

Physical Distance. Social Solidarity

– Prof Kurt Iveson (NTEU)

We're asked by public health professionals seeking to minimise the transmission of COVID-19 to keep a distance of 1.5m between ourselves and others, and to avoid gatherings in confined spaces, where possible.

The term that has been given for such measures is “social distancing.”

These measures are essential to slowing the transmission of the virus and ‘flattening the curve’. But this terminology is unfortunate. Until recently, “social distancing” was a term used by social scientists to describe the practices used to ensure social disconnection in a context of physical proximity. “Social distancing”, in this sense of the term, describes the kind of thing that happens when we share a crowded space such as a train carriage or a bus with strangers. Our bodies are in close physical proximity, but we maintain a kind of emotional and relational ‘distance’ from the people sitting around us.

The use of the term “social distancing” has also been used by social scientists to describe the ways that some people are forcefully disconnected from proximate others – through discrimination, stigma, and other forms of misrecognition. For example, we might talk about the ways that homeless people on the street are “socially distanced”, as countless people pass by them on the street without recognition or connection. Those who are the victims of this kind of social distancing are often treated as though their stigma is ‘contagious’.

But somehow, the meaning of the term has been turned on its head. The term “social distancing” is being used to describe what ought to be termed “physical distancing”.

Used in its original sense, the last thing we need in a pandemic is more “*social* distancing”. We do need *physical* distancing. But we need *social solidarity and connection*. Without that social solidarity and connection, people are atomised and left to fend for themselves. And we know exactly who will suffer the most if that is allowed to occur.

This language matters. We can already see a form of “social distancing” in action in our supermarkets – and it’s not good! People are socially distancing themselves from other shoppers in the aisle, from the staff trying to stock the shelves and operate the checkouts.

Our job, as leaders in civil society, is surely to ensure that in a time when physical distance is required, social distance is not increased. We need to improvise new ways to stay socially connected, lest physical distance make even more people vulnerable to social distancing, with all its harmful consequences for their access to the resources and relationships that sustain a decent life.