

Ethics at a Glance

Ethic of Care

The **ethic of care** is discussed extensively in the nursing literature and specifically with respect to nursing ethics. The ethic of care has its roots in feminist thought; however, the two perspectives are not one and the same. In general, feminism argues for recognition that women tend to view the world and respond to the world differently than men. Sherwin (1992) points out how, historically, this has tended to devalue or deprive women of their status as moral agents by creating an anti-female bias in ethical theory.

Carol Gilligan (1993), and other writers, contend there are two different patterns of moral reasoning, with women generally exhibiting a relationally based ethic (predominantly concerned with care) and men preferring a rule-based ethic (more concerned with justice and rights). Gilligan labeled the first pattern of reasoning, with its focus on feelings and relationships, the ethic of care. The second pattern of reasoning, with its focus on developing universal rules in order to ensure fairness, was labeled the justice perspective. It is important to point out that both men and women are capable of reasoning in either perspective and may lean toward one in some situations and the other in other situations.

In the ethic of care, problem situations are approached in a more context-specific way that looks for resolution in the particular details of a problem situation. Universal principles are only valid if they can be applied with room for discretionary judgment based on the unique circumstances of each situation. There is primary attention paid to preserving relationships and generating options through better communication and cooperation. Also of concern is finding a solution that avoids harming anyone or that minimizes harm to all involved and that promotes caring in the situation.

Nel Noddings (1984) is often cited for her model of caring that is developed to be applicable to both men and women. Noddings suggests that, in reality, we are not guided by ethical principles but by the ideal of caring itself. The ethic of care demands that we maintain conditions under which caring can flourish. Noddings further notes specific standards or ideals within a caring relationship including caring itself, compassion, concern, and sensitivity to context.

The emphasis on sensitivity to context makes it particularly difficult to illustrate moral analysis within the ethic of care. If we are not in the immediate context, we cannot really make a decision based on authentic caring. At the same time, a primary strength of this perspective is its intuitive correctness in view of the

reality of human relationships. While prior theories based on reason alone reject emotion and require impartiality, such an approach is inconsistent with our experience of human relationships. The ethic of care corrects this. On the other hand, complete rejection of impartiality and ethical principles in favor of sensitivity and emotion may also lead to a rejection of otherwise justifiable obligations and rights.

For more on the ethic of care see:

Keller, J. (1996). Care ethics as a health care ethic.

<http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/prevmed/mns/imcs/contexts/care/carejean.html>

Online guide to ethics and moral philosophy. Ethic of Care.

http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/Cavalier/80130/part2/II_7.html