Alone Together

Intimacy and Semi-Mobility during Ho Chi Minh City's Lockdown

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ABSTRACT: In this article, based on my ethnographic experience of Ho Chi Minh City's lockdown, I argue that COVID-19 acted as an accelerator of intimacies, allowing people to negotiate alternative forms of sociality both within and outside the domestic space. On the one hand, by confining people at home it brought to light social and housing inequalities in urban Vietnam. On the other, it forced people to find imaginative ways to cope with social-distancing protocols. Since mobility during lockdown was limited, the normatively private space of the house became an incubator for social life, affording people – even those outside the circle of close friends and relatives – the opportunity to be alone together, sharing their temporary stuckness to challenge normative patterns of intimacy and sexuality.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, domestic space, Ho Chi Minh City, intimacy, mobility, Vietnam

COVID-19 and the measures to contain it have certainly limited the sensuous aspects of our lives, thus threatening our primary and indispensable relation with both the physical and social environment around us (Classen 2012; Howes 2003). On the one hand, its symptoms include a temporary loss of smell and taste. On the other, social distancing and self-isolation have forced people into a touch-deprived quotidianity, in which physical interactions both amongst humans and with the world surrounding us are respectively prohibited by national legislation and inhibited by fear of contagion. In the absence of their full sensory toolkit, people must rely on an emergency synaesthesia, where sound and sight make up for the lack of other senses. This is evident in video communication technologies, which have become an indispensable tool for the maintenance of social interactions while only conveying audio-visual information. However, even in real-life encounters, COVID-19 has established an emergency proxemics in which the boundaries of intimate and personal spaces are renegotiated and habits of verbal

and non-verbal communication are reconfigured to enhance auditory and visual triggers: six feet apart, whispering is not possible, voices must be louder to be heard, and, with facial mimicry hidden behind a mask, body language becomes essential to align the gestural signalling with the spoken message.

The Transformation of Domestic Space

While this sensory revolution has inevitably transformed our relationship with public space (Alter 2020; Null and Smith 2020; Van der Berg 2020), COVID-19 has also affected the way people access, experience and perform intimacy within their houses. For those who are quarantining alone or with people with whom they do not have physical contact, loneliness and social isolation are growing health concerns. For those who are under lockdown with their family, partner or friends, lack of privacy and higher risks of interpersonal tensions can aggravate their sense of stuckness and anxiety. Technology has played a

crucial role in keeping economic and educational activities functional: remote working and distance learning temporarily turn the living room into an office and a classroom. At the same time, windows double as screens through which we leave reassuring messages for neighbours and passers-by, while balconies become the stage for musical flash mobs. All these practices of distant togetherness have allowed people to alleviate the burden of loneliness, by reimagining our houses as flexible spaces of not only family but also social and collective life.

Semi-Mobility under Ho Chi Minh City's Lockdown

The lockdown in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) – where I have been conducting anthropological fieldwork since the beginning of February 2020 – began on 1 April 2020 but with fewer restrictions than other parts of Vietnam and the world (Earl 2020). Nationwide, most businesses providing services that were deemed non-essential were ordered to close, including movie theatres, karaoke bars, hair salons, gyms and retail stores (except those selling essential food and drugs). While in Hanoi fines were issued for those who violated quarantine protocols, HCMC's local regulations regarding people's movements were less severe: public gatherings of more than two people were banned, but individual citizens were still allowed to leave their houses (despite being strongly advised not to do so). However, since public parks and playgrounds had been closed, and restaurants, coffee shops and food stalls were only allowed to provide take-away services, people in HCMC got stuck (Jefferson et al. 2018) in a temporary semi-mobility. Despite being able to leave their houses, city dwellers did not have anywhere to go for recreational purposes, and thus turned to their houses as a way to dodge the limitations of social distancing in public spaces.

In Vietnamese, the expression *đi chơi* (literally 'go play') is typically used to describe a wide range of entertaining activities (Peyvel and Gibert 2012). Anything from going to a coffee shop to eating out or from going to the movies to simply taking a walk can fall within the scope of this expression. In this sense, both on a discursive and a phenomenological level, leisure is associated with an idea of movement and mobility, including a variety of social and sensuous activities that usually occur outside the domestic space. However, since mobility during lockdown was restricted, the house became the only option for social gatherings.

Inviting friends or one's partner over is rather uncommon in Vietnam, where the house is considered a private space for the family and the self rather than as a space for social relations. It is worth noting that the diversity of living arrangements in urban Vietnam denotes severe issues of housing and social inequality. The less well-off urbanites, who usually have a lower social status, tend to live in smaller, overcrowded units (Kimhur 2019; Nguyen et al. 2016) where co-habitants share most of the space available, making it almost impossible to have guests. Wealthier city dwellers, on the other hand, can afford to live in larger houses, where, regardless of the number of residents, each person usually has his/her own room, thus being granted some sort of privacy (Gough and Tran 2009) and the possibility to negotiate guests' presence within the inner part of the house.

When receiving guests, the entrance hall doubles as a living room (*phòng khách*, which literally means 'room for the guest') and usually serves as a threshold between the space of social courtesy and the intimacy of the home, to which only close friends and relatives might have access. However, COVID-19 gave people the opportunity to overcome this spatial hierarchy, normalising, although temporarily, domestic space as a place for social interactions even outside one's circle of intimate friends and family members. In other words, COVID-19 acted as an accelerator of intimacies (Attwood et al. 2017; Plummer 2003): by forcing different people (sometimes even strangers) to live in the same space for an indefinite amount of time, it has undermined the traditional discourse on intimacy as just related to 'physical contact, sex, romance or passionate love' (Attwood et al. 2017: 249) to include promiscuous intimacies that refer to non-sexual relationships amongst family members, friends, colleagues and also within the self. Furthermore, it brought to light some of the limitations regarding the physical and social configuration of the traditional household, as well as issues of both housing and gender inequalities in urban Vietnam. On the one hand, whereas privileged urbanites had adequate space, services and social safety nets to more easily comply with lockdown restrictions, in less affluent households, which usually include up to three generations under one roof, members had to cope with spatial constraints, including poor sanitary facilities and shared sleeping space. In such a living arrangement, which also reflects gender dynamics through the division of labour and domestic responsibilities (Do et al. 2017; Drummond and Rydstrom 2004; Wilkins 2019), social distancing is practically impossible, increasing not only the risk of virus

transmission, but also that of interpersonal tensions and intergenerational conflicts. On the other hand, in more affluent dwelling contexts lockdown might have been perceived as an opportunity for family members to spend more time with each other, favouring solidarity and mutual assistance in coping with this moment of distress and high uncertainty. COVID-19 also acted as a fast-tracker of relationships amongst those people on the razor's edge of coupledness.

Alone Together: COVID-19 and the New Intimacy

Normatively, new relationships follow a certain set of predictable milestones – first date, first kiss, first sex. Somewhere along the path, a couple might openly try to define the status of their relationship based on the degree of their commitment to one another and on mutual expectations. In Vietnam, this conversation occurs rather soon: in the early stages of dating, amongst heterosexual partners, the man is usually expected to formally ask the woman to be his girlfriend (*bạn gái*). In doing so, he communicates his desire to get to know her better and be exclusive. If she accepts, they both express their commitment to the now-official relationship. However, even after this formal exchange, cultural and social pressure can lead couples to wait a long time before engaging in physical affection, with many youths believing that sex is only appropriate after several months of dating or even after marriage only (DiFiore 2011; Nguyen 2007). Once again, COVID-19 has altered the spatialities and temporalities of personal relationships.

The exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 allowed people who are romantically involved to fast-track their relationship and skip the usual steps. The story of Hiền,¹ one of my research participants, provides an interesting case study. Hiền is a 24-year old university student who met her current boyfriend (*bạn trai*), Dũng, for the first time a few weeks before Vietnam enforced a national lockdown. At the time social distancing measures were introduced, they had never dated and had only exchanged sporadic texts and video calls. During lockdown, the two expressed to each other the desire to meet in person and, with nowhere else to go, they agreed on meeting and staying (sometimes even overnight) at his place, where he lives alone. During the three weeks of lockdown, they became a couple, forging ahead with the steps of traditional dating patterns (including kissing and sex).

COVID-19 fast-tracked their relationship because meeting at his house allowed them different kinds of

intimacies, intimacies that would have been hard to achieve in traditional dating spots like coffee shops, restaurants and movie theatres: they did not meet within a group of friends (which, in Vietnam, is very common at the early stages of dating), nor there were other people around; there were less distractions in terms of aural and visual escapes that could mitigate potentially awkward silences, and the opportunities for physical and sexual intimacy were open ended, with no time limit or place constraints. In other words, the lockdown in Vietnam gave them the opportunity to be alone together sharing their temporary stuckness to challenge normative patterns of intimacy and sexuality.

It is worth noting that the lockdown highlighted a tendency that was already occurring pre-pandemic. Following Vietnam's shift towards a market economy, the domestication of courtship has increasingly become part of the urbanisation process through the growing influence of foreign movies, music and the Internet, encouraging gender relations and practices that might deeply differ from those considered normative. However, whereas the pandemic played an important role in accelerating these changes, such a tendency is likely to be prerogative of the wealthy classes living in the city, whose dwelling configurations can accommodate alternative uses of domestic space.

Conclusion

COVID-19 forced us into isolation, a lonely togetherness where we found ourselves moving towards one another through any routes still safely open to us. Animals in their artificial cages, as John Berger observes in his essay 'Why Look at Animals?', tend 'to bundle towards the edge of it. (Beyond its edges there may be real space.)' (1992: 25). For humans, 'real space' is where life is shared through all our senses, without restriction of any kind. And so we rush to the edges of our confinements, waiting to reclaim this lost reality.

COVID-19 has taken away some human perception and relationship tools. In doing so, it caused a very specific effect: to sharpen our need to be whole in our ability to relate fully to our environment and to each other. Even when technology comes into play, we cannot help but remember that the attempt to create intelligent machines is precisely about providing them the instruments to become more similar to us – that is visors, natural language, tactile sensors and limbs suitable for movement. Indeed, the possibility of a complete relationship with the world

constitutes the indispensable premise for reasoning and decision-making – that is, for what we label as intelligence (artificial and otherwise).

COVID-19 impacts are so deep and severe that they can be classified as a 'transformative stressor' (Matthews 2012). These events cause intense social, environmental and economic transformations that affect every level of society. Besides the dreadful figures of the pandemic, this crisis is giving humans the opportunity to reimagine their social life and redefine their sense of place through changes that extend far beyond public space and our relationship with the world 'out there' to include all forms of intimacies we create within and outside the private sphere of our home.

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Note

1. All names in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals cited.

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