

[COVID Information Commons \(CIC\) Research Lightning Talk](#)

Transcript of a Presentation by Michael Rosenfeld (Stanford University), May 5, 2022



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Transcript

Michael Rosenfeld:

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All right, I want to start out by thanking my collaborator Sonia Hausen and the wonderful National Science Foundation that has supported this research over quite a few years.

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What I'm going to be talking about today is a longitudinal study called: How Couples Meet and Stay Together. It's a study that has three waves of panel data. Today, we're going to be focusing on the 2020 wave, but there's also a 2017 wave of these same subjects, and a 2022 wave that just got back from the field. We asked people questions about how their romantic relationships responded to the great coronavirus pandemic. We had open and closed-ended questions. I want to draw your attention to the open-ended questions because we're asking people to explain in their own words how their relationships responded to the pandemic. And I think that's important because people can explain what's going on in their own lives more easily than we can infer those causes from other variables. There are two big theories that have been advanced with regard to how relationships are going to be impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. The predominant one in every way is stress theory. So stress theory predicts that partnered adults will report that the pandemic made their relationships worse - that people will describe anxieties, stress, disputes, and disagreements with their partners. That women in heterosexual unions will report worse effects of the pandemic because of the gender division of labor. And there are many more citations for this than I can squeeze into a slide. But what I want to call your attention to is that the actual empirical evidence for the everything getting worse stress theory is not that great. Suicide apparently went down in 2020 compared to 2019. And there's this Van Winkle et

al paper that found a sharp decline in depression during the pandemic in 11 European countries, which isn't to say that people don't experience stress and anxiety, but the stress and anxiety effects of the pandemic are not so clear. So that's the first thing. There's this family resilience theory - this is theory number two - that I think has a lot to teach us about this situation. Family resilience theory predicts that partnered adults will experience positive relationship effects of the pandemic due to solidarity in the face of an external threat and that, when asked, people would describe mutual meaning making, solidarity, and the benefits of more time together. The family resilience theory has a research cousin in disaster studies which came out of sociology with a key finding that disasters were mostly accompanied by improvements in social relationships between people and primary union. And that's important. We might expect, for instance, that people spending more time together at home with their partners might have some positive things to say about that. And people working from home might see some benefits to less commute and more time together, so there's reasons to suspect that there might be positive effects on relationships of the pandemic. Let's look at some data.

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So in the closed-ended question we asked people a simple question: how did their romantic relationship respond to the pandemic? And most people said no change, but a lot more people said their relationship was better off than worse off during the pandemic. So that's the first thing I want to call your attention to. Men and women in hetero unions report basically indistinguishable results. They both were more likely to say that the relationship was better. People living with children under 13, of course, they had a little bit more stress and work to do during the pandemic. There's no doubt about that. But even people living with children under 13 were more likely to say their relationship was better. People with college degrees have the kind of jobs that are easier to do from home - more flexible. They were a little more likely to say relationship was better, but even people without college degrees [were] also about three times more likely to say [their] relationship was better than that it was worse. One of the fears that people had at the beginning of the pandemic was that people in abusive relationships would be living in a kind of a nightmare scenario and the the point I want to make about relationships and relationship quality is that while over the course of a person's life there may be more bad relationships than good ones, we spend a lot more time in the good ones. And therefore, a cross-section of relationships has - tends to have a lot more relationships where the quality is excellent than otherwise. So if we look at the - what people said about the relationship quality in 2017, and we look down at the sample size here, there's a lot more people who are still partnered in 2020 who said their relationship was excellent in 2017 than there were - more than 10 times more - than people who said it was fair, poor, or very poor. And needless to say that people who were in poor relationships - they were worse off during the pandemic because the relationship was bad. But there's a dramatically larger number of people who said relationship was excellent in 2017 and those people are better off in 2020 than they were before. Okay, what did people say about this?

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One man wrote: We're spending 100% of our time together, so it's a good thing that we're pretty much in total agreement in terms of housekeeping, respecting boundaries, and risk tolerance. And by the way

a lot of the positive outcome of this pandemic for relationships was people having a unified front with respect to public health, and the pandemic, and masking and so on. A 29 year old woman married to a man wrote: We've had so much more time to spend with each other. Love is spelled T-I-M-E. Okay.

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Even people who were opposed to public health advice about the pandemic, if they were both in agreement on that opposition, that was a positive thing for them. So this 37 year old man wrote: We have the same thoughts about how the response to COVID is blown out of proportion and it's all political. Right - as long as the two people in the couple are in agreement about the situation, they have a unified front, that unified front strengthens their relationship. On the other hand, if the two people in the relationship disagree about what to do about the pandemic, this has a really negative effect on the relationship. So this is a 22 year old woman in an eight-year-long non-cohabiting relationship who wrote: A big wedge has been driven between us and how exactly to handle the virus. I want to wear a mask, gloves, limit exposure as much as humanly possible. I wipe down surfaces and use hand sanitizer. He thinks I'm being, in his words, ridiculous and paranoid. If it weren't for store policy he would probably never wear a mask. He doesn't think it's a concern. He's always quoting data on how non-lethal it is. That's why I've seen him once in the past seven months. Here's a here's a pro tip: if your partner only wants to see you once in seven months, things are not going great.

So, what does it mean? In the political rhetoric about how the U.S. has faced the pandemic, we often hear about how divided we are as a country, and that division is real. Most people writing about how the pandemic and the lockdowns and the school closures would affect relationships were predicting some kind of social, relational, and mental health disaster. At the couple level, however, our data show that relationships are resilient. Most American couples were either sheltered in the normalcy of home, describing no change to their relationships, or else they were using the pandemic as an opportunity to build trust and make meaning together with their partner. We're not overlooking the terrible mortality effects of the pandemic. The pandemic has been historically terrible. We're simply arguing that couplehood is an underappreciated reservoir of potential social defense against this pandemic and against any kind of disaster as the family resilience scholars would have predicted. So important caveat - does the subjective sense of couple solidarity lead to objective better outcomes? We are trying to figure that out. And I will leave it there.