Interactional Anomie? Imaging Social Distance after COVID-19: A Goffmanian Perspective

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Abstract

Social distance is a central issue in the institutional communication about COVID-19. The expression has often been improperly used as a synonym for physical distance. In this article, I will compare how international agencies have used the concept in their documents with Erving Goffman's sociological theory on social distance. The Canadian sociologist is, in fact, the author who has explored the sociological aspects of social distance most deeply. In the third section, summarizing Goffman's work, I will try to define a possible research agenda to be developed in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. Finally, I will analyze some elements of social change already visible in various parts of the world. The aim is to understand how COVID-19 could transform some social and ritual aspects of interpersonal distance. The main hypothesis is that in the immediate aftermath of this pandemic crisis, we will live in a period of moral inter-reign, in which we will experience a form of interactional anomie. This concept is also aimed at integrating the already rich Goffmanian theory on the interaction order, from a perspective that takes in account both the classic Durkheimian concept of *anomie* connected to dramatic social change and the Parsonsian theory of *double contingency*. I still do not know how long the pandemic will last and how many further quarantine periods will occur in the future. This is therefore more an exercise in sociological imagination (Wright Mills, 1959) than a sound, grounded theory.

Keywords: covid-19; social distance; Goffman; anomie; social theory.

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1   Social Distance or Physical Distance? How International Health Agencies Communicate

Why is it interesting to focus on the sociological aspects of social distance? Because, I believe, it is a far more complex concept in terms of both its use of common sense and the typical use of institutional rhetoric. Let us start with the latter, considering briefly the official documents about the policies to contain and stop contagion from COVID-19.

Since February 2020, in the documents published by international health agencies, the expression *social distance* has been mainly used as a synonym of *physical distance*. Following is an example coming from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

> Social distancing, also called "physical distancing," means keeping space between yourself and other people outside of your home. To practice social or physical distancing:
>
> Stay at least 6 feet (2 meters) from other people
>
> Do not gather in groups
>
> Stay out of crowded places and avoid mass gatherings
>
> In addition to everyday steps to prevent COVID-19, keeping space between you and others is one of the best tools we have to avoid being exposed to this virus and slowing its spread locally and across the country and world.[1]

In addition to the synonymic use, what is most interesting in the document is the implicit equation of sociality with risk and the semantic opposition between health and sociability: *salus* vs *societas*. Avoiding social contacts means avoiding potential contagion. Interaction = danger. In fact, to different degrees and in different ways, during the lockdown period all countries limited all purely "social" interactions, that is, all ludic and non-instrumental interactions, in a Simmelian sense (Simmel, 1949).

In very similar terms, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control suggests on its website:

> Social distancing is an action taken to minimize contact with other individuals; social distancing measures comprise one category of non-pharmaceutical countermeasures (NPCs) aimed at reducing disease transmission and thereby also reducing pressure on health services.[2]

Finally, the World Health Organization (WHO), in the first weeks of the crisis, called on citizens all over the world to maintain as much as possible a "social distance" from others in order to prevent contagion. But since the press conference[3] held on March 20, 2020, the policy has changed. Since then, WHO has preferred to use the expression "physical distance" to refer

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1.   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html. Retrieved April 18, 2020.

2.   European Center for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/considerations-relating-social-distancing-measures-response-covid-19-second. Retrieved April 18 2020.

3.   WHO, "Coronavirus Press Conference," March 20, 2020. The full transcription of the meeting is available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-press-conference-full-20mar2020.pdf?sfvrsn=1eafbff_0

to the recommended measures of movements restriction in order to avoid the negative effects of a message that could push people into social isolation and alienation. As Dr Maria Van Kerkhove suggested:

> [t]echnology right now has advanced so greatly that we can keep connected in many ways without actually physically being in the same room or physically being in the same space with people, so as the DG highlighted in his speech a lot about this is — we say social distancing. We're changing to say physical distance and that's on purpose because we want people to still remain connected."[4]

The shift has led to some skepticism in the scientific community. This is what two social scientists reported to CNN about the case[5]:

> "Social distancing" was the wrong term to begin with. We should think of this time as "physical distancing" to emphasize that we can remain socially connected even while being apart. (Jamil Zaky, psychologist, University of Stanford).

> My main concern is that this switch in terminology — in the midst of the crisis — violates one of the key principles of effective risk communication, which is to ensure that there is clarity and consistency in messaging (Lori Peek, sociologist, University of Colorado).

In any case, the shift in WHO communication did not much affect the global use of the terms on the Internet. Analyzing Google queries, what results is that the curve of *social distance* relevance is largely more significantly associated with the virus spread than the curve of *physical distance* (see Fig. 1).
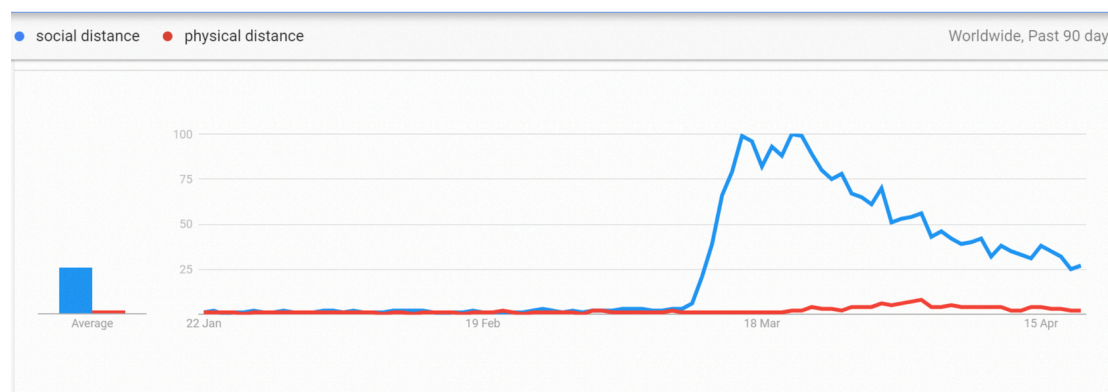

Figure 1: Trends in Google queries for "social distance" and "physical distance" during the January 22 to April 22 2020 period in relative terms

The reported scientific controversy about the use of the two expressions ("social distance" vs "physical distance") is interesting as it demonstrates the possible effects of a medicalization of social relationships. Compared to sociological conceptions, in the health agencies' view the

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4.   Ibidem, p. 6.

5.   Harmeet Kaur, *Forget "social distancing." The WHO prefers we call it "physical distancing" because social connections are more important than ever*, CNN. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/15/world/social-distancing-language-change-trnd/index.html

performative expression of social distance is limited to physical distance. But those agencies also suggest — explicitly or implicitly — the opportunity of limiting almost any "unnecessary" interaction with strangers, at least until the virus will be defeated.

2   Erving Goffman and Social Distance

In sociology, the concept of social distance has been defined mainly in two ways: as a phenomenon concerning the segregation and expulsion of stigmatized groups (Bogardus, 1925; Lofland, 1969), or as a process of regulation and organization of social interactions. Erving Goffman is the sociologist who has contributed most deeply to the definition of both types of social distance (hereafter "SD," save for the definitions of assumptions shown in italics), and this is the reason why I decided to focus on his theories in this article.

It is well known that Erving Goffman was an author much loved by the public and not too appreciated by the scientific community.[6] As was also the case with Georg Simmel before him, Goffman paid for the eclecticism of his interests and for the allegedly poor theoretical systematicity of his work. If it is true that Goffman never intended to produce such a systematic analysis of society, it is equally true that his most important contribution to sociological theory is the study of the first, most common and fundamental form of social order: the interaction order (Goffman, 1983). It is a normative and performative order, in which SD plays a crucial role. Indeed, one can say that, for Goffman, SD is the main element in the "grammar and syntax" of interaction.

Although evident dissimilarities in contents and approaches exist throughout Goffman's rich and varied production, the SD perspective is always present in his work. This makes it possible to show its consistency and extract some general assumptions from it. This is what I will try to do in this section.

From time to time, SD is defined by Goffman as a set of collective norms (Goffman, 1959; 1963a; 1971; 1983) or as an instrumental tool for constructing individual strategies (Goffman, 1969). It is morally defined (Goffman, 1967) and/or produced by a negotiated *working consensus* (Goffman, 1959). It is role-bound and "played" (both as a game and as a drama) in status dynamics (Goffman, 1952; 1955). It can be used as a dramaturgical means of mystification[7] as well as an expression of power in interaction (Goffman, 1959). It can help collectivities to manage safety and security in daily life or a working team to keep crucial secrets away from the audience.

Despite this large conceptual extension, what is common to all Goffman's sociology is the assumption that *interaction order is based on the constraining character of social distance*. SD is a rule of conduct that includes obligations and expectations.[8] All situations in which it is not

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6. Despite being the most widely read sociology book (Burns, 2002), a survey conducted by the International Sociological Association in 1997 found *The Presentation of Self in Daily Life* to be only the 10th most influential book in the career of sociologists, accounting for only 5.5% of total respondents.

7. "It is a widely held notion that restrictions placed upon contact, the maintenance of social distance, provide a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience a way, as Kenneth Burke has said, in which the audience can be held in a state of mystification in regard to the performer." (Goffman, 1959, p. 67).

8. "A rule of conduct may be defined as a guide for action, recommended not because it is pleasant, cheap, or effective, but because it is suitable or just. Infractions characteristically lead to feelings of uneasiness and to negative social sanction (...) Rules of conduct impinge upon the individual in two general ways: directly, as *obligations*, establishing how he is morally constrained to conduct himself; indirectly, as *expectations*, establishing how others are morally bound to act in regard to him" (Goffman, 1956, pp. 473–474).

respected end up either with realigning actions or with a stigmatization of the disrespectful individual.

Since the beginning of his career in Chicago, Goffman has been interested in studying the symbolic processes by which individuals communicate SD in interactions with acquaintances or strangers in the daily dynamics of role-exchange. The main context in which such symbolic interchanges take place is the encounter. The main elements of interpersonal communication in face-to-face encounters are glances, gestures and verbal statements. As in Simmel's theory, for Goffman, sociality is based on the metaphorical use of space, both in a physical and in a symbolical sense. Indeed, one can argue that Goffman's sociology is based on the *egocentric territoriality of self* (Goffman, 1955).

During encounters, individuals are continuously engaged in maintaining morally accepted SD towards others and negotiating possible approaches or estrangements towards their ego-centric spheres of sacredness.[9] Fundamental, in his view, is that in all such processes the social reputation of the subject, that is, his *face*,[10] shall not be endangered. Consequently, when the individual goes beyond the boundaries of morally accepted SD, he must do so with tact and politeness and so must his interlocutor. Then, the second assumption that one can trace in Goffman's theory is that *social distance is morally defined and protected through obligations and ritual activities.*[11]

Starting from the legacy of Durkheim and Simmel, Goffman believes that the individual constitutes the most sacred unity of the Modern Age, the one towards which everyone turns their ceremonial activities. The self is an individual and sacred unity, which the whole "society of individuals" — paraphrasing Norbert Elias (2001) — is committed to preserve. When SD is not respected, the reaction is emotional. In his very Simmelian essay on *Embarrassment and Social Organization* (1956) the Canadian sociologist conceived embarrassment as the emotional reaction to the unfulfillment of morally based social expectations.[12] At the same time, in the ego-alter relationship, embarrassment arises from the lack of tactfulness of one's interlocutors. In many other cases, Goffman referred to the emotion deriving from breaching interaction order in terms of *mortification*, again a concept imported from Simmel. To understand Goff-

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9. "During informal social intercourse it is well understood that an effort on the part of one person (ego) to decrease his social distance from another person (alter) must be graciously accepted by alter or, if rejected, rejected tactfully so that the initiator of the move can save his social face. This rule is codified in books on etiquette and is followed in actual behavior. A friendly movement in the direction of alter is a movement outward on a limb; ego communicates his belief that he has defined himself as worthy of alter's society, while at the same time he places alter in the strategic position of being able to discredit this conception" (Goffman, 1952, p. 456).

10. "The term *face* may be denied as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes — albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5)

11. "Of course, in the matter of keeping social distance, the audience itself will often co-operate by acting in a respectful fashion, in awed regard for the sacred integrity imputed to the performer." (Goffman, 1959, p. 67).

12. "Embarrassment has to do with unfulfilled expectations but not of a statistical kind. Given their social identities and the setting, the participants will sense what sort of conduct ought to be maintained as the appropriate thing, however much they may despair of its actually occurring. An individual may firmly expect that certain others will make him ill at ease, and yet this knowledge may increase his discomfiture instead of lessening it. An entirely unexpected flash of social engineering may save a situation, all the more effectively for being unanticipated. The expectations relevant to embarrassment are moral, then, but embarrassment does not arise from the breach of any moral expectation, for some infractions give rise to resolute moral indignation and no uneasiness at all." (Goffman, 1956, p. 268).

man's moral conception of the relationship between emotion and SD is then necessary to go back to Simmel's sociology.

In his famous essay, Simmel (1911/2018) defines *embarrassment* as a social emotion deriving from the transgression of morally accepted SD. Typically, embarrassment occurs neither in cases of full social proximity, that is, when interacting with members of one's primary group, nor in cases of interaction with people who are complete strangers. Rather, it is a social emotion typically occurring during interactions with people with whom one keeps an intermediate SD, such as colleagues at work, schoolmates and all those with whom we share a limited strip of our social identity.

SD, therefore, has the positive function of preserving the moral character of an individual as a *moral person* in the same sense developed by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Second, and fully connected, SD preserves social and moral community cohesion. Everyone is in fact expected to respect the moral obligation not to transgress against the ritual boundaries of privacy, and this allows social integration. As a matter of fact, both morality and privacy are outcomes of the social order and they do emerge from interaction. They are performative ways of accomplishing categoric imperatives applied to social life. Those categoric imperatives are then translated in norms of interaction.[13]

According to Goffman, to respect SD during an encounter, people engage themselves in complex symbolic exchanges made up of physical movements in the space; non-verbal communication, including kinesics, non-verbal gestures, proxemics, signals of attention/inattention, participation/emotional engagement or dis-engagement; linguistic markers of proximity/distance, such as the use of personal/impersonal pronouns, formal/informal register; symbolic and semantic respect of intimacy, that is, tactfulness; and rituals of deference, such as avoidance (in a negative sense) and presentation (in a positive sense) (Goffman, 1955; 1956; 1959; 1963a; 1971; 1981).

But the sphere of the self is not homogeneous and not subjective. According to Goffman, in fact, it extends as much as the social status of the individual is publicly recognized and appreciated — the more visible and more appreciated the status, the larger the sphere of privacy and sacredness. Thus, we approach a third implicit assumption: *social distance is a performative tool for managing impressions closely related to status dynamics*. Interactions between people, especially in Goffman's dramaturgical approach, are conceived as interactions between role incumbents.[14] Therefore, SD, as all interactional rules of conduct, is expressed in different ways, whether the status dynamics between the participants are symmetrical or asymmetrical.[15] During encounters, SD represents a performative and instrumental device to persuade the audience and to affirm a given, idealized (often, mystified) representation of the status-related-self. The fundamental boundary in any representation is the SD between the *front stage* — where actors show their public identity and perform in compliance with socially accepted values — and

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13. In this sense, Goffman's sociology recalls both the late Durkheimian interpretation of Kant's pure reason and the pragmatist understanding of Kantian practical reason as attention to alter's standpoint, offered by both John Dewey and George H. Mead.

14. As one can read in the *Preface* to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman considers "the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" (Goffman, 1959, p. XI).

15. "In dealing with rules of conduct it is convenient to distinguish two classes, symmetrical and asymmetrical (...). A symmetrical rule is one which leads an individual to have obligations or expectations regarding others that these others have in regard to him (...). An asymmetrical rule is one that leads others to treat and be treated by an individual differently from the way he treats and is treated by them." (1956, p. 476).

the *back stage* — the area limited to a sensorial perception of the public, where they prepare the scene, distribute the parts, behave in a "pre-social" manner and release their instincts from their role constraints. Back stage is again a space of privacy, but not a space of total agency. As a matter of fact, *back stage* is a dialectic consequence of the *front stage*: they stand in a positive/negative relationship of co-occurrence and co-necessity. Therefore, privacy is invented or necessitated by our public life. It has such a functional character, both for the individual psychology and for social organization.

Contrary to what one is led to believe upon first reading, according to Goffman, it is not individuals who try to arrange situations for their own benefit. Rather, it is the interaction order that uses individuals to regulate interactions permanently. Goffman thus disillusions the reader, presenting him with the daily normality (and normativity) of a staging over which the actor himself has very little control. The scenic tools used in the front stage, as well as the back-stage repertories, appear to the subject as means available to the realization of the self, but they are basically nothing but *devices* through which the social organization realizes its integration and its latent goals. Then, in Goffman's view, individual agency is very compressed because, as a fourth assumption, *social distance is socially regulated and socially established*.[16]

One of the clearest examples of this can be found in *Behavior in Public* (1963a) and in *Relations in Public* (1971). In these two books, Goffman develops the corresponding concept of *civil inattention* to explain how we usually behave in large open spaces, dealing with strangers. Civil inattention is the active disinterest shown towards people, such as a passer-by[17] met on the street with whom one is presumed to be unfamiliar. To be not interested in the body, the life, the mood of a stranger is a matter of "civil" avoidance and of *normal appearance* in our urban daily life.[18] Indeed, a radicalization of this principle leads to isolation and human indifference towards anyone else. Nevertheless, as a fifth assumption, *social distance is a necessary feature of social organization for it promotes safety, predictability and the functional orientation towards productivity and effectivity*.

This last point can be also translated as follows: *social distance is a means for reducing the risks connected to the double contingency*[19] *that is present in any interaction*. In Parsons (1951), the doubly contingent character of any social interaction is solved by the omnipresent normative orientation of social action. The integration of reciprocal expectations is a key element for social organization because it makes possible to interact between people and realize com-

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16. In an interview with Verhoeven, Goffman said: "The way I differ from social constructionists is that I don't think the individual himself or herself does much of the constructing. He rather comes to a world, already in some sense or other, established. So, there I would differ from persons who use in their writing the notion of social construction of reality" (Verhoeven, 1993, p. 320). This topic is important for our discussion, because it shows how a high normativity on one's behaviour could produce an high interactional anomie in times of normative confusion and fast social change.

17. "A noteworthy individual often produces in passers-by a standard 'behaviour sequence' during which he is stared at until close enough for an exchange of recognition signals, then civil inattention is proffered until he is just beyond the sight line, whereupon the curious turn and stare once again. The implication is that whereas direct staring is to be avoided, one is free to be exposed in one's staring before those whom one is not staring at." (Goffman, 1971, p. 126).

18. "What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or desire" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 84).

19. For double contingency we refer here to the classic concept introduced by Parsons (1951) relating to the hazard present in any encounter, given the fact that both participants' behaviour is, at least partially, contingent.

plex models of social collaboration.[20] Again, Goffman frames the question on a normative-performative level: showing social distance ego guarantees alter his respect of expectations, reducing the perceived risk of contingency.[21] But he never really dealt with the problem of how people interact in weak normative frames. This is the more the case with the social psychology of the latter Ralph H. Turner.[22]

Finally, *social organisation entails distancing stigmatized and morally rejected groups*. The latter type of SD differs from the previous ones as the processes of distancing are also processes of segregation, that is, processes of stable spatial and social exclusion and separation. They are carried out through internment in total institutions[23] and spoliation of the self, as Goffman has brilliantly showed in his two more radical and "politically oriented" books *Asylums* (1961) and *Stigma* (1963b). Total institutions produce two types of SD. The first is collective: the segregation of outsiders far from insiders. The second is interpersonal and internal to the total institutions; it refers to the SD between staff and inmates. Both forms produce a de-socialization of the individual, that is, a spoliation of the moral character apprehended during his socialization. In Goffman's words, during internment, inmates are subjected to a process of "deculturation" and "detraining" of social rules of conduct.

In brief, Goffman's conception of SD is an integration of a symbolic interactionist perspective with Parsons's structural functionalism and Durkheim's and Simmel's theory about the sacredness of the individual.[24] It includes a moral emphasis on face-saving, and a functional emphasis on preserving established social roles and regulating collective behaviour. Finally, SD is a matter of stratification and inequalities. In facework, those who have more power can get closer to those who have less, but the opposite is not allowed. All individuals, in every situation of their daily lives, are continuously engaged in a conflictual process of negotiating and defending boundaries, including physical, social, personal and ritual. They do so using performative multi-faceted devices and referring to moral rules. They have the impression of an unlimited agency, but they are limited by the existential experience of the *wall* that separates them from others.[25]

3   Drawing a Research Agenda on SD and Interactional Anomie in the AC

This is what happens in the "normal" course of action, where people show "normal appearances," behave respecting reciprocal expectations and define the situation consensually. But what happens during a global crisis such as the one we are experiencing in these months?

Goffman dealt many times with the problem of how to manage SD in circumstances (such as being in a crowded elevator) where it is not physically possible to respect socially accepted

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20.   Again, we find here a neo-Kantian element: the minimal conditions of social stability.

21.   This subject deserves a wider development. For reasons of space and relevance, we will not do so in this article. For an extended review see Vanderstraeten, 2002.

22.   See Turner, 1990.

23.   "A basic social arrangement in modem society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work· in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life" (Goffman, 1961, pp. 5–6).

24.   Especially in the second part of his career, this integration will lead him to develop a greater closeness to eth-nomethodology.

25.   On an existentialist reading of Goffman, much has been written. See, among others, Manning (1976) and Lofland (1980).

rules of conduct. And, a few times, he has dealt with emergencies. He never considered pandemics, but, for instance, in a short excerpt from his *Presentation of Self in Daily Life* he suggests:

> Of course, at moments of great crisis, a new set of motives may suddenly become effective and the established SD between the teams may sharply increase or decrease, but when the crisis is past, the previous working consensus is likely to be re-established, albeit bashfully (Goffman, 1959, p. 197).

"Albeit bashfully" means that, in the passage from before COVID-19 (BC) to after COVID-19 (AC), we will find ourselves in a condition of, let us say, *interactional anomie*. By this concept I mean a condition of uncertain knowledge of what rules of conduct regarding social distance shall be applied to interactions with non-familiar people in public spaces.

In these two months of quarantine, we have been — at least partially — detrained from social interaction, we have been invited to rarefy interactions and we have been put in a condition preventing us to comply with the usual rules of conduct. The risk of contagion is in fact a new element, not yet fully normed, of social distancing. While for Goffman the so-called *body idiom* was mainly a matter of the symbolic expression of social differences, nowadays it has become increasingly more a *vector* of potential danger/risk and stigma. Further, vesting a mask, whilst playing a vital function in preventing contagion, also plays the negative effect of de-subjectifying individuals and homologating their emotional display.

In addition, we are not totally sure about what normative regulation of social interactions is nowadays valid. What will happen, soon, after the lockdown is softened? Will we approach people keeping the usual SD or will we re-frame and re-define SDs in the different ambits of our daily life? This point is particularly critical in countries such as Italy, where, together with the sense of crisis and precariousness connected to the pandemic crisis, we also experienced an overall normative uncertainty, given the contradiction between supranational, national and local norms to contain the spread of the virus.[26]

In the next few months, probably, we will not be very sure about which interaction order is valid and how we can properly address each other. My hypothesis is that the effects of this interactional anomie will be more evident in the situations typically forecasting an intermediate SD, such as relationships between colleagues at work, schoolmates and all those with whom we share a limited strip of our social identity. Those are, indeed, the ones in which the double contingency problem was already more significant, also in Goffman's theory. But, if Goffman gave a moral-performative answer to the double contingency problem, he never really considered what happens when rules of conduct are not clear enough because: a) norms change and

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26. This is the case of what happened in Italy during the lockdown, which started on March 3, 2020 and will be extended, in very restrictive forms, until May 4. It has been calculated that during the 100 days of quarantine 763 different acts have been introduced by national, regional and local authorities (source: *IlSole24Ore*, "In cento giorni di lotta al virus 763 atti di Governo e Regioni," May 6, 2020). In this time range, the Italian Government has produced a normative regulation of the lockdown almost entirely based on emergency decrees. Especially in March, the national regulation of the lockdown changed very quickly, from week to week, thus leading to a substantial normative instability. A further anomalous situation, produced by regional and municipal authorities, was added to this because of local regulations that were heterogeneous and often contradictory to national decrees. This meant that in the very restricted interactions allowed outside the housing context, citizens were faced with contradictory indications with respect to the maximum permitted distance of movement, the obligation to wear gloves and masks in the street or only in shops and the possibility to exchange conversation with a neighbor or a friend met on the street. A further source of anomie are the numerous cases of disparity in the application of sanctions implemented by the various police forces in the territory.

the normative framework is weak; b) the body becomes a means of danger; c) interactions are associated to fear; d) the social roles are to be redefined and so social organization, as this is the case nowadays.

Considering the interaction as an order shall also mean understanding what happens when the order changes or is in danger. This was stated by Durkheim, clearly explained by Robert K. Merton, and — I believe — needs to be integrated into Goffman's theoretical model to make it more general and complete.

Starting from these considerations and summing up all I said so far, I propose here a research agenda on social distance to be developed in the immediate aftermath of coronavirus. Questions arising in the next months could be the following: How will keeping a given SD be interpreted by others? How will we communicate care and proximity to people if we are prevented from being physically near to them? How far will the normative quarantine produce different effects in countries that experienced different regimes of social distancing and different outcomes of the pandemic? How will we change our *body idioms* in encounters with partners, friends, relatives, acquaintances, colleagues and strangers? How will status dynamics be transformed in the AC? How will intimacy be reframed in the coming future?

Of course, to answer these questions properly, we need to be able to predict how long the epidemic will last, how long it will take before a vaccine is introduced and, more generally, how long it will take before we return to the previous everyday *Lebenswelt*, made up of rituals, face-to-face social relations and interactions in crowded collective spaces. We need also to be able to predict how accelerated will be the technological turn towards the dematerialization of work, the digitalization of social relationships, the transformation of social control and interaction at a distance in educational contexts (Rosa, 2013).

By schematizing this reasoning, one can expect the following processes to occur in the immediate aftermath of this first COVID-19 crisis:

- Increasing digitalization of proximity rituals;

- Increasing transformation of work interactions into smart-working interactions;

- Increasing SD and *interactional anomie* in contexts such as school, work, leisure time;

- Increasing SD in contexts of civil inattention, such as sidewalks, public places, public transport, commercial areas;

- Increasing stigmatization of already stigmatized groups, such as former prisoners, foreigners, refugees;

- Increasing subrogation of social proximity rituals through indirect forms of proximity (verbalisations, "secondary adjustments," i.e. forms of resistance to the rules of institutional conduct) and new forms of positive proximity (e.g. neighborhood relations, mutualistic solidarity within areas of cohabitation).

Some of those hypothesized processes are transformations of off-line into on-line interactions, or, to be more precise, they move the already existing continuity between online and offline interactions toward the first pole. John B. Thompson, who applied the Goffmanian perspective to media and modernity in his well-known contribution (1995) has recently proposed to introduce a new theoretical category to indicate this kind of interactions. He spoke of *mediated online interaction* to indicate a new form of communication who has the four following features: a) it is stretched out in time and space; b) it has a narrowing range of symbolic

clues;[27] c) it is dialogical; d) it is oriented from many to many (Thompson, 2020). SD is in-cluded in different degrees in all the four points. It regards how we use metaphorically space and time; how we use symbolic clues to express proximity or distance; how we engage ourselves in a dialog; how we keep personal, interpersonal or socially oriented distance.[28]

4 Incipient Transformations in Social Distance

In this paragraph I will report some experiences that I witnessed or that I became aware of during the quarantine period, from the last week of February to the last week of April 2020, and that seemed to me to be indicative of the process that I called *interactional anomie*. These are not empirical data, but anecdotal references that, in Goffman's typical style of writing, give the possibility to intuit or forecast incipient transformations in the regulation of social distance.

In an increasing number of families and friendship groups, despite the digital divide be-tween geographical areas and generations, the digitalization of family relationships has been greatly accelerated by events. The same is true in the work context, where there has been a significant growth in the use of remote-communication devices. This turn has a visible quan-titative dimension, as shown by a recent inquiry published by Koeze and Popper in *The New York Times*.[29] But it has also interesting qualitative aspects, as summed up by an Italian student in communication studies at the University of Roskilde (Denmark) describing the relationship with her family during the quarantine:

> Since the spread out of the Covid-19 almost a month ago in Padua, my hometown in Italy, my mother created a WhatsApp group with all her sisters, including me and my sister, in order to give and get daily health report about anyone, included all my grandparents, from all the side of the peninsula and outside Italy (me in Denmark) (…).
>
> A new routine seems to be moulded in these days, through a certain pattern: my mother (the eldest sibling in her family) asks every day in the morning in the What-sApp group how the body temperature is or if everything is good in the quarantine. From that moment on, conversations start and go along the day. Surely, her status of mother and eldest sibling influences deeply the reaction time for the answers of all the group participants: if someone does not respond in the morning time, she will be pointed out and asked to reply quickly from one of my mother's sisters.
>
> The affection labour and "care-at-a-distance" are performed in many ways: several are the topics and formats of the messages that are sent in the group and the needs that they want to cover, but many are also the reactions to a late or absent reply from the group components. The main topics identified in the WhatsApp group can be divided into categories, such as: *health check, law restrictions, shared activi-ties to do online, reminders for prayers, everyday life tasks, funny contents*.[30]

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27. An interesting recent example is the introduction of the *care* reaction in Facebook.

28. Again, this is a subject deserving a wider development. For a recent and focussed review see Couldry & Hepp, 2016.

29. E. Koeze and N. Popper. "The virus changed the way we internet." *The New York Times*, April 7, 2020.

30. Anonymous student, "Love in the time of Coronavirus." *Social Media* class, University of Roskilde, 2020. This content is published and anonymized thanks to the consent of the author.

This report shows how the crisis has stimulated an acceleration in the digitalization of some interpersonal rituals of care, sociability and affection. The digital family groups replace physical proximity relationships through alternative symbolic elements of proximity, such as verbalized emotional involvement, attention to a common focus and participation in group routines. In addition, the spatial character of co-presence is digitally replaced by the temporal character of simultaneity. This is an example of what I called *digitalization of proximity rituals*. It complies with the second assumption in Goffman's theory: *social distance is morally defined and protected through obligations and ritual activities*.

From the point of view of the transformation of the role relationships in the workplace, i.e. from the point of view of how SD is connected to status dynamics (third assumption), I will quote here some personal experiences I had playing the role of professor in the last two months. During the pandemic, like most of my colleagues, I have transformed my teaching activity into a smart teaching activity, whatever "smart" means. I have participated in online seminars, held long-distance dialogues with students on academic topics, in research briefings and so on. In each of these cases, the emotional neutrality of the workplace has been replaced by a domestic and familiar place: one's own home. In general, this has led to a reduction in SD both between professors and students and between professors and professors, which is expected to have effects on the coming future. This is an element particularly visible in Italy, where the academic professional culture is still very conservative in the management of impressions. Professors are expected — more or less, depending on disciplines — to behave, dress, speak and look appropriate (read: expressing a middle-high social status), particularly in the workplace. In this sense, gossip plays an important element of social control.

Another interesting element is the re-framing of frontstage and backstage (Goffman, 1959) in videoconferences. In one episode, a wrong Zoom ID indication gave me and my colleagues access to an important institutional meeting where we were not expected to participate. This shows the vulnerability of the digitalized backstage, the digitalization of perceptive barriers and the risks associated with conducting sensitive briefings through web interfaces.

Moreover, smart teaching has de-ritualized some fundamental rites of passage in university careers — graduation ceremonies and the awarding of doctoral degrees. Further transformations have concerned the difficulty in defining speech turns, the downsizing of non-verbal communication and the difficulty in expressing feedback. Again, the usual SD between asymmetric roles have been reduced in mediated digital interactions (Thompson, 2020).

From a dramaturgical point of view, these types of interactions have significantly reduced the effect of status symbols related to appearance. In fact, in Goffman's terms, professors have adapted their appearance to the domestic setting. Nevertheless, an almost constant dramaturgical element in the relationship between professors and students and between professors and professors is the presence of a bookcase in the background of the conversation. The books exhibited by the teacher and less frequently by the student are in fact the customary reified projection of their (supposed) erudition. Nevertheless, a significant minority of colleagues decided to play the role of the *transgressive* professor, using virtual backgrounds, dressing in rock t-shirts and employing other symbolic means to reduce the projected SD towards students.

Finally, let me mention some examples of what I call incipient *interactional anomie*. This time I will mention some personal communications of friends (young students and scholars of sociology) who, during the end of this period of quarantine, experienced their first face-to-face interaction since the beginning of lockdown in Italy:

> Today I saw a friend in the flesh. The first friendly person I've seen with whom
> I have had a dialogue that is not from work or a salesman, and it makes you feel

really weird to start talking to real people again and also with body language. He's a friend of my partner, who we called at home to do some work. We were both very awkward [personal communication #1].

Two weeks before they locked us in, one of my closest friends came to live in the ground floor apartment of my building, which my parents rent. I live with my parents now, so the only contact I have with the outside world is this friend of mine and his roommate, who occasionally invite me to drink coffee downstairs; I don't even have to go out because the flat is on the same stairs. All three of us are working from home, so we have no contact with the outside world. I've noticed that when I'm in their house, they try to keep a greater distance than normal, but when we're in the communal garden smoking a cigarette, the distance increases even more because it's not desirable to be seen by the neighbors at too close distance [personal communication #2].

The first story is interesting because it contains what Goffman calls "secondary adjustments" — a sort of loophole through which you get contact otherwise not allowed between representation teams. The quarantine has in fact limited interpersonal relationships almost exclusively to business contacts. The only way out to have face-to-face relations with a friend, in their case, was therefore to offer him a job. Such overlapping role dynamics (friends and work in this case) and the distraining from face-to-face interactions produced the embarrassment reported by the friend.

In the second story, we still have a sort of secondary adjustment since the friendly relationship is hidden in public places, increasing the apparent SD to keep *normal appearances* of no interaction. A further element of great interest is the public as a normative actor. The neighbors, the ordinary people, embody in this historical moment the transposed authority that works to ensure that the rules of healthy conduct are respected. Then, SD is also a matter of induced reciprocal suspect.

A narrative of what will be the post-quarantine period is clearly visible in the following report on the life of an Italian journalist in Beijing, Gabriele Battaglia, published by the Italian magazine *Internazionale* and emphatically titled "Social distancing has become the new normality in China":

In many shops in Beijing there are signs on the ground made with tape marking the distances to be kept between person and person, for example when standing in line at the checkout. But if at the beginning of the epidemic these distances were rigidly maintained, now nobody really pays attention to them. The two meters in the gym are almost never respected, but the mask, the mask, yes, if you try to take it off they call you to order.

The fact is that maybe there's not so much need for instructions anymore. The social distancing has already entered you, you are no longer close to others, you don't shake hands, you don't hug. The Chinese are still a little afraid to come out, they send us, the unwary Italians, and then of course the old ones, those who didn't give up the *mah-jong* table even in January, at the height of the crisis. They have already seen them all, they have suffered hunger, what is a virus? (...) Perhaps the virus has also imposed on the Chinese an idea of a North European order, made up of distances rather than thrusts? I do not believe it and I do not hope so, so in

my Beijing I look with a mixture of fear and hope at the small violations of social distancing.[31]

The journalist's description is largely dystopic and must be contextualized in the given temporal and spatial context of China in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic's first peak. But interesting enough is his emphasis on some elements that, in my opinion, could favor an incipient interactional anomie: interpersonal distrust, emotional elements of fear, lack of certainty about the rules of conduct, general avoidance of strangers and generalized human skepticism.

5 (Albeit Bashful) Conclusions

In brief, this article, starting from Goffman's perspective, has shown how the concept of social distance is far more complex than the one used in the official communication of international health agencies. It is not simply a dimension concerning physical distance between people; rather it is an element in the "grammar" of interactional order. It is a complex matter including moral, ritual, organizational and functional aspects.

All these dimensions in Western societies tend to remain stable and to be implemented through behavioral obligations and expectations. As a result of globalization, the Western model of social distancing has spread throughout the world. All this makes Goffman's theories even more salient today. The COVID-19 pandemic inserts a new and unexpected element in the regulation of social interactions: the dangers of contamination and contagion inherent in interpersonal relationships. All this, in my hypothesis, will lead to a more or less extended phase of *interactional anomie* in which people will find it difficult to recognize what rule of conduct regulates a changed interactional order. In Goffman's terms, probably, this will lead to a regulatory looseness and to an extended need for *working consensus* between interlocutors each time we encounter someone in an uncertain role relationship with us. In my terms, interactional anomie shall be considered as a pragmatic and processual step in the process of reorganizing a changing interaction order.

This article is not based on solid empirical data but constitutes, as anticipated, above all an exercise in sociological imagination.[32] Such imagination aims more to open up a research agenda than to advance detailed forecasts about the future.

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31. Gabriele Battaglia, "Il distanziamento sociale in Cina è la nuova normalità." *Internazionale*. Available at: https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/gabriele-battaglia/2020/04/17/cina-distanziamento-sociale-normalita?fbclid=IwAR2IWc7cYeeZEqMjYdp23-YA1huaTUGekcpqE_7ql2P4VV9pDjTFK2f6gGI

32. Charles Wright Mills defined sociological imagination as "the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society" (Mills, 1959, p. 5). This is what I tried to do here, helping my self with the stimulation of the imaginative background of Goffman's theory.

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