

ESSAY

The Conundrum of Social Distancing and the Benefits of Physical Touching

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It was the start of the silly season in December 2019 in Australia. The days were long, mornings broke early, and the sun set late. Schools had closed or were about to be recessed for the long summer break. Businesses were winding down, and families were getting ready to take summer holiday trips. At the same time, while cricket dominated the preferred news channels and conversation of most Melbournians, a cloud of somber news was featured on the airwaves and social media. Recurring pictures from China showed people collapsing on the street for no apparent reason. News commentators ascribed this strangeness to a deadly disease that had gripped many areas of China and was spreading like wildfire. Casualties mounted as the sickness assumed pandemic proportions, spreading to places as far as the USA, Europe, and the rest of Asia. People were dying like flies and disposed in body bags as hospitals and respectful sendoffs for the dead were seriously curbed because of the overload. To prevent further infection and contamination, those suspected dead from the dreaded disease were placed in corpse bags and cremated. Governments were scampering to find a solution to the epidemic. Some had enforced a shutdown of their towns and cities, and imposed curfews on the movement of their people.

The mandate from authorities of all persuasions during the early virulent stages of the COVID-19 pandemic was to follow *social distancing*. The edict was to keep hands sanitized and avoid close contact with other persons. The prescription for avoiding infection from COVID-19 was to stay at least one and a half meters from one another. Public authorities and some establishments put markers in queues that distanced patrons by 1.5 meters.

Social Distancing

Social distancing as promoted through governmental and online forums to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and as understood by the public, referred to maintaining physical space between people outside the home and avoiding mass gatherings. Social distancing was viewed as an ethically correct response to the virus. In such a scenario, people were expected to govern themselves and maintain physical distance from everyone else. According to Tyrrell and Williams (2020), social distancing was a useful deterrent to contagion and initially prevented up to 98% of potential COVID-19 infections.

Not surprisingly, social distance has become virtually synonymous with physical distancing. Syed Alatas (2020) observes that social distance, by itself, remains an important concept in sociology, because for many social scientists, “social distance” describes the distance within such categories as social class, race/ethnicity, gender, ability and sexuality. Empirical studies of social distance tend to employ these categories that form their units of analysis. Yet it might be useful to ponder the concept of *distance* when wanting to insulate oneself from physical contact during COVID-19 without compromising the *social* solidarity among individuals.

Perceptions of Touch

Ironically, the fear of physical contact brought on by the now common misunderstanding of social distancing can cause a peculiar anxiety. If the *fear of being touched* grows into a phobia to the extent that handshakes are repelled and replaced by folded palms and fist pumps, a critical expression of emotion and disposition is compromised.

The compelling avoidance of being touched can even bring about a condition known as *haphophobia*. According to clinical psychologists Nahar et al. (2022), *haphophobia* is different from hyperactivation, which is physical pain associated with being touched. People with *haphophobia* feel extreme distress over the mere thought of being touched. This anxiety can lead to symptoms like nausea, vomiting, or panic attacks. For those suffering from *haphophobia*, any form of touch may make them feel uncomfortable, including a well-meaning pat on the back or shoulder, a hug, or a double handshake.

The proscription of touch imposed by the pandemic restrictions also led to negative consequences such as growing impersonality and individualism, and a lowering sense of community. COVID-19 revealed how certain groups become defined as *strangers* and susceptible to discrimination. There is no doubt that human touch is a fundamental human need. According to Marc Jurblum et al. (2020), in its extreme form, depriving oneself of physical contact by quarantine and social isolation during periods of severe coronavirus outbreaks is associated with mental health problems such as desolation, depression, anxiety, and stress.

One is hesitant to argue in favor of touch when it also has a particularly unsavory association. Physical touch, done for the purpose of non-consensual physical intimacy, is sexual harassment, and many courts have ruled that physical touch is more offensive than verbal harassment. Notably, *haphophobia* is often induced by an event of sexual abuse or assault. According to a report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020), 17% of women (1.6 million) and 4.3% of men (385,000) in Australia have experienced sexual assault since the age of 15. Both women and men were more likely to experience sexual assault by an acquaintance than by a stranger. The study by the Australian Institute of

Health and Welfare (2020) examining police and court administration data over a **fourteen-year** period estimated that only one in five cases reported to police proceeded beyond the investigation stage, and only 12% of alleged sexual offences resulted in a conviction. The obnoxious practice of inappropriately touching women and children, particularly by men, is now regularly being charged and widely reported, indiscriminately making touch offensive, even if well-intended.

As a gesture of sharing blessings and good feelings, interpersonal touch has been a normal practice in many cultures historically. Many spiritual belief systems, including Christianity, incorporate touch as a regular part of their rituals. However, touch is unfortunately often regarded negatively in today's environment. If social distancing continues to give gravitas to touch-me-not practice, humans may eventually lose the expression of compassion and kinship that come with touching each other. Before and during the time of Jesus, emotions were shared with touch, including healings sought through touch. In the Synoptic gospels, several references are made to those who were ill or under siege, seeking relief and cure for their afflictions simply by reaching out to touch Jesus or be touched by him. So convinced were Jesus' faithful that they would be relieved of their suffering by merely touching him that they pressed forward, even if only to touch the fringe of his garment to experience his healing power (Luke 6:19, Matthew 14:36, Mark 3: 10).

Behavioral Effects of Touch

Avoiding touch when emotions are being shared is difficult, unless constrained by social conventions. Touch conveys a range of emotions such as reassurance, empathy, comfort, love, compassion, and even sadness. Touch can also evoke resistance if it has an ulterior or criminal motivation. Psychological studies show that when touch conveys safety and trust, it soothes. Dacher Keltner (2010) asserts that a warm touch calms cardiovascular stress and believes that it activates the vagus nerve intimately involved with compassionate response. A simple touch can also trigger oxytocin sometimes called the "love hormone." Medical scientists Ralph Pawling and colleagues (2017) observed that low-threshold nerve receptors present in human skin convey positive and pleasant aspects of touch. Due to the nerve receptors' optimal firing during gently caressive contact, the neurological changes that are brought about can make one feel happier and less stressed. Research suggests that touch can also lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduce depression, increase confidence, boost one's immune system, and even relieve pain. Another's compassionate touch can improve one's mental and physical wellness. Conversely, the absence of a regular supply of oxytocin hormone can leave one feeling despondent. The mental affliction of personal desolation is becoming endemic partially because of the combined effects of the shift in social transactions to non-human-contact social media and enforced physical distance.

Differing Norms of Touch in Individualistic and Collective Societies

As incidents and increasing public media reports of violent and inappropriate interactions rise, it would be unfortunate if the normalcy of appropriate human touch becomes socially unacceptable. All cultures specify social norms for engaging in physical contact, which may vary widely depending on the age, gender, ethnicity, profession, and status of the persons involved.

Shahaduz Zaman and colleagues (2018) lament that, in the atmosphere of apprehension and fear in the Global North, trustworthy familiarity is often unavailable and hard to achieve. Geert Hofstede (1984), in his work on comparative cultures, similarly suggested that in low-contact societies of Western economies like the USA, UK, and Canada, there is a cultural resistance to relying on others, particularly in the more personal and intimate tasks of daily living. Some societies hold individualism in high regard, and a high value placed on autonomy, along with an inability to share one's anxieties confidently with others, can lead to a profound sense of desolation. According to studies of intimate interactions across cultures in various stages of economic development, Zaman et al. (2018) and Hofstede (1984) found that embracing someone with whom one is not familiar is not acceptable social practice in individualistic societies. In collectivistic cultures, sufferers of mental health disorders are more likely to engage in a natural embrace from families and friends, who may have more time and cultural resources available to empathize with their high anxieties. People in such cultures are more likely to gently physically embrace the other. This collective engagement of the family and community helps to assuage feelings of desolation and build trust in unofficial support mechanisms.

Caressing touch, evident in collective communities, is often not possible in societies circumscribed by privacy mandates. While the manner of touching and where to touch is a relevant social matter, engaging in touch can be both an emotional and reasonable act. In societies where collective or divine authority prevails, touch is often a social norm that requires little explanation.

Mark 1:40-45 epitomizes how touch can play out in a legalistically touch-hostile context when a leper asks Jesus to cure him. In the Old Testament era, leprosy was a dreaded disease and the ostracization of lepers was elaborated by God to Moses and Aaron, as recorded in Leviticus 13. Lepers were required to wear torn clothes, leave their hair disheveled, and shout aloud that they were unclean to anyone approaching them (Leviticus 13:45). Audaciously, however, this leper ignored the danger to himself and disregarded social convention, seeking a cure for his leprosy by publicly calling on Jesus. Impressed by his faith, Jesus touched the leper, curing him instantly.

Christianity Embraces Everyone

The effect of touch is aesthetically captured by Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* fresco in the Sistine Chapel which portrays God creating humanity by divine touch. According to Frank Meshberger and Tony Rich (1990), there is a correlation between Michelangelo's design and the anatomy of the human brain. They remark on how God reaches out from the area of the brain that deals with intellect, and argue that God is not only bestowing the gift of life upon Adam in this moment, but also the ability to be in the same mindset (*ad idem*) with God. This allusion by Meshberger to *sharing the same* space is considered "interconnectedness" by economist Amartya Sen (2011) in his seminal book *The Idea of Justice*. Sen refers to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and observes that the Levite and Priest did not walk near the fallen man, but rather crossed the road to avoid him. On the other hand, when the Samaritan tended to the wounded man, he inevitably would have touched him. According to Amartya Sen, by offering help to the fallen man, the Samaritan had extended his "neighborhood". Sen contends that we are all created to co-exist in an expanded neighborhood. He further asserts that interconnectedness is even more relevant in today's global world where many disciplines like music, art, culture, politics, economics, production, and exchange interact continuously due to rapid technological advances. Technological interconnectedness ostensibly discourages us from coming within arm's length of physical contact. However, the deprivation of *nearness* is increasingly creating the need for *real friends*. The move to expand the frontiers of a neighborhood at the micro level, giving opportunities to clasp each other in well-meaning cordial ways, is slowly gaining momentum, evidenced by a burgeoning growth of social clubs after the COVID-19 epidemic.

Touch is a Highlight of Jesus' Ministry

Concerns about crossing privacy lines ought not hold communities back from seeking to achieve a Christian service to society that is neither individualistic nor collectivistic. Above all, a Christian conception of society will always move to support the desolate.

Jesus' clear teaching is that one serves God partially through service to humanity, no matter what the social conditions might be. Christ empathized with the distraught instead of conforming to social norms. Scripture is replete with instances of Jesus liberally spreading works of mercy, and his compassion was often demonstrated as he applied his mercifully healing touch on the needy, regardless of their place in the social order.

Biophysics and Social Constructs Interact when Touching to Bring Comfort

As opposed to the other four senses, touch is not localized. The entire body can feel the sense of touch when any of its parts contacts another body. The science of physics explains that every "body" carries potential energy. When one body touches another

body, energy is transferred from the body with higher energy to the body with lower energy. In thermodynamics, this energy transfer is known as conduction. When a pot of water is placed on the stove to boil, conduction warms the pot, which heats the water molecules inside.

Scientists recognize that energy flows within the human body can be explained through the laws of thermodynamics applied to biological systems. Just as in classic thermodynamics, the actual energy transfer through touch is not of primary concern and is often ignored. The warmth of the human touch is conducted through the human body's nerve receptors, which have thermal sensitivity. Pawling et al. (2017) noted that the nerve receptors are susceptible to small skin displacements during touch. They send impulses to the brain through *conducting* nerve cells.

The case of Jesus curing the bleeding woman who touched the hem of his garment (Luke 8:43-48, Matthew 9: 20-22; Mark 5: 25-34) could be considered a typical example of conduction physically manifesting itself in human touch. This woman had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. When she heard about Jesus, she moved through the crowd and touched his cloak, thinking that, if she just touched his clothes, she would be healed. She came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhaging stopped. At once, Jesus realized that power had gone from him and he asked, "Who touched me?"

The instantaneous transfer of energy from the Lord to the besieged woman when she touched his garment exemplifies the principle of conduction in the laws of physics. In the Synoptic gospels, the slight sanguine touch of the cloak unleashes Jesus' divine power into the woman's body. Touching one another with good intentions can similarly spark the transfer of warm feelings to those requiring help. However, decrees on social distancing can inhibit us from making close contact even with those who may benefit from crucial tactile support.

Such is the versatility of touch that Jesus used it to dispel one of the greatest recorded doubts in history by allowing his disciple Thomas to touch his wounds so he could feel and believe that this was Jesus, who was wounded but alive (John 20:24-27).

Conclusion

Cultural traditions and empirical science both have noted the positive aspects of touch for good health. During gentle, caressive touching, human skin that contains low-threshold nerve receptors connected to conducting nerve cells, communicates positive and pleasant feelings of touch to the brain. Sensitively touching another person causes the transfer of warm feelings to that person, including to one who may need caring

support. Social distancing, however, confronts us with the question of whether to touch or not to touch. It would be culturally and socially impoverishing if an act so natural as touch was stigmatized due to its potential to transfer infections or its misplaced association with assault or other inappropriate contact. This would deprive us of the uplifting power of touch immortalized by Louis Armstrong in his song "What a Wonderful World," where he sings "I see friends shaking hands, saying, 'How do you do?' They're really saying, 'I love you.'"

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