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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Love in the time of COVID-19: How couples stayed 'at home' during the first lockdown in Italy

Lidia Katia Consiglia Manzo 

Università degli Studi di Milano, Dipartimento di Scienze Sociali e Politiche (SPS), Via Conservatorio, 7, Milano, Italy

ABSTRACT

How did the initial COVID-19 lockdown affect family life in terms of household chores, childcare, finances, communication, sexuality and other spheres of a romantic relationship? How do these issues differ based on whether the couple is in a long-distance relationship, dating but not living together, or is married or cohabitating, with or without children? Drawing on a virtual ethnography of Italian social-media communities, sixteen follow-up online interviews with eight adult couples and a discussion of their 'Corona diaries', this contribution extends a practice-based approach to focus on couples' experiences, feelings and coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown temporalities of Spring 2020 in Italy. Forced self-isolation eroded feelings of ontological safety, making especially non-cohabiting partners feel even more vulnerable to the stress of contagion risk and loneliness. This phenomenon in some cases even de-romanticized the relationship to avoid feeling the lack of the partner. On the contrary, cohabiting couples revealed a discomfort linked to 'domestic gravity' and daily crowding, or the difficulty of safeguarding small moments of solitude. Conflicts were particularly exacerbated when partners had to reconcile agile work, childcare and domestic work. Working mothers with young children are among those most affected by the increased workload and resulting frustration.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Encierro por COVID-19; ensamblaje de emoción-riesgo; relaciones de pareja; amor; hogar; temporalidades

MOTS CLEFS

Confinement de la pandémie de COVID-19; agencement émotion-risque; relations de couple; amour; foyer; temporalités

Amor en tiempos del COVID-19: Cómo las parejas se quedaron 'en casa' durante el primer confinamiento en Italia

¿Cómo afectó el confinamiento inicial por el COVID-19 la vida familiar en cuanto a las tareas del hogar, el cuidado de los niños, las finanzas, la comunicación, la sexualidad y otras esferas de una relación romántica? ¿Cómo difieren estos temas en función de si la pareja está en una relación a larga distancia, saliendo, pero no viviendo juntos, o está casada o cohabitando, con o sin hijos? Con base en una etnografía virtual de las comunidades de redes sociales italianas, dieciséis entrevistas en línea de seguimiento con ocho parejas adultas y una discusión de sus 'diarios del Corona', esta contribución amplía un enfoque asentado en la práctica para

centrarse en las experiencias, los sentimientos y las estrategias de afrontamiento de las parejas durante las temporalidades del confinamiento por el COVID-19 en la primavera de 2020 en Italia. El autoaislamiento forzado erosionó los sentimientos de seguridad ontológica, haciendo que especialmente las parejas que no convivían se sintieran aún más vulnerables al estrés del riesgo de contagio y la soledad. Este fenómeno en algunos casos incluso desromantizó la relación para evitar sentir la falta de la pareja. Por el contrario, las parejas que cohabitaban revelaron un malestar ligado a la 'gravedad doméstica' y al hacinamiento diario, o a la dificultad de salvaguardar pequeños momentos de soledad. Los conflictos se exacerbaban especialmente cuando las parejas tuvieron que conciliar el trabajo ágil, el cuidado de los niños y el trabajo doméstico. Las madres trabajadoras con niños pequeños se encuentran entre las más afectadas por el aumento de la carga de trabajo y la frustración resultante.

L'amour au temps de la pandémie de COVID-19: comment les couples sont restés « chez eux » pendant le premier confinement en Italie

Comment le premier confinement dû à la pandémie de COVID-19 a-t-il touché la vie familiale sur le plan des tâches ménagères, du quotidien des enfants, des finances, de la communication, de la sexualité et dans les autres domaines d'une relation amoureuse? Comment ces problèmes ont-ils été différents pour les couples dans une relation à distance, ceux qui ne vivent pas ensemble, ou ceux qui sont mariés ou en vie commune, avec ou sans enfants? En s'appuyant sur une ethnographie virtuelle des communautés sur les réseaux sociaux italiens, seize entretiens de suivi avec huit couples d'adultes et une discussion sur leurs « journaux de confinement », cette contribution se sert d'une approche fondée sur la pratique pour focaliser sur les expériences, les sentiments et les stratégies d'adaptation des couples pendant les temporalités du confinement au cours du printemps 2020 en Italie. L'isolation forcée a amoindri les sentiments de sécurité ontologique, surtout pour les couples qui vivaient séparément et qui se sont sentis plus vulnérables au stress de la solitude et du risque de contagion. Dans certains cas, ce phénomène a même vidé la relation de sentiments amoureux pour éviter de ressentir la douleur de l'absence du partenaire. À l'inverse, les couples en cohabitation ont révélé une gêne liée à la « pesanteur du foyer »: et l'entassement quotidien ou la difficulté de sauvegarder de courts moments de solitude. Les conflits étaient particulièrement exacerbés quand les partenaires devaient accommoder le travail en mode agile, la garde d'enfants et les travaux ménagers. Les mères qui travaillent et ont de jeunes enfants étaient parmi les plus touchées par l'augmentation de la charge de travail et la frustration qui en a découlé.

Introduction

The year 2020 will be remembered as a breaking point in human history. Stay-at-home orders aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19 destabilized economic activities worldwide (OECD, 2021) and created a 'great pause' in our love lives. The latter change was so

profound that some have called it ‘anthropause’ (Rutz et al., 2020). Our homes changed overnight. During lockdown, our kitchens, spare rooms, living rooms, the spaces under the stairs and even our bedrooms became offices, classrooms, playgrounds, gyms, community spaces and more. Meanwhile, our coping mechanisms – hanging out with friends, shopping at the mall, exercising outdoor – were taken away from us. The lockdown led to changes in relationship roles. One partner suddenly became the primary caregiver for the children who were at home from school, while the other became the sole breadwinner because their partner was laid off. Inevitably, this situation increased opportunities for conflict. The picture emerging from Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, was dramatic. Divorce filings doubled from pre-lockdown levels (Liu, 2020). But even when marriages did not collapse, this unprecedented 24/7 separation or cohabitation increased the pressure on them.

These were uncertain times. An emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic can be a source of stress for couples who are confined to their homes (Cirulli et al., 2020). Many partners engaged in a love relationship were living in a permanent state of anxiety and insecurity. They seemed no longer able to maintain a continuity of identity. COVID-19 disastrously catapulted us from a process of disaggregation to one of re-aggregation, as Giddens (1992) would say. It put us back into those hyper-local and domestic territories of interaction that are restructured on a defined space-time and are reminiscent of a never-ending Sunday.

These are dangerous, slow days, imbued with wait, concern and deprivation. The coronavirus, in a highly democratic way, has taken away so many really important pieces of our intimate lives. It has temporarily robbed them from our daily lives, putting a strain on intimacy and affectivity. Love needs skin and senses, body and sharing; ingredients strongly discouraged during this delicate and fragile phase of our lives (Randone, 2020).

How did the initial COVID-19 lockdown affect family life in terms of household chores, childcare, finances, communication, sexuality and the other spheres of a romantic relationship? How do these issues differ based on whether the couple is in a long-distance relationship, dating but not living together, or is married or cohabitating – often in small apartments – with or without children? Drawing on a virtual ethnography of Italian social-media communities, 16 follow-up online interviews with eight adult couples (aged 24–46) and a discussion of their ‘Corona diaries’, this article aims to extend a practice-based approach to focus on couples’ experiences, feelings and coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown of Spring 2020, as well as capture the deep meaning of this critical period of the pandemic and its impact on Italy, which was hit first in Europe.

Paying attention to the spatial dimension of home quarantine, this article reviews the literature on disruptive temporalities of risk, uncertainty and disaster and the intimate spaces of love through the feminist scholarship on emotional geographies. Before reviewing this literature, though, the following section briefly outlines the dramatic context of the pandemic in the ‘three Italies’ of early 2020.

The ‘three Italies’ of the COVID-19 pandemic

On 20 February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in the Lombardy¹ region (Cereda et al., 2021). This was the country’s first ‘domestic’ case. Late on 7 March, the

President of the Italian Council of Ministers issued a decree with restrictive measures that applied to Lombardy and 14 provinces in the centre-north of the country. Travel to, from and within these areas was prohibited. On March 9, these restrictions were extended to the nation, placing more than 60 million people in lockdown. A few days later, on 21 March, the government closed all non-essential businesses and industries and forbade unnecessary travel. Even to go to the supermarket, one had to carry an official form to show to the authorities if required. Schools and universities began online teaching. All public gatherings were forbidden, including weddings and funerals (burials and cremations went ahead behind closed doors). In many towns, parks, beaches and other public areas were cordoned off. Outdoor exercise was severely limited. Going for a short walk or taking the dog out was allowed as long as one remained near their home. What ‘near’ meant depended on local authorities’ rules. In worst-hit Lombardy, for instance, people were forbidden from exercising outdoors and had to limit dog walks to within 200 metres of their homes.

As Figure 1 shows, the marked spatial heterogeneity of the first pandemic wave divided the country into what have been defined as ‘three Italies’ (ISTAT-ISS, 2020): most of the northern provinces, where the gravity of the infection was highest; most of the central areas, where contagion ranged from medium to high; and the rest of the nation, which was only mildly affected. In June 2020, Italy’s National Institute of Statistics and National Institute of Health reported 209,254 infections and 26,892 deaths as of 4 May 2020. 2020 also became the year with the highest number of deaths since 1945, when Italy was fighting in World War II (ISTAT-ISS, 2021).

One of the most striking images of this period, which fully conveys the fear of death that gripped Italy at the time, is that of the column of military vehicles that on 17 March transported about 70 coffins of Bergamo residents outside the region due to the local crematoria being unable to cope. The image² quickly became ‘viral’ and was described as depicting ‘the darkest day of the pandemic’.

On 26 April 2020, the Prime Minister issued a new decree effective from 4 May. This was the beginning of ‘phase two’, i.e. a gradual easing of lockdown measures. Fifty-six days

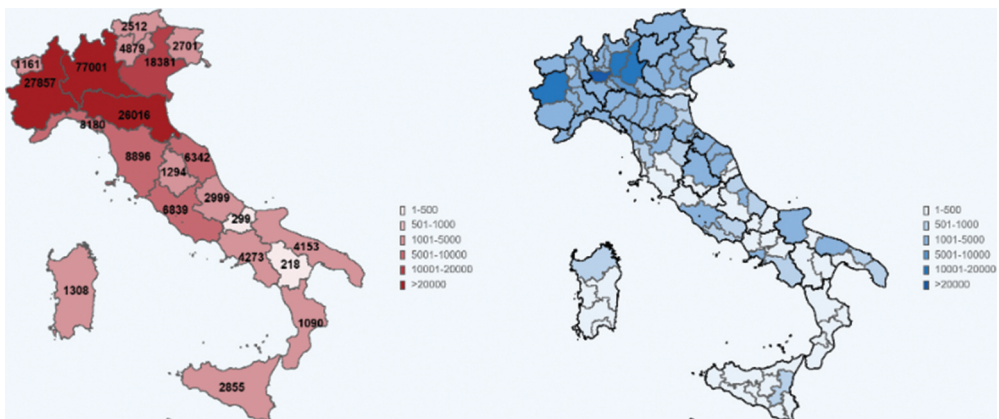


Figure 1. Total number of COVID-19 cases by region and province of residence on 4 May 2020. COVID-19 task force of the Italian Department of infectious diseases (https://www.epicentro.iss.it/coronavirus/bollettino/Infografica_4maggio%20ITA.pdf).

had passed since the beginning of lockdown. As I will discuss in the empirical sections, for many couples, this phase involved long-awaited reunions. For some, these moments meant taking stock, reworking the relationship and, in some cases, facing a day of reckoning.

Spaces of love in times of risk and uncertainty

Understanding the socio-spatial effects of COVID-19 stay-at-home lockdown orders on couple's relationships requires bringing into dialogue the intimate spaces of love and home with the disruptive temporalities of risk, uncertainty and disaster – or as Lupton (2013, p. 640) suggests, thinking through the 'emotion-risk assemblage'. While scholars continue to situate risk and anxiety at the centre of contemporary intimate relationships (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1991), reflection on the construction of specific embodied performances in space (Butler, 1990) and the renewed interest in emotional (Davidson et al., 2007) and affective studies (Clough, 2008) over the past two decades have led to a recognition of how representations and cultures of risk are invested with emotion.

In late modernity, the concept of risk has gained particular resonance and predominance 'due to widespread generalized and low-level anxiety and fear, a sense that we are living in uncertain and disorienting times, that imminent disaster awaits' (Lupton, 2013, p. 634; see also, Beck, 1992, 2009; Beck et al., 1994). Other scholars have argued that such a state of anxiety has been exacerbated by environmental disasters, global financial crises and terrorist attacks in the early years of this century (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2011; Giddens, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of those radical events that deeply alters the functions of social contexts and, therefore, the sense of 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1992) and biographical continuity that foster confidence in the stability of our lives. However, despite significant research in both the social geography of risk and emotions, the relationship between the two concepts remains under-theorised (Lupton, 2013). Both emotions and risk are intersubjective dimensions produced through social relations. They possess a history, which is based on previous experiences, and cultures, which are located within specific spaces. Finally, emotions are collective: they are never solely and simply personal, individualised experiences; they can also be shared between people, circulating through bodies (Ahmed, 2014; Seyfert, 2012; Thrift, 2004). Risks, in turn, are potentialities, considered to be in some way threatening to an individual or a community. To define a risky phenomenon is 'to draw attention to it and recognize its importance to our subjectivity and well-being' (Lupton, 2013, p. 638).

The challenge addressed in this article is to consider not only the emotional effects of risk – such as fear, anxiety, solitude, anger and frustration – but also the processes of representation, memory, imagination and relational structuring, starting from the assumption that maintaining the quality of a romantic relationship in times of high uncertainty – such as in the case of lockdown – is very challenging. According to Maddrell (2016, p. 182), 'both emotions and spaces can be seen as dynamic shifting assemblages, and, combined, represent a complex interrelation of lived place-temporalities, shot through with socio-economic, cultural and political norms'. Combining space and emotions is key to understanding how couples perceived and negotiated their romantic relationships during the pandemic in deep and sometimes disruptive ways (Longhurst, 2001). Space and time are mutually constituted and socially

constructed through everyday spaces and places (Pred, 1984; Soja, 1985; Thrift & Pred, 1981). During the pandemic, lockdown measures reconfigured both our everyday temporal rhythms (Melucci, 1996) and our relationship with home, which went from being a place of refuge and relaxation (for the lucky among us) to one of confinement and novel chores, such as paid work and schooling. As a sphere of intimate life, home spaces have both material and affective aspects (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Duncan & Lambert, 2004; Easthope, 2004). While it is important to acknowledge that allegedly universal aspects of home, such as privacy, identity and family (Mallett, 2004; Somerville, 1992; Young, 2005), differ intersectionally, it is still possible to argue that the pandemic morphed home spaces into places of confinement and isolation.

Quarantine measures and uncertainty are events that may have increased couples' emotional and relational distress, a mechanism known as 'stress spillover' (Bolger et al., 1989). When experiencing high levels of stress, subjects tend to have more negative views of their partners' behaviour (Neff & Karney, 2004) and engage in more negative communication patterns (Williamson et al., 2013). The study conducted by Bellani and Vignoli (2020) in Italy, Spain and France in April 2020 highlighted the vulnerability of couples' relationships during the first weeks of the pandemic: 12% of respondents reported that their relationship had deteriorated during the lockdown. Participants in a study of the effects of COVID-related stressors from 57 countries around the world also reported a lower quality of love relationships and greater conflict with their partners (Balzarini et al., 2020).

In the following sections, the article explores how the spatial and emotional dimensions of the COVID-19 lockdown of Spring 2020 affected couples' relational practices in Italy. The article's research approach and methods are outlined next.

Approach and methodology

Couples' relationships are situated at the intersection of different moral, political and sociocultural contexts. They are also centred on everyday intimate interactions, gestures and 'practices' (Gabb & Fink, 2015; Morgan, 2011) that are. They are situated in the familiar territory of the private home nest and closely tied to the sociocultural and political contexts where love is discursively defined and signified (Smart, 2007). Understood from an analytical perspective, couple's relations refer to those actions that partners take to 'enable, generate, and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (Jamieson, 2011, p. 1), which entails intimate, caring and sometimes conflictual practices.

Situated within this approach, the research discussed in this article was conducted to understand the impact of lockdown on couple relationships as part of a significant shift in daily living practices. Based on the theoretical premises discussed in the previous section, this study attempted to answer the following questions: to what extent did the coronavirus lockdown measures affect the management of household work, children, professional life, communication, sexuality and the other spheres of a romantic relationship? Did these aspects differ depending on whether the couple lived together or was in a long-distance relationship?

The research design had two phases. Between early March and late May 2020, a digital ethnography (Lupton, 2020) of several online social communities of practice (Wenger

Table 1. Participating couples.

NO.	Pseudonyms	City	No. of children	Her age	His age	Her occupation	His occupation
<i>Living together</i>							
1	Grazia & Marco	Milan		30	30	Unemployed	Journalist
2	Margherita & Marcello	Milan	2	38	37	Researcher	Sales Agent
3	Yu & Davide	Milan	1	33	34	Teacher	Barman
4	Carla & Francesca	Milan	1	45	46	Consultant	Manager
5	Fiorenza & Luca	Rome	2	42	44	Professor	Manager
<i>Living apart</i>							
6	Elena & Patrizio	Naples/Rome		37	34	Social worker	Filmmaker
7	Cecilia & Roberto	Milan/Pavia		31	32	Fundraiser	Researcher
8	Lea & Simone	Milan (*)		24	24	Unemployed	Clerk

(*) parental homes

et al., 2002) focused on mutual help and psychological support was conducted to explore the quarantine narratives that emerged from adults engaged in a loving relationship. Subsequently, between June and September 2020, eight couples were selected to conduct narrative interviews. The partners were interviewed separately to avoid the risk of bias. The interviews took, on average, one and a half hours. They were recorded and transcribed in their entirety, then studied using content analysis and the Atlas.ti software package (Dunn, 2021). Finally, whenever possible, participants' physical and virtual 'Corona diaries' were also analysed, including their photographs and social media posts. An information sheet and a consent form were given to participants prior to conducting the interview, and anonymity was guaranteed.

Participants were recruited in the virtual communities through word of mouth and the author's website. They were aged between 24 and 46 years and had higher education degrees and middle-class jobs. Of the eight couples that were interviewed, five were cohabitants (three of which had children) and three were in long-distance relationships (in one case, the partners still lived in their respective parental homes). In one of the couples, one of the partners was of migrant origins. One couple was homosexual (Table 1). More importantly, most of them lived in northern Italy, where the impact of COVID-19 in Spring 2020 was severe (Figure 2).

In the pages that follow, we will see how the analytical lens of practices can be used to unpick understandings of intimate life during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Italy and how couples experienced quarantine apart or together.

Couples in lockdown

How does love transform when a couple faces the risk and uncertainty of a pandemic? Is it 'brave and courageous enough – perhaps even over-exuberant and rash enough – not to be deterred by national boundaries and vast distances' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2011, p. 45)? The price of the COVID-19 quarantine has been vulnerability: missing human interaction with friends and family. How have couples coped with confinement, distance and stress during lockdown? How have partners experienced such a high 'emotional-viral-load' (Maddrell, 2020, p. 107) driven by multiple COVID-19-related uncertainties and bereavements and such a high level of stress linked to daily working and domestic chores? This study explores the situated, relational and embodied experience of emotions

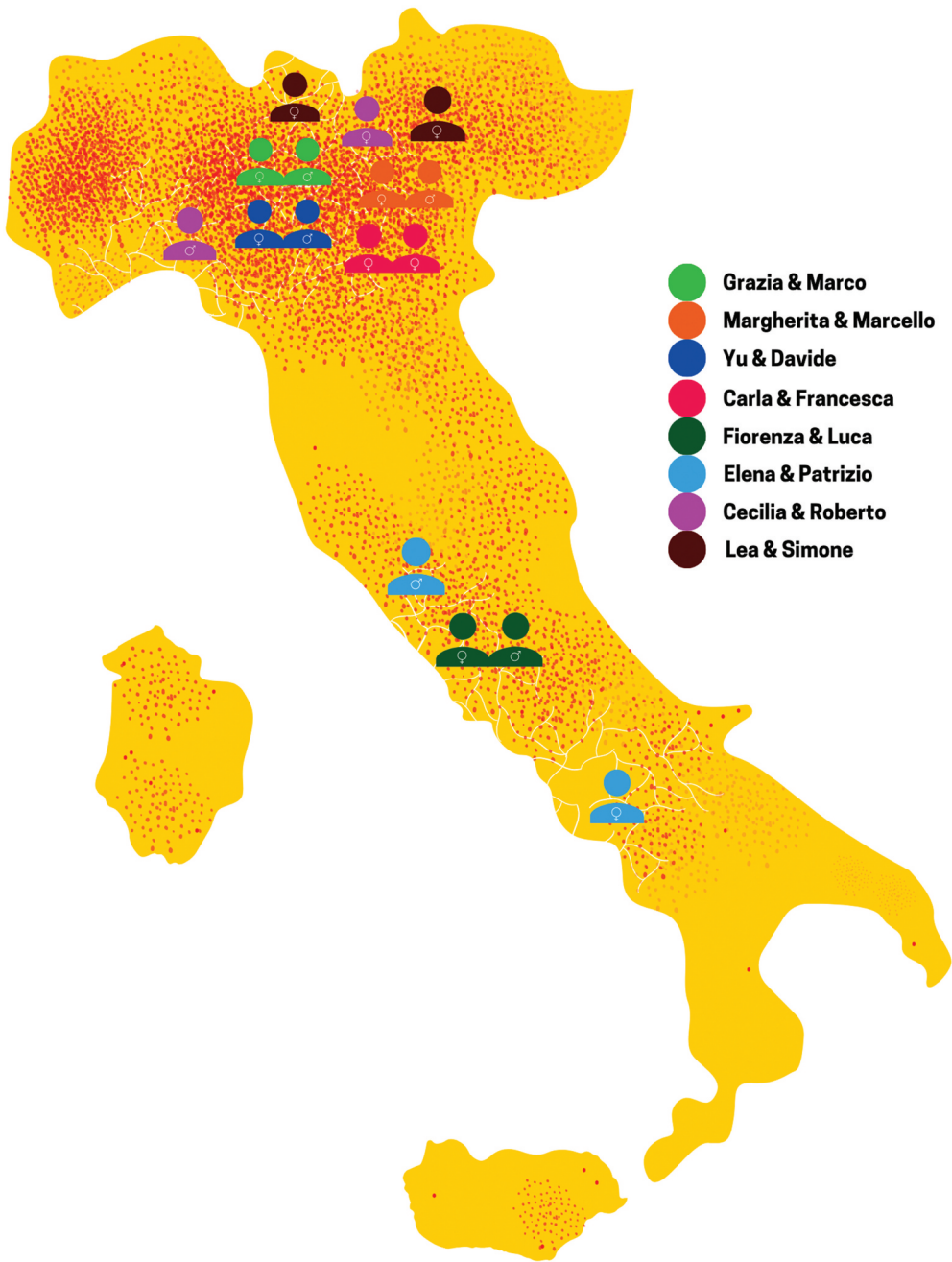


Figure 2. Map of participating couples by place of living. *Credit: Alison Fernandes.*

that the pandemic generated in Spring 2020 in Italy by looking at two different forms of romantic relationship during a lockdown: on one hand, a relationship characterized by the geographical distance imposed on non-cohabiting partners forced to 'be apart'; on the other, a relationship defined by 24-hour 'domestic closeness'. How much distance can

love survive? And how much distance does it need, instead? How do forced closeness and forced distance affect a romantic relationship?

Being together, without being together

Relationships involve investments that weave together a shared past, present and imagined future, which in turn illustrate a diachronic dimension of the everyday. The COVID-19 'temporal framing' (Ho, 2021, p. 1674) disrupted this routine, putting long-distance relationships on hold. During the lockdown, words had to take the place of hugs and kisses and act as surrogates of a temporarily denied and procrastinated intimacy. Especially for partners living away from each other, everyday life became suspended in the uncertainties of the pandemic. In the excerpt from Elena's diary below, the title 'Day 2520' indicates a day (25) and a year (2020) without a month, 'basically imagining an infinite pandemic situation', as she explained to me.

Day 2520

At the beginning of the P. [pandemic], we found it difficult to imagine that it could last much longer and we were ready but careful to start everything as before. Today, time is calculated elsewhere and we simply live in a constant [state of] suspension. A perennial faded light amplifies the nostalgia for [...] our love, but we have all learnt to live with ourselves. One's survival counts for nothing, but then again, once we survive, we cannot be reunited. So, love [has] to live in the spaces that are created [...] in the very act of writing, between present, past and future. (Elena, 34, social worker, Naples)

To cope with loneliness and not be overwhelmed by anxiety, separated partners described taking structured, restrained or utilitarian approaches to their daily living practices. They had to live in the uncertainty generated by the constant modification of national and/or regional anti-COVID-19 measures. This entailed having to endlessly adjust their everyday rhythms and home coping strategies. Some of them rewrote a schedule stuck to the fridge to keep some sort of ownership of time and work-life balance. Others restructured the spatial organization of their home or planned fitness sessions and online movie meetings with their partners just to avoid having a nervous breakdown, which was mentioned by all participants.

It helped me a lot with work and I tried to keep a very structured approach. In the morning I would wake up at a set time, wash, dress, put makeup on, even earrings. I would start work at 9 a.m., then have a lunch break at 1 p.m. I finished regular work; I actually worked a lot. In the evenings I would organise myself by doing workouts, seeing movies, online exhibitions, etcetera. I had made myself a daily planner, which I hung on my wall, with all my scheduled activities, then I would cross them off. It gave me a bit of a timestamp and helped with the perspective aspect. I noticed that every new DPCM³ was very heavy for me. Every time I went back to another date, there was an emotional breakdown! So, I would redo the schedule and hang it up, and that helped me keep track of the here and the now, dealing with one day at a time. (Cecilia, 31, fundraiser, Milan)

Well, I am someone who tries to contain, not to say repress, her emotions. I try to avoid having emotional breakdowns. So, during the lockdown, I tried not to give in to feelings of existential angst related to the future. I oscillated between the containment of anguish, which I knew would not take me far, and the acceptance of the situation. [...] I was very dedicated [to myself]. I rested. At the time I had been very sick. I had a kidney colic one night; I really had a psychophysical collapse. So, [I tried to] recover the space for exercising every day, writing, eating well. (Elena)

I continued to work during the entire lockdown period. [. . .] Obviously, the issue was more of an emotional nature. Not being able to see anyone is quite heartbreaking, but luckily my head was busy elsewhere. (Simone, 24, clerk, Milan)

Partners separated by lockdown found themselves having to face not only the daily routine of self-isolation but also the sense of threat, anxiety and depression posed by the experience of Covid without vaccines. This was a situation of elevated risk of contagion and possibly death for themselves or their beloved, friends and neighbours, as Cecilia explained referring to her neighbourhood in east Milan:

Even going out of my apartment was something that had to be calibrated and thought through, because my neighbours were [COVID] positive and received health care at home. I was advised to go out only once a week to do the shopping and then to sterilise my clothes and backpack. [. . .] My area was quite militarised. There were three armoured vehicles nearby. One covered the Forlanini area. The second one was near where I went shopping. And the third one was parked in the middle of the avenue. Also, in my area, several elderly people died, which meant ambulances passed by very often. There was medical personnel in hazmat suits picking up the bodies. It was not quite the trenches, but you felt that the threat was there and you had to take all the necessary measures to avoid it! (Cecilia)

During an emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic, fear of the unexpected and its potential impact on health, combined with isolation, caused a feeling of loss of control that triggered stress reactions (Cirulli et al., 2020). To reduce the anxiety and distress caused by these uncertainties, Cecilia decided to seek an online psychological consultation, which consisted of 3 to 4 monthly telephone meetings that helped her increase her capacity to gain control of her 'quarantined life'.

Under lockdown, non-cohabiting partners found themselves deprived of the intimacy that is linked to physical contact, pleasure and the possibility of meeting emotional needs through the body. The maximum amount of closeness was video calls, which were used to share the preparation of a pizza, see the same movie on the couch, or work out with a Jane Fonda video, always strictly from home. Even sexuality was sublimated into a different kind of platonic intimacy. It became a sort of 'internal object' – a term borrowed from psychoanalysis – that dwells within us in the hope that it will last forever. Elena, who at the time had been with Paolo for five years, told me that just before the lockdown she had decided to have an open relationship with him, which allowed other intimate encounters:

Even though we had decided not to live together, both of us were tired of the question of Eros [. . .] and during the lockdown we completely understood each other on an imaginary level! We resumed a closer dialogue. We started to reason about a whole series of political issues. So, we maintained a much more intense daily relationship than the one we had had until a month before. He is undoubtedly an important point of reference in my life and we have recovered a platonic pleasure in this period. (Elena)

Younger couples showed a lower tolerance for frustrations and limitations. Simone, who is 24, told me he had tried in vain to convince his girlfriend of the same age, Lea, to join him at the supermarket for a fleeting encounter. He recounted the repressed anger he felt at her refusal, but also the difficulty he faced in conveying his emotions over the telephone:

Not being able to transmit anything from the physical point of view [was hard]. I was looking for a little more attention via telephone, so [my fear was] that besides the lack of physicality,

there was also a lack of interest in being together, because I couldn't really perceive it! (Simone)

Yes, let's say that it was a bit up and down. The fact that we didn't see each other and that we were both at home with our parents was difficult! This increased our nervousness a lot and with this nervousness came small disagreements, maybe about irrelevant things . . . It was not easy! (Lea, 24, unemployed, Milan)

Couples separated by lockdown also experienced intermittent, asynchronous patterns of communication when, for example, one partner decided to 'stay silent.' As Roberto explained:

I was a bit worried about the issue of communication. I was fine. I was calm and my concern was about how she was feeling. When I saw that perhaps she was sleeping too little or that her days were all the same, I was sorry and it is not that I could . . . Between us, there was no communication! (Roberto)

During self-isolation, couples became accustomed to 'being without'. Therefore, to avoid experiencing stress and frustration, which are difficult to manage, the mind begins to make people feel less what is not there. The risk was to confuse this mechanism of emotional self-protection with the end of love. This is what happened to Cecilia, who during quarantine decided to de-romanticize her relationship with Roberto, eventually breaking up with him:

Someone [his parents] was taking care of him and the perception of loneliness didn't have that much strength. Then, I don't know, there were also different degrees of sensitivity. I mean, I didn't feel like I was in the same boat here! So, from this point of view, I felt quite lonely and in my loneliness, I tried to find a balance. [. . .] A month and a half had already passed [. . .] and I could feel that there was a storm brewing inside me. I said, "Look, in my opinion, it doesn't make any sense, everyone goes their own way and that's it". There are probably moments when you get to the essence of things and I was there, even though I knew I was in pain. I felt I had reached my point of awareness. You strip everything down and, in the end, you look yourself in the mirror. (Cecilia)

Together again, under quarantine

Grazia and Marco began by explaining how the arrival of the pandemic had plunged them into a climate of anxiety that became a phobia. This was fear of not seeing each other again because Grazia, a 30-year-old communication expert, was in Kenya for work when the lockdown started, while her partner, Marco, a 30-year-old journalist, was alone in their home in Milan, sinking into a state of dread for the high level of deaths in the city.

I had a moment of total hypochondria, I was really scared! Obviously, I didn't unload all my anxieties on her; I tried to contain myself. But it seemed to me that she didn't have a very clear picture of the situation, as she wasn't here. I think [the hypochondria] was also a result of *burnout*! (Marco, 30, journalist, Milan)

The risk of being stranded in Kenya, the anguish of not being able to find a flight back to Italy, the worry of not seeing her partner again soon and knowing that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown made Grazia decide to return immediately – 'now or never', as she put it – at the end of March.

Milan was a spooky city, [with everyone] staying at home all the time . . . One could get scared when they went outside all of a sudden! When I went to pick her up by car at the central station, illegally, I risked a huge fine! Grazia had arrived by plane in Rome, then she had taken a train to Milan. I was worried. I had done two weeks of quarantine alone, but what about her? I couldn't know. She had taken a plane, a train . . . I was definitely healthy, but what about her? When I arrived, I let her in the car with the greatest caution. I made her put her suitcase in the trunk and took her home, but I didn't touch her until she had showered and put her clothes in the washing machine. She was very offended by this! It was more the frustration, I guess. She cried for five minutes because even though we hadn't seen each other in a long time, instead of welcoming her with open arms I was treating her with circumspection! I didn't get angry. I was a bit annoyed that she was reacting like that, but she didn't know how bad the situation was in Milan. (Marco)

In this instance, COVID-19 altered the loving momentum of the reunion and prevented Marco from enjoying the intimacy of Grazia's kisses, plunging him into a climate of distrust and control. However, despite everything that happened, the couple found each other again under quarantine.

Being together, 24 hours a day

Adjusting to the new life under lockdown required cohabiting couples to make a significant transition in a matter of days, causing stress, frustration and resentment. Participants recounted having to organise a new family routine, especially when it was necessary to balance work with childcare in a confined home space. Even when parents tried to divide the workload equally, it was generally the mothers who devoted themselves more to the care of the children and the home, sacrificing their work time, which was squeezed in during the children's afternoon nap, in the evenings or at night (Manzo & Minello, 2020). Regarding coping strategies, the one used most often by couples was to organise the home space differently: the balcony for afternoon snacks and play (Figure 3); the living room for gymnastics, yoga and Pilates; the table for doing puzzles and drawings while the parents worked. However, the quarantine also laid bare vulnerabilities, and many fears and anxieties emerged in an uncontrolled way. Some participants felt guilty and experienced a sense of inadequacy, as Yu, a 33-year-old mom of a 4-year-old boy, explained to me:

I set the alarm clock at 9:30 a.m. or so. My baby would like to watch TV; I try to resist and not leave it on for too long. I feel very guilty, so I try to organise things. On the round table, we do puzzles, constructions and drawings together. Sometimes I turn on the computer and work while he plays. We don't interact much. There is silence, so I put on some music. It's all horrendous! Perhaps you are in a call with your boss and your son needs to pee and you can't understand either of them. [. . .] My mood is very low. In the beginning, I was very stressed; I even had high blood pressure! I took some vacation days at Easter and started to take it a little easier at work. (Yu, 33, mother of a 4-year-old boy, teacher, Milan)

The 'corporeal space' (Moss & Dyck, 1999, p. 389) of motherhood aptly conveyed the contextual, discursive, material, emotional and physiological embodiment of the new, destabilized boundaries of COVID-19 lockdown temporalities. Margherita, a 38-year-old academic researcher, recounted her frustration. She lived together with Marcello, a 38-year-old engineer working as a sales agent; they stayed in a three-bedroom apartment in Milan with two children aged 5 and 2.



Figure 3. Balcony is the new playground! *Whatsapp chat with Margherita, 18 March 2020.*

While I was working, my partner was paid a reduced salary to stay at home. The agreement was that he should work one day a week, but the company actually exploited him; he did a little more than part-time and I'm full-time. We gave each other shifts. In the beginning, it worked well; after a while, we felt the strain. We were tired. We had nothing apart from work and the kids. I've never been inside the house so much; I've never cooked so much. It sounded like a no-brainer, but I was not used to preparing snacks, lunch and dinner every day for everyone. It was a lot. Because the kids spent more time at home, the housekeeping changed too. (Margherita, 38, mother of a 5-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl, researcher, Milan)

Expectations of women's domestic labour relate to wider moral beliefs about the ideal order of society (Holdsworth, 2020), as exemplified in Margherita's emotional account of her in-laws' prejudice towards her. She referred to her identity as part of her romantic relationship, demanding recognition for her value (Illouz, 2011).

I felt unfairly treated, because my mother-in-law's answer was: "Well, can't Margherita give up her thing?" I should have given it up? I was on an exam board! I was even learning how to do braids, but why should I have given up my job? (Margherita)

Margherita's partner, Marcello, recounted how the fundamental issue was the question of irreconcilable work-family commitments and the high stress that came with them. In

general, the sentiment shared by the participants who had children was that there was nothing left of their relationship but a series of tasks to be completed.

We both reached the evening tired and after putting the children to bed, instead of having a moment together like watching a movie or having a chat, she would start working again! So I got angry. We were staying at home. We were doing well for the children. We were good at organising the house and buying groceries. But we were like two workers who had no relationship. Except in theory she is your partner and you would like to spend some nice moments with her. This definitely made me suffer! (Marcello)

Most conflicts were shaped precisely by the abrupt revelation of the unacceptability of the partner's way of doing things. When couples were locked up all day, the apparent banalities of housework often played as important a role as one's emotions – they acquired a sort of 'domestic gravity' (Berger, 2020). During the pandemic, feelings of control had free rein. With people spending so much time at home, it was all too easy to get caught up in putting things back in their place. 'Tidying up' the uncertainties was another way of coping with the lockdown. The messier and more unpredictable the pandemic became, the greater the desire – perhaps the anxious necessity – to bring our immediate circumstances under control.

I really felt like I was the house servant. I prepared everything to eat. I cleaned everything. He is very messy, so in a situation where we are locked in the house 24 hours a day, it is very annoying for me to have to constantly tell him, "Tidy up your things". I ended up getting impatient and tidying up myself, even though I didn't want to. I accumulated a lot of frustration. [...] In my opinion, the lockdown has exasperated control mania, because for everything that you can control, like stuff in the house, you become a hyena! (Grazia)

These disrupted COVID-19 temporalities and rhythms of domestic routine and family life made cohabiting partners feel almost displaced in their intimate home spaces. However, sometimes couples' fights were replaced by 'secret defection', which consisted of recording this dissatisfaction in a sort of soft memory without saying anything, waiting for future exchanges (Kaufmann, 1993):

I fell back into these fights, these ugly faces, these bad things that we say to each other. It was a vicious circle. I mean it stole all my energy! Yoga and breathing helped me a lot, but it was a solution I adopted on my own, [so as] not to go crazy. [...] In the sense that if I didn't slam the door and the fight didn't turn into a tragedy, it was better! (Fiorenza, 42, mother of a 5-year-old girl and a 1-year-old boy, professor, Rome)⁴

The lockdown facilitated deep conflict among the interviewed couples. Maintaining the right distance was felt as essential to achieving a good balance, so that the relationship could last and not asphyxiate.

Couples after lockdown: reunion and reckoning

On 4 May 2020, the lockdown in Italy was eased. Marcello told me that the lockdown allowed him to rethink the priorities of life, especially when, at the end of the redundancy period, he was laid off. He believed that life cannot be made up only of domestic tasks and work. But instead of losing heart, he decided to invest his savings and severance pay to buy a camper and leave with the whole family for a two-month vacation:

After seeing all the people that passed away in Milan, I thought, “Damn, do I have to live for work or can I enjoy life and my time?” That’s when the thought came to me. Of course, saying “I lost my job, so I leave with a camper for a two-month vacation” seemed crazy from the outside! [...] Then again, I opened the (camper’s) door and saw nature in front of me. (Marcello)

Simone also realised how the lockdown helped his girlfriend develop a clear position regarding their relationship. The ability to express a different opinion compared to that of her parents has greatly calmed Simone’s sense of insecurity. Relying only on ‘digital’ communication, he could not understand if she had little interest in seeing him or if there was another problem.

Perhaps the most beautiful thing in this lockdown was that I saw a clear idea on her part. She took a more adult position perhaps. [...] In this lockdown, she was able to tell me, for example: “I don’t agree with my parents but I live with them, so I can’t do otherwise and I have to concede”. [...] I have my own difficulties, but if you make me understand clearly your position, then I will meet you halfway. (Simone)

In contrast, Elena experienced a moment of ‘negative’ awareness when she discovered that her partner had not been as faithful as she had imagined while they were separated in Naples and Rome:

A few weeks later, I discovered that the asshole was having an affair with his neighbour. He had realised the lockdown dream! [...] At that moment, I had a collapse [of his figure] in my imagination. It was awful. I felt destabilised. It felt like a thing from the 1950s. Just as his grandfather used to do. He kept his mistress upstairs, with his grandmother suffering in the house. But I’m not like his grandmother and he can’t be like his grandfather! I felt a kind of dissonance for our emancipation. I even said, “Let’s separate. Let’s take some time. Let’s throw ourselves into these love stories and see what they become”. I tried, but then he is the one who stops the possibility of a real separation. (Elena)

‘Perhaps COVID-19 has helped each of us highlight more the limits and the potentialities of things’ was Cecilia’s conclusion while talking about the future of her relationship with Roberto. Theirs was a vision that looks ahead and, at the end of phase 1, they found themselves with a common desire to throw their hearts over the obstacle and move in together. *‘Because if you only focus on the obstacle, whatever that might be, smart-working or commuting or living together, you remain trapped’* (Cecilia). Upon discovering her partner’s betrayal, Elena felt weak and vulnerable, but at the same time, as she restructured the relationship, she became newly aware of herself and her spaces of autonomy:

Sometimes the problem in open couples is that one risks telling lies. You are a bit dishonest with yourself to avoid losing *Filippo and o’ panaro*.⁵ But I realised that a bond has to strengthen you; it cannot weaken you. If it weakens you in any way, then there is a problem. [...] Another thing I understood is the question of space, so that whatever I do, I have to do it with a space for autonomy! (Elena)

The pandemic as a wake-up call

The pandemic has left cracks in intimacy practices. The quarantine was often internalised as a wake-up call or a moment of rupture with the past, but also as a magnifying glass

applied to the limitations and opportunities of the relationships themselves. When faced with the dangerous uncertainties of COVID-19, couples experienced anxiety, loss of control and stress, which affected their romantic relationships. The spatial, emotional and risk assemblages involved in this phenomenon helped them to build, maintain, and sometimes disrupt the corporeal spaces of love during the temporalities of lockdown (Davidson et al., 2007; Moss & Dyck, 1999).

Forced self-isolation eroded feelings of ontological safety (Giddens, 1992), making especially non-cohabiting partners feel even more vulnerable to the stress of contagion risk and loneliness. The intimacy denied to long-distance couples and the impossibility of repairing emotional tears in the arms of a partner caused great distress and frustration. The implementation of structured daily routines partially contained the discomfort of these subjects. In some cases, this phenomenon even de-romanticized the relationship, which helped individuals to avoid feeling the lack of the partner.

In contrast, cohabiting couples revealed a discomfort linked to 'domestic gravity' (Berger, 2020) and daily crowding, or the difficulty of safeguarding small moments of solitude. Conflicts were particularly exacerbated when partners had to reconcile agile work, childcare and domestic work. Working mothers with young children were most affected by the increased workload and resulting frustration.

It seems clear that we are left with the following question: Will we ever be able to look at the relationships in our home spaces in the same way? During the COVID-19 crisis, domestic rhythms and routines of social reproduction were upended (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). It is also clear that the pandemic altered couples' relational and interdependent temporalities (Ho et al., 2021), thus revealing how inequalities of care work are tied to intimate space-times (Ho, 2021). Therefore, it is important to 're-imagine the politics of mothering but also the places and spaces of mothering' (Longhurst, 2001, p. 150). In this context, the road back to the 'new normal' of couple life may be longer than originally anticipated and may present a challenge. If the pandemic is a wake-up call about how to build a different society, then perhaps it is also an opportunity to think of a different style and rhythm of life that requires more social closeness and participation, not less. This point of view, argues Colombo (2021, p. 579), is 'guided by the priorities of defending sociality [and] fostering human dignity and social justice'.

Notes

1. Located in the northern part of the country, Lombardy occupies 23,844 km² and has a population of about 10 million (roughly one-sixth of Italy's residents). Over a fifth of the country's gross domestic product comes from the region. The metropolitan area of Milan – Lombardy's capital city – is the largest in Italy and one of the largest in the European Union.
2. The photograph was taken by Emanuele di Terlizzi from his balcony in Bergamo. https://bergamo.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/20_marzo_26/06-bergamo-b14tcorriere-web-bergamo-8b1a4526-6f3e-11ea-b81d-34b613fc-6f45-11ea-b81d-2856ba22fce7.shtml.
3. Every time the President of the Italian Council of Ministers issued a decree (DPCM) with new restrictive anti-COVID-19 measures.
4. Verbatim transcription of a Zoom meeting of a mutual help group for mothers during quarantine, March 2020.
5. A Neapolitan saying meaning that in situations of uncertainty you should never linger too long, otherwise you risk losing everything.

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ORCID

Lidia Katia Consiglia Manzo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8530-6719>

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