

Does love laugh at locksmiths? Partnership quality during the lockdown in Italy, France and Spain. Some descriptive findings.

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Introduction

The Shakespearean expression ‘love laughs at locksmiths’ is interpreted to mean that, even during hard times, partners find a way to maintain their relationship. Is this the case also during the COVID-19 lockdown? The home confinement imposed as part of nationwide movement restrictions in many countries represents an exceptional setting for the study of intimate relationships. Many partners are forced to live together, locked inside the same home throughout the day during a historic moment characterised by the threat of severe illness for themselves and their loved ones (as well as for the rest of humanity). In a way, couples are held in captivity.

Up to now, scholars have examined the consequences of the 2020 pandemic in terms of physical, economic and environmental outcomes. Studies have shown that the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also influenced the family sphere (e.g. Craig, Churchill 2020). A crucial but unresolved question is the extent of these consequences for partnerships. Have lockdowns weakened partnerships quality? Does the link between lockdown and partnership quality vary by gender? Do we observe differences between countries?

From a theoretical point of view, answering these questions could be challenging. On the one hand, a pandemic could reduce support for and increase stress among family members. On the other hand, it could increase family cohesion, bringing partners closer together.

The available literature on the consequences of natural disasters on marital quality and couples' instability shows mixed findings. Some studies show that relationships within immediate families improve (e.g., Henry, Tolan and Gorman-Smith 2004). The bulk of evidence, however, suggests that the stress of calamities erodes intimate relations (e.g., Norris, Uhl 1993). Nonetheless, Cohan and Cole (2002), who analysed the family consequences of Hurricane Hugo in 1989, found that marriage, birth and divorce rates increased in the US counties that were affected by the natural disaster. Life-altering events, such as natural disasters, seem to motivate people to take actions that accelerate life course events.

In this article, we briefly review the theoretical underpinnings and summarise the scant empirical findings of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and other natural disasters on family dynamics. We also present some descriptive findings based on a recent online survey focused on family relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, which covers three countries, Italy, Spain and France.

Our study offers the first descriptive evidence on the consequences of COVID-19 for partnership quality. We observe that about 12% of those interviewed in the three countries reported that their relationship with their partner worsened during the lockdown. Young people and women, in particular, experienced partnership quality deterioration. Furthermore, we show that negative emotions – such as feeling lonely – are associated with a worsening of partnership quality. Given that a decrease in partnership quality might presage couple's dissolution, a descriptive study of this kind is a necessary starting point for future, in-depth investigations on the consequences of the pandemic for intimate lives.

Theoretical considerations

As a framework for understanding the processes underlying marital outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw on stress theory (Selye 1956). This suggests that natural disasters can be perceived as stressful events and become psychological stressors. Quarantine and home confinement can also be perceived as stressful events that may increase emotional distress for couples. Studies show that during the SARS quarantine (e.g., Reynolds *et alii* 2018), individuals experienced negative psychological feelings, such as depression, anger, confusion and stress. Lowe, Rhodes and Scoglio (2012) found that home confinement due to Hurricane Katrina increased partner stress in vulnerable couples that, in turn, undermined their relational processes.

As Ammar *et alii* (2020) reported in a recent study, the COVID-19 home confinement triggered negative emotional consequences. They observed that people experienced an increase in depressive symptoms, unhappiness and loneliness during the lockdown. The impediments to personal freedom and the conditions of semi-isolation have played a crucial role in intensifying such negative emotions. At the couple level, individual negative feelings could have worsened marital functioning because of a detriment to partners' communication

and an increase in conflicts – as reported in studies about marital quality after natural disasters (e.g., Biglan *et alii* 1985). The experience of a stressful event can also weaken marital responsiveness because individuals are less likely to provide/solicit support to/from their partners (Conger, Rueter and Elder 1999). Balzarini *et alii* (2020) found that ‘love in the time of COVID’ faces challenges, particularly when individuals report stressors related to the pandemic and when they perceive their partners as less responsive to their requests for support. This study, however, suffers an important limitation that its participants were recruited from social media sites.

The negative consequences that stay-at-home policies have had on employment and incomes, with the increase of financial losses and the reduction of economic activity (United Nations 2020), could also have indirectly exerted pressure on marital quality. Béland, Brodeur and Wright (2020) show that COVID-19 increased the unemployment rate and decreased hours of work and labour force participation, particularly in those occupations where employees work in close proximity to others. Moreover, COVID-19 induced an enormous increase in economic uncertainty during the first weeks of the pandemic (Baker *et alii* 2020). As the family stress theory predicts (Hill 1958), underemployment and uncertainty are crucial stressors that can potentially induce relationship dissatisfaction and conflict (Hansen 2005).

Data

The data were collected through an online survey named Intergen-Covid (<https://sites.google.com/unifi.it/intergen-covid>), conducted by the survey company Lucid (Arpino, Bordone and Pasqualini 2020). The total sample size was 9,186 individuals across Italy, Spain and France (with approximately 3,000 respondents per country). Respondents were interviewed in April 2020, when the majority of the interviewed were forced to stay at home. The questionnaire was translated into three languages, Italian, Spanish and French, and asked respondents about their lives and feelings during home confinement. It collected information about intergenerational relationships and, more interesting for our purposes, information about individuals’ experiences in terms of social connection, living arrangements, preferences and emotions. Data were collected by imposing country-specific representative quotas by age, gender, region and educational attainment. As a result, as can be seen by comparing the data to that of national statistical offices, respondents were proportional to the demographic and socio-economic fundamentals of the countries.

Our variable of interest takes the value 1 if the interviewee reports that the relationship with their partner worsened during the lockdown (0 otherwise), capturing the (potential) shift in partnership quality during the lockdown. More precisely, individuals were asked the following question: ‘Since the entry into force of the first nationwide restrictions due to the Coronavirus in your country (date), have you experienced any of these changes?’ Among the possible answers, the respondents could choose ‘Worsened relation with partner’.

We are interested in the association between the (shift in) partnership quality and other variables, such as feeling lonely, losing income or jobs and receiving emotional support. In the following, we present descriptive findings considering the country of residence and the gender of the respondents as an interpretative lens. We use country-specific weights to offer national estimates.

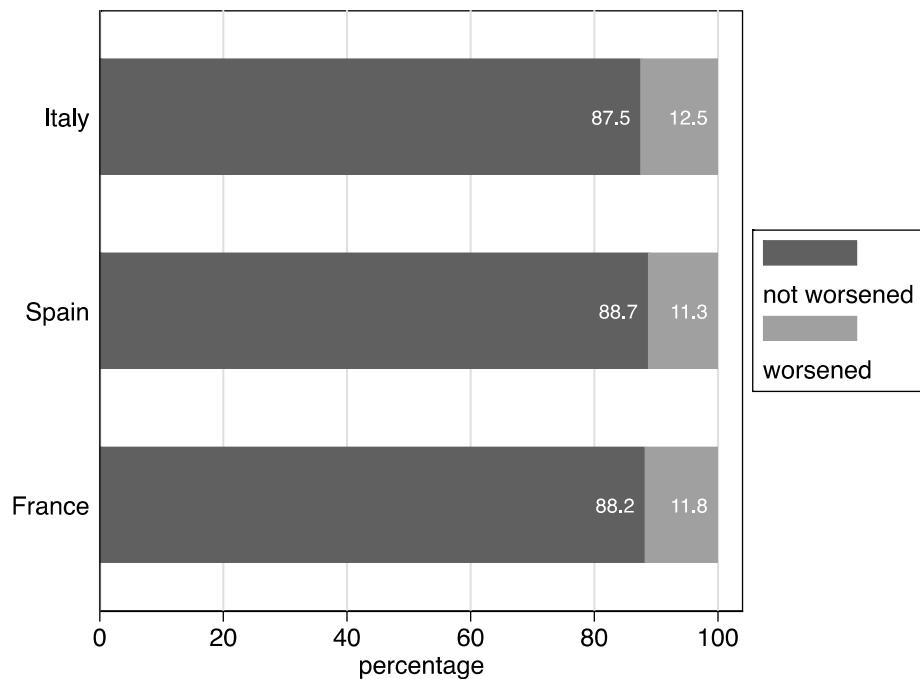
Sample

We select male and female individuals that are married or cohabit with a partner, aged from 20 to 60. Our final sample is N = 3,920 (N = 1,304 for Italy, N = 1,430 for Spain and N = 1,186 for France).

Descriptive Results

Figure 1 reports the percentage of married or cohabiting respondents that report a worsening in their relationship by country. We observe that in all three countries, around 12% of the respondents report a worsening of the quality of their intimate relationship.

Figure 1. Worsening of relationship quality during the lockdown, by country



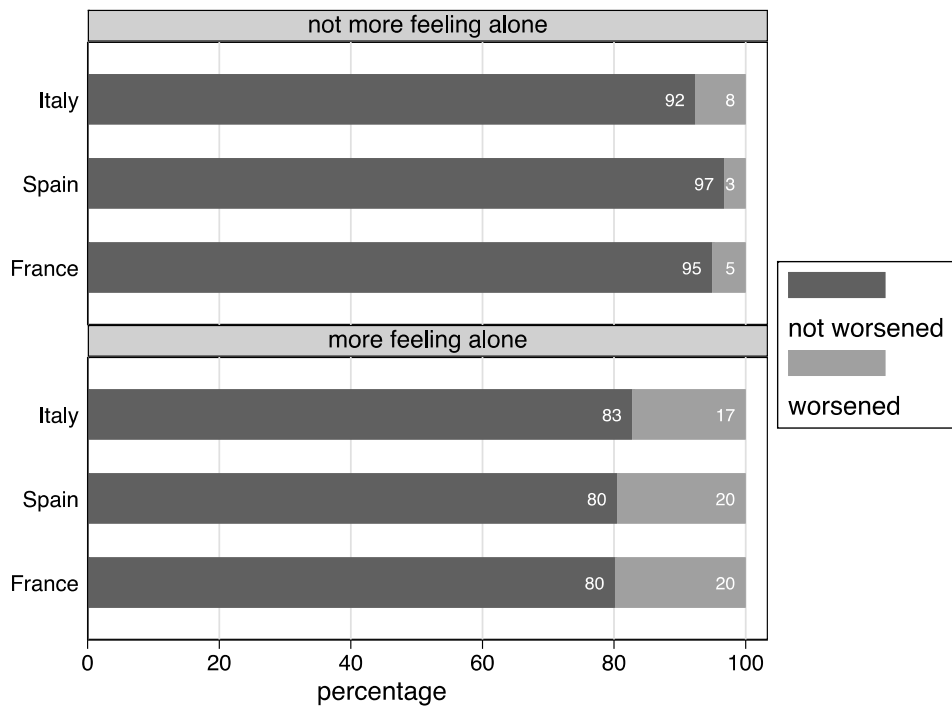
Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020)

If we split the analysis by gender, we can observe that in Italy and France, women were more likely than men to report that their relationship with their partner has worsened, around 13% of women and 9% of men in Italy, and around 15% of women and 8% of men in France.

This was not the case for Spain, where we observe a different result – about 10.5% of women and 14% of men reported a worsened relationship.

Following indications from stress theory, we are interested in the association between some stressors and the variable of interest – the shift in relationship quality. Figure 2 illustrates that an increase in negative emotions, such as feeling lonely, is associated with a decrease in relationship quality. As suggested by stress research, it seems that negative emotions represent relationship stressors in times of COVID-19 for residents of all three countries. According to the result obtained by the chi-squared test, we can say that this relationship is statistically significant within countries. We do not observe relevant differences by gender.

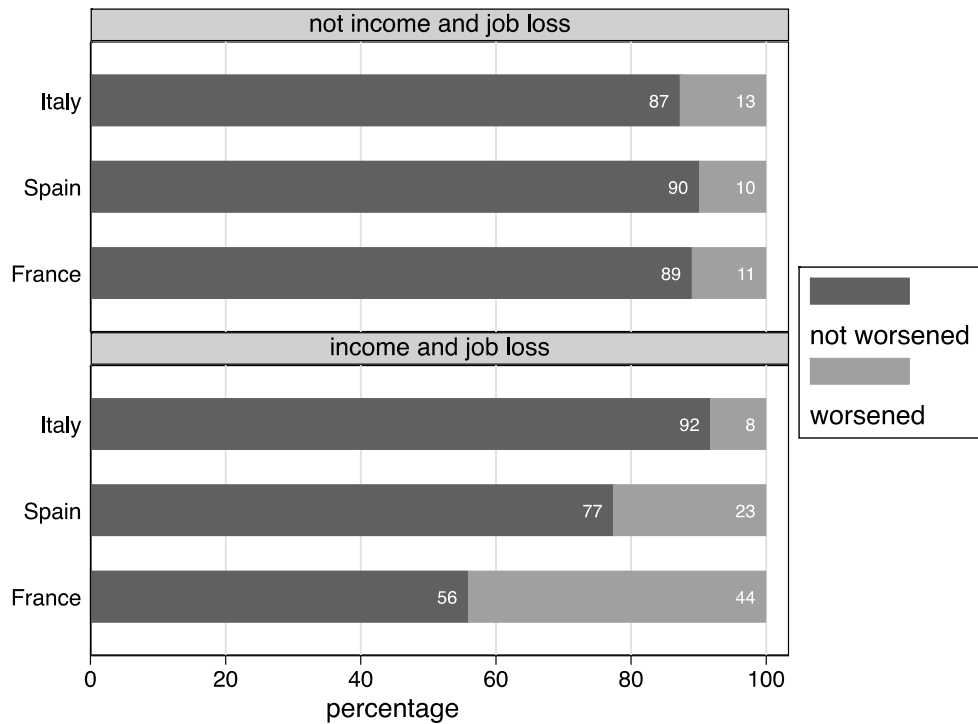
Figure 2. Worsening of relationship quality by shift in perception of loneliness during the lockdown, by country



Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020)

Family stress theory also suggests that indirect stressors, such as income and job loss, might affect intimate relationships. Figure 3 shows that while in Spain and France respondents who experienced job and income loss during COVID-19 home confinement reported a decrease in relationship quality, this seems not to be the case for Italy. Accordingly, the chi-squared test shows that the relationship between job loss and partnership quality is statistically significant in Spain and France.

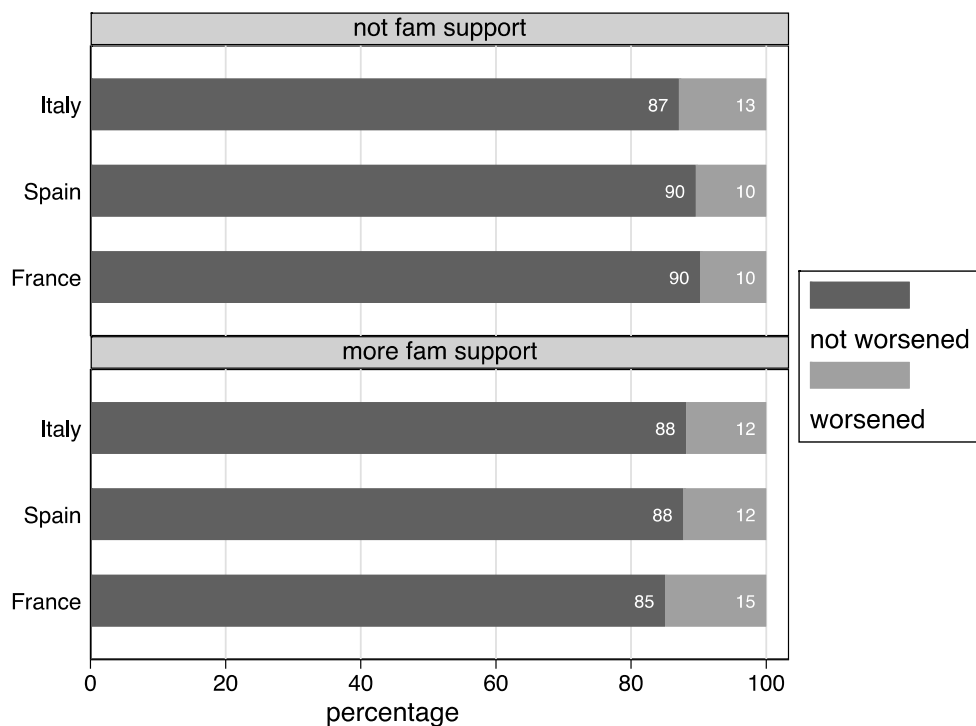
Figure 3. Worsening of relationship quality by job and income loss during the lockdown, by country



Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020)

Finally, we present descriptive findings related to an anti-stressor – emotional support. According to attachment theory, couples during the pandemic should strengthen their relationship. This means that partners that receive emotional support should be less likely to report worsening relationship quality. Our descriptive findings do not confirm this prediction, for women or men, as also suggested by the chi-squared test. As our data refer to emotional support from family and/or friends, the question does not capture a real couple dimension.

Figure 4. Worsening of relationship quality by job loss during the lockdown, by country



Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020)

Conclusions

This study provides preliminary and descriptive findings about the association between some stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and relationship quality. It seems that love does not laugh at locksmiths; indeed, a non-negligible proportion of respondents (12%) reported that their relationship has worsened during the lockdown. One of the potential drivers of this phenomenon refers to the individual emotional sphere. Feeling alone during the lockdown is associated with a weakening of intimate relationships in all three countries. Indirect stressors, such as job and income loss, also influence relationship quality. Our findings are in line with theoretical predictions about the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 on partnership dynamics. As expected, the pandemic has led to direct stressors for relationships and also to indirect stressors, including job and income loss. These stressors, in turn, have undermined partnership quality.

This study adds to the growing strand of research on the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, these consequences are not only economic; we suggest that couples and intimate relationships are also vulnerable. This is important as partnership quality is an important predictor of marital instability and reproductive choices. This study plants first a seed that will – we hope – germinate into future studies on the topic.

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