Article

Stay Home—The Impact of Social Distancing in Families during COVID-19 Lockdown: The Case of Cyprus

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Abstract: Everyone has experiences that make them feel upset, disappointed, or fatigued. When these types of feelings are combined with certain life events or situations, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, they often lead to mounting tension and stress. A crisis is a disruption or breakdown in a person's or a family's normal or usual pattern of functioning. The aims and objectives of this study are to explore how lockdown and social distancing had an impact on family relations in Cyprus and to what extent affected stress level of participants. By examining the impact of social distancing among adults 18 and older ($N = 160$), valuable conclusions were extracted. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to strengthen the idea of using alternative approaches in social preventions and/or interventions in crisis in order to deal with stress. The study argues that the disruption of usual patterns of functioning, in addition to other psychosocial and economic factors, diminishes the quality of life, resulting in tension and stress in a family environment. On the other hand, findings from the current study indicate an enhancement of relationships in challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; family; Cyprus; social distancing; lockdown

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1. Introduction

The recent Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused unprecedented, multiple, and complicated issues to the global population. To avoid a massive need for hospitalization national governments, following the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and related scientists, a series of strict measures against COVID-19 were introduced. Lockdowns and social distancing during the pandemic could be characterized as the most extreme measures the western world experienced, probably since WWII. These extraordinary measures led millions of people to separate from their loved ones, their jobs and colleagues, their friends, and parents.

As psychiatrist Paolo Brambilla pointed out, this is a social experiment that has never been done before (Sarner 2020). Not only have vulnerable population groups been affected, but in many cases the whole social and family networks were under severe pressure to deal with the rapid changes in their everyday life. While protection measures against COVID-19 were similar all over the world, mainly through lockdowns and social distancing, it is interesting to examine how those measures affected people from different cultures. In this particular paper, the case of Cyprus is examined.

Cyprus, a country with strong family ties, was not an exception to the strict protection measures against COVID-19. To examine any effects on the Cypriot family system, an online survey among 160 families and individuals was contacted during the lockdown period between 5 April and 20 May 2020 (one day before the termination of the lockdown in the country).

Through a mixed-method approach, this survey aims to explore how the lockdown and social distancing affected the psychosocial functioning of families, their stress level and stress coping skills, as well as their views around the new social conditions of distancing

that were established as a result of the pandemic. The hypothesis on whether the different status of people played an important role in the way they handled lockdown and social distancing was tested to examine if family status and place of living, type of living, area of living, and work status affected their capacity to handle lockdown conditions.

During the recent lockdown, families went through an intense period, governed by a unique set of very strong external boundaries. Physical contact and close emotional contact have been mandated in many places by orders to remain within living units (Lebow 2020). At the same time, for many people, mostly parents, staying at home meant multiple roles simultaneously: parent, teacher, chef, entertainer, partner, and professional. Similarly, homes were transformed to work offices, classrooms, restaurants, gyms, etc., while parents were struggling to stay on top of everything else (Colling et al. 2020). The actions people all over the world had to take in order to curb the spread of the disease have left many of them struggling to cope with lack of childcare while working, loss of income, separation from family and friends, and serious health fears. During that stressful and potentially traumatic time, many people were forced to adapt to a new reality dominated by fear of viral spread and contagion.

The front line workers, such as medical professionals and first responders, were facing an increased risk of contracting the virus as they remained on duty (Chen and Bonanno 2020). For many of them, it has meant working on the front line, facing potentially traumatic experiences, and making tough moral decisions as to who lives and who dies (Sarner 2020). It is imperative to point out that many people, mainly children and adolescents, have not dealt with that scale of stress before, and some were having newfound anxieties (Phillips 2021).

Yet, while social distancing and lockdown were seen by many people as a threat to their established daily customs, this paper argues that these extraordinary conditions could be an opportunity for reconnection with family members (mainly nuclear) and new prioritizations among family members.

Nevertheless, to understand the family dynamics during a crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic and the outcome of social distancing and lockdown, it is imperative to examine the theories behind family in general and under extreme social conditions. This paper fits within Family Stress Model theory, Olson's Circumplex Model, and Hill's ABC-X model, which will be presented later in the paper.

Coping with Stressors

A stressor is interpreted as a condition that "may or may not have caused changes in the family system" (McCubbin et al. 2001, p. 17). The stressor can be any reason that can lead to a change that, in turn, can lead to stress development (Boss 2002).

Stressors can be characterized as either internal or external, depending on their origin (Hill 1949, as reported in Weber 2011). A person has greater difficulty in handling external factors than internal ones, mainly because the person is not under the control of an external stress factor (e.g., pandemic, earthquake, or financial crisis).

Stressors are divided into individual, family, and community (Patterson 1998). For example, individual stressors may include illness, job loss, and the start of a school year for the child. Family stressors may be affected by divorce, sexual abuse, relocation, or having a child. Communities can be hit by storms, war, economic crises, bank collapse, or pandemics (see COVID-19). However, a family may have significant difficulties in handling even internal stressors (Hill 1958, as reported in Weber 2011). The main reason for this situation is the disintegration of family members in a state of crisis, which makes it difficult for family members to resolve the situation themselves, possibly blaming other family members.

Moreover, individuals are likely to benefit from utilizing several strategies for coping with work stressors and family stressors. Specifically, the more resources an individual utilizes to cope with demands (e.g., one's repertoire of coping strategies), the more likely that individual is to experience reduced negative outcomes such as burnout and strain

(Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Clark et al. (2014) suggest that cognitive restructuring, a psychotherapeutic process of learning to identify and dispute irrational or maladaptive thoughts known as cognitive distortions, such as taking care of marriage, family-work segmentation, recreation and relaxation, and verbalizing with others are also coping mechanisms.

While stressor events are defined as situations that occur outside the family, the definition has since been expanded to consider that stressors include both internal and external events for families such as an illness, disability, or substance abuse problem (Rosino 2016). Different stressors affect families in different ways. According to Burr and Shirley (1994), both the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the stressor itself influence the amount of change and potential stress that it imposes upon a family.

In relation to the above discussion and within Hill's ABC-X stress model frame, where (A) represents the stressor event, (B) the resources available to a family, (C) the family's perceptions of the stressor, and (X) the likelihood of crisis, this study aims to analyze the factors that determine the relationship between stressful events and crises within families in the context of the potentially disruptive effects of COVID-19 pandemic. Noting that stressful events may or may not result in crises, Hill posed that families can mitigate the negative effects of stressors on family well-being and functioning with the proper available resources and definitions of the situation (Rosino 2016).

At the same time, however, the individual feels more isolated and fragile. These conditions create a climate of individualism, even among family members. The family interest now stands out from the individual who has priority. 'The individual is necessarily involved in self-limiting processes' (Muncie et al. 2008, p. 143). However, despite the changes in modern times, the relativization of life choices and the interpretation of reality, family, as a carrier of interpersonal relationships, security, and communication, continues to play a leading role in the value system of young people' (Riga et al. 2012, p. 38). As the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic indicates, lockdown and social distancing forced families to look for coping mechanisms to deal with ongoing stressors and manage to keep psychological distress at a minimum (Chen and Bonanno 2020).

Consistent with the ABC-X model and the Family Stress Model (Hill 1949; Conger et al. 1992 in Waters 2016) it is important to examine how and to what extent COVID-19 produced stressors, such as loss of income, difficulties to pay bills, unemployment, prolonged family and friend separation, which, in many cases, could undermine both individual functioning and relationship process. Psychotherapist Catriona Wrottesley argued that "at a certain point, one partner might feel highly anxious, while the other feels calm, then they swap. Anxiety is held within the couple system but does not necessarily lodge permanently with one partner or the other" (Sarner 2020, p. 43). If a couple cannot manage a difference in response to anxiety or risk management, it can feel as if one is against the other. One partner can feel that the other does not understand or care about them (Sarner 2020). This situation presents a spillover effect, which means the generalization of behavior, emotions, attitudes, or stress of one life domain to another life domain (Wilensky 1960; Geurts and Demerouti 2003). This means that stress experienced in one life domain spills over into another life domain and causes stress or strain in the second life domain as well (Amstad and Semmer 2011). A rather similar effect of spilling over emotion can be observed between persons. This inter-individual transmission of stress is called crossover in a wider sense (Westman 2001). Crossover effects can be divided into two different types: Firstly, if emotions, stress, or strain, which an individual experiences in the moment (Hatfield et al. 1992) or over time (Bakker and Schaufeli 2000), are transmitted to another person of the same life domain, we are talking of emotional contagion or same-domain crossover. Secondly, if stress or emotions experienced in one life domain by an individual leads to stress or similar emotions experienced by a close person in another life domain, this is called crossover in a narrower sense or cross-domain crossover. An example of this phenomenon is whereby an individual experiences work stress and transmits these negative emotions to his/her spouse, such that the spouse experiences family strain (Amstad and Semmer 2011).

Furthermore, children may absorb and be affected by the emotions their parents experience leading to a change in their behaviors. Therefore, stressful situations that parents and children are experiencing because of the pandemic bring about a general upset in a family as its members are called to change the way of their daily routine and adapt to new family life conditions (Koutelekos 2020).

This study aims to explore how lockdown and social distancing affected people's lives and to what extent families handled any stressful situations derived from the pandemic in general and the lockdown in particular.

2. Materials and Methods

This study followed a mixed method approach. According to Tashakkori and Creswell (2007, p. 4), a mixed method is a 'research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study.' Mixed method research has exploded in popularity and prestige since the mid-1990s. This explosion was driven in part by methodological debates in the social and behavioral sciences. Initially, these debates focused on the relative merit of different methodological traditions (e.g., quantitative versus qualitative), but a productive debate eventually emerged about the complementary and synergistic strengths of different traditions, and therefore on the value of leveraging different approaches in mixed method designs (Harbers and Ingram 2020). Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Schoonenboom and Johnson 2017). Mixed methods research affords researchers the opportunity to draw on the full repertoire of methods and methodologies found within a researcher's toolbox to generate new knowledge and insights in response to their research questions (Plano Clark 2019).

Following the mixed method approach, the survey comprised three parts. In the first part, demographic information was collected: gender, age, marital status, number of children, area of living, place of living (house vs. apt.), type of living (rent vs. ownership), work status, living status (alone, with a spouse, etc.). In the second part and through 15 Likert-Scale questions and 3 Yes/No questions, participants had to reflect on whether lockdown and social distancing had affected them. In the final part, through five qualitative questions, participants were asked regarding their relations with spouse, partner, parents, and children. Additionally, they were asked to describe how much the "Stay Home" situation affected their psycho (stress, feelings of insecurity) and social (daily routines, socialization) condition. A pilot study of five participants preceded the final one to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument (Cronbach's Alpha 0.751, N of Items 18).

The questionnaire was constructed in Google Forms and administered online through the snowball method, making use of online platforms, such as Facebook, text messages, and emails. Participants with whom contact had already been made through social media, text messages, and emails were invited to use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in the study. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit "hidden populations", that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies (Mack et al. 2005).

The qualitative part of the survey made use of a textual narrative analysis model (Figgou and Pavlopoulos 2015). Narratives incorporate temporality, a social context, complicated events, and an evaluative conclusion that together make a coherent story. Using a narrative methodology enables us to document variable and shifting ways of understanding experience, both within and between individuals. Finally, multiple views on experience can co-exist as part of the narrative research report, so it is possible to provide a richer and more plausible representation of lived experience (McAlpine 2016). Narrative research is the potential it provides to value multiple ways of knowing (Pinnegar and Daynes 2007).

2.1. Ethics and Funding

The survey was approved by the University's Ethics Committee. No funding was needed for the study since it was carried out electronically. Even though in several cases personal invitations were sent through emails, text messages, and Facebook messenger, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the process since the researcher could not identify any of the respondents in the survey. Participants were able to withdraw from the survey at any point of the process. Information and clarifications about the survey and its purpose were provided to potential participants on the very first page of the instrument, so everyone was adequately informed about the philosophy of the study.

2.2. Participants

While the anticipated sample size was 267 participants, an invitation was sent to 1000 adult persons (over 18 years old). However, only 160 responded (43 males and 117 females). A possibility for the low response is the psycho-social conditions created by the lockdown which did not allow further participation. The qualitative part of the research served as a compensation for the response to the relatively low quantitative research. However, literature suggests that response representativeness is more important than response rate in survey research (Cook et al. 2000). Some scholars have suggested that low response rate concerns can be mitigated, if not completely eliminated, by the use of specific tactics, including the 'drop-and-pick' mode (Ibeh et al. 2004) and dynamic web-based survey methods (Bonometti and Jun 2006). Therefore, the mixed-method seems to have significantly contributed to the preservation of the validity and reliability of the current survey.

The mean age of participants in the sample was 26.6 (standard deviation (SD) = 9.6). Moreover, 40% of the participants were singles, 7.5% were divorced, and 52.5% were married. 73.8% were living in urban areas, 26.3% in rural areas, 30% in an apartment, 70% in a house with courtyard, 23.1% were living on rent, 76.9% were living in their own place, while 35% were government employees, 34.4% were private-sector employees and 30.6% stated other (unemployed, self-employed, pensioner).

The research took place all over the entire south part of Cyprus. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research. A consent form was also included in the questionnaire stating that those who would decide to proceed with the answering of the questions had expressed their consent to participate in the study.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Results

To examine significant effects, Descriptive Statistics, Independent *t*-Test, and One Way ANOVA were applied through SPSS. In the initial model, the three variables of marital status (single, married, divorced) were entered as dependent variables and the number of children, area of living (rural vs. urban), place of living (house vs. apartment), type of living (own vs. rent), and work status (government vs. private employee) were entered as independent variables.

It is worth to point out that, likely, the different status of people plays an important role in the way they handled lockdown and social distancing. It may be the case that because of the place of living, type of living, area of living, and work status, their capacity to handle lockdown conditions has been affected accordingly. In this respect, the capacity of those living in rural areas, in a house they own, and working for the government is different from those who live in urban areas, in apartments they rent, and working in the private sector.

It should be also noted that the difference in the way they handled lockdowns may not be due to the place, the area type of living, or work status, but due to the mechanisms families utilized so they deal with that unprecedented situation.

3.1.1. Long-Term Stay at Home in Urban vs. Rural Areas, Stress, and Relations

To examine whether long-term stay at home was affected by family status, a series of One-Way ANOVA tests were performed. The results indicated no significant main effect [$t(2) = 2.32, p = 0.506$] of long-term stay at home, regardless of if they were married [$M = 4.13, SD = 1.80$], divorced [$M = 3.67, SD = 1.558$], or single [$M = 4.32, SD = 1.990$].

Nevertheless, significant differences were found in other areas. Further One Way ANOVA tests were conducted in order to compare marital status and the effects of long-term stay at home. The results indicated that there was a significant main effect on marital status and the increase of house chores, [$F(92,157) = 4.441, p = 0.013$], on frequent arguments at home when living with others, [$F(2,138) = 7.771, p = 0.001$], on clear separation of tasks and roles at home, [$F(5,132) = 4.627, p = 0.001$], on free time limitation, [$F(5,154) = 4.165, p = 0.001$], on social distancing from friends and family members, [$F(5,154) = 2.900, p = 0.016$], on financial issues (bank loans, mortgages), [$F(2,157) = 8.106, p < 0.001$], on psycho-emotional condition during long-term stay at home, [$F(2,157) = 4.466, p = 0.13$], and on the time they spend with their partner comparing with the pre-lockdown period, [$F(2,157) = 7.983, p < 0.001$].

Moving further to the data analysis, One Way ANOVA tests compared the effect of lockdown between families, singles, and divorced individuals living in urban areas vs. rural areas, place of living (house vs. apartment), and type of living (own vs. rent). The results indicated that the effect of the area of living on families was not significant, [$F(2,157) = 3.308, p = 0.39$]. Similarly, place of living (house vs. apartment) did not seem to have a significant effect [$F(2,157) = 2.612, p = 0.77$] as well. On the contrary, the effect of type of living (own vs. rent) was significant, [$F(2,157) = 7.480, p = 0.001$].

3.1.2. Working Sector

The working sector was another area that was tested to examine whether participants were affected financially by the lockdown. The results indicated that among the six job categories (pensioner, private sector, public sector, self-employed, unemployed, and other), the effect of job-sector on participants' financial condition was significant [$F(5,154) = 3.532, p = 0.005$].

3.1.3. Children vs. No Children

Furthermore, an Independent Samples T-Test was applied to examine any differences between those with children and those with no children. As predicted, results from the Independent Samples T-Test indicated that those with children [$M = 5.32, SD = 1.565, N = 19$] scored higher on missing their friends and loved ones due to lockdown measures than those with no children [$M = 4.33, SD = 1.996, N = 42$], [$t(59) = 1.895, p = 0.063$]. At the same time, those with no children [$M = 5.00, SD = 1.431, N = 42$] scored higher on evaluating their psycho-emotional condition during lockdown as opposed to those with children [$M = 3.95, SD = 1.433, N = 19$], [$t(59) = -2.658, p = 0.012$].

Regarding free time limitations, there was not a significant effect between families ($M = 3.12, SD = 2.177, N = 86$) and singles [$M = 2.75, SD = 1.545, N = 12$], [$t(96) = 0.562, p = 0.575$]. On the contrary, there was a significant effect on free time limitations between families [$M = 3.12, SD = 2.177, N = 86$] and divorced individuals [$M = 2.34, SD = 1.810, N = 62$], [$t(146) = 2.297, p = 0.023$].

3.1.4. Urban vs. Rural Areas

Comparing families living in urban areas vs. rural areas and the effects of lockdown, there is no significant difference between the two groups regarding their relations with other family members, except on the long-term stay-home situation where there was a significant difference in the score for living in urban areas [$M = 4.36, SD = 1.824, N = 118$] than those living in rural areas [$M = 3.64, SD = 1.792, N = 42$], [$t(158) = 2.186, p = 0.030$].

3.1.5. Quantitative Findings

As a conclusion to the quantitative findings, despite the various status someone falls in (married, single, with children or not, area of living, etc.), the coping skills they have developed in order to deal with extreme and unprecedented situations played a significant role in the way they handled lockdown during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, living with others in the same house during lockdown conditions may increase stress level since lockdown itself is already a stressful condition, let alone coexisting with other people in a few square metres for a long time, especially those living in urban areas as opposed to those in rural areas who may not feel 'trapped' inside a small apartment. Work sector in combination with the financial condition of someone was another factor that affected people. Yet, despite the conditions one lives in, for those who had the necessary coping mechanisms to deal with enormously disrupting circumstances, in many cases life-threatening, as COVID-19 proved to be, it was easier for them to go through lockdown in a less harmful way.

3.1.6. Qualitative Results

To maintain a clear view of the responses, this section has been divided into three subsections (positive, negative, and not affected/neutral) which present the feelings, views, and perceptions of participants. Through exploratory research and the use of open-ended questions, participants had the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than having to choose only from fixed responses. Since the current survey was carried out during the COVID-19 lockdown, the qualitative part of the study was conducted in written form through Google Forms.

In the question "If in relationship, describe your relationship with your partner in the current conditions of long-term stay at home", 70 participants responded by describing their experiences. It is worth to note that 51 participants expressed positive views, 10 expressed negative views, and 9 stated that long-term stay at home did not affect them in any way.

3.1.7. Positive Feelings

The majority of those who responded in a positive way stated that their relationship was good, very good, harmonious, supportive, exceptional, perfect, and pleasant. Furthermore, several participants elaborated their responses by stating: "My relationship with my partner is very recent, so it hasn't been affected that much, there is communication". "On the contrary, we have time to make plans and big discussions to get to know each other better". "Little by little we came closer and we notice [take care] each other more in contrast to the busy daily routine". Other participants pointed that: "We came closer to each other", "Supportive, even more activities at home together", "Companionship with understanding and support", "It's pretty good, supportive, with common decisions about our family and other issues that arise", "We are trying to resolve any disputes that may arise due to the incarceration".

Further responses include the following comments: "There are no frequent conflicts since in general, we separate our responsibilities and personal time". "Harmonious with more common activities Compassion and cooperation with a common goal for the benefit of the family". "Perfect relationship, balanced". "Our stay at home helps our relationship because we get to know each other better every day because of the free time we both have". "No change, all is well as before".

Moving further to the positive responses, these include the following statements: "When the relationship is based on mutual respect, understanding, and love, the couple's relationship cannot be affected". "I am much calmer now than before and that comes out in my relationship with my partner". "Our relationship has become stronger. It was a good reminder of how much I love him to be able to bear with him!". "Increase interaction time and joint activities, no time pressure". "Better now because she understands the pressure of both housework and raising children, how difficult it is for a working woman". "Much better than before, we have more time together".

Through the next question, the researcher wanted to explore how the lockdown situation affected parents' relations with their children: "If so, describe your relationship with your children in the current conditions of long-term stay at home. Several participants stated that they had more time to spend with their children; "I have infinite time with my children, something I never had and we all have a great time together". "And they tell me how happy they are that we spend so much time together!!".

Four others focused on the improvement of their relationships with their children:

"Our relationship became better". "I never understood how much our daughter needed our presence more". "I didn't know so many things about my kids and I enjoy every moment with them".

Furthermore, positive comments include the following: "It suited me". "Few obligations". "It was good enough so far". "I did things that I didn't have time before, for example cooking, hobbies, more time with my pet but at the same time work". "Much better than before due to time savings in travel, unnecessary delays from the interventions of colleagues in the office, etc". "More time to deal with growing family responsibilities". "More free time". "Closer to each other". "I am very calm, I do not run to catch things, I do everything in my peace plus I enjoy every moment with my children". "Reduction of external work, therefore increase in time for relaxation and entertainment activities". "I have calmed down from going to the streets".

3.1.8. Negative Feelings

Regarding long-term stay at home, several participants pointed that: "Tension at home because we both work from home with a baby who constantly wants attention". "Difficult because I work from home because I have to be with our son and the partner works normally there are moments of tension". "Disappointing, after 33 years of living with our ups and downs, we confirm that we are not changing". "It is not possible to sit on the couch for endless hours when there are pending/housework that needs to be done". "There was more tension than before. Several times with conflicts, because there is communication difficulty because there is no routine of everyday life". "Frequent conflicts over small, insignificant issues". "Conflicting".

The following question explored how much their "Stay Home" situation had affected their daily life. Out of 77 respondents to the above question, 45 stated that the situation affected them negatively. Some of their responses include the following comments: "Some tense days". "With ups and downs—when I need to work and I'm constantly bothered by the baby it's very difficult to be calm at home". "Intensity and stress online courses". "Excessive fatigue due to increased obligations (work, household, teaching children)". "We have been greatly affected by the deprivation of our, such as going out, swimming in the sea, fishing and it has affected my psychological state". "It has affected me, it has trapped me".

Further to their daily life, participants were asked about their mood. 45 of them indicated that their mood was much or very much affected by the lockdown situation. Some of their responses are presented here; "Mentally, I am not feeling well". [My] "psychology sucks". "Yes, it has affected my psychological state". "Uncertainty has affected me". "Annoyance even though the effort for patience is great". "Anxiety about tomorrow". "Anxiety, insecurity, fear". "Greater stress". "All of the above (anxiety, insecurities, etc.)". "More anxiety about the future, my outcome, and whether I am less productive compared to other people". "Yes, my mental state has deteriorated, not so much for me, but seeing my children not being able to dream and each of them having gathered in a different way, as much as everyone's self-defence".

3.1.9. Neutral Feelings

The rest of the respondents were characterized by a neutral situation where little or no changes occurred in their relationships. Some of their responses include comments such as: "He lives in another city. So we have no direct contact". "With mood swings, etc."

“We were forced to spend more time with each other due to the restriction”. “As before. Routine”. “Just like before quarantine”. “Distance—distance relationship”.

Further to the previous question, participants were asked to describe how “Staying Home” has affected their mood (anxiety, insecurity, etc.). 16 participants stated that their mood was not affected or affected a little bit; “Not at all, I consider all this pre-planned, for many reasons, but it also has its positives, as I have mentioned above (time, tranquillity, etc.)”. “I have not been affected at all”. “To a very small degree”. “Almost none”. “Very little”.

Through the final question researcher requested from participants to express any comments, concerns, and opinions on how they evaluated the “Stay Home” situation and the social distancing and its impact on their family/companionship/friendships and what they would suggest for the best possible management of the situation. 67 participants responded. For the sake of word length, only a summary of the major responses is provided.

Briefly, what has been captured from the views expressed by the respondents include the use of technology, the contact network, relationship development, socialization vs. social distancing, domestic violence, family communication, new family traditions, appreciation of small everyday things and nature, proper crisis management, engaging in new activities, enriching the routine with new activities, acquisition of knowledge, strengthening of the welfare state, need to protect public health.

3.1.10. General Responses

Further to the above, and following the aims and objectives of this study to explore how lockdown and social distancing had an impact on family relations, the following responses represent the major points as those have been extracted from the survey participants’ responses:

- (a) “In a world that is constantly running, we were forced to stop abruptly, to look around us, and to understand the most important and the most essential!! What I suggest is to look a little inside ourselves, to see our right and wrong, and to get to know more about ourselves and the people we have chosen to have in our lives!”
- (b) “In the middle of so many problems, incarceration creates an opportunity to learn how to share things”.
- (c) “Whatever happens in our lives, if there is a plan, then we can continue, no matter how sad it happens around us. They increase when we are confined within four walls, but this is a stage that we can take advantage of, of course having the foundations. You need a good mood”.
- (d) “Staying at home” was a necessity during the first weeks of the virus. But it turns out that no matter how serious a condition such as the threat of the virus is, a person cannot stay at home for long periods without affecting their psychological health”.
- (e) “The technology was a tool that helped in communication, exchange of views, ideas, and emotions”.

4. Discussion

Through a mixed-method approach this study aimed to explore how lockdown and social distancing had an impact on family relations in Cyprus, to what extent that situation affected the stress level of participants, and how families in Cyprus reacted in the lockdown and social distancing measures that were imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many people, mainly children and adolescents, had not dealt with that scale of stress before, and some were having newfound anxieties (Phillips 2021). Therefore, the hypothesis on whether the different status of people played an important role in the way they handled lockdown and social distancing was tested to examine if family status and place of living, type of living, area of living, and work status affected their capacity to handle lockdown conditions. Lockdown and social distancing forced families to look for coping mechanisms in order to deal with ongoing stressors and manage to keep psychological distress at a minimum (Chen and Bonanno 2020). Thus, it appears that the disruption of their

usual pattern of functioning in addition to other psychosocial and economic factors could be a factor of diminishing the quality of life resulting in tension and stress in a family environment.

Nevertheless, reactions include positive, negative, and neutral feelings among participants in the survey. The following sections discuss the findings from the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study. It is worth to note that any differences in the way participants handled lockdowns were based on the place, area of living, type of living, or work status, as well as to the mechanisms families utilized (or not) to deal with that unprecedented situation.

4.1. Quantitative Study

Long-term stay at home did not seem to affect people based on their marital status. For many participants, the lockdown was a traumatic experience since it forced them to cut any physical communication with friends and/or significant others. Human beings, as social entities, do not have the mechanisms to deal immediately with sudden and unprecedented social conditions. Yet, families with children are more vulnerable to such lockdown measures, mainly because children do not realize or understand why they should stay at home away from their friends. This situation seems to affect parents' psycho-emotional condition since besides work and family/house duties they have to deal with the pressure that is coming from their children. On the other hand, in the cases of families it seems that they have more abilities to deal with difficult situations than those living alone (singles and divorced). The survey findings show that in crisis situations, creativity can be effective coping mechanisms to deal with stressors.

At the same time, where one lives (urban or rural area) plays an important role in their psycho-emotional condition. Living in rural areas in times of extreme social conditions (see COVID-19) allows people to continue their daily routines to a significant extent, since most of them have their plots or back yards and gardens, as opposed to those living in urban areas where most of their time is spent inside their house or apartment with no or limited open space.

The work sector is another issue that creates pressure on people. In times of extreme social conditions, the private sector is the one affected the most. Private employees and self-employed usually experience salary cuts, lay-offs, or bankruptcy as opposed to those who work in the government sector and their jobs and salaries are much more protected. This survey identified the differences between the private and government sectors and the pressure private sector employees felt during the lockdown. The pressure increases in the cases where people work in the private sector (as employees or self-employed) and at the same time live and/or work on rent (for the self-employed).

4.2. Qualitative Study

Although families indicated supportive mechanisms and creativity during the lockdown, it seems that many feelings were hidden deep inside, preventing them from maintaining stability within their family environment. Another important element that the qualitative part of the study extracted, yet well known, is the ability of human beings to adapt to their environment, especially when they have a responsibility to others (i.e., children, older parents). Although adaptation to extreme social conditions is not an easy task, the basic human instinct for surviving is always on alert along with other coping mechanisms. For instance, spending time with their children and engage in indoor activities with them is one coping strategy, rather than sitting on the couch watching TV all day long. Investing in their marriage is another major element that this survey found. Staying for a long time at home was an opportunity for many participants to get together with their families and invest in their family needs. For many, it was also a time for self-realization and self-actualization since they had the time to examine or re-examine their beliefs, goals, and achievements.

On the other hand, weak family foundations can apply more pressure on people who cannot communicate and collaborate with other family members. Conflicting environments were the result in families where lack of communication, cooperation towards common family goals, and sharing responsibilities were on their daily agenda.

The inability to respond to extreme conditions due to a weak family system inevitably leads to burn out symptoms. Tension, stress, anxiety, fatigue, emotional collapse, lack of effective time management, inability to balance work, home, and children, feeling trapped, bored, and isolated, lack of creativity and coping skills are the major findings from those who did not manage to control the lockdown situation.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that not everybody is positively or negatively affected by extreme social conditions, such as COVID-19. There are people whose daily lives and the way they responded to this situation was not affected. It seems that this, rather neutral, approach was based on various factors. For instance, there were people whose job was not affected at all, and they maintained their everyday schedule. For others, it seems that they have some kind of an automatic response to extreme situations, so they adapt relatively quickly in a new condition. This is an interesting finding since it allows us to focus on this type of person (along with those who responded positively) and examine how they manage to remain unaffected by extreme social conditions, as opposed to those who lack coping mechanisms and are vulnerable to crisis.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the factors that determine the relationship between stressful events and crises within families in the context of the potentially disruptive effects of COVID-19 pandemic. It has extracted important elements regarding the lockdown and social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cyprus. Certain areas of human reaction to extreme social conditions have been identified, but also need to be researched further. These areas should be seen as an opportunity to promote the appropriate studies which will lead to the development of guidelines for people who lack effective coping skills. In light of a new coronavirus wave (or other infections as scientists warn), in the near future people will need to prepare appropriately to deal with any crisis.

It is important for current and future studies to explore the coping mechanisms individuals and families develop to deal with social distancing and lockdowns. It is necessary to inform researchers and health care and mental health care professionals on how to deal with the conditions created by crisis situations. Yet, longitudinal and prospective studies that identify patterns of outcome using relatively sophisticated data analytic approaches (e.g., latent growth mixture modeling) can provide more accurate assessments of long-term family psychosocial adjustment. Such studies will allow researchers to create a vivid picture of the situation in a long-term context. Knowing how people from different cultures respond to extreme circumstances will help professionals develop the necessary skills and techniques to deal with problems that arise from such extreme conditions.

Social policies on family issues should focus on new approaches to improve coping skills among families who are affected by harsh situations. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and fear for a new wave, national governments should focus on new approaches to protect families during a crisis and plan for future measures and strengthen the idea of using alternative approaches in social preventions and/or interventions in crisis in order to deal with stress in families. Consistent with the ABC-X model and the Family Stress Model (Hill 1949; Conger et al. 1992 in Waters 2016), it is important to examine how and to what extent COVID-19 produced stressors, how and to what extent families as well as individuals are able to cope with. As has been mentioned earlier in the paper, individuals are likely to benefit from utilizing several strategies for coping with work stressors and family stressors. Specifically, the more resources an individual utilizes to cope with demands (e.g., one's repertoire of coping strategies), the more likely that individual is to experience reduced negative outcomes such as burnout and strain (Bakker and Demerouti 2007).

At a time of a global unprecedented challenge, social policies should not ignore the fact that without the design and implementation of specific strategies to support the thousands of vulnerable people, the latter could face high financial, mental, or social exclusion risks. It is therefore very important for policymakers and social policy professionals to take into serious consideration research on families and the various suggestions for an improvement in the support mechanisms to all those families in need.

Furthermore, in the middle of such extraordinary global conditions, families should not be left alone to deal with additional pressures, such as job losses and salary cuts. Specifically designed interventions within the community could allow families to remain calm and in balance within their family and social environments with the additional social support from professionals with training in family systems, if necessary. Such interventions could include a variety of activities (online or face-to-face) designed to cover the needs of the heterogeneous family systems. Maintaining family homeostasis and resilience is crucial in helping families preserve balance within their system.

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