CHAPTER 13

FAMILY IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: FAMILY TIES AND COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships. The paper seeks the answer to the following questions: i) To what extent have family ties become stronger? and ii) To what extent have communication problems in the family increased? Data were taken from a study on the social effects of the pandemic. Of the total respondents, 55% stated that their family ties had become stronger during the quarantine period. In contrast, 17% stated that communication problems in the family had increased. The quarantine period brought family members closer to each other in middle and high-income families, whereas unemployed and poor people faced greater economic problems. This reflected negatively on family relationships among some disadvantaged groups. The majority of those who reported that family communication problems had increased were poor, unemployed, and young people. Especially those who could not continue their work online faced greater economic and social problems during the quarantine period.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, family sociology, family ties, communication problems, social problems

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Introduction

In 2020 the world has experienced a huge pandemic. More than 100 million cases have been observed to date, and the number of those who have died from the pandemic has exceeded 2 million. During the writing of this paper, mortality rates continue to increase rapidly especially in countries such as the USA, Latin America, and India. This virus affects almost everyone, regardless of geography, country, race, nation, society, status, class, and gender. Presidents, ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentarians, wealthy businessmen, clergymen, famous footballers, doctors, and most ordinary people have been seen to be infected by the coronavirus.

The COVID-19 virus has affected the lives of billions of people around the world, with negative effects seen in almost every area of society, from the economy to tourism, from politics to family institutions (Şeker, Bayhan, & Köse, 2020). The concept of “ontological security” by Giddens is used to explain this situation in detail. According to Giddens, at the time of birth, an emotional vaccination against anxiety is given to people by their mothers. This dose of emotional vaccine, taken from childhood, protects the person against the negative effects of abnormal situations that may arise in their normal life (2010a, p. 88). There is a very close correlation between anxiety, trust and daily routines. The normal routines and rituals of people in their daily life serve to reduce their anxiety. Routines and rituals teach people how to manage social concerns as well as social integration (Giddens, 2010b, p. 67). The COVID-19 pandemic created an ontological insecurity in this context. People who cannot go to school, work, shopping, use public transport, or perform public worship because of the virus are in a state of great anxiety. The modern individual, who has lost daily routine and habits because of the pandemic, experiences “ontological insecurity.” The prolongation of this period called “normal” deepens the negative consequences of the epidemic. From December 2019 to June 2020, millions of people around the world were removed from the normal order of their daily life and cannot predict how long it will last.

The COVID-19 pandemic is, above all, a health problem. However, the problem is not limited to the field of health. In a short time, it has negatively affected the social structure elements such as population, institutions, values, and social relationships etc.. The effects of pandemics are observed in all institutions of society.

1. Reflections of the Pandemic in the Family

Nobody expected to have an outbreak of this size. As in other areas, the pandemic also influenced family relationships. During the pandemic, people were confined to their homes

for a certain period of time. Uncertainty and anxiety increased at an incredible level. To this extent, the pandemic was something unknown for all of us. We had little idea of how it would affect the family. There are hardly any studies on this subject in the academic literature, so the aim of this study was to contribute to this gap in the literature.

This paper is based on the data of research conducted on 5338 individuals in April 2020 by Veysel Bozkurt. Data was collected online during the quarantine period when the coronavirus was at a peak. The convenience sampling method was used in the research so it does not claim to represent the whole of Turkish society. This sample represents the urban population at the middle / upper-middle income level, the majority of which has a higher education level. The respondents comprised 57.9% females and 42.1% males with a mean age of 35.12 years. Education level was determined as university (including students) in 61.6%, 30.7% were post-graduates and 7.7% had completed high school or a lower level. Marital status was reported as 48.3% single, 46.1% married, and 4.5% divorced. In the reporting of occupation, 25.6% worked in the public sector, 22.7% were students, 18.9% were private-sector workers, 10.2% were self-employed, 7.3% unemployed, 5.7% retired and 4% were a housewife. Income level was described as middle by 51.1% of the sample, “middle-upper” by 23.6%, 18.4% “middle-lower” by 18.4%, the “lowest” by 5.7%, and the “highest” by 1.1%. In respect of place of residence, 75.9% of the respondents lived in a metropolitan area. 71.8% in an apartment, 12.9% on a residential complex, 12.9% in a detached house and 1.3% in a villa.

Table 1. My family ties are now stronger					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	371	7,0	7,3	7,3
	Disagree	644	12,1	12,7	20,0
	Undecided	1288	24,1	25,4	45,5
	Agree	1775	33,3	35,1	80,5
	Strongly agree	986	18,5	19,5	100,0
	Total	5064	94,9	100,0	
Missing	System	274	5,1		
Total		5338	100,0		

The effects of the pandemic on family relationships are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, the COVID-19 virus was reflected positively on the family relationships. Approximately 55% of the respondents stated that their family ties strengthened during the pandemic. During the quarantine period, all family members spent much more time together than ever before. Thus, the external threat (virus) brought the majority of family members closer together.

Modern urban life, intense working conditions and long school hours eliminate the opportunity for family members to spend time together and engage in activities at home. In this context, the pandemic gave families the opportunity to spend more together and to carry out common activities. Family members who had the opportunity to eat together, watch movies, chat and read books stated that they were happy with the situation.

Quarantine changes social role distribution. Although traditional household chores such as dishwashing, laundry, cooking, and house cleaning are traditionally performed by women, some men started to do some of these tasks during the pandemic process. The increase in shared posts on social media about men making cakes and bread is the biggest sign of this. The family division of labor during the quarantine period satisfied the majority of family members and strengthened the bonds of some families. In the competitive environment of business life, some people generally do not spend enough time with their family members. The quarantine period gave many people the opportunity to both do some hobbies and spend more time with their families.

However, the virus epidemic entered the life of world societies as a crisis and conflict. The epidemic disrupted normal life and created a source of conflict. Coser emphasizes that conflicts have a regulatory role in relationships. Conflict acts as a “safety valve” with functions of balance and order in social relationships (Swingewood, 2010: 266). Conflict and crisis also have a creative nature, sometimes revealing hidden malaise and problems. Coser stated that conflict is an integral part of human relationships (Wallace & Wolf, 2012, p. 190). Conflict also offers an opportunity for change and development. Therefore, the pandemic disaster also provided an opportunity for some families to improve their relationships.

Nevertheless, not everybody has been affected in the same way. For example, the effects of the pandemic on the wealthy are not the same as those on the poor. While some middle and upper-middle class families saw the pandemic quarantine as an opportunity to take care of their families, the unemployed and those without enough savings experienced more worry. Approximately 40% of the respondents stated that they were afraid of not being able to meet their basic needs, and negative aspects were expressed in the following statements: “I feel like I’m imprisoned” by 52%, “I have become angrier and irritable” by 37%, “I am living under constant fear of this virus” by 41%, and “I have become scared of losing loved ones” by 64%.

The participants were asked whether the problems of domestic communication increased after the pandemic. While the majority of the respondents (64%) said that their family communication problems had not increased, 17% stated that family problems had increased.

Moving away from familiar relationships that provide “ontological safety” may have affected these results.

Table 2. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1440	27,0	28,7	28,7
	Disagree	1756	32,9	35,0	63,7
	Undecided	951	17,8	19,0	82,7
	Agree	570	10,7	11,4	94,0
	Strongly agree	299	5,6	6,0	100,0
	Total	5016	94,0	100,0	
Missing	System	322	6,0		
Total		5338	100,0		

In addition, the increase of “existential anxieties” of some people may have increased the problems of communication within the family. A statistically significant correlation was determined between the increase of intra-family communication problems and “existential anxieties” ($r=0.245$, $n=5006$, $p<0.000$).

It was seen that what appeared in relationships during the pandemic was associated with the relationship before the pandemic. Poor family relationships before the pandemic were likely to become more evident under intense stress. The COVID-19 quarantine partially changed social role distribution, and quarantine at home led to some family members discovering new talents or improving existing talents, with some developing brand new skills.

Table 3. My family ties are now stronger and Gender			
	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Strongly disagree	6,7%	8,2%	7,3%
Disagree	11,7%	14,1%	12,7%
Undecided	25,5%	25,5%	25,5%
Agree	34,9%	35,2%	35,0%
Strongly agree	21,3%	17,0%	19,5%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
$(\chi^2 [4] 21,275, p < .000)$			

Table 4. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family and Gender			
	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Strongly disagree	28,9%	28,3%	28,7%
Disagree	33,4%	37,2%	35,0%
Undecided	19,1%	19,0%	19,0%
Agree	11,5%	11,2%	11,4%
Strongly agree	7,1%	4,2%	5,9%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
$(\chi^2 [4] 22,194, p < .000)$			

Table 3 and Table 4 present the relationships of the effects of the pandemic according to gender. Men and women evaluated the pandemic and its experiences differently. As can be seen in the tables, more females than males expressed that both the family bonds were strengthened and the problems of family communication increased during the pandemic. For women working online, obligations increased enormously, especially for those with large families, because women working throughout quarantine period had lost their assistants (Bozkurt, 2020).

Gender is a concept that tries to explain the status and role differences between men and women. Status and role differences between genders from past to present have attracted the attention of almost every sociologist. There are biological, social, feminist and patriarchal-based theories to explain the differences between genders. Theories based on biology see physiological and natural factors as the source of factors that cause and maintain universal inequality between men and women. However, historical, anthropological and sociological findings reveal that the behavior, status and roles of women and men vary according to time and place. While it is difficult to explain the change in the biological theory, social theory comes into play. The theory suggests that although we are born as female and male, roles related to femininity and masculinity have been learned by society. From this point of view, there are two gender roles, one being female and the other being male, and two different “scenarios” are attached to each of them by society. Genders are learned and implemented in the “scenarios” attached to them. Feminist theory, on the other hand, approaches this differentiation between the genders from a different perspective. In particular, Marxist feminists explain gender inequalities through capitalism, the economy-political system, in that a capitalist economy requires the free labor of women in the home and takes advantage of it. Therefore, in a patriarchal society, there is a tendency for women to see their submissiveness to men as a product resulting from the submission of labor to capital. According to Maynard,

patriarchy created the most basic social divide. Walby focuses more on the concept of patriarchy, stating that patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men rule, crush and exploit women. Especially with an application produced at home, women are almost always behind men. In a patriarchal society, women are often imprisoned in the household and their participation in public life is restricted. In the system of public patriarchy, women are not excluded from public life, but they face inequality and discrimination in paid jobs (Pilcher, 2010, p. 109-115). Consequently, men and women are not just born as two different sexes, but they are allotted different tasks, roles and status in society. In a male-dominated society, the life of women is associated with the home and the child or limited to the home and the child, while public life belongs more to the man.

Simmel (2016, pp. 9-12) states that human culture is not genderless, and objective culture has a completely masculine character except for a few fields. According to Simmel, it is the man who creates art, industry, science, trade, state and religion. Not only the object of culture, but its nature, is based specifically on masculine energies, emotions, and a markedly masculine mentality. It is decisive in this case that society allows men to express their energy without limiting their personality. The society provides more opportunities for men to do what they want, to produce and to express themselves.

Associating the issue as an economic-political system of society, Marx claims that all biological needs have a social mediation, and cultural constraints are decisive in meeting biological needs. There is no fundamental human nature in Marxism, but in contrast there are certain historical forms of human nature such as feudalism, capitalism, socialism and others. Starting from this idea of Marx, Holmstrom attempted to reach a theory about women. Based on the findings from a number of intercultural studies, he suggested that the majority of women's behavioral patterns are based on social imposition rather than biology (Brown, 2016, p. 39-40), referring to the difference in social role and status between men and women. As an extension of this difference, the place of women in science is quite limited historically.

In a study conducted in Turkey in 2016 of 20,580 households, 85% of the population had a positive approach to women's work, and 15% did not regard women's work positively (Ministry of Family and Social Policies, 2016, p. 142).

Graph 1. The Relationship between the Occupation and the Family Relationship in Pandemics

After the pandemic, especially housewives stated that their family ties strengthened. Before the pandemic, women who could not spend time with their husband because of work intensity spent more time together during the quarantine period. This seems to have satisfied the majority of most wives. In contrast, quarantine has not had the same effect on the family ties of all groups. Unemployed people in particular started to experience much more economic worry, as finding a job and making money has become much more difficult. The unemployed were seen to be least likely to say that family ties had strengthened (See Graph 1)

**2. Two Elements that Increase the Problem in the Family:
Unemployment and Poverty**

Unemployment is a major current problem. Although this situation was also present before the pandemic, it increased exponentially after the pandemic. In addition, this problem is not only our problem, but can be seen throughout almost the whole world. According to a study conducted in the USA, 49% of the respondents were worried about losing their job in the next 2 or 3 years. Again, 70% thought that unemployment was not a temporary situation but has become the main characteristic of the modern economy (Lohr, 2010, p. 343). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, global industrial production dropped drastically in a short time, with some factories having to close for a long time. Unemployment has increased worldwide.

Regular income increases a person's life satisfaction and optimism. It strengthens social ties and sense of responsibility. Working in a regular job disciplines people, and unemployment causes the person to lose control over time and space. This directly affects family and married life as lack of permanent employment or irregular employment prevents rational organization of daily life (Wilson, 2010, p. 329). The effects of the social control mechanism are weakened on the unemployed.

A decline in production and wages has a negative effect on family life. Economic concerns negatively affect people's moods, thereby affecting communication among family members negatively. Domestic violence is known to increase in times of increased economic problems. As can be seen from Graph 2, students and the unemployed were the groups who stated that their problems in family relationships had increased the most. Students are most affected by the uncertainty created by the pandemic. The unemployed cannot establish good quality family communication due to economic concerns. Public-sector workers with regular income were seen to be least affected by quarantine, as they had no concerns about unemployment and income loss.

Graph 2. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family and Job

It would not be correct to link the problems experienced by students during the quarantine period to “economic concerns” entirely. Young people, who are at a much more active age, were unable to go out during this period. Students at universities away from their hometown returned to their families and moved away from their friends, thereby losing their freedom. Therefore, the uneasiness of young students was higher than all other respondents.

Graph 3. My family ties are now stronger&Income Status

After the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, one of the factors affecting family relationships was household income. As seen in the related graphs, the ratio of those stating that family ties had strengthened increased in parallel with increased income. Families in the lowest income group reported the least that family ties had strengthened the least, whereas those in the upper-middle and upper income groups stated the most strengthening of ties.

An economic crisis creates poverty and has a negative effect on family life with already impoverished families most badly affected. The failure of parents to meet economic obligations for family members increases family problems (Çılga, 1995, p. 334-33). Economic problems have always been one of the important factors affecting family relationships (Saran, 1991, p.

140). An economic crisis and unemployment also lead to violence and discord in the family, and the greatest impact of economic problems in the country manifests first within the family. In poor families, the care of children in particular becomes a major problem.

Graph 4. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family & Income

Economic problems affect men just as much as women, and poverty creates chronic stress and pressure. When a man is under intense stress, he may experience outbursts of anger. In traditional Turkish culture, the man is the primary breadwinner in the family, and if a man in such a society is prevented from providing for his family, he can easily become aggressive, leading to increased domestic violence in such times. In a previous field study by the Family Research Institution, the leading cause of domestic violence was reported to be financial problems at the rate of 28.2%. (Causes and Results of Domestic Violence, 1995, p. 143).

Graph 5 shows the relationship between the job position and family ties during the pandemic process. As can be seen from the table, those with no job anxiety stated that their family ties were strengthened, whereas the unemployed and those concerned about losing their jobs in the future gave relatively negative answers about the strengthening of family ties. In addition to economic problems, uncertainty about the future was also reflected negatively on family relationships.

Graph 6. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family & Work

Anxiety about the future has a negative effect on family communication, and this was confirmed by the findings obtained in the research. Those who fear hunger or being unable to meet basic needs in the future have more family communication problems. The anxiety caused by the pandemic has had a deep effect. In recent years, global warming and global poverty have become the most concerning issues. Beck (2011) pointed to the globalizing risk in his famous work entitled “Risk Society Towards Another Modernity”.

Graph 7. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family& Are you concerned about meeting your basic needs in the next 2 months?

3. The Effect of Age in the Pandemia

The pandemic has had different effects on different age groups. The statement, “My family ties are now stronger” was disagreed with most by those aged ≤ 24 years, and agreement was seen to increase with increasing age ($f(4) = 4.374, p < 0.002$). The very nature of being young means being in a state of change and uncertainty with less economic accumulation and less experience. Anxiety about exams and the future is at the highest level during youth.

Graph 8. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family& Age

Modernization affects young people more than other age groups. Individualization among the youth tends to gain strength (Furlong & Cartmel, 2010, p. 306), and scientific and technological development changes the professional skills required. The jobs of Industry 4.0 (or Society 5.0) require higher qualifications. The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Turkey has risen to an unprecedented extent, but young people are now facing a much more complex labor market. The pandemic (quarantine) has taken away what young people value most, which is their freedom. As can be seen from the graph, the statement, “Communication problems have increased with respect to my family” was agreed with most by young people.

4. Working at Home in Pandemia

(i) Globalization, (ii) increased flexibility in the labor market, (ii) changes in information and communication technologies, and (iv) the development of an information-based economy have made it easier to work from home. Online work has been a cost-cutting factor for many businesses, but it became a lifeline during quarantine, and has become a preferred form of employment for some employees (Jewson & Felstead, 2010, p. 358-359).

However, all countries were caught unprepared for the pandemic and working from home. Employees mostly stated that their productivity decreased (Bozkurt, 2020), while those who reported that their efficiency had increased were also those who reported strengthened family ties. Those who reported decreased efficiency were mostly those who stated that communication problems had increased ($f(4) = 21,396, p < 0.000$).

Graph 9. Communication problems have increased with respect to my family& Work productivity

5. Our Value Differences

The world views and cultural values of the family affected family relationships in the pandemic. Religious people in many countries often give the family more priority than people who are sceptical / non-believers. The family is at the heart of the conservative mind. Those who stated “I have faith and practice it” reported stronger family ties during the pandemic. In contrast, those who stated no religious belief or scepticism were the least approving of this view ($f(2) = 21,509, p < 0.000$). The respondents with religious beliefs and who practiced their religion stated that they had fewer communication problems in the family than others ($f(2) = 14,902, p < 0.000$).

Graph 10. My family ties are now stronger & Religious involvement

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the economy, politics, science, culture and the family. Especially during quarantine, people were confined to their homes for a long time and spent more time together than ever before. Quarantine was an opportunity for those who could not previously spare time for their families due to workload. Especially those who had no economic concerns stated that they were happy because they spent more time with their families.

The data showed that young people experienced family communication problems the most. Restricting people's freedom in quarantine created stress for everyone, but the stress it created on young people was seen to be a little more. Increasing stress increased family problems more for these young people. In contrast, it was observed that communication problems decreased with increasing age and family ties were strengthened during the quarantine period, especially for adults.

The COVID-19 virus does not recognize social class. It infects anyone who does not take protective action against the virus. It kills those with a weak immune system, whether rich or poor. However, the socio-economic impact created by the pandemic is different for each social class (Bozkurt, 2020). The problems experienced by rich families and the problems experienced by poor families are different.

Rich families were able to allocate more time to each other during quarantine period, developing new hobbies or learning new programs, and to a certain extent, they were able to work remotely.

However, poor or unemployed families experienced increased economic anxiety. Increasing concerns also increased communication problems among family members.

Some people continued to work during the quarantine period. As they used public transport, rates of infection increased especially in poor provinces. However, as the level of trust of individuals in other people and the government has increased, it can be seen that they cope more easily with the psycho-social problems in the family created by the pandemic.

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