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Social Distancing vs. Social Proximity
Alain Lempereur, 17 March 2020

For obvious reasons, social distancing is the key word all around us at the moment. However, during our whole life, we have measured the quality of relationships through social proximity. The more we care about someone, the closer we get to them. And we do so unconsciously at home and at work. It is about living our lives normally, as near as possible to people we like.

Proxemics is the science that studies how close (or far) people are from each other, depending on their ties, but also their gender or culture. We shake hands, do high fives, touch elbows, hug or kiss, etc. In marketing, social proximity designates a salesperson connecting for example with a given prospect to get a deal. Negotiations themselves get won through closer relationships.

In these strange times, we need to bracket all these social codes of proximity for a while. Suddenly, if we care about others (and ourselves), we are told to do the opposite of what we have always done. To be prophylactic, we keep a distance of at least six feet between us. We stay away from our neighbors, our friends, many family members and mostly from our elders. Social distancing is pervasive from one day to the next: the health authorities require it, the principal of our kids' school repeats it, and even our kids integrate it – to everyone's dismay.

Today social distancing is necessary to protect society, but it goes so much against its underpinnings that it can undermine it too. Our human need for social relationships relies on the principle of proximity, which is as important for our mental health. We need to feel close to colleagues at the office to enjoy working, to friends for a social life and to all family members to be fully ourselves. Remaining close to many defines our social being. If we get estranged from nearly everyone, we miss many of our social bounds and it is likely to become traumatic.

For sure, many of us still enjoy our close family nucleus, but consider the members of society living alone: our grandmother or grandfather, a single sister or brother, a lonely student, or that co-worker whom we used to have coffee with? The risks of social and individual disintegration are huge if we solely endorse social distancing without compensation mechanisms. And even for people who are confined in their house with their closest relatives, they need to "get out" in their minds, at least virtually, to avoid suffocation and the feeling of being besieged.

We need to imagine new forms of social proximity to counterbalance the loss of "physical" proximity. In France, young volunteers do the shopping for their senior neighbors. In Italy, apartment neighbors get together to start practicing music on their balcony. We can all care for our favorite restaurants by ordering take-away food. It is all about socializing differently.

Leveraging "e-proximity," especially with those who end up alone, is another global priority. Social proximity means connecting with the elders through Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp or otherwise. Teachers engage their students through their Google classrooms. Our kids share videogames or a Netflix episode with the friends they were playing soccer with. Thanks to the Internet, we can outreach to everyone we know in our community. Let us do it.

Social distancing is not the only way forward, even for now. We can complement our toolbox with new forms of social proximity. Let us do it now!