



# No more “social distancing” but practice physical separation

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Dear Editor:

Nations around the world have been urging their citizens to practice “social distancing.” It has become the moniker for what we “need” to do to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. However, social distancing is a misnomer. It is not self-explanatory, conceptually ambiguous, practically misleading, and intellectually misplaced. A recent Oxford English Dictionary update reflects social distancing in the context it is in use currently—separating ourselves physically to avoid infection (Paton 2020). In public health, social distancing refers to community infection-control measures to achieve physical separation by restricting movements of and contacts between individuals during outbreaks (Fong et al. 2020). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) guideline for social distancing directs people to stay “at least 6 feet (2 meters) from others,” and “out of crowded places...” Thus, practices of social distancing are purely physical-spatial with nothing social in nature. In fact, “...social distance, ... as an epidemiologic principle, has not been used in the exact terminology adapted by sociologists...” (Ipsen 1959, p. 162).

The concept of social distance, which originated from Georg Simmel (Ethington 1997), has long been used in sociology, psychology, and geography to evaluate social separation among individuals and population groups. Measured on the Bogardus (1925) Social Distance Scale, it is interpreted as a function of an individual’s “prejudice” toward a/any sociological group. Thus, social distance is not the same as physical distance, although they can correlate (Forrest, La Grange, & Yip 2004). This distinction renders the current and past use of social distancing in public health problematic and out of sync with what the

term actually means. Consequently, some authorities had provided confusing guidelines. For instance, England’s social distancing guideline instructed people to reduce “social interaction,” but also directed citizens to maintain social interaction using information-communication technologies (Public Health England 2020). A literal and intuitive interpretation of the social distancing message may indeed result in unintended social isolation. Similarly, advocating social distancing undermines the importance of “physical” separation essential for breaking the chain of infection to limit its spread.

While some (cf. Government of Canada 2020) have transitioned away from the term, others continue to use it (cf. CDC 2020). Some have supported the continued use of social distancing because it is now a familiar phrase, and switching to a more physical term may no longer be needed (Gale 2020). Any such claim founded solely on the current context is shortsighted. The succession of zoonotic pandemics in the twenty-first century directs us to a longer-term outlook for better public health preparedness. Moreover, rapidly evolving global events require sharing of information across cultures and disciplines, but the misleading nature of the term inhibits this communication.

Removing social distancing from the public health vocabulary and replacing it with a term such as physical distancing or separation would ensure unambiguous health messaging and avoid further academic confusion. We urge governments and public health officials to lead the change and appeal to the media to support correct public health messaging. *No more “social distancing” but practice physical separation.*

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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