

Parenting in a Pandemic:
Social Distancing and its Effect on Support and Social, Emotional Loneliness

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Introduction

My son fidgets as we are waiting for a virtual “back to school” session to start on my laptop. It is early April and he is excited to see his teachers and friends, whom he has not seen since the beginning of March. To my son’s disappointment, the session finally begins, almost 10 minutes late, and consists entirely of the teachers and a few administrators talking about the structure of online learning. No friends in sight. As the teachers go over the plan for distance learning, questions start appearing in the chatroom. One parent asks if adults are required to assist kids during the one-hour instruction session everyday, adding, “Can we work?” The administrators empathize, but their answer is vague.

This is the reality many parents have faced since March 2020, with no clear end date in sight. The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in the closure of organizations and institutions that not only support but connect parents. Further, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends social distancing, an infection control action that limits interaction outside the home. This limits exposure to others by either maintaining a six-foot distance in public or entirely avoiding public spaces in which infection can easily spread, such as public transportation, restaurants, bars, concerts and other close-quarters spaces. While this benefits the public by slowing the spread of the disease, it also increases alienation and shifts the responsibilities of full-time caregiving and teaching carried out by organizations and institutions to parents.

This paper uses Mario Small’s *Unanticipated Gains* and the work of Mark Granovetter as a stepping off point to investigate the effects of social distancing on parents’ support structures. My theory is that social distancing is breaking weak ties and compartmental intimate ties — relations characterized by “openness, trust and the revelation of privacy, but only within confined domains” (Small 2010:92) — formed between adults at daycares and schools. During a period like this, I believe only strong ties remain. I also use literature from the sociology of disaster to determine if the pandemic shares common traits with other disasters in order to explain the effect on support structures.

The Importance of Compartmental Intimates and Weak Ties

In an attempt to answer how people make connections, Smalls argues in *Unanticipated Gains* that “social capital depends fundamentally on the organizations in which [people] participate routinely, and that, through multiple mechanisms, organizations can create and reproduce network advantages in ways their members may not expect or even have to work for” (Small 2010:5). In other words, the organizations we interact with everyday are brokers that

connect us with others, broadening our network and our ability to access resources, such as services, information and even material goods.

Small focused on childcare centers in New York City to ask whether these centers were effective brokers for the mothers of enrolled children and if the mothers of enrolled children improved their circumstances compared with those who did not enroll their children. The data show that enrolling children in a childcare center is statistically associated with lower material and mental hardship. Small equates this benefit to the formation of what he calls “compartmental intimates.”

In his paper “The Strength of Weak Ties,” Granovetter defines the strength of a tie as the combination of “the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutually confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter 1973:1361). Compartmental intimates are strong ties that have a domain-specific focus, meaning they provide support only in specific areas of life. In the case of the centers, the domain *is* the center, and conversations tend to revolve around topics such as problems with kids or the center. Shared activities include playdates and baby-sitting, and interaction beyond the center is limited to parks and playgrounds.

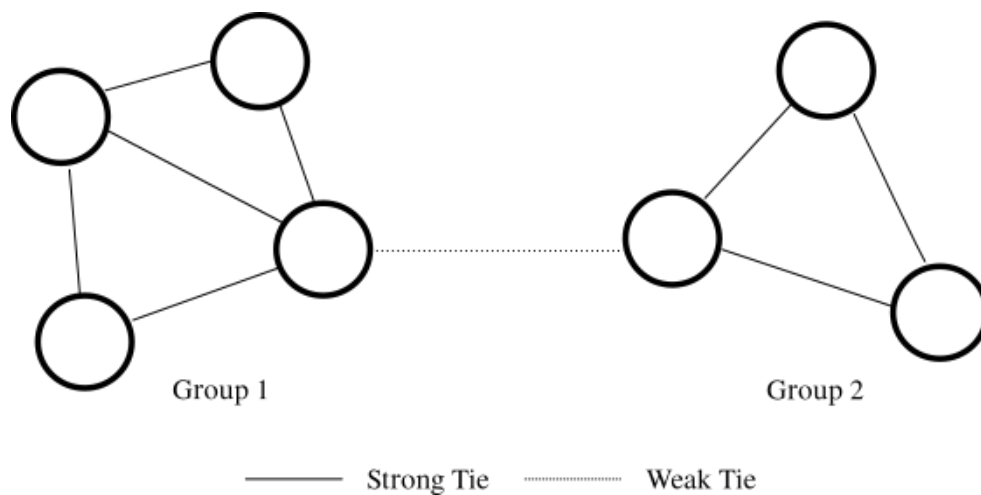
Mothers form these intimate ties for two reasons: people tend to associate with others who resemble them (known as homophily) and the frequency of interaction. “Organizations can institutionally perform much of the maintenance work” of compartmental intimate relationships simply by providing opportunities for interaction (Small 2010:105). But a structural change to the opportunities for interaction can cut short a relationship.

Support networks, of course, exist beyond these close friendships. Even among weakly tied acquaintances, Smalls finds organizations can create conditions in which networks of social support emerge. This occurs through trust and formalized obligations. A mother may trust another mother because she sees her frequently at the center. A parent who volunteers to handle a phone tree in the event of the emergency may be in touch with other parents to keep contact information up to date. Acquaintances formed in these examples could provide social support in an emergency.

If you were to apply Granovetter’s theory of weak ties to Small’s finding, these non-intimate ties are important because they serve as bridges to even greater networks of ties. In a close circle of friends who are bound to share similar characteristics, homophily limits the type of information or knowledge shared. But with weak ties, information is diffused from one group of strong ties to another. Through these network bridges, “ideas, influences, or information socially distant” from an individual may reach her and her group of strong ties. **Figure 1** below is a simple example of two groups connected by a weak tie.

Granovetter believes that the less indirect contacts a person has, the more this person will be shut off from the world beyond his/her inner circle. For this reason, Granovetter warns that “removal of the average weak ties would do more ‘damage’ to transmission probabilities [of important information] than would that of the average strong [tie]” (Granovetter 1973:1366). By definition, social distancing removes access to, if not all, many weak ties in a person’s network. And with school closures, social distancing has reduced access to compartmental intimates as well. So what effect does this have on parents?

Figure 1 - Example of Weak Tie Bridging Two Groups of Strong Ties



Social capital, in the form of social embeddedness, has also been found to play an important role in disasters and recovery (Aldrich 2012). In this paper, I will be using Nan Lin’s definition of social capital as “resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (Lin 2002:41). Research on social capital highlights three forms: bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam 2000; Szreter and Woolcock 2004). Bonding focuses on connections between community members in terms of reciprocity and solidarity. Bridging creates access to extralocal networks, the kind of transmission created by weak ties. This process can connect people more or less of the same class status but of diverse backgrounds — unlike the social homophily that can be found in local networks, or strong ties. Linking, on the other hand, creates access “between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society” (Szreter and Woolcock 2004:655). This is vertical bridging. An example would be communities in a disaster scenario that have relationships with

NGOs or local authorities and thus are granted preference in resources and information during recovery.

While the pandemic is a different type of disaster than the kind studied by Aldrich and other researchers, I believe these concepts are important in understanding how support structures operate, or cannot operate, when in-person access is limited.

Data Sources

To answer the question of how social distancing has affected parent support structures, this paper relies on two data sources: a survey of 103 parents from a total of 17 states conducted in April and 20-minute interviews with three respondents, two women and one man. Throughout this paper, respondents' names are changed for anonymity.

The survey consisted of a question about which social distancing methods respondents have been following, four questions on relationships in and outside of school settings, and six questions that gauge emotional and social loneliness. The questions on relationships asked how many people the respondent remains regularly in contact with (n); how many of those contacts were met through the respondent's child's daycare, school or a parent support group; and how many of the contacts (overall, represented by s , and those met through an organization) are considered close relationships. I define close relationships as someone with whom a person shares mutual support, regularly interacts with outside one specific location and can have discussions on a variety of topics, including private matters. Examples include family or long-time friends. This way, compartmental intimates are defined as close relationships met through daycare, school or a parent support group, and weak ties are defined as $n - s$.

The six questions dealing with emotional and social loneliness are taken from the De Jong Gierveld 6-item loneliness scale. I selected this scale because of its length and research has found there is no cultural variation in results, meaning it is suitable across locations. The scale is a shortened version of De Jong Gierveld's 11-item scale, which measures emotional loneliness, "stemming from the absence of an intimate relationship or a close emotional attachment," and social loneliness, "stemming from the absence of a broader group of contacts or an engaging social network (e.g., friends, colleagues, and people in the neighborhood)" (Gierveld and Tilburg 2016:584). Research has found that results from the six-item scale are mirrored in the quality of the 11-item scale (Gierveld and Tilburg 2016:592).

Three questions address emotional loneliness, with statements like "I miss having people around me" and options for "Yes," "No" and "More or less." Three questions address social loneliness, with statements like "There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems" and options for "Yes," "No" and "More or less." The score is tallied by adding neutral

and positive (in the case of emotional loneliness) or negative (in the case of social loneliness) answers. A respondent who scores 0 is believed to be socially embedded while a respondent who scores 6 is believed to be completely lonely.

In addition to those sections, I collected some basic demographic information on gender, educational attainment and number of children. I wanted data on gender as recent data suggest an increasing gender gap in work hours, with mothers significantly reducing work hours in dual-earner, heterosexual households likely to focus on caregiving (Collins et al. 2021). I also focused on educational attainment as research has shown highly educated people are more likely to engage in volunteering and philanthropic activities (Putnam 2000:118). These are proxies for social embeddedness.

The survey takes a couple of minutes to fill out. I made the decision to keep the survey brief to increase the number of potential responses; however, this brings up some issues with the data collected.

Potential Issues with Data

As **Table 1** shows, survey respondents are disproportionately college-educated women. Responses were collected via social media (appeals on Twitter and through parenting groups on Facebook) and through listservs. The sources I used to advertise the survey likely reflect the means of communication for predominant types of respondents. Further, I noticed a snowballing effect, where a parent would comment that they wanted to pass along the survey to their network of friends. This is an indication of the social homophily prevalent among these networks and makes it difficult to make inferences about a population through the sample.

I chose not to collect race, ethnicity, age and income data. Again, I wanted to limit the number of questions in order to boost responses. I believed including more personal questions would affect the number of responses.

I also did not ask questions about contact with ties pre-pandemic, meaning it is possible, but unlikely, that the number of indirect contacts reported in the survey are not that different from contacts before social distancing was enforced. I say “unlikely” because throughout a normal day we have so many indirect contacts with people that it can be taken for granted: the barista at the coffee shop that you see regularly when you pick up your coffee, or coworkers you may not work directly with but you see them around the office. Also, the parents at school that you do not regularly interact with but see at drop-off. These are what Small calls “hi-and-bye” relationships. These interactions are all lost through social distancing.

Table 1 - Survey Respondents by Gender Identification, Educational Attainment

	Total	Female	Male
Responses	100%	84%	16%
Educational attainment			
High school or less	2.9%	1.9%	1.0%
Some college or no degree	15.5%	15.5%	0.0%
Associate's degree	1.9%	1.9%	0.0%
Bachelor' Degree	31.1%	25.2%	5.8%
Master's degree	41.7%	34.0%	7.8%
Doctoral degree	5.8%	4.8%	1.0%
Prefer not to say	1.0%	1.0%	0%

Results

Social Distancing

If we are talking about social distancing, it's important to define what sorts of disruptions social distancing causes in day-to-day activity.

In the survey, respondents were asked if they had participated in the following measures:

- Maintaining a distance of at least 6 feet from others in public.
- Staying away from crowded places.
- Working from home instead of at the office.
- Visiting loved ones by electronic devices instead of in person.
- Avoiding unnecessary travel.

People cannot be expected to follow every one of these measures, as the survey noted to respondents that work and caregiving obligations may prevent compliance. Yet 93.1% of

respondents indicated they are maintaining a safe distance in public, 97.1% are staying away from crowded places, 81.4% are teleworking, 90.2% are visiting loved ones via electronic devices and 96.1% are avoiding unnecessary travel. There is likely a little bit of social desirability bias in these results, since there is social pressure to follow the guidelines.

There does not appear to be a statistical significance, however, between the number of guidelines followed and the respondent's loneliness score or other variables.

In the interviews, there was judgment for those not following social distancing protocols. Elizabeth, a mother of two, spoke of avoiding in-laws who were not following distancing guidelines because her daughter is asthmatic: "She's been to the hospital more than once to get oxygen ... There's no way I'm risking her being in that situation." This can have an effect of not being able to get support even from strong ties.

In other instances, it is a case of social shaming for those who do not appear to care for the health of others. Michael, a father of two, spoke of his wife's experience standing in line at the grocery store, wearing a mask while surrounded by others who were not wearing protective equipment: "She's thinking, while she's sitting there in line, holding stuff in her arms with her mask on, 'I'm wearing this mask to keep you safe, why aren't you wearing a mask to keep me safe?'" The thought of a parent getting sick is stressful because, apart from the fatality rate for certain age groups or those with chronic conditions, there are not many options for in-person support for infected parents. There are no sick days for quarantined parents. So whom are parents relying on for support?

Education

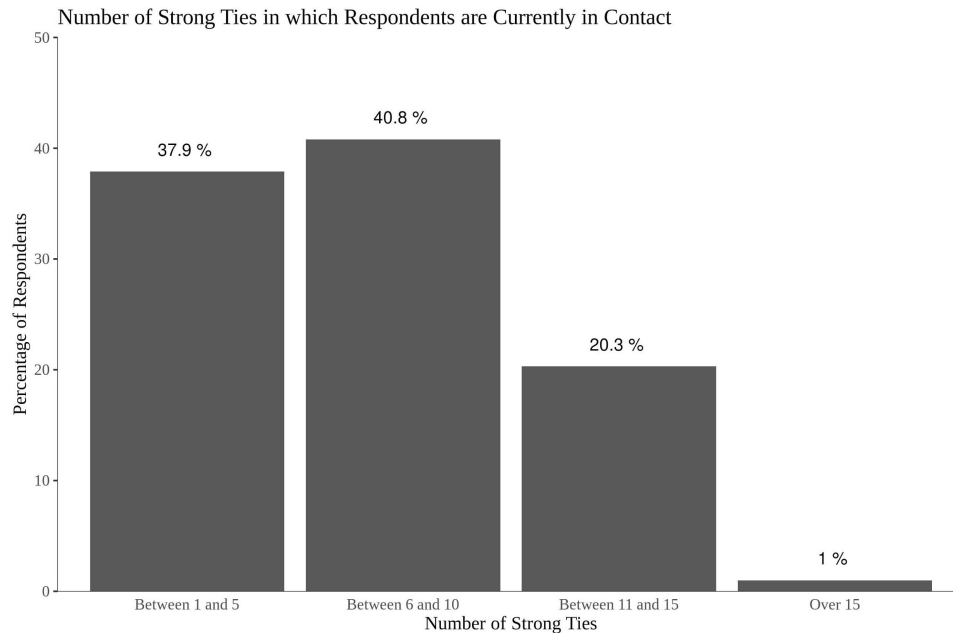
Since there were only a few respondents with an educational attainment of "high school or less," I removed them from the dataset and separated the rest of the respondents into three categories: Some college or associate's degree (n=18), bachelor's degree (n=32) and graduate degree (n=49). Though respondents overwhelmingly fell in the categories of bachelor's degree and graduate degree, there was no statistically significant relationship between education and social embeddedness, reflected by the respondent's social score. This is interesting because one would expect, based on Putnam's research on altruistic behavior and civic engagement (Putnam 2000), that higher education would still correlate with social embeddedness, even in a pandemic. Either the sample is too small or Putnam's theory of the decline civic engagement is reflected in these findings.

Strong Ties and In-Person Support

Figure 2 looks at the number of strong ties with which respondents remain in contact. Almost 80% of respondents have remained in contact with between one and 10 people with

whom they share a close relationship, whether through person-to-person contact, video conferencing, Facebook or text messaging.

Figure 2



Strong ties can be a blessing and a curse in an emergency. In the case of Elizabeth, her father-in-law is continuing to go to work, potentially exposing himself to the virus. This means both that in-person support from her in-laws is not available to her family, and she is also concerned about their well-being. On the other hand, Elizabeth, who is teleworking full-time, receives assistance from her husband and 14-year-old daughter in caring for her 4-year-old son.

Virginia, a mother of two, is a professional musician whose performances have been canceled through June but still teaches lessons to students online. Her husband is teleworking full-time, so the burden of caregiving and homeschooling her six-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son falls on her.

I am not OK. I don't know why this is so hard, but it is so draining. And I am breaking up fights and trying to redirect and coaching them through it and entertaining and cleaning. And then I have to figure out how to feed all these people three times a day and then with way more cleaning.

Both Elizabeth and Virginia share the same family structure, but the fact that Elizabeth has a teenager changes her support structure entirely. As **Table 2** shows, parents with more children scored lower on the De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale than parents with fewer children,

meaning they felt more socially embedded. A simple regression model looking at the impact of the respondent's number of children on the overall score was not statistically significant, $R^2 = 0.02$, $F(1, 99) = 3.072$, $p < .08$. However, when separating the social score from emotional score, the impact of the number of children on social loneliness was statistically significant, $R^2 = 0.04$, $F(1, 99) = 5.066$, $p < .02$. Based on the regression, with the average respondent having two children, for every additional child, the social loneliness score decreases by 0.2533 points. However, with a low adjusted R^2 , there is clearly more behind this phenomenon.

Table 2

Number of Children	Median Score	Average Score
1	3.14	3
2	3.02	3
3	2.14	2
4	2.33	2.5

Granovetter writes, “Weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle; but strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available” (Granovetter 1983:209). Larger families naturally have more strong ties and increase the probability of having an older child in the house who can provide assistance to parents. Even if there is not a teenager in the house, having more kids has other benefits. As Lillian, a mother of three young children, wrote: “All three of my kids play really well together so sometimes I’ll get a couple of ... hours that they entertain each other.” In a time like this, it may be beneficial to have more children.

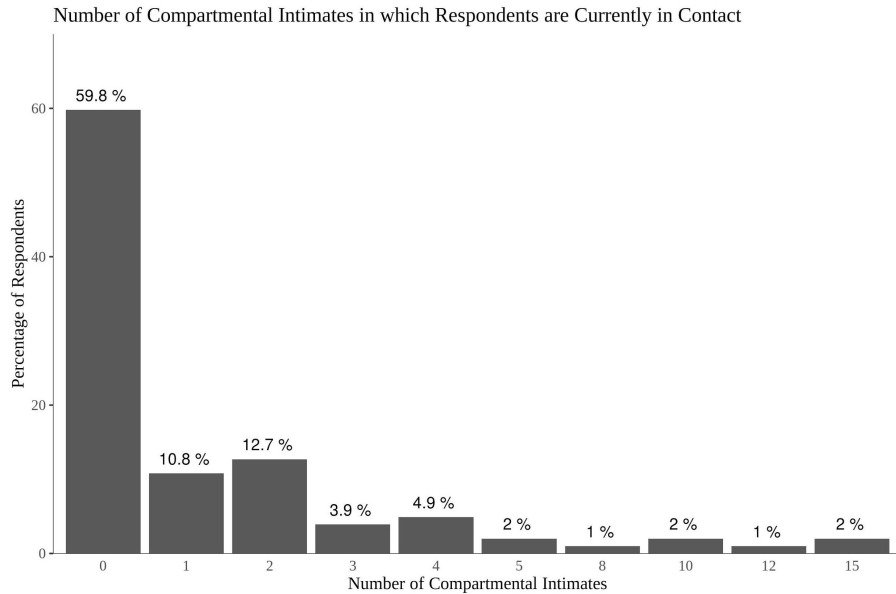
But Ithiel de Sola Pool, in a comment on Granovetter’s work, notes that where “primary families are large, more of the total contacts of an individual are likely to be absorbed in them,” meaning the more strong ties you have, the less time you have for weak ties (Granovetter 1983:220). Families with more strong ties may miss out on the information that travels through networks connected by weak ties.

Compartmental Intimates and Weak Ties

As **Figure 3** shows, the majority of respondents were not in contact with a person whom they met through an organization and considered close. This could either be interpreted as these

respondents have not formed friendships through an organization or they have lost contact during social distancing.

Figure 3



A regression model looking at the relationship between respondents' overall score and number of compartmental intimates was statistically significant, $R^2 = 0.03$, $F(1, 98) = 4.512$, $p < 0.04$. When separating results out by emotional and social score, there was only a statistically significant relationship between the number of compartmental intimates and a respondent's social score, $R^2 = 0.05$, $F(1, 98) = 6.271$, $p < 0.01$. Based on the regression, with the average respondent having contact with 1.19 compartmental intimates, for every additional contact, the social loneliness score decreases by 0.12404 points. Again, with a low adjusted R^2 , there is clearly more to this relationship.

For those who remain in touch with compartmental intimates, interactions occur primarily through technology, such as over Zoom or Facebook. Virginia could not identify any relationships formed through her children's school, but she still had access to compartmental intimates from other organizations:

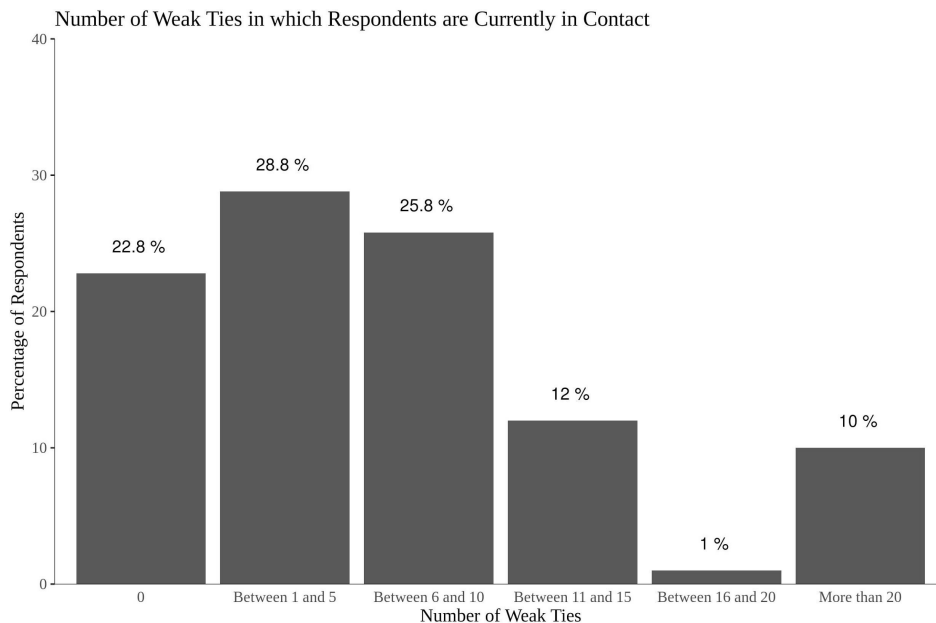
Anybody that I've really spoken to at length or tried to do a virtual happy hour ... I mean, we're trying to do a couple of those things with some of my friends. Those are friends I was already friends with. Not people I met solely through school, right? So either through church or a mom's group or something like that.

For another respondent — Rose, a mother of two — even though she remains in contact with compartmental intimates through technology, the loss of in-person interaction is especially difficult:

I'm used to my monthly La Leche League Meetings and weekly toddler hiking group. Those are the people I lean on for support. While I can call and message them, it's not the same as watching them model parenting behavior and seeing how they interact with their children, which always inspires me to be the parent I want to be.

Figure 4 looks at the number of weak ties with whom respondents are in contact. As stated before, we have indirect contacts throughout the day that most people take for granted, so it can be easy to undercount the number of weak ties. But social distancing removes most of those in-person interactions, making it easier to count indirect contacts. As Figure 4 shows, the majority of respondents have been in touch with none or between one and five contacts.

Figure 4



It is interesting that 24% of respondents remain in contact with somewhere between 11 and more than 20 weak ties. My theory is that, for some, social media has filled the hole left by a lack of indirect, in-person contact throughout the day, and for those I interviewed, weak ties equated with contacts on Facebook. Elizabeth, in particular, found the networking on Facebook to be beneficial:

I got invited to this pandemic rescue swap group. And so people will share pictures of the food they made or like the idea they came up with for their 57 potatoes and like the recipe

for it. And that's actually like stuff that has been really, really nice to just feel like I'm part of a bigger community of people who are trying to help each other figure stuff out, you know?

Virginia mentioned that she was attending PTA meetings before the pandemic, adding, “I tend to peripherally know a lot of people because they’re other parents that I know have been in my kid’s class since kindergarten, that kind of thing.” When I asked her if she had reached out to parents when running into difficulty with distance learning, she responded, “I have had other parents mention to me, either they don't understand their kids work or they are not feeling like the instructions to the parents were clear.”

We can assume that indirect contact has dropped as a result of social distancing, as that is the definition of social distancing. But there is no credence to my theory that it has dropped off entirely. People are finding ways to obtain information from sources they trust through an organization, whether it is through a Facebook group invitation from a friend or parents using their resources to clarify online learning instructions. If weak ties were to abruptly cut off from a person’s network, we would also expect individuals to feel a lack of social embeddedness, but no correlation exists between weak ties and respondents’ De Jong Gierveld loneliness score.

If my theory that parent support structures have fallen apart as a result of social distancing lacks evidence, then what is an alternative explanation?

Matching Data at Different Spatial Scales

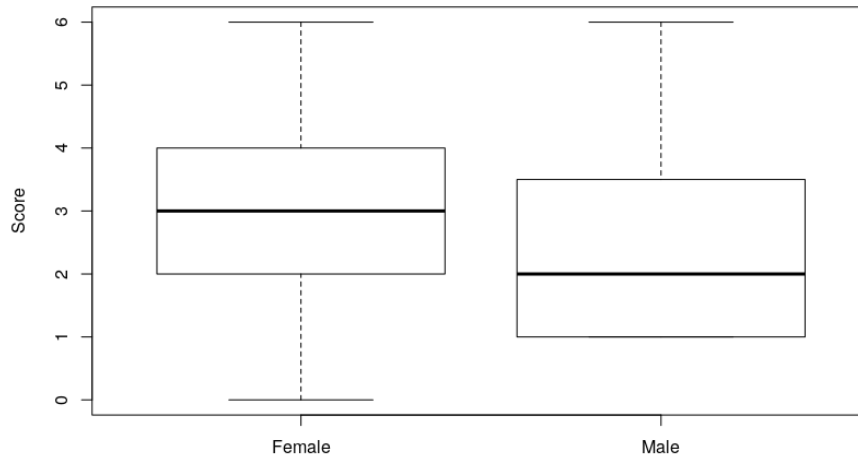
In *Everything in its Path*, sociologist Kai Erikson explored the effect of a disastrous flood on Buffalo Creek, a hollow in West Virginia containing several small towns. Erikson details the collective trauma that stems from a disaster like a flood as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson 2012:154).

In a small community it is easier to detect how these bonds have been affected after a disaster. But spread across several communities — and in the case of my survey, states — there is no overall pattern. This makes it much more difficult to identify common problems. This is a common issue in anthropology, where broad paleoenvironment data applied to localized archaeological sites can lead to misleading conclusions about past human-environment interactions (Contreras et al. 2018). What we have learned about the pandemic is that the effects are hyper localized, thanks to a patchwork of local, state and federal regulations.

Research also has found experiences differ across socioeconomic and demographic variables, such as class and gender. As **Figure 5** shows, while on average men and women fell into the middle of the De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale, women’s responses were much more varied than men’s. This could be explained by several factors, such as the low response rate

among men and ideas of masculinity that prevent some men from admitting to social and emotional issues. However, my interviews reflected this finding.

Figure 5



Unlike the disaster at Buffalo Creek, there is no uniformity in the survey respondents. There is trauma evident in respondents such as Virginia, who repeated during our interview that she was “not OK.” Barbara, a mother of two, wrote about not feeling supported, with the burden of educating her children falling on her shoulders.

After week two, I gave up. It was just too much work and I didn’t know what my daughter had learned/not learned in any subject except math.

In other respondents, however, there was a sense of community, even though people were socially distant. These stories share the theory put forward by Rebecca Solnit in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell* that the “prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathetic and brave” (Solnit 2009:8). Michael, who lives in a town in Pennsylvania where he teaches fifth grade, wrote, “The support system is there, but it’s moved to more like text-messaging and I guess the daily phone calls... .” Elizabeth finds support through her coworkers, as well as Facebook groups.

There’s a coronavirus parents group that was started by an organization that a friend of mine is part of ... that’s been great. Some of it is activities to do with your kids-type stuff and some of it is ... parents giving each other help and advice back, you know? And having all of that comes from the perspective of like we all know what moment we’re in right now so like, let’s not try to be idealistic about this.

These variations make it difficult to compare social distancing in a pandemic to the reaction of a small community to a natural disaster such as a flood or fire, among other more

obvious reasons. Ultimately, this leads to me to believe that while the loss of ties occurs and has an effect on some individuals, other individuals share a different experience.

Erikson writes, “When individual persons or whole groups of people undergo what appear to be dramatic shifts in character, skidding across the entire spectrum of human experience from one extreme to another, it is only reasonable to suspect that the potential had been there all along – hidden away in the folds of the culture, perhaps, but an intrinsic element of the larger pattern nonetheless” (Erikson 2012:83). Much like the pandemic has worsened underlying inequalities in other social structures, it has exacerbated weaknesses in organizations and networks and revealed strengths in others. More research is needed to determine where and how this is occurring.

Conclusion

Writing of the Buffalo Creek disaster, Erikson wrote of the effect it had on children for their community to vanish overnight:

“Communality, to [children], meant a continuing atmosphere of warmth and concern, and their fears were obviously aggravated by the abrupt disappearance of that surround. Parents try to fill the vacuum, of course, but they are low on such resources themselves and cannot substitute for all the other people who once made up their children’s social world” (Erikson 2012:238).

The coronavirus pandemic has not had the same, uniform effect on communities as other types of disasters. For some, there has been support; for others, there has been isolation and anxiety. The broad spectrum of responses from survey respondents shows that we cannot make general assumptions about how parents’ social relationships are being affected. More research is necessary to identify areas of society that are impacted more than others, as this cursory survey can only provide a glimpse. Technology has certainly helped many, not only by making telework possible but keeping the different nodes in a network connected during social distancing. But technology cannot replace in-person interactions, and we certainly have a long way to go before this pandemic ends.

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