Why Can’t I Walk Your Dog? Not Accepting Help as a Coping Strategy During the Swiss Lockdown (#WitnessingCorona)

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> “Et nous souhaitons ici lancer un appel à l’ensemble de la population et notamment un appel aussi aux personnes âgées et vulnérables: Restez à la maison pour protéger votre santé. Évitez autant que possible les contacts avec d’autres personnes”[1] (Alain Berset, Swiss health minister, press conference of the Swiss Federal Counsil, 16/03/2020).

In the first months of 2020, authorities around the world urged citizens to stay at home, wash hands, and keep the distance. A collective effort was requested, in some countries as a legal obligation, and in Switzerland as a strong recommendation to slow down the spread of COVID-19.[2] There is scientific evidence that social distancing considerably reduces the transmission rate of viral infections (Kelso, Milne, & Kelly 2009). However, keeping distance from each other by default might deeply affect what holds together the social fabric, namely weak and invisible ties (Felder 2020; Granovetter 1973, 1983). How does society cope with the fact that most of the daily social interactions must now take place online? Although some of the observations in this contribution might also apply to other European countries, they are specifically elaborated in the Swiss context.

The so-called “lockdown” alarmed citizens. To prepare, people hoarded everyday goods and got their last things from their office. On March 23, the video conferencing software application “Zoom” was downloaded 2.13 million times worldwide (Neate 2020). Communication technologies promised to carry on with business as usual. After some re-scheduling, activities could move into virtual space. Meetings, fitness exercises, school lessons, and many other gatherings were organized online. People got creative and took joint coffee breaks via video call, for example, as working from home was not everyone’s cup of tea. Just as professional relations had to be re-organized, it was far from easy for most citizens to refrain from physical contact outside the household with their beloved ones.

When thinking about social relations, people usually refer to family members, friends, or colleagues. Certainly, being in lockdown at home strongly affected interactions with family

members or other close friends living outside the household. Instead of meeting at a restaurant, these contacts had to be sustained through more frequent phone and video calls, instant messaging, or surface mail. Thus, strong ties get organized over and over again, continually renewing these close social bonds. However, while the lockdown was a real challenge for our personal network of close relations, it probably has had an even greater impact on our incidental sociability.

The importance of weak and invisible ties

People tend to forget loose but regular interactions with people whom we know by sight but not always by name, such as the friendly cashier, the helpful neighbor always going for a walk at 10 a.m., or the elderly man always sitting in front of the supermarket with his red bag. Although these situations may be familiar to the reader, it is difficult to define them precisely (Felder 2020). On the one hand, there are relations that could be called *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Weak ties consist of regular, but rather casual interaction. Examples are the usual (small-) talk with the neighbor, or this coffee shop owner who knows your standard order by heart (Felder 2020).

On the other hand, there are relations that could be called *invisible ties* (Felder 2020). Invisible ties refer to strangers we know from sight. Examples are the friendly cashier or the woman with her young girl always smiling at you on the bus ride to work. While weak ties are usually mutual, invisible ties can be unidirectional. These categories can be described as distinct concepts, but they should be understood as ideal types, resembling a continuum in real life. They can evolve over time and depend on the context. For example, frequent visits to the same supermarket over several years might turn an initially invisible tie between the customer and the cashier into a weak one when conversations become more personal, and advices are exchanged. Thereby, the cashier and the customer are becoming social resources to each other, namely social capital (Forrest & Kearns 2001).

About space and time

However, maintaining such weak and invisible ties is inseparably connected to everybody’s daily routine. Most people stick to a certain routine in everyday life. They leave their homes at a certain time to go to work, go for a walk, or shop for groceries (Figure 1). Some of the habits are usually established according to predefined obligations, such as picking kids up from school, while others are created over time through our own preferences. Some might choose a certain time to go shopping to avoid crowds. Others prefer the public space to be lively when resting for a moment on a bench. Inevitably though, our routines are going to overlap with those of other people. Hence, people tend to appear regularly in the same space at roughly the same time, thus reproducing a sort of over-arching societal structure embedded in space and time.

Figure 1: An elderly man walking across Plainpalais in Geneva at a particular time. A habit he maintained during the lockdown? Copyright: Dana Mahr, 28/3/2020. Reproduced with permission.

The public health measure of a general lockdown turned our daily routines upside down. Subsequently, roads and public spaces appear to be “uninhabited.” And suddenly, all these people that have made our streets such a busy place are now confined at home. It has become visible in a cruel way how much the liveliness of a location depends on the recurring presence of others (Augé 2010). The lockdown drastically restricted people’s daily mobility radius, re-centralizing their activities in walking or biking distance around their residence. Familiar strangers suddenly disappear from our routine. Such encounters were put on an abrupt halt without guarantee of renewal for the duration of the lockdown. Such weak and invisible ties might be renewed after the pandemic but also be lost forever, as social disruptions of the magnitude of a general lockdown could lead to the establishment of different routines.

The lockdown has limited people’s daily interactions to the core of their network, namely to strong ties of whom they know the phone number. This can be very problematic for people who have only a few or no strong ties at all. Often, their feeling of belonging (Blokland & Nast 2014) is essentially constituted of weak and invisible ties. Most of these ties have been severed by the

lockdown, with little or no substitute.

The limits of digital tools

Especially elderly people are affected harshly by social distancing. Usually, their everyday mobility is already restricted to a certain perimeter. Within this “cocoon,” loose encounters of the same individuals essentially contribute to the feeling of social belonging and public familiarity (Hummel, Burton-Jeangros & Riom 2017; Ziegler & Schwanen 2011). Going out regularly or even several times a day represents a way of adopting a daily routine in which moments of fleeting interactions with people from the neighborhood constitute a sense of familiarity (Nordbakke 2013). By going out on a regular basis, be it a necessity or a pure pleasure, elderly people establish a vital routine that keeps them going even in difficult times (Hummel, Burton-Jeangros & Riom 2017). From this perspective, it seems more obvious why elderly people are not entirely committed to staying at home, even though they are the most at risk. At this point, some readers might argue that there are a lot of digital possibilities to fight loneliness.

This argument, however, applies to a much lesser extent to the elderly people, and, more importantly, to both weak and invisible ties. Although socio-economic factors influence access to and know-how of digital technologies among younger generations (Korupp & Szydlik 2005), this so-called digital divide is strongly pronounced regarding old age (Friemel 2016; Hargittai & Dobransky 2017). Moreover, by shifting personal meetings to the virtual world, many dimensions of non-verbal communication are lost, as Blokland, Krüger & Vief (2020) argue in their blog post. Digital encounters are not made to establish a routine of familiar strangers, as meetings only happen with whom one has chosen them to happen. However, social support often originates as a non-intentional side product of other shared activities (ibid.). If such social resources were based on weak and/or invisible ties, the lockdown made them scarce.

The power of social belonging

During the lockdown, weak and invisible ties created close to the places where people live, might persist, but only if one of the two deciding parameters of space and time, continues to be the same. While the strength of weak ties has been described early on (Granovetter 1973, 1983), little is known about the strength of invisible ties. One example could be the cashier, still working at the same place, whose invisible ties to certain customers provide continuity in the uncertainty of the changing routines due to the pandemic. The cashier might accept now socially despised behavior from a long-term customer, for example, an eighty-year-old still paying by cash, while urging other customers to pay contactless. Although the cashier’s presence can be comforting in such unstable times, the interaction will still be different from the time before the pandemic. A glass pane installed between in front of her desk makes it clear: do not come too close. Such an invisible tie could turn out to be the pivotal resource for some people as invisible ties are all they have in their personal networks. Another example could be

made with that elderly neighbor always smiling when he crosses someone. Having to keep social distance as well as the fear of being infected, make him distrust others. Instead of the usual friendly greeting, he might appear grumpy and only nod shortly to say hello. These examples indicate that invisible ties are of a certain quality, as it is known for weak and strong ties. Furthermore, this would imply that invisible ties are not necessarily beneficent but can also consist of uncomfortable encounters. Invisible ties of bad quality would, if ever possible, not be renewed by avoiding the other person.

Some people's social network might only be constituted of weak and/or invisible ties. This presumably applies especially to vulnerable people, like the elderly people with chronic diseases, or homeless people. Although they are most at risk of contracting COVID-19, a general lockdown might have deprived them of all the daily independence they were left with. Keeping that in mind, it seems less astonishing that some people refused to accept assistance proposed by younger people for grocery shopping or walking their dog (Figure 2). Handing over daily duties could mean abandoning an essential routine and consequently the feeling of social belonging, which is all the more important for vulnerable people. Hence, not accepting well-intentioned help could be part of a deliberate coping strategy during the lockdown.

Figure 2: An elderly woman walking her dog in Geneva during the lockdown. Copyright: Dana Mahr, 20/4/2020. Reproduced with permission.

The directive to stay home to slow down the corona pandemic made a crucial aspect of social cohesion visible (Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier 2019). Weak and invisible ties are important parts of our sociability. It is impossible to replace them with online communication technologies as they rely on daily incidental encounters of familiar strangers, creating a social fabric out of individuals.

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[1] English translation by the author: "And we would like to make an appeal to the whole population and in particular to the elderly and vulnerable: Stay at home to protect your health. Avoid contact with other people as much as possible."

[2] Switzerland's health system is organized in a decentralized manner, putting the cantons in charge of implementing public health measures. Some cantons had already taken action to stop the spread of Covid-19 before the Federal Council adopted general lockdown measures on a national level on March 16, 2020. The most affected cantons were the Italian-speaking canton Ticino and the French-speaking cantons, Geneva and Vaud. These cantons advocate now for a more cautious approach regarding the relaxation of these lockdown measures (Trein & Wagner 2020).

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