

Couples Satisfaction during the Covid-19 Pandemic: a Systematic Review

Jonathan Martínez-Libano^{1*}, María Mercedes Yeomans^{2,3}

¹Escuela de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas, Universidad Viña del Mar, Chile

²Facultad de Comunicaciones y Artes, Universidad de Las Américas, Chile

³Facultad de Educación, Universidad de Las Américas, Chile

*jmartinez@ctpi.cl

ABSTRACT

Couple's satisfaction is a relevant phenomenon to study since it is a central element for mental health, especially if couples are affected by a pandemic such as COVID-19. Consequently, the objective of this systematic review was to determine the satisfaction of couples during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a secondary objective, to establish possible risk factors. The search was carried out following the PRISMA model in the Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Medline search engines between January 2020 and March 2021. To evaluate the methodological quality of the study, we used the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS). Regarding the results at the end of the search, five relevant studies were identified for analysis. In the end, it was possible to stipulate that there are no conclusive studies on the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the satisfaction of couples and that the risk factors were anxiety and anguish, high levels of stress, social isolation, perception of worse mental health, job loss, salary reduction, symptoms of depression, fear of COVID-19, being a woman, parental exhaustion, low wages and parents of children with chronic diseases.

Keywords

Couple Satisfaction, Mental Health, COVID-19, Pandemic, Coronavirus.

Introduction

COVID-19 is a disease that has caused havoc in all areas of life, not only due to its high mortality but also due to the political, social, educational, and economic consequences (Martínez-Libano, 2020). Confinement, social isolation, and the interruption of daily life during the COVID-19 period have impacted the population (Tasnim et al., 2020), becoming an epidemic that affects all aspects of human life (Nguyen et al., 2021). In this sense, COVID-19 has been characterized by presenting three traumatic components: first, fears of present and future infections; second, generalized economic impact; and third, interruption and isolation of routine (Kira et al., 2020). In this way, the confinement generated by this pandemic meant, for many people, radically changing their lifestyle, avoiding contact with friends and family, and, in addition, stopping non-work-related activities (Corvo & Caro, 2020). Although the medical impacts of COVID-19 are remarkable, the pandemic's interpersonal, financial, and social consequences are likely to have the largest and most sustained effect on psychological health (Madigan et al., 2020) in the short and long term (Park et al., 2021).

Research on the psychological effects of COVID-19 has found elevated levels of anxiety,

depression, and sleep disturbances in the general population (Huang & Zhao, 2020). Currently, there is considerable empirical evidence that speaks of the effects of COVID-19 on the psychological health of the population (Gruber et al., 2020). For example, greater family and occupational stress, greater anxiety about health due to fear of disease or contagion (Asmundson et al., 2020), as well as job loss and financial insecurity, lack of essential supplies, fear of infection, loss of resources, supports and interpersonal connection, and the possible separation and/or death of loved ones (Gruber et al., 2020).

The pandemic has brought a decline in the quality of life and mental health of people around the world (Kaparounaki et al., 2020). Many parents have experienced greater role overload and stress as life family has been disrupted (AL van Tilburg et al., 2020) and has challenged the quality of the couple's relationships (Mousavi, 2020). Therefore, the risk of conflict and marital dissolution is likely to be high (Prime et al., 2020), thus affecting the satisfaction of couples during the COVID-19 pandemic and consequently the impact on mental health, general happiness, and social interaction (Ashwini, 2018).

Everyday stressors can weaken feelings of togetherness ("we"), decrease emotion sharing and dyadic coping, increase withdrawal behaviors, and compromise communication quality (Prime et al., 2020). Major life events can exacerbate pre-existing marital problems or create new difficulties, as natural disasters have shown, especially when accompanied by stress related to job loss, injury or illness, and parenting concerns (Cohan, 2010). The physical illness of the partner is a significant stressor that increases marital dissatisfaction and the likelihood of a subsequent divorce (Daniel et al., 2009).

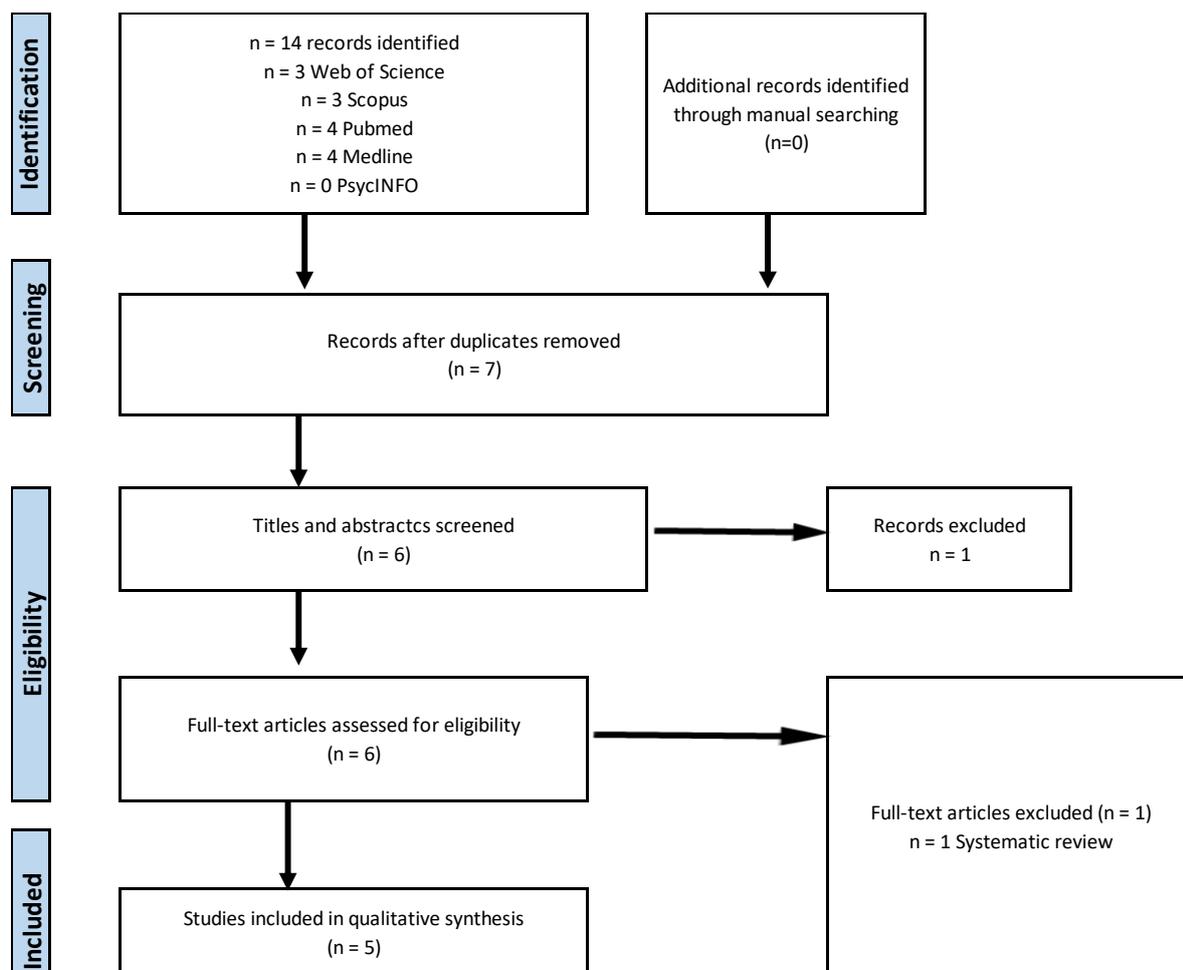
Although a systematic review was recently carried out on mental health problems in the general population (Xiong et al., 2020), the background

that speaks about couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce and has not been accurately determined. Consequently, the objective of the systematic review was to determine couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated risk factors were then established as a secondary objective.

Materials and Methods

A systematic review was carried out, which identified articles published in Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, Medline, and PsycINFO databases between January 2020 and March 2021, written in English and Spanish.

Figure 1. Prisma Flow chart.



Search strategy

The bibliographic search was carried out according to the preferred reporting protocol for systematic reviews and meta-analysis PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2020; Urrútia & Bonfill, 2013). Searches are searched in the title, abstract, and keyword search fields in each of the databases. The following keywords were used combined with Boolean operators (OR / AND): ("COVID-19" OR "Coronavirus") AND ["partner satisfaction" OR "marital satisfaction" OR "couple satisfaction"]. Search selection studies are found in Figure n° 1.

Selection criteria and study eligibility

Titles and abstracts of each article were screened, then the full text was reviewed for eligibility. Studies were eligible for inclusion if: 1) they followed a cross-sectional study design; 2) the population was in pairs; 3) with the application of clinical and non-clinical instruments; 4) with positive and negative results; 5) field studies; 6) texts in English and Spanish; 7) If the data in the articles were during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following exclusion criteria were used, 1) studies that are not under a COVID-19 pandemic; 2) subjects who are not in a relationship; 3) academic notes, letters to the editor, or reflections; 4) longitudinal studies.

Data extraction

A data extraction form was used to include relevant data: (1) Main author, (2) Country, (3) Study design, (4) Sample size, (5) Measurement instrument, (6) Prevalence, (7) Associated risk factors.

Quality Assessment

To assess the quality of the studies, the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) adapted for cross-sectional studies was used (Epstein et al., 2018). The scale consists of three dimensions: selection, comparability, and result. Seven categories assessed the sample representativeness, sample size justification, comparability between respondents and non-respondents, exposure

determinations, comparability based on study design or analysis, evaluation of the result, and adequacy of statistical analysis. A total of nine stars can be awarded if the study meets certain criteria, with a maximum of four stars assigned for the screening dimension, a maximum of two stars assigned for the comparability dimension, and a maximum of three stars assigned for the dimension results (Epstein et al., 2018).

Results

Search results

In total, 14 (four-teen) publications were identified on the subject of couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these, 7 (seven) were eliminated in duplicates. 1 article was excluded by reading the title and abstract; finally, 1 (one) was eliminated by reading the full text. In this way, 5 (five) articles that met the inclusion criteria were selected for the systematic review.

Study Characteristics

The characteristics of the study and the findings of this review are summarized in Table 1. The sample sizes of the 5 articles ranged from 166 to 1,840 participants, with a total of 2,917 people. All studies had a cross-sectional study design. The 5 studies were conducted in various countries around the world, the USA (n = 1), Israel (n = 1), China (n = 1), Switzerland (n = 1) and Iran (n = 1).

Assessment of Methodological Quality

The result of the evaluation of the methodological quality of the studies is presented in Table 2. The overall quality of the included studies was moderate, with a total of 6 stars for all articles (AL van Tilburg et al., 2020; Mousavi , 2020; Reizer et al., 2020; Q. Wu et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2021).

Table 1

Summary of the characteristics of the study sample, study design, evaluation tools used, level of satisfaction, associated risk factors.

Main Author	Country	Study Design	Sample Students	Instrument	Prevalence	Risk factors
<i>AL van Tilburg et al., 2020</i>	EEUU	Transversal	628	KMSS	Mean = 6,2	Parents of children with chronic illnesses, high levels of stress and worse mental health, social isolation, loss of job, reduced wages, symptoms of depression and anxiety
<i>Reizer et al., 2020</i>	Israel	Transversal	130 women	RAS	Mean = 4,40	Fear of COVID-19, social isolation, association of fear of COVID-19, psychological anguish, stress.
<i>Wu et al., 2020</i>	China	Transversal	1840	Own measurement	Mean = 88	Stress, low social support, anxiety.
<i>Xue et al., 2021</i>	Suiza	Transversal	53 (106 personas)	CSI	Not specified	Not specified
<i>Mousavi, 2020</i>	Irán	Transversal	213	KMSS	Mean 5,7	Parental burnout, low income, distress, low socioeconomic status

Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS) (W.R. Schumm et al., 1983); The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (Hendrick, 1988); Couples Satisfaction Index Scales (CSI) (Funk & Rogge, 2007)

Measuring Tools

Various scales were used in the studies (n = 5), such as the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (n = 2); Relationship Evaluation Scale (n = 1); Own measurement (n = 1); Partner satisfaction index (n = 1).

mental health (n = 1), job loss (n = 1), salary reduction (n = 1), symptoms of depression (n = 1), fear of COVID-19 (n = 1), being a woman (n = 1), parental burnout (n = 1), low wages (n = 1), and being parents of children with chronic diseases n= 1).

Risk Factors Associated to Couple Satisfaction

Among the risk factors for couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic we found anxiety

and anguish (n = 4), high levels of stress (n = 2), social isolation (n = 2), perception of worse

Table 2: Results of Study quality appraisal of the included studies

Study	Total Score	Selection				Comparability Based on Desing and analysis	Outcome		
		Representativeness of the sample	Sample Size	Non- Respondents	Ascertainments of exposure		Assessment of Outcome	Statistical Test	Quality
1 <i>AL van Tilburg et al., 2020</i>	6	*	*		**	*	*	satisfactory	
2 <i>Reizer et al., 2020</i>	7	*	*		**	*	*	satisfactory	
3 <i>Wu et al., 2020</i>	6	*	*		**	*	*	satisfactory	
4 <i>Xue et al., 2021</i>	6	*	*		**	*	*	satisfactory	
5 <i>Mousavi, 2020</i>	6	*	*		**	*	*	satisfactory	

Discussions

The review conducted explored couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of this review, we can refer that there are no specific or conclusive investigations in relation to the subject investigated; therefore, it is not possible to ensure whether the satisfaction of the couple was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it is required to continue advancing in the study and the effects of the pandemic on couples.

The results are dissimilar. The studies approached with the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale present means from 6.2 (A L van Tilburg et al., 2020), 5.7 (Mousavi, 2020), and 4.4 (Reizer et al., 2020) during the pandemic. The above can be explained given that although the scale is the same, without a doubt, the differences in societies and cultures can affect the measurement (Mafé & Blas, 2006). These results could vary given the conditions of the population locked in their homes, presenting different levels of satisfaction although according to the indicators of the GDP growth rate in the US of 2.2%; Israel 3.5% and Iran -6.8% (World Bank, 2019). In addition to GDP spending on health for 2014 for these countries Iran 6.89%; Israel 7.81% and the US 17.14%, (World Health Organization, 2014), there would be no relationship between economic growth and couple satisfaction.

Regarding the results, some investigations coincide with these before the COVID-19 pandemic where marital satisfaction presents a mean of 6.1 (Walter R. Schumm et al., 2008) and 6.4 (Levant et al., 2014) in the US population, so

we cannot yet be conclusive about the effect of the pandemic on couple satisfaction.

In other studies where couple satisfaction was associated with unemployment, it was observed that the average was 5.03 (Bland & McQueen, 2018), even lower than the studies during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore both apparently the issue of the pandemic could generate less impact on the satisfaction of couples, as it is a global issue and with vast consequences throughout the world involving intrapersonal, interpersonal and stress factors are associated with the development of marital satisfaction (Tong et al., 2021). Therefore, couples seem to be more affected by specific and particular situations in their relational development than a catastrophic event such as a global pandemic, generating greater understanding in the couple (Allen et al., 2020), although there are other longitudinal studies that report a prediction of daily stressors with marital satisfaction and higher marital risk (Ong et al., 2020). Therefore perhaps the the effects of the pandemic in couples can be observed in the long term.

Couples externalize the conflict to an external entity and not an internal entity of the relationship, which is why couples who mutually seek to help each other feel empowered in a relationship as equal and full partners (Leonhardt et al., 2020).

Among the risk factors found that can affect the satisfaction of the couple during the pandemic we can find:

Anxiety and distress

Anguish and anxiety are intimately historically linked with couple satisfaction, and their implication has been highly proven (Sajedi et al., 2020). The above may since, when couples present high levels of anxiety and anguish, there are expressions of low warmth between them and demonstrations of hostility that lead to conflict (Smith et al., 2020). Likewise, this marital anguish is associated with the prevalence and incidence of psychiatric disorders in the people who make up the couple (Whisman et al., 2021). In this case of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is a new virus and little knowledge, it led to an increase in anguish in the couple, exacerbating the conflict, marital or family conflict, and causing psychological anguish and social isolation (Perlick et al., 2011).

Social isolation

Social isolation is associated with increased psychological distress, including elevated levels of general distress, such as panic, emotional disturbances, and depression (Best et al., 2021). How individuals in a relationship respond to each other and cope with stress together has important results at both an individual and a dyadic level (King & DeLongis, 2014). Couples can vary their degree of understanding and connection when they are in historical experiences disaster (Allen et al., 2020).

High levels of stress

Research has shown that intrapersonal, interpersonal, and stress factors are associated with the development of marital satisfaction (Tong et al., 2021), demonstrating that it plays an important role in understanding the quality and stability of relationships (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). They even affect the sexual life of couples (Morokqff & Gilliland, 2010).

Perception of worse mental health

The mental health of the members of the couple is fundamental. The findings highlight the interdependence between the mental health of the spouses and the satisfaction of the relationship (Jenkins et al., 2020), being worse when one of the members has a severe mental illness (Weiss et al., 2018). Various studies highlight the

importance of open communication for dyadic coping among couples facing chronic diseases (Zhaoyang et al., 2018). Good marital relationships, good social support, family harmony, and parents without a history of mental illness can be protective factors for parents' mental health (M. Wu et al., 2020).

Job loss & reduction, and lower wages

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an increase in unemployment and economic recession, which are risk factors for people's mental health (Longyear et al., 2021). Several studies refer to the quality of the couple can be directly affected by salary factors (Bland & Mcqueen, 2018) since unemployment increases anxiety and tension (Skinner et al., 2021) in couple relationships. It triggers conflicts in the relationship of the couple (Bland and Mcqueen, 2018). The salary reduction has also resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, with studies with 68.7% concern about the fear of salary reduction (Salas-Nicás et al., 2021). This salary reduction leads workers to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Duarte et al., 2020) among the protective factors against job loss is the educational level of the members of the couple (Bland & Mcqueen, 2018).

Symptoms of depression

The findings revealed that depressive symptoms predicted relative decreases in marital satisfaction (Jenkins et al., 2020). The above can be explained since, when one or both members of the couple suffers from depression, this could generate a suppression of emotional expressions; therefore, it is possible to hide emotions and, prevent the couple from providing adequate support (Weckbacher & Baker, 2018). The repression of emotions would generate dissatisfaction in the couple (Zhaoyang et al., 2018), given the lack of social support (Taraban et al., 2017). This is more profoundly present in women since they are more demanding when requesting containment and emotional support (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2014). In addition to the conflicts generated by this dissatisfaction with emotional support, the presence of depressive symptoms in the couple increases (Du Rocher Schudlich et al., 2011).

Fear of Covid-19

The fear of the virus is universal and generates an emotional cost in people (Cohen-Louck & Levy, 2021) and it has remained despite the isolation measures taken by various governments (Lukacs, 2021). There is a relationship between mortality and satisfaction in relationships throughout the time, which implies that the more satisfied people are in their relationships, the longer they will live (Whisman et al., 2018). However, the high mortality of the COVID-19 virus is currently attentive to both partner satisfaction and longevity both of its members and the partner itself (Mutti et al., 2020).

Being a Woman

Among the research found, it is stated that being a woman can be a risk factor for low satisfaction in the couple's relationship. This contrasts with other studies where women present high couple satisfaction despite various circumstances (Allen et al., 2018) or, failing that, there are no significant differences (Sened et al., 2017). The drop-in satisfaction in the couple in women in the COVID-19 pandemic could be because they are under constant pressure from domestic and work tasks (Sun et al., 2017) and are connected to higher suicidal risk (Martínez-Líbano, J. & Yeomans Cabrera, M.M., 2021). This is the reason why women get involved much more in the problems of their children and respective families (Kuo et al., 2017), which could lead to such a high tension that it could lead women to think about divorce (Birditt et al., 2017).

Parental Exhaustion

Parenting is recognized as one of the most demanding roles in adulthood (Gillis & Roskam, 2019), which does not stop presenting great emotional wear on parents (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). The above is explained given that parents have had to develop a double task with their children's work and educational responsibilities, generating educational segregation (Álvarez et al., 2020). This situation increases the levels of stress, tension, and conflicts in the family (Association of Systemic

Psychotherapy of Buenos Aires, 2020; Yeomans Cabrera, M.M. & Silva, A., 2020), directly affecting the functioning of the couple and the relationship between parents and children (Peltz et al., 2018).

Parents of Children with Chronic Diseases

Having a child with a chronic disease is of great stress for couples and their families (Long et al., 2017); for many parents, partner support is necessary to cope with costs and stressors (Gillis & Roskam, 2019), even more so in a period of a global pandemic such as that of COVID-19. In families where this situation exists, levels of satisfaction are lower, and communication is less effective (Lavner et al., 2020). This is because the presence of a child with a disease may generate various conflicts around the care of the child and the concentration of the child's needs over those of the couple (Cuervo Botero, 2017).

All of the above should motivate us to continue studying the effects of the pandemic on couple relationships worldwide and, by the way, continue to delve into the mental health of couples and the possible repercussions they will have in the next coming years.

Conclusions

We can conclude that little research addresses couple's satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. According to the studies reviewed, it cannot be ascertained whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative or positive effects on the satisfaction of couples around the world. Among the risk factors found that could reach the satisfaction of the couple during the COVID-19 pandemic, we find anxiety and anguish, high levels of stress, social isolation, worse mental health perception, job loss, reduction of salary, symptoms of depression, fear of COVID-19, being a woman, parental exhaustion, low wages, and bring parents of children with chronic diseases.

It is necessary to emphasize the couple's satisfaction since these are and will be the basis of the families of our society. We still do not know the effects that it will have in the long term on couples and families around the world.

Limitations and Future Studies

This article is the first systematic review to examine and summarize the existing literature on couple satisfaction and the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated risk factors.

There are certain limitations in this systemic review, where most of the studies consulted were not directly measuring couple satisfaction. Likewise, it was possible to determine the means of most of the studies, this being a discrete measure for the comparison and the development of possible consequences. In addition, all the studies were cross-sectional, so they were measured at a specific time; it is not possible to extrapolate these results to the general population, so causal inferences cannot be made.

It is interesting to note that partner satisfaction is an area that should continue to be studied, especially in the long-term effects that this pandemic will have. The pandemic may bring new mental pathologies and new social problems, and new challenges for current couples. Therefore, it is very necessary to advance with new field investigations that can identify the problems that couples face and take the necessary measures to confront these new situations.

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