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Reflecting on experiences of social distancing

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One of our children, age 7 years, was asked if he wanted to talk to his friends online. "No!" he replied angrily, "what's the point if I can't touch them!?" While his exasperation may not be shared by all of us, it concerns something basic to human life: embodied interaction with other people. Many aspects of our lives that were once taken for granted have been profoundly altered by lockdowns and social distancing measures that are part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Things as simple as hugging a friend, talking face-to-face, socialising freely, and travelling have been restricted in many countries. Even as social distancing measures are slowly relaxed, hesitation and anxiety remain. The situation has had a profound effect on our social relations. How might we better understand how people have experienced this seismic shift?

A promising place to look is the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which is dedicated to the detailed study of human experience. Phenomenology draws on a range of methods to make explicit and clarify the subtle and intricate structures of experience. We build here on our previous work on the phenomenology of illness, which brought to light fundamental dimensions of illness experience using this method. Phenomenology is concerned with aspects of experience that are so deeply rooted in our lives that we typically overlook them, seldom reflecting on their nature. These include being situated in a meaningful world, feeling connected to others, feeling at home in a place, and experiencing things as real or present. Differing forms of experience, including illness experiences, have characteristic features that can be illuminated by phenomenological research.

Phenomenology also provides us with concepts to draw on in trying to understand how aspects of experience might have been disrupted by social distancing measures. The nature of our immersion in the social world, and how interpersonal relations permeate our lives, can be made salient by the disruption and loss of what was once taken for granted. The fact that lives have been altered on a global scale further presents us with an opportunity to learn more about which aspects of human experience are invariant across backgrounds and cultures, and where differences lie. Health, racial, and social inequities, as well as different health-care systems, have been shown to give rise to profoundly different pandemic experiences, thus emphasising the importance of situational contexts.

Two broad and inter-related aspects of social experience are to be distinguished. First, there are our face-to-face relations with others, including particular individuals and people in general. Phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre emphasised how people immediately recognise others as fellow subjects of experience, in ways that are self-affecting rather than neutral and detached. Our interactions with other people shape our feelings, thoughts, and activities in all manner of ways: the pleasure we gain from our surroundings, whether we feel at ease or unsettled in a situation, the narratives through which we interpret our lives, how we regulate our moods, whether we anticipate the future with hope or dread. Interaction with another person can nurture a sense of comfort and hope or, by contrast, a feeling of discomfort and vulnerability. This applies even to brief, mundane interactions with strangers—whether someone smiles while walking past or glares at you with trepidation as they hurriedly cross to the other pavement. To be experienced as a potential conversational partner is quite different from being experienced as a potential source of infection.

Many dimensions of interpersonal experience have thus been affected by lockdowns and other social distancing measures. In some cases, the effects are more positive: some people have been brought together; friendships have been rekindled without the usual distractions; and rewarding pastimes have been discovered or rediscovered. A strong sense of solidarity and expressions of gratitude towards front-line key workers in different sectors have also emerged. With this, questions arise of where and to what extent have we been able to adapt successfully to

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the new situation and what, if anything, remains missing or even irreplaceable.

In studying social experience during the pandemic, we also need to emphasise a second theme: the context within which interpersonal interactions unfold, the shared world that we already find ourselves situated in when we encounter another person. The phenomenologist Martin Heidegger speaks of our "being-in-the-world", the manner in which we are already practically and purposively immersed in a meaningful context when we experience and relate to others. We share a world with others and much of its meaning comes from this sharedness. Embedded in the pregiven world are numerous norms for interacting with other people. For instance, our prereflective understanding of objects and places, including roads, pavements, signs, playgrounds, shops, workplaces, and parks, is at the same time an understanding of what to expect from others and how to interact with them in different situations.

With social distancing in many countries, much of this background structure has changed; norms of interaction that were once taken as given are gone. At times, there is a sense of not knowing what to do anymore, how to interpret and interact with other people. The rulebook is not only new but also strangely incomplete. There are experiences of anxious uncertainty and of absence and loss, as our habitual patterns of expectation are repeatedly challenged by socially distanced public spaces.

For some, this amounts to what might be called global uncertainty: the loss of a once prereflective trust or confidence relating to most things in our lives. This does not concern specific situations or places. Rather, it envelops one's experience of, and engagement with, the world as a whole. Various elements of pandemic experience are characterised by suspicion, uncertainty, and doubt. We may distrust the air we breathe and the surfaces we touch, while strangers suddenly seem unpredictable sources of potential danger.

A pervasive sense of uncertainty can make one doubt and question every bodily discomfort (is my throat sore? what was that cough?) and also arises during routine activities, such as handwashing and cleaning surfaces. Have I done it well enough? The remaining doubt (did I wipe off everything?) can dismantle an everyday, habitual confidence, reshaping it into a mould of distrust, compulsion, and anxiety. With this change, a sense of confidence, trust, homeliness, and belonging that many of us—although certainly not all of us—once took for granted becomes uncannily visible in its absence.

This dismantling of the everyday inevitably leads to a pervasive breakdown of habits. The Friday evening socialising that ushered in the weekend, or the Monday morning rush, organised and punctuated our lives into a familiar tempo. Previous schedules have been largely removed from daily life, resulting in changes to our experience of time. The loss of norms, routines, and structure alters our sense of temporal passage. Some people report that time feels like an undifferentiated flow, an experience that is disorienting and dispiriting.

It is important to investigate these kinds of experiences: how have people's experiences—of themselves, others, and the world more generally—changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result of prolonged social distancing measures? If phenomenology is on the right track with its claim that embodied interaction with others is an essential foundation of human experience, then the unprecedented disruption of such interaction is likely to have a destabilising effect. It is valuable to better understand both the negative and positive consequences of this disordering of people's experiences. However, the detrimental impact of prolonged disruption to social life requires the most urgent attention, given some reports in the media and by mental health charities of its association with mental health concerns.

We have therefore begun, with Matthew Broome, Clara Humpston, Alice Malpass, and Tomoari Mori, an international collaboration, to study the phenomenological effects of social distancing, and of the pandemic more generally. We seek to obtain a substantial and diverse collection of personal accounts via surveys and interviews. As well as furthering our research, these testimonies will be turned into a publicly available resource. The online survey is open to participants worldwide.

In the coming months, as—we hope—the world transitions out of the crisis phase of this pandemic and towards something resembling "normal" life, it will be crucial to make the most out of this opportunity for social reintegration. Better understanding the loss of normative structure from the social world and the effects of social distancing on people's interpersonal abilities might help cast light on certain disruptive behaviours that ignore social distancing, which we are now seeing. Phenomenological reflection on our experiences, on what we have gained and lost during the pandemic, can also lead to a renewed and deeper appreciation of what we had previously taken for granted—our embodied being with others in a shared world.

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