How Social Distancing Will Affect our Lives? A Commentary

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The Coronavirus Disease which broke out in Wuhan, China in 2019 and was later declared a global pandemic by the WHO in March 2020 has not left the world the same (De Vos, 2020). Since the emergence of the coronavirus, there is barely any aspect of the social system that functions optimally (including the health institution). COVID-19 is an event that has challenged age-long beliefs about the socio-economic organisation of man's life.

There is no doubt that the impact of such social upheaval will not be forgotten in a hurry. The effect of this pandemic cuts across all social strata in society; though some have argued that it is taking more toll on the upper-class members of society. The first rule of staying free from the virus as almost every health professional has stressed is social distancing – a concept that only became relevant at the wake of the coronavirus. Social distancing as defined by the Apoorva Mandavilli in "*wondering about social distancing"* is the idea to maintain a distance between you and other people — in this case, at least six feet (cited in Engel, 2020). However, in its broadest sense, we could use it to mean minimising the level of contacts we have with people. That is; avoiding public transportation when and where possible, limiting of non-essential travels, staying away from the workplace or working from home were necessary and skipping any form of social gathering such as; worship centres, bars, wedding, burial ceremonies, etc.

Social distancing, no doubt, has helped to save millions of lives. In fact, as Dr Gerardo Chowell, chair of population health sciences at Georgia State University puts it; *"every single reduction in the number of contacts you have per day with relatives, with friends, co-workers, in school will have a significant impact on the ability of the virus to spread in the population"* (cited in Mandavilli, 2020).

For many, coronavirus is an event that will re-shape society in lasting ways cutting across travels, buying and selling, social bonding, security, etc. Thus, this pandemic that contained many at their homes is already reorienting our relationship to friends, family, colleagues, the

government, and the world at large. Some of these changes we are expected to see might feel so unfamiliar and unsettling. Hence, questions like; will people still maintain the convivial and touchy relationship they have so long practised, or will touching become a taboo (especially handshakes and kisses as a form of greeting)? What will become of social hang-out especially in clubs and bars? Will more events be organised through virtual platforms? These and more are some of the questions that are ahead of us in the coming weeks, months, year or years (Politico, 2020).

One basic issue that currently needs to be addressed is how social distancing is currently affecting our lives. The effect of social distancing can be likened to two sides of a coin as we will keep experiencing both positive and negative impacts. On a positive note, social distancing has made many to realise the fact that some things we do, places we go to, and travels we embark upon are not as important as we thought they were. Furthermore, families will have more time for themselves as they remain at home, therefore resulting in more social bonding between family members. On a negative note, it has disrupted the calendar of the people in the world as pre-planned activities such as family meetings, wedding and burial ceremonies, birthday parties, conferences and symposia, and sports activities have all been disrupted and subsequently postponed.

According to Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics and author of "*You're the Only One I Can Tell: Inside the Language of Women's Friendships"* (cited in Politico, 2020), we can suffer the calamities of past eras, like the economic meltdown of the Great Depression. For instance, we are now well aware of the fact that touching things or people, maintaining proximity with other people and sharing the same air space with others could be very risky. Inasmuch as we concur that the level of this awareness will recede with time (depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of the group), it might be impossible that it will disappear for people of our current generation. Therefore, it could become second nature for people to recoil from shaking hands, kissing, touching our faces. The washing of hands which most hygienic households have maintained might just become the norm of every household after they go out and come back.

In the months to come following the post coronavirus, the effects of social distancing will still be felt. As more individuals and organisations embrace virtual gatherings and meetings, several businesses may be affected leading to retrenchment, loss of jobs and source of livelihood. Also, students will experience a setback educationally as the majority of those affected do not have access to the internet to study at home. Theda Skocpol, a professor of government and sociology at the Harvard University (cited in Politico, 2020) wrote: *"...but many will struggle with job losses and family burdens. They are more likely to be single parents or single-income households. They're less able to work from home, and more likely employed in the service or delivery sectors, in jobs that put them at a greater danger of coming into contact with the coronavirus. In many cases, their children will not gain educationally at home, because parents will not be able to teach them, or their households might lack access to the high-speed Internet that enables remote instruction"*.

Additionally, social distancing could result in health issues such as isolation which could lead to loneliness and subsequently, depression, high blood pressure, and death from heart disease, weight gain due to less exercise and activities, etc. Married and cohabiting couples would engage in more sexual activities, this could also result in more births at the end of the social distancing period. However, People will learn how to do things they do not know how to do as they sit at home. In order to beat boredom and loneliness, more and more persons will engage in profitable enterprises at home. Notwithstanding, the social distancing period is not going to be an easy one, thus people are advised to brace up for whatever may come. In his *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, Eric Klinenberg a professor of Sociology and Director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University wrote: *"the coronavirus pandemic is going to cause immense pain and suffering. But it will force us to reconsider who we are and what we value, and, in the long run, it could help us rediscover the better version of ourselves"* (cited in Schwartz, 2020).

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