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[Home](#) > Historical Reflections on Social Distancing

Opinion

Historical Reflections on Social Distancing



by
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When I was around twelve years old, I was introduced to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in a largely forgotten chapter of my school textbook on European history.

The textbook's author told how in that collection of short stories, Boccaccio described a group of seven women and three men who had fled to Florence during the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century.

Interspersed with bawdy tales of intrigue among travelling merchants and corrupt members of the clergy, we are told of how the plague made parents shun their own children.

Yes, the frightened people sinned and sinned, and they committed a new sin — social distancing. Crazy times.

Avowed Christian people were constantly suspicious of each other, even lovers. Then, once the plague finally passed, people only emerged from quarantine and self-isolation very tentatively and carefully, and continued to social distance, held by the thought that just one rodent that could make everything fall apart again. In reality, this drama played out for generations. Fear, as they say, eats the soul.

I don't think human nature has changed much since then. And whereas present-day psychologists have studied it more, we still can't seem to grasp why fear can be so generally destructive in society.

In the fourteenth century, there were no professional psychologists or economists to advise on coping strategies when the plague wiped out loved ones, wrecked many family businesses and created economic upheaval. I'm not sure we are doing any better today.

Here in the twenty-first century, we apparently have bats, not rats, to worry about. Family businesses all over the world, let alone Europe, are folding with alacrity — this time, not just because potential customers have cowered behind their front doors, but because governments all over the world have placed all citizens under house arrest, including the well, and severely restricted people's human contact. The cost of this fear is not just economic, but medical and psychological.

Some of the most widely cited, but brutal, series of scientific experiments of the twentieth century were carried out in the 1960s by a psychologist called Harry Harlow. Anyone who has studied a biological or social science should be familiar with them.

Harlow isolated rhesus monkeys in a laboratory environment, away from their mothers and other monkeys. In their cages were placed two crude monkey dummies made out of wire. One monkey was made of wire only, and the other was encased in a soft terrycloth "skin" pulled over foam cushioning and had a more recognisable monkey-like face.

When given the choice, the monkeys chose to feed from, and stay with, the cloth "mother" monkey. There were also control groups of monkeys who only had access to the wire mother monkeys: these ones became extremely disturbed from the lack of physical contact with a softer mother figure.

Around the time of these experiments, scientific reductionism was a very prevalent paradigm, and B.F. Skinner's school of behaviourism was seeking to build models of behaviour without reference to the higher mind. Emotions were considered to be far less formative than

operant conditioning in the shaping of human and animal behaviour, whereas food and other material rewards were seen as primal.

Harlow's experimental results surprised some, for he used them to conclude that animals — and, by dint of that, people — are *primarily social beings*, and need of the love and company of others. This included physical proximity to others.

Those behavioural psychologists, surprised by Harlow's results, cannot have been familiar with that classic in the history of biology, Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* [1], which is, in the opinion of this writer, Darwin's best work.

In it, he gives a close, observational review of animal emotions as can be read in facial expressions and bodily behaviour — and regardless of whether or not you agree with his evolutionary ideas, Darwin takes these emotions to be both innate and essential to the healthy life of the animal. But that book has been largely ignored over time, through the gradual promotion of a somewhat distorted version of Darwin's evolutionary theories, and a generally more materialistic view of biology. We ended up with a theory whereby emotions are ephemeral, not really worthy of scientific research — and this is what Harlow set out to disprove.

In 2020, no psychology department would countenance Harlow's kinds of studies on animals; at least, not openly. For Harlow's work was cruel, but it validated the work of John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst who wrote about separation anxiety, and influenced a generation of parents to remember that infant animals and humans need to form and keep bonds, or attachments, to develop normally, healthily. Again, Harlow had extended the meaning of that bond to include physical contact.

But what about cruel experiments on humans? They too still go on. Indeed, you know it — you are now part of one. You are a participant in a grand psychology experiment called “social distancing to flatten the curve”. This is how it has unfolded:

On Friday, 20 March, the British government announced that because we “would” be facing a coronavirus pandemic, the UK could need to endure up to a year of this thing called social distancing.

With the population thus pre-warned, on the evening of Monday, 23 March, Prime Minister Boris Johnson placed the nation on partial quarantine, or lockdown, and this meant staying inside as much as possible, always keeping at least six feet away from others, refraining from social activities involving gathering in groups, and refraining from making journeys other than for purposes approved by the government.

Even worse, those 70 or over were to be totally quarantined inside.

Why did the government impose this upon us?

They allege it is to save our lives (and to save the National Health Service). However, the assumption that social distancing saves lives rests on a flawed understanding not just of human emotion, as we have just glimpsed above, but also of the immune system and the transmission of infectious diseases, and this is what I wish to briefly outline here.

We'll start with a classic study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1997, entitled “Social Ties and Susceptibility to the Common Cold” [2]. This study examined 276 subjects in quarantine to see whether diverse ties to friends, family, work, and community are associated with increased resistance to infection. The results and conclusion: after the subjects were given nasal droplets containing rhinovirus, those with more social ties were less susceptible to upper respiratory tract illnesses.

That study was broad in scope, but was not a one-off; it spawned a whole area of study that carries on to this day. And since this is a well-cited study, shouldn't its results have somehow been on the government's radar in helping to prevent the spread of infection? Moreover, when you read that people have been prevented from visiting dying relatives, on the putative grounds of helping to keep the Covid-19 virus at bay, just what about the more recent 2015 study that found that physical contact in the form of hugging buffered people from feeling stressed [3], and made them less susceptible to upper respiratory tract infections and illnesses? Nevertheless, if you wanted to hug a person public today, don't do it in sight of the police, as it would likely be taken as an act of terrorism.

It is true that the above studies — just two of many — were both conducted outside the UK. However, the most damning scientific paper I have found on social distancing, quarantining and/or isolation was a review of the scientific literature on the topic in general [4], published in *The Lancet* in 2019. Note, in particular, that it was commissioned as a response to a possible coronavirus quarantine. It roundly condemned quarantines, social isolation and social distancing. And, lo and behold, it was funded by the British government — in the form of Public Health England and the National Institute for Health Research — and the University of East Anglia, and Newcastle University.

The multi-authored article found that:

the psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial and can be long-lasting, [and that] if the quarantine experience is negative, the results of this review suggest that there can be long-term consequences that affect not just the people quarantined but also the health-care system that administered the quarantine and the politicians and the public health officials who mandated it.

That is quite an interesting conclusion in the light of how the NHS has been disrupted by the coronavirus crisis. We now have temporary emergency hospitals in industrial-scale hangars, which are largely empty, while established hospitals are also largely empty, and where specialist staff have been redeployed to work in unfamiliar areas. For a view on this, see my previous article Exercise Cygnus: UK Government Exercise Justifies Covid-19 Lockdown [5].

The *Lancet* article finally reasons that it is “unacceptable to ask people to self-isolate for the benefit of the community's health, when while doing so might be putting their loved ones at risk.” But in contrast, under this government, relatives of vulnerable people have nevertheless been asked to self-isolate.

Considering immune response itself, some of the reasons why the authors of the *Lancet* article warn against quarantines, so-called self-isolation, and social distancing (albeit not specifically discussed) concern the need to keep up the level of beneficial microbes in the body — yes, *up*. For the microbes inside our body have a huge influence on both our psychological state and on the balance of hormones we need for optimal functioning.

Actually, this information was not really new even in the twentieth century. The *Lancet* authors have indirectly confirmed Louis Pasteur's biggest regret, one voiced back in the nineteenth century. At the end of a now well-publicised career, Pasteur turned away from his lifelong approach to the eradication of germs, discovering and declaring, “*Le microbe n'est rien — le terrain c'est tout*”. In other words, the presence of individual germs means nothing; what is important is the environment (they are in). At the time, without electron

microscopes, viral infectious diseases had not yet been distinguished from bacterial, fungal, or protozoal ones, and Western understanding of what constitutes adequate public hygiene was unsatisfactory.

Today, however, we have made improvements with cleaner water supplies, indoor air quality, and general housing and nutritional standards, which has been a huge help in bringing down active infections. Yet only in the last twenty years or so has there been a research explosion in what is called the microbiome: research setting out to establish which bacteria, viruses and fungi are both beneficial, and indeed essential, to the functioning of the human body. Let me put this in another way: we need infections! And the more types of microbes, the merrier, because some 80% of our immune system can be found inside our gut microbiome. What matters is that the microbes be in an internal terrain that is balanced, where no single species can overcome the other players on the scene; an equilibrium similar to a draw in the game of chess. This is just as Pasteur eventually discovered in his own day.

In fact, we even house more microbes inside us than we have cells, and without a healthy balance of these microbes, disease eventually follows. To a large extent, this explains why some people catch a cold when others with the same exposure don't: one person's unique microbiome could have been badly affected by poor diet, a course of antibiotics, exposure to certain toxins, and/or emotions which cause the release of stress hormones. In contrast, another's microbiome may have a full and healthy mix of microbes capable of overcoming any newly introduced pathogen, such as a cold virus — which, incidentally is a member of the Coronavirus group.

We have been told by the government that if we keep our distance from other humans, we are less likely to catch the Covid-19 virus; thus we will "flatten the curve". This is supposed to mean that instead of having a huge and sudden surge of Covid-19 cases, as in a bell curve, the epidemic peak will be smaller and more gradual, or flatter, and hence more manageable. But take your pick of predictive statistical chart; it really doesn't matter, for — as I set out above regarding the microbiome above — each of us has a unique immune system tempered by a lifetime of our habits and individual exposures to various drugs and toxins; thus, without comparability of a study group's internal microbial populations, any policy treating the population as an undifferentiated mass results in unpredictability of immune response. So the social distancing regulations are not based on science.

Now here we are, in lockdown, in virtual monkey cages. And we might be able to foresee how we, like Skinner's rats, are being conditioned to develop the habit of avoiding people. What's more, old habits die hard; certainly this is what researchers from Pavlov to contemporary behaviourists, some of whom practice an approach called neurolinguistic programming (NLP), have proven. But the developing of such habits results — as we have seen from a quick review of the literature — in harm, both to those who commit the sin of social distancing and to those sinned against, such as the relatives dying in hospitals alone. Even a video link is just too ...distant.

So, in this year of 2020, in this season bereft of human company, we return to Boccaccio. How did you get through a plague in mediaeval times? Boccaccio's implied answer was that if on your journey you have the seven women — whom, it is thought, Boccaccio meant to represent the four cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude, and the three Pauline axioms of Faith, Hope, and Charity — then the wheel of fortune could turn in your favour. In the twenty-first century, we have a different kind of plague, but a journey that involves just as testing a challenge to the soul.

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[3] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25526910/>

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