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LONDON SCHOOL OF HYGIENE & TROPICAL MEDICINE



Qualitative findings from Natsal-COVID: exploring difficulties & distress within established relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

COVID-19 has increased stresses for many couples, potentially diminishing relationship quality and impacting health. COVID-related restrictions have impacted the dynamics of romantic relationships, with many cohabiting partners spending more time together and non-cohabiting partners much less. We explored qualitatively, the ways in which couples (mal)adapted to the increased stressors impacting romantic relationships following the initial COVID-19 lockdown.

Methods

45 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with participants who had completed a national web-panel survey (Natsal-COVID) and agreed to follow-up [02/10/20-16/11/20]. Here we draw on the accounts of 18 participants in steady relationships who reported relationship difficulties.

Analysis drew on Karney and Bradbury's 'vulnerability-stress-adaptation' model. The model illustrates how relationship quality and stability is impacted by a couple's adaptive processes: their ability to communicate, support one another, problem solve etc. These adaptive processes are shaped by stressors, as well as by enduring vulnerabilities (the individual factors that one brings to a relationship, such as one's social class or history of trauma).

The sample comprised 11 women and 7 men, ages ranging from 26 to 60. Of our sample, 13 were cohabiting and 5 were non-cohabiting couples. Relationships varied in length from 1 to 40 years.

Ethical approval was obtained from University of Glasgow MVLS College Ethics Committee (ref 20019174) and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Research Ethics committee (ref 22565).

Stress and maladaptation

Participants in the sample discussed how enduring vulnerabilities such as mental illness, financial precarity, disability, or health conditions, amplified their experience of stress since lockdown and affected their ability to adapt within a couple.

Stresses on relationships included different understandings of COVID-19 and risk, worries about one's relationship ending, the loss of prior coping mechanisms, increased work demands, and unemployment. Those not cohabiting additionally experienced frustrations over not being able to see each other, whilst those cohabiting had to navigate childcare, divisions of housework, and a lack of personal space in which to unwind and have distance from one's partner.

Several people discussed pressures becoming so intense they focused on individually coping, and no longer felt like they could cope as a couple. Negative adaptive processes increased, with participants reporting more frequent arguments, or increased avoidance and withdrawal from the relationship.

"He whinges a lot and I ignore it." F, 58

Emotional, verbal, or physical abuse increased for those in unhealthy relationships. For two participants this escalation of negative adaptive processes consolidated their decision to end the relationship and leave their partner.

Cohabitation and adaptation

For those not cohabiting, not being together weakened their relationships making it feel "less real". Participants reported that the lack of physical affection made it harder to express love and support, resulting in relationships feeling more platonic. It was harder to enjoy small and big moments, with one participant discussing being apart for their 10-year anniversary.

"It almost felt like the whole relationship had stopped" F, 26

Some, however, felt that their relationship quality increased and their negative adaptive processes decreased when they were able to meet in person again.

Those living together reflected on the paradox of physical proximity and yet emotional distance. They didn't have the space to decompress and regain perspective, felt overexposed to their partners, and lacked the opportunity to "miss" them. Many relationships became "transactional", sharing a space and house tasks without the intimacy associated with relationships. Participants found it harder to have quality interactions as a couple when they lacked time, felt stressed, and were navigating a de-eroticised home where one worked and spent all day in pyjamas.

"The other person, they don't go away so that you can think, "oh, I miss them", they're literally sat there." F, 47

Adaptation and resilience

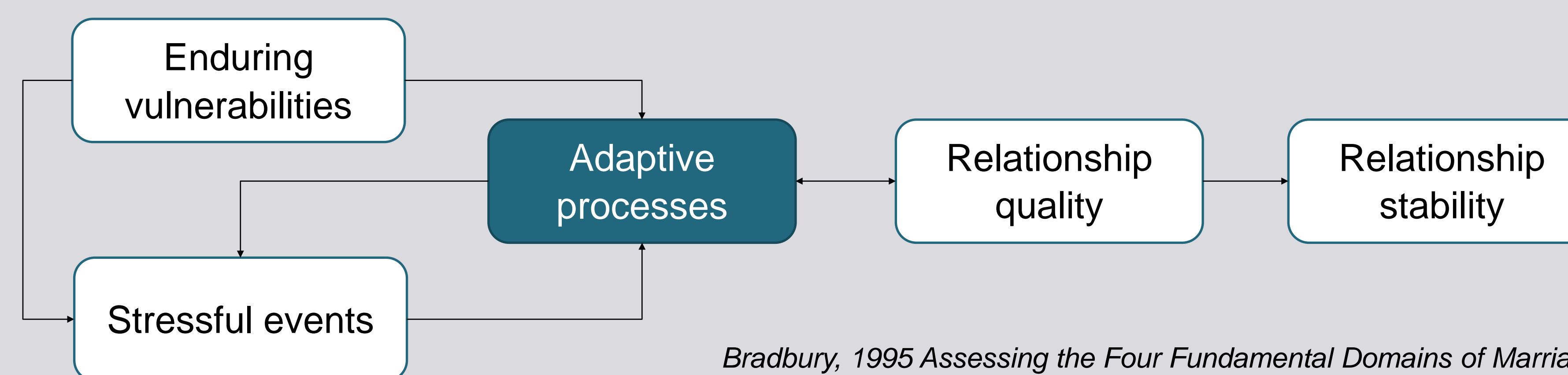
Those who felt more able to navigate the challenges reported cognitive attributions such as a hope in the future of their relationship or a belief that their relationship was inherently positive despite their current hardships. Relational skills included recognition of their partner's signs of distress; empathy for their partner's experience of the pandemic; and attempts to create a new normal for their relationship, figuring out ways to express love to their partner in this new context.

Conclusion

The pandemic and resulting lockdown placed additional strain on many relationships. Our study illustrates couples struggling with supporting one another, nurturing romance, and constructive approaches to conflict. Those who fared best demonstrated adaptive processes, such as empathy and recognition of their partner's needs. Viewing relationships through the lens of the 'Vulnerability-stress-adaptation' model can aid our understanding of how best to support couples to thrive through these difficult circumstances.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all study participants; Ipsos MORI, Margaret Blake and Reuben Balfour; as well as our funders the UCL Covid Rapid Response Fund, Natsal (Wellcome Trust, ESRC, NIHR), and the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit (Core funding).



Bradbury, 1995 Assessing the Four Fundamental Domains of Marriage