

## Families In the Storm: an observational study on family systems during the pandemic in an Italian sample

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for social contact limitations have forced everyone to drastically alter their lifestyles in the emotional, social, and working spheres. The contagion prevention measures, in particular, forced families to spend all of their time together at home for long months, resulting in a reorganization of relationships, time, and living space. Families have had to protect the cohesion of their relationships across all latitudes and cultures as they face a period marked by uncertainty about the future, health anguish, and mourning for those who have died because of the pandemic. Within this framework, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of the pandemic on family cohesion because of prolonged social isolation. A sample of 132 families (33 fathers and 99 mothers, whose mean age was 42 years) were recruited using an ad hoc questionnaire that asked one of the parents about their subjective assessment of the perceived changes in their families because of the pandemic. The data gathered point out that these families show resilient coping patterns. The positive effects on interpersonal cohesion, emotional bonding, and communication quality appear to outweigh the pandemic's negative antithetical effects.

### Introduction

In the last century, there has not been an event of such global catastrophic impact as the COVID-19 pandemic, with the exception of the Spanish flu of 1918 and the two world wars. The rapid spread of the contagion endangered the lives of entire populations, imposed severe social isolation, jeopardized the economic stability of nations and individuals, and undermined social relations and the daily lives of families and communities over a period of about 30 months (Singh & Singh, 2020). The pandemic limited personal freedoms, altered long-standing personal and collective habits, and established behaviours, social attitudes, and representations. The pandemic has intervened in the life cycle of families by altering dynamics, roles, and functions, acting as a rapid reorganizer of family relationships (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). Since the Covid-19 pandemic's outbreak, a growing body of research has examined the effects on family and couple relationships (Musolino, 2020; Soejima, 2021; Weeland et al, 2021; Peltz et al.,

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2021; Singh, & Sim, 2021; Cassinat et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2021; Mohanty et al., 2021; Rudolph & Zacher, 2021; Nursetiawati et al., 2022; Yiang et al., 2022). Most of these scientific contributions investigated family dynamics based on the premise that the potentially traumatic effects of the pandemic may have weakened family ties, or they assess families' resilience and coping resources (Annarumma et al., 2020; Daks et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Eales et al., 2021; Gayatri & Irawaty, 2021; Masten, 2021). Multiple factors have created tension in family relationships and tested relational strategies to cope with this experience: forced cohabitation with relatives, the risk of losing loved ones, the deprivation of social relations, distrust of relatives and strangers perceived as carriers of contagion, the compulsion to work from home, feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression (Xiong et al., 2020; Alzueta et al., 2021; Prati & Mancini, 2021).

### The pandemic as a family relationships organizer

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced families into a kind of '*relational paradox*' (Rivett, 2020). This paradoxical condition is characterized by the isolation imposed by the pandemic, which suspended human relationships. However, families have used a variety of strategies to stay in touch with their kinship and community. Indeed, the nature of interpersonal contact has shifted, with social media serving as a guarantor of the continuity of ties. In our opinion, this has resulted in greater nuclear family cohesion and, conversely, a distancing from the extended family and a "*coarted*" family configuration has become prevalent, in which non-cohabiting relatives have become marginal and episodic presences in daily life. Furthermore, a large body of empirical evidence suggests that many people have experienced anxiety and depression, as well as increased dependence on alcohol and psychotropic substances. This widespread psychological discomfort has harmed family relationships, which have become conflictual (Long et al., 2022).

The relational paradox seems to manifest itself in relationships with strangers as well, fuelled by the fear that their presence may increase the risk of contagion. Based on the available literature, it is reasonable to assume that families with pre-existing difficulties in their family dynamics were more vulnerable to the effects of the 'lockdown,' whereas families with strong and harmonious ties were better able to cope with the pandemic by strengthening their internal cohesion (Tam et al., 2021). In the broader context of social groups, the pandemic triggered mass trauma (Landau et al., 2008) highlighting an additional resource for coping with trauma. For the first time in human history, TV and social media, as a vehicle for encounter and dialogue, joined the resources of the family and community to implement resilience strategies. As a result, private relationships inevitably reshaped into social relationships in which the subject could share all of the problematic aspects of this experience. Landau et al. (2008) also observe a '*transitional conflict*' within a traumatized community because each member of the community, different families, and different social groups deal with the trauma differently. This phenomenon exacerbates the polarization of peoples' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, undermining their essential feelings of belonging and cooperation for coping. Mass traumas, on the other hand, acknowledge the possibility of 'post-traumatic growth' because of the collective challenge they cause

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(Olson et al., 2020; Cheng & Liu, 2022).

According to Walsh (2007), the traumatic experience frequently produces remarkable transformation and positive growth. Several studies have found a similar phenomenon in families (Prime et al., 2020; Northfield & Johnston, 2022). For example, most families built family and social resilience in the face of crises and/or adversity (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Ungar, 2018). Therefore, the two-year path that families faced during the pandemic led to realigning these relational systems, distinguishing between those families that were able to cope with this traumatic experience and those that experienced a crisis.

### The challenge for families

The pandemic has forced families to face new challenges, such as reorganizing and sharing living spaces, renegotiating domestic and caring roles. Families have also been on a “rollercoaster” (Walsh, 2020), overwhelmed by the emotional and relational impact that the pandemic's consequences have had on them. Many family systems have experienced an ongoing and pervasive fear of loss: the fear of losing loved ones; the loss of physical contact with extended family members and social networks; the threat of job loss; the loss of pre-crisis lifestyles; the loss of future hopes and dreams, the loss of a sense of normalcy (Walsh, 2020). In times of crisis and loss, each family's belief system, rooted in multigenerational and sociocultural influences, comes to the fore, influencing the experience of members and their paths of adaptation. In this way, the pandemic has weakened family resilience (Walsh, 2020). Prolonged cohabitation has forced each family member to an unusual situation, as no one is accustomed to spending the entire day with their own family; in fact, the family's stability consists in the ability to balance individual time among work, children, relatives, and friends. At least, during the pandemic, the family experience of mourning was profoundly altered, at least during the lockdown. The sick relative frequently passed away alone, and family members were unable to accompany their loved ones during final days. Furthermore, pandemic control measures had an impact on the period immediately following death as funeral rites were prohibited for a long time. This prohibition made it impossible to share grief and find solace in kinship (Imber-Black, 2020; Amorin-Woods, 2021). The forced suspension of these grieving strategies had a significant impact on families' psychological health by eroding their symbolic superstructure (Stroebe & Schut, 2021; Asgari et al., 2022; Cipolletta et al., 2022).

### The pandemic effects on couple dynamics

Numerous studies on the effects of the pandemic have also looked at couple dynamics. With home confinement, many couples shared a constant dialogical space to deal with their problems, which resulted in significant changes in their relationship (Balzarini et al., 2020; Donato et al., 2021). Anxiety, health and financial insecurity, and the loss of social relationships made it difficult to maintain a satisfying relationship, especially for couples who were already in crisis. Studies about the effects of pandemic on the attachment patterns of couples (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020), showed that an insecure attachment represents a strong

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predictor of couple difficulty in adapting to the stressors, and that such couples are more likely to break up during the Covid period (Walsh & Stephenson, 2021). According to these studies, a self-perception of the pandemic's consequences may be related to its effects on significant interpersonal relationships (Walsh & Stephenson, 2021).

Taking together, these findings suggest how healthy relationships may be protective of individual and couple psychological health, whereas conflict and relational dysfunctionality may be detrimental (Fetters, 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that less conflictual couples coped better with this situation, improving their conflict management strategies and experiencing mutual reassurance (Fetters, 2020). It also appears that whether or not multiple resources may be available during such a time period influences how couples cope with stressful events. Pietromonaco & Overall (2022) pointed out that couples who confronted with the pandemic and had few financial resources, greater individual vulnerabilities, and less adaptive dyadic processes were more likely to break up. The financial situation appears to be a predictor of couple tension. Indeed, people who experience more social isolation and financial difficulties linked to COVID-19 report higher levels of conflict and dissatisfaction in their relationships (Balzarini et al., 2020). Finally, being able to communicate with one's partner about the difficulties to be faced during this period of crisis appears to have reduced couples' perceived stress. Several studies have shown that the perceived responsiveness of the partner, i.e. the partner's willingness to listen and empathically share feelings, opened up a space for dialogue and confrontation, which was able to mitigate the effect of stress factors on relationships (Balzarini et al. 2020; Leonard et al., 2022). Maintaining or increasing this capacity during a crisis can ensure a satisfying, emotionally secure relationship marked by intimacy and closeness (Reis et al., 2004).

### The study objectives

In light of the above evidence, the goal of our exploratory study was to investigate whether the Covid-19 pandemic had altered family dynamics, particularly communication patterns and perceptions of family cohesion (Tam et al., 2021). Based on this goal, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Significant changes in relational dynamics have occurred in family systems.

H2: Family systems have become more cohesive.

H3: Family systems have improved interpersonal communication in terms of mutual understanding and emotional expressiveness.

### Participants

Approximately 17.5 percent of the 160 participants (80 couples), initially involved in the study, omitted answers for more than half of the questionnaire administered and were thus excluded from the final sample. The final sample included 132 participants, of whom 33 (25%) were fathers and 99 (75%) were

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mothers; the average age was 42 years; the majority of the study population (58.3 percent) were university graduates or specialists, 33.3 percent had a high school diploma, and only 8.3 percent had compulsory schooling (see Table 1.). The number of children in the sample families ranges from one to four, with a higher percentage of families having two children. Only 16.7% (n.22) of the questionnaire respondents became ill with Covid-19; 18% of fathers (n.6) and 16.1% of mothers (n.6) fell ill (n.16). Covid-19 infected 69.2% of family members, with 21.2% (n.28) being members of the nuclear family (spouse and/or child). 11.4% of the family members in the sample died, accounting for 16.6% of the total number of sick people. All of the latter were members of the extended family (n. 15). It should be noted that when the questionnaire was administered (April 2021), the vast majority of people over the age of 65 had already been immunized.

### Procedure

An online cross-sectional study was conducted from March 15 to April 31 2021, immediately after the third wave of SarsCoVID19. A virtual snowball sample through social media was used within a wider web-based study including other psychological measures. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants included in the study.

### Measures

General information concerning sex, age, nationality, marital status, education, geographic area and region, number of family members or sons and daughters were collected. In addition, participants were asked to answer about their infection with the SARS-CoV-2 (“if they have been infected by COVID”), having a relative affected (“Have you had family members infected with COVID-19?”), they have suffered a recent loss (i.e. “Have you had family members who died because of COVID-19?”). Six items classified in two categories measured the effects of the pandemic on family cohesion perception because of prolonged social isolation by COVID-19 pandemic infection: positive effect (#1, #2, #3, and #5); negative effect (#4, #6). All the items have been formulated according to comprehensive criteria with a lexicon free of specific psychological constructs. Respondents were asked about the frequency whether they had experienced positive or negative effects on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree”). A preliminary version of the items has been piloted on a curtesy subsample of 28 couples, to assess its feasibility and comprehensibility. The questionnaire was administered to a group of families living in the Campania region. For each family, only one of the parents was asked to fill in the questionnaire. The 6 items are the following:

Item #1: My family changed with the pandemic

Item #2: Our family ties have improved with the pandemic

Item #3: The links with kinship have improved with the pandemic

Item #4: In the family, we now understand each other worse than before

Item #5: In the family, after the pandemic, we express our emotions more

Item #6: Communication between family members worsened with the pandemic

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for socio-demographic characteristics and variables about SARS-CoV-2 status. In addition, a series of parametric (e.g., Pearson r) and non-parametric test were carried out to determine the degree of associations and/or the presence of statistically significant differences between the target variables included in the present study. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistic 21.0 (IBM SPSS Statistics). Statistical significance was set by *p* values of less than .05.

## Results

Sociodemographic variables and COVID related variables are shown in Table 1.

**Tab. 1**

		<i>f</i>	%
<i>Family Role</i>			
	Father	33	25,0
	Mather	99	75,0
<i>Age</i>			
	M±SD	42,54±9,30	Range: 25-70
<i>Offspring</i>			
	Mediana	2	Range: 1-4
<i>Education</i>			
	Primary/Secondary Education	11	8,3
	High School Diploma	44	33,3
	Degree	44	33,3
	Postgraduate	33	25,0
<i>Did he get COVID?</i>			
	No	110	83,3
	Yes	22	16,7
<i>Family members who got COVID-19:</i>			
	Nobody	42	31,8
	Spouse	19	14,4
	Son	9	6,8
	Parent	7	5,3
	Brother/Sister	16	12,1
	Brother-in-law	14	10,6
	Other relative	25	18,9

*Family members deceased due to COVID-19:*

Nessuno	117	88,6
Altro parente	15	11,4

Notes. f = Observed Frequency; %= Percentage

The distribution of the answers to each item of the questionnaire is shown below (see Table 2).

Item 1: My family changed with the pandemic

51.6% agreed, while the other half were evenly divided between those who did not see a change in their family (25%) and those who did not express an opinion (23.4%).

Item 2: Our family ties have improved with the pandemic

Those who agreed (47%) outnumbered those who disagreed (28.8%) and those who had no opinion (24.2%).

Item 3: The links with kinship have improved with the pandemic.

In this case, there is an equal distribution of answers: 37.1% of the sample think that the ties with the family have improved, 38.7% disagree, while 24.2% have no opinion about it.

Item 4: In the family, we now understand each other worse than before

With respect to this item, which describes a negative quality of family dynamics, the distribution is reversed. Only 22.8% agree with this statement, 16.7% have no opinion about it, 60.5% disagree.

Item 5: In the family, after the pandemic, we express our emotions more

The majority of the participants agreed (48.5%), the other answers were equally distributed between those who disagreed (25.7%) and those who had no opinion (25.8%).

Item 6: Communication between family members worsened with the pandemic.

Once again, it appears that the attribution of a negative quality to households is not reflected. In fact, the majority disagreed with this statement (62.2%), the remainder of the respondents either agreed (21.2%) or had no opinion (16.6%).

Tab. 2

	Strongly agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Correlations				
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	2	3	4	5	6
1. My family changed with the pandemic.	34	25,8	34	25,8	31	23,4	16	12,1	17	12,9	,080	,163	,061	,205*	,131
2. Our family ties have improved with the pandemic	24	18,2	38	28,8	32	24,2	24	18,2	14	10,6		,517**	-,266**	,513**	-,395**
3. The links with kinship have improved with the pandemic	16	12,1	33	25,0	32	24,2	27	20,5	24	18,2			-,033	,359**	-,086
4. In the family we now understand each other worse than before.	15	11,4	15	11,4	22	16,7	26	19,7	54	40,8				,053	,561**
5. In the family, after the pandemic, we express our emotions more.	21	15,9	43	32,6	34	25,8	25	18,9	9	6,8					-,0152
6. Communication between family members worsened with the pandemic*	11	8,3	17	12,9	22	16,6	27	20,5	55	41,7					

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Notes.  $f$  = Observed Frequency; % = Percentage\* $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$ 

Differences among sociodemographic variables, as well as questions about infection with the SARS-CoV-2, having a relative affected, and have suffered a recent loss, were not found statistically significant in both positive and negative family cohesion perception during pandemic. When examining the relationship between the specific effects of the pandemic on family cohesion perception, “Our family ties have improved with the pandemic” was found positively associated on averaged with improvement with the ties of kinship (item #3) ( $r = .517$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as well as with greater expression of emotions (item #5) ( $r = .513$ ,  $p < .01$ ). On the other hand, the improvement on family ties during the pandemic, were negatively associated with both the negative pandemic effects items (#4-6)  $r =$  ranging from  $-.266$  to  $-.395$  ( $p < .01$ ). The more expression of emotions in the family (item #5), was also found to correlated positively with a family changed with the pandemic (item #1) ( $r = .205$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and improvement with the ties of kinship (item #3) ( $r = .359$ ,  $p < .01$ ). An improving in communication and comprehension among the members of the family was also evident in the correlation between the items: “In the family we now understand each other worse than before” with “Communication between family members worsened with the pandemic” ( $r = .561$ ,  $p < .01$ ). No correlations were found between the remaining variables.

## Discussion

To our knowledge, very few studies have been published on the overall effect of the pandemic on family relationships (Ferrara et al., 2021). Our study is intriguing, as it appears to be at odds with the available literature, which claims that the pandemic has increased the risk of dysfunctional dynamics in family systems (Prime et al., 2020; Browne et al., 2021). Indeed, items describing improved family cohesion as a result of the pandemic received a significant consensus of responses, with percentages ranging from 37.1% (item 3) to 51.6% (item 1).

On the other hand, the items attributing a negative impact of the pandemic on family dynamics show a prevailing disagreement ranging from 60.6 - 62.2%. In this regard, it is possible to speculate that the pandemic has elicited cohesive resources in families, which are suitable for dealing with this critical event, or that the negative connotation of items 4 and 6, (“*in the family we now understand each other worse than before*”; “*communication between family members worsened with the pandemic*”), has elicited defensive responses. The high percentages of answers in disagreement with items 4-6 appear to support this second hypothesis, because a negative description of family relationships elicits greater emotional implications in order to protect one's positive representations of the family. Also, the low percentage of neutral responses to the same items (16.7%) when compared to the percentage of neutral responses to items focused on a positive impact of the pandemic (from 23.5% to 25.8%) appears to confirm this hypothesis. Furthermore, it appears that the pandemic had no negative impact on communication patterns (item 6) and actually improved family ties (item 2) rather than kinship ties (item 3).



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Furthermore, the increase in family cohesion appears to be confirmed by responses to item 5 expressing easier emotional sharing among family members.

The responses to items 2-5 can be interpreted as a positive effect of each person's lockdown period spent at home with their family members and, therefore, of the time spent in daily communicative interactions. The even distribution of responses to item 3 could also be attributed to the lockdown experience, which caused a significant social isolation and loss of contact with family members. It should be noted, however, that our study was conducted approximately one year after the end of the lockdown period in Italy. So, attributing the responses to items 2-3-5 to an event that occurred twelve months earlier assumes that the effects of the lockdown on family dynamics were not transitory but stable over time.

### Limitations of the study

According to the relevant literature, our observational study suggests the presence of cohesive resources in family systems in the face of worldwide traumatic events. However, it does have significant methodological limitations. The present research is based on a small sample of families living in a specific region of Italy. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from it cannot be considered descriptive of a relational coping style that is common in Italian families. Second, the ad hoc questionnaire, developed for the study, examines only some aspects of the complex family dynamics that have emerged because of the pandemic, as a single item examines each of the dimensions investigated. Moreover, the spread of the questionnaire allows for random sampling errors. The data collected in this manner do not show statistically significant correlations between the questionnaire responses and the sample's socio-demographic variables concerning age group, gender differences of the respondents, and role in the family. For example, the small sample size prevents us from concluding whether the pandemic affected young people more than the elderly or fathers more than mothers. The questionnaire's items is not oriented to the exploration of the deep emotional family dynamics. Finally, the complete absence of deaths in the questionnaire respondents' nuclear family, hence of bereavement experiences, may represent a descriptive bias because it oriented our sample's responses in a positive rather than a negative direction. Given all of this, our study requires further empirical validation through larger and more detailed studies, particularly with an increase of the reference sample.

### Conclusions

In summary, our study found that half of the sample experienced changes in family relationships because of the pandemic's spread and the prolonged social distancing, as evidenced by the responses to item 1. If we consider the responses to items 2-5, these changes appear to be positive and of a moderate gradient. In light of the responses to items 4-6, negative changes appear even less relevant. This evidence suggests that family systems coped with the pandemic through positive resilience and interpersonal cohesion.

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