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Isolation and Social Distancing in Times of Coronavirus: Between Attachment and Alienation

Social distancing and the need for attachment
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The start of a new decade: COVID-19 in 2020

At the beginning of 2020, we could not have predicted where we would find ourselves in six months. The COVID-19 pandemic has raged through the world, brought most of the world to a standstill.

In this webinar, I and my co-panelist Ninad Patwardhan, would like to take stock of the present circumstances, and speculate on the likely psychological implications of the isolation and distancing actions being performed in the current pandemic.

Social distancing: Origins of the term

Where does it come?
And what is the problem with it?

‘Social distance’ – coined by Edward Hall in 1963 to develop a theory of proxemics within Cultural Anthropology (Szasz, 2020). He delineated 4 zones of space between individuals:

- Intimate distance (less than half a metre),
- Personal distance (about 1 metre),
- Social distance (2 to 3 metres), and
- Public distance (more than 5 metres).

‘Social distancing’ – usage escalates with the spread of SARS in 2003 (Drum, 2020).

Discursive shift in the move from *social distance* to *social distancing*, from a way of categorizing space between individuals to an action that must be performed with dubious medical sanction.

In March 2020, WHO recommends the use of physical distancing instead of social distancing.

The psychology of attachment

If we look towards the discipline of psychology, especially developmental psychology, a starting point could be the first year of life itself, through the attachment theory developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

- Bowlby – Infant bonding with the caregiver (the attachment figure) who looks after the needs and wants to this new person. Proximity to the attachment figure is essential for the survival of the infant, but there are long-term consequences of the kind and quality of care the infant receives.
- Ainsworth - Early attachment styles can predict later forms of relating in children, and even in adults.

Attachment theory topicalises the self-other dialectic, relating to the other is key to the development of the individual.

From infancy to adulthood

Individuation is the ability to differentiate oneself from others, a process we see intensify from infancy to adulthood.

- Children, through play and schooling, explore the ways in which they must relate and connect with people outside the family unit.
- Adolescents are pushing to express individuality, and often are caught in oppositional stances against those around them, from people who hold power over them.
- By the late teens, well-rounded development of the individual requires meeting with more diverse kinds of people, with experiencing difference, even by being challenged by alterity.
- For young adults, it is contact with difference that spurs development, through the building of intellectual, social, and sexual relations.

Some questions to educators

The University as a site for the meeting of differences, and the necessary move to online teaching in the COVID era.

- What are the consequences of remote learning experiences?
- How much is proximity to other people significant for intellectual development in young adults?
- What are the psychological effects of maintaining physical distance?
- What are the psychological effects of social distancing?
- How do we ensure that distance does not create social isolation for remote learning students?

The New Normal

There is a great deal of speculation what the post-COVID 'New Normal' will look like.

It would be problematic to think that the risk the other poses to our health and well-being is 'new' in the circumstances of the current pandemic. The Other has always been a risk.

We have acknowledged this risk and have developed many ways to keep the Other at a distance. Through the mechanisms of caste, class, gender, sexuality, disability. In fact, *we have always practised social distancing.*

So post-COVID we are going to see a new normal, but we must ask what is new about it ... as well as what is the new that we want to see.

The world post-COVID

The pandemic has provided us with a freeze-frame, a slice of time where the social realities of the world before the birth of the virus are not only replicated in this moment but magnified.

Presented by a psychological analysis is a conception of what it means to be human... that in the relating, creating social bonds, networks and solidarities, in the dialectics of the self and the other is a psychological conception of being human.

Psychological theory demonstrates that human beings are relational beings, not only for survival but for development, that we are drawn to creating bonds and seeking connections, and which must take us further away from the spaces of comfort and familiarity, to the encounter with a radically different other.

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