

Is the COVID-19 pandemic a driver of partnership dissolution? A comparative study of Austria and France

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The measures taken to stop the spread of the Corona virus had a drastic impact on all areas of life including social relationships, employment and (mental) health. Changes in those areas also affected one of the closest and most important relationships: the one to the partner. Previous research showed both positive and negative changes in partnership quality during the pandemic (e.g. Luetke, Hensel, Herbenick, & Rosenberg, 2020; Schmid, Wörn, Hank, Sawatzki, & Walper, 2021). For instance, in Germany, positive changes in relationship satisfaction were observed in 20% of couples and negative ones in 40% between 2018/19 and spring 2020 (Schmid et al., 2021). Especially in challenging times such as the pandemic, partnerships are an important source of support (Pieh, Probst, Budimir, & Humer, 2021). As partnership quality affects partnership stability (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021), we analyse partnership dissolution over the course of the pandemic from spring 2020 – compared to the years 2018 and 2019 – in Austria and France.

The lockdown measures implemented in all European countries had a fundamental impact on family relationships as life became much more strongly concentrated within households. There were restrictions as to the reasons for which persons could leave the house. Contact limitations with other households were in place as were distancing rules in the public sphere. Working places were oftentimes relocated to the home. Children also stayed home due to school and kindergarten closures. Overall, people's daily radius was significantly diminished and families were more isolated. While some experienced the additional time with the partner and children and a slowing down of everyday life as gratifying, others felt trapped at home (Lebow, 2020). As Lebow has summarized: "The intense environment that has emerged the wake of COVID-19 leads many to greater intimacy, egalitarianism, and connection [...], but for those close to the fault line, acrimony and distance readily increases. In this intense confined environment, thoughts about the advantages of separating and divorcing are for many intensified." (Lebow, 2020: 968) The presence of different kinds of stressors – e.g. employment-related, work-family conflict or health concerns – influenced which experience dominated (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

During the lockdowns, only essential shops (like supermarkets, pharmacies, banks or petrol stations) could remain open while non-essential shops as well as restaurants, hotels, building sites etc. were closed. This meant a strong rise in the unemployment rate. In addition, many employees had to reduce their employment hours to short-time employment. These changes led to declines in earnings, which put financial strain on families and increased the potential for partnership conflicts (Berghammer & Beham-Rabanser, 2020; Steiber, Siegert, & Vogtenhuber, 2021). Unemployment has long been recognized as a risk factor for mental health (OECD, 2021; Pieh, Budimir, & Probst, 2020). Spillover effects of

unemployment to the spouse are likely, sometimes even resulting in domestic violence (Schneider, Harknett, & McLanahan, 2016). There was a high degree of uncertainty about the future development of infections and, relatedly, the duration of the restrictions. In these unpredictable circumstances, even people who were not directly affected by unemployment or short-term employment may have felt employment insecurity.

The rise in work-family conflict was another stressor for partnerships. It concerned especially families with children as they faced a strongly elevated level of childcare (and, to a lesser degree, housework) due to kindergarten and school closures (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Childcare and support with distance learning had to be almost entirely provided by parents since external caregivers like grandparents were generally not available due to contact restrictions. Couples had to renegotiate and redistribute childcare and housework time between them. When the distribution is deemed unfair, conflicts are more probable with negative consequences for partnership satisfaction (e.g. Bodi, Mikula, & Riederer, 2010; Ruppner, Brandén, & Turunen, 2018). Parents who worked from home faced additional difficulties in combining their employment with the children being present, possibly even in the same room (Derndorfer, Disslbacher, Lechinger, Mader, & Six, 2021). During the pandemic, some grown-up children moved back in with their parents, which may have constituted an additional stress factor.

Based on comparative, high-quality data from the European labour force surveys (LFS) for Austria and France, we contrast the incidence of partnership dissolution during the pandemic (from spring 2020) with the years 2018 and 2019. The LFS is a panel study, in which all household members are interviewed for five (Austria) or six (France) consecutive quarters. The sample sizes are large, which allows us to analyse the rather rare (at least within a short time frame) behaviour of partnership dissolution. Each transition from one quarter to the next includes around 4,200 cases in Austria and around 9,000 cases in France. Participation is compulsory in both countries and response rates are accordingly very high (around 95% in Austria and 80% in France). We focus on couples with and without children in the age range 20 to 54, as we are interested in middle-ages, where some stressors, such as the presence of children, are more prevalent. Our main dependent variable is the separation of couples, measured by living together in one quarter and living apart in the next. We examine how the risk of partnership dissolution depended, among other factors, on family composition (presence, age and number of children) and employment situation (employment hours, working from home). In order to examine changes in these effects during the pandemic, we estimate separate logistic regression models for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020/21.

First results show that, despite an increase in partnership conflicts in many families, partnership dissolution has declined in 2020. The decline was strongest among couples without children in the household – a group that generally has higher dissolution rates. In other words, there was convergence in dissolution rates between couples with and without children, suggesting high strains for parents. We also find increased dissolution rates in 2020 among unmarried couples and couples with older children. Employment uncertainty – men's short-time employment (France) and both not working (Austria) – also seems to have heightened the risk of partnership dissolution.

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