

Living Alone Under Lockdown

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CHAPTER 10

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Introduction

Actions speak louder than words. It is easy for governments to spout ‘modern’, ‘liberal’ and ‘tolerant’ rhetoric. But the lockdown orders many have implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 belie these stated values. The specific ways in which governments have re-regulated our social lives have revealed an astoundingly narrow and outdated picture of how people live, or ought to live, with respect to their personal relationships. The typical public health regulations required people to stay at home, to venture outside only for particular purposes (such as grocery shopping and physical exercise) and to do so alone or with members of their own household. People were asked to keep minimum distances from all others, with the assumption that these ‘others’ were simply strangers one happened to come across outdoors. Governments thus assumed that people live together with the people with whom they have their most important personal relationships. They assumed that a person’s physical household is also the nucleus of their social world. Subsequently, many governments supplemented these lockdown rules with special permissions for ‘intimate partners’ who live in separate households to meet. They thereby assumed that for everyone sexual relationships have paramount importance in our relationship networks, in a way that, for instance, close friendships, ties between siblings, or relationships to one’s religious co-believers do not.

In this chapter, I argue that on the basis of these assumptions, governments have acted in a way that is harmful, unjust, and discriminatory towards people who do not fit into governments’ picture of our social lives: people whose closest interpersonal relationships do not coincide with their physical households and are not of a sexual nature. The aim of this chapter is to highlight these harms and injustices in order to sketch a better way forward for public health measures, one that respects the diversity of household models and core social relationships. Furthermore, by bringing to light governments’ and societies’ lingering biases, the pandemic also enables us to better recognise these biases in other policy areas and wider culture.

Interpersonal needs and social rights

Assuming the nuclear family model as the basis for lockdown regulations is highly problematic for people whose home does not overlap with their central social relationships. These are, first, people who physically live alone in a self-contained household without sharing any rooms with others. In high-income countries, where more people can afford this relatively expensive living arrangement, people who live alone account for some 10 per cent (in the US) to 24 per cent (Sweden) of the total population (United Nations Statistics Division 2020, Eurostat 2020). As the total population also contains children, their proportion of the adult population is even higher. While there are people who live extremely secluded lives – such as *hikikomori* in Japan – the vast majority of these people are not recluses. They simply live their social lives differently – with partners who live separately, families who live elsewhere, friends whom they meet outside or invite over. Most of my discussion will focus on this group, as the social harms and injustices are clearest here. Yet note that the separation of physical household and social home, and hence many of my arguments, apply also to people who live together with others *physically*, but not *socially*. Most notably, with rising housing costs, many students and young professionals share households, often with complete strangers. In the UK, it is common for people in their twenties to live in such flat-shares, and Germans even have a special word for this kind of household: a ‘*Zweck-WG*’, or ‘utilitarian houseshare’. Young adults who have to live in their parents’ household for economic reasons – something that might become more common due to the economic hardships of COVID-19 – can be in a similar situation. While they don’t live with strangers, the focus of their own, independent social world often lies firmly outside of their physical household. Similarly, single parents find themselves in a multi-person household, but not one that provides them with a close adult relationship.¹

For people who live alone, most stay-at-home orders have meant going without meaningful face-to-face contact or human touch for many weeks in a row (unless one had to be physically present at one’s socially interactive workplace *and* has meaningful relationships with one’s co-workers). This is a sacrifice qualitatively different from those made by people mostly confined to their family homes. For people who live in such homes, the COVID-19 measures mean a loss of in-person interactions with specific persons, such as close friends or relatives living in different households. This is a significant cost, which consists in an unwelcome *restriction* and *concentration* of social

contacts. It is, however, not a loss of supportive face-to-face personal contact and human touch *altogether* – which is the cost borne by people who live alone.

This cost is highly detrimental to people's well-being, and consequently a matter of the utmost ethical seriousness. We are deeply social creatures, and our general psychological well-being, as well as our sense of belonging, purpose and security, depend on our social interactions. So too do our physical and mental health (see e.g. Holt-Lundstad, Smith and Layton 2010). Social interaction of a particular kind and quality is an essential human need. Indeed, this need is so essential that it is acknowledged in many human rights documents. For example, the UK Human Rights Act asserts a right to respect for one's private and family life, which courts have interpreted as including friendships and other relationships (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2018). Most strikingly, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, interpret the Universal Declaration's prohibition of torture or 'cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment' to also cover prolonged solitary confinement (UNODC 2015). The underlying line of thought is that our need for social relationships and human contact is just as essential for our well-being as our need for food, clothing and housing, which are protected by human rights (United Nations 1948, Article 25) and consequently likewise warrants protection by inalienable human rights. Political philosopher Kimberley Brownlee hence argues that we should explicitly acknowledge a general human right to sociability (Brownlee 2020).

The essential needs, and human rights, of people who live alone were thus seriously compromised by the lockdown measures. Granted, we were fortunate that COVID-19 struck at a time of widespread access to video telephony, which helped people to stay connected and feel less lonely. Yet such online interactions lack the crucial element of affectionate touch, a lack of which studies have shown to be associated with 'depression, stress, loneliness, insecure attachment, alexithymia, and the number of diagnosed mood/anxiety disorders and secondary immune disorders' (Floyd and Hesse 2017).

The Austrian Corona Panel Project, a representative longitudinal study with 1,500 respondents in each wave, demonstrates this particularly high social cost borne by people who live alone, even with online connectivity (which all respondents had, as the study had to be conducted online) (Austrian Corona Panel Project 2020: section 3.1). The study found that under the full lockdown restrictions, 13 per cent of people who do *not* live

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alone reported feeling lonely daily or almost daily, while in the most affected (and arguably most internet-connected) group of people who live alone, over 40 per cent of men, and 54 per cent of women under the age of 35, reported such frequent feelings of loneliness (Bacher and Beham-Rabanser 2020).²

Proportionality and discrimination based on household model

But was the social cost experienced by people living alone not necessary for combating the spread of COVID-19, where everyone just had to do as much as possible? If it was, then we should ask why such a sacrifice was not asked of people in multi-person households. After all, the most effective way to contain COVID-19 would have been for everyone to meet absolutely no one. In multi-person households, this would have meant following the guidelines usually applied only to households with a suspected case of COVID-19: to always stay in individual rooms, to use communal areas only one person at a time, and to always disinfect and air them after each use. Yet such drastic measures were not required. While practical (and legal) considerations may have been a factor here, it is fair to assume that the enormous social cost of disrupting close-knit household bubbles was deemed disproportionate to the limited additional benefit of completely atomising society into individuals. It was politically accepted that people in multi-person households would likely infect each other if one household member got infected.

Yet for people who live alone, such an atomisation was mandated: they were required to not meet anyone face to face. This was done despite the possibility of allowing them a similar level of risk-taking as people in multi-person households, namely by allowing them (as very few governments did) to ‘bubble’ up into ‘virtual households’ with other people or isolated multi-person households (see below).

People who lived alone and strictly abided by the lockdown rules were thus among the unsung heroes of COVID-19 restrictions. They displayed ideal containment behaviour, at an exceptional personal cost. Yet given the severity of this cost, and that it was not required of others, their self-isolation behaviour should have been considered what philosophers call ‘supererogatory’: laudable behaviour, but beyond the call of moral, and legal, duty.

Governments indirectly mandated near total self-isolation of people who live alone, as a result of general lockdown regulations that took households

to be the smallest social unit. This reflected neglectful or wilful ignorance of the easily obtainable statistic that some 10–24 per cent of people live in households with only one person (or a lack of imagination of what the lockdown rules would do to the social lives of people who live alone). This ignorance did not only impose extreme personal cost on those living alone. It also made them, and their sacrifice, invisible. For example, the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz urged people to spend Easter only with the people with whom one shares a household – implying that everyone lived with at least one other person (Bundeskanzleramt 2020). In the UK, it took the government almost twelve weeks from the start of the lockdown on 23 March 2020 (UK Government 2020) to acknowledge the situation of more than seven million people who live alone (Office for National Statistics 2019), who were then allowed to form ‘support bubbles’ with one other household from 13 June onward (Hill 2020).

As well as inflicting serious harms on people who live alone, governments’ neglect of their social lives also unfairly discriminated against them for their way of organising their home and their social relationships. In the typical lockdown regime, members of multi-person households were permitted to take the infection risks of being close to each other, relating face to face, and physically expressing affection, at home as well as in public. They could, for example, hug or even kiss each other in public. By contrast, two friends (or even a couple) who both lived alone were at best permitted to stand two metres apart from one other, and even this was typically not explicitly permitted but only an implication of the rule to keep distance from people one happened to encounter outdoors. If they dared to defy the social distancing rules and form their own small support bubble, then they were criminalised and stigmatised as life-threateners for activities, and a degree of risk-taking, that was legal and deemed perfectly acceptable for people from multi-person households.

It is almost as if governments were saying, ‘You could have lived together with housemates or a partner, so it is your fault for choosing a living arrangement that now lands you in this situation.’ Yet ‘this situation’ – losing all face-to-face human contact – is not a necessary consequence of the need to contain a pandemic. It is a political choice. And it is a choice that reflects governments, out of conviction or ignorance, deeming some forms of intimate social life – the nuclear family – to be particularly valuable and protection-worthy, but others – the ‘family’ of close friends who live separately – as somehow less important, less worthy of protection, and more acceptable to be sacrificed for the greater good.

Intimate partners vs other relationships

While most governments remained oblivious to the social deprivation and discrimination their policies entailed for people who live alone, many did take notice of one particular subset of that group: couples who live in separate households. They then introduced a permission to meet and visit one's 'intimate' partner even if they live in another household, by clarifying that doing so fell into the category of activities necessary to fulfil one's basic needs.

This permission was appropriate – recall the picture of one couple kissing in the park, while the other had to stand two metres apart. But by introducing *only* this permission, governments committed yet another kind of discrimination: namely, against people whose most important relationships do not qualify as 'intimate' (i.e. sexual). Having sex, or just coffee, with one's intimate partner was deemed a basic need that people could not be required to leave unfulfilled for the sake of public health, while for a single person to have coffee with their closest friend was not deemed so important. Governments' actions basically said, 'If you're single, or asexual, your social needs don't matter that much, and you don't really have any relationships comparably worth protecting.'

By granting permission to meet only to intimate partners, governments have unjustly discriminated against other people who live alone. They have also acted in a highly illiberal manner, by buying into what philosopher Elizabeth Brake calls 'amatonormativity', a privileging of amorous love relationships as particularly valuable types of relationships, which one should aim at over and above other types of relationships (Brake 2012: ch. 4. iii). It is, however, not appropriate for governments to treat some forms of living – such as the nuclear family or the intimate couple – as more important or protection-worthy than others – for instance the close-knit non-sexual friendship or a close sibling relationship. To use an analogy provided by philosophers Stephanie Collins and Luara Ferracioli, governments' actions were akin to closing Muslim schools but keeping Catholic schools open – treating people differently without good pandemic-related grounds for doing so (Collins and Ferracioli 2020).³

Objections to my diagnosis, and replies

At this point, the reader may be tempted to defend governments, particularly those that imposed very stringent and successful lockdowns. After all,

governments had to react quickly and strongly, there were many unknowns, and not every detail that appears in hindsight was clear then.

In response to this defence, let me point out that, for any government, the statistic of how many people live alone is not hard to come by, and with 10–24 per cent of the population, it is not a small group. While the welfare of these people may justifiably not have been at the forefront of governments' attention early on, it is not asking too much of governments to pay attention to essential interpersonal needs after a few weeks, especially since that is when social deprivation had started to become acute, and when it became clear that the lockdowns would persist for a matter of months. Moreover, some countries made special allowances for people who live alone very early on in the pandemic, most notably New Zealand with its 'social bubbles' (Long 2020) and Belgium, which permitted households to exercise outdoors with one additional friend (Galindo 2020; Office of Sophie Wilmès, Belgian PM 2020), and such policies were also discussed by some epidemiologists (Tiffany 2020). These policies show that even in the midst of an emergency situation, it was possible to be attuned to people's different social situations. And once some governments had taken such measures, other governments could have seen this and followed suit, even if the issue had not occurred to them initially.

Furthermore, responses to stress and uncertainty are not random. Often they clarify our priorities and deeply held convictions. Most governments did not act in a blind panic. It was, for example, immediately obvious to governments that jobs would be at risk and needed protection. It is therefore revealing that it was not as obvious to governments that people who live alone would face a situation awkwardly close to solitary confinement, or that people without intimate partners might still need to see other people.

A second line of defence is that the legally binding lockdown regulations were not as stringent as I have made them out to be. Some lockdown regulations, such as Austria's general 'stay at home' order, turned out to lack legal basis and were judicially overturned. And with some legal creativity and perhaps economy with the truth, one could meet friends. For example, one could just so happen to spend one's permitted time exercising outside at the same time as one's friend, running in parallel at a two-metre distance. Or one could just so happen to walk past one's friend's house and accidentally enter it, thereby 'unintentionally' leaving public space and entering a private space where the lockdown rules no longer applied. Or one could simply claim that one is about to have sex with the friend with whom one was just taking a stroll.

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This defence, however, is woefully inadequate. For the harms and discrimination suffered by the lockdown measures, it does not matter what exactly the legal status of a given government requirement was, whether it was actually backed by the force of law, merely intended to be so backed or only intended as an urgent request.

This is because, first, all of these kinds of government communications were aimed at, and succeeded in, restricting people's social lives. Regulations which were later overturned in the courts nonetheless impacted people's lives while they were still in effect. Communications whose legal status was left ambiguous left citizens and police unable to readily distinguish legal requirements from mere recommended guidelines. So cautious or conscientious citizens as well as (perhaps overly) diligent police ended up treating many publicly announced requirements as legally binding, irrespective of their actual legal status. Lastly, even those communications that were framed as not legally binding requests still restricted people's actions, by way of shifting 'softer' social norms. For example, no one aims to legally enforce 'wash your hands' or coughing hygiene advice, yet constant reminders of this advice change social norms nonetheless. It is much less acceptable to be seen coughing into one's hand, or to be seen to only very briefly (or not at all) wash one's hands in a public bathroom. Likewise, any mere requests pertaining to our interpersonal relationships started to change social norms (e.g. by deliberately stigmatising certain behaviour as 'life-threatening' in the UK). Through people's own conscientiousness, and social control by others, these new norms restricted people's interpersonal contacts.

Because all kinds of government lockdown regulations – legally binding, legally ambiguous, as well as clearly not legally binding requests – were effective in restricting people's options, they must be subjected to the same standards: to not inflict serious harm to the fulfilment of essential needs, and to not discriminate against particular ways of living.

Finally, irrespective of the effectiveness of government regulations, being able to have face-to-face contact only in a legal grey area, with the Damocles' sword of punishment and social sanction hanging over one's head, while one's neighbours could happily hug in the park, is not to be treated with respect and as an equal. Neither is potentially getting questioned by police about whether one really does have sex with one's closest friend simply because you want to talk to them face to face. It is not unreasonable to demand that governments do better than that.

A better way forward: a flexible contact budget

So how could governments effectively contain the spread of a pandemic in ways that, first, permit all people to maintain a minimum of face-to-face contact, and, second, treat people with different modes of family and relationship life, and household organisation, equitably? One possibility is to start with stringent rules for typical multi-person households – the nuclear family – and then subsequently add special provisions for other groups. But such an arrangement would still take the nuclear family as the primary focus of policy, and treat it as a social default, with other lifestyles being a mere afterthought. Instead, it is preferable for governments not to take a stance on which relationship types and living arrangements are standard. Instead, people could be granted a ‘contact budget’, a sum total of face-to-face contacts, which they can freely ‘spend’ on whichever face-to-face interactions they deem most important.

The UK model of a ‘support bubble’, albeit developed far too late, captures this ideal of neutrality well: people who live alone were permitted to form ‘support bubbles’ with one other household, thereby being effectively treated as member of that household for the purposes of the lockdown restrictions. Notably, this permission did not specify the nature of the relationship to that other household one needed to have. One could form a support bubble with one’s partner, a sibling, a close friend, but also with one’s dance partner.

Most people in multi-person households would spend their limited contact budget on seeing their other household members, so for them this kind of arrangement works similarly to the typical ‘stay at home’ orders. But it automatically makes provision for people who live alone to be able to have some personal contact. Furthermore, in principle, one could also spend one’s contact budget *outside* one’s multi-person household. This is because the concept of a contact budget can do away with the assumed link between physical household and social bubble, by not only allowing people who live alone to *join other* households, but also allowing people in multi-person households to *disassociate* from the other members of their household. This would be helpful for people in multi-person households who prefer to socialise with people from another household. For example, people who live in more utilitarian house shares could see their closest friends or partners rather than their housemates, if they are willing to pay the price of setting up social distancing within their household. Likewise, young people who live with their parents might instead see their closest friends.

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As legally enforceable rules, such a completely consistent application of the contact budget approach would likely be impractical and highly privacy-intrusive. But it can work as an ideal on which to measure policies, and if and when the pandemic is sufficiently under control to permit people leeway in their social interactions, the idea of a limited social budget can function as a social norm and personal ethic. By endorsing the norm of a limited contact budget, governments would clearly acknowledge that one's household need not coincide with one's social home – instead, our true home is the people we care most about, whoever they are.

Conclusion: beyond the pandemic

It is often said that the pandemic's disruption of our societies is also a chance for change. In their pandemic responses, many governments have inadvertently revealed that they hold very conservative, outdated and illiberal biases about what people's social lives are or ought to be, with unprecedented harmful and discriminatory consequences. Looking beyond the pandemic, this situation allows us to address these biases in other policy areas, as well as in other social norms and practices.

A few examples shall suffice here: governments regularly grant tax breaks, and some employers even offer salary subsidies, for married couples. Immigration regimes make special allowances for married people and intimate partners, but not, for example, for close friends. Landlords rent out some flats only to families, but not to house shares. At work, single people are sometimes treated as being generally more available, for instance for undesired weekend work, than people with family. Sports clubs routinely offer family or couple memberships, but only to people who live at the same address.

Just like the lockdown restrictions, these and other laws, policies and norms treat people who live alone, or without an intimate partnership as their central relationship, as a sort of exception or afterthought. Their living arrangements are not duly recognised as worthy of support and protection. We should emerge from the pandemic with a more acute awareness of such biases and their consequences, and move towards a more inclusive society that respects and supports the interpersonal relationships each of us values most, whatever form they take.

Suggestions for further reading

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Notes

1. Another much more seriously affected group are people, mostly women and children, whom lockdown orders have confined to a situation of domestic violence or emotional abuse. I do not focus on this harm, because it has received at least some media and political attention quite quickly, and has been discussed elsewhere (see e.g. Taub 2020; Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020). And while the harms suffered there are *exacerbated* by lockdown measures, contrary to the harms I focus on here, they are not *created* by the measures in the first place.
2. These numbers decreased with increasing age of respondents, but still amounted to 36 per cent of men and 32 per cent of women in the age group 35 to 60 years, and 32 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively, for people over 61 years of age.
3. Collins and Ferracioli also point out that on a so-called 'perfectionist' liberal outlook, it *is* permissible for governments to favour and promote those forms of living that are objectively best. However, even on this outlook, favouring a romance-centred over a friendship-centred way of living is not permissible because, arguably, a social life that revolves around an intimate partner is but one of several good ways for humans to flourish.

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