this destabilizing process outstrips the conceptual resources contained with an overlapping consensus, rendering it vulnerable to the human-induced threats we can expect to encounter for years to come.

In their cross-national, co-authored contribution “Human Rights and Ethics in the Management of the Covid-19 Pandemic: the Experience of Brazil and Israel,” Karen da Costa and Shlomit Zuckerman, have analyzed the effects and intertwining of the local legal measures with the universal human rights within the case studies of Brazil and Israel. The two countries were characterized by different approaches, and specific subcases. The similarity was that the pandemic uncovered deeply rooted structural issues and questioned the legitimacy of the system, which led to political changes in Brazil, and citizens’ protests in Israel. The paper underscores the global impact of COVID-19, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity. While countries experienced the disease differently, the collective response necessitates global cooperation for effective pandemic management. The authors conclude that, despite diverse local and individual experiences, global collaboration is vital in addressing future pandemics, offering valuable insights into the intricate relationship between pandemic management, human rights, and ethical considerations.

In their contribution “Between Securitization and Desecuritization: The Shifting Discourse on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Serbia,” Pavle Nedić and Marko Mandić, use the theory of securitization and desecuritization, in examining the political decisions reflected in the anti-pandemic measures during the crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Securitization implies that an issue is constituted as a security threat through the use of a specific speech act performed by the securitizing actors in order to gain support by the audience for the emergency measures. As in the previous cases of Brazil and Israel, the authors argue that the constant change of the security discourse on the issue caused a loss of the authority possessed by the securitizers, induced a state of confusion among the citizens (audience), and resulted in some political shifts during 2020.

In her contribution, “Towards Global Health Governance or Towards Global Control of States and People?” Mirjana Dokmanović

presents the key challenges in the ongoing reform of the global health regime based on the initiative to adopt a binding Pandemic Treaty and a reviewed International Health Regulation. The author claims that the proposed regulation gives the World Health Organization (WHO) the ultimate authority to decide on all issues related to public health, as well as the monopoly on informing about measures to prevent and combat pandemics and other public health emergencies. The author warns that the proposed centralized global health governance opens the door to corruption, and she proposes some anti-corruption measures to be implemented in the new regulation to avoid the concentration of the decision-making power concerning all health-related issues in the hands of a few.

In his contribution “The Attitude of Far-right Organizations Towards Measures Against the Covid-19 Pandemic in Serbia 2020–2022,” Jovo Bakić acquaints the readers with the relation between an authoritarian attitude of the political regime, and reactions of a wide spectrum of far rights organization in Serbia during COVID-19. The author hypothesizes that the harsher the measures against COVID-19, the harsher far-right criticism should have been. However the author draws the conclusion that the right-wingers’ response to the measures of the Serbian political regime have not been consistent in all cases, thereby trying to show which of these organizations have been under the control or influence of the regime.

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