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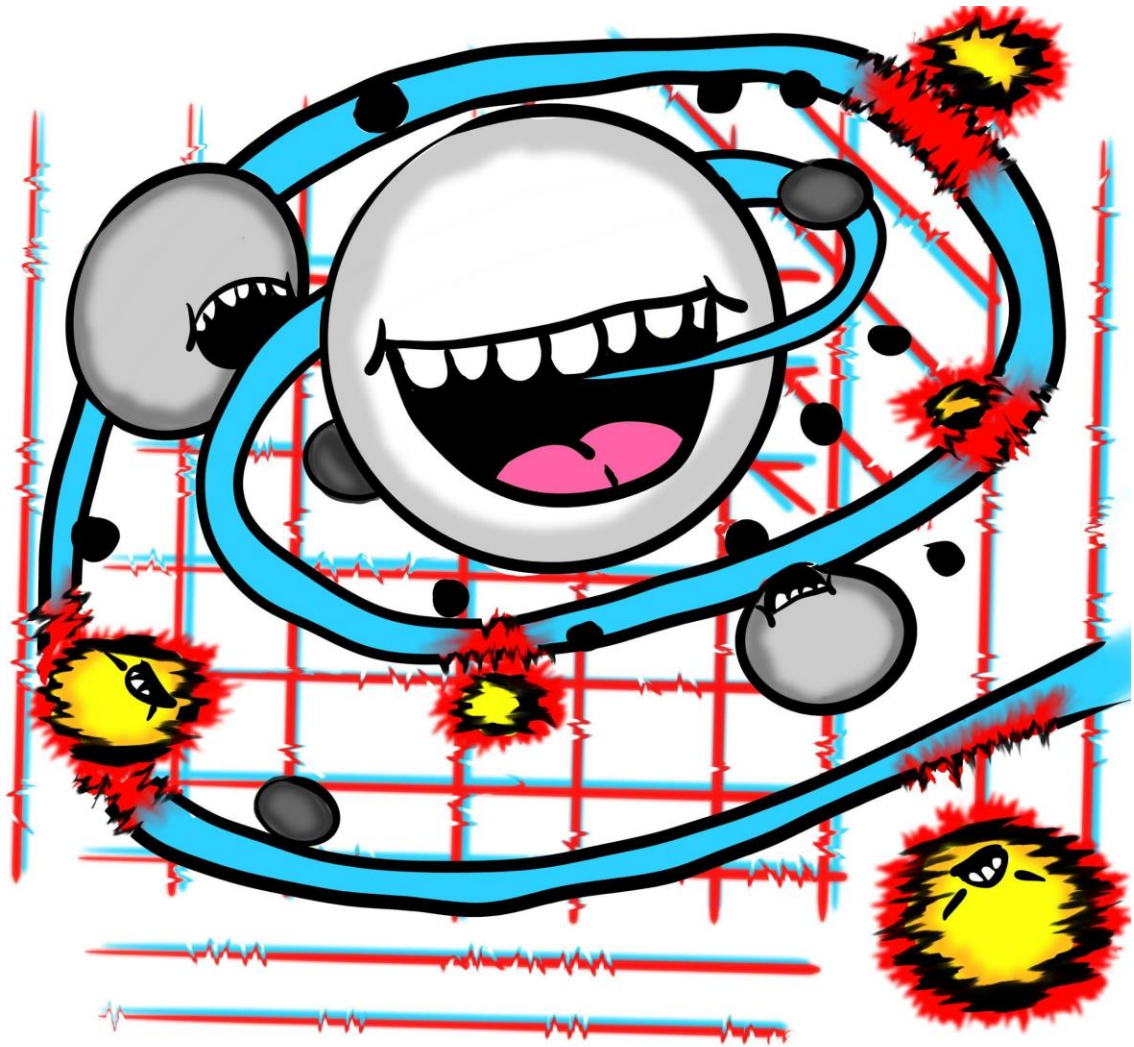
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Social Distancing

The New Professional Civility

Benjamin Hunt

7/1/2020



Julia Stavale

Julia Stavale. (2020). *Aggressive Doodle* (digital). Grand Rapids, MI.

Abstract

“As technology enters our lives, one characteristic of everyday life is amplified: That of being a practical accomplishment created moment by moment by our actions and discourse. In the end, everyday life is a constant cultural work, a process through which individuals produce the meaning of things, their own identities, and the rules of community life” (André, C. & Caronia, L. 2014, p 217).

As a naturalistic paradigm dictated by dialectal practices, culture must be understood in relation to a time and place in order to make ethical sense of society. Similarly, culture cannot be appropriately measured and studied without a reference to prior historical and geographical contexts. “Naturalism is an approach to philosophical problems that interprets them as tractable through the methods of the empirical sciences or at least, without a distinctively a priori project of theorizing” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Jacobs, J.n.d).

Naturalism is a dialectic that manifests as a type of evolution within our society. This cultural phenomenon allows human beings to reflect on those constructs through empirical means in order to understand the world, and to best prepare a society for how to move forward. Bruce Gilbert, a professor of philosophy and liberal arts at Bishop University, defined dialectic as “the process by which being, and a fortiori, human being, elaborates, develops, and embellishes itself into more sophisticated forms of self-determination” (*The Vitality of Contradiction : Hegel, Politics, and the Dialectic of Liberal-Capitalism*, MQUP, 2013). A dialectic is created when a society remembers its past and uses those lessons to adjust its values. Take an orange for example; this specific orange is rotten and when one takes a bite it tastes

bitter, but since that is their first experience with an orange, they would not know that the one they tasted had gone bad, they would think all oranges tasted bitter. However, if they had tasted a ripe, fresh, orange prior to the rotten orange, they would have context to know that the orange was bad in reference to ripe oranges, thus inferring that not all oranges are bitter. Similarly, a dialectic offers humans the means to make judgements about what is good, desirable, and beneficial for a society, including the workplace.

The actions of the United States Government in regard to social distancing reflect a dialectical process that can be studied empirically, specifically on whether they either embody or hinder professional civility. According to Washington Post's article "Mapping the Worldwide Spread of the Coronavirus", published on May 19th, 2020, at least 514,000 worldwide people have died from the COVID-19 virus. The coronavirus, originating in Hubei province of Wuhan, China, has swept across the United States. As a safety precaution, the U.S Government has instituted a mandated social distancing measure to deal with an unprecedented health crisis. The article continues: "On March 31, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the pandemic 'the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War'". As a cultural phenomenon, social distancing has potentially created a ripple effect of new procedures and ethics that could replace the current social norms in the workplace and elsewhere. This chain of events may have also introduced a change of perception regarding professional civility in workplaces across the U.S. This paper examines the practice of social distancing instituted by the U.S Government in 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this practice impacts professional civility as a communicative virtue.

Epicenter of the World

“The United States is now the outbreak’s epicenter of the world, with more reported infections than any other country” (The Washington Post, WP Company, 2020, April 10). Currently, all fifty states in the U.S have reported cases of COVID-19. The cases include infection by travelling, close proximity, and asymptomatic passing. Asymptomatic cases are when individuals are actively carrying the coronavirus but are experiencing no typical symptoms. On the CDC’s website, and other owned media outlets, the CDC recommends that people wear face masks when going out in public, to protect themselves and others from the spread of the virus. The recommendation to wear personal protection is backed by the scientific community, as they have found that the virus spreads quickly from person-to-person.

“Early on, many of the patients at the epicenter of the outbreak in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China had some link to a large seafood and live animal market, suggesting animal-to-person spread. Later, a growing number of patients reportedly did not have exposure to animal markets, indicating person-to-person spread. Person-to-person spread was subsequently reported outside Hubei and in countries outside China, including in the United States.” (“Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation”. 2020, May 6).

The most serious problems presented by this pandemic revolve around thousands of people dying at an alarming rate, and the first step to stopping this virus from spreading further must be effective communication. It is my belief that communication is at the forefront of any action that can be taken, therefore in order for any solution to take form and be implemented, it

must first be communicated to another party – whether that be verbally or nonverbally. If scientists and other like minds had not gathered to exchange and communicate information regarding COVID-19, it is unlikely that the idea of social distancing would have presented itself. Once the idea has been vocalized, others can confirm or deny the effectiveness of it, and then act on it. One example of the centrality of communication practices to disseminate scientific knowledge is through the concept of flattening the curve.

As of May 1st, 2020, there were 2,343 deaths per day, and in order to flatten this curve, the practice of social distancing was encouraged and enforced (“IHME: COVID-19 Projections”, n.d). “‘Social distancing’, also called ‘physical distancing’, means keeping space between yourself and other people outside of your home” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In order to do this successfully, one must keep at least six feet from others, and avoid groups and large gatherings at all times. According to various Government, business, and personal social media posts, and direct-mail adverts, social distancing has been shown to be integrated into the culture of the United States, it has not only affected patrons, but also businesses and organizations on all levels. However, while some employers have learned to adapt, others have failed. This inept adaptability is just as much of a threat as the illness itself, as all individuals, such as employer to employee, are responsible for the safekeeping of those around them. “Although the risk of severe illness may be different for everyone, anyone can get and spread COVID-19. Everyone has a role to play in slowing the spread and protecting themselves, their family, and their community” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, April 4).

Professional Civility in the Midst of an Outbreak

To see social distancing's effect on the workplace, we must first look at the current workplace practices and professional civility ethics. Dr. Fritz, a professor and director of the Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University, specializes in such communicative practices, and is the author of *Professional Civility: Communicative Virtue at Work*. In this book she asserts that professional civility "protects and promotes the good of place by tending to the vulnerable internal environment of an institution through attentive communicative practices" (2013, p 155). The phenomenology of professional civility depends on the moral agents acting as ethical communication between organizations and companies, and is something that will be tested as the pandemic, and prevention practices, continue. Businesses will be looked at to see how they hold up under such a crisis.

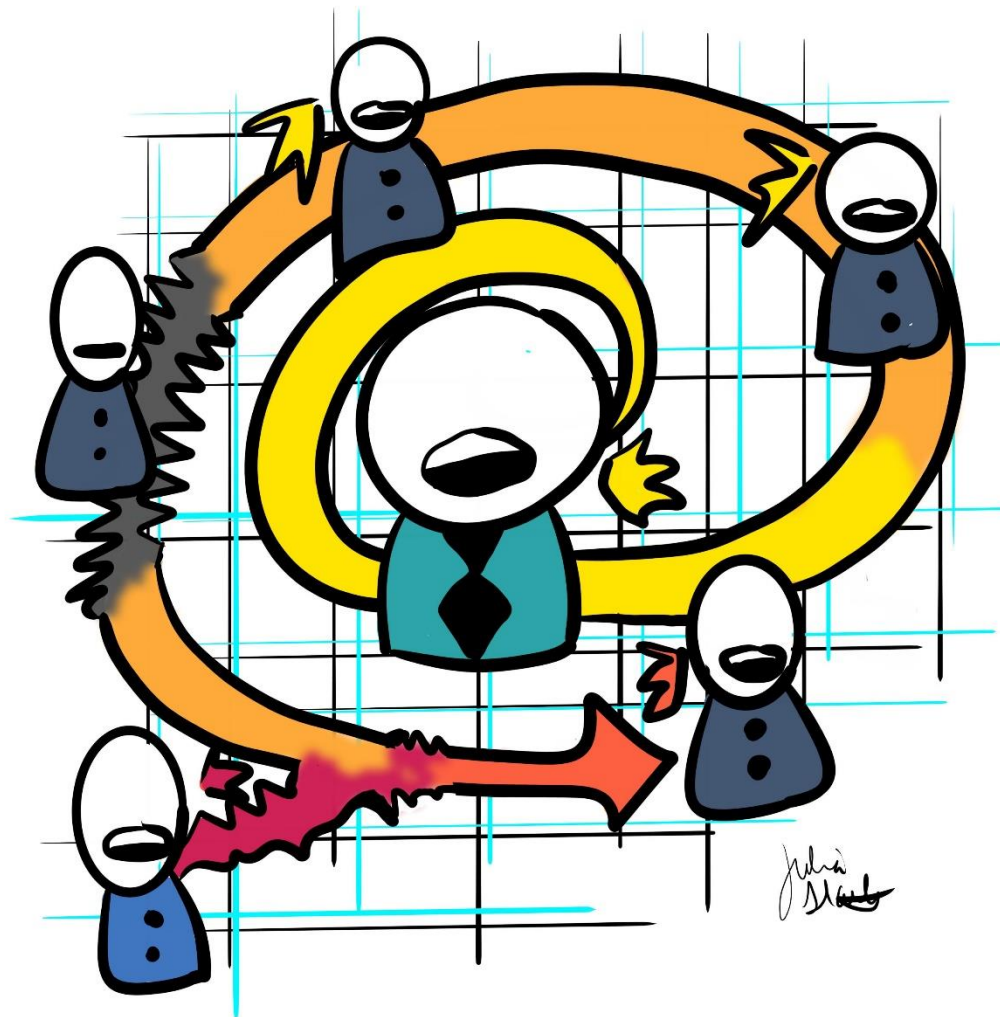
To maintain ethical communicative practices, there needs to be a relationship that acknowledges the intrapersonal (with yourself) and interpersonal (with others) dynamic of those practices. When the relationship is unstable, it can produce negative effects in the work environment such as high stress, turnover rates, and low productivity. As Rita Men states, PhD in the Department of Public Relations at the University of Florida, "communication professionals should help educate leaders about their role in fostering a positive emotional culture. Practitioners should show empirical evidence that supports the connection between a positive emotional culture and positive employee and organizational outcomes" (Men, R. 2019, *Public Relations Review*, 45). Professional civility acts as a foundation for communication that encourages the relationship between employee and employer that Rita Men speaks of. As Fritz

posits, “Professional civility as a communicative virtue at work becomes a foundation for productive, constructive action in organizations, action that protects and promotes human flourishing, defining the role of professions as part of a good human life” (2013, p 11). The ethics of professional civility discourages the action of hiding our own feelings for the sake of another’s, and instead encourages being open to a spectrum of ideas and emotions. This phenomenon leads to a more ethical and productive relationship between management and the employees that trust them. “Ultimately, upward channels help leaders make better decisions. From an ethical standpoint, they allow organizations to make informed decisions with the most utility, the perspective of utilitarianism” (Lyon, A. 2016). Professional civility is the thread that holds communicative action together and is a force of innovation for an environment to change the bad to good.

“Professions can be evaluated as to their contributions to the good of human flourishing, and they can be understood as a practice with a defined end, aim, or good against which particular instantiations of practices can be evaluated as meeting, or failing to meet that end, aim, or good, as defining more or less well the particular good internal to that practice” (Fritz, J. 2013, p 25).

The encouragement of human flourishing is currently in direct conflict with pre-COVID-19 work procedures, like physical attendance and face-to face operations, because of the pandemic and COVID-19’s hyper-contagious properties. Changes will have to be made to protect the ‘aim’ that Fritz describes so that organizations can still reap the benefits with professional civility. The overall goal of social norms in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic is called ‘flattening the curve’, and is achieved through social distancing.

“Flattening the curve involves reducing the number of new COVID-19 cases from one day to the next. This helps prevent healthcare systems from becoming overwhelmed. When a country has fewer new COVID-19 cases emerging today than it did on a previous day, that’s a sign that the country is flattening the curve”
(Hopkins, J. Coronavirus Resource Center, n.d).



Julia Stavale. (2020). *Doodle* (digital). Grand Rapids, MI

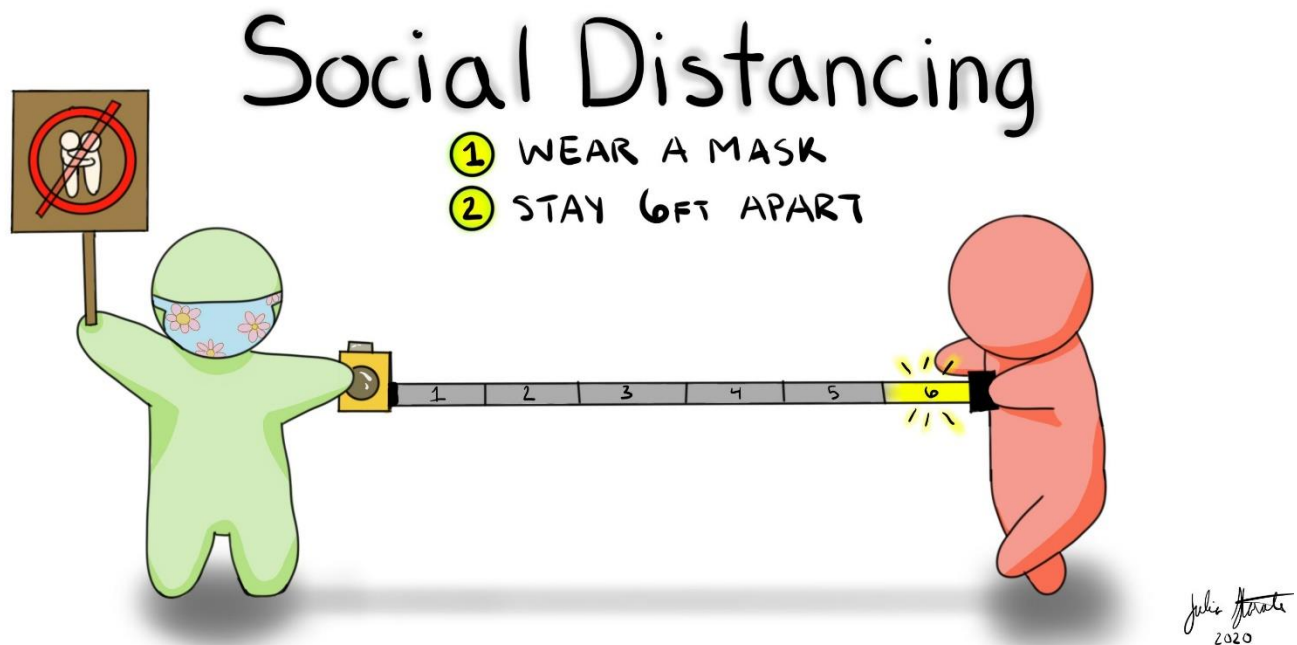
Social distancing and flattening the curve are important as they allow communities to develop shared immunity, also referred to as herd or shield immunity, at a steady pace. Herd immunity, as described by J Mock, is “how a society collectively fights off infections to keep the transmission of disease low” (2020, May 4). Although, there is a divide with some who think social distancing will create more harm than progress, especially with the large percentage of individuals whose work is dependent on face to face communication.

“CBER's “Occupational Exposure to Social Distancing: A Preliminary Analysis Using O*NET Data,” discovered that there are about 28 million jobs involving high levels of physical proximity with others and working with others. These jobs pay an average of \$32,774 per year” (Valentic, S. 2020, March 16).

The workers negatively affected by COVID-19, such as the dine-in restaurant business, movie theaters, and recreational activities, are not considered essential. “Our pandemic-era meaning of ‘essential work’ refers to work that’s needed to meet basic human needs and safety while sheltering in place” (Jaggers, 2020, May 11). Thus, employers have introduced creative ways to keep their businesses running such as no contact delivery/pickup, online shopping, delivery applications such as door-dash, and streaming platforms. In doing so, these companies are still able to earn a percentage of what they would have prior to the pandemic and remain in business. These adaptations raise the question of whether companies are doing enough to protect themselves and their employees. However, Dr. Hicks, the director of *Ball State’s Center for Business and Economic Researchers* admits that radical social distancing practices such as this haven't happened in decades, so there is not enough economic data to fully analyze the effects.

The best data available for us to analyze is from the 1918 Spanish Flu and other smaller pandemics in the 50's and 60's, unfortunately this does not give us a strong enough indication on how the economy will recover.

According to Martin, the economy is not the only thing negatively affected by social distancing, “A report compiled by Senate Democrats found that social distancing, isolation and unemployment due to the coronavirus have negatively affected the mental health of 45 percent of adults and increased rates of suicide, substance abuse and domestic violence” (2020). Martin’s report continues by advocating for funding from the next relief package focusing on the behavioral health providers, suggesting a rise of stress levels caused by isolation and limited social interaction from the pandemic. The report is based on an April 2020 survey of 880 facilities with the *National Council of Behavioral Health*. The survey found that funding for facilities has been cut significantly since 2010” (Martin, G. 2020). The estimate from the *Behavioral Health Organizations* shows that it would cost \$38.5 billion, where Congress has only provided \$425 million of that amount. The money should be allocated towards the front-line workers, telemedicine, and protective equipment, as they are crucial factors in lessening the impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, based on the report above we can conclude that there is evidence to suggest that social distancing will increase stress and isolation among Americans, as well as potentially damage the economy. The *National Ensemble Forecast* shows that cumulative deaths are to be between 130,000 and 150,000 by July 18th. This is where professional civility plays a part in promoting social distancing, as it aims to protect the good of human flourishing, as Fritz suggests, by choosing what might be the ‘best’ of the ‘worst’ options.



Julia Stavale. (2020). *Keep Your Distance* (digital). Grand Rapids, MI

Making the Transition

“Unfortunately, with the recent Coronavirus pandemic many business owners have been faced with some tough decisions regarding their businesses and their teams in terms of social distancing. Which has led to some very important discussions between you and your staff” (Finkel, D. 2020, March 18).

Many companies and businesses have embraced the guidelines of social distancing, creating a work from home culture that supports virtual practices, such as video meetings, skype usage, and more online programs. This can be seen in companies like Kellogg, which someone close to me currently works, where they shut down the main facility and required their employees to work from home – now holding their meetings via skype or teams. However, the companies that were not able to adjust had to lay off their employees and/or go out of business.

This unforeseen pandemic, and its associated recommended guidelines, forces upper management teams to adapt to the current situation, rather than believing the overall health risks of the pandemic will not affect their business. A change of communicative action, such as social distancing in the form of remote work, can greatly improve team morale within the realm of professional civility. “Changing the way you do business is stressful, but with a little communication and teamwork the transition doesn't have to be a painful one. How does your business handle social distancing in times of crisis?” (Finkel, D. 2020, March 18).

Social distancing acts as the ideal communicative action for the U.S in times of an emergency, such as this pandemic, and as a result it could also be implemented as the new professional civility of employee communication.

“From a sociological point of view it makes sense to begin with communicative action. The necessity for coordinated action generates in society a certain need for communication, which must be met if it is possible to coordinate actions effectively for the purpose of satisfying needs.” (Habermas, J. 1986, *The Theory of Communicative Action V.1*)

Otherwise, if companies are not able to adjust to work from home practices, it is my educated conclusion, from the research conducted and displayed in this paper, that the United States is at risk for not only more deaths and tensions between countries, but also rising unemployment rates leading to an economic crisis such as a recession, as not enough money is being put back into the economy. Even with these threats present, companies are already looking at numbers for success rates. By looking at the quality and quantity of work being completed at home, business should reevaluate practices, which can open the door for better communication and evolved methods.

Working from home also encourages management to check in on their employees more, as extended isolation can cause negative mental affliction, previously stated in the report by Martin.

Those Considered Essential

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of our society: education, employment, community and lifestyle facilities, religious affairs, and emergency responses. Because of this global health threat, American society has quickly learned the true meaning of ‘essential work’, specifically within the frame of habitual changes. Unfortunately, not many businesses meet the criteria to be considered essential, so any plans to reopen them are a low priority.

As stated before, businesses must adapt to the current situation or be left behind. “One in five (20%) businesses have switched at least some employees to teleworking. 17% have transitioned their retail presence to virtual or digital configurations, while 17% have asked for flexibility in rent payments” (Small Business Coronavirus Impact Poll, 2020). As reported by the US Chambers, 32% of businesses are applying for the Paycheck Protection Program, a program that is crucial for small businesses. “Small businesses said they are primarily concerned about lack of profitability due to decreased customers (54%), protecting the health of their employees (36%), and that a resurgence of the virus will force their business to shut down again (34%)” (Small Business Coronavirus Impact Poll, 2020). According to a written report by Miklos Koren and Rita Peto, industries that have the highest share of communication intensive workers, “customer-facing occupations”, which makes up around the 35% mark, such as: arts, entertainment, educational and food services are facing a hindering limit on worker interactions, sometimes by half. They are compensated with a 12.2% wage subsidy, but what of the areas with

a larger population density, where 43% of the people are working in those face-to-face reliant occupations (Koren, M. and Peto, R. 2020, March 20, p 9)

Even so, not all organizations and businesses have closed, there are still some that are considered essential and have remained open under the active practice of social distancing. “Not all employees can work remotely. For those who remain on-site, like many service employees, changes in workplace processes and design will help provide the social distancing they need to stay safe” (Omale, G. 2020, April 14). In addition to my work as a scholar, I work as a security officer for a major hotel chain, which is considered to be essential as my coworkers and I are responsible for the safety of the residents and the building. We have successfully integrated safer precautions into our regular practices. It can be seen not only at an organizational level, but also on a national level with the quarantine that is still in effect. All aspects and practices of a normal routine, such as how shifts are scheduled and workplace communications, like the security patrols, backup assignments, and where we will be stationed have changed. The hotel has shut down, and residents of the condos and apartment complexes are asked to stay home except for the case of emergencies, and security is no longer going on scheduled rounds or receiving and delivering packages. New procedures have been put in place, by the owners of the chain as well as upper management at my specific location, to avoid contact with other workers and patrons. As a result, business as usual is being recontextualized based on what scientists, health professionals, and government officials are learning about COVID-19. The changes occurring in the security sector are a micro example of how business is now being handled between countries on a macro level. Other responder positions, such as law enforcement and medical professionals, are considered essential to maintain a standard of societal normality, and are still expected to actively practice social distancing when possible. The new communicative practices acting as

workplace ethics show that the government is making an effort to slow down the pandemic at the cost of an economic decline, despite the critics of this effort. The critics of social distancing are compiled of those whose political beliefs go against what social distancing stands for. One study finds that

“Republicans and misaligned Democrats are less likely to adhere to social distancing orders. Bipartisan support for social distancing measures thus appears to be a key factor in how quickly we can mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus” (Painter, M. and Qiu, T. 2020, May 11)

Other opposition social distancing guidelines can be seen in the May 1st and May 14th protests at Michigan’s State capital, where gun toting protestors fought against the stay at home orders in place. “During that gathering, demonstrators entered the Capitol and chanted: ‘Our House’ and ‘Let Us In’ outside of the House chamber against a line of Michigan State Police. Many protesters didn't wear masks or follow social distancing” (Censky, A. 2020, May 14). Ironically, these protests may increase the number of COVID-19 cases in the state, as no safe methods were actively practiced by the protestors.

But Does it Work?

Beyond citizen opposition to the recommended safety precautions that people have to worry about, the U.S government should also consider the negative implications of not flattening the curve. The increasing rate of the infected population directly corresponds with how well medical facilities can respond with their available resources. If the ‘curve’ of affected people is too steep, it is my hypothesis that hospitals will not be able to keep up on treatment, and will struggle with capacity. Because of this threat, any measures of slowing the virus, like social

distancing, is recommended by the scientific community. As one scholar puts it: “In epidemiology, the idea of slowing a virus' spread so that fewer people need to seek treatment at any given time is known as ‘flattening the curve.’ It explains why so many countries are implementing ‘social distancing’ guidelines” (Specktor, B. 2020, March 16). According to America’s COVID-19 curve, the number of cases and deaths are expected to steadily rise until August, but all is not lost.

“A body of preliminary research suggests that social distancing and lockdowns have worked to flatten the curve and, at a minimum, greatly slowed down the spread of the disease. “We’re seeing less cases,” professor of health metrics sciences Ali Mokdad at the University of Washington told me. “Social distancing is working.” (Piper, K. 2020, April 15)

The Health Affairs evaluated the impact of event bans, school, gym, bar closures, entertainment venues, restaurants, and shelter in place orders of the United States social distancing measures in a study that looked at the months of March and April of 2020.

“Adoption of government-imposed social distancing measures reduced the daily growth rate by 5.4 percentage points after 1–5 days, 6.8 after 6–10 days, 8.2 after 11–15 days, and 9.1 after 16–20 days. Holding the amount of voluntary social distancing constant, these results imply 10 times greater spread by April 27 without SIPOs (10 million cases) and more than 35 times greater spread without any of the four measures (35 million)” (Courtemanche, C. 2020, May 14).

This data demonstrates that social distancing is a successful method to flatten the curve, while also identifying the potential dangers in the absence of it. Considering social distancing as a

communicative action of professional civility, if we can agree to practice social distancing while not blaming others, then it can work towards keeping the United States from long-term issues.

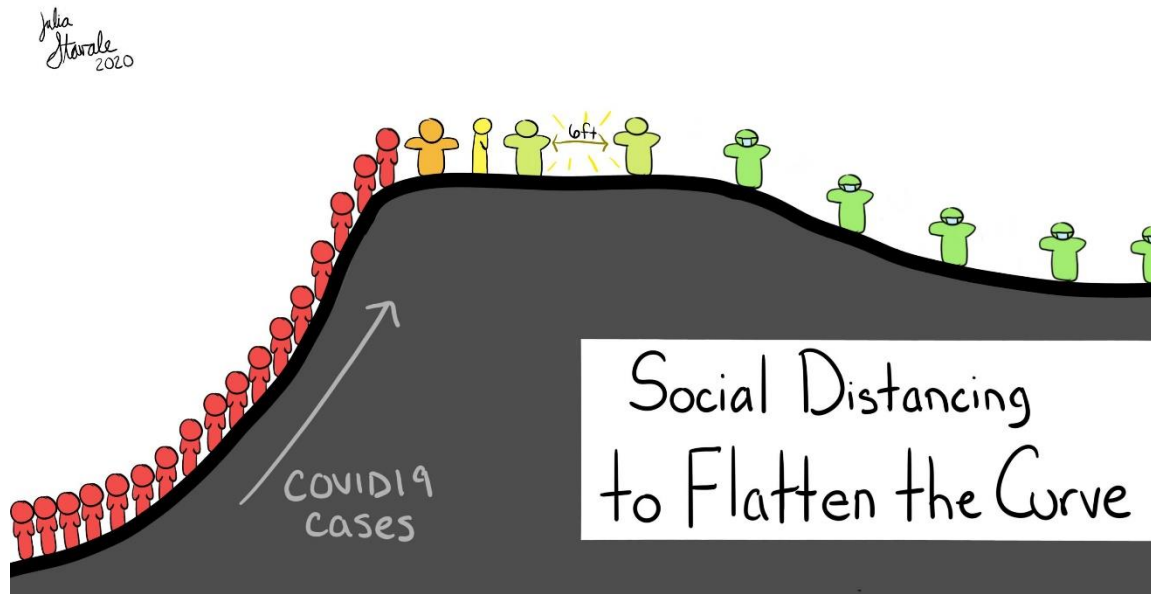
Moving Forward as a Means of Professional Civility

Because China is considered ‘ground zero’, it is important to examine the country’s social and cultural norms that created the circumstances for a rising pandemic, and how they altered their habits to correct those problems. We must address these problems as our own if we are able to move forward productively. Freedom to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is an ontological right unless that freedom infringes on others. This right exists not only as a universal law between individuals, but also on a macro level, such as this case between neighboring countries.

“The coronavirus is a result of the many variants of unnatural & unnecessary practices that every society and culture can do better without. Even after several pandemics, the Chinese regime is yet to realize that its entire system is a flaw.”

(Wion, 2020, April 10)

Not only must we be honest and practical in our communicative action between countries, but we must do the same amongst ourselves in the U.S as well. “Civility transcends politeness and encompasses pursuing shared ideas to reach common ground. Prioritizing civility facilitates effective communication, high-functioning teams, inclusive and productive communities and civic engagement” (*American Psychological Association*, n.d).



Julia Stavale. (2020). *Flatten the Curve* (digital). Grand Rapids, MI

In the case of recent events, such as COVID-19, this transcendence of politeness has now evolved with the action of social distancing to become a means of effective communication with the U.S. government. It has inverted our social norms in a positive way, where the goal is now for the greater good of eradicating the virus. The effective implementation of social distancing, within the ethics of professional civility, act as that new social norm within an organization to assist in reaching that greater goal. Public health officials say that in order for us to stop the curve completely, the U.S must integrate a social ethic, like the ones described before, that works in the practice of social distancing for at least two years.

“What this is saying is that SARS-CoV-2 will stay with us through 2022, that it’s not going to die down to nothing in the summer. So I think it’s helpful for thinking about what interventions are sustainable and effective,” said Rivers, an

assistant professor of epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.” (Branswell, H. 2020, April 14)

Despite the science backing it, it will be questioned as to whether society will continue to integrate social distancing as a part of a new socio-cultural norm, even after the quarantine orders lift. The U.S government will also be questioned on the incivility and inhuman cultural practices that were responsible for the virus to spread within its nation and neighboring countries. As this paper began quoting *Moving Cultures*, so must it come full circle in that the ethics of the United States are tested in ways that will continue to turn, and in this case, hopefully adapt and evolve. Only time will tell how we communicate our needs and shifting values within the frame of professional civility towards a communicative action that stomps this virus in its tracks.

In this paper, I have explored the potential effects that social distancing guidelines may have on civility levels of contemporary professions in the U.S. The shift in the ethos of American culture has created a new ethic called social distancing, which will guide what it means to be a professional in the years to come. What characterizes professional civility has changed regarding what it means to conduct oneself in the day to day operations of communication as a result of this pandemic. Just as nonverbal communication still communicates something to that other person, so does keeping one’s distance as a tacit response to nonverbal communication. However, if employers and employees alike are unable to adapt to the new practices, problems will develop in key interpersonal communication areas, such as trust, confidence, and mutual alignments, both in the workplace and outside of it. What makes social distancing valuable as an ethical practice is that it is a sign of respect for the other person with regard to the context of the COVID-19 virus. Without mutual respect, relationships and interpersonal affairs become that much more difficult to build from. Social distancing as a means of professional civility is a

practice that will replace the handshake through actions such as nodding or a hand wave if we are to learn from this pandemic in how we are able to communicate effectively going forward.

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