



DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 49, ARTICLE 24, PAGES 635–650

PUBLISHED 5 OCTOBER 2023

<https://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol49/24/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2023.49.24

Descriptive Finding

Partnership satisfaction in Czechia during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Partnership satisfaction in Czechia during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

There are several published investigations of family life during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, only a few describe trends in partnership quality, and none do so for the later stages of the pandemic.

OBJECTIVE

We want to show how various measures of partnership quality develop over time and whether trends differ by respondent's sex and education.

METHODS

We use non-parametric descriptive methods based on aggregated weekly measures of subjectively assessed partnership quality and separation proneness. These dependent variables are obtained from a preliminary version of the Czech GGS2 survey; all respondents interviewed between May and December 2021 are retained for analysis. We apply a scatter plot smoother to weekly means and display them graphically.

RESULTS

We document a massive deterioration in both measures of partnership quality. For instance, separation proneness increased from 2% to 28% between May and December 2021. The trend was more pronounced among women and individuals without college education. Among less-educated women separation proneness reached 35% in December 2021.

CONTRIBUTION

This paper suggests that the negative effects of COVID-19 may unfold and cumulate over a long period and may become extreme, especially when combined with additional external stressors such as rising price levels and energy market turbulence, which were apparent in Czechia in the latter half of 2021.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted families in many detrimental ways (Lebow 2020; Zartler, Suwada, and Kreyenfeld 2022). Several surveys organized in spring 2020 show increased gender inequality in households (Hipp and Bünning 2021; Fodor et al. 2021), less satisfaction with family life (Zoch, Bächmann, and Vicari 2021), increased domestic violence (Kim and Kim 2021), and lower partnership satisfaction (Schmid et al. 2021; Pauly et al. 2022). However, the pandemic continued beyond 2020 and was not a single event, but rather a series of developments with possibly cumulative effects (Hudde, Hamk, and Jacob 2023).

This paper focuses on changes in union satisfaction in the more advanced phase of the pandemic (summer and autumn of 2021) in Czechia. This was a particularly intriguing period when a new COVID-19 wave coincided with other disruptive developments such as rising prices and turbulence in the energy markets. We argue that union satisfaction was affected differently during the different stages of the pandemic, depending on available resources, objective circumstances, and subjective perceptions. It therefore makes sense to pay particular attention to changes over time (cf. Guetto, Vignoli, and Bazzani 2021; Sánchez, Fasang, and Harkness 2021; Zamberlan, Gioachin, and Gritti 2022), especially among the most disadvantaged segments of the population (Reader and Andersen 2022; Li et al. 2022). For that reason, we describe overall trends in union satisfaction as well as developments within segments of the population defined by education and gender to show how disadvantages combined (Langmeyer et al. 2022).

2. Uncertainty and partnerships during the pandemic

Uncertainty is linked to several demographic variables in detrimental ways (Blom et al. 2019; Conger et al. 1990; Kreyenfeld, Andersson, and Pailhé 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique situation in which a wide array of uncertainties affected most (if not all) members of society (Möhring et al. 2021; Sánchez-Mira, Moles-Kalt, and Bernardi 2022) via multiple channels: financial strain, changes to the organization of work and care, social isolation, and health concerns (Balzarini et al. 2023; Möhring et al. 2021; Pauly et al. 2022; Sladká and Kreidl 2022). The combined (and possibly cumulative) effects of these variables during COVID-19 have not been investigated.

Most analyses have described only a change in union satisfaction when comparing the pre-pandemic period and a relatively narrow window of time around the first lockdowns in spring 2020. This is mainly due to data limitations. Several cross-sectional surveys were conducted during spring 2020 with retrospective reports on the pre-pandemic situation (e.g., Guetto, Vignoli, and Bazzani 2021; Kushtanina and Vinel 2021;

Pieh et al. 2020). A few surveys were also fielded in spring 2020 as part of existing infrastructures, but very few extended into the later stages of the pandemic (for exceptions see Pasqualini et al. 2022; Zamberlan, Gioachin, and Gritti 2022). However, only two studies have explored trends in partnership satisfaction over the various stages of the pandemic. Balzarini et al. (2023) report an increase in loneliness and stress, but no deterioration in partnership satisfaction in a panel covering 57 countries between March and June 2020. A drop in subjective relationship satisfaction in Czechia was observed in a two-wave panel between December 2020 and April 2021 (Zvoníček, Fučík, and Kreidl 2023).

3. Data, variables, and method

Our analysis used a preliminary version of the Czech data from the first wave of the second round of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS; Kreidl et al. 2023). The GGS is an internationally harmonized survey focusing on partnerships, fertility, household organization, and care arrangements. It is a key component of the Generations and Gender Programme, a large research infrastructure providing researchers with policy-relevant, cross-culturally comparable data covering over 20 countries (Gauthier, Cabaço, and Emery 2018). Data collection for the most recent Czech GGS began in November 2020 and continued (with some interruptions) until July 2022. However, we could only use a preliminary version of the data, which was obtained in December 2021 (our focus is therefore on data for calendar weeks 21 to 50 of 2021). The sample was constructed via probability sampling and interviews were conducted using a combination of CAPI and CAWI (CAPI was used in less than 3% of cases). Respondents were recruited through two methods: in their homes (at randomly selected addresses) and via a random digit dialling method; the ratio of these two recruitment methods in this sample was approximately 2:1. We analysed the data for respondents who lived in a heterosexual coresidential partnership and reported valid values for all necessary variables ($N = 944$).

We divided the sample into weekly periods based on the interview date; there were 30 such intervals. For each time interval (and the overall population or the sub-population defined by sex/education), we computed (using the smoothing method described below) the predicted values of two dependent variables: (1) respondent's satisfaction with the partnership, measured on a 0–10 scale (0 is the lowest and 10 is the highest satisfaction; mean is 8.73, $sd = 1.63$), and (2) a binary variable indicating that the respondent has recently thought about breaking up with his/her partner (0=no, 1=yes; 15% of respondents said yes; this variable is called 'separation proneness'; see Moore and Buehler 2011).

Our sample was not designed to be representative within each week. This is especially true for the sample of addresses, which were distributed to fieldworkers based

on availability (not every fieldworker worked every week) and convenience (assigned addresses were located close to the fieldworker's residence). We chose a simple smoothing strategy – a scatter plot smoother, which is available as a user-written procedure *mrunning* in STATA (Royston and Cox 2005) – to mitigate the problem of non-representativity within time units. The objective of the smoother is to offer a picture of the relation between a response variable and a continuous predictor and is considered “a valuable tool in exploratory data analysis” (Royston and Cox 2005: 405). The smoother is completely non-parametric and is intended to visualize trends by removing noise from the data, which was especially necessary when analysing subsamples (the smallest sub-sample was that of college-educated men with $N = 174$). The smoother is estimated by backfitting (Royston and Cox 2005: 405) and we set it up so that 20% of neighbouring cases are considered when computing the predicted value.

We ran the smoother, saved predicted values, and then applied graphical methods to display trends. When applying the procedure we constrained predicted values to fall within the interval of acceptable values of the respective dependent variable. We also used a substitution method for missing predicted values, taking the average of the neighbouring weeks if there were no observations with a particular combination of traits. We describe the overall trend as well as trends within categories of sex and/or education. Our interpretation relies entirely on the assessment of substantive significance. We consider changes of less than 0.5 (on the relationship quality scale) or 0.05 (when measuring the share of individuals thinking about breakup) to be non-significant and changes of more than 1 point (or 0.1 when examining shares) to be very strong.

4. Context: COVID-19 in Czechia

In early 2021 Czechia emerged from a sequence of three COVID-19 waves and the strictest set of restrictions (Slabá 2022), which had stopped fieldwork operations for the Czech GGS. Data collection was resumed in May 2021. The subsequent weeks were characterized by low COVID numbers, but the situation began to worsen in late summer, culminating in the second half of November with almost 28,000 new confirmed daily infections. Some restrictions were put in place that autumn, but they concerned vaccination certificates and limitations to the size of gatherings rather than typical lockdown measures such as closed schools. Table 1 summarizes the context of the observed period, including important social and political events and selected findings from opinion surveys.

Table 1: Context of analysis: Confirmed COVID-19 cases, major events, and public opinion by week

Week	COVID cases	Survey data	Major events
Context for weeks 1–20		The representative cross-sectional survey Our Society repeatedly asks respondents to evaluate near-future developments regarding COVID.* In weeks 5–6, 32% of respondents say the situation will get better, 31% declare it will get worse, and 33% assume it will remain the same. In weeks 12–15, 62% say the situation will get better and 12% say it will get worse.	Strict COVID lockdown measures are lifted in week 15 after being in place since week 8. People aged 80+ have been able to register to get vaccinated since week 2. Russian GRU agents are linked to the Vrbětice ammunition warehouse explosion (2014), thwarting plans to import the Sputnik V COVID vaccine (week 15).
21	3,235	Our Society respondents are still optimistic: 62% maintain that the situation will get better, 10% say it will get worse.	
22	2,387		
23	1,444		
25	710		A tornado (F4 on the tornado damage scale) destroys several villages in the South Moravian region.
26	1,028	Only 31% of respondents say the situation will get better, while 36% think it will get worse and 26% assume it will not change.	
27	1,389		
40	6,037		Czech parliamentary election, victory of (democratic) opposition. Bohemia Energy, one of the largest energy suppliers with about 1 million customers, and a few other smaller suppliers go bankrupt due to rising power prices. Czech president is hospitalized, prognosis uncertain.
41	9,630		
45	77,044		
46	107,506	29% of respondents say the situation will get better, 47% say it will get worse.	
47	128,635		President released from hospital. Omicron variant confirmed in Czechia.
50	68,429		Government appointed by the president.

Note: * The question was: "Do you think the situation in Czechia regarding the spread of COVID-19 will get better, remain the same or get worse during the next few months?"

5. Results

5.1 Subjective partnership quality

Figure 1 (left panel) presents the overall change in average relationship quality. We can see that relationship quality was quite high in May 2021 (mean 9.1 in calendar week 21); this figure is higher than Zvoníček, Fučík, and Kreidl (2023) found in a Czech non-representative sample (in their data the mean satisfaction was 8.3 points in December 2020). Relationship quality then declined to around 8.7 points, where it remained (with

little oscillation) for another 20 weeks, only to experience another decline to 8.1 in week 50. Overall, in 30 weeks the average relationship quality declined one full point on the 0–10 scale.

Figure 1: Average relationship satisfaction and share of respondents thinking about breakup, per calendar week. Czechia, May–December 2021. Number of cases = 944

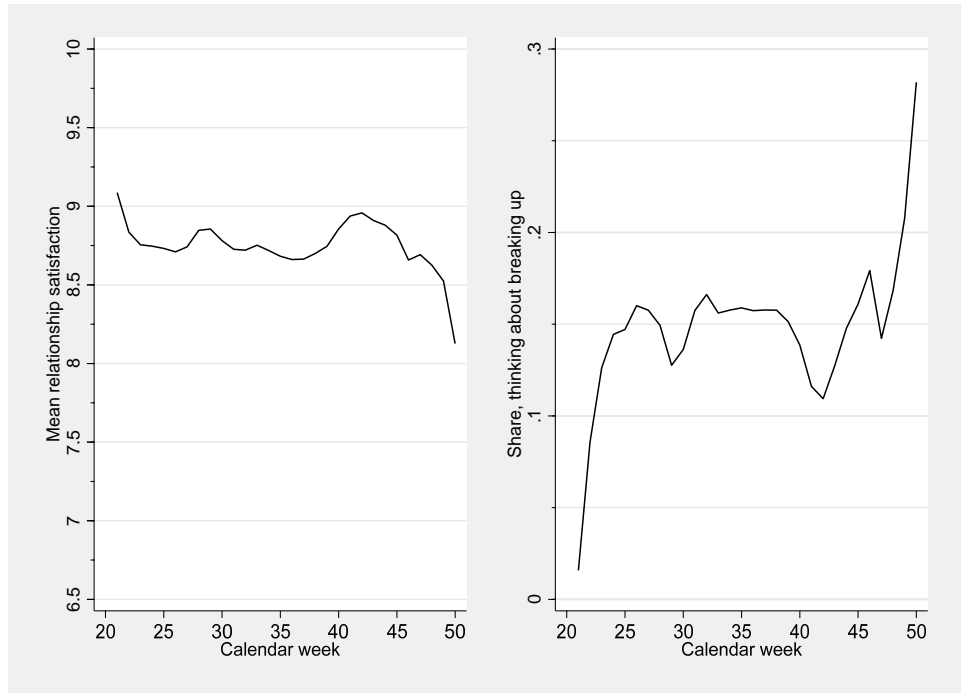
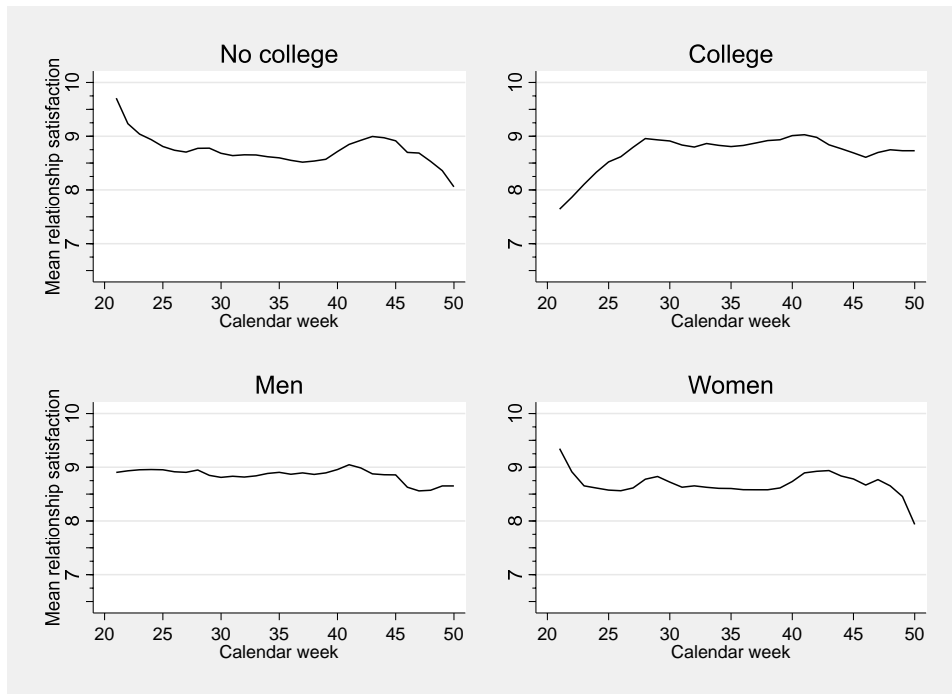


Figure 2 presents relationship quality in sub-populations defined by education (top panels) and sex (bottom panels). We observe that respondents without a college degree experienced a decline in subjective relationship quality, which dropped from 9.7 points (week 21) to 8.1 points (week 50). College-educated respondents, on the other hand, witnessed improving relationship quality (from 7.6 in week 21 to 8.7 in week 50; see the top right panel in Figure 2).

Figure 2: Average relationship satisfaction, per calendar week, by education and sex. Czechia, May–December 2021. Number of cases = 944



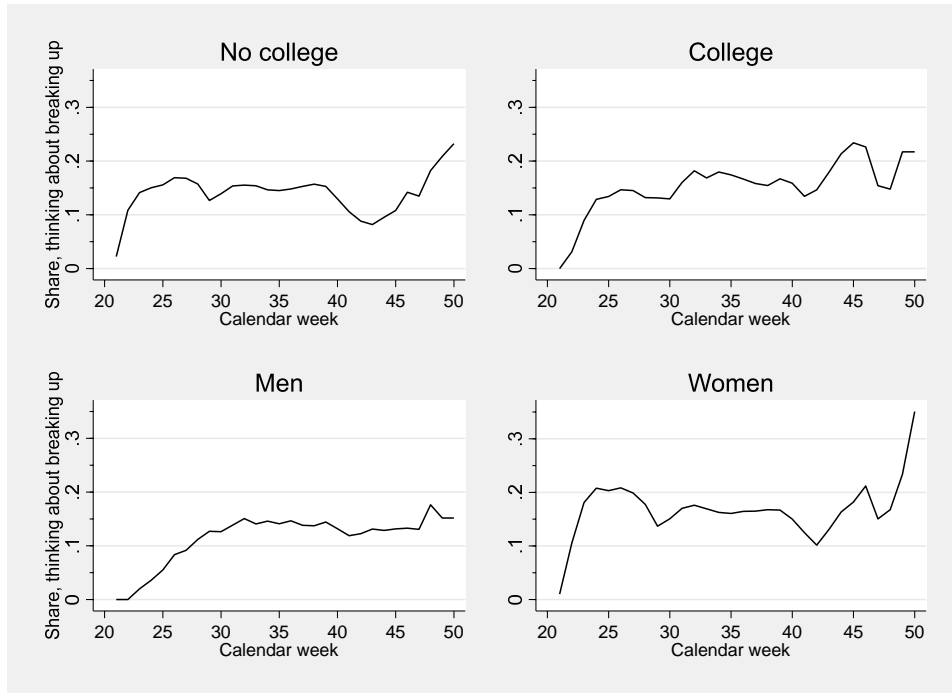
We see little change in relationship quality as reported by men: the line starts at 8.9 points (week 21) and ends at 8.7 points in week 50 (lower left panel of Figure 2), which is a trivial change. For women, on the other hand, we see more variation over time and a clear decline in average relationship quality. Female respondents reported high relationship quality in the early observation period (9.3 in week 21), which then declined to 8.6 (weeks 24 to 27). After a period of stabilization (until week 39) another period of rapid decline followed between weeks 43 and 50, when women's relationship satisfaction reached its low of 7.9 points (see the lower right panel of Figure 2). Overall, women experienced a deterioration of subjective relationship quality over this observation window, going from 9.3 to 7.9.

5.2 Separation proneness

Figure 1 (right panel) turns our attention to the share of respondents who admitted thinking about breaking up with their partner. Separation proneness was around 0.02 (i.e., only 2% of people were thinking about separation) at the beginning of our observation window. Some older, pre-pandemic surveys indicated that 7% of couples experienced separation proneness (Sladká and Kreidl 2023). Separation proneness grew rapidly in subsequent weeks to reach 0.16 in week 26. After a period of stabilization, separation proneness started to increase again around week 45 to reach 0.28 in week 50. This represents an unprecedented deterioration in relationship quality over a relatively short observation window.

Figure 3 shows separation proneness by education and sex. Clearly, thinking about union dissolution skyrocketed in the latter part of 2021 in both education categories. Among respondents without college education, separation proneness rose from 0.02 (week 21) to 0.23 (week 50; see the top two panels of Figure 3). College-educated individuals experienced a similar development, going from values below 0.05 (in calendar weeks 21 to 22) to 0.22 (in weeks 49 and 50; see the top right panel of Figure 3). Both men and women experienced increases in separation proneness. While the share of men thinking about leaving their partner rose to 0.15 (bottom left panel of Figure 3), the increase was much more dramatic among women, for whom it reached 0.35 in calendar week 50 (bottom right panel of Figure 3).

Figure 3: Share of respondents that had recently thought about breaking up with their partner, per calendar week, by education and sex. Czechia, May–December 2021. Number of cases = 944



5.3 Intersectional view: do gender and education interact?

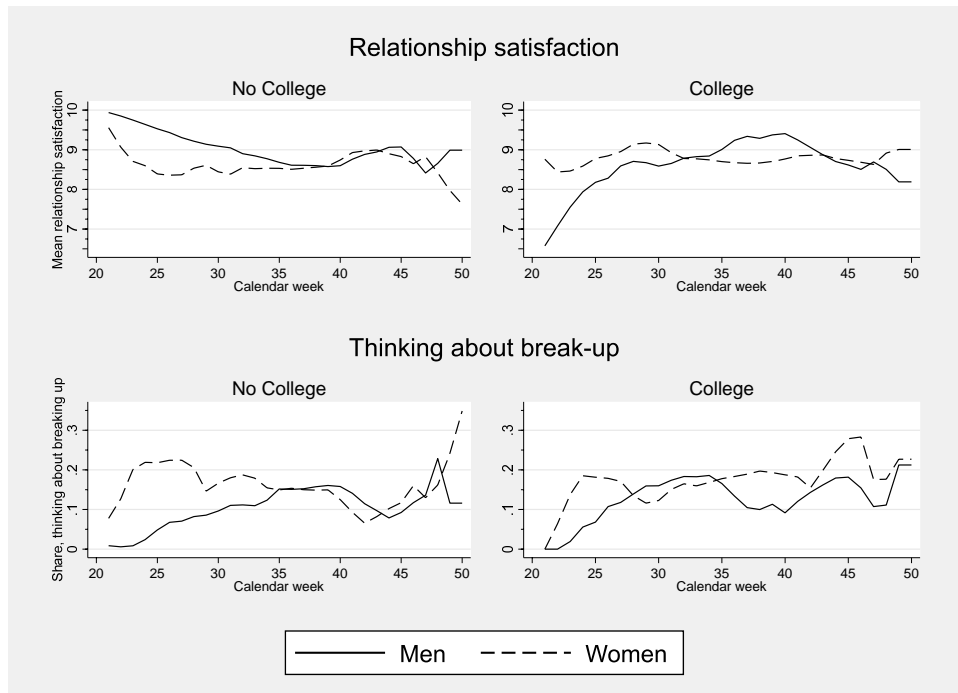
While there is clear evidence that relationship quality deteriorated in Czechia between May and December 2021, we also observed that some subpopulations were harder hit. Men, on average, fared better than women on both dependent variables. College education also represented a protective factor, at least as far as average subjective relationship quality is concerned. Are the effects of education and sex additive, or do they interact to create a particularly heavy burden of disadvantage?

Figure 4 shows changes in both dependent variables by education and sex combined. This figure reveals some noteworthy interactions. Most notably, women without a college degree experienced the worst developments on both dependent variables. For instance, their average relationship satisfaction declined by two full points (from 9.6 to 7.6); the

second-worst change was a decline by 1 point (from 9.9 to 8.9) among men without college (top left panel in Figure 4). Of the four combinations of sex and education, only one (men with college education) experienced some improvement in reported relationship quality.

When we focus on the second dependent variable (thinking about breakup), we observe a similar pattern: women without college education witnessed the largest increase in separation proneness (increasing from 0.08 in week 21 to 0.35 in week 50; see the bottom left panel in Figure 4). This last point cannot be overemphasized: fully 35% of women without college admitted in December 2021 that they had thought about leaving their partner. This is an increase of 27 percentage points since May 2021. All other combinations of sex and education experienced much smaller increases in separation proneness.

Figure 4: Relationship quality and share of respondents that had recently thought about breaking up with their partner, per calendar week, by sex and education. Czechia, May–December 2021. Number of cases = 944



6. Conclusions

This short paper described trends in partnership quality in Czechia during the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely between May and December 2021. Over that period we observed a massive deterioration of two indices of relationship quality among coresident couples: subjective relationship satisfaction and separation proneness. For instance, the proportion of people who admitted that they had recently thought about leaving their partner increased from 2% to 28%. Women reported much worse developments than men, as did respondents without college education. Women with lower education were impacted the most. Separation proneness increased by 27 percentage points (to 35% in December 2021) in this group.

While it may be tempting to attribute these developments solely to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are cautious, as there were other concurrent developments not directly related to the pandemic that increased the burden on families and households and made some social categories particularly vulnerable. These included rising price levels and interest rates (which impacted mortgage payments), strong turbulence in energy markets (international as well as national; several major Czech energy suppliers went bankrupt in October 2021 and almost one million Czech households were transferred to the ‘supplier of last resort’, which charged prices several times higher than households had paid previously; see Table 1 for additional contextual information), as well as other factors that combined to increase stress and uncertainty.

Our data does not allow us to differentiate the unique effect of each of these contextual variables. Even though the data collection for the Czech GGS continued beyond December 2021, adding these extra weeks would not necessarily increase our interpretive (and analytical) leverage, as other external events (such as the war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, and related developments in energy and other markets) would have to be added to the group of potential explanatory factors. We invite other scholars to examine trends in relationship quality in other contexts and within other data sets to increase our shared knowledge base and to possibly propose theories that would help provide adequate interpretations.

7. Acknowledgements

This research received financial support from the Czech Science Foundation (project num. 20-12364S). We would like to thank participants of the RN21 ESA conference Quantitative Methods and the COVID19 Pandemic at the University of Salamanca (Salamanca, October 5–7, 2022) and of the 20th annual conference of the European

Divorce Network at Masaryk University (Brno, October 13–15, 2022) for their comments and suggestions that significantly contributed to the final shape of this paper.

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