

Intimacy, home, and emotions in the era of the pandemic

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Abstract

While much of the sociological scholarship on intimacy has been understood in the normative sense of foregrounding and supporting human closeness, this article points to the role intimacy has as a sociological concept to better understand regulatory ties between the subject and the institution. While subject and institution are treated by modernity as distinct entities, separated by the boundary between private and the public, the article elucidates their mutual engagements by reviewing the work on intimacy in the sociology of emotions. Discussing the scholarship on intimacy from this perspective enables us to understand private suffering as a social problem linked to the collective recognition of subjective feelings. To illustrate the point, the article briefly reflects the public discourse on home upended by world-wide stay-at-home orders to contain the spread of coronavirus disease 2019. While this article neither analyzes these orders, nor judges their legitimacy, it takes the particular situation as a chance to review the sociological discussion on the emotional boundaries of home, foregrounding the concept of intimacy. Intimacy is presented as a key sociological category for understanding collective recognition of people's emotions, which impacts the way emotions are seen as relevant and legitimate in public discussions of social problems.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

“In a crisis? Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a Crisis Counselor,” states an advertisement for the nonprofit counseling hotline Crisis Text Line¹. The organization is providing a free mental health texting service in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada amid the resurgence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Citizens in need of help are invited to connect with them through SMS. As the pandemic continued into the fall of 2020, the nonprofit launched a new campaign called “Mask your face not your feelings” to invite citizens to open up about their private suffering. Against the various “stay-at-home” orders to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, “home” seemed to have become both a sanctuary and a dangerous space. Viewed from the sociological perspective, home as a private sanctuary lies in contrast to the public space, which might carry unexpected dangers, harm, and suffering. However, for an individual and groups to feel “at home” or to “make home” involves the access to rights and resources, which are not distributed equally among all members of the society (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020). To feel at home is thus an intersectional experience, which involves relational, cultural, structural, and above all emotional aspects that this article discusses more in detail while foregrounding the concept of intimacy.

As Berlant (2004) reminds us in her conceptualization of intimacy, public spaces are held together through all sorts of arrangements that might inhibit or even forbid expressions of private engagements, or that might limit expressions of such engagements to a publicly acceptable level (see the discussion in Linke, 2011, p. 15). In sharp contrast to public space, intimacy takes place in an arena of human closeness and trust—such as home—where a person can receive recognition for their feelings (see also Hochschild, 2003 for discussion). Such recognition varies according to socioeconomic and cultural conditions, in which human closeness and trust are practiced bringing forward vulnerability of subject asking for such recognition. In the pandemic situation, citizens have been asked to downplay their emotional comfort and stay resilient and follow the institutional orders (Orsini, 2020), such as the stay-at-home orders. Emotional boundaries of home—as discussed in this article through the lens of the discourse on home during the pandemic—can thus spell out regulatory frameworks of emotions by an institution. These institutional frameworks take form of legislative orders as much as they include regulations brought forward by public authorities and can involve both emancipatory and patronizing power schemes all of which is also processed through the public scrutiny of emotions.

Such scrutiny could be seen, for example, in the public discourse on planned home births as a reaction to COVID-19-related restrictions on the presence of a companion of choice at the delivery, as well as due to concerns about mothers' emotional well-being (see e.g., in Grünebaum et al., 2020).² Despite World Health Organization guidelines stressing the need for a positive childbirth experience for women during the pandemic, many hospitals have limited women's requests for accommodations, citing the risk of contraction and spread of the disease. As a result, some women have stressed the importance of home as an environment where their emotions can be recognized, while the public institution of a hospital has become an arena of inhibited intimacy (for the role of intimacy in planned birth see Cheyney, 2008).

Although specific conditions and regulations vary state by state, the example points to the way modern industrialized societies discuss and regulate social problems related to private suffering. This article thus focuses on home's emotional boundaries, which have been either ignored or underestimated in modernity. Such reflection allows us to conceive social problems through collective recognition of people's emotions. While public regulations directed toward home are shaped externally by society and governments, they are also applied, followed and contested by those who live in the home, which involves emotional negotiations and, in some cases, increase stress

and threat for those in vulnerable positions. In particular, home is submitted to public scrutiny through meanings assigned to emotional closeness and intimacy. In this sense, focusing on home's emotional boundaries opens a gateway to problematize emotions felt at home and to observe contexts, in which public articulation of these emotions is framed as relevant and legitimate, or not.

Viewing emotional boundaries of home as a gateway to problematize collective regulatory frameworks of private suffering recalls the sociological concept of intimacy. Although commonly understood and studied in the context of sexual relationships (Giddens, 1992; Rubin, 1983), intimacy has also become a major sociological concept to understand the way subjective and collective levels of social action are regulated by each other (Berlant, 1998; Habermas, 1990; Sennett, 1976; Zelizer, 2005, 2006). In the feminist scholarship on body and care, intimacy has been conceptualized as a framework for helping us to understand how individual feelings are mediated by normative discourses on body and behavior and how they at the same time mediate them (Durnová, 2013, 2018; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Viewing intimacy from this angle allows us to strengthen its analytical value as it relates to the study of social problems (Alexander, 2018) and to conceptualize intimacy as a way to better understand public framing of private suffering. This brings new insights in how to analyze institutional regulatory frameworks of the private sphere, such as home.

The article uses the pandemic to lay bare how the related public discussion on home brought to light the interconnection of vulnerable individuals experiencing all sort of emotions, that are either seen as relevant by the public or not. The urgency to reevaluate the way modernity understands these emotions and related private suffering calls at the same time for a review of the concept of intimacy beyond its context of sexual relationships and human closeness. The article suggests conceptualizing intimacy as a framework that elucidates the ties through which institutions regulate people's lives by relating emotions to each other and by validating some emotions while downplaying others. In this way, the scholarship on intimacy delivers insights on the ways to include nonelite knowledge in public debates through particular framings of emotions. At the same time, it is important to stress that such a conception of intimacy does not speak to the question of whether these emotions are really felt by their subjects, but rather shows how their public articulation impacts framing of social problems.

2 | EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES OF HOME

This time of extraordinary stress on citizens has made visible the different conditions for arrangements for work, school, and privacy in people's homes, and has exposed the emotional boundaries of home. These boundaries become visible through the exceptional situation of a pandemic, which has created the urgency to discuss issues related to home outside the usual context of counseling services (see also Durnová, 2020). We can better understand these boundaries, if we observe the particular ways in which discussions on home surge in public debate and become part of public discussions on private suffering. Public exposure of issues that were otherwise dedicated to particular spheres of society is understood by Jeffrey Alexander as a process of "societalization of social problems" (Alexander, 2018). Societalization reveals discursive conditions through which a specific issue is opened to public scrutiny and becomes part of a broader discussion on societal conditions and culture. In Alexander's understanding, societalization is an analytic tool to understand the dynamic and changing character of the culture we live in. Anchored in the *Strong Program in Cultural Sociology* (Alexander & Smith, 2001), Alexander conceives of culture through public scrutiny of competing meanings that reflect or contest the norms of behavior of a society or create new ones, when new challenges rise to the surface of public debates (Alexander, 2018, p. 1050). From that perspective, home entails a configuration of rules that are designed through subjects and are reflective of their feelings and emotional needs but that are at the same time affected by a culture comprised of the regulatory frameworks of institutions as well as external events (i.e., the pandemic).

Understanding the emotional boundaries of home through such a process of societalization means to assess the divergence of home by linking home's emotional conditions to the way social conditions and regulations on home

are discussed in public. While still presented as a romanticized sanctuary, home is simultaneously propped up by a system that ignores structural features of our economy and society that are emotionally invested in the idea of home as a peaceful place (see Illouz, 2012 for discussion). Any private problems linked to home rarely reach public space in any other form than as a social pathology. That emotional conditions of a home can be oppressing, without being pathologic, does not fit the usual discussion format around private suffering. In that sense, emotional boundaries of home can be used as an example of how the issue of private experience is perceived through its contrast to a public sphere which impacts not only what kind of topics can be discussed in the public, but also how they should be framed in these discussions.

To begin with, the largely accepted notion of home as private sanctuary which is conceived in an opposition to the public sphere, has been criticized for romanticizing home and undermining the structural inequalities and power differences that forms the experience of the space (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Manzo, 2003). Aiming to go beyond this binary opposition of home as sanctuary private versus public space, feminist scholars defined home as both private and public (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Rather than a fixed location, home is a fluid place that supports identities (Hooks, 1990). Drawing on an understanding of home as both constituted through and constituting a public debate (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020), home can be understood as both physical and special as well as emotional (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020; Massey & Massey, 2005ma; Rubenstein, 2001). Our discussion focuses here on the emotional aspects of home.

As an emotionally loaded sphere, home has also an important place in the sociological scholarship on emotions (Belford & Lahiri-Roy, 2019; Jupp, 2017; Jupp, Pykett, & Smith, 2017). Hochschild proposes to understand emotions in contrast to the rational public sphere (Hochschild, 2003). Paid family services, such as baby-sitting, party clowns or hired cooks might be perceived as disturbing because they challenge the view of home as a private zone of emotional engagements where human closeness is practiced naturally, and by family members only (Hochschild, 2003, pp. 35–36). In her analysis of various types of paid emotional labor, Hochschild shows how working with emotions and showing and articulating emotions while working receives a different status because such work blurs the way modern societies are accustomed to view work as separated from emotions and feelings. Such separation has a moral status in modernity, because locating human closeness and open articulation of feelings within home represents clear and stable boundaries of where emotions are present and articulated (see also Luhmann, 1986). As Morrison (2012) demonstrates, home entails the embodied experience of human closeness attached strongly to the spatial contours of a private space.

Yet such a sphere of human closeness is also rife with negotiation among subjects sharing the home. As feminist scholarship reminds us, home is both material, and imaginative imbued with feelings such as intimacy, belonging, as well as fear, and alienation (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Blunt & Varley, 2004). These negotiations of emotions of those sharing a home thus relate mostly to the quest for an acceptable equilibrium between subjective longing for accommodating emotional needs and collective cultural norms that see this longing and these needs as either relevant or irrelevant (see Durnová, 2018, pp. 160–196, for discussion). From that point of view, the emotional experiences of those sharing a space called home are result of the way cultural views and emotions intersects with the social structural forces. Any social analysis must therefore combine references to emotions with the larger sociopolitical context through which they are submitted to public scrutiny (see also Berezin, 2009 for review). As Barbalet (2002, p. 5) points out, the social significance of emotion, that is how emotions are understood by institutions, is a key sociological question. To see emotions through their social significance brings the analysis nearer to patterns of recognition of emotions in society and the various way in which emotions are evaluated as good, relevant, legitimate, or justified.

The focus on the emotional experience at home, in shelter from the institution and public view, is significant for this type of social analysis because it touches upon the question of public recognition of private suffering (Illouz, 2012, pp. 145–153). Private suffering is by definition hidden from the public eye, yet it still involves subjects demanding collective recognition of their experiences (ibid, pp. 142–143). Illouz explains that modernity has separated the private and public sphere only at the surface because it has bound the subject to societal conditions

and expectations through their feelings. The modern self has a freedom to choose whom to love or to show emotions to, however it is through this “architecture of choice” that the subject places these emotions on a scale of morality and rationality (Illouz, 2012, pp. 44–45). By making an emotional choice, the subject still wants to make a choice that makes sense for the collective, that is one that is seen as validated. In a similar vein, Zelizer (2005) also sees privately felt emotions bound to processes of collective recognition. By looking at divorce practices or practices of break up between couples, Zelizer presents a zone of negotiation between on one side the emotional argument and on the other side the material and economic. Through this analysis, Zelizer shows how emotional choices and practices appear not only on the subjective level but when this subjective level is in contact and in negotiation with culture. Love and related feelings have their basis in social and cultural arrangements. Emotions become part of the collective recognition and are put in the context of larger sociopolitical patterns of manners, habits and “reasonable things to do” (see also the “emotional habitus” in Wouters, 2012). Subjects understand their innermost feelings through culture while subjective experiences of love can be framed differently in the public discourse, which brings us closer to conceiving intimacy as an analytical concept to understand the interaction between the subject and the collective recognition. Such interaction can be seen through the different regulatory frameworks of institutions.

3 | FROM INTIMACY AS A HUMAN CLOSENESS TO INTIMACY AS A COLLECTIVE RECOGNITION OF PRIVATE FEELINGS

In the sociological scholarship dealing explicitly with intimacy, two uses of the term are apparent. This differentiated use of the concept allows us to make a distinction in the body of work between normatively oriented concepts of intimacy—calling for an overall increased interest in foregrounding human closeness—and more analytically oriented concepts seeking to understand the mutual engagement of subjects and the regulatory frameworks of institutions. The analytically oriented conceptualizations of intimacy, by emphasizing that the ideal of intimacy in modernity has resulted in a marginalization of the role of structural factors in personal problems, open a gateway to postulate intimacy as a key sociological category for understanding collective recognition of people's emotions, which impacts the way emotions are seen as relevant and legitimate in public discussions of social problems.

The first area of work on intimacy builds on sexual relationships and foregrounds family intimacy and human closeness as an important part of social life (Giddens, 1992; Luhmann, 1986; Rubin, 1983). The main aim of these works is to understand the status of intimacy and its transformation in modern society through profound analyses of the practices of sexual relationships, love and friendship (see Forstie, 2017, for an extensive review of the topic). Beyond their heuristic value of bringing to light insights on intimate practices, these works also show that intimacy is being negotiated through and against the structural factors of a society and the regulatory frameworks of institutions. Major work in this respect has been done by Anthony Giddens. Giddens (1992) postulates a transformation of intimacy, which has brought radical changes in the gender order. In modernity, intimacy is the highest goal of a relationship and subject develop all sorts of strategies to create intimacy and to sustain it. Despite the subjective character of intimacy inequalities might appear in how much resources and energy is needed for subject to deal with intimacy. Giddens sees as a remedy to this situation a call for making intimacy part of the debate on democratizing the personal domain in a manner which would be compatible with the democratizing of the public sphere (Giddens, 1992, p. 25).

Such ties of intimacy to the collective recognition of people's emotions are the focus of Sennett's (1976) reflection on the transformation of the public sphere. Sennett conceives of intimacy as a useful lens to observe societal conditions reordering the status of public life. When subjects open themselves more in the public sphere, public life becomes less important because it is increasingly personalized and psychologized (Sennett, 1976, pp. 262–264 and 321–325). For Sennett, this results in intimacy pushing political rationality of institutions to the

margin at the cost of an increasingly emotionalized public sphere that recalls once again the modern separation of intimacy and the public (see also intimate spheres of domesticity in Habermas, 1990).

The normative aspect of intimacy as something desirable to sustain in privacy, but disturbing in public, is apparent in these works and is also coherent with the overall understanding of modernity, which has been built on the separation of political rationality from the emotional spheres of our lives (see Ahmed, 2004 for an overview of the debate). In her critique of the dominant framing of modernity through political rationality, Ahmed conceives collective framing of emotions as important for explaining how emotions are linked to morals and norms and ties emotions to the overall cultural context in which subjects feel and articulate their feelings (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 4–6). Seeing emotions through their social and cultural framing can explain specific emotionalizations of the public sphere. The importance of the social context of emotions is also part of Forstie's (2017, p. 10) proposition to conceive of intimacy as a distinct social relationship composed of affect, knowledge, mutual action, and norm. This fourfold composition connects structural and interactive components of feelings with the normative frameworks in that emotions are both felt and articulated.

Feminist works on body and care take the relation of privately felt emotions to larger collective patterns of judging and discussing as the core of the social analysis of intimacy and represent the other side of the sociological body of work dealing with intimacy. While anchored in the feminist philosophy of observing the patronizing and oppressive power schemes through which gender is limited (see e.g., Kulawik, 2017; Paterson, 2010b), these works postulate the taboo and silenced character of intimacy as something which should be named, articulated and opened up in order to be dealt with on the societal level as part of moral and political dilemmas (Lister, 1997, p. 128). While for Sennett the focus on intimacy means the destruction of political rationality, for feminist scholarship this focus represents the historical challenge to call out the social conditions that have made such detachment of political rationality from emotions possible in the first place. Berlant (1998, p. 282) speaks in this sense of how “the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness.” While dedicated to subjective feelings, intimacy is not spared of tacit rules and tacit obligations. These are however difficult to spell out because intimacy is part of what Berlant (1998) calls the process of “taken-for-granted” feelings. As Berlant (1998) further highlights, the political is the personal: that is bodily feelings, arousal and enjoyment are deployed in people's lives as normative judgments. The public discourse on intimacy no longer patronizes women through what they should do but through what they should feel.

In a similar vein, Jamieson (1999) takes the transformative potential of intimacy under further scrutiny and criticizes Giddens of disregarding how much of personal life is structured by inequalities. “Gendered struggles with the gap between cultural ideals and structural inequalities result in a range of creative identities and relationship-saving strategies” (Jamieson, 1999, p. 477). Moreover, for Jamieson the modern discourse on “the pure relationship” (Giddens, 1992), emphasizing intimacy as the ideal, may point subjects in the wrong direction both subjectively and collectively (Jamieson, 1999). These both levels are intertwined and result in all sorts of relationship-saving strategies which make the subject think that their suffering is of private nature and relevant structural factors of a society are either seen as irrelevant or downplayed as marginal. In that respect, Jamieson's critique feeds into a broader scope of sociology of emotions on the way individual feelings and private experiences are primarily seen as personal problems underestimating sociological explanation of subjective feelings (see also Berlant, 2004).

What is important in these works is that this articulation combines the deeply subjective experience of intimacy (Plummer, 1996, p. 151) with its collective normalizing through public discourses on body and bodily behavior (as demonstrates e.g., Keskinen, 2017), observable though all sorts of regulatory frameworks of institutions. Intimacy is conceived of as respect for bodily and emotional integrity and is seen as part of citizens' rights. By making the subject and the act of intimacy the index of national politics and social policies (Paterson, 2010a; Roseneil, 2013; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), feminist works on intimacy highlight it as a validation of a deep subject's feelings by a collective. Observed from that perspective, analyzing intimacy involves analyzing how the reference to subjective feelings and emotional needs of a subject in the public discourse can serve

diametrically opposed interests: it can be used to alienate a person, to show that she is not normal, too emotional, or to side with her and to protect her or even to empower her. Intimacy then compels reflection on how the instability and fragmented nature of subjectively lived experiences can be tied to trajectories of the collective (see the interpretation of Berlant's concept of intimacy in Linke, 2011). Such collective trajectories are institutionalized through patterns of interaction among subjects articulating their emotion and engaging with the emotions of the other: such as girl talk, therapy, or psychoanalysis. All these types of interactions are part of regulatory frameworks making visible the constant and latent vulnerability of subjects that open themselves under certain circumstances.

Two important insights result from this discussion for the conceptualization of intimacy. First, the feminist perspective on intimacy asserts that all citizens are seen as potentially vulnerable—and this vulnerability does not go away when we turn to articulating of emotions in the public sphere, as vulnerability is a crucial part of the collective recognition of subject's feelings. This implies, second, that intimacy is not a realm of purely subjective emotions but is always tied in a specific way to collective representations. Intimacy becomes a key sociological category through the dimension that the collective has validated a subjective emotional experience (see also Zelizer, 2005). Viewed from the perspective of collective recognition, intimacy can be regarded as the boundary between subject and institution, which is negotiated in public debates on an issue. These negotiations touch upon regulatory frameworks around our private sphere (birth, engagement, marriage, divorce, and death) put forward by public authorities and the notion of intimacy appears in these negotiation through the debates on what types of emotions are permissible for whom and what should be felt under what circumstances (Durnová, 2018). Zelizer (2006) conceptualizes this zone of negotiation through the tension between the subjects' ideas and feelings, and the recognition of these ideas and feelings by market conditions. Instead of drawing normative consequences for the development of market conditions, Zelizer is more interested in what this tells us about the way the emotional and the economic are positioned against each other, thereby giving rise to specific subjective strategies toward collective recognition of the intimate.

Conceptualizing intimacy through the ties between subjective feelings and their collective recognition makes apparent that analyzing how emotions are framed in public discourse is key for understanding how institutions organize and regulate individual behavior and feelings and why they do it in a particular way rather than another. This impacts public debates on social problems, as illustrated through the example of home birth as a choice foregrounding the need to recognize mother's emotional comfort, as well as through the emphasis on the need of emotional comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic by psychological consultation services. Viewed through the lenses of intimacy, social problems require collective recognition of the emotional experience of the subjects and their forms of private suffering in order to be discussed and regulated by institutions accordingly.

4 | CONCLUSION

There has been an overall reevaluation of the emotional spheres of our lives in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. National lockdowns necessitated among others appeals to self-care in response to long isolation, as well as efforts to make counseling services available online and funded by local governments. These are examples of emotional labor, which, while of course is not new, has now become more visible through a dramatic rise in scale, both of the labors required, and of the number of people who are now affected by such emotional labor. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed some limitations of sociological scholarship to address patterns of collective recognition of the emotional spheres of our lives.

From the perspective of the scholarship on intimacy, the ways in which the emotional spheres of our lives are regulated by marginalization, silencing, or taboo still remains understudied. The concept of intimacy can elucidate the tacit regulatory frameworks of such spheres, as demonstrated by our discussion of the emotional boundaries of home. Intimacy ties subjective feelings to collective framings of these feelings, raising the issue of the conditions of

the collective recognition of private suffering and personal struggles. It shows also the central role of the interplay of deeply individual emotional experience with societal and cultural conditions in understanding collective representations of these struggles, how they are challenged by new framings/representation, and how regulations should be designed to make society more democratic.

The binary of private and public have been once again under scrutiny through the pandemic in so far as the particular social conditions of our private spaces have been thrown into relief. To be self-quarantined with or without care responsibilities makes a difference, just as much as the concrete spatial contours of a home. The sense of feeling at home all of a sudden felt to be a lot more complex than it assumed, which has among other revealed the importance to relate emotions of those who have been tied to home by lockdowns to socioeconomic and cultural conditions. That this divergence exists, and that it is often taboo, is known in sociological scholarship on emotions and private suffering. This divergence starts already on the level of how we feel in the private sphere accorded to us. Emphasizing this, and reviewing the relevant literature on intimacy, is a chance to reshape sociological reflection on intimacy and to bring it beyond the scope of sexual relationships and human closeness. In this sense, discussing emotional boundaries of home reveals the capacity of emotions to impact regulatory frameworks of institutions and influences collective understandings of the culture we experience our emotions in. Understanding intimacy through its analytic capacity to elucidate these ties of the subject to collective regulatory frameworks offers us a better understanding of evolving of cultural norms and their relation to emotions experienced in the context of extreme experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See <https://www.crisistextline.org/>

² See also media reports on home births because of fear of contracting coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in hospitals, such as <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/nyregion/coronavirus-home-births.html> or <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-12/coronavirus-fears-drive-increase-in-homebirth-interest/12138386>. According to an international survey from spring 2020, those planning a hospital birth dropped from 96.4% to 87.7% following COVID-19 (Moyer, Compton, Kaselitz, & Muzik, 2020).

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