Partnership Satisfaction and Conflict among Czech Couples during the Pandemic-related Employment Insecurity[1]

Tomáš Zvoníček, Martin Kreidl, Petr Fučík

ABSTRACT It can be reasonably assumed that the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll on family and interpersonal relationships. Previous research has established that job insecurity and financial hardship lead to reduced relationship quality and a higher incidence of partner conflicts. Our goal is to investigate the dynamics of partnership satisfaction and partnership conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic among Czech couples, focusing on pandemic-related employment change and perceived job insecurity. We use longitudinal panel data from "Czech GGS COVID pilot study", which was conducted in December 2020, and from a follow-up survey organized in April 2021. Our results show that the immediate effects of economic hardship during the pandemic were not as strong and uniform as we expected. Many families apparently had the resources to bear the economic impacts of COVID-19 in terms of maintaining subjective relationship quality and curbing conflict between spouses. The most important conclusion worth further investigation is the gendered nature of these mechanisms. There are contradictory, gender-specific associations hidden under the weak total effects. This suggests that the perception of family life could be very different for men and women in relation to economic circumstances.

KEYWORDS COVID-19 impacts, partnership satisfaction, Gender and Generations Survey, job insecurity, family

Introduction

Like many other European countries, the Czech Republic went into lockdown in March 2020 and then again in October 2020 to prevent the spread of the virus. The unprecedented lockdown measures, which lasted until May 2021, were characterized, among other things, by restrictions on social contacts, limitations on movement, and school closures.[2] The measures had immediate effects on the economy and the labor market, leading to loss or reduction of income, financial uncertainty, and job insecurity (ILO 2021) and to profound changes in the daily operation of many households.

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2 The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al. 2021) provides a useful overview and comparison of governmental measures in each country: https://covidtracker.bsg.ox.ac.uk

It is likely that the COVID-19 pandemic has therefore taken a toll on family and interpersonal relationships. In situations of complex social change or crisis such as natural disasters or pandemics, individuals typically rely on the people closest to them (Williamson 2020). Relations are exposed to more challenges than in ordinary times, which may – in some cases – lead to a strengthening of mutual relations (Pietromonaco and Overall 2021). The pandemic may also take a toll because related life changes such as employment modifications, reduced income, and job insecurity can spill over into intimate life (Blom et al. 2020; Bakker and Demerouti 2013). Job insecurity and financial hardship lead to reduced relationship quality and a higher incidence of partner conflicts (Cheng et al. 2014; Neppl et al. 2016). However, research examining partnership quality during the recent pandemic has thus far yielded somewhat mixed conclusions, with some couples experiencing worsening relationships and others seeing improvements or no change at all (Balzarini et al. 2020; Möhring et al. 2021; Perelli-Harris and Walzenbach 2020; Schmid et al. 2021; Vigl et al. 2021).

Our goal is to investigate the dynamics of partnership satisfaction and partnership conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic among Czech couples, focusing on pandemic-related employment change and perceived job insecurity. We start with theories explaining the negative impact of employment change and insecurity on partnership satisfaction that have been suggested by prior research, namely the spillover theory (explaining how work-related emotions are transferred to the home) and the family stress theory (explaining how economic hardship impacts subjective well-being, which can cause a strain on the partnership). We then modify these models to match the specific characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic, which – as a disaster-like widespread, global, existential threat – can multiply these negative effects on partnership satisfaction, but can also foster attachment and closeness in relationships.

The analysis of the consequences of employment change and insecurity in this specific pandemic context has thus far only been tentatively outlined in the literature (Walsh and Stephenson 2021; Balzarini et al. 2020, Biddle et al. 2020). However, given the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the general importance and protective nature of fulfilling romantic relationships, it is crucial to specify the situations in which the effects of work problems on the family may be more significant and especially which social categories are more exposed to the adverse effects of employment change and job insecurity. Therefore, we analyze three potential moderators of the effect: respondent's gender, respondent's education, and the presence of minor children in the household.

Context: Employment in the Czech Republic in the Times of COVID-19

The economic implications of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will be considerable and are expected to be comparable in scope to economic crises such as the Great Recession of 2008–2010 (ILO 2021; Eurofound 2021a: 3). The EU economy contracted by 6.3 % in 2020, the most significant decline since World War II, with an expected rebound of 5 % in 2021 (European Commission 2021). Similarly, GDP in the Czech Republic declined by 5.6 % in 2020 and is expected to grow by around 3 % in 2021 (European Commission 2021). Registered unemployment in the Czech Republic as in the EU increased during the

COVID-19 pandemic, although in the Czech population its year-on-year increase was rather slight (measured from the outset of the crisis in Q2 2020 to Q1 2021, on average + 0.9 %, ČSÚ 2021). It is worth noting that, according to Eurofound's "Living, working and COVID-19" e-survey, about 7 % of Czech people who were employed before the pandemic had lost their job by spring 2021 (Eurofound 2021b: 2). Moreover, the number of actual weekly hours worked in the Czech Republic fell by up to 2.8 % year-on-year in Q4 2020 (the strongest decline in the EU, EU-LFS 2021).

As expected, the effects are not uniform: young people aged 15–24, women, temporary employees, and less skilled and less educated employees were more at risk of losing their jobs (in the context of the EU: Garrote Sanchez et al. 2020; Eurofound and European Commission Joint Research Centre 2021, in the context of the Czech Republic: ČNB 2021). The traditional explanation is that members of these groups are more often employed in precarious jobs, which makes them generally more exposed to economic fluctuations and crises. This vulnerability is then exacerbated by the fact that the crisis associated with the pandemic, as noted by Eurofound (2021a: 10; Eurofound and European Commission Joint Research Centre 2021: 17), more greatly affected the more female-dominated and low-paid service sectors such as accommodation, gastro business, travel and tourism, and arts and entertainment. On the other hand, this effect was partially offset by increased demand in other sectors of the economy (ILO 2021: 14). For those who kept their jobs, European Union Labour Force Survey data from 2020 suggest that weekly working hours decreased slightly more for men than for women, although women were more likely to be temporarily absent from work or furloughed (Eurofound 2021a: 10; Eurofound and European Commission Joint Research Centre 2021: 18). Moreover, there was greater resilience to negative labor market outcomes among those who were able to work remotely, which could have positively impacted better educated people as a higher level of education is generally strongly correlated with telecommuting opportunities (Cetrulo et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic go far beyond employment changes and reduced working hours. One of the most severe and distinguishing implications of the pandemic is the decline in general well-being triggered by restrictions on social contacts, general health concerns, and the unprecedented nature of the whole situation. Severe deterioration in mental health across all social groups has been highlighted by several studies in national contexts (Zacher and Rudolph 2021; Möhring et al. 2021). The "deadly cocktail" of economic hardship, well-being issues, and work patterns during the pandemic (e.g., massive use of telecommuting) combined with the novelty of work circumstances (notably, the absence of guidelines to direct employee behavior at work) resulted in increased job insecurity (Lin et al. 2021; Wilson et al. 2020).

Even in pre-pandemic times, many Czech employees felt insecure about their jobs. In the European context, the Czech Republic once had higher-than-average perceived job insecurity (about 34 % compared to the European average of 16 % in 2010; EWCS 2012); however, in recent years, it has relatively declined to about 17 % of employees concerned about losing their job in next six months (basically at the European average of 16 % in 2015; EWCS 2016). According to the third round of the "Living, working and COVID-19" e-survey in March 2021, around 14 % of Czech employees reported the likelihood of losing

their job in the next three months (the European average was 9 %), with women considering this slightly more likely than men (Eurofound 2021c).

Theoretical Framework

There is robust evidence that employment loss and job insecurity negatively influence partnership quality and increase partnership conflict (Bastianelli and Vignoli 2021; Hughes and Galinsky 1994; Blom et al. 2020). The explanations for such a relationship emerge from psychological reactions to stressful events in the partner's personal life and economic outcomes. Prior research suggests two main theories: the spillover theory and the family stress theory.

The spillover theory supposes that one's life spheres are interfering with each other (Sok et al. 2014; Kinnunen et al. 2006). The assumption is that "activities in one role can benefit an individual's activity in another role (…) and quality of life in another domain" (Grzywacz et al. 2007: 561); conversely, activities in one role may make other roles more difficult. Job insecurity is most likely to affect partnership quality indirectly through various stress reactions such as anxiety, concentration problems, fatigue, irritability, and burnout (Mauno et al. 2017; Dekker and Schaufeli 1995). Several studies have documented the negative outcomes of perceived job insecurity for family well-being and partnership quality. Partners experiencing high stress engage in more divisive behavior, such as conflicts; they tend to make negative attributions emphasizing adverse events in the relationship and report more partnership discord (Balzarini et al. 2020).

The family stress theory focuses on the consequences of economic hardship, especially of a loss in income and resulting financial pressure (Blom et al. 2019; Neppl et al. 2016). This can directly affect the ability to meet basic material needs or to pay bills on time, which may lead to conflicts in the couple. Unemployment can also lead to the loss of structured time or a sense of purpose (Hiswåls et al. 2017). Similarly, the mere expectation of economic hardship may lead to conflict as well as it may hamper partners in making plans (Blom et al. 2020). This, in turn, leads to increased conflict and reduced intimacy and, therefore, undermines partnership satisfaction.

Can the COVID-19 pandemic change anything in these assumptions? While research in this regard is still rather preliminary, some important insights might be offered by examining the effects of natural disasters and crises on families. Pietromonac and Overall (2020) pointed out that in unforeseen major crises with high mortality, such as terrorist attacks, many people experience uncertainty about the world, future attacks, and their being in the world – this can thus lead to an increase of emotional attachment and the need for security from their significant others (also Williamson 2020). Events such as natural disasters that are slower in their pace and consequences and require a longer time to rebuild communities and reclaim lost assets lead to chronic stress and increase conflicts (Pietromonac and Overall 2020; Cohan and Cole 2002). The COVID-19 pandemic as a "multisystem, cascading disaster" (Masten and Motti-Stefanidi 2020) contained elements of both: on the one hand, couples were facing a novel event of unknown duration and likely a relatively long rebuilding and recovery process; simultaneously, it was a high-mortality crisis where fear, including for

one's own health and mortality, was widespread (Pietromonac and Overall 2020; Walsh and Stephenson 2021). Moreover, it included hitherto completely unfamiliar measures, such as radical restrictions on social contacts and reduced institutional care for children and healthcare. However, at the same time, certain aspects can be seen as positive factors for partnership satisfaction, including more time spent with family and children and more flexible working conditions.

The empirical evidence has offered ambiguous results. While several studies show the negative effect of the pandemic on family satisfaction (Möhring et al. 2021; Schmid et al. 2021; Balzarini et al. 2020; Ahuja and Khurana 2021), some other publications appear to indicate that the pandemic had no substantial effect (Williamson 2020; Vigl et al. 2021 found no effect only among cohabitants) or even that it had a positive one (Biddle et al. 2020; Perelli-Harris and Walzenbach 2020; Canzi et al. 2021).

Similarly, although studies have indicated that we can expect a negative impact of pandemic-related employment change on partnership satisfaction (Balzarini et al. 2020; Biddle et al. 2020), it cannot be ruled out that during the COVID-19 pandemic this impact may be positive in some cases (Walsh and Stephenson 2021; Lim and Tan 2021) or nonexistent (Ogan et al. 2021). As Walsh and Stephenson (2021) pointed out, those experiencing employment change or job loss during this time may have been more likely to attribute their change to broader circumstances as opposed to personal failure, thus lessening its otherwise documented negative impact on partnership (see also Williamson et al. 2021).

Presumably, the outcome will depend on the number and severity of the various consequences of the pandemic that the person will face in addition to employment change or job insecurity. Especially given the duration of the current crisis, it can be expected that even if couples initially had emotional and social resources to restore their relationship in the wake of the stressful events, these may have been gradually exhausted (Pietromonac and Overall 2020). Indeed, this has been confirmed by recent studies that have already had the opportunity to analyze the late stages of the pandemic (Neff et al. 2021). Above all, even disasters and pandemics do not take place in a social vacuum; therefore, the degree to which relationships may be damaged or may thrive is likely to be unevenly distributed. The COVID-19 pandemic is probably not the "great equalizer" as some mainstream media have initially portrayed it. Rather, similar to other disasters and crises, it should be seen as a revealer "of social conditions that are less visible but nonetheless present in everyday life" (Klinenberg 1999; see also Cohan and Cole 2002). Our research aims to examine this assumption.

The literature suggests that the associations that we would observe in cross-sectional data may be spurious. While we can see, for instance, that people report poorer relationship quality if they also report higher job insecurity, this association is hard to interpret causally, since we cannot rule out reverse causation or spuriousness of the correlation with cross-sectional data. Hence, if we want to get closer to a real causal impact on family life, we need a panel that would let us assess – for instance – the impact of a change in job insecurity on changes in relationship quality, i.e., a within-person change model, which is exactly the kind of statistical model that we employ in our analyses.

Hypotheses

To summarize the previous arguments, the main hypothesis in our study can be stated as follows: partnership dissatisfaction and frequency of conflict will have been increased by the experience of economic impacts and job insecurity during the pandemic. Additionally, we focus on the role of possible modifying factors, among which we choose sex, education, and the presence of minor children in the household. There are several arguments for why men and women may experience and perceive the objective COVID-19 impacts differently, and these distinctions may result in a different effect on the frequency of conflict or the subjective quality of the relationship. First, there are structural arguments based on gendered positions in the labor market, their different contributions to the household economy, and their unequal share of the unpaid household work that typically increase during the pandemic lockdowns. Women facing lower wages and less stable jobs and experiencing a higher share of unanticipated unpaid work (England 2010), will probably be under more pressure that is likely to translate the economic impacts of COVID-19 into conflict or lower partnership satisfaction. This is also suggested by an exploratory study conducted by Hipp and Bünning (2021) early in the pandemic. Second, considering the broad empirical evidence about the higher propensity of women to initiate divorce (Vohlídalová 2010), it is reasonable to expect that women will exhibit and thematize partnership dissatisfaction with higher sensitivity and reflexivity than men (Carlson et al. 2020). On the other hand, there are contradicting arguments based on the symbolic aspects of men's position in the labor market, assuming that the COVID-19 impacts on the economic position will be stronger in men because of their prevailing social role as the primary breadwinners. Their inability to provide a household income may reduce men's sense of self-worth as they may be concerned that they will not meet the traditional gender expectations (Blom et al. 2020; Richter et al. 2010). As men also tend to make a more significant contribution to the family budget, an endangered job position for them can also be more stressful in general for both partners (Blom et al. 2020; Mauno, Cheng, and Lim 2017).

The need to control for education is based on the evidence of the educational gradient in the stability of marriage, which has also been found in the Czech Republic (Trávníčková and Kreidl 2021) and the stratified position of education groups on the labor market. Additionally, the pandemic probably amplified social inequalities and socio-economic status modified the impacts of the pandemic (Chen and Wang 2021). Therefore, we expect that less educated individuals experienced higher partnership conflict/dissatisfaction mostly because of the spillover stress that result from their less stable job position and their lower reemployment chances (Železná and Kreidl 2016). Furthermore, they lacked other sources (housing quality, savings) resulting in their higher vulnerability (Blom et al. 2020).

The third modifying factor possibly is the presence of minor children in the household, which changes the dynamic of family life in many aspects. Moreover, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, numerous families faced the necessity of providing daily care as the (pre)schools were closed,[3] helping children with online study, or just sharing the home more intensively.

[3] In the Czech Republic, there were three major school closings including all types of schools from kindergartens to universities. The first was launched from March 12, 2020, until the end

This has been shown to significantly increase rates of depression and anxiety symptoms in mothers and fathers (Kerr et al. 2021) and reduce life satisfaction, especially among women (Zoch et al. 2021). A general negative effect from the pandemic on partnership satisfaction among parents of minor children has already been confirmed by a recent study by Fleming and Franzese (2021) on the US population. These circumstances presumably intervene also in the mechanisms that transform the COVID-19 work impacts into partnership satisfaction or conflict as they can be another major stressor in addition to possible economic hardship. We expect the presence of minor children in the family to magnify the effect of COVID-19 work impacts on partnership satisfaction and the conflict between partners.

Data, Variables, and Methods

Data

Data for this study come from the "Czech GGS COVID pilot study", which was conducted in December 2020 (Kreidl et al. 2021a), and from a follow-up survey organized in April 2021 (Kreidl et al. 2021b).[4] The "Czech GGS COVID pilot study" was conducted as a precursor to the main GGS survey.

This study (with over 1300 respondents) is unusually large for a pilot. Its existence and especially its size were dictated by both financial and epidemiological circumstances. The pilot used the questionnaire that was prepared for the main study (containing a translation of the core questionnaire plus around 40 country-specific items focusing on economic uncertainty and the consequences of COVID). Several questionnaire items refer to the respondent's partnership situation. Only the respondents were interviewed, so all couple and household data are based on their responses. The pilot study employed computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI). The pilot study did not utilize a random sample. Rather, we approached respondents from an online opt-in panel. This is a group of rather experienced respondents – they had completed (on average) eleven other questionnaires. A group of over 7000 such respondents were invited to participate in early December 2020. A simple quota sampling procedure (based on age and gender) was implemented to control the composition of the sample. Since this is a non-probability sample, we refrain from using statistical tests. This recruitment strategy was very efficient and over 1300 questionnaires were completed by early February. Respondents were offered a financial incentive of CZK 500 for a completed questionnaire.

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of May (with gradual easing of restrictions), the second took place from October 5, 2020, until December 2020, and third closing was announced again in March 2021 and lasted until May 2021. The total duration of school closures in the Czech Republic was 46 weeks between March 2020 and June 2021 (when summer holidays begin).

4 Data collection for both waves occurred at a time when the Czech Republic adopted strict measures in pandemic prevention. Data of the COVID-19 Stringency Index (see footnote 1; index is ranging from 0 to 100 with higher values indicating stronger regulations; Hale et al. 2021) show that in December 2020, the stringency of the measures in the Czech Republic was at about 65 on the index, and in April 2021, it was as high as 82 (one of the highest in the world at that time).

A short follow-up study to the "Czech GGS COVID pilot study" was conducted in April 2021 using a 15-minute questionnaire composed partly of replicated questions and partly of new questions. All pilot respondents were invited to participate in this follow-up study on April 4 and interviewing was completed by April 19, 2021. A total of 1201 respondents participated in the follow-up. This study only uses data from respondents who participated in both waves of the survey. The sample is limited to *employed respondents who had a co-resident partner at both waves of interviewing*. There were 512 such respondents.

Dependent Variables

We use two outcome variables: "partnership satisfaction" and the "frequency of conflicts". Partnership satisfaction is measured with a single questionnaire item: "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner? On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied' and 5 means 'about average", what number best represents your satisfaction with your relationship?" All respondents with a partner answered this question.[5] The average satisfaction was relatively high (8.34, s.d. = 1.85) at wave 1 and significantly lower at wave 2 (mean = 7.79, s.d. = 2.07), see Table A1. A full distribution of responses to this question in both waves is shown in Figure 1.

Partnership conflict scale is based on a battery of questions that begins "Within the last 12 months, how often did you and your partner have disagreements about…?" While respondents reported conflicts across seven domains, we only used five of them (household chores, money, leisure, relationships with friends, relationships with parents and in laws) to create a scale.[6] We used these variables to construct a summary "frequency of conflict" index. We decided to exclude items concerning children (conflicts about having children and child-raising issues) to maintain childless couples and couples with adult children in the sample). These two decisions follow practices found in the literature (Berninger et al. 2011; Naderi and Diabaté 2018). Respondents employed a five-point scale for each domain (1- never, 2- seldom, 3- sometimes, 4- frequently, 5- very frequently). Responses were summed and divided by the number of items. Thus, the resulting summary scale places each respondent into the 1 to 5 interval, where higher values represent more frequent conflict. The mean was computed for all respondents who provided a valid response to at least four of the five items. Figure 2 shows the distribution of values of the "frequency of conflict" scale by survey wave.

5 For our analysis, only data from respondents with coresident partner were used.

6 If we examine items in the battery, we observe rather high intercorrelation: exploratory factor analysis suggests one factor accounting for 49 % of the variance; Cronbach's alpha was 0.73.

Independent Variables

Our analysis focuses on two independent variables: an objective measure of economic impact of COVID-19 on the respondent and a subjectively assessed likelihood of job loss, which we take as a measure of perceived job insecurity. Both variables were measured in both waves of the survey. The measurement of economic impact is based on a battery of indicator questions, in which respondents reported if COVID-19 resulted in the following circumstances: termination of their own business/entrepreneurial activities, job loss, forced job change, forced early retirement, or significant income reduction. Responses for each option were binary (yes/no). Items showed a relatively low occurrence of each event (below 10 per cent), so we decided to use one summary index measuring the number of impacts that COVID-19 had on individual respondents. Overall, 88 % of respondents in our analytical sample reported no negative economic consequences of COVID-19 at the first interview and 83 % of respondents reported no economic consequences of COVID-19 at the second interview. While only 2 % of respondents reported two or more impacts at wave 1, this share grew to 3 % at wave 2.

The likelihood of a job loss (a proxy for economic insecurity) was initially measured on a five-point scale. All (self-)employed respondents were asked: "How likely is it that you will lose your job in the next 12 months?" Respondents chose from 5 options: 1- very likely, 2- likely, 3- unsure, 4- unlikely, 5- very unlikely. Overall, 70 % of respondents stated that job loss was unlikely or very unlikely. The next 25 % were not sure about the probability, and 4.5 % perceived job loss as likely or very likely. These percentages were stable over the two survey waves of the survey. Summarizing the univariate analysis of both independent variables, both the perceived direct economic effects and the subjective job insecurity were relatively rare. This can be due to the gradual nature of the economic consequences of COVID-19 restrictions and to the various kinds of governmental economic support.

Control Variables – Interaction Effects

Main effects of explanatory variables can be significantly modified by other factors. Therefore, we also use interaction effects to capture these complexities. Based on the literature, we use the following modifying variables: gender, education (primary and lower secondary; upper secondary; tertiary), and the presence of minor children in the household (a dichotomous variable).

Methods

Our analysis is based on a combination of simple descriptive and multi-variate methods. Multi-variate methods from the family of "multi-level" models were employed. We see our data as hierarchically structured: individual measurements (*micro-observations*) are nested within respondents (*macro-contexts*). We chose to use the fixed-effects version of multi-level models, which effectively controls the additive effects of all measured and unmeasured macro-level characteristics (in this case, respondents) on the outcome, thus minimizing the risk of omitted-variable bias. With this method we can't estimate additive effects of stable

respondent-level characteristics (such as gender, education, and household composition), these variables can be utilized in interaction with other (micro-level) explanatory variables, thus showing whether the effect of – for instance – economic insecurity varies between genders, parents and non-parents, or across education groups.[7]

Results

Mean Values of Conflict and Satisfaction Scales According to Objective and Subjective COVID-19 Work Impacts

We can see mostly tiny differences if we compare the mean values of the summary index of conflict and the relationship satisfaction across the main independent and control variables. These descriptive analyses suggest there is almost no systematic influence of the economic impacts of COVID-19 during the first wave of the survey. However, a clear pattern emerges in the second wave when the higher economic impact is associated with a higher frequency of conflict and lower partnership satisfaction on average. In the case of job uncertainty, small differences are visible in both waves: the mean score of the partnership satisfaction is lower, and the frequency of conflict is slightly higher among respondents reporting a higher likelihood of a job loss. Concerning the control variables, men report somewhat higher partnership satisfaction, and there is also a gap between families with minor children (higher frequency of conflict, lower satisfaction) and without them, but this difference is visible only in the first wave.

7 Given the nature of the data, we refrain from reporting formal statistical tests. We prefer to highlight the substantive significance of the estimated parameters. We do, however, report standard errors of estimates as a descriptive tool.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables overall, by survey wave, and across categories of independent variables. Employed Czech adults living with a co-residential romantic partner. Number of respondents = 512

		Wave 1, mean of summary index of conflicts with partner			Wave 2, mean of summary index of conflicts with partner			Wave 1, Relationship Satisfaction			Wave 2, Relationship Satisfaction		
		Mean	N	Std. dev.	Mean	N	Std. dev.	Mean	N	Std. dev.	Mean	N	Std. dev.
Number of economic impacts, truncated*	0	2.01	451	0.66	1.95	426	0.71	8.35	451	1.86	7.88	426	1,98
	1	2.22	52	0.58	2.09	71	0.69	8.23	52	1.79	7.52	71	2,34
	2	2.04	9	0.49	2.33	15	0.90	8.33	9	1.66	6.73	15	2,99
The likelihood of a job loss*	Very unlikely	1.96	141	0.63	1.78	138	0.63	8.52	141	1.80	8.15	138	1,97
	Unlikely	2.04	217	0.68	2.02	219	0.69	8.36	217	1.74	7.75	219	2,07
	Unsure/likely/ very lik.	2.09	154	0.65	2.11	155	0.79	8.15	154	2.03	7.54	155	2,12
Sex	Women	2.07	238	0.68	2.05	238	0.71	8.21	238	2.04	7.61	238	2,19
	Men	2.00	274	0.64	1.92	274	0.71	8.45	274	1.66	7.96	274	1,95
Education of respondent	Lower sec or less	2.00	76	0.64	1.94	76	0.65	8.59	76	2.06	8.16	76	1,99
	Higher sec	2.09	208	0.70	2.00	208	0.76	8.08	208	2.01	7.60	208	2,22
	Tertiary	1.99	228	0.62	1.97	228	0.69	8.50	228	1.58	7.85	228	1,95
Minor child(ren) in the household	No kid	1.94	246	0.64	1.98	246	0.73	8.41	246	1.85	7.89	246	2,04
	Has kid	2.12	266	0.66	1.98	266	0.70	8.27	266	1.85	7.70	266	2,10
Total		2,03	512	0.66	1.98	512	0.71	8.34	512	1.85	7.79	512	2.07

*W1 and W2 data used for the computation within appropriate columns

Multi-Variate, Respondent-Level Fixed-Effects Models

In this section, we present four sets of models – one set for each combination of a dependent and an independent variable. Within each set, we begin by presenting a baseline model that contains the independent variable and a dummy variable for wave. Then, three additional models are presented that contain interactions of the independent variable with respondent-level controls (parenthood, gender, and education).

Table 2 shows the estimated parameters (and respective standard errors) of models predicting relationship satisfaction on the number of economic impacts of COVID-19 on the respondent. Model 1 (the baseline) documents that overall, the association between the dependent and the independent variable is very weak. Model 1 also confirms that the average relationship satisfaction is high (over 8.8 points on a 0-10 satisfaction scale) and that reported relationship satisfaction declined by more than a half-point between the first and the second interview. We can also see that the coefficient on intra-class correlation (rho) is very high (0.737 in Model 1), indicating a high degree of stability of relationship assessment.

Table 2: Estimated parameters (and s.e. in parentheses) of selected fixed-effect regressions of relationship satisfaction on the number of economic impacts of COVID-19 experienced by the respondent. Employed Czech adults living with a co-residential romantic partner. Number of respondents = 512, number of measurement occasions = 1024

	Model 1	Model 2	Model3	Model 4
Economic impacts of COVID	-0.005 (0.141)			
2nd wave	-0.547 (0.068)	-0.552 (0.068)	-0.546 (0.068)	-0.546 (0.068)
Interactions				
Economic impacts of COVID*has kid		0.432 (0.279)		
Economic impacts of COVID*no kid		-0.230 (0.202)		
Economic impacts of COVID*female			0.299 (0.212)	
Economic impacts of COVID*male			-0.537 (0.281)	
Economic impacts of COVID*lower sec. or less				0.182 (0.313)
Economic impacts of COVID*complete secondary				-0.204 (0.373)
Economic impacts of COVID*tertiary				-0.277 (0.397)
Constant	8.889 (0.107)	8.346 (0.052)	8.345 (0.052)	8.342 (0.052)
rho	0.737	0.740	0.739	0.736

We observed that the economic impacts of COVID-19 rather strongly interacted with all respondent-level controls, as indicated by the gray shade in the table (darker shades indicate stronger association).[8] Model 2 shows that, interestingly, relationship satisfaction increases with the number of economic impacts of COVID-19 among parents, while it decreases among respondents without children. The increase of relationship satisfaction among parents is 0.432 points for each unit increase in the economic impacts of COVID-19, while the decrease among non-parents is –0.23. Similarly, the economic impacts of COVID-19 tend to increase relationship satisfaction among women (by 0.299 points, see Table 2), while the impact among men is negative (each additional economic impact of COVID-19 decreases relationship satisfaction by –0.537 points). Finally, we also see a divergence by the level of education. Whereas the economic impacts of COVID-19 increase relationship satisfaction

8 Our assessment of the substantial significance of an interaction is contextual. For the relationship satisfaction scale, we interpret changes of more than 0.4 points to be significant and more than 0.6 points to be strongly significant. For the number of conflicts scale, the respective thresholds are 0.2 and 0.4.

among the least educated (by 0.182 points for each impact), the effect is negative among respondents with completed secondary or tertiary education (the effects being –0.204 and –0.277, respectively).

Table 3 shows the next set of models, which focus on the effects of the economic impacts of COVID-19 on the number of conflicts between partners. The logic of model building is the same as in Table 2. We first estimate the baseline model with two predictors only (Model 5) and we then add interaction terms. Model 5 reveals that associations between the dependent and the independent variables are weak. Model 6 shows that the effects of economic impacts of COVID-19 on the number of conflicts does not differ by the presence of children. Model 7, on the other hand, documents a rather strong interaction between respondent's gender and the economic impacts of COVID-19. While the effect of the economic impacts is negative among women (i.e. more economic impacts result in fewer partnership conflicts), we observe the opposite among men (the more men suffer economically, the more frequent partnership conflicts are reported). Both effects appear to be significant. We see that each additional economic impact of COVID-19 shifts women, on average, by –0.182 points on the conflict scale (toward its zero-conflict extreme). In men, the corresponding effect is + 0.213 (see Table 3). Similarly, Model 8 documents how education stratifies the effect of the economic impacts of COVID-19 on partnership conflicts. Whereas among the less educated, this effect is zero (or perhaps slightly positive), it is negative among the better educated (i.e. individuals with at least completed secondary education, see Table 3). This means that it is less common for economic hardship to translate into partnership conflicts among high school and university graduates.

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the estimated parameters of FE regression models of relationship satisfaction and number of conflicts on perceived job insecurity. Overall, these models show fewer significant interactions than the models reported above. As we see in Model 9 (see Table 4), the main effect of perceived job insecurity on relationship satisfaction is negligible. We also observe – across all models reported in Table 4 – that relationship satisfaction tends to decrease significantly over time. For instance, in Model 9, the average relationship satisfaction declined by –0.547 between the first and the second interview. Perceived job insecurity does not interact with parenthood status (see Model 10). It does, however, interact with respondent gender. When women experience a shift toward higher job insecurity between panel interviews, their relationship satisfaction increases by 0.220 points. Among men, this has the opposite effect and an increase in perceived job insecurity leads to a worsened relationship satisfaction (see Table 4, Model 11). Model 12 suggests that the effect of perceived job insecurity varies by level of education. This interaction, however, does not follow the pattern predicted by any of our hypotheses: the effect of job insecurity is strong and negative among the individuals with the lowest education and it is strong and positive among respondents in the middle education category. The effect is practically zero among individuals with tertiary degrees. Such a complex pattern is hard to explain in our view.

Table 3: Estimated parameters (and s.e. in parentheses) of selected fixed-effect regressions of the number of conflicts with partner on the number of economic impacts of COVID-19 experienced by the respondent. Employed Czech adults living with a co-residential romantic partner. Number of respondents = 512, number of measurement occasions = 1024

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Economic impacts of COVID	-0.062 (0.052)			
2nd wave	-0.047 (0.025)	-0.047 (0.025)	-0.047 (0.025)	-0.046 (0.025)
Interactions				
Economic impacts of COVID*has kid		0.005 (0.103)		
Economic impacts of COVID*no kid		-0.064 (0.075)		
Economic impacts of COVID*female			-0.182 (0.078)	
Economic impacts of COVID*male			0.213 (0.104)	
Economic impacts of COVID*lower sec. or less				0.082 (0.116)
Economic impacts of COVID*complete secondary				-0.142 (0.138)
Economic impacts of COVID*tertiary				-0.236 (0.147)
Constant	2.087 (0.040)	2.041 (0.019)	2.039 (0.019)	2.040 (0.019)
rho	0.711	0.711	0.714	0.713

Finally, Table 5 displays the estimated parameters of models predicting the number of conflicts between partners on perceived job insecurity. These models (Models 13 to 16) revealed no significant effects. Neither the main effects of job insecurity and interview wave nor any interactions between job insecurity and other variables (parenthood, gender, education) were significant.

Table 4: Estimated parameters (and s.e. in parentheses) of selected fixed-effect regressions of relationship satisfaction on perceived job insecurity. Employed Czech adults living with a co-residential romantic partner. Number of respondents = 512, number of measurement occasions = 1024

	Model 9	**Model 10**	**Model 11**	**Model 12**
Perceived job insecurity	0.0588 (0.095)			
2nd wave	-0.547 (0.068)	-0.551 (0.068)	-0.548 (0.067)	-0.541 (0.068)
Interactions				
Perceived job insecurity*has kid		0.092 (0.192)		
Perceived job insecurity*no kid		0.011 (0.137)		
Perceived job insecurity*female			0.220 (0.131)	
Perceived job insecurity*male			-0.337 (0.190)	
Perceived job insecurity*lower sec. or less				-0.139 (0.274)
Perceived job insecurity*complete secondary				0.368 (0.310)
Perceived job insecurity*tertiary				0.085 (0.309)
Constant	8.770 (0.220)	8.221 (0.199)	8.263 (0.199)	8.237 (0.200)
rho	0.738	0.739	0.750	0.751

Conclusion

As we have seen and discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant factor influencing everyday family life. The pandemic affected interactions in families and couples in many ways. Some of the most frequently discussed effects resulted from closed schools, widespread working from home, closed dining establishments, restricted contacts with peers, and reduced possibilities of contact within the wider family. In our analysis, we studied how the labor market situation impacted subjectively evaluated partnership satisfaction and reported frequency of conflict between partners. Our investigation employed two different measures of respondents' labor market experience during COVID-19: one summarizing the "objective" experience (job loss, lower wage, involuntary retirement, etc.) and the other relying on respondents' subjective assessments of employment insecurity.

Table 5: Estimated parameters (and s.e. in parentheses) of selected fixed-effect regressions of the number of conflicts with partner on perceived job insecurity. Employed Czech adults living with a co-residential romantic partner. Number of respondents = 512, number of measurement occasions = 1024

	Model 13	Model 14	Model 15	Model 16
Perceived job insecurity	-0.006 (0.035)			
2nd wave	-0.051 (0.025)	-0.051 (0.025)	-0.050 (0.025)	-0.050 (0.025)
Interactions				
Perceived job insecurity*has kid		.021 (0.071)		
Perceived job insecurity*no kid		-.016 (0.050)		
Perceived job insecurity*female			-0.017 (0.049)	
Perceived job insecurity*male			.024 (0.071)	
Perceived job insecurity*lower sec. or less				-0.063 (0.102)
Perceived job insecurity*complete secondary				0.063 (0.115)
Perceived job insecurity*tertiary				0.067 (0.115)
Constant	2.093 (0.081)	2.042 (0.073)	2.040 (0.074)	2.048 (0.074)
rho	0.709	0.708	.710	0.710

Starting from the stress and spillover theories, we hypothesized that the negative labor market experience would directly and causally translate into more frequent conflicts in partnership and lower partnership satisfaction. Summarizing the results from the "Czech GGS COVID pilot study", which employed a panel design and interviewed respondents twice (in December 2020 and April 2021), the evidence for this apparently reasonable hypothesis is weak. Fixed-effect (i.e. within-person change models) models predicting change in the frequency of conflict as well as the models predicting change in subjective partnership satisfaction did not show any significant effects of the economic impacts of COVID-19 or the subjective job insecurity.

Interestingly, subjective relationship satisfaction declined significantly between the two waves of the survey, but this was not the case for the frequency of conflicts. This means that while the subjective assessment of the relationship deteriorated, the reported frequency of conflicts remained unchanged. This is probably a result of the fact that the pandemic worsened so many aspects of personal life, including work–family balance, contact with extended family, friends, and work colleagues, that the dissatisfaction spilled over to the evaluation of other spheres (such as the couple relationship) even though these did not themselves deteriorate. It is striking that this happened without direct influence from the

labor market experience. This finding partially echoes results from several earlier studies of partnerships during the COVID-19 pandemic that also reported a generally negative trend in partnership satisfaction (Möhring et al. 2021; Schmid et al. 2021; Balzarini et al. 2020; Vigl et al. 2021). In the context of the spillover theory, these results suggest that when the effects of a pandemic situation on partnership satisfaction emerge, the path is more direct and probably does not lead primarily through personal labor market experiences, but the overall lockdown situation plays an important role. Various forms of stress taken all together can apparently magnify concerns about the long-term viability of the relationship and therefore influence an individual's perceptions that their relationship is in trouble (Ogan et al. 2021).

We chose to use a within-person change model (i.e. a respondent-level fixed-effect regression model) for its lower susceptibility to omitted-variable bias. These models give robust causal evidence, but do not, by their very nature, make it possible to estimate the additive effects of respondent-level variables, which are, however, controlled in this design (Kalvas et al. 2009). Fixed-effect models do enable the estimation of interactions between respondent-level variables and the main explanatory variables. These interactions show how respondent characteristics such as gender, education, and the presence of minor children in the household modify the effects of the labor market experience. These models reveal significant interactions. Especially in the case of gender, the overall zero-association pattern is produced by two offsetting effects of opposing natures. While we see significant worsening of partnership satisfaction and rising conflicts for men experiencing either the economic impact of COVID-19 or job insecurity, the association is exactly the opposite for women, whose partnership satisfaction rises and whose conflicts are less frequent when their labor market experience deteriorates. This pattern was consistently present in the analysis of all four combinations of the dependent and independent variables and is consistent with a pre-pandemic study by Blom et al. (2020) in the Dutch population, which also rather surprisingly found a negative impact of job insecurity on partnership satisfaction in men only.

Opposite effects in men and women can be explained by several mechanisms stemming from the differentiated gender roles that persist in Czech society (Hamplová et al. 2019; Hašková and Klenner 2010) despite significant recent shifts in prevailing norms and attitudes (Hubatková and Doseděl 2020; Kreidl 2010). First, the economic impacts of COVID-19 on women can partially free their capacity for the extraordinary amount of unpaid work that fell to the families due to the lockdown of institutional providers of childcare, education, alimentation, and other services. On the contrary, in the case of men, any erosion of their symbolic role as breadwinners could deteriorate the family climate. Moreover, a drop in male income usually has more significant consequences for the family budget due to the gender pay gap and relatively long parental leave in the Czech Republic (Bičáková and Kalíšková 2019).

These results have important implications for refining the spillover and family stress theories as it is clear that the mechanisms of stress transmission are likely to be fundamentally different for men and women. It should be noted that the Czech Republic is one of the lowest rated countries in the EU according to the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021). On the other hand, the fact that a similar effect was found (albeit before the pandemic) in the Netherlands, which in contrast has almost the highest Gender Equality Index score (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021), suggests that gender

inequality may not be the sole cause or is more persistent than expected. This may be the subject of further research.

The persistent gendered division of childcare would also be a probable explanation for the similar pattern of the flipping effects of negative labor market experience between parents and non-parents. Couples with small child(ren) tended to cope with adverse economic conditions better; in fact, they reported higher partnership satisfaction in response to economic pressure. For non-parents, the impact was strong and negative, i.e. if they did not do that well economically (or if they perceived their jobs as insecure), their partnership deteriorated.

Our results suggest that education played only a limited mediating role. We found that the effect of the economic impact of COVID-19 on partnership was stratified by the respondents' educational attainment. Among the better educated, the frequency of conflicts rises and partnership satisfaction deteriorates with stronger economic impacts of COVID-19. This contrasts with a positive or zero effect for the less educated. This interaction goes against the general expectation of the stress-absorbing function of higher social status, but more inquiry would be needed to prove or falsify this tentative conclusion based on a relatively small sample.

Several factors limit our analysis. First, while we are interested in the quality of partnership, this central concept is measured by a report from only one spouse. Therefore, our results can be understood as measuring individual associations only (personally experienced COVID-19 impacts vs. personally perceived partnership quality and frequency of conflict), which is a somehow unnatural setting, but the data available did not allow for a more complex design. Multi-actor surveys making it possible to compare and merge the data from both partners and create a dyadic perspective are strongly needed for this area of research (Blom et al. 2020). Second, our measurement instrument asked respondents to report economic changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire left it up to the respondents to assess the cause of any change in employment and/or income. This means that some of the job losses or wage drops could be the result of other factors falsely attributed to the COVID-19 and vice versa; there can be personal COVID-19 economic impacts that the respondent does not associate with the pandemic. For our purposes, the most important information is the experience of economic impact that took place during the pandemic, regardless of the cause mentioned in the survey question.

In general, our results showed that the immediate effects of economic hardship during the pandemic were not as strong and uniform as we expected. Many families apparently had the resources to overcome the economic impacts of COVID-19 in terms of maintaining the subjective relationship quality and curbing the level of conflict between the spouses. The most important conclusion worth further investigation is the gendered nature of these mechanisms. There are contradictory, gender-specific associations hidden under the weak total effects. This suggests that the perception of family life could be in a very different relation to the economic circumstances for men and women. Future inquiries into this pattern could be beneficial not only for revealing the complex nature of COVID-19 impacts but also for general research on the connection between economic settings and partnership satisfaction and instability.

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Authors

Tomáš Zvoníček is a PhD student in sociology with a focus on population studies at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University. He is a member of the research team of the Generations and Gender Programme in the Czech Republic.
Contact: 421295@mail.muni.cz

Martin Kreidl is professor of sociology at Masaryk University. He is a social demographer studying family from a social stratification perspective typically taking a comparative approach and using survey data. He is a country coordinator of the Generations and Gender programme in the Czech Republic.
Contact: kreidlm@fss.muni.cz

Petr Fučík is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social studies, Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. His research focuses on post-divorce adaptation processes in connection to social reproduction, stratification, and gender topics.
Contact: fucik@fss.muni.cz