

## **Public Intimacy**

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### **Abstract**

Modernity has established a strong focus on individual making intimacy a central dimension of privacy. Intimacy was the place where an inner-self was formed and where singularity was obtained apart from the public and from society. Interior meant an inward and isolated space of self-definition and personality development.

In contemporary societies intimacy is being public. As public and private domains merge, interior and exterior become mixed. We call this extimacy as intimate and exterior become simultaneous. Unlike modern thesis, intimacy seems only to be complete when it is exhibited in public domain. We examine contemporary public intimacy by distinguishing two types of extimacy while highlighting the subjectiveness and mediation processes.

### **Key words**

Intimacy, extimacy, publicness, public and private, post-modernity.

### **Resumen**

La modernidad ha establecido un fuerte énfasis en que el individuo hiciera de la intimidad una dimensión central de su construcción. La intimidad era el lugar donde un yo-interior se formaba y donde se obtenía una singularidad aparte de lo público y la sociedad. El interior significaba un espacio introspectivo y aislado de auto-definición y desarrollo de la personalidad.

En las sociedades contemporáneas la intimidad se hace pública. Interior y exterior se mezclan. Llamamos a esto *extimidad*, en la medida en que lo íntimo y lo exterior se dan de forma simultánea. A diferencia de las tesis de la Modernidad, actualmente parece que la intimidad sólo puede ser completada cuando es exhibida en la esfera pública. Examinamos la intimidad pública contemporánea distinguiendo dos tipos de *extimidad* al tiempo que subrayamos los procesos de subjetividad y mediación.

### **Palabras clave**

Intimidad, extimidad, público y privado, postmodernidad.

### **Introduction**

With modernity begins a slow but steady process that it will have its climax in 18<sup>th</sup> century emphasizing the subject's autonomy over society. We assist to a certain individualisation in which personal identity becomes more and more relevant. A person's body is made object of substantial value as self-portraits and mirrors proliferate, toilets become gender specific and individual tombs turn up. At the same time, man tends to renounce to appear in public and takes shelter in the *home, sweet home*. The practice of introspection is banal as the lonesome leisure, like silent reading, stresses the increasing privatization of life. The domestic architecture changes: the number of rooms rises up in prejudice of the big and social dining room, while the courtyard shrinks and it is placed at house's rear.

Family has gained a new and stronger meaning. It was one of the processes, with the world of letters, which helped to institutionalize the bourgeois public sphere since it was its inherent subjectivity and intimacy that was in the origin of the critical-rational public. "To be sure, before the public sphere explicitly assumed political functions in the tension-charged field of state-society relations, the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public" (Habermas, 1991: 29). The public's public use of reason was guided by the intimate and familiar private experiences. Family's intimacy promised a substantial liberation from grief because it

was a domain of pure interiority. It was seen as a refuge to go when one wanted to escape public gaze and gain a new dimension of affection and sentiment. The family comprised a privacy function as it drove away from the public domain in privilege of a better self. As a result, sentimentality was the innermost core of the intimacy and this was the most profound aspect of privacy. Privacy's inwardness, where one could enter into sheer human relation into one another, assumed a literary form in which letters played a major role. Through writing one unfolded his subjectivity. Letters bore the most expressive feeling of self as if they were literary imprints of the soul. In that way, the diary was the symbol of this "writing of self" as a letter where writer and audience coincided and the person entered in dialogue with himself.

Public domain was identified in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with necessity, politics and society, as the private sphere contained a dimension of intimacy seen as the sphere of individual freedom, self-fulfilment and shelter to the sourness of the world outside. So, it has appeared in individual, the idea of a dichotomy between an exterior which is public and shared with everyone, and a private interior which is only accessed and understandable by the subject. Interior and exterior have become dimensions that not only guided subject's recognition of himself as also structured privateness and publicness' importance. The public domain was identified with mundane experience, while private domain was synonym to spiritual life.

The process that ends in 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> modernities had his roots in the Judeo-Christian culture, one about the experiences of spiritual dislocation and homelessness (Sennett, 1992: 5-10). What Augustine's *City of God* dealt with was the quest for finding a equitable city on earth where one could search for the faith of God apart from the worldly existence. History is for the theologian of Hippo the conflict between the City of Man and the City of God, between the battle of the soldier and the inner experience of the good Christian. For Augustine, finding faith is nothing more than a course of relearning how to get to God through one's own meditation. There is no assumed method a Christian could be taught. Each believer must find his own way to God by searching inside him. Just by returning to himself, just by bounding his interiority, it is truly possible to the Christian to open himself to the truth and to God. It is necessary to approach the most intimate and hidden self's core to reach

something beyond it. Truth is for Augustine something that belongs to man's inwardness and it is only obtainable by his *Confessions*. Self's intimacy constitutes the path to man's conscience.

This power accorded to the interior was interpreted by the moderns in dual terms: the outside expressed the diversity that confused and bruised man while the interior acquired the meaning of an inner space of self-definition and moral value. The public world of the streets was harsh, complex and cold, while the domestic intimate realm was identified as the realm of order, tranquillity, self-evidence and clarity. The modern intimacy rested upon the idea of a warmth place where subjective life flourished because was not exposed to the threats outside represented. Moderns aspired to improve subject's personality by closeness and tenderness means with others. By rejecting the impersonality, detachment and aloofness of society's public realm, the moderns figured to have found in the "ideology of intimacy" the resolution to individual development. "Social relationships of all kinds are real, believable, and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person. This ideology turned political categories into psychological categories" (Sennett, 1974: 259). Intersubjectivity, like society, became evaluated in psychomorphic terms. The sentiment was the reference-point one felt when in search for social situations' meaning. What one was feeling converted into the fundamental question. Through self-examination and self-awareness, every interaction was oriented to intimate response and personality's expansion.

The modern intimate society expressed a vigorous individualism articulating the hiperinvestment of privacy and the erosion of public life. The measurement of society in terms of personification implied a tyranny of intimacy, imposing the lost of plastic and scenic capabilities, characteristic of *ancien régime's* public life, and took off individual's civility (Sennett, 1974: 264). Without civility, sociability retreated and narcissism grew. The modern narcissistic intimacy manifested the emptiness of private domain which deflated collective life and destroyed public life. "Narcissism only discovers its true meaning on the historic scale: he coincides with the process that carries individuals to reduce the emotional load invested in public realm, or in transcendent realms, increasing the private realm's priorities" (Lipovetsky, 1989: 14). The intimate society brought a narcissist man into play while the world was

but a self's mirror. However, the more narcissist man tried to live and feel vivid experiences, the more difficulty it became. He turned into a frigid person (cf. Lash, 1991: 11). Intimacy has made man a being secluded from others, closed in himself, searching in his very deep conscience the world's significance. As Arendt states, "Men become beings entirely private, set apart from seeing and listening others and set apart of being seen and heard by them. They are all prisoners of their single existence's subjectivity which continue singular even if the same experience can be multiplied. The common world finishes when it is seen just by one lens and it only permits one perspective" (Arendt, 2001: 73).

### **Intimacy's Redefinition**

Given its esoteric aspect, the modern conception of private realm expressed a pessimistic vision: there was an individualistic man who returned to the loneliness of his intimacy in order to appeal to his interiority and determine his self. The subject became a man only if he remained apart from society. Public and private domains were completely separated as man accomplished himself in intimacy.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century brings a fundamental evolvement in the modern borders of public and private realms as well in the meaning of intimacy which proved that man's modern insight was too negative. In both cases, in public and private realms, as in intimacy, we observe the same phenomenon: a growing porosity and interconnection between modern dualisms.

The blurring of private and public domains is a well-known fact. As domestic issues are brought to a public light, as well as more and more public themes become private matters, public and private's intersection forms a Social Sphere where a public becomes private and a private becomes public (Habermas, 1991: 142; Arendt, 2001: 51-64). However, the contemporary intimacy reflects an entirely new phenomenon, one which demands a firsthand approach in order to understand it.

Modernity argued that the simple contamination between private and public would destroy any hope of intimacy. The public light would never fall upon intimacy because it would annihilate it. Individualism would just succeed as long as man stood in domestic scene separated

from society. Without intimacy, secrecy and closure, man would not have a chance to fulfil himself.

Yet, and in sharp contrast to modern ideology, we assist in contemporary developed societies to a deliberate disclosure of intimacy. The recent intimacy visibility, his social relevance and his increasing public status exemplifies the exact opposite of modern claims. The mediatisation of publicness, the personal's invasion of public discourse, the change of media programs in order to reflect individual problems, the inflection of private discourses to a more confessional tone, the mounting technologies of privacy-sharing, all this attests a transfiguration in the concept of intimacy.

We distinguish modern intimacy which was a physic intimacy from contemporary intimacy which is an emotional intimacy. The former intimacy underlined a spatial and psychological dimension, whereas the latter highlights a relational dimension and the establishment of intersubjective involvements. Intimacy appears now as a subjective appraisal, more and more a subject's decision than a social norm. His definition comes to be a more personal decision than a collective one and it is less dependent on society's moral authority. Intimacy is an individual choice which lacks a concrete and immutable delineation. It is a socially shifting notion. There are neither specific limits nor established frontiers.

From the deepest intimacy to the most visible and common publicness, sexuality, love relationships and intimate sentiments come to the surface. Secrecy's geography has travelled from the private space to the mediatisated public sphere. What used to be an absolute secret may today be a topic of public discussion in media. As politics become more transparent with the advent of democracy, the entire society and individual come to be crystal clear (it is possible, for example, to view in social magazines a public figure cooking a romantic meal to his family, or to see in television a woman telling everyone her husband has never given her an orgasm, or even to watch in a reality-show a complete romance since the seduction phase until the marriage). What used to proudly pertain to the intimate realm is nowadays placidly flaunted.

The intimacy's admission in the public scene does not signify a complete liquidation but, more important, a chief restoration and renovation. The intermittence between the concealed and the disclosed is the

symptom of a changeable, impermanent and flexible intimacy. Therefore, intimacy is not nowadays diluted in the public realm nor weakened by social indiscretion. It is redefined as it is only conceived in conjunction with its exposure (Mehl, 1996: 163). People's private life is being, at the present, purposely or unwillingly, exhibited.

A public intimacy configures the confusion between interior and exterior even making the former almost unthinkable without the latter. The interior is, in the contemporary age, the outcome of a reflexive self who takes very earnest the opinions that society has of him. Thus, the interior's public revelation is part of the process where the self-accomplishment relies on other's opinion to succeed. Coupled with his values, self's fulfilment depends on others. Unlike modern thesis, contemporary intimacy seems to make sense only in the juxtaposition with a public domain, with self and society's exchange of ideas. Intimacy is not an invincible shelter of retreat, as moderns would say, but a haven of a subject who needs to meet others in order to find himself. The intimate may not be individual's final point of resistance but the first stage of self's reflexive project. It is not a shell of protection but a paramount moment of self constitution that only succeeds in exposure. As a program for making exterior the interior, public intimacy seems, thus, to be the template of self's conscience as a being that needs others.

Having said that, we will attempt a contemporary intimacy's description by accounting subjectiveness and mediatisation processes. We will, then, sketch a possibility of examination of the contemporary publicness by making some observations about its emotional aspects.

### **Extimacy: subjectiveness and mediatisation**

What stands out in contemporary intimacy is the public display of the individual's relationships making central terms like genuine, indiscreet or authentic. Intimate thoughts and sentiments escape the private realm towards the public. Affections are not acted or faked but a spontaneous and felt activity. The psychological turns out to be a major theme as intimacy becomes public.

The psychological dimension of today's public intimacy rests more in a subjectiveness process which is very different from the personalization

process of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century's modernity (Sennett, 1974). In the personalization process, sentiments were embodied by universal persons who shared the same psychological structures. Self's interest persevered in the extent that he was a society's mirror. In the personalization apparatus, self was singular in the way he could identify himself with society's general concerns. He was a society's symbol representing its framework.

But in a subjectiveness process the central question is to individualize affections. Sentiments arise interest only if are lived by concrete personalities and trigger intersubjective relationships (Mehl, 2006: 173). Psychological needs goes in pair with social emotions. Public intimacy acts based in a subjectiveness process that demands social acceptance at the same time it calls individuals together in order to psychological validation. The subjective point of view is now regarded with high esteem and subjectiveness fills subject's psychological facet. This signifies that only what has been felt by anyone is worthy of attention. Individual's emotions get out to the public domain and become a serious social theme.

We know intimate confessions are not a new occurrence. First, the church, then the psychological consulting rooms, have received, since always, intimate admissions and private complaints. What are brand new are public confessions and the creation of a public and sharable intimacy. Media, especially television, play a major role. Television introduces the society's gaze directly in the emotion's core giving a face to a formal sentiment. The tears one drops in front of an audience make the deepest and privileged emotions visible. It is this transparency, this intimacy's capacity to be seen by anyone, that strikes us most.

The individual's desire to tell everyone his hidden feelings not only destroy the secrecy of intimacy as also installs a new concept. If modernity contended intimacy (from the latin *intimu-* meaning what is secret, interior or profound), the contemporary times acclaim a public intimacy that configures a "extimacy" (from the latin *extimus*, past participle of *exter* meaning exterior or foreign). The public intimacy shapes an *extimacy* due to the individual's pretention to communicate his interior and express his deep thought to a vast audience. There is a wish to divide intimacy equally between people and share what used to be a well-guarded secret.



Public intimacy describes an extimacy making interior and exterior concurrent, intimate and public simultaneous. This aim in making public “private” intimacy is due to an attempt of better self-understanding by integrating others’ reaction in order to create a more rich intimacy. Extimacy shows and confirms an other-directed individual who needs constant direction and approval as a psychological need of positive sanction in order to enrich his personality (Riesman, 2001: 22). The difference between a modern intimacy and the intimacy we nowadays observe is one between an inner-directed and an other-directed character: intimacy regarded as individual’s goal; and extimacy, or to be more precise extimacy, as individual’s step to size his own social personality. Extimacy, thus, implies a double posture: by one hand, in order to trust one’s self to other, it requires a partake of values between individual and other; by the other hand, in order to individual be oriented, it is obligatory that the other be different so he may identify with him (Tisseron, 2003: 53).

We will discriminate two main extimacy’s practices: verbal practice and image practice. Each one frames different modes of self-expression to which corresponds a distinct *medium*. So, each form of symbolic self-representation based in the intimacy’s exteriorisation signifies a special process of mediatisation.

Let’s start by the verbal aspect of extimacy. Today, we assist to a profusion of subject’s confessional genres: talk-shows where people go to have a specialist opinion, reality-television shows where one thinks to gain a fresh new identity just by making a diet or even magazine readers demanding counselling. Nevertheless, we would like to mention another verbal self-expression: the mobile phone. With mobile phones the private realm is not banished but enlarged. The street, the waiting room or work are places where intimacy develops, even if it is a public intimacy, consequently, an extimacy. Privacy is publicly staged.

The mobile phone modifies the relation subject has with himself and with others. By being always on the phone, the individual feels less insecure and less lonely. Even though he may not be alone he is physically present but psychologically absent. This makes mobile phone alter space’s perception. The self’s identity does not come from personality but from self’s present location. When a call starts, the question “*How* are you?” is relegated to second place by this other question “*Where* are you?”. In what concerns the mobile phone, it is more

important self's surroundings than self's interior. Mobile phone permits a self's verbal representation as a person does not just talk to the person on the other side of the line, as also to the person physically present. What a individual tells to one, tells to the other. So it is the own extimacy process taking place.

Related to extimacy's verbal practice are the new writing methods of Internet. On-line chats underscore a self-understanding writing as thought comes and goes before and after received answers. This heterogeneous writing with many punctuation marks, smileys and colour emphasis is preferentially focused on the self's interiority expression and it is an example of extimacy performing. This original writing stresses interiority's irruption. Internet chats are, thus, platforms to intimacy's publicisation where lays a subject's hidden desire for better self- understanding.

Extimacy also occurs through images. There are so many ways to picture the world as ways to picture the individual. With photographic cameras, video cameras, webcameras, security cameras or mobile phone cameras, there is a superabundance of images. The individual is overwhelmed and stunned. Because there are so many images, there is an augmented necessity of making self explicit. Taking his pictures is one way of putting together all the variegated images and to exteriorize interiority. Making images seems to be a form of extimacy because it is an attempt to objectify individual's perception and receive others' reaction to it. The desire of showing in public self images is the desire to express publicly interiority in order to magnify the personality (take the example of Hi5, Flickr, Photobucket or Photoblogs). There is a true pictorial discourse made by contemporary individuals with technology aid that frames a true interiority's exhibition. Pictures convert into pure self's representation. Subject's appearance stands for subject's identity, so appearance turns out to be a mode of extimacy, a mode to reveal to society a so far hidden identity and to invite others to pronounce about it. Since images convey identity they are a good media to extimacy. Contemporary individuals demand the right to show, convey and expose their identity, their privacy, their intimacy. That is the clearest evidence of their will to take full possession of their existence.

As we see, in media epoch publicness is technologically mediated influencing the way individuals make use of public intimacy. Extimacy becomes a visual question. The two most substantial consequences of

mediatisation were the delocalisation (public realm has no fixed place) and an intensification on visibility aspects. Both mean the erosion of face-to-face interaction and the aesthetics' strengthen on public issues evaluation. Like extimacy "the publicness of persons actions and events is reconnected with the capacity for them to be seen or heard by others. In the age of television, visibility in the narrow sense of vision – the capacity to be seen with the eyes – is elevated to a new level of historical significance" (Thompson, 1995: 129). Mediated Publicness is associated with the individual's visual appearance and this is just an invitation card a self present to others about his personality and intimacy.

Extimacy is, thus, both part of the process of intimacy's public exposure and part of the mediated publicness' rise. It is organized in this constitutive duplicity. Its essence manifests a dialectical nature uniting a social petition of one's existence with a technological development that visually enhances that same request.

### **An Emotional Publicness**

If intermingling of public and private domains meant a complete destruction of bourgeois public sphere, in the contemporary societies it indicates a sort of reconstruction of the old public-private dichotomy. We must confront the unsuitable character of modern conceptions in present social conditions. Our way of thinking about the public sphere is severely shaped by Ancient Greece and Rome and is anchored in a spatial-temporal setting in which individuals come together to discuss common anxieties in a rational-critical manner. Nonetheless, there are contemporary signs that point to a radical new approach to the public realm. We have tried to shortly pinpoint some of those through the subjectiveness and mediatisation processes.

Contrasting the modern grasp of the public sphere and a secret intimacy, the paradoxical disclosure of intimacy suggests the coexistence of public and private as a composite unit. There is a publicness/privateness strong association which enables us to speak in a public private realm and a private public realm.

We face a publicness/privateness pair focused on individual's visibility which is also worried with self-expression, self-development, self-

fulfilment through its openness to others, to society and to the public. Its mediated nature builds a space of the visible, non-localised, non-dialogical where an absent plurality of potentially receivers can actually help on the self's achievement task.

Standing aside a public sphere based in reason, legitimate by expert's discourses, locally fixed and that cherishes generalisation, there is a disseminated publicness/privateness pair outlined by singular experiences and aimed in intersubjective relationships. Public debate is framed by man's experience, feelings and anxieties. It feeds reflexion in other way than reason by being more close to everyday life's unevenness. By giving word to average man an enlighten perspective of one's own life outbreaks and at the same time a collective and social project is built based in personal experience and not in general, abstract, universal discussions. It is society who debates his own insights with itself focusing in emotional experience, not in rational knowledge. Reality-shows participate from this phenomenon giving masses the opportunity to make a statement and express themselves. Television's image gives an additional impetus to the extimacy's tendency promoting an emotional publicness in which affection has the same value as reason (Mehl, 1996: 180). A publicness where singular experiences are stressed is a publicness where emotions dwell and where discover, appropriations and authenticity are common. Instead of opposing reason to emotion in prejudice of the latter, it is useful if we consider both as an important dual regime. Exhibition replaces demonstration and inaugurates a comprehensive model of publicness. The public debate is, thus, broaden by the type of representation that individual acquires in exposing his singular life story to society.

Publicness's emotional accent does not mean any form of depoliticisation. It points instead to new types of politics. Visibility and display make public new issues came from the private. It implies a transfer from what Giddens calls "emancipatory politics" to a "life politics" where individual's reflexive mobilisation happens. A "life politics" is the creation by the self of legitimate moral justifications in order to promote self-fulfilment. "How are we supposed to live?" becomes the central question stressing individual's ability to settle his own life. Extimacy and emotional publicness are, then, the evident expressions of this "life politics" where individuals try to define their life's reflexive project with a strong

other-directed character by exposing their intimacy to society's gaze and, thus, have a positive validation of their conduct.

Let us make some concluding remarks on intimacy.

Intimacy's display, we insist, does not suggest its complete elimination. Extimacy is intimacy's public exhibition but it does not imply (for now) that all that pertains to intimacy is simply disclosed. As far as reality-shows demonstrate, intimacy is like an iceberg: the top is visible to all but beneath it there is a still bigger amount of ice (Mehl, 1996: 160). What is brought to public light is considered to be just a small part of individual's intimacy. Intimacy is like a secret place where just one portion of it is exposed. Only what is essential to enrich the individual's personality is publicly displayed. Intimacy seems to be composed of more parts than those related to appearance. Individuals' emotions and thoughts, even if exposed, are deeper than those taking part in extimacy.

So, it is as if the individual could displace his interiority and intimacy whenever he wants and make interchangeable the intimacy and extimacy domains. Intimacy and extimacy are interrelated and form a dyad determined by subjects. Like his own life, man's private realm is a reflexive feature that performs his defined purposes. The possibility of make intimacy more visible or more concealed is an integrant part of individual's strategy to accomplish self's reflexive project.

This last assumption shows how fragile, rigid and linear was modern presuppositions on intimacy. With an emotional publicness supported by extimacy the subject must not know his inner self before he can share his self with another. His self-differentiation does not depend of self's closeness. On the contrary, he only reaches his inner-self by making it public and sharing it. It is extimacy's condition that enables the very possibility of individuality.

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