



Space of relationship as a space of distance: A new proximity

Guest post by Maria Flora Mangano

Among the measures for controlling the infection of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is the need to avoid interaction among human beings, and, when that is not possible, to fix a distance of at least one meter, according to the World Health Organisation. In addition to the medical masks, in almost every part of the world, this measure implies a prohibition on shaking hands, or hugging and kissing. The warnings stress the need to interact with others without having any contact, especially of hands and face, the parts of the human body which, more than others, may transmit the infection. These two also are the parts of the body which, more than others, transmit the message, thus play a central role in communication.

During these last few days, the global news media have reported several alternatives to greetings and physical contacts created by many people around the world, involving touching elbows, or feet. Also, people have rediscovered the use of non-touching hand gestures, as with *namaste*, the Buddhist greeting, where hands are put together, or even blinking, as ways to respect a safe distance, yet still acknowledge another person.

The COVID-19 infection is introducing a new space of relationship among individuals, related to our interpersonal communication. This is affecting everyday life at the moment and will probably have effects in the future on human communication. A “new distance” is arising, which may be added to the original four proposed by the anthropologist Edward Hall in 1966 in *The Hidden Dimension*. He distinguished four levels of distance in spatial interrelationships among humans, which vary by such factors as culture, education, gender, and status. We might now add what has been popularized as “social distancing” to the intimate, the personal, the social, and the public spaces proposed by Hall.

Despite Hall’s emphasis on cultural differences, as the new distance is required for global safety reasons, this relationship of distance between individuals is the same all over the world. Therefore, it cannot, and it is not supposed to be, different depending such factors as culture, age, education, gender, or status. What may change is the resilient capacity of human beings to find alternatives, to adapt themselves to (almost) every condition, and to try to find an answer, even when it seems hard, as during this time.

The challenge to us all will be to consider this necessary distance imposed on individuals as an opportunity to rethink the space of relationship as a space of proximity to the Other. Distance, as well as proximity, are terms generally related to a physical space of relationship among humans. What happens when this space is dramatically and unexpectedly avoided or altered, as it imposes another dimension, even a fixed measure of separation among individuals?

The opportunity which this social distancing offers is to consider distance, and consequently proximity, unbound from a physical space of relationship. Distance may become another term for proximity, if we will be able to look at the face of the Other even through a medical mask, and from one meter. We may still be touched by the Other's call, even without touching her/him with our hands.

If we will be able to overcome a physical space of relationship - in the sense of going beyond it, rather than over it - we might also discover a new sense for proximity. It may sound like a paradox, and probably it is, as the challenges required to the human behaviour which affect our daily life. If we will be able to accept the paradox of distance and proximity as one, we may discover that the safe distance established by social distancing can be overcome, in a way, not because we violate the prohibitions, but as we are able to go beyond ourselves towards the Other.

The Latin term *alter* literally refers to "the other than two"; social distancing is offering us all the chance to alter our perspective of the Other, every Other than us: close or distant, with a medical mask or without, by touching her/him or without using our hands. This implies the opportunity to modify the distance at which we stand from the Other, in terms of prejudices rather than medical or safety prescriptions. It might be surprising to realise, when the COVID-19 epidemic will eventually end, that we have reduced our mental and heart distance from the Other, in addition to again being able to reduce our physical distance.



In these new and solitary days, in our creative country [Italy], a spontaneous proposal was born. It was soon shared among the people and became viral (in every sense!): find a way to encourage the others, with messages posted on the windows and the balconies. The sentence proposed was: "Andrà tutto bene," or "Everything is going to be fine." The idea was to write on white sheets, drawing the rainbow. It was soon made by children and families. I thought to draw it on paper and I posted the design on my window facing the road.

To cite this article, use this format:

Mangano, Maria Flora. (17 March 2020). Guest post: Space of relationship as a space of distance: A new proximity. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2020/03/17/maria-flora-mangano-space-of-relationship-as-a-space-of-distance/>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.