

Virus redefines respecting personal space

March 18 2020, by Frances D'emilio



Pastors wearing face masks attend a service at the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, March 15, 2020. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

Social distancing could qualify as an oxymoron in Italy, where walking arm-in-arm with friends, kissing neighbors in greeting and patting the heads of babies are part of the demonstrative culture.

But a [new virus](#) has rapidly redefined the concept of respecting [personal space](#) for tactile Italians, as well as for South Koreans, Filipinos, Americans, Spaniards and citizens of many other crowded parts of the world.

Whether acting under government orders or following basic public health advice, people are putting distance between themselves to keep the [coronavirus](#) away. The new rules of engagement call for maintaining a gap of one to two meters (or three to six feet) to prevent possible exposure when an infected individual coughs or speaks.

The COVID-19 illness causes mild or moderate symptoms in most of those infected, but severe symptoms are more likely in the elderly or people with existing health problems. The vast majority of those infected recover.

The reset norm for an acceptable degree of separation became visible evidence of the pandemic's reach as schools, shopping malls and sports venues closed and opportunities for public encounters dwindled. Outside a gun shop in California, a [post office](#) in Hungary and a supermarket in Manila, lines lengthened as customers queued up at more or less proper intervals.



People keep their distance as they queue up in front of a post office in Debrecen, Hungary, March 16, 2020. (Zsolt Czegledi/MTI via AP)

Practicing [social distancing](#) at first created confusion among shoppers waiting at a supermarket in Madrid. Some harsh exchanges ensued. But customers soon learned that if they wanted their groceries, they needed to fall into line.

The safe space standards also reveal how closely humans positioned themselves before. Pastors at a church in Seoul had room to spread out in empty pews after deciding to conduct Sunday services online. Journalists at a news conference in Berlin sat in chairs spaced away from one another.

A nationwide decree that took effect in Italy last week obliges people to stay at least one meter (about three feet) apart. Overnight, habits of a lifetime and of an entire society were turned upside down.

In a country where waiting your turn often equates to elbowing your way to the front of an undisciplined pack, Italians dutifully lined up with breaks in between—one meter, two meters, sometimes standing across the street from each other to keep stores uncrowded and themselves from getting COVID-19.



People line up to enter in a shop to buy supplies in Barcelona, Spain, March 17, 2020. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Residents line outside a supermarket in Manila, Philippines, while the government implements a localized quarantine as a precautionary measure against the spread of the new coronavirus, March 17, 2020. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)



People wait in a line to enter a gun store in Culver City, Calif., March 15, 2020.
(AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu)



Residents step on measured tape placed outside a supermarket to practice social distancing as a precautionary measure against the spread of the coronavirus in Metro Manila, Philippines, March 17, 2020. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)



A line of people waiting to buy supplies amid coronavirus fears snakes through a parking lot at a Costco, March 14, 2020, in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)



People queue outside a bakery in the rain, in Pamplona, northern Spain, March 16, 2020. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)



German Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks during a news conference about the coronavirus, where journalists sit spread out, at the chancellery in Berlin, Germany, March 16, 2020. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber, Pool)



People wear masks as they line up to enter a pharmacy, in Rome, March 16, 2020. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



Customers make a line with shopping carts at a local retail store, March 16, 2020 in New York. (AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura)



Customers make a line with the shopping carts at a local retail store, March 16, 2020 in New York. (AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura)



People line up at a supermarket, in Paris, March 17, 2020. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus)



Enza Garzia, 79, left, talks at a distance with Paola Albano, in central Rome, March 11, 2020. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



People wait in line to vote for local elections March 15, 2020, in Paris. (AP Photo/Christophe Ena)



A supermarket cashier waits for costumers behind a makeshift plastic curtain as a precaution against the spread of the new coronavirus, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, March 16, 2020. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko)



People line up to enter a shop to buy supplies in Barcelona, Spain, March 17, 2020. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

Shopkeepers whipped out measuring tapes.

"I have seen a lot of discipline, solidarity and collaboration, and everybody understands that the first that falls will pull the others with him," said Piero Emilio Vincenzi, owner of an appliance store near the Vatican.

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