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Monographic Section

Love, work and the lockdown. Partnership quality and intentions to split during the lockdown in Italy, France and Spain

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Abstract. This study contributes to the growing strand of research on the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The home confinement imposed as part of nationwide movement restrictions in many countries represents an exceptional setting for the study of intimate relationships. Did the lockdown reduce partnership quality among couples? In this study, we present some descriptive findings based on an online survey conducted during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in France, Italy and Spain. Around 12% of those interviewed in the three countries reported that their relationship with their partner had worsened during the lockdown and about 2.5% intended to split up. In addition, we show that negative emotions – such as feeling lonely – and deterioration of income/work conditions are associated with a worsening of partnership quality. In all, we suggest that couples and intimate relationships have been sensitive to the lockdown, at least in Italy, France, and Spain.

Keywords: marital quality, work, pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The Shakespearean expression ‘love laughs at locksmiths’ is interpreted to mean that love copes with any difficulty and can overcome everything. Accordingly, even during hard times, partners find a way to preserve their relationship. Does this figurative sentence, that has become a common proverb over the centuries, fit with the feelings and emotions experienced by couples during the first COVID-19 lockdown?

The home confinement and the strong recommended social (physical) distancing imposed as part of nationwide movement restrictions in many countries have represented an exceptional setting for the study of intimate relationships. Many partners have been forced to live together, locked inside the same home throughout the day during a historical moment character-

ized by the threat of severe illness for themselves and their loved ones (as well as for the rest of humanity). In a way, couples were held in captivity in their home for a relative extended period, since in many countries they were not allowed to leave their home or the neighborhood they were living in.

During the last years, scholars have especially focused their research on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of health, economic and environmental outcomes. Recent studies have shown that the far-reaching impact of the pandemic influenced the family sphere, too (e.g., Craig, Churchill 2020; Egidi, Manfredi 2021; Bellani, Vignoli 2022). At this regard, a crucial question is whether and how the lockdowns have had any consequences on closeness of romantic partners. As clearly reported by Biroli *et alii* (2021, pp. 1) “this lockdown artificially created a fusion between the work and family life of men and women.” As such, our main research question is the following, has the first lockdown, that was the most restrictive, weakened partnerships quality?

The available literature on the consequences of natural disasters on marital quality and couples’ instability shows mixed findings. In brief, some studies show that relationship within immediate families is likely to improve (e.g., Henry *et alii* 2004). The bulk of evidence, however, suggests that the stress of calamities is likely to erode intimate relations (e.g., Norris, Uhl 1993). Nonetheless, Cohan and Cole (2002), who analyzed 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. Specifically, they shown that life-altering events, such as natural disasters, seem to motivate people to take actions that accelerate life course events.

In this article, we review and discuss the theoretical underpinnings and summarize the recent empirical findings of the consequences on family dynamics of the most recent natural disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic. We also present some descriptive findings based on an online survey about family relationships during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which covers three countries, Italy, Spain and France. Because of data constraints, this paper focuses only on the potential short-term negative effects of the pandemic on relationship quality. The focus on the negative effects of the pandemic is motivated by the academic discussion on its potential consequences for union dissolution (e.g., Manning and Payne, 2021). We leave to future investigations an analysis of the pandemic’s potential positive effects on relationship quality, using more complete and timely data.

Our study offers descriptive results on the consequences of COVID-19 for partnership quality. Specifically, we observe that about 12% of those interviewed in the three countries reported that their relationship with their partner worsened during the first lockdown. In parallel, we find that, in the same period, about 2.5% of the couples intended to split up. Furthermore, we show that negative emotions – such as feeling lonely – the deterioration of working conditions and the experience of organizational issues were associated with a worsening of partnership quality as well as with the intention to dissolve the union. Given that a decrease in partnership quality as well as the intention to dissolve the union might presage couple’s dissolution, a descriptive study of this kind represents a starting point for in-depth investigations on the consequences of the pandemic for intimate lives.

THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

In many European countries, during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments imposed full or partial stay-at-home policies, which affected millions of people. Additionally, they forced restricted movements for all their citizens – even with some exceptions (i.e., health workers). How did individuals react in terms of personal well-being and family connection?

As a framework for understanding the processes underlying marital outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw on one of the most widely recognized theory, the so-called stress model (Selye 1956). This suggests that natural disasters embody stressful events that induce psychological distress. In the case of pandemics, the imposition of quarantine and home confinement can be experienced as highly stressful and upsetting, too. Studies show that during the SARS quarantine (e.g., Reynolds *et alii* 2008), individuals experienced negative psychological feelings, such as depression, anger, confusion, and stress.

The stress model has been applied not only to individuals but also to the family system. According to family stress theory (Boss 2002), stress in the family sphere is a strong disturbance factor in the normal functioning of the intimate relationships. In particular, when families experience life changes – that can be expected (the so-called normative events) or unexpected (the so-called non-normative events) – they have to adapt in order to reestablish their steady state. The process of adaptation is not always achievable. For instance, Lowe, Rhodes and Scoglio (2012) found that home confinement due to Hurricane Katrina increased partners' stress of vulnerable couples that, in turn, undermined their relational well-being. At the couple level, negative feelings of family's members could worsen 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 *et alii* 1999).

Family stress theory also predicts that the availability of certain protective factors and resources influences the reaction to stress events. Protective factors consist in all those elements that protect from an emotional point of view the normal functioning of the family – i.e., decreasing the likelihood of marital instability. For instance, Sunarti and colleagues (2021) shown that one key protective factor, that they identify with family resilience (Benzies, Mychasiuk 2009), positively influenced functional coping strategies during the Garut flash flood. Resources refer to all those factors that are related to the material and social conditions of families – i.e. education, social network, household's income. At this regard, Peek and colleagues (2011) found that positive adaptation processes of families in Colorado after Hurricane Katrina were strongly benefitted by the availability of resources such as the support with housing, employment, childcare, and education.

In the next section we review recent studies that provide insights into the family dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY STRESS AT THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Partnerships have been strongly challenged in the context of COVID-19. The reasons are two-fold. First, partners, being confined at home, have experienced an exceptional period of interactions between them – and with other cohabiting family's members, that might exacerbate covered conflicts or create new ones. Second, many couples, facing a decrease of crucial resources, due to employment loss/insecurity or income reduction, might experience a challenge in the quality of their partnership.

Concerning the first factor, 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 – see also Ahuja & Khurana 2021. The COVID-19 home confinement triggered negative emotional consequences (Ammar *et alii* 2020). People experienced an increase in depressive symptoms, unhappiness, and loneliness during the (first) lockdown. The impediments to personal freedom and the conditions of semi-isolation have played a crucial role in intensifying such negative emotions. Given that human beings are deeply embedded in relationships with their similar, in the case of romantic partnerships, individual feelings of stress and depression could potentially reduce couples' wellbeing (Fleming, Franzese 2021). Holmes *et alii* (2020) found that uncertainty associated with the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic generated emotional stress and pain. In fact, frustrated hopes of establishing a time frame for a return to normality made individuals more vulnerable to stress and anxiety. Couples were likely to respond to these factors becoming more vulnerable (Pietromonaco, Overall 2021) instead of employing dyadic coping strategies. Another factor that might represent a source of couples' conflicts was working from home. Even if it theoretically implies for individuals in a partnership an increase of time spent with the partner – that has been identified as a measure to reconcile family and work (e.g., Chung, van der Lippe 2018) – it might also play as a source of disturbance in the division of work and family life (see Schmid *et alii* 2021 for the German case).

As hypothesized by the family stress theory, not only protective factors but also material and social resources influence the reaction of families to stress events (e.g., Karney, Bradbury 1995). In this vein, underemployment and uncer-

tainty are crucial stressors that can potentially induce relationship dissatisfaction and conflicts (e.g., Hill 1958; Hansen 2005). Losing a job generally has a negative impact not only on individual's wellbeing (Burgard *et alii* 2012), but also on marital satisfaction (Lund *et alii* 2018). 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), have been shown to indirectly exert pressure on marital quality. Béland, Brodeur and Wright (2020) showed that COVID-19 increased the unemployment rate and decreased hours of work as well as labour force participation, particularly in those occupations where employees worked in close proximity to others. Despite the provision of massive amounts of welfare support to alleviate financial distress during the pandemic, Mimoun *et al.* (2020) reported that Israeli people who were even temporarily underemployed or laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced higher levels of distress than those who were unemployed prior to the crisis. Moreover, COVID-19 induced an enormous increase in economic uncertainty during the first weeks of the pandemic irrespective of person-specific circumstances (Baker *et alii* 2020), with consequences for family formation (Guetto *et alii* 2020; Guetto *et alii* 2021).

Scholars highlighted the huge organizational issues in the sphere of unpaid work that couples faced during the first lockdown. Clearly, the number of hours spent at home increased for most of the couples; as such, the number of hours dedicated to domestic work and, eventually, to the provision of childcare boomed (Farrè *et alii* 2020; Villadsen *et alii* 2020). Studies show that in many Western countries, women increased more than men their participation in housework and childcare duties (see Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque 2021 for the UK) – even this is not always the case (Farrè *et alii* 2020). Facing organizational issues, due to an unequal reallocation of duties between partners or to additional housework, could undermine partners' wellbeing and thus their couple satisfaction (e.g., Bellani, Esping Andersen 2020)

In our descriptive analysis, we will focus on protective factors as well on resources in order to analyze whether and how characteristics of the 'household context' play or not a protecting role for partnership quality.

ITALY, FRANCE AND SPAIN: NATIONAL FACTORS

We focus our analysis on three countries: Italy, France and Spain. The motivation of this selection is that the initial phase of the pandemic had heterogeneous effects on the three countries. Notably, they experienced a different timing and a dissimilar severity of containment strategies. In addition, these countries are ranked differently in the individualism–collectivism scale (Hofstede 2001), and in a situation of isolation because of lockdowns, individuals as well as families might react differently in the case they belong to a more individualistic or collectivist country.

According to some studies (e.g., Chun *et alii* 2006), the individualism–collectivism dimension is crucial in explaining the emotional reactions to stress processing. Given that collectivistic cultures give more importance to group harmony compared to personal enjoyment and satisfaction, the emotional costs of the quarantine period are expected to be greater in individualistic cultures. According to the individualism–collectivism scale (Hofstede 2001), Spain, compared to other European countries, is more collectivistic. France, instead, belongs to the group of individualistic countries. Italy is considered an individualistic country but is more collectivistic than many of the Western European societies. As such, in Spain the associations between emotional, work and organizational issues and relationship quality are expected to be weaker than in France and, partly, in Italy. The level of social contacts, however, decreased during the first phase of the pandemics as well as the intergenerational support (Luppi *et alii* 2020, 2021; Furfaro *et alii* 2021). As such, couples living in more collectivistic countries have experienced a deterioration of the degree of care provided by family members. This is especially the case of grandparental childcare, that is generally more intensive in Spain and Italy (Bordone *et alii* 2016; Arpino *et alii* 2022; Cisotto *et alii* 2022). The reduction of family support led governments to implement policies towards improving parents' work-family balance. With "Plan Mecuida" Spanish government allowed employees with care responsibilities to reduce their working hours. In Italy, parents were eligible to have thirty additional days of parental leave, and in France the lockdown did not allow families to use outside help for childcare (e.g., babysitters) but parents were entitled to paid sick leave if no alternative care or work arrangements could be found (Duragova 2020).

Finally, the three countries are different considering the policies implemented in order to mitigate the effect of lockdowns on employment. French workers were allowed to have short-term or flexible working hours. Spanish and Italian governments allowed the implementation of wage support schemes – in Italy, in particular, a temporary suspension of layoffs for economic reason has been imposed (Moizard 2020).

DATA

Generally speaking, most of cited studies suffers an important limitation, that their participants were recruited from social media sites or data come from a convenience sample. The data we employ, instead, were collected through an online survey named Intergen-Covid (<https://sites.google.com/unifi.it/intergen-covid>), conducted by the survey company Lucid (Arpino *et alii* 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 individuals (of those countries) were forced to stay at home. The questionnaire was translated into three languages, Italian, Spanish and French and was about respondents' lives and feelings during home confinement. It collected information about intergenerational relationships and, more interesting for our purposes, individuals' experiences in terms of working conditions, 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, the quota of respondents was proportional to the demographic and socio-economic fundamentals of the countries.

Our first outcome variable 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'.

The second outcome variable is the intention to divorce/separate. It takes value 1 if the interviewee reports that he/she intends to dissolve the union (0 otherwise).

We are interested in two associations. The first is between socio-economic and psychological variables, such as feeling lonely, losing income or jobs and receiving emotional support, and the (shift in) partnership quality. The second association of interest is between the same explanatory variables and the intention to separate. In the following, we present descriptive findings considering the country of residence and the gender of the respondent as interpretative lens. We use country-specific weights to offer national estimates.

ANALYTICAL 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 shows 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.

The percentage of married or cohabiting respondents that report the intention to dissolve the union is similar across countries. We observe that in all three countries, around 2.5% of the respondents report the intention to separate.

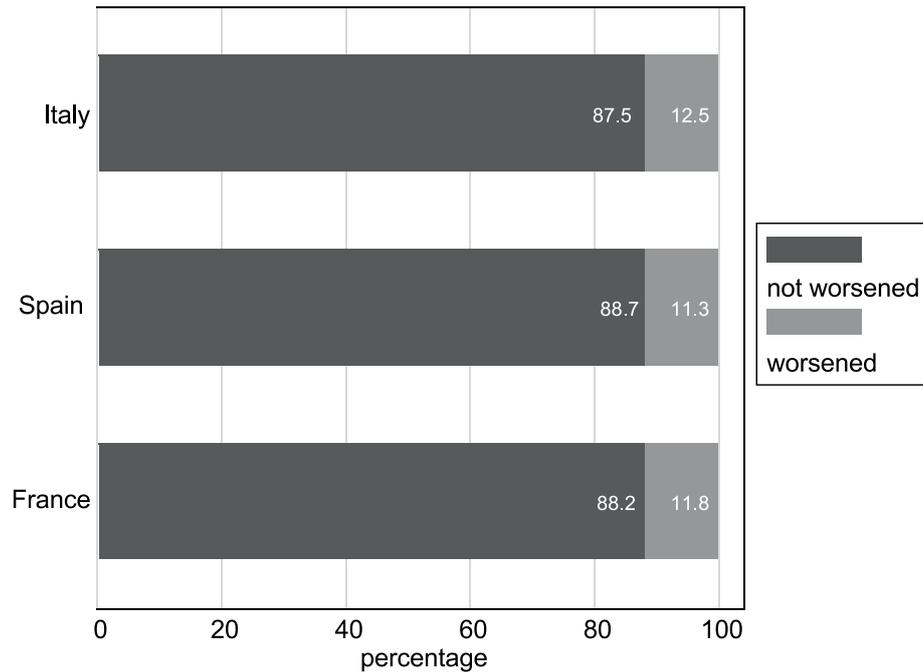


Figure 1. Worsening of relationship quality during the lockdown, by country. Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020).

If we split the analysis by gender, we note that in Italy and France, women were more likely than men to report that their relationship with their partner had 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.

Interestingly, we observe that in all the countries women (men) are more (less) likely to intend to separate. The corresponding percentages for women are 2.6 in Italy, 3.01 in Spain and 3.41 in France, while for men are 2.2 in Italy, 0.36 in Spain and 2.38 in France.

We continue by exploring the association between some stressors and the variables of interest – the shift in relationship quality and the intention to dissolve the union. 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 family research, 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. Moving to the other outcome variable, intention to divorce, we observe that the emotion of feeling alone is positively associated with the intention to divorce in all the countries. This is especially marked in France, as the chi-squared test suggests.

Family stress theory also indicates that indirect stressors, such as income and job loss, 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 income and job loss with partnership quality is statistically significant in Spain and France.

In parallel, implementing the chi-squared test, we observe that the deterioration of the working conditions does not influence the intention to divorce in any country. This suggests that, even if couples experience a weakening of marital quality when working conditions worsen, this does not trigger the intention to leave the couple. In Spain, however, if we focus on job loss, we observe a positive relationship, that is statistically significant, between job loss and the intention to divorce. As such, Spanish couples appears as more sensitive to the worsening of employment conditions.

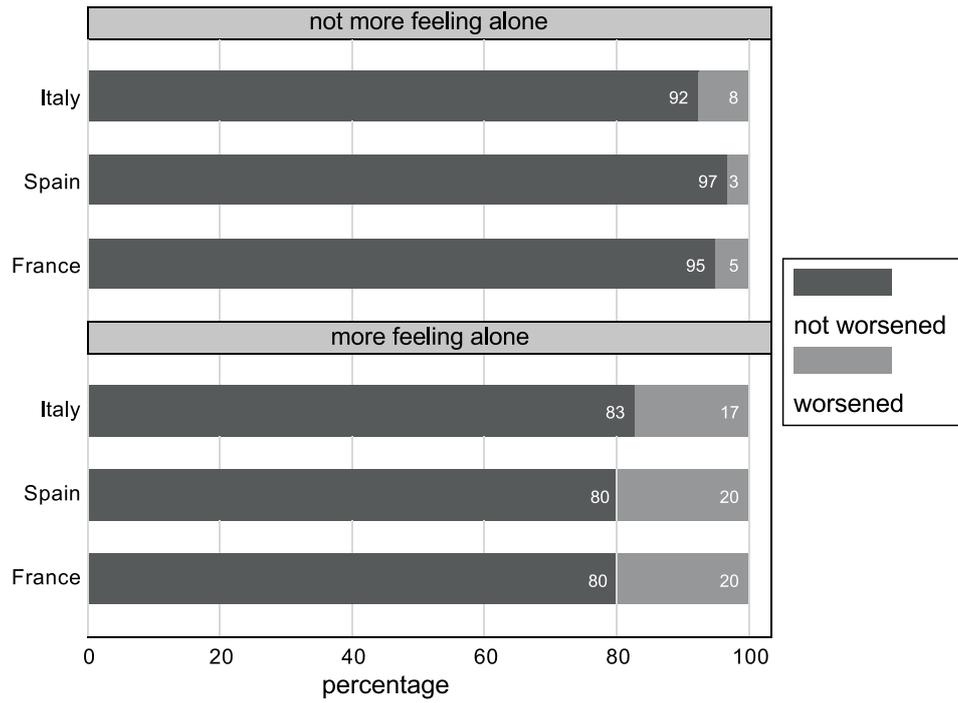


Figure 2. Worsening of relationship quality by shift in perception of loneliness during the lockdown, by country. Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020).

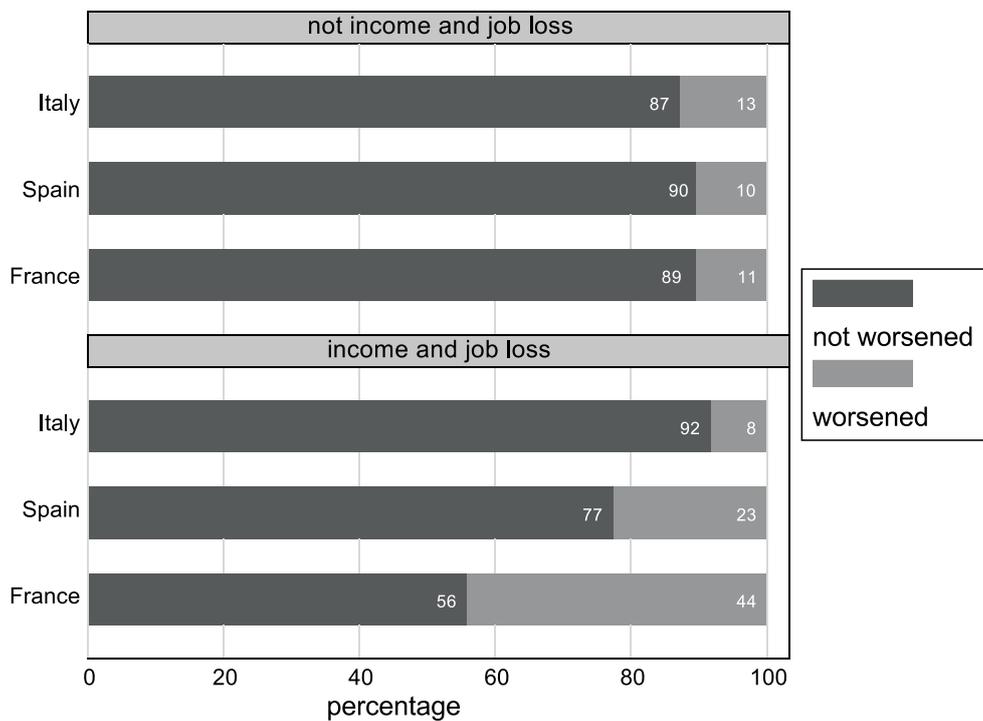


Figure 3. Worsening of relationship quality by job and income loss during the lockdown, by country. Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020).

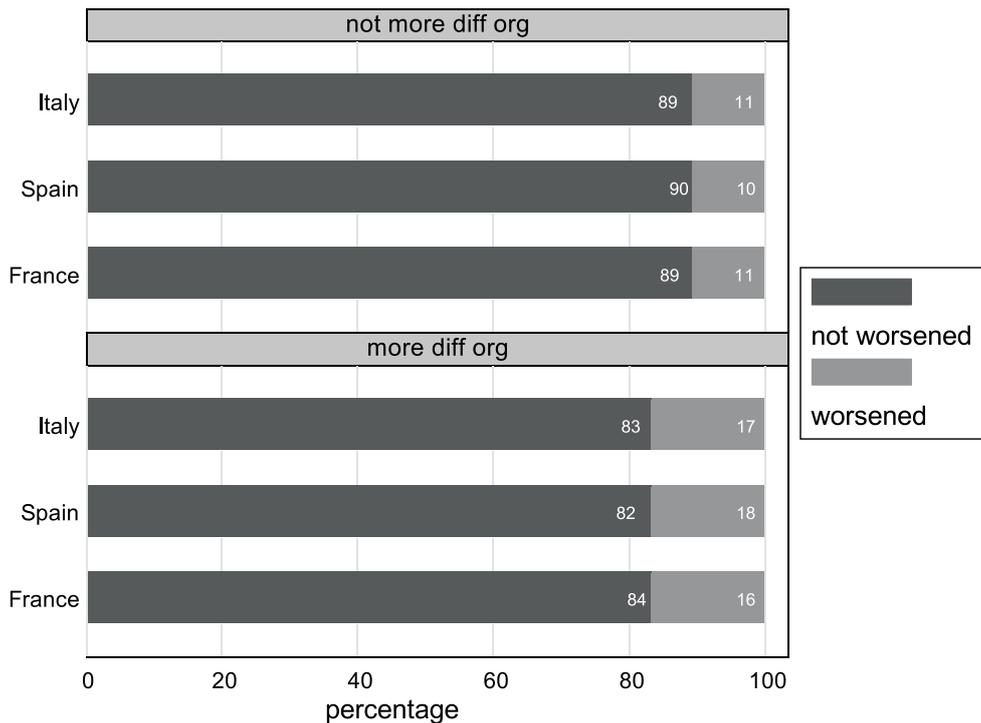


Figure 4. Worsening of relationship quality by organizational issues during the lockdown, by country. Source: Own processing of data from Intergen-Covid Survey (2020).

Finally, we present descriptive findings related to a potential driver of a decrease of marital quality – organizational issues (Figure 4). According to stress theory, couples during the months of (strict) stay-at-home orders were likely to experience organizational conflicts. This means that partners that experience stress related to the division of organizational duties should be more likely to report worsening relationship quality. Our descriptive findings confirm this prediction, for women and men, as also suggested by the chi-squared test. Even if organizational issues trigger a worsening in marital quality, this is not associated with more severe consequences for the partnership, such as the intention to divorce.

CONCLUSIONS

Exploiting unique data, this study explores the immediate consequences of the pandemic for family life, adding insights to the growing strand of research on the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provides descriptive findings about the association between crucial stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and relationship quality/intention to separate.

It seems that love does not laugh at locksmiths; indeed, a non-negligible proportion of respondents (although not huge, 12%) across Italy, Spain and France reported that their relationship has worsened during the first lockdown. This figure suggests that the consequences of the pandemic have been profound and been across the board, affecting families in several countries (see also Biroli *et alii* 2021).

In all three countries surveyed, both protective factors and resources have played a role in insuring partnership quality. Regarding protective factors, we analyzed the individuals' emotional sphere. We found that feeling alone during the first lockdown was associated with a weakening of intimate relationships in all three countries. The lack or the reduction of crucial resources, such as job and income, also negatively influenced relationship quality.

Our findings are in line with theoretical predictions of family stress theory. As expected, the pandemic has tested the foundations of couple relationships, in both its emotional functioning and (im)material domains. The results indicate that relationship quality has been decreasing more strongly when members report to have felt more alone (than before the pandemic), on one side, and to have experienced job and income loss, on the other side. These findings are consistent with other studies (e.g. Balzarini *et alii* 2020) reporting that the first phase of the pandemic can be identified as a stage that has threatened the ordinary functioning of couples' relationship. Overall, our results emphasize that the costs of the pandemic are not only monetary; we suggest that the non-monetary costs, in terms vulnerability of couples and intimate relationships, have to be added when counting the social losses of the pandemic.

The pandemic dramatically changed the daily routine of millions of adults and children. As we shown, the new lifestyle has partly generated additional conflicts within households with less resources (those experienced income and job loss) of and less protective factors (those experienced isolation and loneliness). This is important as partnership quality is a crucial predictor of marital instability and reproductive choices.

This paper concentrated to short-term (negative) effects of the pandemic on relationship quality and intentions to separate. Given the duration and pervasiveness of the pandemic, future research should address how families adapt and thrive in the new and challenging conditions faced by families over the longer-term, exploring not only negative but also potential positive effects.

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