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# The Pandemic, Sociability, and Citizenship

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Abstract: We have experienced social isolation in response to COVID-19. In particular, our weak ties (ties among acquaintances rather than between family and friends) have been trimmed. I argue, based on the work of Granovetter, Nussbaum, Talisse, and Lanoix, that this trimming of weak ties has consequences, not just for well-being, but also for how we practice social citizenship. I conclude with the suggestion that we make use of research on how to build resilience in individuals, in the hopes that resilient individuals will be in a better position to rebuild some of what the pandemic has destroyed.

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**Introduction**

Our social experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have been incredibly diverse. Some worked from home, others held essential jobs, and many lost their work. Some reside in cramped quarters and others live alone. The waves of infection, regardless of whether they trigger government responses, are not equally distributed throughout the world. At the time of writing, Manitoba is at the tail end of a third wave while other provinces are starting the opening up process. There are more changes to come.

Many of us have been quite isolated for a long time. Sure, some of us have socialized online and some of us have "bubbled" (where a group of people has agreed only to socialize with other members of that group), but what many of us have renounced is the wider socializing that takes us outside of our bubble.

We have many reasons to be concerned about these changes to our social practices. Here I discuss the ramifications of creating and staying within a smaller social bubble over a long period. Obviously, we face (and have faced) negative implications for well-being and mental health, but I will focus on the negative implications for how we live together as citizens. My

position is that the social isolation we have faced, and may continue to face, trims our *weak ties* (ties among acquaintances rather than between family and friends) which will have a negative influence on how we relate to each other as citizens (as opposed to relating to each other as friends or family or neighbors). It is important for us to relate to each other as citizens because this is the arena where we figure out, articulate, and strive to establish our rights and responsibilities in an ongoing way. Relating to each other as citizens is always worth doing, but right now as we face all the disruptions, including economic and political changes, the need to work together as citizens is downright urgent. The ramifications of the pandemic will continue long after the pandemic has ended.

I will not be discussing legal citizenship along with its attendant legal rights and responsibilities, even though we might have deep concerns about the possibility that governments and companies might capitalize on the COVID-19 crisis to erode our rights ("shock doctrines," Klein 2007). Instead, I will focus on some philosophical views of citizenship (Nussbaum, Talisse, and Lanoix) that emphasize the social interactions among citizens *qua* citizens.

I will begin by explaining what "weak ties" are and why we should care about them. Then I will discuss Nussbaum's, Talisse's, and Lanoix' views on citizenship, with an eye to the role that weak ties play therein. Finally, I will consider whether using online methods of connecting to each other maintains weak ties. My conclusion, unfortunately, is grim. We have suffered and may continue to suffer in several ways, and our connection to each other as citizens is one of those ways.

**Weak Ties**

Granovetter has distinguished between strong ties and weak ties (Granovetter 1973). Strong ties are the social connections between family and friends. In my experience, strong ties have been the easiest to maintain during pandemic isolation. Strong ties are with the people I already felt I could phone or text or meet in a video call. Weak ties are with acquaintances. Weak ties could be with members of a sports team we play with, or people we sing with in a choir.

We have probably all come across studies linking strong ties with well-being and positive health outcomes (e.g., Uchino 2013; Rook and Charles 2017), but Granovetter and others found that weak ties matter as well. Weak ties can give us what might be otherwise missing from our strong ties. Weak ties can bring in new information, which can be useful for combatting echo chambers. Weak ties also bring in new opportunities not already contained within the strong tie network (Granovetter 1973, 1371-1372). Perry-Smith found weak ties increase creativity by putting people in contact with different perspectives (Perry-Smith 2006).

One might think that marketing and other less personal forms of information sharing would lead to the same results, but both Granovetter and Ryan found that information from weak ties was perceived as more trustworthy and actionable than information from impersonal sources (although Ryan cautions that if a weak tie is too weak, it performs about as well as an impersonal source, Ryan 2016).

Besides providing benefits at the individual level, weak ties provide benefits at the social level by linking networks and supporting social cohesion (Granovetter 1973, 1373). Moreover, Montgomery found that weak tie networks aid in the reduction of inequality. Strong ties tend to

be within relatively homogenous groups, but weak ties can function as bridges to transmit information about opportunities outside of homogenous groups (Montgomery 1994).

Weak ties go beyond providing new information and opportunities. In a study, Sandstrom and Dunn found that students experienced greater subjective well-being on days when they interacted with more weak ties than with fewer weak ties (the study was designed to test the link between weak ties and well-being, rather than general sociability and well-being). Interestingly, for our purposes here, Sandstrom and Dunn point out that initial data suggest that simply instructing people to engage in weak tie activities does not influence how many weak tie contacts the subjects make. Sandstrom and Dunn speculate that perhaps situations need to be designed to foster weak tie contact (Sandstrom and Dunn 2014).

Unfortunately, as Leslie observes, our response to COVID-19 has the side-effect of limiting weak tie contact (Leslie 2020). For example, even in times when restrictions were loose, and we were allowed to attend live music events, audience members were directed to remain at their tables, with tables spaced out. The mingling aspect of live music events has been eliminated. While there are excellent reasons for these restrictions, it is also clear that the weak ties normally enjoyed in these contexts have been reduced to a wave from across the room.

**Sociality and Citizenship**

The reduction of weak ties has implications beyond just missing out on hobnobbing at musical events. It has implications for how we interact as citizens. A variety of authors emphasize the importance of social activities to citizenship. I will select three topics to discuss because they exemplify three different ways to conceive of the relationship between sociability and citizenship.

*Nussbaum: what the government owes its citizens*

According to Nussbaum's capabilities approach, governments are required to "secure to all citizens at least a threshold level of these ten Central Capabilities" (Nussbaum 2011, 33). I will not list all ten, but will zero in on the capabilities most relevant to our discussion. Two capabilities of interest are affiliation and control over one's environment. 'Affiliation' refers to a number of social capabilities, including the capability to socially interact and to experience empathy. 'Control over one's environment' similarly refers to several capabilities, including the capability to engage in political participation in order to have a say in how the society we live in affects our lives (Nussbaum 2011, 33-34).

Granted, people can choose to be socially isolated, either as a lifestyle or as a temporary retreat. This is an option for which Nussbaum allows in her discussion of capabilities. What matters is whether the social isolation is freely chosen. She uses Sen's example of comparing a starving person to a person who is fasting. The physiological situation might be the same, but the difference is whether or not the person without food had a choice in the matter (Nussbaum 2011, 25). With the pandemic, we do not face many good choices.

In the pandemic context, affiliation and environmental control capabilities are in tension with two other capabilities Nussbaum lists, namely, life and bodily health. Nussbaum argues that a cost-benefit analysis is the wrong way to think about situations that create conflicts among capabilities. Instead, it is a "tragic choice," a "cost of a distinctive sort, one that in a fully just society no person has to bear" (Nussbaum 2011, 36-37).

5

Nussbaum's example of a tragic choice, where poor parents use the wages from the labor of their children in order to survive, is one that is created by an unjust society. In the COVID-19 case, some of the tragic choices are because of injustice and some are not. Someone who has chosen to work in a dangerously crowded workplace or risk not being able to put food on the table has made a tragic choice arising from injustice. There are many other examples, as indicated by the growing body of literature on how the pandemic has amplified previously existing inequalities (e.g., Dasgupta and Murali 2020; Haeck and Lefebvre 2020; Kousoulis et al. 2020; Kristal and Yaish 2020; Nassif-Pires et al. 2020; Pickersgill 2020). We have also faced, however, tragic choices that are not because of injustice. For example, when I made the heartbreaking choice to avoid my elderly parents, this choice was due to how the virus spreads and who is especially vulnerable to it. This is unfortunate but not unjust.

Some might argue that human error, sometimes gross human error (to the point of malignancy), has exacerbated the severity of the pandemic, thereby amplifying costs to health and affiliation. I agree. It is also the case that some missteps made in the pandemic response resulted from bad luck decisions reached with incomplete information. I suspect Nussbaum would still consider the choices between affiliation and health during this pandemic to be tragic, but only in certain (important!) cases would the choices result from an unjust society.

*Talisse: what citizens need to do to support a healthy democracy*

Talisse also focuses on social connections.  Unlike Nussbaum, however, his focus is not on what makes a society just but on what provides fertile grounds for fruitful political engagement. Talisse is interested in the question of why our political climate is so harmfully divisive. The answer he offers is that we jump straight into political conversations rather than building

6

relationships first (Talisse 2019, ch. 3). It would be better to build relationships "across the aisle," first by sharing non-political projects. Once we build relationships, we are far more motivated to listen with empathy to each other when we find a source of political disagreement.

The types of relationships Talisse has in mind are what he calls 'civic friendships'. Regular friendships generally involve personal interactions and often require a sharing of at least some important values. Civic friendships, by contrast, do not require personal interactions or a sharing of values. They may even feature difficult disagreements of the sort that would mortally wound a regular friendship. Civic friendships do, however, require respect and sympathy, where the other is recognized as a citizen with the attendant rights, including the right to engage politically. The polarization we have witnessed in our society does not express the values of civic friendship (Talisse 2019, ch. 5).

According to Talisse, regular friendship is a correlate good. This means that simply having the goal of enriching our friendships does not, in itself, give us an action plan. Instead, our friendships get enriched when we pursue other goals and activities together. Similarly, civic friendship requires that our relationship be based on shared projects that fall outside the domain of civic activities. "In order for democratic citizens to treat each other properly as citizens, they must be able to regard each other as something more than citizens." (Talisse 2019, 156). To support this, we need to engage in non-political shared projects (Talisse 2019, 152-157). It is, however, important to note that, on Talisse's view, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that these non-political shared projects be in person, but given his examples, it seems clear that in-person shared projects are the recommended route (Talisse 2019, 162-163). Nevertheless, there are limits to Talisse's proposed solution. For example, it is unlikely that any shared project could function to bring Antifa and the Proud Boys together in harmony.

*Lanoix and others: relationship citizenship*

Lanoix (Lanoix 2007) and others (e.g., Fraser 2014; Tronto 2001) aim for an inclusive definition of citizenship. For example, if a definition of citizenship focuses on the ability to engage in rational negotiations, then this definition leaves out those who cannot engage in rational negotiations. According to Lanoix and others, the concept of citizenship that relies on a certain level of rational abilities excludes far too many who should count as citizens and should be covered by principles of social justice. Instead, we need to broaden our conception of what types of relationships citizens have *qua* citizens to include caring relations and other forms of social participation. Lanoix, for example, views the citizen as cohabitant. The concept of cohabitant is designed to accommodate not only Kantian active citizens (those sufficiently independent to express their wills), but also Kantian passive citizens. All citizens are passive at some point in their lives, and some citizens are passive throughout their entire lives. Nonetheless, citizens share a social space regardless of their abilities to express and negotiate for their interests, and thus should be considered when constructing rights and obligations (Lanoix 2007, 121-122, 126). Active citizens have a responsibility to consider the interests of passive citizens.

Lanoix associates her views on citizenship with those who emphasize the political significance of concepts like care and trust (e.g., Kittay 2001; Silvers and Francis 2005; Tronto 2001). We might think of concepts like care, trust, and cohabitation as belonging to personal relationships, but our current situation highlights the need for care, trust, and healthy cohabitation at the political level as well. Take trust as an example. Responding to the COVID-

19 pandemic requires the global coordinated cooperation of individuals, and this cooperation is only likely to happen if individuals trust governments and scientific organizations. I am not the first to point this out. A quick search of the literature reveals that researchers from a variety of disciplines are concerned right now in the crucial role that trust plays in the pandemic response (e.g., Deslatte 2020; Fancourt, Steptoe, and Wright 2020; Kye and Hwang 2020; Sibley et al. 2020; Spalluto et al. 2020).

**Citizenship, the Pandemic, and Weak Ties**

While there are important differences among the above authors, especially with respect to what their projects are (Nussbaum considers what a just society owes its citizens, Talisse discusses what citizens can do to improve democracy, and Lanoix develops an ontological approach to what a citizen is), there are commonalities. The commonality I emphasize here is the need to participate respectfully and empathetically in relationships and projects with people outside our friend and family bubbles. For Nussbaum, affiliation beyond family and friends will support controlling one's political environment in a way that goes beyond the formal right to vote. For Talisse, civic rather than regular friendships are required to improve democracy. For Lanoix, relationships with people outside family and friends is required for the concept of cohabitation to be a citizenship concept at all. Furthermore, weak ties have the potential to fill the trust gap because, as noted earlier, information dispersed through weak ties is considered more trustworthy than information communicated via impersonal means (Ryan 2016).

In short, a network of weak ties is useful for all three of these approaches to citizenship. Given the benefits listed above that are documented by sociological studies (new information, new opportunities, putting us in touch with alternative perspectives, social cohesion, reduction of

9

inequality, and increases in well-being), it is easy to see why weak ties are important for not just the health of individuals, but the health of a citizenry. The concept of weak ties illuminates why social affiliation is not just an individual well-being concept, but also one that shows why civic friendships are so important to social cohesion. Weak ties are often connections to projects and people at the same time (when we join a choir, or join a bike club), which can reinforce empathetic connections as we interact in the larger shared political space.

The relationship between weak ties and the three approaches to citizenship discussed above is both grass roots and indirect, in ways that are potentially beneficial. For example, the cycling club I meet with once a week is about cycling, not citizenship. Nonetheless, through this club, I have opportunities for conversations with people outside my normal circles. Even though our love of cycling is a selection factor, I have regular conversations with people I did not meet through work or through mutual friends. As a result, the cycling group is more diverse than my strong tie circles. While we often chat about cycling, sometimes we share stories that convey our lived experiences on matters other than cycling. These lived experience narratives can form a bridge that can support empathy and give meaning to information.

The approaches to citizenship discussed above illuminate some reasons we should be concerned about the social isolation produced by the pandemic. On Nussbaum's view, we will be denied some of our entitlements, which is obviously bad in and of itself. On Talisse's and Lanoix' views, we get an account of the cascading consequences that may follow. As we are cut off from our civic friendships that allow for meaningfully caring cohabitation, the quality of our democracy will decline. The bonds of care and trust will decline. For anyone worried about divisive political climates, the developments likely to continue because of the pandemic should be alarming. We need to strengthen our weak ties. We do not yet know how quickly we can

10

return to the usual way of strengthening weak ties. This raises the obvious question of how, or whether, online connections can support weak tie relationships.

**Online Weak Tie Relationships**

Online options (social media, video conferencing, gaming, etc.) seem tailor-made for maintaining and increasing the number of weak ties. There are, however, studies that give us cause for concern about online options that we should keep in mind, especially if our interest in maintaining weak ties is to support healthy relationships among citizens *qua* citizens. I will quickly review some of these studies with the caution that these studies were mostly conducted before the pandemic, and thus might not apply seamlessly to our current situation. The studies I looked at connect online interactions and dissemination of information, respectful and empathetic communication, social cohesion, and well-being. Across the board, the benefits and costs are mixed.

Social media are pretty clearly designed to disseminate information and opportunities, and I have witnessed firsthand how effective this can be (e.g., I have received recommendations for roofers, for physiotherapists, and so on). Nonetheless, we are all, unfortunately, aware of what an effective tool for misinformation social media can be, and how disastrous the results can be (e.g., Prier 2017; Shin et al. 2018; Sharma et al. 2020; Chou, Oh, and Klein 2018). We have seen misinformation about the pandemic unfolding in real time.

There is reason to be concerned about online interactions and their influence on respectful communication and social cohesion. Online interactions can be connected to echo chambers, gatekeeping against new perspectives, and the creation of extremism. This does not support good communication or social cohesion (e.g., Garimella et al. 2018; Boulianne, Koc-

Michalska, and Bimber 2020; Baumann et al. 2020). On the other hand, Kim and Kim found that social media use among college students increased network heterogeneity, which could be beneficial (Kim and Kim 2017).

Online ways of connecting have proven to be powerful tools for providing a supportive network and organizing movements. The #MeToo and #BLM movements likely would not have had the traction they did without online networks (Suk et al. 2019; Halpern, Valenzuela, and Katz 2017; Valenzuela, Correa, and Gil de Zuniga 2018; Wandel 2009; Stern 2008). The effectiveness of online networks for organization works just as well for movements that have negative effects on society as well as positive effects, which makes online networks a two-edged sword. For example, Elliot Rodger (who murdered six people and injured fourteen) spent time online in PUAhate and ForeverAlone communities where, according to Rodger, he found confirmation of his misogynistic views of women (Woolf 2014). Online networks seem to function a bit like a megaphone. Some movements, if amplified, contribute to positive social cohesion and change. Other movements are destructive if amplified.

Studies suggest that the connection between online interactions and well-being depends on a variety of factors. Online use is not an effective way to deal with stress (Rasmussen et al. 2020), may be connected with anxiety and depression (Dhir et al. 2018), and can lead to desensitization and narcissism (Twenge et al. 2008; Twenge 2014; Ritter et al. 2009; Stockdale and Coyne 2020; Weinstein 2018; Vannucci and Ohannessian 2019).

In most of the studies listed here, the results depend on how social media and other online interactions are used, as well as the mental health of social media users. Even if we use social media responsibly and are in good mental health (which has been an extra challenge during the pandemic), we still have obstacles to overcome. For example, while video meetings are one way

to stay in contact with our weak ties, many of us have experienced "Zoom fatigue," where we find ourselves exhausted after even an hour-long meeting. The problem is not that we are using Zoom irresponsibly or for the wrong reasons, but rather that the platform itself disturbs our normal routes for making use of social cues. Some reasons offered for Zoom fatigue include the slight delays that make it difficult for us to figure out when to speak and when to listen, the way people appear disengaged when they look at the screen rather than the camera, and the different distances participants have to their cameras which cause some people to appear uncomfortably close (Morris 2020).

**The Pandemic Objection**

Thus far, I have argued that by sticking to our pandemic bubbles, our weak ties and therefore our civil friendships have been undermined. Furthermore, socializing online is not a straightforward solution, but brings potential problems. Can this be right, given that, if anything, we have witnessed an encouraging increase in the strength and quality of our civil friendships? We have cooperated globally and, to an impressive degree, with one another, not just to save our own lives and the lives of those we love, but also the lives of strangers we will likely never know (although the vaccine nationalism we have witnessed has been distressing). In addition, we have seen a concerted global action against racism. These are both tremendous shared projects of global citizenship, something we managed to do while being physically isolated from each other. (To be sure, some people are not cooperating, but in general the level of cooperation has been impressive, even if nowhere as good as we need.)

I think the pandemic objection is on target in that there are opportunities opening up to us during the pandemic. Especially early in the COVID-19 pandemic, our attention was narrowly

focused. This type of narrow focus may well be the best way to address big problems. Furthermore, these big problems are obvious priorities. I worry, however, that other types of shared projects have fallen by the wayside (e.g., improving accessibility of public transport or dealing with litter in the neighbourhood park). Our civil friendships may have improved on some fronts, but may have declined on others. For a quick analogy with personal friendships, I was chatting with a friend about how all conversations with friends seem to follow the same pattern of circling back to our experiences with the pandemic. This is natural, of course, but friendship conversations often cover a wider range of topics. We both felt that this focus on the pandemic, while probably necessary, has been an exhausting drain on the quality of our friendship interactions. Friendship interactions, when pandemic-focused, become narrow. Similarly, civil friendships, when narrow, might miss the broad and rich system of interconnections.

Granted, it could well be that the cause of our narrow focus is not our social isolation, but simply that we face a large and urgent problem (unfortunately, when it comes to systemic racism, this is a large, urgent, and old problem). This is undoubtedly part of the explanation, but here is one quick reason to think that social isolation is another part of the explanation: smaller issues may only become salient when we bump up against them in our daily lives and our daily lives have been more constrained. For example, during periods of social restrictions, I was not thinking about the lack of a good bus route to visit my parents because I was avoiding visiting them.

**Concluding Remarks**

It is pretty clear that online methods for maintaining weak ties and supporting social cohesion are solutions that come with hazards, and those hazards are increased when our mental

health is under threat. Furthermore, we have a greater need for social cohesion now than we did under more positive circumstances. Several studies emphasize the importance of social cohesion in supporting community resilience in response to disasters (Aldrich 2012; Aldrich and Meyer 2015; Greene, Paranjothy, and Palmer 2015; Townshend et al. 2015). 'Community resilience' is defined as "the collective ability of a neighborhood or geographically defined area to deal with stressors and efficiently resume the rhythms of daily life through cooperation following shocks" (Aldrich and Meyer 2015, 255). Unfortunately, for us, responding appropriately to this particular disaster required cutting ourselves off from the usual methods of maintaining social cohesion, or at least of maintaining a broad rather than narrow version of social cohesion. More research is needed on what we can do to improve social resilience, given this dilemma.

One approach that might help for building social resilience is making use of the research on building resilience at the individual level. Granted, a good deal of the research on individual resilience cites social support as a key factor (Wandersman and Nation 1998; Betancourt and Khan 2008), but social support is not the only factor cited. For example, Cortes and Buchanan include a sense of agency, hope, and growth (Cortes and Buchanan 2007). Betancourt and Khan list, among other things, the importance of cultural beliefs and practices about mental health (Betancourt and Khan 2008). Perhaps if we take the time to do what we can to support a sense of agency, hope, and growth, and do what we can to create an online culture of positive mental health practices, we will have a good toolkit for maintaining or rebuilding social resilience. Perhaps.

More research is also needed for establishing best mental health practices for social media use. While much of the literature on the best practices for social media use has focused on adolescents and young adults, people of all ages and developmental stages have had to deal with

the need to interact socially while maintaining physical distance. This is not a problem of the past, as much as we would like it to be. Vaccine-rich countries have been able to reduce the risk of serious illness and death, but some countries have been left behind. Even in vaccine-rich countries like Canada, we are not out of the woods yet and face many unknowns. We may need to physically distance again. Attention needs to be paid to accessibility and best practices for social media use for everyone (e.g., Spagnoletti, Resca, and Sæbø 2015; Nervik, Dahl, and Kofod-Petersen 2011).

It would also be useful to think creatively about online activities. Some activities are already well-suited to supporting online social interactions. Gaming is an excellent example of pre-pandemic online socializing. Not everyone is into gaming, however. It would be useful to have a variety of "how to" manuals for different social activities (e.g., how to host a genuinely fun online cocktail party, how to host an online book club meeting without the awkward interruptions, and so on), so that people with different interests will want to participate in an online social life. In the meantime, in much the same way that we need to be aware that our knowledge of COVID-19 is incomplete and evolving, we need to be aware that our knowledge of how to support social cohesion and civil friendships online is incomplete and evolving.

So far, I have been calling for more research on several fronts. While it is standard procedure to identify research areas in a conclusion, the problem in this context with a call for more research is that research requires the luxury of time, and we have had very little of this luxury. Instead, we were required to respond quickly, and may still need to respond quickly in the future. We are now well acquainted with how difficult it is to make decisions based on research that is unfolding in real time. On a less pessimistic note, humanity has obtained (rapidly and imperfectly) a massive amount of experience with moving our social and work lives online.

We have learned a lot about creating and maintaining connections remotely, and our experiences

provide a significant database from which to learn even more about how to support weak ties in

times of crisis.

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19

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