

Article

Reframing Leadership: Jacinda Ardern’s Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Submitted: 29 July 2022 | Accepted: 16 November 2022 | Published: 28 February 2023

Abstract

Women’s underrepresentation in political leadership has been a constant global challenge during recent decades. Although women’s leadership and its impact on organizational and country performance have been systematically explored, new research avenues are opened through the emergence of various crises. Crises constitute instances in which the intersection of leadership and communication is shaped and enforced, and how female leaders tackled and managed crises has been found to be different from that of their male counterparts in various instances. This study aims to examine the crisis communication approach taken by Jacinda Ardern during the 2020 global public health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Female leaders were found to enforce a more effective and persuasive communication approach during the crisis, but Jacinda Ardern’s crisis management approach has been grounded in a feminist ethics of care since her response to the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019. This article aims to emphasize the importance of communication in reframing leadership, by analyzing Jacinda Ardern’s Facebook communication from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. By examining how her messaging is embedded in values and attitudes specific to the ethics of care, we contribute to theorizing ways in which crisis communication is grounded in feminist ethics.

Keywords

crisis communication; ethics of care; female leaders; Jacinda Ardern; leadership

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Global Inequalities in the Wake of Covid-19: Gender, Pandemic, and Media Gaps” edited by Margreth Lünenborg (Freie Universität Berlin), Miriam Siemon (Freie Universität Berlin), and Wolfgang Reißmann (Freie Universität Berlin).

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1. Introduction

The global health crisis catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a great opportunity to assess political leadership across the world. It was a time of utter uncertainty and unprecedented decisions needed to protect public health, but also a time to communicate those decisions to the public to ensure compliance with such extreme measures. In science communication, audiences not only expect competence, but also for communicators to report in an objective manner, substantiate their arguments, explain complex issues, navigate uncertainty with transparency (Janich, 2020), and show empathy.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also provided exceptional opportunities for women leaders to display feminine protectionism and to leverage women’s caregiving role in political settings, and these feminine attributes were publicly appreciated in media coverage. For instance, Jacinda Ardern (P. H. Huang, 2020), Angela Merkel (Jaworska, 2021; Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2022; Raupp, 2022; Wodak, 2021), or Sanna Marin (Llopis-García & Pérez-Sobrino, 2020) showed strength in ensuring compliance, while also displaying feelings of caring, empathy, and compassion (Johnson & Williams, 2020), in stark contrast with the inadequate answer of male leaders like Donald Trump (Hatcher, 2020; Just et al., 2022; Tian & Yang, 2022), Boris Johnson (Newton, 2020;

Sanders, 2020), or Jair Bolsonaro (Kakisina et al., 2022; Raupp, 2022). A male exception among leaders was former president of the Dominican Republic Danilo Medina, who made public appeals to compassion at the beginning of the crisis (Dada et al., 2021). Although studies show that a leader's gender does not secure favorable Covid-19 outcomes, women-led governments acted quicker in the initial phase of the crisis and were more successful at eliciting collaboration from the population (Coscieme et al., 2020), and women's prioritizing of public spending on healthcare made them better prepared for the crisis (Abrás et al., 2021).

Building on a growing body of research, this article aims to further "Jacinda studies" by examining how the ethics of care surfaced in Jacinda Ardern's Facebook communication during the 2020 Covid-19-generated crisis. By analyzing how her messaging is embedded in dimensions of the ethics of care, we contribute to theorizing ways in which crisis communication is grounded in feminist ethics, thus starting from the following research question: What are the prevailing dimensions that Ardern's ethics of care exhibit in each of the three stages of the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Ethics of Care

The debate on the need for an ethics of care reemerged as the pandemic revealed the depth of human vulnerability (Taylor, 2020). Scientific literature underlines that the ethics of care is characterized by transparency, responsibility, and honesty (Jin et al., 2018), brought together by a strong sense of moral conscience (Bowen, 2008).

In essence, the ethics of care celebrates benevolence as a virtue and emphasizes the importance of a tailored response to individual vulnerability, around which it is centered. In applying the ethics of care, political leaders demonstrate their nuanced understanding of contextual sensitivity, acknowledging the vulnerability of certain groups. Essentially, care represents emotional concern about others' well-being. What remains central to the concept of the ethics of care is *care* itself (Edwards, 2009). Tronto (2010) described competence, responsiveness, responsibility, and attentiveness as the four main instances of care, thus capturing the essence of what is needed to restore the conditions that allow people to live together as well as possible (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Based on previous research (McGuire et al., 2020), we conceptualized competence as a dimension of the ethics of care that encompasses international comparison, expert advice, gathering facts, and anticipating based on facts. When it comes to responsiveness, we conceptualized it as representing acts of information, empowerment, outlying responsibilities, and communicating confidence in people and the system in general. Responsibility was conceptualized as acts of communicating strong decisions, coordination, and penalizing non-compliance.

Lastly, based on Proverbs et al.'s (2021) work, we conceptualized attentiveness as the ability to recognize cultural vulnerability, economical vulnerability, and human vulnerability, with empathy as an essential characteristic.

2.2. Crisis Communication

According to scholars in crisis communication (Coombs, 2015; George, 2012; Zaremba, 2014), each stage of a crisis can seriously impact the performance of a political leader, as each stage has its distinct characteristics. Crisis communication is event-oriented, and it is essentially mediated (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). The first stage, i.e., preparing before the crisis (also referred to as the prevention, planning, or pre-crisis stage) seeks to outline a plan to manage the crisis, research the topic, and prepare the response. Studies mention that already in this stage there must be a crisis communication team in place—which Jacinda Ardern makes very clear existed, from her very first message on February 28, when she introduced the minister of health. She later specifically mentions various ministers of her cabinet (e.g., the minister of finance, on March 16; the director-general of health, Dr. Ashley Bloomfield, on April 5; the minister of education, on April 8), as well as the cabinet altogether, in many of her messages. This stage is also crucial in identifying scenarios for the upcoming crisis, so that the response is efficient and effective, anticipating as much as possible and limiting the damage.

The second stage is managing the crisis, which implies recognition and containment (Cheng, 2018). This is also the stage in which communication is king because it allows the spokesperson (in this case, the prime minister) to make information available to those who are directly and indirectly affected. This stage opens with an initial statement (which Jacinda Ardern delivered on March 23) and exhibits key features such as using the media to push updates on the crisis, ensuring business continuity, and urging people to remain calm. A common advice in this stage is related to the necessity of leaders to be regular in their communication to inhibit rumors or fake news from reaching the public through alternative lines of information (Collins et al., 2016).

The last stage of crisis communication is the recovery (also known as post-crisis or post-mortem). In this phase, the leader imagines a world in which the main obstacle was overcome, and shares what they—the society or organization they lead—have learned from that experience. Post-crisis emerges as a context in which the public becomes more critical over decisions taken during the crisis, thus scholars (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) argue that post-crisis communication implies efforts towards salvaging legitimacy and/or reputation. This stage also represents an opportunity for leaders to make public commitments to rebuild and to minimize the uncertainty following any crisis. As a matter of fact, Jacinda Ardern often refers to the "economic recovery from the virus" (Wilson, 2020) that her cabinet was focused on.

3. Jacinda Ardern: Reframing Leadership Through Communication of Care

Serving as the 40th prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern is the third woman to hold the position and was the youngest female head of state at the time of her election, aged 37 in 2017. The exceptional character of her tenure is further linked to a gendered issue of becoming the second elected head of state, after Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, to give birth while in office. Jacinda Ardern has reframed leadership and communication in plenty of ways, as her leadership was tested in critical times.

As a self-proclaimed feminist, Jacinda Ardern revitalized New Zealand's political landscape and created such momentum that experts are calling her rise to power "Jacindamania" (Żukiewicz & Martín, 2022). Crisis communication propelled Ardern to unprecedented global prominence, showing that the politics of empathy can engender a real and massive impact (Mustaqim, 2019). Proverbs et al. (2021) explore how Ardern's feminist approach to crisis communication following the Christchurch mosque's attacks influences the media agenda and public opinion. Jacinda Ardern's leadership performance is deeply embedded in the ethics of care (Jong, 2020), as she "made meaning and managed emotions by incorporating care in her symbolic crisis response" (Proverbs et al., 2021, p. 16). She acts as a compassionate leader, calling for closer ties with the community under attack and for a common responsibility to contribute to "a place that is diverse, that is welcoming, that is kind and compassionate" (Ardern, 2019), while also showing sensitivity to specific cultural practices, such as wearing a hijab when meeting the Muslim community or naming the attacker a terrorist—even if he was an Australian citizen, unfit for the conventional portrait of a terrorist. Reflecting upon politicians publicly manifesting emotion, Jacinda Ardern makes the case for empathy: "We're there to feel empathy, we're there to reflect on what it would be like to walk in others' shoes, and if we try to cauterise that, what kind of politicians would we be?" (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020, p. 168). Thus, kindness appears to be foundational in identity construction in Jacinda Ardern's rhetoric and embodied effect (Elliott, 2020). In the 2022 Harvard Commencement speech, Jacinda Ardern once again makes the case for empathy in bridging differences among individuals, concluding that "there are some things in life that make the world feel small and connected, [and one should] let kindness be one of them" (Ardern, 2022).

Ardern displayed a unique fusion of strength and empathy in a context in which Jamieson's (1995) double bind is still a struggle faced by women in political leadership; this catch-22 translates into women being deemed unfeminine and thus inauthentic when adopting masculine leadership styles or weak and unfit for politics when acting according to female gender expectations. However, women in politics tend to have greater

emotional freedom than their male counterparts (Karl & Cormack, 2021), which can be leveraged into their communication strategy. Jacinda Ardern's approach escapes the classic bind and elevates her to an exemplary leader, whose "vision for a better world gained global attention at a time when world leaders were facing scrutiny and criticism" (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021, p. 236). Ardern not only shows mastery in relating and connecting to others but also transforms leadership and the way politics is enacted, embracing diversity through culturally sensitive gestures that carry political significance (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). Jacinda Ardern's success in office is strongly rooted in a particular performative style that reflects "communication skills across mass and social media, empathy and compassion, combined with firmness and constancy, and command of policy detail" (Craig, 2021, p. 289).

In 2020, Jacinda Ardern entered the Covid-19 crisis with the edge of being a trusted leader, rating high on trust and empathy and very low on personal ego (Mazey & Richardson, 2020). Jamieson (2020) showed that, beyond the country's circumstances that constituted an advantage in tackling the crisis, Ardern's response to the emergence of the Covid-19 crisis was a generalizable lesson. The success of the national response to the crisis is largely owed to the leadership of the prime minister (Craig, 2021; Mazey & Richardson, 2020). In the early stages, Jacinda Ardern sought to reassure the public about the government's decisiveness and willingness to be led by expertise and evidence, then shifting to a more empathetic approach to encourage solidarity and meaning-making (McGuire et al., 2020). "'Go hard, go early' was not just a sound bite, but it encapsulated the government's approach to reduce the spread of the virus" (Jamieson, 2020, p. 602). The New Zealand approach was founded on key leadership practices meant to build the trust needed for collective action: being led by expertise, mobilizing collective effort, and enabling coping (Wilson, 2020). Thus, Jacinda Ardern's communication can serve as a compass in assessing a leader's response to the global health crisis. Jacinda Ardern's approach is not free from criticism: Her strategy could be criticized as isolationist rather than fostering a global effort (Simpson et al., 2021). However, the Ardern-led approach enjoyed a high level of cross-party support and an overwhelming endorsement from the public, with an approval rating of over 80% throughout the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, as compared to the 48% average approval rating among G7 countries (Colmar Brunton, 2020).

Effective risk communication was enforced via a variety of features: transparency and the consistent communication of policy initiatives; clear and concise official communication; a government website designed to help individuals, communities, and businesses navigate the intricacies of Covid-19-related policies; as well as excellent science communicators who supported the government in communicating best practices for tackling

Covid-19 (Jamieson, 2020). Top scientific experts were not only present in formal press briefings, but also in Ardern's conversations (Saccà & Selva, 2021) on social media, carried out in a colloquial tone, to facilitate understanding by the public.

Another artifact of Ardern's effective leadership consists of adapting to an ever-evolving situation: where shortcomings emerge and the government largely responds by adjusting the strategy, doubled by presenting motivations and implications for doing so (Jamieson, 2020). Through her discursive performance, the prime minister enables citizens to cope with change and act for the collective good of citizens, framed by Ardern as the "team of 5 million" (Hafner & Sun, 2021; L. Huang, 2021; Menzies & Raskovic, 2020). Capitalizing on shared identities, Ardern positions herself as a leader sharing a stake with her audience in the decision-making process, presents her decisions as moral imperatives, and enables collective agency so that citizens address the pandemic through mutual solidarity (Vignoles et al., 2021). In her people-centric approach, Jacinda Ardern focuses on describing and relating to people's experiences:

Be kind. I know people will want to act as enforcers. And I understand that. People are afraid and anxious. We will play that role for you. What we need from you is [for you to] support one another....Be strong and be kind. (Ardern, 2020)

Through her communication, Ardern carries out a unifying campaign that galvanizes the collective will to suspend the citizenry's day-to-day life temporarily in support of lockdown measures (Jamieson, 2020). Widely recognized for her compassionate leadership (Simpson et al., 2021), Jacinda Ardern's communication enables her followers' resources and alleviates their distress during the meta-crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic (Saccà & Selva, 2021). Her daily briefings focused on open, honest, and straightforward communication, distinctive and motivational language, and expressions of care, including her characteristic appeals to kindness (Beattie & Priestley, 2021). Her empathetic style of communicating does not equal a soft approach to policy, but rather one that firmly walks the audience through each step of the governmental plan (Saccà & Selva, 2021).

Jacinda Ardern's skillful use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis led her to be crowned "the Facebook prime minister" by news media (Kapitan, 2020). In her Facebook activity, Ardern nurtures a close relationship with her audience, having live chats from home, and she presents herself as approachable and diligent, making time for her audience despite her busy and unpredictable work schedule (L. Huang, 2021). Jacinda Ardern's choice to use Facebook live sessions may thus be effective in reducing the hierarchy between her and the public, and in establishing a sense of solidarity (Martin-Anatias, 2021).

4. Methodology

The current article aims to examine how the ethics of care surfaced in Jacinda Ardern's public communication during the 2020 global public health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study investigates 44 speeches delivered by New Zealand's prime minister in 2020, between February 29 and June 8. Jacinda Ardern acted as the leader of a national crisis communication team, which seems to have carefully drafted and implemented a crisis communication plan, as described by George (2012). Her frequent public appearances during the crisis indicate that Ardern relied heavily on communication, thus proving she understood how important communication is in developing the relation between the leader and their followers (Gigliotti, 2016).

The evolving Covid-19 pandemic also uncovered the evolution of the prime minister's communication over the timeframe under analysis, allowing Ardern's messages to exhibit various characteristics of the ethics of care, different from one phase of the crisis to another. The aim of the analysis is to understand how the ethics of care manifested itself in Jacinda Ardern's communication both before, during, and after the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand. For this study, we broke the timeline into three major stages: (1) preparing before the crisis (which encompasses the timeframe between February 28, the date marking the first case of Covid-19 infection in New Zealand, and March 23, which also included Alert Level 2); the second phase is (2) managing the crisis (between March 23 and May 12, which encompasses the timeframe under Alert Levels 3 and 4, and then reverting to Alert Level 3; this phase also comprises the period that was declared a "state of national emergency"); finally, the last phase is (3) the start of the recovery (between May 13 and June 8, when the prime minister announced the country was moving down to Alert Level 1). Figure 1 provides a timeline of the pandemic and indicates the three stages we analyzed.

The body of data ($n = 44$) used in this study is constituted from updates on Covid-19 response briefings ($n = 27$), post-cabinet press conferences ($n = 13$), Facebook live broadcasts ($n = 2$), recorded statements ($n = 1$), and parliament addresses ($n = 1$) of Jacinda Ardern published on her Facebook page between February 28 and June 8, 2020. The analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti based on MS Word transcripts (realized via Speech to Text from Microsoft Azure) of Jacinda Ardern's public communication throughout the aforementioned timeframe. The transcripts are found in the Supplemental File in chronological order and will be further referenced using a code system based on Jacinda Ardern's initials and the number of the speech (i.e., JA1 for Speech 1, delivered on February 29). We analyzed the data using 15 codes that corresponded to four main code groups, which allowed us to examine the relation between the data, presenting how Ardern approached crisis communication from the perspective of the ethics

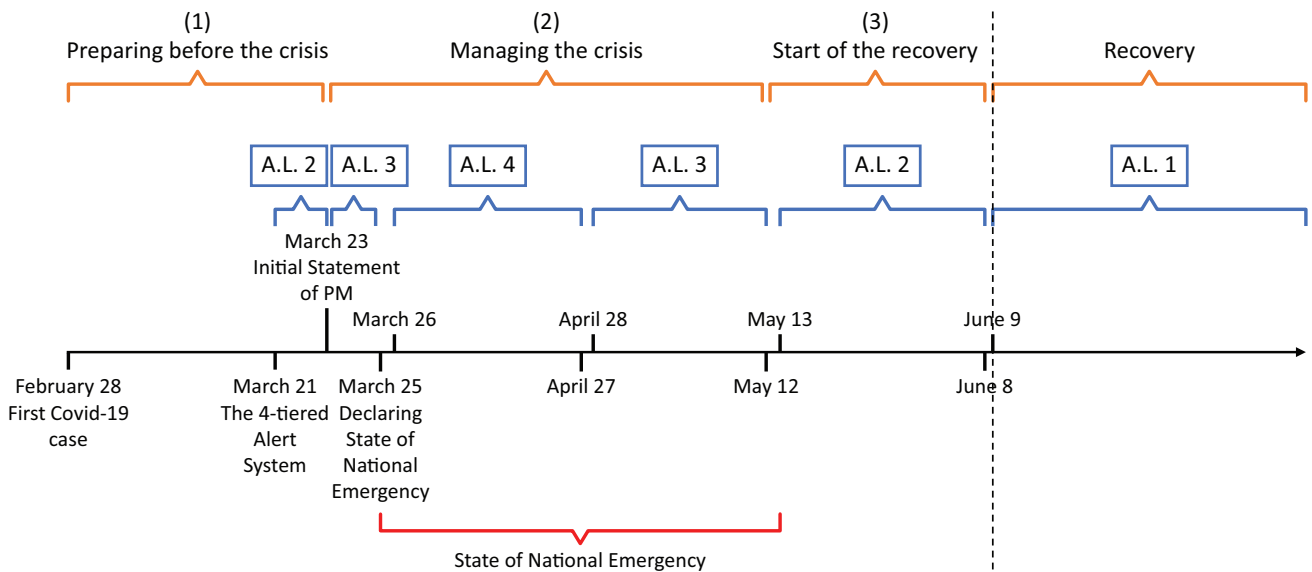


Figure 1. Timeline and stages of the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand.

of care. Figure 2 presents the code groups and codes we used for our analysis.

To determine intercoder reliability (Weathers et al., 2014), we analyzed a random sample of 20% of the total number of articles ($n = 10$). We used Krippendorff’s alpha for the calculation. The reliability coefficient for the analyzed category was .93, therefore providing stable estimates.

By conceptualizing the ethics of care as a style of communication that relies on the following four dimensions—competence, responsiveness, responsibility, and attentiveness—the aim of our research was to understand how Jacinda Ardern approached her public communication during the three major stages of the crisis. We, therefore, formulated the following research question: What are the prevailing dimensions that Ardern’s ethics of care exhibit in each of the three stages of the Covid-19 crisis in New Zealand?

5. Findings

Results indicate that the ethics of care practiced by New Zealand’s prime minister during the pandemic developed in a variety of forms throughout the three stages of the crisis. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the results.

Throughout the first stage of our analysis—i.e., (1) preparing before the crisis—the ethics of care practiced by New Zealand’s prime minister was mostly characterized by attentiveness (31.82%). Very often, Jacinda Ardern would express her empathy with those affected by the spreading of the virus. In this same stage of the crisis, attentiveness was characterized by Ardern’s frequent acknowledgment of people’s vulnerability in troubling times. On March 14 she declared: “We accept that for New Zealanders currently overseas, this is a stressful time, and we encourage any New Zealander needing consular assistance to contact the Ministry of Foreign

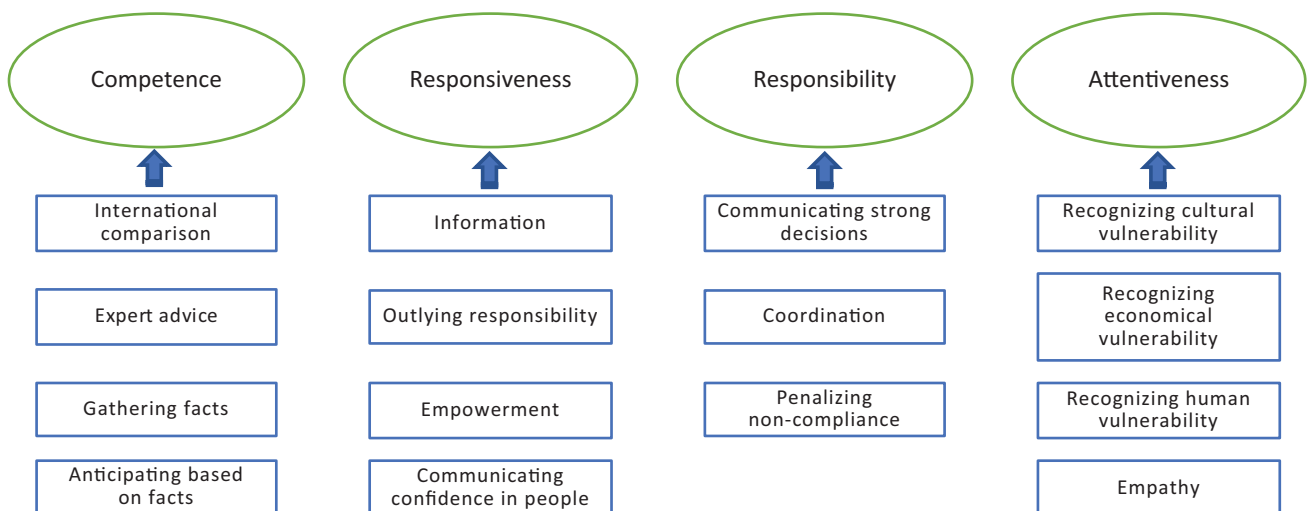


Figure 2. Data structure.

Table 1. Ethics of care across crisis phases in Jacinda Ardern’s discourses.

Ethics of care	Stages of crisis		
	(1) Preparing before the crisis	(2) Managing the crisis	(3) Start of the recovery
Competence	25%	19.31%	19.88%
Responsiveness	20.45%	28.28%	9.73%
Responsibility	22.73%	24.83%	29.82%
Attentiveness	31.82%	27.59%	40.57%
Totals	100%	100%	100%

Affairs” (JA3). Jacinda Ardern also reassured those that were more vulnerable of the support state institutions were preparing to offer: “We will also increase community support to those unable to support themselves in self-isolation” (JA3). “We are prepared for this rainy day” (JA4) she famously declared on March 16, anticipating the difficult times ahead and sending out the message that all efforts will be made to meet the needs of both people and the economic sector. In this first stage, Jacinda Ardern’s ethics of care was also characterized by competence (25%), as she many times relied on expert advice and was constantly seeking to gather facts and anticipate how the crisis would evolve based on the latter. However, the most noticeable characteristic was her constant reporting on what was happening in other countries. International comparison was one of the key features of her messages throughout the entire crisis, but mostly during this stage: “It is not realistic in New Zealand to only have a handful of cases. The international evidence proves that it is not realistic, and so we must plan and prepare for more cases” (JA3). A few days later, she would also declare:

While there remains no evidence of community outbreak in New Zealand to date, there continues to be significant outbreaks in other countries and that poses health risks for New Zealanders, as most cases recorded to date relate to people traveling here and bringing the virus with them. (JA6)

Although to a lesser degree, the ethics of care in this first stage of the crisis was also characterized by responsibility (22.73%). It is in this stage that Ardern stated her now famous principle of “going hard and going early” (Murray & Kras, 2020):

Ultimately, New Zealand must flatten the curve. That is why ultimately we must go hard and we must go early. We must do everything we can to protect the health of New Zealanders. That is exactly why to tackle this global pandemic cabinet made far reaching and unprecedented decisions today because these are unprecedented circumstances. (JA3)

The ethics of care in stage 1 was least characterized by responsiveness (20.45%). However, even in this stage, it becomes apparent that Ardern considers it auspicious

to convey her confidence in how the state, especially the health system of New Zealand, is designed to face such crises:

We have, as I say, a system that is world class and very, very good at situations like this. Keep in mind that the system went through this some years ago with SARS and New Zealand did have a case and the system worked exactly as we would expect. (JA1)

She also repeatedly expressed her confidence in citizens: “Finally, we are a tough, resilient people. We have been here before, but our journey will depend on how we work together” (JA3).

However, responsiveness came to prevail (28.28%) over other dimensions in Ardern’s ethics of care throughout the main part of the crisis, i.e., (2) managing the crisis. Jacinda Ardern’s bet was especially on empowerment, which is evident in statements such as:

Now I’m asking you to do everything you can to protect all of us. None of us can do this alone. Your actions will be critical to our collective effort to stop Covid-19. (JA8)

Your job is to save lives and you can do that by staying home and breaking the chain. (JA10)

Attentiveness came in close second (27.59%), thus proving she maintained her empathy, and was still aware of how vulnerable people were. Indicative of her approach is the message she delivered on March 31, 2020: “I do want to acknowledge that I do not underestimate the difficulty of the challenge of being an alert level 4 for families, for those living on their own, for anyone in New Zealand right now” (JA13). Responsibility accounted for 24.83% of Ardern’s ethics of care, with much of her attention concentrated towards penalizing non-compliance and stigmatizing those who do not respect restrictions: “While compliance has been generally strong, there are still some who I would charitably describe as ‘idiots’” (JA16). Later that month, she used the “team of 5 million” soundbite: “To get there, our team of 5 million needs to have zero tolerance for cases to complete our goal of eliminating the virus at Level 3” (JA28). The least developed dimension of Ardern’s ethics of care during this second stage of the crisis was competence. Even so, like the

first stage of the crisis, the main characteristic of competence in the second stage was international comparison. Ardern would frequently refer to what was happening outside the borders of New Zealand, either to legitimize her decisions or—most of the times—to put her country under a positive light as compared to other countries: “However, we did better than many other countries we compare ourselves to....Your efforts, New Zealand, have put us at the front of the peg and everyone should feel very proud of that” (JA31).

Our findings also highlight that attentiveness bounced back as the dominant dimension (40.57%) of Jacinda Ardern’s ethics of care in (3) start of the recovery. But whereas empathy was the main characteristic of attentiveness in stage 1, the last stage of the crisis directed most of Jacinda Ardern’s attention towards recognizing economic vulnerability. “We know that there will be job losses, and for many, losing their job will be incredibly hard on them and their family financially,” (JA41) Ardern declared on May 25, 2020. She would repeatedly refer to economic recovery packages and subsidies that her cabinet was preparing as a safety net for citizens that were financially affected by the pandemic. In this stage, responsibility was only secondary (29.82%) in Ardern’s ethics of care, many times referring to the coordination efforts the government was making in restarting the economy:

And as a result of our team’s hard work, we have scoped to get our economy moving again and in doing so not only avoid the worst of the health outcomes

others have experienced, we can also try to minimize some of the economic pain. (JA40)

Competence scored similar proportions (19.88%) to the ones in the previous stage of the crisis, ranking only third in Ardern’s ethics of care during the last stage of the crisis. Lastly, in less than one out of ten of her public statements, Ardern addressed responsibility as a dimension of her ethics of care. Figure 3 presents a diagram that visually shows the complex dynamic of Jacinda Ardern’s ethics of care across the three stages of the crisis.

6. Conclusions

The aim of the current article was twofold: on the one hand, to add to the burgeoning literature on political leadership in times of crisis; on the other, to offer a nuanced understanding of the ethics of care as applied by New Zealand’s prime minister through her communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research builds on the existing literature on the topic, as it has the advantage of applying a more holistic approach in comparison to previous studies that were published earlier during the pandemic (Jamieson, 2020; McGuire et al., 2020).

It is not uncommon for crisis communication to be researched from an ethical perspective, as the centrality of ethics in decision-making processes has become uncontested. The type of ethics regularly associated with crisis communication was the ethics of justice. This means that especially during a crisis, decisions should

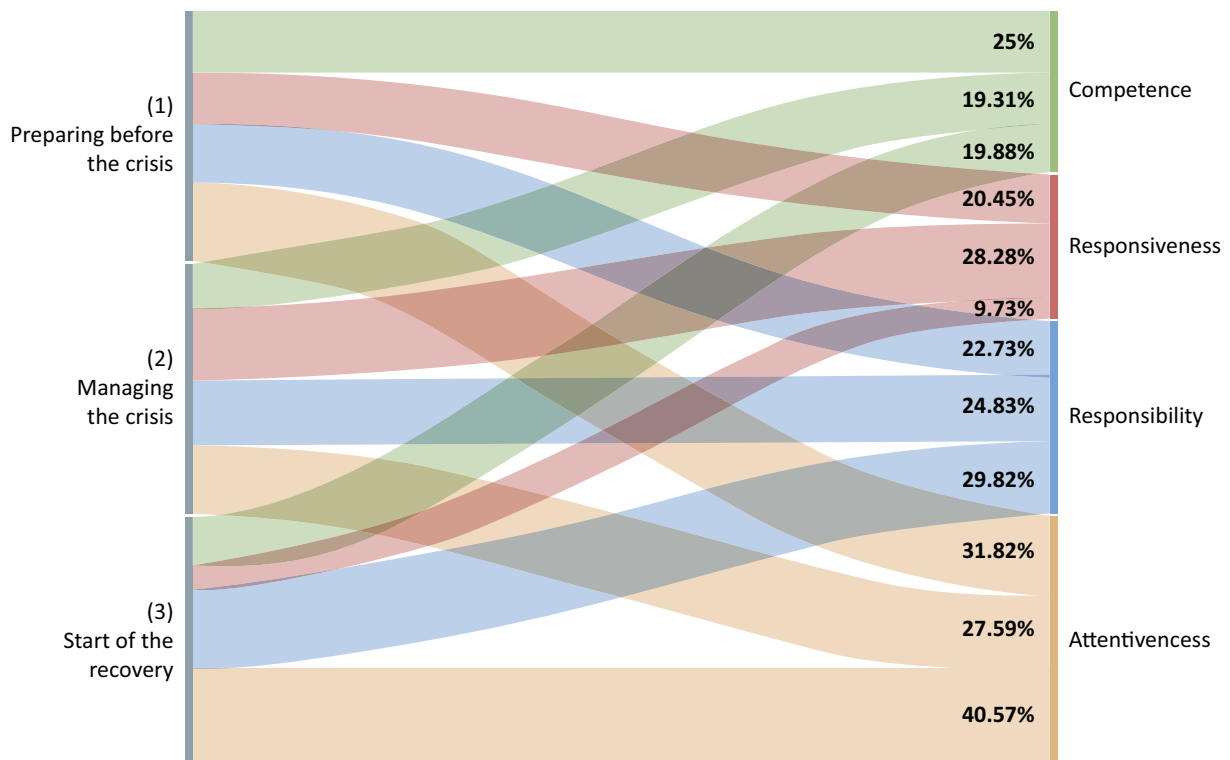


Figure 3. Diagram showing the dimensions of the ethics of care across crisis phases in Jacinda Ardern’s discourses.

be impartial and taken based on rigid rules to ensure that all parties involved in a crisis are treated equitably (Tao & Kim, 2017). However, the need for flexibility in taking decisions during a crisis led to reconsidering the role of ethics, which should ideally strengthen relations between individuals. Scholars then conceptualized the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1993), which was theorized from a feminist perspective that stresses the need of keeping decision-makers sensitive, involved, and responsive (Sandin, 2009). As such, with the introduction of the ethics of care, crisis communication suffered a shift of paradigm. The accent is no longer on the outcome as seen from the decision-maker's perspective, but on how those who directly suffer the consequences of a crisis receive the decisions. Scientific literature also identified that crisis communication can be accompanied by a so-called "ethics of apology," but in contrast with the "ethics of care," the first tends to develop into a normative standard that is characteristic of the post-crisis phase (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 353), whereas the latter is a characteristic of communication from the very beginning until the end of a crisis.

Although Jacinda Ardern is not the first or only political leader to use the rhetoric of kindness in politics since reaching power, her leadership and policies continue "being informed by a commitment to kindness" (Curtis & Greaves, 2020, p. 205), further capitalized on in her crisis communication. Comparative analyses would show whether this leadership approach is unique to Ardern, and investigating her public communication throughout the pandemic, across Covid-19 waves, would make a comprehensive account of her ethics of care. "Care is not a word generally associated with political crises" (Proverbs et al., 2021, p. 1), but Jacinda Ardern's leadership performance shows that care and empathy are critical components of crisis communication. In her Covid-19 rhetoric, Jacinda Ardern navigates kindness and control, and her answers in the media conferences largely feature positive assertions, thus displaying an ethical commitment to actual communicative exchange, as well as the clear delineation of a politician's role, strongly deferring to health science experts (Craig, 2021). Both these strategies helped convey the legitimacy of governmental action.

This research highlights that especially the beginning and the end of a crisis request acknowledging vulnerabilities that people face, as these tend to be amplified in moments of crisis (Yap et al., 2021). Our findings also reflect the fact that as a crisis deepens, responsiveness should be enhanced, since it allows communication to flow both ways between a leader and their followers (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Empowerment, expressing confidence in one another, and understanding where responsibilities begin and where they end could aid the efforts of both parties. Jacinda Ardern's handling of the pandemic represents a relative success, but it is not a recipe for perfection in political communication. However, amid dire straits for leadership all around the

world, her ethics of care provides a model that, if replicated, would aid communication in times of crisis.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitalization (Romania), CNCS—UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-PD-2021-0267, within PNCDI III.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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