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Abstract

This introduction describes the background for the special issue entitled “Relationships in the Time of COVID-19: Examining the Effects of the Global Pandemic on Personal Relationships.” It also examines reasons for conducting interdisciplinary research on COVID-19 and personal relationships, and previews first articles published in the special issue.

Keywords

COVID-19, personal relationships

At the heart of this special issue is a personal relationship, and the panicky and growing necessity for two old friends to feel connected across the United States as an uncertain, terrifying pandemic increasingly hooked its tentacles into the world.

How it started

We first met in the fall of 1999, when Jen arrived in Athens, Georgia to start the Ph.D. program in Communication at the University of Georgia, and where Pam had been a graduate student since 1995. We bonded immediately, sharing not only research interests, but also nearby upbringings in the Philadelphia area, and the sorts of romantic drama that only grad school seems to invite. Luckily, our friendship actually grew after

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we finished our Ph.D.'s, and we continued doing research together to maintain our connection.

So, it should not have been too much of a surprise to Jen when an email from Pam entitled "wanna do this together?" landed in her inbox on April 7, 2020. As most of you likely cannot forget, April 2020 was less than a month into the initial throes of the COVID-19 pandemic and a time of lockdown for most around the world. Indeed, we were both in the strictest of state and local lockdowns in California (Jen) and Pennsylvania (Pam) in the U.S. at that time.

While Jen was spending a lot of her lockdown time in a depressed, unproductive haze, Pam's mind was whirring away. For almost 20 years, Pam's research on marriage and LGBTQ+ people had examined the ways that societal level changes affect personal relationships. As different communities gained marriage equality or banned it or gained it again, Pam had investigated how dynamic social and civil shifts impacted couples, families, and friends. Combining Pam's research expertise with that of Jen's, which focuses on dark side topics such as jealousy, infidelity, and conflict, as well as how relational partners manage health issues related to family caregiving and chronic illness, created what we felt was an ideal pairing for better understanding the interplay between COVID-19 and personal relationships. Now, COVID-19 was clearly going to bring large-scale societal shifts that were likely to affect personal relationships in significant ways. Given our long-time involvement with IARR, we wanted *JSPR* to be a showcase for research on COVID-19 and personal relationships. Within a couple of weeks, and with easy coordination with Editor-in-Chief Melissa Curran, the special issue was finalized and being publicized online. We were on our way. And now here we are, 1 year later, writing this introduction.

For most of us, fear and helplessness was the overwhelming experience in those early days of the pandemic. This potent combination was what motivated us to propose this special issue—we had to do *something* to stay connected and to make sense of what we do best, and are most passionate about—studying personal relationships.

Many in academia felt the same way, as the very nature of our jobs, our relationships, and our interactions with our students and colleagues fundamentally shifted locations, responsibilities, and modes. Despite the burnout, stress, and extra time and effort associated with these changes, scholars immediately rose to the challenge and began asking important empirical questions about the pandemic's impact on their chosen area of study. Scientifically, we believe that there has never been such an abrupt, yet thoughtfully and expertly undertaken, shift in research focus to one overarching topic across so many different research areas and academic disciplines in history. A topic has never yet demanded it, until now.

Though any number of academic disciplines can reasonably argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced their research priorities to a uniquely extreme extent, we believe this is the case when it comes to the study of personal relationships. We offer just two of many possible examples why. First, the sheer breadth of the types of relationships that can be affected means that there are countless possible opportunities for shifting relational trajectories. For example, how could grandparent and grandchildren relationships change after not seeing one another for an extended period of time during lockdown? How could cultural and ethnicity differences potentially moderate those

changes? How well—and/or how poorly—will romantic couples fare while spending more time together during their “COVID year?” What will this mean for their relationships long-term? How will fewer visits from family members and friends—and the accompanying lack of nonverbal cues such as touch, eye contact, and overall nonverbal immediacy—translate into short- and long-term health implications for nursing home residents?

Second, the depth of relational knowledge and communication within one personal relationship means that multiple, complex issues can arise when faced with a long-term crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In a romantic relationship, for instance, to what extent might married couples with children shift their conflict patterns to different topics and styles when the entire family is in closer proximity to one another during lockdown, working from home, and/or home schooling? How did Black couples relationally manage the additional stressors and anxieties initiated by George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 and the resulting protests and racial unrest in the United States, coupled with the ongoing pandemic? How did same-sex couples who were just forging a relationship—perhaps via an online dating app or other technological means—at the beginning of a lockdown period navigate that transition communicatively?

Woven into these examples are questions related to communication, health, culture, social psychology, intergenerational issues, aging/gerontology, caregiving, and marriage and family studies. Of course, these topics, and the many and varied disciplines from which they emerge, exemplify the incredibly interdisciplinary and intersectional nature of the study of personal relationships. Indeed, we sought to reflect this in our call for papers for this special issue by soliciting manuscripts that placed a high value on diversity, equality, and inclusion, and by specifically seeking to publish studies with diverse samples and varied methodological approaches.

How it’s going

After the special issue call was published, we nervously waited to see when (even if) extended abstracts would be submitted. Would personal relationship scholars have composed themselves enough to conduct research early in the pandemic? Were individuals—particularly in the understudied and diverse groups we were hoping would be part of the samples submitted in the first round of extended abstracts—willing to take part in research studies about how their relationships were affected by COVID-19 so early on in the pandemic?

Just as with everything else in 2020, it turned out that COVID-19 was all we could think about, and interest and participation from researchers and even from participants was extraordinary. We ultimately received over 100 initial extended abstract submissions, from authors residing in 33 different countries. We invited 78 of these abstracts to submit full manuscripts by February 2021 and are currently in the process of concluding the first round of review of the full manuscripts that were submitted by this deadline.

We will conduct and report on a full survey of the patterns (and deviations) across our final set of studies in the conclusion to this special issue (stay tuned!), but there are a number of interesting findings in the studies we have already accepted for publication that we wanted to highlight here. For example, relational turbulence theory and the

communication theory of resilience have already been fruitful theoretical frameworks. Specifically, Goodboy et al. (2021) found that college dating relationships were more turbulent and less interdependent during the pandemic compared to how they were recalled pre-pandemic. Further, in Lillie et al. (2021), greater use of communicative resilience processes during the first wave of COVID-19 were negatively, directly related to relational uncertainty and negatively related to dyadic coping in married individuals in the U.S.

Findings in unique relationship contexts are of note as well in this first issue of published COVID-19 articles. For instance, in same-sex relationships, experiencing higher perceived threat of COVID-19 predicted greater avoidance of complaints, which then predicted decreased relationship satisfaction, and increased depression, anxiety, and substance use (Li & Samp, 2021). The relationship between COVID-19 perceived threat and relationship satisfaction was particularly strong for people of color and those with greater internalized homophobia (Li & Samp, 2021). Further, for single individuals, physical attractiveness remained an important partner preference in the face of higher COVID-19 concern, which was contrary to Alexopoulos et al.'s (in press) prediction, alongside increases in family commitment and the importance of stability.

These are just a sampling of the interesting, exciting findings we are lucky enough to engage with on a daily basis. We are thrilled and honored that Sage Publications is offering the final versions of these studies as Open Access articles, so they will be widely and freely available for scholars, students, members of the press, practitioners, and the general public. Our ultimate goal is that these research findings will be translatable and useful for the very audiences who our authors are studying: individuals in a variety of personal relationships that are affected by COVID-19.

Where it's headed

As we were writing this introduction, Jen found herself in a discussion with another scholar in her discipline about the value of conducting COVID-19 research. This interaction made Jen think about the importance of crafting a rationale for scholarship focused on the pandemic beyond just the obvious claim that an unprecedented event such as this is in need of study. Such a claim is necessary, of course, but certainly not sufficient. Three additional justifications come to mind. First, as we stated in our call for papers for this special issue, we hope that the body of scholarship that emerges here will begin to assist researchers and practitioners as they work to understand the short- and long-term implications of this significant relational event. Ultimately, as research on the pandemic's impact on personal relationships grows in depth and breadth, the patterns that emerge can offer translational and practical applications for relational partners who are continuing to struggle with the pandemic's aftermath.

Second, lessons learned from this pandemic via personal relationship scholarship such as what is published in this special issue can ideally be applied to the emergence of other future crises related to health, climate, mass migration, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks. These are each possible—and unfortunately, likely—at a global, national, and/or local scale, and all have the potential to affect the trajectory of personal relationships. Prior research examples that bear this out include the September 11 terrorist

attacks in the United States (Cohan et al., 2009), lockdowns in Canada in response to similar outbreaks of infectious diseases such as SARS (Hawryluck et al., 2004), the California wildfires (Afifi et al., 2012), and the experiences of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (Afifi et al., 2016). If only we had the prescience to turn to this body of research for a blueprint of coping mechanisms, buffers against uncertainty, resilience processes, likelihood of relational continuation, and the psychological impacts of lockdown before the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps we could have better understood how personal relationships would be affected as the COVID-19 news broke.


Finally, it is imperative that we consider the unique personal relationship implications of groups who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 health disparities. For example, Black patients were almost 3 times as likely as white patients to be hospitalized for COVID-19 in California at the beginning of the pandemic (e.g., Azar et al., 2020). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals have a higher prevalence of health conditions such as asthma, stroke, and kidney disease that are associated with serious COVID-19 incidences compared with heterosexual people (Heslin & Hall, 2021). Worldwide, as of April 2021, the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have administered 70% of all COVID-19 vaccine doses, though they have less than half of the world's population; meanwhile, the lowest income countries have been unable to access vaccine supplies due to funding and accessibility (McClellan et al., 2021). Cumulatively, this lack of equity likely translates to a range of personal relationship challenges for members of these groups. Understanding and untangling these effects both theoretically and practically must be a priority for personal relationship researchers.

This special issue is still unfolding as we write this, much like the pandemic itself. As U.S. citizens with doctoral degrees, we realize we are in a vantage point of incredible privilege: we are both fully vaccinated, healthy, and remained employed and safe throughout the pandemic. Our families are safe and healthy as well. But the fear and helplessness we experienced in early 2020 was real, and we managed it the only ways we knew at the time: by reaching out to our loved ones any way we could, caring for ourselves, our students, and our colleagues, working harder (not necessarily better, at least at first), and brainstorming ways to better understand how the pandemic could affect personal relationships. This special issue is one small contribution toward that latter goal. We hope you enjoy it, and can take something meaningful from it too.

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Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are not available. The materials used in the research are not available.

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