



ORIGINAL PAPER

COVID, VALUES, AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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ISSN: 2283-8961

Keywords:

Covid, values, belief systems, social action

The global impact of the Covid pandemic has highlighted the fragility of health services, social and commercial structures, and political systems. In many countries hospitals and community services have been under extreme pressure, unable to respond adequately either to the demands of Covid or the ongoing needs of those with other medical or social problems. The challenges of rolling out global vaccine programmes have led to significant supply and logistical problems, also the prioritizing of wealthier countries over those less fortunate. The impact on commercial activity has resulted in business closures, increased unemployment, and economic uncertainty. Social structures, vital to community and family life, have been shaken by ongoing uncertainty, repeated lockdowns, and the personal tragedies of lives broken or lost. The failure of many political leaders to exercise wise, timely and science-based

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leadership has resulted in thousands of preventable deaths, and undermined confidence in democratic decision-making processes.

Covid has exposed the values of modern society, driven by the quest for economic prosperity and individual wealth, and the difficulty we have in dealing compassionately and fairly with shared adversity. With Covid, and more broadly with other shared challenges, including climate change, sustainability, and the need for international collaboration, we are facing the reality that behaviour, be it at the individual or tribal level, has consequences. We are in one of those periods in human history when the stakes are high for all of us, and the strategies we pursue to address shared challenges will have consequences, for good or ill, for all.

Do social and health scientists have a special role to play as our ‘global village’ struggles to clarify the values which should guide collective decision-making and future action? Colleagues in other academic fields – biologists, environmentalists, economists, lawyers, political scientists - have their own areas of knowledge and skill which may, and sometimes may not, help inform and guide trustworthy decision-making and action implementation processes, nationally and internationally. Can those who study behaviour, health, and illness, contribute to our understanding of how belief systems and values may either help or hinder trustworthy decision-making and collaborative action in the future?

The development of the social sciences, and pursuit of the study of human behaviour, resulted, perhaps inevitably, in conflict with some sectors and structures within society which have in the past defined and controlled the values by which we live. For millennia religious leaders have been the major authorities on values governing human behaviour, values derived from beliefs seen to be divinely ordained. But as the once dominant influence of established religion has declined in many countries, other social forces have become more prominent in shaping our values and shared or competing priorities - forces including global movements promoting action on social, environmental, or other issues, social media facilitating everything from friendship networks to conspiracy theories, and powerful commercial and political interests pursuing their own overt or covert agendas. The decline of religious influence over

cultural and societal values has created the opportunity and responsibility, for good or ill, to clarify what we value and collective action we should pursue to shape our shared future.

Values are deeply rooted in our belief systems, in the ways in which we perceive our world, the shared emotional history of family or tribe, and our well established behaviour patterns. Our values are arguably as much a product of the human imagination, our capacity to create our psychological environment, as our capacity for rational thought and logical analysis. According to acclaimed historian of religion, Karen Armstrong (2000), at the centre of fundamentalism and its rigid belief systems, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are the emotions of fear and rage. One could argue that fear and rage are also at the core of the white supremacy movement, motivated by fear of and rage against the perceived loss of much valued racial privilege. Deep divisions in the United States, with their conflicting beliefs and values, arise, according to Barak Obama, from ‘an empathy deficit, the inability to recognise ourselves in one another’ (Onos E., 2020). What we understand as ‘truth’ may be more a reflection of our beliefs than information available to us. The basis for establishing ‘truth’ is increasingly and widely debated, in an environment of ‘fake news’, distrust of evidence-based data, and widespread and sophisticated promotion of conspiracy theories. The association of conservative religious beliefs, acceptance of conspiracy theories, and reluctance to take the Covid vaccine, reported in the US media (General J. e Naik R., 2021; Dias. E e Graham R., 2021), illustrates the need to challenge beliefs and behaviour at variance both with research evidence and measures to protect and promote the public good.

That our world as we know it will undergo unprecedented change over the next few decades, physically and socially, is widely accepted, though not by all. The evolutionary process has given *homo sapiens* a remarkable ability to adapt and adjust to change, but the process of such adaptation is not without cost, and successful adaptation is not guaranteed. The risks are great, that self-interest will outweigh public good, that division and conflict will win against collaborative action, and that totalitarian regimens will supplant democratic processes. Shared values and cooperative action will be critical to effective adaptation to the global changes we face. Challenging destructive dissension and misinformation, establishing bridges

between differing cultures and world views, and applying knowledge of and skills in dealing with the vagaries of human beliefs and behaviour – core components of the social and health sciences - will be vital tools as we face an uncertain and challenging future.

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