

The tyranny of distance: The social effects and practice adaptations resulting from Covid-19 lockdown rules

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Abstract

This reflective commentary identifies and discusses the effects of the social distancing rules required by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown¹. The rules required rapid adaptation that many found challenging, creating new norms for behaviour that were governed by both the state and many citizens. These rules changed patterns of social interaction, attitudes towards others and how families and communities were defined. Existing inequities relating to class were exacerbated, and inequities relating to gender and childcare made more visible. Those with more resources and secure jobs that could be undertaken “from home” were less exposed to the economic fallout and the virus itself. Attitudes towards the body and its physicality were heightened as the body became the target for intervention and isolation. Place-based communities of the neighbourhood were strengthened while other types of physical communities diminished. All these changes created new opportunities for accelerating the morphing of people with the digital world, intensifying the use of online technologies to mediate the self, and shape employment practices, social work provision, and personal relationships. While some experienced this rapid transition online as a barrier to relationships, others, especially those already proficient in online technologies, experienced areas of improved functionality and efficiencies. Social work practice also adapted to this environment, finding new ways to meet the practice, support and ethical commitments of the profession.

Humans adapt. You do not have to be a dedicated evolutionist to see that when social

conditions change, humans change too. Our adaptations may not be uniform in character, or even consistent across the duration of a crisis, but a functionalist view of behaviour proposes that we are, at least partly, shaped by the social conditions and rules we are embedded in. How have the social distancing rules affected our social lives? Are we affected equally? What are the effects on social work practice? And do we want to go back when it is over? What changes might we want to retain and nurture? This brief article explores some of these changes, and reflects on what it means for our experience of the social, as well as how relationships of power are changed, and how inequalities may be intensified or reduced.

Social work relies on understanding and responding to the social world, and addressing inequities in that world. But many elements of our social lives, as well as social inequalities, have been reshaped by the distancing requirements of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown rules. The social construction of the self is affected by the increased use of online representations. Attitudes to the body are changed by the intense focus on the mechanisms of biological disease transmission. Communities are changed through the re-drawing of community boundaries, allegiances, spaces and functions. All of these affect our understanding of the human-in-environment that is fundamental to the practice of social and community work. The Covid-19 social distancing rules differ slightly between nations, but generally involve only essential workers at work (many others working from home), schools, businesses, places of worship and sports all closed, and food shopping the only really legitimate reason to be out of the house. Remaining two

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metres away from every other human (apart from those from your household “bubble”ⁱⁱ) is required.

The distancing rules became the hard filter through which everything we did must pass: our work practices, family relationships, leisure time and exercise. All of these must be undertaken only in ways that meet the rules’ criteria, refracting them into new forms. Distancing rules are the new “rules of the game” that are currently ascendant, changing our social norms and with it, reshaping relationships of power. Bourdieu (1988) proposed that, within prescribed “fields”, people who had the most social and cultural capital were those who knew both the rules of the game and had a nuanced “feel for the game”—that is, the rules had become so internalised that they are second nature (Lareau, Adia Evans, & Yee, 2016). Through drawing on these rules, particular people gain social and cultural capital and therefore, power (Collyer, 2015).

The rule implementation process is important. Its rapid pace and high stakes reinforcers led to a stressful and for some, traumatic, learning curve. The twin fears of the virus itself (contracting or spreading it) and the social approbation involved in getting the rules wrong (heaven forbid you might be called a “flouter”) are powerful teachers for most. Overnight we learnt of the threat itself and of the reach of social control that was possible into our lives. Images of dreadful death tolls flooded our screens. We quickly learned to worry about if Myrtle on the corner saw us drive to take the dog for a walk, or worry about what we might tell the cops if we are stopped. Fear is a powerful teacher, both directly and in social observation of others. This tends to make learning “stick” for many. But the effects are variegated by other factors. Not everyone is worried about the virus, and not everyone wants to accept the rules imposed from above, and not everyone has the luxury of obedience due to the nature of their work. Rather than construing this as irresponsible selfishness, it is better thought of for some,

as the opting out of people who have little pre-existing investment in the political-middle-class-media industrial complex. This is combined with a sense of resistance to the disease itself. If the state has done little for you, and also have a sense of physical imperviousness to the disease, then the rules are less likely to stick to you. This is why it is likely that the prime rule-breakers are likely to be young, male and working class—those in a group with an overlapping sense of being bulletproof while also having little regard for the rules of the ruling class.

There is also another reason though, as mentioned above—differences in types of employment. As the mobility data show, those from working-class suburbs had more movement during the lockdown, in part because many working class people had essential jobs, such as supermarket workers, cleaners and caregivers. Supermarket workers in particular often bore the brunt of people’s frustration with shortages and queues. The other side of the romance of domesticity epitomised by the craze for home baking was the spectre of low-paid women being abused because of the flour shortage. There was not the luxury of “working from home” for many (Parahi, Kilgallon, & Fyers, 2020).

What are the effects of these well-learned rules? Somewhat contradictorily, they are superficially a great leveller, but beneath the surface, such rules reinforce old inequities. We all have to line up at the supermarket and sanitise our hands, but the homes we are returning to afterwards are quite different. Some had warm, spacious homes with well-stocked pantries even before the lockdown. They can comfortably “hole up” for a few weeks, no problem. Their jobs are secure and they have backstop assets. But at the other end, there are those who are held even more forcefully in substandard housing, overcrowded and with limited food, without the usual outlets of work, school, hobbies, parks and sports. No job, no income and little likelihood of recovery. These divisions will only increase as the economic fallout becomes ever more stark.

Inequalities around the care of children, often gendered, also have changed in a number of ways, becoming less entrenched for some, but heightened and more visible for others. For those with two parents at home, if they are both working, it may demand a more even gender split of childcare—the “I’ll work mornings, you afternoons” scenario. The visibility of childcare labour has heightened, with many children making appearances in work calls and their immediate needs having to be attended to—breaching the carefully boundaried “work imaginaries” for some. For those parenting alone, however, the experience is very different. My friend (and we all have this friend or are this friend) is a single parent with two young children, who worked from home and was still expected to bill the same number of hours at her paid-for job while looking after them. Academics with small children, or home-schooling older children, were advised by human resources departments to plan their work for after the children’s bed-time, as if child care and educating is not real work. Inequities relating to the labour of childcare are made more visible than ever, as kids are forced into the “work world” consciousness by work call intrusions and parents squeezed by twin demands. But economic inequities are also silently growing.

The effects of class differences have also shifted during the lockdown. As recent analysis by *stuff* (Parahi et al., 2020) shows, middle-class people showed less mobility during the lockdown period than those worse off, showing the class differences where many middle class had the luxury of staying home to work, while many people in poorly paid jobs were also in essential service jobs, so had to keep travelling for work. This inequity meant increased exposure to the virus for those in working-class jobs compared to wealthier populations. But there are more subtle class reflections. The experience of staying home as represented in the media shored up a view of middle-class life as “the norm”, for example, the following of a “typical family” during lockdown where there was a stay-

at-home parent, a large spacious house and many types of toys, activities and food for the two children in the home did not only reflect material differences, but their portrayal as the norm reinforced the subtle rules of the game available to middle-class parents.

What about the ways that social boundaries have been drawn? Like dividing Africa, assumptions about the lines around the household as the primary social unit are somewhat removed from lived realities. They make sense from a disease perspective—those we are physically close to—but are fairly arbitrary as a marker of our primary social groups or “felt families”. By demarking those lines of inclusion and exclusion so forcefully, the household social unit is strengthened while others are diminished. We are moulded into a dense core, our outer limbs blown off in pandemic winds. The extended families spread across several households in a city may be fractured, but place-based neighbourhoods seem to be revived. We see our street-fellows much more now, without the ebb and flow of the nine to five gutting the suburbs daily, as we pad restlessly around our “local” streets. Some collectivities are fortified while others wane.

Attitudes towards the body are also shaped anew. Our bodies are the problem—their messy cavities the source of disease, their ability to carry tiny killers silently and without our consent a betrayal of our intentions. The body is disloyal at the best of times, but in a pandemic with rapid and virulent transmission, its deceit knows no bounds. We discipline it by sanitising its extremities, control its emissions, fear the messy fluids of other bodies. It is this fear of the bodies of others that results in intense “othering” behaviour. We literally avoid proximity to others in the street, in the supermarket, crossing the road to avoid contact. While usually related to class or ethnicity, this new othering of literally every “other” outside our bubbles as a potential source of disease creates social aversion like never before. In person, at least.

But then there is the online world, the saviour, the promise of social connection, of community and relationships. Many online vehicles are effective enhancers of both personal and professional relationships, maintaining and enhancing the bonds of individuals and communities. Yet they can be self-consciously performative in a way face-to-face interactions are usually not. The possibility for misunderstanding emotion and intent, and the curated nature of projections of the self in online environments raises questions about how such forms are shaping our sense of both the self and the social. Zoom meetings, for all their functional abilities, require a certain intentional way of speaking, a structured manner of interacting useful for a work meeting or teaching task, less useful for those interactions that require silent nuanced observation of the face and body, or require the subtle combination of space, speech and action to be made sense of.

Yet experience of shifting communications online are also patterned by age, competence and experience. Those younger and with high competence across a number of different complex interactive technologies may disagree that it is a lesser form of communication, and questions about the relative authenticity of online communication compared to face to face are as old as the question: do androids dream of electric sheep? (Dick, 1968). Some specific groups of people may argue that despite never having met face to face, the type of collaboration they engage in and the extensive, complex nature of the technologies they use, can enable a curious depth—rather than superficiality—of relationship. An example of this kind of online relationship might be a team of gamers which has played together many times, must work with highly coordinated strategies, and can speak to each other in real time and in chat to execute a particular strategy. Some people are emboldened in text, saying things they would never say in person, enabling rather than suppressing honesty (but also unbridled cruelty).

All these social changes have inevitably affected social work practice. Social work is intensely concerned with promoting social justice through the provision of needs and supports to enable equitable outcomes. With such a large effect on equity of the Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdown rules, social services have responded to meet both immediate humanistic needs while also responding to new and existing inequities. Many services have had to reshape how people gain access to their services, the nature of the service delivery once they are in it, clarify ethical and cultural issues evoked by online practice, and find ways to manage staff needs and processes (Social Service Providers Aotearoa [SSPA], 2020b). Some were able to provide hardware such as phones, laptops or tablets directly to families, addressing the most glaring inequity: lack of online access. Others changed their daily contact from long home visits to shorter, more frequent Zoom calls, organised food parcels and income relief, and ensured that consent and privacy were attended to online. Providing activities for children via social media community pages and directly through email were other ways they supported parents through the long stay of children being away from school (SSPA, 2020a, 2000b).

Increased collaboration between services was reported, as those more focussed on one aspect of support worked to ensure other basic needs could be met by forming professional networks with other services. For example, a professional charged with running strengthening families meetings joined a local community group to ensure her clients could access the food bank. Others found ways to ensure that people with English as a second language could also access online modes of interaction, using interpreters within three-way voice calls or the Zoom platform environment (SSPA, 2020a). Finally, others adapted their therapeutic practices through counselling via Zoom, phone calls, texts and increased the use of therapeutic letter writing. This latter form of feedback is common practice in many interventions such as solution focussed, narrative and

cognitive-behavioural approaches, and this came to the fore during this time (SSPA, 2020a, 2000b). Those charged with managing situations of risk to either children or adult victims of violence also had to adapt practice, ensuring they were able to make contact with people likely to be victims or perpetrators, ensuring that safety plans were still made, and that people could talk privately when this was needed (SSPA, 2020a). In all these ways, social and community workers adapted to the changed shape of society by offering different social solutions, building different kinds of communities through strengthening online community networks, and leveraging them to respond more holistically to people's diverse needs. Boundaries between home and work were also significantly reduced by these practices. Social workers commented during the lockdown about feeling as if they never left work and that it was unpleasant and unsettling having work intrude so much into their private space. Some of these changes will persist, especially with the realisation that although for many reasons, including culturally face-to-face interaction might be preferred, it is not always needed for every kind of interaction. The efficiencies of online meetings are functional for some purposes, while for others, less so. Clarifying through experience and evidence which of these adaptations may be retained going forward is the next task for practice (SSPA 2020b). Furthermore, Goldkind, LaMendola, and Taylor-Beswick, (2020, p.89) caution that we need to carefully consider the privacy implications of these adaptations:

Uncomfortable questions around location data being shared with governmental agencies are now being asked, but the tech adoption is happening before society has had a chance to grapple with the answers. In other words, a significant portion of the general public is now reliant on digital tools that have not fully considered user privacy.

What will happen after it is all over? Will these changed social forms return to as how they were? Or will we flinch when a person

stands too close to us in the supermarket line, only feel truly safe at home in our bubble or on the internet, overthink how our actions will appear to others, prefer the more mediated and managed self we can create online? Or are we desperate to return to proximity, to hugging, handshake and kiss, to frame our families as we wish, get away from our neighbours? To be able to interact less self-consciously? And how will the vestiges of this time affect our professional practice for better or worse?

Notes

- i In March 2020 the New Zealand Government announced four levels of alert for the Covid-19 pandemic. These levels specified the actions required and Level 4 was the highest. <https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19/restrictions/alert-system-overview/>
- ii The term 'bubble' was used in New Zealand to denote the group of people within a dwelling with whom social distancing was not required during the Level 3 and 4 lockdown.

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