

Special Issue Distances

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

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Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
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YEAR VI - VOL. 15 - NUM. 2 - JUNE 2023

FedOA – Federico II University Press

ISSN (online) 2723 – 9608 – ISSN (print) 2532 – 750X



This Special Issue of *Fuori Luogo* is made possible with the contribution of the Italian Association of Sociology
Section Sociology of the Environment and Territory

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Gabriele Qualizza, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia

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English text editor: Pietro Maturi.

Cover by Fabio Improta. Creative idea by C. Urciuoli

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FedOA - Federico II University Press
University Library Centre "Roberto Pettorino"
University of Naples Federico II

Editorial responsibility

Fedoa adopts and promotes specific guidelines on editorial responsibility, and follows COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.

Authorization of the Court of Naples n. 59 of 20 December 2016.

Director: Carmine Urciuoli

ISSN 2723-9608 (online publication) ISSN 2532-750X (printed publication)

Articles

In evaluating the proposed works, the journal follows a peer review procedure. The articles are proposed for evaluation by two anonymous referees, once removed any element that could identify the author.

Propose an article. The journal uses a submission system (open journal) to manage new proposals on the site. www.serena.unina.it/index.php/fuoriluogo

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Fuori Luogo is included in the ANVUR list of scientific journals for Area 14, Political and Social Sciences (since 2016), in Area 8, Civil Engineering and Architecture (since 2019), and Area 11, History, philosophy, pedagogy and psychology (since 2019). It is classified in Class A in 14/C1, Sociology (since 2019), 14/C2, Social Policy and Social Work (since 2019), 14/C3, General and Applied Sociology (since 2017), and 14/D1, Methodology of Social Research (since 2017).

Fuori Luogo is indexed in: DOAJ Directory of Open Access Journals - ACNP Catalogue code n. PT03461557 - Index Copernicus International ID 67296.

The journal is part of CRIS Coordinamento Riviste Italiane di Sociologia.

Fuori Luogo is included in the LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) network of the Public Knowledge Project (PKP PLN)

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How to reflect on social distance to strengthen socio-territorial cohesion and equality

Mathematically speaking, the concept of distance has to do with a topological space that allows the definition of limits, continuity and connection through geometric typologies that include Euclidean, metric and manifold spaces.

This definition represents a fundamental starting point for analyzing the theme of "distance" from a spatial-social perspective. Sociologists define social distance as a subjective perception or experience of distance from another person or other persons.

Since Park and Burgess introduced the concept of social distance, drawing first from the work of Tarde and then from that of Simmel, its use in sociology has become quite widespread. It is not just a matter of thematizing a social dimension that insists on the degree of physical separation between actors and actants in a given space (a city, a sidewalk, a highway...), but distance (and proximity) play a role in human relationality, since the opportunity for interaction is clearly also related to physical distance. Speaking of an urban condominium, to give an applied example, the neighbors could have a more intense and lasting relationality than that which takes place within ties of ascribed origin, such as family ones.

Each of these social distances corresponds to a degree of intimacy/confidence that depends on culture, gender and personal preferences. For example, according to Islamic law, closeness (being in the same room or in a secluded place) between a man and a woman is permitted - at least in theory - only in the presence of their "mahram" (a spouse or a person from same sex or a pre-pubescent person of the opposite sex). This social distance can also be parameterized. For an average Westerner, for example, the "personal" space and therefore the distance from other people present in the same living space would be approximately 70 cm in front, 40 cm behind and 60 cm on each side. During the last pandemic, social distancing regulations included specific social distancing safety protocols across the globe. In that case the recommendations aimed to maintain a distance of at least one meter between people to avoid the spread of diseases transmissible through respiratory droplets.

In the phenomena of social life, the concept of distance also applies to social groups and determines their system of power hierarchies. In stratified social systems, such as those based on social class, social distance indicates a marked difference in power, access to resources, and social position between dominant and disadvantaged power groups. Consistently with this principle, Lammers and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that individuals in *high-power conditions* have a stronger preference for independent, solitary activities that create or maintain social distance than individuals in *low-power conditions*. These Scholars showed that power-holders' preference for social distance is partially explained by weaker motivation to interact with their low-power counterparts because they (theoretically) feel less dependent on others to satisfy their goals.

This social distance may also be linked to other factors such as education, occupation, social class or even race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. People from stigmatized or marginalized groups may experience greater social distance than privileged groups, which can manifest itself through discrimination, prejudice and unequal treatment.

In sociological terms, talking about social distance also evokes, among other things, both the dimension of socio-spatial homogeneity and heterogeneity.

Individuals often prefer to live in neighborhoods where their neighbors have similar characteristics. Hipp and Boessen (2012), for instance, discovered a negative correlation between housing demand and the social distance between neighboring households: a higher distance between households was associated with a lower demand. Hipp and Perrin (2009) had found in a previous study that there was a decline in the establishment of "weak ties" in the neighborhoods of those with higher incomes, as well as those who are older, married, and have children. This validates

findings from earlier studies. For example, Blokland (2003) notes that there is little interaction between the various population strata. A study in Bristol shows that middle- class parents tend to move for schools they believe are better for their children, even though they very much appreciate the heterogeneity of the neighborhood they left (Bridge, 2006).

Social distance can create a sense of separation and isolation, particularly in areas with limited transportation and communication infrastructure. Individuals living in remote or rural areas may perceive a greater geo-social distance from urban centers and experience a lack of access to resources and opportunities. Both social and geographical distance can impact these dynamics, as individuals who are geographically distant or socially different may experience social exclusion and isolation. Social distance is not fixed or static. It can change over time due to various factors such as advancements in technology, migration, urbanization, and social movements. These changes can lead to shifts in the perceived and actual distances between individuals and groups (migration flows, income polarisation, gender gap...) impacting social cohesion and social change.

As the result of social changes or the fall-out of ideological preferences (whether too much Keynesianism or too much neoliberalism), there is a need for new policy and political strategies. Indeed, some call for a new social architecture and forms of social protection in order to rebuild cohesion and to reduce critical consequences of social distance.

These actions should not be taken in siloes. An effective action agenda against unjust social distances requires an integrated approach, which looks to the interplay between policy areas, rather than merely measuring the distributive effects of separate interventions. Close collaboration across sectors, agencies, government and citizen groups will be indispensable to drive progress in fighting social distances in terms of inequality. Moreover, any adequate approach must address the structural barriers that drive gender, class, mobility and other forms of inequality. As well as action at the domestic level, there is also an urgent need for collective action at the international level to tackle the cross-border policy impacts and global governance deficits which are perpetuating inequality between as well as within countries.

This special issue of *Fuori Luogo* on the topic of social distancing tries to do its "job", promoting the debate on the issue through highly original research ideas. Hoping that the relationship between research and political application becomes increasingly closer.

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