




Article

Enforced Togetherness: Change and Continuity in Relationship Satisfaction among Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This paper investigates how the sharp increase in time spent at home due to COVID-19-related restrictions shaped parents' relationship satisfaction with their partners. Drawing on 78 in-depth interviews with heterosexual partnered parents with at least one child aged 18 or under, we find that this experience of what we call "enforced togetherness" had varied effects on couples' relationships. More than half of the respondents (fifty-five percent) reported improved relationship satisfaction, while fifteen percent reported a decline, and the remaining thirty percent no change. Individuals with higher satisfaction took advantage of enforced togetherness and sought out more frequent and intense communication and leisure activities, underscoring the importance of spending time in strengthening relationships. On the other hand, those who were unable or unwilling to engage in these activities, due to lack of support for increased care needs and their continued uneven distribution across the couple, saw their relationships deteriorate. Finally, individuals experienced stability in their relationships when their prior routines and arrangements remained largely undisrupted by the pandemic. Our findings shed light on the significance of time as a valuable resource for couples' relationships, while at the same time emphasizing the role of their agency in its utilization.

Keywords: relationships; parents; time; confinement; COVID-19



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1. Introduction

One of the most noticeable ways the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's daily lives was by confining them to their homes. Social distancing measures, lockdowns, and event cancellations left people spending an unprecedented amount of time in their households. Changes in how people structured and lived their lives were pronounced for partnered parents, especially for those who shifted to remote work and/or managed remote schooling for their children. While the duration of such confinement varied by state-level and employer policies, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the pandemic had sharply increased the time people were now spending with their partners and children.

We examine this experience of being home-bound with one's family due to pandemic-related restrictions on mobility and social gathering, or what we call "enforced togetherness", and its varied consequences for how satisfied parents are in their relationships with their partners. Drawing on 78 in-depth interviews with married or cohabiting heterosexual parents with at least one child aged 18 or under, we find that parents' relationship trajectories during the pandemic diverged depending on *whether* and *how* they spent the increased amount of time made available to them. More than half of our interviewees—fifty-five percent—reported that they became more satisfied with their relationships than before the pandemic. They utilized the extra available time by engaging in effective communication and joint recreation, activities that they could not readily afford in the pre-pandemic era.

About fifteen percent of our sample, in contrast, reported a decline in their relationships. Most of these respondents reported that the enforced togetherness brought more stress and anxiety both individually and between the couple. The remaining thirty percent reported stability in their relationship quality and satisfaction throughout the pandemic.

In what follows, we review the literature on couples' relationship dynamics generally and specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the effects of time, stress, and communication. Next, we explain our data and methods and discuss our findings. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for scholarship on how the pandemic impacted relationships and how work modalities influence relationships and life satisfaction, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Stressors on Relationships*

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on couple's relationships to date tends to paint a bleak picture, characterizing it as an externally imposed crisis causing various stressors, such as uncertainty and anxiety from contracting the virus, confinement, and lack of social interactions (Bretaña et al. 2023; Cénat and Dalexis 2020). This largely corroborates pre-pandemic research on stress and intimate relationships (see Randall and Bodenmann 2009 for a review), which shows that stressful life events such as economic pressure (Conger et al. 1999), illness (Bolger et al. 1996), and daily stress from work and other spheres of life (Harper et al. 2000; Story and Repetti 2006) negatively impact relationships.

Much pandemic research on relationships focused on how people were coping with work and caregiving responsibilities as paid work shifted to remote work, childcare facilities closed, and schools went online. It highlights an intensified burden on parents, borne disproportionately by women (Collins et al. 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Mooi-Reci and Risman 2021; Calarco et al. 2021). This body of work shows how these stressors make individuals prone to experiencing an increase in both the frequency and intensity of conflicts with partners (Balzarini et al. 2023; Ishikawa 2020; Lima et al. 2020; Vigl et al. 2022). Studies vary on the specific mechanisms of this impact, including fears about health and finances, as well as emotional exhaustion. All of these issues can potentially trigger problematic behaviors and lower relationship quality.

Research has also shown that the COVID-19 pandemic created other stressors, such as disruptions in employment arrangements. Drawing on German data, Schmid et al. (2020) find that, on average, relationship satisfaction decreased for both men and women following the onset of the pandemic. This decrease in relationship satisfaction happened regardless of whether their employment situation changed during this time or not. This suggests that COVID-19-related changes in employment were not the primary factor impacting relationships. Overall, studies with data collected early in the pandemic highlight that, as stress levels increased among individuals, spousal support and marital satisfaction decreased.

However, some research suggests that the pandemic may have had an unexpected positive impact on couples. Using data on cohabiting couples in Canada and the United States, Ascigil et al. (2023) report that those who were satisfied with the quality of time with their partners reported higher relationship satisfaction during the first year of the pandemic. This finding is echoed by Vigl et al.'s (2022) cross-national study of cohabiting and noncohabiting couples which shows that the reduction in shared activities with a partner leads to a decrease in relationship satisfaction. Together, these studies underscore the emotional dimensions and temporal investments in relationships as pivotal factors shaping outcomes during pandemic challenges. This is consistent with research on natural disasters which finds that the exposure to disasters often mobilizes people to turn to their intimate relationships to cope with loss of resources (Fredman et al. 2010) and to take significant action in their close relationships, such as the transition to marriage (Cohan and Cole 2002).

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced both challenges and opportunities for relationship satisfaction. Remote work and increased shared time might increase satisfaction, but external stressors, employment changes, and the presence of children with daycares and schools shut introduce possible negative factors for relationships. There is yet no consensus on if or how the pandemic era has affected couples' relationships. It is unclear if enforced togetherness by itself would influence how satisfied respondents were in their relationships. Past research, however, suggests that enforced togetherness needs to be studied in context, including attention to external stressors and the quality of a couple's communication. The direction of change in relationship satisfaction surely depends on not only whether they experienced stress-inducing disruptions in their arrangements of work, family, and personal lives but also how they coped with such changes over time in an era of enforced togetherness. As the initial stressors of the pandemic became the "new normal", little is understood about the effects of external stresses on relationships. This study is one attempt to update this issue and one of the first qualitative research studies to do so.

2.2. Effects of Time on Relationships

Time is an unequally distributed resource that many individuals, especially working parents, find scarce, given the intense demands from both the workplace and home life (Jacobs and Gerson 2001). For the employed parent, the job puts a ceiling on the time spent on a couple relationship and on caretaking. The issue is not only how much time is allocated to family but how the intensity of work and conditions of the workplace influence the quality of family time and leisure spent as a couple. This "time bind" is especially true for dual-income families, where both partners juggle paid work and family responsibilities (Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Wajcman 2014).

Pre-pandemic research suggests that having enough quality time is important to couples (Flood and Genadek 2016; Roxburgh 2006; Shafer et al. 2018; Stolarski et al. 2016). Individuals report higher levels of happiness and meaningfulness and lower levels of stress when they are able to spend time with their spouses (Flood and Genadek 2016). Dissatisfaction with time spent with family is a widespread experience, cutting across class and gender lines, contrasting with findings on general time pressures (Roxburgh 2006). According to one study by Roxburgh (2006), only one-fifth of working men and women are satisfied with the time they spend with their spouses and children when taking into consideration workplace support, long work hours, housework demands, and childcare demands. While there were no gendered differences in dissatisfaction, it is interesting to note that while men simply wanted an increase in the time spent with their partners, women in the study emphasized their desire for an increase in quality time with their partner (Roxburgh 2006).

While experiencing dissatisfaction with the amount of time shared with spouses is a constant experience across gender and class lines, taking a closer look, there do appear to be nuances to the intensity of that dissatisfaction. Shafer et al. (2018) reveal how the demands of long hours influence time satisfaction for heterosexual couples, reporting that women married to men working more than 50 h per week have significantly higher perceived time stress when compared to women married to men working between 35 and 49 h per week. Interestingly, the number of hours women worked did not influence their male spouse's perceived time stress. Low-income couples reportedly have fewer opportunities for shared time with their spouses, and the time they did spend with their partners was marked by increased stress when compared to high-income couples (Williamson and Schouweiler 2023). We do expect that for respondents who experienced serious time shortages while juggling work and family before the pandemic and become remote workers, the extra time at home may increase their personal and relationship satisfaction.

2.3. Effects of Communication on Relationships

Partners with strong communication skills report higher relationship satisfaction. Based on their research studying the relationships between marital satisfaction, division

of labor in the home, and communication, using survey data, [Carlson et al. \(2020\)](#) argue, “strong communication skills help couples improve the long-term, global health of the relationship in a positive and constructive fashion that leads to mutual satisfaction”. In a study seeking to determine whether relationship satisfaction led to sexual satisfaction or vice versa, researchers found that there was not a direct relationship between the two variables, but rather it was a third variable, communication, that actually influenced relationship satisfaction ([Byers 2005](#)). This study of eighty-seven individuals in long-term relationships showed that an increase in communication quality led to increased relationship satisfaction, and a decrease in communication quality led to a decrease in relationship satisfaction.

Whether or not communication leads to satisfaction, however, is not entirely clear. [Lavner et al. \(2016\)](#) find that satisfaction was a slightly better predictor of couples’ communication rather than the other way around. In other words, a correlation exists, but causation is not so clear. Another study using longitudinal data showed that when couples had fewer negative interactions, it generally meant that they were happier in their relationship at that moment ([Johnson et al. 2022](#)). But feeling happy because of positive interactions did not seem to affect their overall satisfaction with the relationship as much, suggesting that the way a couple communicates might be more of a reflection of their relationship satisfaction rather than the other way around.

Stress on relationships also appears to have an influence on communications between partners. In their study comparing distressed couples with non-distressed couples, [Burlison and Denton \(1997\)](#) show that the distressed couples observed were not lacking in communications skills per se but showed signs of ill will in their communications, pointing to “spousal motivations” as the key influence of effective communication. [Zemp et al. \(2017\)](#) show that child-related stress is generally linked to lower relationship satisfaction, as well as communication quality. Couples with high child-related stress have impaired communication strategies, leading to an overall communication decline in the relationship. In a time of high stress such as COVID-19, with many opportunities for even higher child-related stress due to school closures, daycare closures, and at-home schooling, one might expect to see relationship communication decline as a result. There does not appear to be a strong empirical basis to support the causality between the correlation that exists between communication and relationships satisfaction.

3. Materials and Methods

To understand how and why parents’ relationship satisfaction with their partners changed over the course of the pandemic, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 78 women and men in heterosexual marriages or cohabiting unions with at least one child aged 18 or under. These women and men are not partnered with each other, and these data thus represent an individual’s narrative of how his or her relationship unfolded. While the interviewees’ partners may have a different point of view of their relationship trajectory, we were nonetheless able to gain rich and detailed accounts of the respondents’ perceptions of how their partners understood the shared experience in the household.

The study’s sample was recruited as part of a larger study, where a nationally representative sample of American adults with childcare or elder-care responsibilities were collected via the National Opinion Research Center’s AmeriSpeak survey ([NORC at the University of Chicago 2022](#)). AmeriSpeak is an online survey panel. Our team asked if people responsible for caregiving for either children or the elderly would be willing to be interviewed. We contacted everyone who answered yes to the question on that survey and met the eligibility criteria for being partnered and having childcare or elder-care responsibilities. The response rate was approximately 25 percent. The zoom interviews were not part of the AmeriSpeak project, but we used their representative panel to find interview respondents. The interviews were conducted from June 2021 to February 2022, all via Zoom, and lasted between forty minutes and two and a half hours. The interviews began 16 months after the pandemic began, so that we could capture changes the respondents felt

happened over more than a year. During the latter half of the data collection process, we asked the respondents to refer to acquaintances that fit the larger study's eligibility criteria to increase the sample size. This generated a dozen additional interviews. We find no perceptual differences in the interviews with those from the AmeriSpeak data and others.

This research is part of a larger study of work and caregiving during the pandemic. The interview scheduled was collaboratively designed to provide the respondents' narrative understanding of how the pandemic was shaping their work and caregiving experiences. The interview began with questions about household and care responsibilities before the pandemic and then proceeded with questions about changes in work and personal responsibilities over the course of the pandemic. The next module of questions focused on life satisfaction before and during the pandemic, including focus on employment and couple relationships. We then asked about adaptation to the pandemic in caretaking, schooling, and domestic experiences, as well as changes in mental and physical health. We then followed up with questions about social policies enacted during the pandemic and possible future policies to help parents balance work and family responsibilities. Lastly, we gathered demographic information, including race, income, geographical information, religion, political orientation, and educational status. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded by the authors and their colleagues of the larger study. The two first co-authors of this article further coded the 78 respondents of this study, focusing on relationship-related themes. Given the scale of these data and size of our research team, we used a flexible coding approach for the initial round of coding. Flexible coding is useful for large-scale interview data such as ours and involves "starting big with index coding" and attribute coding before applying more fine-grained thematic codes (Deterding and Waters 2021). We began with attribute coding and then coded the data for each research question. For this analysis, we then reread each transcript and analyzed it for themes relating specifically to the experience of spending more time together during the pandemic. The first two co-authors reiteratively coded the data when themes emerged that appeared to be related to the time each respondent spent with his or her partner during the pandemic. We went back to each full transcript and applied the detailed thematic codes to capture more nuanced dimensions of each theme related to time spent together. In this step, clear patterns and themes emerged which we discuss as key findings below.

The sample consists of 46 women and 32 men aged 26 to 61 (mean = 39) who are partners and parents. Despite efforts to diversify the racial identities of the sample, more than seventy percent is non-Hispanic White. Ninety-two percent are married, while the remaining eight percent are cohabiting. Nearly two-thirds are in dual-earner households, where both partners worked full-time jobs; one-third of the respondents are in traditional or neotraditional households, where the female partner was out of the workforce or employed part-time (i.e., less than 30 h a week). The sample is nearly equally split between those with a high school degree or some college, a college degree, and graduate education, representing a significantly more educated sample than the overall population. Relatedly, many of our respondents hold jobs with high levels of occupational prestige. This study may thus not fully capture the diverse range of experiences and challenges faced by less-educated couples or those in less prestigious occupations, which may have implications for the generalizability of our findings.

We used pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. As noted above, the sample reflects only one partner's perception of the couple's relationship trajectories. This limits our ability to ascertain whether or how couples may have diverging outlooks on their relationships despite shared experiences—a critical issue for future studies. Another limitation to this sample is that because we interviewed people at least 16 months after the start of the pandemic, those most affected and least satisfied with their partners may have already divorced. Table 1 presents a descriptive summary of the sample, delineating variations in relationship satisfaction, categorized as increased, decreased, or unchanged.

Table 1. Descriptive summary according to relationship outcome.

		Increased		Decreased		No Change		Total	
		N	Proportion	N	Proportion	N	Proportion	N	Proportion
Gender	Male	19	0.44	3	0.27	10	0.42	32	0.41
	Female	24	0.56	8	0.73	14	0.58	46	0.59
Household type	Dual-earner	25	0.58	4	0.36	14	0.58	52	0.67
	Breadwinner *	9	0.21	5	0.45	6	0.25	16	0.21
	One Partner PT **	9	0.21	2	0.18	4	0.17	10	0.13
Age range	20–29	2	0.05	1	0.09	1	0.04	4	0.05
	30–39	23	0.53	5	0.45	10	0.42	38	0.49
	40–49	16	0.37	4	0.36	9	0.38	29	0.37
	50 or older	2	0.05	1	0.09	4	0.17	7	0.09
Race and Ethnicity	Non-Hispanic White	33	0.77	8	0.73	16	0.67	57	0.73
	Non-Hispanic Black	4	0.09	1	0.09	4	0.17	9	0.12
	Hispanic	3	0.07	2	0.18	2	0.08	7	0.09
	Non-Hispanic Other	3	0.07	0	-	2	0.08	5	0.06
Marital Status	Married	42	0.98	9	0.82	21	0.88	72	0.92
	Cohabiting	1	0.02	2	0.18	3	0.13	6	0.08
Number of Children	1	15	0.35	1	0.09	8	0.33	24	0.31
	2	16	0.37	5	0.45	8	0.33	29	0.37
	3	8	0.19	1	0.09	4	0.17	13	0.17
	4 or more	4	0.09	4	0.36	4	0.17	12	0.15
Educational Attainment	High school	3	0.07	0	-	1	0.04	4	0.05
	Some college	13	0.30	4	0.36	6	0.25	23	0.29
	College graduate	13	0.30	3	0.27	9	0.38	25	0.32
	Postgraduate	14	0.33	4	0.36	8	0.33	26	0.33
		43	0.93	11	0.34	24	0.31	78	

* All but one breadwinner was the husband. ** All but three part-time workers were wives.

Importantly, this study differs from previous studies on the COVID-19 pandemic and relationships in that we collected the data more than a year after the pandemic started. By the time of the interview, respondents had moved past the dramatic disruptions that occurred in the early months of the pandemic, such as the first experience of lockdowns, e.g., the closing of public schools and childcare institutions. In other words, the respondents were largely distanced from the initial turmoil that marks the pandemic experiences examined in previous research. They were well-situated to take stock of their early experiences of the pandemic, to make changes to their lives, or to maintain the changes they made during this time based on such experiences. This may partly explain why, as we later show, many of the participants found their relationships to have improved, despite some high-intensity conflicts early in the pandemic.

We asked questions about participants’ work and home lives, covering the period from before the pandemic began, through the initial months, and up to the present state during the interview. We also asked a variety of questions about the respondents’ relationship with their partner before the pandemic and how it changed over the course of the pandemic to the present. We first asked how satisfied they were with their relationship and why. Whenever they expressed ambivalence or negative feelings, we asked why and what they wished had unfolded differently. We also inquired about changes in the respondent’s

partner's employment situation; how they affected the partner's well-being, as well as his or her own; and whether and how he or she dealt with the challenges brought on by these changes.

4. Results

4.1. Enforced Togetherness

All respondents in our sample spent significantly more time at home with their partners since the pandemic began than they had before, due to changes in work situations (e.g., remote work and job loss), limitations to social activities in public spaces (e.g., stay-at-home orders and social distancing), or both. We call this sustained condition of being home-bound together with one's partner in place of pre-pandemic activities and routines *enforced togetherness*.

Interviewees' experiences varied in terms of the duration and intensity of enforced togetherness. Couples for whom either one or both partners transitioned to working from home and sustained this arrangement over an extended period underwent radical transformations in their daily lives. As one such example, Robert, a 40-year-old father of two who works in data management, said the following:

The number one change that comes to mind first is the amount of time that we spent at home. . . everything has become more centralized to the home. When the pandemic began, schooling was at home, working at home, eating at home all the time. Any type of family activities or social activities would be at home. No outside activities.

Yet, even in cases where none of the partners worked from home or lived in regions where social-distancing measures were imposed for only briefly, couples nonetheless found themselves spending more leisure time at home, such as after-work evening hours and weekends. For instance, Monique, a 46-year-old clinical laboratory scientist and a mother of one, continued to work in-person throughout the pandemic, and so did her husband. Nevertheless, the increased time spent at home was the defining characteristic of her pandemic experience: "Since we really couldn't go out to do anything, we stayed at home together, so we did spend a lot of time together".

As we later show, despite shared experiences of enforced togetherness, interviewees varied in terms of whether and how their relationship with their partners changed since the pandemic began (see Figure 1). To explain such divergences, we turn to an analysis of *how* they spent the time brought by enforced togetherness.

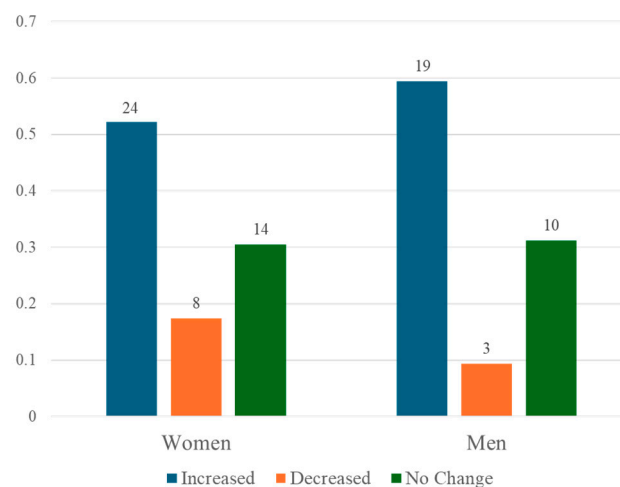


Figure 1. Pandemic outcomes on relationship satisfaction by gender. Note: The bars indicate the proportions within each gender group.

4.2. Increased Relationship Satisfaction

More than half of the people in our sample (42 out of 78) reported that their relationship satisfaction increased compared to before the pandemic. Many in this group noted the transition to remote work and its associated changes, such as reduced travel and flexible schedules, as contributing to more time with their partners. While such adjustments initially created disruptions that were stressful, respondents eventually came to enjoy the extra time and energy that they were afforded. Respondents reported a consistent desire for more leisure and family time away from work, and the pandemic provided them with such a gift. Such positive experiences during the pandemic were equally salient for individuals across household types.

Tommy, a 39-year-old father of one and government employee, had steadily worked from home full-time since the beginning of the pandemic, and so did his wife, a video game programmer. Tommy acknowledged the benefits of the enforced togetherness, noting that the increased time spent with his wife and son was a welcome change from their previous hectic schedules: “The forced togetherness time has been really good for us because we just never seemed to have enough of it before. That’s probably my big pro. As I said, we’ve been lucky”. Juggling childcare responsibilities and remote schooling with his partner, Tommy valued the flexibility and family-focused reprioritization brought about by telecommuting. Enforced togetherness seems to have a clear positive impact on couples that were overworked and who previously lacked the time that they would have liked to spend with their partners and children.

The interviewees in this group echoed similar narratives that they found pleasure in spending ample time with their partners, which required extra special effort in their overworked lives before the pandemic. Despite the initial stress and challenges, Diane, a 26-year-old daycare worker and mother of three, reflected on their experience as a couple, suggesting that the pandemic did not fundamentally alter the way they operated in their relationship but provided them with the gift of time: “I don’t think that the pandemic really changed anything for us. It just gave us time to be together more”.

Similarly, Joanna, a 35-year-old mother of two and software developer, said: “When we were both remote, we would take a morning walk with the dogs and that was just really nice that was something that we’ve never really had time to do”. Jennifer, a 32-year-old college administrator and mother of one, similarly noted: “We have lunch together, every day we make coffee when I get home from daycare drop off, so I feel like our relationship is a lot stronger as well when we’re both home”. In a different interview, Tommy complemented these sentiments with his own story: “we almost never got to sit down other than on the weekends. We didn’t get to sit down to a family dinner hardly ever. . . and we’re sitting down to three meals a day during the pandemic now, and that’s been kind of nice”.

It is noteworthy that rather than perceiving this enforced togetherness as a strain, couples who saw their relationship satisfaction increase proactively engaged in meaningful interactive activities. The women and men in this group attributed such outcomes to the high frequency and intensity of what we call *quality couple time*, activities that both partners participate in together, actively nurturing and deepening their emotional bonds. Quality couple time is distinct from time spent in the partner’s presence at home, something that enforced togetherness increased for all individuals in our sample. It is also different from what we typically call family time, which tends to revolve around the care and entertainment of one’s children rather than one’s spouse or romantic partner. Instead, the term “quality couple time” highlights the couple’s use of enforced togetherness to engage in interactive activities with *each other* that provide opportunities for connection and intimacy, rather than merely co-existing in the same physical space or performing caregiving tasks for their children. It includes having deep conversations about their feelings, concerns, and grievances about each other and participating in leisure and entertainment activities together. For example, when asked about how the pandemic changed his relationship, Jack, a father of two children under six working in-person as a power plant technician throughout the pandemic, reflected as follows:

[W]e had to communicate a lot more. Because we were around each other so much more frequently, you know, we spent a lot more time talking to each other, working out little minor things. . . we do little projects together, and then you know, caring for the kids. Definitely strengthened it. . . It got better.

Here, we see how, in addition to simply being around each other more, Jack highlights the importance of both communication and shared activities with his spouse—with or without their children—in contributing to their overall increased relationship satisfaction, encapsulating this concept of quality couple time. We detail these two factors in turn.

Leisure activities. One way that respondents engaged in quality couple time was through enjoying leisure activities with their partners at home or in their neighborhood. These activities usually meant relishing the simple pleasures in life, such as cooking together, eating together, doing puzzles, playing games, and taking long walks together. While they may be simple, respondents noted that they were nonetheless not readily attainable prior to the pandemic, given work commitments, long and exhausting commutes, and other social obligations that took place outside their homes. Indeed, many interviewees lamented the loss of such social interactions with friends, colleagues, and extended family members. However, they remarked on the joys of being able to spend leisure time with their families and cited this as the best parts of their pandemic experience.

Don, a 35-year-old salesman and father of one, had always wanted to spend more time with his wife but always found his work encroaching on his time and energy. The pandemic had been a blessing, as it finally allowed him to align his values with his action and “walk the walk”:

I’ve always talked about family being the number one thing in my life, but I wasn’t living by that value when I was working, commuting and doing all those other things. Now I get to actually walk the talk. . . . So I’ve put things in a better perspective for my wife and I and our household. And because of that, I think it’s become strengthened. I think that’s why we’ve been blessed.

Edith, a 38-year-old mother of four and office secretary, echoed this sentiment. Although neither Edith nor her husband could work from home, the mere absence of social events on workday evenings and on the weekends allowed them to focus more on each other. They made a deliberate decision to shut off their electronic devices and to entertain themselves with inexpensive activities, such as card games and board games. She explained as follows:

I think our relationship grew stronger because, it’s like, okay, everyone put down the phones, everybody’s home, we’re going to do family stuff . . . I guess the best part would be that it forced us to think outside the box. Like, what can we do that’s not going to involve us having to go anywhere, but still have fun and spend time together? It just brought us closer as a family.

Communication. The respondents in this group said they also experienced a notable increase in the frequency and quality of communication with their partners during this period of enforced togetherness. The increased availability of time—and energy—allowed couples to break away from their routine inertia and engage in long conversations about topics that they had not previously had the time to discuss, such as life goals, values, and parenting strategies. Discussing such topics both reflected and cemented their shared futures and commitment toward each other, bringing them closer together.

Kevin, a 42-year-old father of three and athletic director at a local college, started to work from home for the first few months of the pandemic and then changed his job to a permanent hybrid position which allowed him to stay home four days of the week. Meanwhile, his wife lost her job for over a year as a part-time instructional aide in an elementary school and had only recently returned to her job by the time of the interview. Both found themselves with more time and energy than they ever had before, which allowed them to discuss critical issues that they had not previously. As Kevin explained:

We're more in tune with each other's emotions. We communicated those emotions better because we spent more time together . . . Now we have talked about the plan five years from now, and we set goals, which aren't things we did before. So, I think that improved our relationship and the way we feel about each other, too, because now we're talking about 10 years from now where we want to be and what we want to do.

Belicia, a 33-year-old mother of two and dental hygienist, also emphasized that enforced togetherness offered her and her husband an opportunity for self-reflection and open communication about their thoughts and feelings:

The one good thing about the pandemic shaking things up—it gave us more time to think about things that we needed to strengthen between parenting, marriage, giving out tasks and everything. I think sometimes everybody just gets used to their day-to-day and get in the habit of just going through the motions without feeling or without really questioning what needs to improve. The pandemic kind of helped us just take a step back and be like hey, we can actually improve this aspect. . . like, take a step back and be able to open up, communicate more, so we know what each other wants and expects. . . we're able to like, open the gates to better communication, which makes a healthier relationship overall.

In essence, the pandemic served as a catalyst for couples to engage in more frequent, meaningful, and profound conversations. These discussions, coupled with the challenges faced collectively, contributed to a significant improvement in communication dynamics and, consequently, enhanced relationship satisfaction for many participants.

Additionally, for several respondents in this group (n = 8), a move toward a more equitable division of household labor emerged as a significant factor contributing to relationship satisfaction. Before the pandemic, one partner in the couple—typically the woman—did a disproportionate share of the routine household chores and childcare activities, such as cooking for and feeding the children and doing the laundry and cleaning. However, enforced togetherness during the pandemic heightened men's awareness of their partners' substantial contributions at home, prompting them to increase their involvement in household tasks.

Joanna, a 35-year-old mother of two and software analyst, described her husband's shift during the pandemic-induced reduction in work obligations. Being at home more not only provided him with the opportunity to see how much effort his partner was putting into maintaining the home, but his newfound flexibility also afforded him the opportunity to lessen her load and contribute more. She offered the following reflection:

He didn't realize how much I was doing until he started helping out and doing those things, and he's like, *oh my gosh*. Before, with his previous job, he was really working long hours and really just not available to pitch in as much. But with his new job, he has more flexibility and more time . . . He has admitted to me, 'I didn't realize how much you were doing.' So now he pitches in.

Yasmine, mother of three working as a medical administrator in a dual-earning relationship, makes the connection between increased communications and an increase in equitable divisions of labor in the home. During the pandemic, her husband's in-person auto-repair hours were reduced, and she shifted to remote work, affording them more time to be together and enhancing opportunities for communication. She said the following:

Because we have more time to work things out, our communication has gotten a lot better. And my husband has, I guess, grown. He has this willingness to change and so he's been improving a lot in his communication with me. And he's been a lot more helpful. He does the dishes, and from time to time does the cooking. With his relationship with the kids, it's gotten better. He makes an effort.

Her husband's willingness to change and contribute to household tasks further exemplified the positive impact of their increased opportunity for communication and overall relationship satisfaction. While the division of labor in the home may not have been notable for all couples, its salience was pronounced for many, particularly those whose relationship satisfaction declined, as we explore further in the subsequent sections.

Quality couple time, characterized by increased communication and engaging in leisure activities, played a crucial role in strengthening relationships. Increased communication fostered deeper emotional connections, while leisure activities promoted closeness and mutual enjoyment. For some, a balanced division of labor also facilitated greater appreciation and support between partners, ultimately contributing to an increase in overall relationship satisfaction.

4.3. Decreased Relationship Satisfaction

Eleven interviewees—eight women and three men—reported that they had become less satisfied with their relationship than before the pandemic. Their pandemic relationships were marked by becoming distant from each other due to emotional unavailability and unresolved grievances, or having more frequent and intense arguments. Like those who reported increased relationship satisfaction, the transition to remote work was a common experience among individuals in this group, their partners, or both. Together with the suspension of external social activities, these shifts presented an opportunity for couples to spend more time together at home. However, for some individuals in this group, relationships took a different turn, as tension and resentment emerged between the partners, hindering their ability to enjoy this time together.

Notably, all respondents in this group identified the unequal division of household labor between themselves and their partners as the primary cause of such negative feelings. For those in dual-earner households, whether both partners had steadily worked from home or only one partner did while the other shortly returned to the office, such an increase in household labor had become too demanding for the parent who remained primarily responsible for care work—the mother, in all cases. Unlike for those who reported an increase in satisfaction, there was no shift toward a more equitable division of labor in regard to housework, and an imbalance remained or, in many instances, was amplified. In this context, the lack of emotional or instrumental support from their spouses turned women's feelings of indifference and resignation to those of anger and resentment.

Alice, a mother of four young children and a government employee, had been working from home since the start of the pandemic. Her husband, a customer service executive for a delivery company, had also been working from home, but much shorter hours than before, as his regular on-site responsibilities, such as client meetings, were no longer taking place. Despite such a decrease in work hours, Alice's husband became only slightly more engaged in playing with his children, mostly enjoying leisure activities on his own and taking naps. On the other hand, Alice continued to carry out the bulk of domestic work, now including new tasks, such as cooking for and attending to the needs of her two older children who were taking classes online, while simultaneously working at her job from the dining table. This arrangement continued for more than nine months. During this period, she often asked him to help her with some housework, but each time he had a "very chauvinistic response, that 'I shouldn't have to do so and so.'"

Although she decided early on not to confront him about the issue because it was "probably the safest thing to do", Alice eventually became exhausted from having to juggle work and caregiving responsibilities on her own and frustrated with her husband, who continued to turn a blind eye to her challenging situation. As she noted, such feelings had undoubtedly taken a toll on their relationship:

We bicker a lot more . . . The kids are here . . . it's tough to get things done around the house, so the house didn't look like somewhere you want to be in . . . And I see him take a nap, and I'm like, I don't get to take a nap!

Similar experiences were echoed by other dual-income couples where only one partner worked from home, including one case where the couple had equally shared household labor before the pandemic. During the first few months of the pandemic, Adam, a schoolteacher, and his wife, a meetings planner, worked from home and took care of their two teenaged children and household chores together. However, things changed when he was called to return to school and she was not called back to her workplace. Since then, for almost a year, Adam's wife had been the sole person responsible for housework and childcare during the workday for most of the time since the pandemic had begun. This was further intensified when he began to isolate himself from the rest of the family in the evenings to work on his postgraduate degree. His lack of engagement in the home, despite clear physical presence, negatively impacted the well-being of his wife and their relationship:

My wife was still working from home, so that shifted things dramatically. She ended up picking up a lot more of the everyday—feeding the kids, making sure they got out to school, making sure that laundry was being done and stuff, because she was physically at home . . . There were real battles, never to the point where I thought we were going to get divorced or anything, but the relationship was pretty frosty . . . She dug in her feet and told me she wasn't supportive of this at all, and that I was going to have to bring them to all of their practices and all of their games.

For the remaining five respondents in traditional and neotraditional households, the lopsided division of household labor was not much of a concern prior to the pandemic. For these respondents, the mother, in all cases, had already been shouldering the bulk of the household labor and had a part-time job or no job at all, making such an arrangement possible. Yet, for them, too, as the pandemic continued, it eventually became a source of stress, tension, and exhaustion between the couple, leading to emotional distance and a lack of connection.

For instance, Beatrice, a stay-at-home mother of two small children, saw her responsibilities increase significantly, especially given her oldest child's disability and health difficulties, as well as her preschool going virtual. While she is used to singlehandedly taking care of her children, the pandemic had brought added pressure to navigate uncertainty and dangers of the pandemic, which became growingly difficult to handle when she was "the sole person for every appointment, every phone call, every health issue". On the other hand, her husband, a schoolteacher and soccer coach, had been preoccupied with his job responsibilities, which, despite physically being present and visible from each other's sight, they were not emotionally available for each other in a meaningful way. Beatrice explained as follows:

We haven't connected at all . . . We're normally in the same sentence, or on the same page, but now we're chapters apart. I'll constantly say, 'Hey, we should probably find some time to catch up, at least say hello to each other'. But it just ends up being like, him and I are both so exhausted and stressed out by the end of the day that I don't think I bothered. I'm so stressed, this happened today, I don't feel good, like, with our daughter, [I would tell him] this happened, and I wrote all this stuff down to the doctor and I have another doctor visit, and he'll be like, 'Okay, I'm really tired', or something, and then he'll just turn on the TV and will be watching a show.

Emotional distance grew within couples when they continued to rely on the pre-pandemic division of household labor despite the increase in its volume.

4.4. Continuity in Relationship Satisfaction

The remaining twenty-four interviewees—fourteen women and ten men—reported that their relationship with their partner remained largely the same over the course of the pandemic and thus maintained their satisfaction. When asked whether and how the

relationship changed since the pandemic began, the language of stability dominated their responses: they were “the same people” and “nothing changed” between the two. For most respondents, this was because their existing routines—how they arranged their time for work and caregiving as individuals and coordinated these responsibilities as a couple—were not disrupted. Some had already had access to flexible work schedules or worked from their homes, or their children were old enough to take care of themselves. Enforced togetherness simply meant spending an extra few more hours at home on the weekends instead of traveling and attending social events outside, which did not prompt the couples to alter their established routines or the amount of time they spent together.

Since before the pandemic began, Logan, a 29-year-old father of one, has made a living by selling various items online from his home. His wife has also spent most of her time at home, taking care of their two-year-old son and occasionally helping him with his business and providing respite care services in the community. Given such an arrangement, the two pandemic-related shifts that were consequential to many couples’ lives, as shown here—the transition to remote work and closure of childcare supports—did not have much of an impact on Logan and his wife’s day-to-day lives. Without changes in relationship dynamics, his relatively high level of relationship satisfaction before the pandemic continued. He made the following remark:

I really can’t think of anything that was different [about the relationship] off the top of my head . . . [Before the pandemic] things were working, like the communication was good, relationship was good, obviously not perfect, because no one’s marriage is, but nothing significant.

On the other end of the spectrum, a few respondents emphasized the continuity of their poor relationship dynamics and satisfaction. Anthony, a 47-year-old stepfather of a teenager, has mostly worked at his home, running two businesses. His girlfriend, an office administrator, also worked from home several days a week. Much like Logan and his wife, Anthony and his girlfriend did not find the pandemic to influence their day-to-day routines. Without a catalyst for change, their relationship dynamics stayed the same, though, in this case, at a dissatisfactory level. As he explained, “There wasn’t really much contention, which is maybe one of the problems there. There just wasn’t a whole lot of communication at all . . . Everything kind of stemmed from that one probably . . . I don’t know that anything’s changed from, let’s say, two years ago. It sounds very similar to what it was before”.

A minority of respondents in this group indeed found the existing structure of their lives to have changed during the pandemic, such as the transition to work from home. However, unlike those whose relationships improved, they did not spend the extra time brought by the pandemic on activities that strengthen their relationship; instead, they mostly spent the time alone in separate spaces in their homes.

Sam, 42-years-old, works as a financial administrator at a local church, while his wife homeschools their three children and takes care of the home front. When his work became hybrid, Sam began to enjoy his newfound freedom and comfort of working from home. Despite the increased presence at home along with their spouse, neither Sam nor his wife made deliberate attempts to use the extra time allowed to them to communicate or to engage in shared activities. Instead, they mostly spent the time alone in their own spaces within the home and occasionally watched television together, which he described as “side-by-side entertainment”, rather than having “face-to-face” communication or leisure activities:

I don’t know if we grew apart, but we, by the end of the day, neither one of us wanted anybody talking to us. Just leave us, you know. [We were] lying in bed, watching TV by ourselves . . . let’s watch something that makes us laugh. We did things together, but it wasn’t like sitting there talking, it was more side-by-side entertainment.

Taken together, respondents in this group saw no change in their relationship quality or satisfaction because their couple quality time remained largely constant. When provided

with the opportunity to spend more leisure time together or communicate more, these couples did not take advantage of this newfound time and flexibility to reinvest in each other. Without the need or desire to make changes in the frequency or intensity of the interaction with one's partner, enforced togetherness did not matter for these individuals.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated policies and guidelines compelled many people to stay in their homes. For many partnered parents, this emphasized the significance of time spent with their partners—a finite resource they had previously found wanting, given their various commitments, such as paid work and social responsibilities (Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Moen and Roehling 2005; Wajcman 2014). To understand the effects of this enforced togetherness on relationship satisfaction, we interviewed 78 married or cohabiting heterosexual parents with at least one child aged 18 or under living in the home. Participants were asked to look back and assess how their relationship with their partners unfolded over the course of the pandemic and how they feel about these developments.

Prior studies on the issue, most of which were conducted in the early months of the pandemic, have tended to paint a negative picture. This body of research highlighted the individual and psychological tolls of anxiety and uncertainty, and how these in turn shaped relationship dynamics (Balzarini et al. 2023; Cénat and Dalexis 2020; Vigl et al. 2022). Our study provides an update to this narrative and shows that the pandemic, in the long term, had three different outcomes on couples' relationships. In contrast with previous research, we find that the majority of the interviewees—fifty-five percent—felt that their relationship actually improved compared to before the pandemic. Only fifteen percent reported a decline in their relationship quality and satisfaction, and the remaining thirty percent said that the pandemic did not change their relationship in any significant way.

We find that the variation depended on whether and how they spent the increased amount of time at home. This was influenced by the couple's work and childcare conditions, such as remote-work and remote-schooling policies, dictating how much extra time each couple had. However, according to our respondents, the most significant factor contributing to relationship satisfaction was the mutual commitment to allocating this increased time toward shared experiences that strengthened their bond and intimacy. We identify two such endeavors among those who reported higher relationship satisfaction—an increase in intimate communication and jointly participating in leisure activities. Indeed, neither of these two is particularly costly or out of the ordinary. One might argue that these are, in fact, essential components of any well-functioning relationship. Yet, the respondents' constant emphasis on the significance of such banal activities in improving their relationships suggests just how little time they had to dedicate to them before the pandemic. The pandemic-driven enforced togetherness had finally offered an opportunity to enjoy what they have always found lacking—the time to communicate and enjoy each other's company.

On the other hand, fifteen percent of respondents saw their relationships deteriorate when surges in paid work, children's remote schooling, or both continued for an extended period. Under these circumstances, the division of household labor between the couple remained unequal despite an increase in its volume or became more unequal than before the pandemic—arrangements that ultimately took a toll on the person performing the bulk of the work and thus the couple's relationship. Lastly, the remaining thirty percent of the sample reported stability in their relationship and quality. The pandemic did not pose any significant disruptions to their pre-existing routines and arrangements; the couple did not see an opportunity to change the way they spend their time with their partners.

Taken together, our findings shed light on the significance of time as a valuable resource for couple's relationships but also point to the important role of the couple's agency in whether they are able and willing to use the time in meaningful ways. As we have shown, enforced togetherness by itself did not lead to stronger relationships; the connection existed only among those who took advantage of the opportunity it presented to invest in quality couple time. Only those couples that talked about how they effectively

managed the pandemic by talking about their changing schedules, their values, or goals believed that the unusual time spent as a couple benefitted their relationships. In this way, the pandemic was a blessing that finally allowed them to ease the stress from their busy lives of combining paid work and raising a family. With the pause in activities outside the household during the pandemic, these families had the time to focus on spending time together. Our findings also suggest, as does previous research, that effective communication is necessary for relationships that are experienced as satisfactory or high quality.

6. Conclusions

We offer the concept of enforced togetherness as a contribution to the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic. Quality couple time, characterized by increased communication and engaging in leisure activities, emerges as a key component contributing to the positive experiences of enforced togetherness. Couples not only adapted to the circumstances but actively sought opportunities for connection and growth. Looking forward, participants who increased their relationship satisfaction expressed a collective desire to carry forward the lessons learned during the pandemic. As couples embraced the newfound significance of togetherness and reevaluated their core values, they prioritized shared leisure activities and enhanced communication as cornerstones for their relationships. This led to contemplations on refining parenting approaches, realigning priorities, and embracing ongoing personal growth. However, the lingering question remains: will these earnest intentions persist in a post-pandemic world, where enforced togetherness no longer shapes their daily lives?

This study carries implications for couples seeking to enhance their relationships. While the pandemic and its associated lockdowns have concluded, the period of enforced togetherness described by our participants remains a part of their history. Yet, couples consistently seek avenues for relationship improvement even in post-pandemic times. Our respondents whose relationships improved enjoyed the benefits of more time together by communicating effectively and actively planning leisure-time activities as partners and with their children. Even without a pandemic, busy families would benefit from carving out intentional time each week to spend together. But that alone may not be enough. They might also pay attention to effectively communicating with one another and taking the time to talk about their daily needs and long-term goals as well.

Our findings are also useful to governmental policymakers and corporate managers as new workplace guidelines are created for a post-pandemic moment. We are experiencing a moment in which reorganizing the role of work in our lives is being openly discussed on the organizational and structural level. Much has been written about a transition to hybrid work modalities (Lockey 2021; Yoe 2023). While managers may want people to return to the workplace, employees often prefer to remain at home, at least part-time (Kossek et al. 2021; Neeley 2020; Waldrep et al. 2024). The hybrid workplace affords the flexibility parents desperately need, helping them feel less rushed and to focus on maintaining healthy relationships with their partners and their children. With flexible working hours, and daily commutes reduced, working parents have more time to spend with partners and children (Waldrep et al. 2024). Workplaces that give parents the flexibility to be dedicated employees and engaged family members are those that can retain skilled workers. Policies that demand workers be physically committed to a space away from their partners, families, and communities for the majority of their waking day must be reevaluated.

In this study, we identified the skills most conducive to navigating enforced togetherness effectively. Our findings reveal that couples with strong communication skills and a deliberate commitment to quality time emerged from the pandemic with improved relationships. The experiences shared by our participants underscore the nuanced dynamics of love during challenging times, emphasizing both the fragility and strength that emerged from this period of enforced togetherness. As we move beyond the pandemic, these reflections offer valuable insights into the ways in which relationships can evolve and thrive amidst

adversity, highlighting the capacity of couples to navigate challenges and find meaning in shared experiences.

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