

THE IMPACT OF PANDEMIA COVID-19 ON THE RESILIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY: SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, on the samples of 2705 respondents from Serbia and 1123 from Montenegro, the authors used an electronic survey to compare family relationships and affective life of adolescents before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contrary to the results of other research, the relations between parents and adolescents and the overall family relations were significantly better after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although to a lesser extent, improvement was also reported in affective life, although depressive syndrome remained dominant. The authors explain these unexpected results as a greater individual and group resilience due to increased family cohesion,

as well as greater emotional and social support of parents during the Covid-19 pandemic. At first sight, paradoxically, significant catalysts for increased resilience were certain anachronistic collective-psychological patterns of patriarchal heritage in both countries and especially in Montenegro.

Key words: Covid - 19, resilience, family relationships, emotional problems

JEL classification: I1, J12

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to serious health problems in almost all spheres of everyday life, and especially to large reductions in social contacts. [1] At the beginning of the pandemic, people were mostly inclined to deny and minimize the possible consequences, which was largely due to the often controversial opinions of experts and sensationalist articles in the media [2]. At first, the most common defense mechanisms were negation, followed by rationalizations and projections [3,4]. The lack of reliable knowledge about the causes, symptoms, and consequences has led to a very diverse array of attitudes and behaviors that range from negation and minimization to social isolation as a consequence of heightened anxiety [5]. This was largely due to daily media reports of a sharp increase in the spread of Covid-19, which resulted in a sharp rise in deaths. Many of the daily sensationalist epidemiological reports, with often exaggerated statements and unreliable conclusions, often seem to have contributed more to the spread of confusion, anxiety, and depression than to preventing and combating the virus [6,7]. In any case, the socio-psychological problems were numerous and the defense mechanisms initially changed almost on a trial and error basis. Such rapid and inconsistent changes were in the function of finding more optimal resilient solutions. Rapid changes and inconsistencies in the search for these solutions are the results of insufficient and often contradictory information on the causes and consequences of covid-19 [8,9]. After the first frequent changes in the defense mechanisms of the personality on covid-19, there are efforts to harmonize attitudes and behaviors to increase resilience to the pandemic.

AIM

This study aimed to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social and psychological relations in the families of Serbia and Montenegro. Also, the aim was to present the resilience of families to the pandemic, and the mechanisms the families used to increase pandemic resilience.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The sample consisted of 3825 respondents. In 2021, according to the principle of anonymity and full voluntariness, the survey was completed by 2705 students of all grades of high schools in Serbia and 1123 students of high schools from Montenegro.

In the questionnaire, adolescents provided one of five answers on the five-point Likert scale about their relationships with fathers, mothers, and overall family relationships, as well as the degree of representation of one of the seven emotional states (anxiety and tension, loneliness, bad mood, rapid mood swings, feelings losses, lack of society, reduced interest in school and learning), referring after and before the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results for the first three questions are quite unexpected. With small differences, in both samples, approximately 40% of respondents reported an improvement in parental relationships and overall family relationships. Only less than 10% of respondents reported deterioration in parental relationships and overall family relationships. This deterioration was slightly more common between fathers and adolescents than between mothers and adolescents. In terms of overall family relationships, deterioration is reported by 1/4 of respondents (Table 1). In both samples, about half of the adolescents reported that nothing had changed in the parents' relations and overall family relations. Also, adolescents reported improvement in the mothers' relations with them and the total family relations in about 48.3% of cases, and the fathers' relations, and total family relationships in over 40% of cases (Table 1).

Relatively small differences can be attributed to the fact that men/fathers experienced greater social isolation than women/mothers because they spent more time at work, and due to the pandemic a significant percentage were forced to work from home, which intensified feelings of social exclusion and isolation and increased propensity to abrasion such situations in conflicts with family members [1].

Based on one of our recent studies during the Covid-19 pandemic, the respondents had the hardest time withstanding social isolation, significantly reduced social contacts, and lack of gathering with close people from the social environment [1]. The way out of such a situation is usually sought in two ways - by intensifying family conflicts due to social frustrations due to a significantly narrowed framework of social interactions and increased stereotyping of daily activities within very narrow psychological and spatial boundaries of the family or trying to compensate the forced social isolation. What will determine whether the choice will go in one direction or another? The answer can lay mostly in the quality of family relationships that existed before the Covid-19 pandemic. If these relationships were healthy, family members are more easily motivated to overcome the social frustrations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, because they manage to trigger internal potentials and mechanisms to

overcome these stressful situations. Otherwise, new stressful situations and traumatic social experiences intensify existing ones, especially since they all act cumulatively together. All this immobilizes and paralyzes the already limited individual and group family capacities of coping with stressful situations in various areas of family life caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1. *Distribution of answers to questions on adolescent-parent relationships and overall family relationships before and after the Covid-19 pandemic*

Relationships between fathers and adolescents	Total sample		Serbia		Montenegro	
	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly worse	86	3,8	42	3,9	44	3,9
Worse	88	3,9	43	4,0	44	3,9
The same	1121	49,8	565	52,1	532	47,4
Better	383	17,0	174	16,1	201	17,9
Much better	571	25,4	260	24,0	302	26,9
Total	2249	100,0	1084	100,0	1123	100,0
Relationships between mothers and adolescents						
	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly worse	34	1,5	16	1,5	18	1,6
Worse	71	3,2	34	3,1	35	3,1
The same	1057	47,0	539	49,7	496	44,2
Better	387	17,2	180	16,6	198	17,6
Much better	700	31,1	315	29,1	376	33,5
Total	2249	100,0	1084	100,0	1123	100,0
Overall family relationships						
	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly worse	32	1,4	20	1,8	12	1,1
Worse	114	5,1	50	4,6	61	5,4
The same	1112	49,9	573	52,9	525	46,7
Better	376	16,7	171	15,5	201	17,9
Much better	605	26,9	270	24,9	324	28,4
Total	2249	100,0	1084	100,0	1123	100,0

Considering that the families in our samples belong mostly to „healthy“ families, such outcomes are not entirely unexpected. The seemingly paradoxical situation in both countries contributes to the positive outcome of the Covid-19 pandemic. Anachronistic socio-psychological derivatives of patriarchal family heritage can also have some positive consequences in crisis social situations; activation of collective-egalitarian patterns of patriarchal family heritage contributes to homogenization and enhanced social cohesion in counteracting stressful situations and their sublimation in Serbia, and especially in Montenegro.

Table 2. Comparison of adolescent emotional problems before and after Covid-19 pandemic on the total sample and samples of Serbia and Montenegro

	Total Sample		Serbia		Montenegro	
Anxiety and tension	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	337	15,0	177	16,3	152	13,5
Less	306	13,6	153	14,1	151	13,4
The same	1016	45,2	484	44,6	510	45,4
More	442	19,7	195	8,0	242	21,5
Much more	148	6,6	75	6,9	68	6,1
<i>Total</i>	2249	100,0	1084	100,0	1123	100,0
Loneliness	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	473	21,3	246	23,1	217	19,5
Less	396	17,9	189	17,7	200	18,0
The same	911	41,1	433	40,6	460	41,4
More	306	13,8	138	12,9	165	14,9
Much more	132	6,0	60	5,6	68	6,1
<i>Total</i>	2176	100,0	1066	100,0	1110	100,0
Bad mood	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	428	19,3	227	21,3	192	17,3
Less	377	17,0	192	18,0	181	16,3
The same	943	42,5	424	39,7	501	45,2
More	326	14,7	151	14,2	169	15,2
Much more	144	6,5	73	6,8	66	6,0
<i>Total</i>	2176	100,0	1067	100,0	1109	100,0
Fast mood swings	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	291	13,1	166	15,6	120	10,8
Less	283	12,8	140	13,1	140	12,6
The same	1097	49,5	519	48,7	555	50,0
More	359	16,2	156	14,6	197	17,7
Much more	188	8,5	85	8,0	98	8,8
<i>Total</i>	2176	100,0	1066	100,0	1110	100,0
Feeling lost	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	488	22,2	253	24,0	227	20,6
Less	307	14,0	142	13,5	159	14,4
The same	1008	45,9	473	45,0	514	46,6
More	238	10,8	108	10,3	126	11,4
Much more	157	7,1	76	7,2	78	7,1
<i>Total</i>	2198	100,0	1052	100,0	1104	100,0
Lack of company	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	476	21,5	242	22,7	227	20,5
Less	355	16,0	169	15,9	176	15,9

The same	826	37,2	388	36,4	419	37,7
More	400	18,0	194	18,2	203	18,3
Much more	161	7,3	73	6,8	85	7,7
<i>Total</i>	2218	100,0	1066	100,0	1110	100,0
Decreased interest in school and learning	N	Valid %	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Significantly less	266	12,0	151	14,2	112	10,1
Less	232	10,5	111	10,4	117	10,5
The same	996	44,9	483	45,4	489	43,9
More	400	18,0	180	16,9	216	19,4
Much more	324	14,6	139	13,1	179	16,1
<i>Total</i>	2218	100,0	1064	100,0	1113	100,0

When it comes to the emotional problems of adolescents related to the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be generally observed in the samples from Serbia and Montenegro that the pandemic caused a decrease in emotional problems. On the other hand, approximately half of the respondents stated that the pandemic did not affect changes in emotional life, which remained the same as before the pandemic (Table 2).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic had significantly less of an impact on adolescents' attitudes toward fathers and mothers and also overall family relationships than it did on adolescents' affective lives (see Tables 1 and 2). By comparing Tables 1 and 2, it can be noted that the relationship between parents and adolescents, as well as overall family relationships are on average better in all aspects. While family relationships after the Covid-19 pandemic were assessed much more positively, respondents assessed their emotional states as similarly or more positively (Table 2). More dominant are tendencies to improve the emotional states of adolescents after the Covid-19 pandemic; loneliness and low mood are relatively diminished, as is the feeling of loss and lack of company, while anxiety and tension, as well as rapid mood swings, remain similar. The Covid-19 pandemic had the greatest impact on reducing interest in school and learning, especially among adolescents in Montenegro (see Table 2). Rapid mood swings are also more pronounced among adolescents from Montenegro compared to the sample from Serbia. Decreased motivation for school and learning is a consequence of a complex set of factors, among which cognitive ones are probably not the most important. It is known that even in normal conditions, adolescents show significant variations in school success, which is conditioned by numerous challenges and temptations that adolescence brings with it. As in this period, adolescents do not seek for peers who will confirm and justify accuracy of their knowledge, expectations, choices and attitudes, which is possible only in intensive interactions. Reduced interest in school and learning, which is a consequence of all other emotional problems associated with Covid-19, should be sought in previously written.

It is possible to ask - How did adolescents in Serbia and Montenegro manage to get through the crisis related to the Covid-19 pandemic without major emotional problems? It can be assumed that the most important factor is enhanced family cohesion and social support of parents. However, a more reliable answer would require longitudinal research.

The results of our study differ from the findings of other researchers on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on family relationships and the emotional lives of adolescents. These differences may be due to appropriate sample selection, honest answers, and applied research tools that, due to the simplified picture of family interactions, provide more reliable and in-depth knowledge of family relationships and the emotional life of adolescents in the Western Balkan. However, it is necessary to emphasize that adolescents according to other research assess family interactions more sharply and objectively than parents, and certainly have a sharper self-perception of their emotional states and behaviors [11, 12, 13]. The main findings of our study are that relationships between adolescents and their parents are better after the Covid-19 pandemic than before, which differs from the findings of other researchers. Changes in family life due to the pandemic can negatively affect parent-adolescent relationships. The authors of the the Canadian study [14] state that adolescents experienced family relationships differently during the pandemic. Four profiles of adolescents were identified: those who observed low change, only improvement, moderate instability, and high instability in the quality of family relationships. The results of the study conducted on Dutch parents and adolescents [15] showed negative changes in family relationships; less support between family members, less positive parenting, and increased negative interactions between parents and adolescents. Also, the findings of this study suggest that extra attention needs to be paid to parent-adolescent relationships during a pandemic, especially for adolescents with high-stress levels. Another Dutch study [16] points out the importance of perceived parent-adolescent relationships. The authors of this study assert that there is a connection between the symptoms of depression in adolescents and perceived family relationships. The perception of “worse” relationships with mothers predicted symptoms of depression in both female and male adolescents. The perception of “worse” relationships with the father predicted symptoms of depression, especially in male adolescents.

After the first defensive mechanisms of the Covid-19 pandemic, which are characterized by negation, rationalization, and projection and which do not give results, families strive to develop longer-term resilient strategies for the Covid-19 pandemic. These resilient strategies are characterized by the intensification of family help and support. This strengthens family cohesion in front of the many external and internal temptations and frustrations that the pandemic has brought with it. Whether families will succeed in this depends on the previous emotional and social support that family members provided to each other. This is why we find the results of our study not so unexpected, keeping in mind that our sample is made of so-called “healthy families”. Some anachronistic patterns of patriarchal heritage have, paradoxically,

benefited from these positive findings. Due to the pandemic, which brought numerous social, economic, psychological, and social problems, families in Serbia and Montenegro resorted to strengthening collectivist-egalitarian patterns as mechanisms of group defense. This primarily forced confinement in families prevented families from disintegrating, but it also resulted in increased social isolation, which was most difficult for all members to endure, especially children and adolescents. Earlier traumatic experiences related to the chronic cumulative socio-economic crisis of the 1990s increased the resilience of families in both Serbia and Montenegro to cope with all types of crises, including the pandemic crisis. The pandemic had significantly less of an impact on adolescents' attitudes toward fathers and mothers and overall family relationships than it did on adolescents' affective lives. Although adolescents' effective lives were generally better than before the pandemic. Depression is a dominant syndrome due to reduced social contact. Observing lower correlations, adolescents have a harder time dealing with the externalization of the problem than with the internalization of the depressive syndrome caused by social isolation and loneliness. These positive outcomes are primarily conditioned by greater parental emotional and social support for adolescents and higher family cohesiveness during the pandemic. This has been confirmed by the findings of high positive correlations between the three items on family relationships and the seven items that describe the emotional states of adolescents.

The importance of family cohesion, solidarity, and parental support can be seen during the analysis of Table 3. Table 3 shows high positive intercorrelations between all three issues; Spearman's correlation coefficient values are above 0.600. There are slightly higher intercorrelations between fathers' and adolescents' attitudes than the mothers' and adolescents' attitudes, as well as fathers' attitudes with overall family relationships ($\rho = 0.790$, Table 3). It may be assumed that given the derivatives of patriarchal family heritage in situations of crises, fathers' attitudes and behaviors have a greater impact on establishing cohesive mechanisms in the family. That is only an assumption that deserves more detailed, refined research. These findings indicate a high level of family cohesion, as a result of which families have been able to significantly amortize the negative aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic on family relationships, primarily emotional and strengthen individual and also group resilience.

Table 3 shows that the correlations of all three issues (father, mother and overall family relationships) are highly positive with all seven items describing adolescents' emotional problems (anxiety, tension, loneliness, bad mood and sadness, rapid mood swings, feeling lost, lack of company and reduced interest in school and learning). All correlations without exception are significant at 0.000. Thus, it can be concluded that in families in which adolescents perceived their relationships with fathers, mothers, and overall family relationships as „better“, adolescents had significantly less emotional problems than those who perceived relationships as „worse“. It should be noted that negative signs on the scale of items of emotional problems of adolescents are a consequence of the reverse score.

Table 3. *Intercorrelations between 10 items on family relationships and emotional problems of adolescents*

	S	RF	RM	OR	A/T	L	BM	RMS	FL	LC	DISL
R	Rho	1,00	0,66	0,790	-0,386	-0,359	-0,384	-0,329	-0,393	-0,288	-0,232
F	Sig.	0,00	0,00	00	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2207	2207	2207	2207	2176	2176	2176	2156	2176	2177
R	Rho	0,646	1,00	0,708	-0,353	-0,387	-0,380	-0,296	-0,381	-0,294	-0,193
M	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2207	2207	2207	2207	2176	2176	2176	2156	2176	2177
O	Rho	0,790	0,708	1,00	-0,406	-0,412	-0,418	-0,331	-0,429	-0,302	-0,242
R	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2207	2207	2207	2207	2176	2176	2176	2156	2176	2177
A/	Rho	-0,386	-0,353	-0,406	1,00	0,614	0,655	0,619	0,625	0,450	0,399
T	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2207	2207	2207	2207	2,176	2176	2176	2156	2176	2177
L	Rho	-0,359	-0,387	-0,412	0,614	1,00	0,754	0,583	0,673	0,548	0,354
	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,00	0,00	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2176	2176	2176	2176	2176	2167	2165	2148	2165	2163
B	Rho	-0,384	-0,380	-0,418	0,655	0,754	1,00	0,689	0,734	0,484	0,386
M	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,00	0,000	0,00	0,000
	N	2176	2176	2176	2176	2167	2176	2171	2151	2167	2165
R	Rho	-0,329	-0,296	-0,331	0,619	0,583	0,689	1,00	0,667	0,25	0,406
M	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
S	N	2176	2176	2176	2176	2165	2171	2176	2152	2168	2166
F	Rho	-0,393	-0,381	-0,429	0,625	0,673	0,734	0,667	1,00	0,489	0,412
L	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2156	2156	2156	2156	2148	2151	2152	2156	2153	2149
L	Rho	-0,288	-0,294	-0,302	0,450	0,548	0,484	0,428	0,489	1,00	0,373
C	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	2176	2176	2176	2176	2165	2167	2168	2153	2176	2169
D	Rho	-0,232	-0,193	-0,242	0,399	0,354	0,386	0,406	0,412	0,373	1,00
I	Sig.	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
S	N	2177	2177	2177	2177	2163	2165	2166	2149	2169	2177
L											

Legend: S-Statistics, RM-Relationships with mothers, RF-Relationships with fathers, OR-Overall family relationships, A/T-Anxiety, tension, L-Loneliness, BM-bad mood, RMS- Rapid mood swings, FL-Feeling lost, LC- Lack of company, DISL-Decreased interest in school and learning

As expected, the biggest correlations are between the three items on family relationships, and then between the seven items that describe the psychological problems of adolescents. This was to be expected because these are special composites. However, family relationships are associated with the internalization or externalization of adolescent psychological problems, as other studies have shown [10]. Although, these relationships are often the result of several indirect mechanisms of action. Therefore, it is expected that Spearman's values or intercorrelations between

items that describe the psychological problems of adolescents; they mostly range from 0.200 to 0.400 (see Table 3). Nevertheless, all these intercorrelations are positive and significant at the 0.000 level.

We were particularly interested in the structure of correlations between the seven items that describe the psychological problems of adolescents. As a criterion of strong positive correlation that could indicate that it is a composite, we took the values of Spearman's correlation coefficient above 0.600. The strongest positive correlation (above 0.700) is between the following items (Table 3):

- loneliness, bad mood and sadness 0.754; $p = 0.000$
- feelings of loss, bad mood and sadness 0.734; $p = 0.000$

Positive correlations above 0.600 were found among the following items:

- rapid mood swings and bad mood and sadness 0.689; $p = 0.000$;
- loneliness and feelings of loss 0.673, $p = 0.000$;
- anxiety, tension and bad mood 0.665; $p = 0.000$,
- anxiety, tension and feeling lost 0.625; $p = 0.000$;
- rapid mood swings and anxiety, tension 0.619; $p = 0.000$.

All these highly interrelated items indicate the internalization of the depressive syndrome mentioned in research on mental problems associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, non-specific only to the adolescent population [1]. Interestingly, correlations have slightly lower values when it comes to symptoms that indicate the externalization of the problem (lack of society, reduced interest in school and learning, see table 3). These findings indirectly suggest that adolescents have a harder time coping with the introjection of psychological problems associated with Covid-19 than with their externalization in the social environment.

CONCLUSION

The relations between parents and adolescents and the overall family relations in Serbia and Montenegro were significantly better after the COVID-19 pandemic. Improvement was also reported in affective life, although depressive syndrome remained dominant. These results can be explained by a greater individual and group resilience due to increased family cohesion, as well as greater emotional and social support of parents during the Covid-19 pandemic. Earlier traumatic experiences related to the war increased the resilience of families in both Serbia and Montenegro to cope with different types of crises, including the pandemic crisis. Families in Serbia and Montenegro resorted to strengthening collectivist-egalitarian patterns as mechanisms of group defense.

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