PRZESTRZEŃ
Społeczna

Social
SPACE

Distancing

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The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic introduced the term *social distance* into public discourse. Picked up by moderately intelligent journalists and politicians alike, the term – divorced from its proper meaning – easily entered bureaucratic language, including university bureaucracy, and then para-scientific texts.

A curious example of this phenomenon is the para-scientific Polish-language Wikipedia. Directly under the entry *social distancing*, there appears the note "Not to be confused with: social distance", which does not prevent the author from beginning his arguments by accepting that social distancing is a synonym for physical distancing, and then using interchangeably, sometimes even within one sentence, the terms: "social distancing", "social distance", "socio-distancing", "socially distanced" and "socio-distance" (*Dystansowanie…*, n.d.).

Bohdan Jałowiecki notes that *social distance* – according to politicians and many journalists – means "a distance between people in the street" (Jałowiecki 2020c), while in fact it is a spatial distance. "Social distance separates the millionaire from the bootblack, [and] the director from the worker. In interwar Poland, the landowner was separated by a huge social distance from the groom working there, and at the same time by spatial proximity, while there was no social distance from another heir who lived miles away. This is a primer taught in sociology lectures, which are obligatory in many […] fields of study. Maybe it was worth attending to them" (Jałowiecki 2020c). The author's hope seems too optimistic, because, apart from attending, one should expect not only listening with understanding, but also remembering and associating facts. B. Jałowiecki right-

ly notices that "[m]any journalists are uneducated, not to mention politicians[,] who cannot be expected of much" (Jałowiecki 2020b). Therefore, the above-mentioned "error rises to the best" (ibidem), and the "[l]anguage of public debate becomes more and more sloppy" (Jałowiecki 2020a). This "sloppiness in language is in fact the sloppy in reason" (ibidem), which is a dangerous phenomenon (ibidem) for the traditional model of culture, but characteristic of populisms if not of newspeak as assigning different meaning to terms.

Therefore, it is astonishing to find in a university document a recommendation on what to do "in the event that it is impossible to maintain a social distance of at least 1.5 m between individual places" (*Zarządzenie…*, 2020: 1). This document implies not only the assumption that social distance is measured in meters, but also that it is not between people or social positions, but between workplaces.

It might be supposed that the source of the confusion is the notion of *social distancing* – and the corresponding term. The term has traditionally, though not very sensibly, been used for "a set of non-pharmaceutical interventions or measures intended to prevent the spread of a contagious disease by maintaining physical distance between people and reducing the number of times people come into close contact with each other" (Johnson et al., 2020). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) initially described *social distancing* as a set of "methods for reducing frequency and closeness of contact between people in order to decrease the risk of transmission of disease" (Kinlaw, Levine, 2007), but later stated that rather it is about "remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining (approximately […] two meters) from others when possible" (Pearce 2020). However, the World Health Organization (WHO) rightly pointed out that this is not about any "social distancing" but about *physical distancing*, as this is the physical distance that prevents transmission of infections, and "people can remain socially connected via technology" (Hensley 2020). It was therefore recommended that one stops using the nonsensical term "social distancing" in favour of physical distancing (Tangermann 2020), which apparently did not register with journalists, politicians, or Wikipedia's authors.

The concept of *social distance* is closely related to the concept of *personal distance*. The latter is, according to Edward Hall (1966), one manifestation of spatial behaviour. Personal distances are treated as extensions of the body. In relation to people, E. Hall distinguished four distances: intimate, individual, social and public, and in relation to animals also critical distance and escape distance. The *critical distance* is the absolute defence distance, i.e. the one from which the intruder triggers aggression, while the *escape distance* (alert distance or flight zone) is the shortest distance at which animals allow their natural enemies to approach. All personal distances can be expressed in terms of physical distance related to anatomic dimensions, also in the case of humans. An *intimate distance* is one that allows one to stroke the partner's cheek; *individual distance* allows partners to shake hands; *social distance* allows to follow the partner's facial expressions and clearly hear his/her voice, without feeling the heat and smell of his/her body; *public distance* makes it possible to see the entire partner's silhouette together with his/her surroundings. The detailed physical distances associated with individual personal distances vary from culture to culture. Personal distances are important non-verbal messages (Hall 1959) because the distance that individuals, including humans, keep to others illustrates their emotional relationship to them, their social status, and the type of their interaction, including conversation. Generally, it can be concluded that social distance is correlated with (Matthews, Matlock, 2011), although not identical to, physical distance.

In sociology, social distance has been classically defined as an attempt to reduce the issue discussed herein to the measurable categories of scope and degree of understanding and intimacy that generally characterise personal relationships and social relations (Park 1924). Nowadays, the notion of social distance is understood as the distance between different social groups: classes, races, ethnic groups or genders. Members of different groups mix less than members of the same group. Social distance is therefore a measure of the nearness or intimacy that an individual or group feels towards another individual or group in a social network; it is also a measure of the level of trust that a given group has for the other, as well as the degree of perceived similarity of beliefs

(Boguna et al., 2004; Helfgott, Gunnison, 2008). Social distance includes affective, normative, interactive, and cultural and habitual distances (Karakayali 2009).

Affective distance refers to emotional reactions, especially likes or dislikes, towards other persons and social groups (Bogardus 1947). *Normative distance* refers to commonly accepted and often consciously expressed norms about who can be considered as "insider" and who as an "outsider", so these norms define the distinctions between "us" and "them". Thus, normative social distance embraces social distance as a non-subjective, structural aspect of social relations (*Social distance*, n.d.). *Interactive distance* refers to the frequency and intensity of interactions between groups, based on the assumption that the stronger or more frequent the interactions of these groups, the closer these groups are socially. The frequency of interactions can therefore be considered as a measure of the strength of inter-group social ties (ibidem). *Cultural and habitual distance* refers to the concept of social capital (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1990). The above four concepts of social distance can be considered as its aspects, and, in topological terms, as non-linearly correlated dimensions (Karakayali 2009). Social distancing is often related to prejudices stemming from a deeply entrenched belief in the cultural superiority of one's own group and the inferiority of other cultures.

It was also pointed out that social distance is part of a wider category of distance, assuming that space is socially produced (Jałowiecki 2010) and saturated with social life, and not only a container of human activity (Simandan 2016). In this context, four dimensions of distance were experimentally identified: spatial, temporal, social and hypotheticality (Simandan 2016). In other words, these are four separate ways of distancing the object from the observer's self here and now (ibidem), and thus the object visible in one's mind's eye (d'Eposito, Postle, 2015). In this context, the "[t]ranscending of social distance is produced every time a given individual begins to think about people other than herself, even if those people are in the here and now, i.e. spatially and temporally close. It is an ability that develops in the first years of life, as children succeed in overcoming their earlier egocentrism and progressively take into account other[s]. Traversing social distance constitutes the foundation for altruistic behaviour and for the cultiva-

tion of an ethics of care for the distant other" (Simandan 2016: 250). "Traversing social distance must also be a pre-supposed ability for theorisation of humans as relational place-makers" (Pierce et al., 2011), because space-making is a social process (Malpas 2015).

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In our journal *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)*, we invariably have a *distance* to terminological carelessness and linguistic awkwardness, which distinguishes us from the narrative style accepted in the mainstream of some social sciences in Poland, to which we are therefore *distanced*. And the ethics of care for the distant other is our imperative.

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