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Abstract: PC06 (June 8) *COVID-19 and social inequalities in a syndemic approach: social, clinical and psychological aspects*

Individual differences modulate social distance during COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Background: Interpersonal space (IPS) is the space we maintain between ourselves and others to feel and interact in a comfortable way. Individuals regulate IPS through basic behaviors, i.e., extending / reducing distance when they feel in dangerous / safe situations, respectively. Individual differences (e.g., sex, age, education level) and psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, fear, personality factors, risk perception) might modulate IPS. COVID-19 pandemic has obliged people to maintain larger-than-usual interpersonal social distances, along with wearing a face mask.

Aims: To investigate the effects of a) individual differences (sex, age, education level) and b) psychological factors (state and trait anxiety, local and general risk of contagion perception) on IPS during the first lockdown due to COVID-19 in Italy.

Methods: The survey was conducted online over April 2020 during the first lockdown. A total of 210 participants (164 females) aged 18 to 70 years took part in the study. The Interpersonal Visual Analogue Scale (IVAS) investigating the desired IPS distance maintained by the participant with respect to a variety of confederates (male and female; child, young, and old) and a battery of standardized self-report questionnaires investigating state and trait anxiety, and local and general risk of contagion perception were administered.

Result: The IPS distance regulation was affected by gender of the participants and age of the confederates. Interaction effects emerged between these variables, and between gender and age of the confederates. Moreover, IPS distance was predicted by state anxiety and perceived local risk of contagion.

Conclusions: These results seem to be in line with proxemics literature before and during pandemic and reveal how subjective and psychological factors modify choices regarding the management of our own interpersonal space, even during a dangerous and life-threatening event such as a pandemic.