Social distancing deals a triple blow to people of color

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The current Coronavirus pandemic requires social distancing to intervene against the spread of the virus, but such an intervention measure can put people of color, especially African Americans, in a disadvantageous position.

"Social distancing" really means physical distancing, when people distance themselves physically in public or social settings. First and foremost, physical distancing can lead to greater interethnic distance, as we have learned from years of sociological research.

Emory Bogardus developed the original 7-point social distance scale in 1925, ranging from the closest distance of "close kinship by marriage" to the farthest distance of "exclusion from my country." The middle categories include integration in social, residential, and occupational contexts.

Physical distancing in the current pandemic requires people to avoid public spaces. Such distancing will reduce potential racial and ethnic integration in public spaces. In his 2011 groundbreaking book, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*, Elijah Anderson introduced the concept of the "cosmopolitan canopy" or the urban island typically in a public space where interracial civility exists amidst the ghettos, suburbs, and ethnic enclaves where segregation is the norm. Under such a canopy, people of diverse ethnic background come together.

When public spaces have become empty, effectively removing all potential canopies under which people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds can mingle and interact, interethnic social distance will unfortunately increase for all groups, especially for African Americans, the focus of Anderson's research.

Physical distancing means a higher dependence on internet computer access, dealing a second blow to African Americans, who have lower rates of computer ownership and internet access. A recent (2019) survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that only 58% of African Americans owned a desktop or laptop computer (compared to 82% of whites), and that only 66% of African Americans have broadband internet access at home (compared to 79% of whites).

This digital divide is mitigated, to some extent, by the near parity in smartphone usage (80% among African Americans and 82% among whites). But our mobile devices are far from perfect substitutes for computers when it comes to telecommuting (whether to work or to school). And the expense of mobile devices (and cellular connections) contributes to service cancellations for African Americans at about twice the rate as for whites.

Libraries have been a vitally important bridge across the digital divide. While 42% of African Americans use library computers and broadband connections, only 25% of whites rely upon these public cyberspaces. The closure of public libraries, however vital to a containment of the pandemic, represents a significant rip in the cosmopolitan canopy. The loss of public connections like our libraries is likely to exacerbate the "homework gap," a consequence of the digital divide of special concern to educators. Other studies by the Pew Research Center show that 21% of African Americans rely upon public WiFi to do their homework, as compared to 11% of whites. Before the pandemic, 25% of African Americans were often or sometimes unable to complete homework due to the lack of a reliable computer or internet connection, compared to 13% of whites.

When our colleges and universities are open, and working like libraries to bridge the gap, we try to reduce these disparities for our students in various ways—from computer loans to computer labs, with widespread WiFi across the campus. But physical distancing means, for many of our students, a distance from these public goods, and both a homework and a classwork gap—as so many classes are now conducted online.

Physical distancing also presents a public health challenge, the third blow to African Americans, because COVID-19 data from the CDC shows that African Americans make up 26.3% of the confirmed positive cases (and multiracial account for 15%) but only 12.6% of the US population, according to the US Census Bureau data.

The infection rate data combined with the issues of social distance and the digital divide is particularly concerning because over a century of sociological research has consistently documented the negative impact of social inequalities on health. Link and Phelan (1995) argued that socioeconomic status is so closely associated with health outcomes that it should be viewed as the fundamental cause.

David R. Williams's (Williams & Sternthal 2010) work demonstrates these trends in relation to populations of color specifically and expands on the research conducted by W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois (1899) argued that the overall poorer health of African Americans demonstrated the impact of racial inequality, evidenced by their higher tuberculosis infection rates, food insecurity and lower diet quality, and lower quality living conditions. Williams expanded Du Bois's work to show the relationship between exposure to discrimination (a result of social distance) and racism and the resultant declines in mental health for populations of color (Williams 2018). Collectively, sociological research shows the lasting impact of structural racism imposed by the 1934 National Housing Act and by recent events like Flint Michigan's water crisis. Indeed, persistent housing segregation often results in concentrated poverty and places African Americans in poorer quality housing, a challenge to physical distancing. The negative impacts of these stressors on health and mental health include higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, respiratory, and renal diseases, some of which are known high risk factors for COVID-19. Thus, increased social distance creates structural problems like poorer housing conditions with poorer health outcomes.

Let us reconsider the impact of physical distancing on social distance. One way to address the concerns above is to reduce social distance between white and black Americans. Achieving this will require more creativity from us all while we also abide by physical distancing requirements. We all need to think about ways that we can ensure that the cosmopolitan canopy does not disappear simply because of the digital divide and physical distancing. Moving forward, we must consider how to increase access to free and online educational resources. To avoid rips in a cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson 2018) and the possibility of a public space eventually returning to rigid white space or black space (Anderson 2015), we must consider digital means through which a virtual cosmopolitan canopy can be set up and maintained, thereby helping us create, during and after the current pandemic, a more inclusive society.