

Article

Family Coping Strategies During Finland's COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract: During spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdowns fundamentally changed families' everyday lives. This study aims to examine how families with children coped during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland and what kind of coping strategies they developed. An online survey including both qualitative and quantitative questions was conducted between April and May 2020 to gather Finnish families' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. In this study, we focus on information from one open-ended question, and Huston's social-ecological theory was used as an analytical framework. The results showed that Finnish families employed coping strategies on three levels: macroenvironmental, relationship, and individual. This supports the argument that to better understand families' coping strategies, the macrosocietal environment surrounding families, their relationships, and the interactions between family members, as well as individual decisions and attitudes, should be taken into account.

Keywords: coping strategies; COVID-19; families; social-ecological theory

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected nearly every country in 2020 [1]. During this pandemic, many countries, such as Finland, opted for a lockdown strategy and required physical distancing to slow the spread of the virus and protect their populations. To prevent the spread of the virus, the Finnish Government adopted several policy measures. For example, the government recommended that, whenever possible, children should be cared for at home; however, daycare centers remained open to ensure access to early childhood education and care for the children of employees who worked in sectors critical to the functioning of society. School premises were closed, and contact teaching was suspended and replaced by remote teaching. These recommendations to care for children at home, as well as remote teaching, were in effect for approximately two months between 18 March and 14 May 2020. In addition, it was recommended that remote work be favored as much as possible during the virus outbreak.

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown strategies have had many, often negative, consequences: Besides the health risks, economies have crashed, unemployment and redundancies have increased, and there have been concerns that different kinds of social problems, such as domestic violence, have escalated [2–5]. In relation to these consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdowns have fundamentally changed the everyday lives of families. In particular, families with children have faced different kinds of challenges regarding how to organize and manage their everyday lives. With school premises closed and daycare facilities operating at a limited capacity, many parents with children were solely responsible for childcare and perhaps even homeschooling. Moreover, physical distancing altered and reduced both parents' and children's social contacts outside the family and increased the time spent as a family in the home. Many welfare services, such as child

welfare clinics, that normally provide support for families' wellbeing, were also operating at a limited capacity, and some families faced economic uncertainty in terms of either (potential) unemployment or redundancy. Families where both parents were working needed to negotiate how to allocate childcare, homeschooling, and the increase in housework, along with continuing their paid work from home. Furthermore, there has been much discussion on how the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequalities, with women being forced to undertake even more domestic work in these circumstances [6].

In this study, we examine how families with children coped during Finland's COVID-19 lockdown and what kind of coping strategies these families developed, by using an online survey conducted in spring 2020. Coping strategies represent an important issue since lockdowns can potentially produce different kinds of risks to families' wellbeing. Recent studies have revealed that the current COVID-19 lockdown has impacted children's physical activity and induced longer screen times, irregular sleeping patterns, less favorable diets [7], intolerance to rules, mood changes, and problems with sleeping alone [8]. Parents, on the other hand, have been reported as worrying about their ability to provide income for their families, experiencing general stress and feelings of tiredness, having difficulties in their relationships and with managing children's academic pursuits, and suffering from poor mental and physical health [9].

Many previous studies have lacked a clear theoretical framework that could provide an overview of coping strategies during pandemics. We used Ted Huston's [10] social-ecological theory to understand people's responses and coping strategies during Finland's 2020 lockdown. This theory takes into account individual, dyadic, and group-level effects, helping to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of work–family balance and behavioral responses to pandemics. Research that has focused on families during pandemics has mostly dealt with the risks that they face [11], rather than their actual coping methods; thus, this paper makes an original contribution to the literature since studies on family coping strategies during the current pandemic remain scarce.

How people respond and organize their everyday lives during a pandemic is likely to involve a complex process of balancing competing motivations. Chew et al. [12] found that common themes among the psychological responses during previous infectious disease outbreaks included anxiety/fear, depression, anger, guilt, grief and loss, post-traumatic stress, and stigmatization, as well as, conversely, a greater sense of empowerment and compassion towards others. Meanwhile, the coping strategies adopted included seeking alternatives, self- and other-preservation, seeking social support, avoidance, and positive appraisal of the situation.

1.1. Social-Ecological Theory as a Framework to Understand Family Coping Strategies

Social-ecological theory has proved popular in explaining various phenomena in the field of social sciences. Its basic idea is that in order to understand human behavior, several levels of analysis should be taken into account [13] (p. 43). Based on this concept, Huston [10] developed a social-ecological theory to understand marriages and intimate unions, which responded to the critique that most theories about marriage and other intimate relationships focus attention on only one aspect of a relationship, rather than the causal system as a whole. Huston's [10] argument was that both wide-angle and close-up lenses should be utilized to create a rich, comprehensive portrait of issues concerning intimate relationships, for example, families' coping strategies.

The profound principle in social-ecological theory is that for an understanding of intimate unions, research should take into account group, individual, and dyadic-level effects. As such, the theory distinguishes three levels of analysis. The first is the group level, which consists of macrosocietal forces, such as culture and the broader physical environment and ecological niches that Huston viewed as a constellation of behavior settings within which couples function in their everyday lives. The second is the individual level, including the psychosocial and social attributes of individuals, their personal attitudes, and their beliefs. The third is the marital relationship, that is, the dyadic level, which is viewed as a behavioral system embedded within a larger network of close relationships. Social-ecological theory is also based on the notion that marital behavior is not static, but dynamic, and that all three

layers of the relationship interact with and influence each other persistently over time. According to Huston, each level provides the context for the others: The societal context within which relationships are embedded is affected by the decisions made by individuals and couples, while individual spouses both shape and are shaped by their relationship [10].

Several studies on intimate relationships have tested Huston's social-ecological theory, which has been a useful framework for understanding aspects of romantic relationships, including romantic challenges [14], conflicts between partners [15], and equity dynamics in infant care [16]. In our adaptation of social-ecological theory, we explore if and how these three levels of analysis are evident in the experiences of families' coping strategies; however, instead of applying all the nuances of Huston's [10] theory, we chose to utilize the three levels of analysis to conceptualize and define these coping strategies in a broader framework.

1.2. Earlier Studies on Coping Strategies During Pandemics

Previous research has revealed the wide range of coping responses that pandemics induce in people; however, little consensus can be found in the categorization of these coping methods [17]. Despite this lack of consensus, many studies have attempted to categorize coping responses into subgroups to obtain a comprehensive portrait of different coping strategies. One of the most commonly used coping categorizations is Folkman and Lazarus's [18] distinction between problem- and emotion-focused coping. In their study, the authors conducted empirical research in which they followed the stressful daily life events that participants experienced and suggested two higher-order categories based on their findings. Although Folkman and Lazarus's categorization is widely used, it has been criticized for numerous reasons; for example, their categories are not exclusive and exhaustive, as some ways of coping seem to fit both categories, while others fall outside of either category [17]. Following this distinction between problem- and emotion-focused coping, numerous other categories have been developed [17].

At the same time, some studies in the field of coping research have avoided making strict categorizations. The problem in identifying different categories is that "coping" is not a specific behavior [17] that can be easily defined. In the context of pandemic research, one of the most widely accepted definitions of the term "coping" is that of Lazarus and Folkman [19], who describe coping as "the constantly changing and behavioral efforts to manage specific external/ internal demands . . ." (p. 141). Another problem in coping research is the difficulty in comparing the results of different studies because coping categories are specific to each individual study [17].

The existing research related to coping strategies and COVID-19 has focused mainly on specific groups, such as healthcare workers [20], the youth [21], and inhabitants of a specific country [22]. Based on our understanding, the literature on families' coping strategies during the current pandemic is still very limited.

Gerhold [22] identified problem-focused and emotion-focused coping methods. Some of the most common problem-focused strategies were listening to experts, following their advice, and carefully considering what to do next. The most common emotion-focused coping methods were accepting the situation and trying to distract oneself with different activities. Orgilés et al. [21] observed three coping categories among the youth: task-oriented strategies (e.g., collaborating on social activities and emphasizing positive attitudes by highlighting the pros of being at home), emotion-oriented strategies (e.g., seeking comfort from others), and avoidance-oriented strategies (e.g., not worrying about the situation, ignoring it, and acting as if nothing is happening). The most common strategy adopted among the youth was acceptance. Shechter et al. [20] did not employ any coping strategy categorizations but found that the most common coping behavior among healthcare workers was physical activity, followed by faith-based religion and/or spirituality. Hence, as with studies of previous pandemics, no comparable coping categorizations can be found in research that has focused on the current outbreak.

Interestingly, it seems that the dyadic level of Huston's theory has been missing in previous studies. The most common coping strategies observed in the existing research relate to individual-level

strategies, such as ignoring the situation or trying to maintain a positive attitude. In addition, group-level coping strategies, such as listening to experts' advice or seeking comfort from others, appear to be typical. The missing dyadic level might be due to the lack of coping-related studies that have particularly focused on families, where marital relationships represent the dyadic level.

2. Materials and Methods

This study aimed to analyze coping strategies of families with children during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland, using Huston's [10] social-ecological theory as an analytical framework to reveal the individual, dyadic, and group-level coping strategies that these families developed. Research questions are: (1) How did families with children cope during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland? (2) What kind of coping strategies did they develop?

2.1. Data

Data from an online survey on Finnish families' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown were used. The survey included quantitative questions on work–family reconciliation, marital and parental conflicts, and well-being, as well as qualitative open-ended questions concerning everyday life during the pandemic. In this study, the interest is solely on the qualitative data of the survey and quantitative questions are excluded from analyses. The survey was launched on 23 April 2020, approximately four weeks after the Finnish government administered physical distancing guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19. Data collection ended on 17 May 2020, a few days after schools and childcare facilities had begun to operate normally again. This data collection period, thus, enabled analysis of the experiences of families during the time that the lockdown was in effect.

The data were gathered using a convenience sampling strategy, which is a nonprobability sampling technique. In nonprobability sampling, the data are not representative of the population, and subjective methods are used to gather the sample. Thus, convenience sampling does not give all members of the population an equal chance of being included; instead, members of the target population that fulfill certain practical criteria, such as geographical proximity, easy accessibility, or willingness to participate, are included in the sample [23]. In this study, convenience sampling was chosen to enable quick sampling and data gathering during the lockdown. To minimize problems related to convenience sampling, efforts were made to spread information about data gathering through different channels. The main channel used to advertise the survey was the University of Turku's communication service, which shared a press release on the study with more than 400 media representatives around Finland. In addition, information on data gathering was shared through the University of Turku and the researchers' own social media accounts.

The sample comprised 654 respondents, who were parents with at least one child under 18 years of age. As data were gathered using convenience sampling, they were somewhat biased, mostly in terms of its gendered nature: 92 percent of respondents were women, 7 percent were men, and 1 percent identified as "other gender." Respondents were also relatively highly educated: 78 percent had either university or applied university degree, 21 percent had intermediate level education, and only 1 percent had a basic level education. Respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 60 years, with a median age of 37 years. All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

In the present study, only the information from one qualitative open-ended question of online survey was used. In this question, respondents were asked to write down their families' experiences in everyday life during the lockdown, its challenges, and their possible solutions to these challenges. Hence, the data to be analyzed consist of respondents' written answers to the above mentioned question. Altogether, 420 respondents answered this qualitative open-ended question. However, as our interest was to also examine the role of marital relationships, that is, the dyadic level [10], single parents were excluded from the analysis, and only answers of those respondents that came from families with two parents living together were included. Hence, the final data included the written answers of 376 respondents.

Before starting the analysis, the data were read according to the date they were received, starting with the oldest answers received at 23 April and ending with the newest answers received at 17 May. This was done in order to evaluate the saturation of data. Reading revealed that the newest answers did not raise any new themes for analysis but they could be situated along with the themes of older answers.

2.2. Method and Analysis

To better track families' coping strategies, we employed both inductive and deductive approaches in the data analysis, inductively exploring the coping strategies and deductively using social-ecological theory to understand and interpret them. As Xu and Zammit [24] noted, this so-called hybrid approach assists a researcher in identifying the most basic elements of the raw data and flexibly discovering both descriptive and interpretive meanings that appear interesting and relevant to the research agenda. The analysis was performed using the NVivo12 software.

In the first stage, we used inductive thematic analysis, per Braun and Clarke [25], to identify families' coping strategies from the individual descriptions they provided in the data. Based on this analysis, preliminary themes were defined from the data itself without utilizing any preexisting coding framework. During this stage of the analysis, the coders (M.S. and A.K.) familiarized themselves with the data by reading it and selecting the texts that described coping strategies.

In the second stage, the texts selected by the two coders were compared, and the coders reached a mutual decision regarding which texts described families' coping strategies and, hence, should be included in the final data. During this meeting, the coders generated the initial data codes. Third, based on these initial data codes, the data were further coded by M.S. Thereafter, A.K. carefully read and proposed some changes within the coding.

Fourth, the coders reviewed the coded transcripts, and disagreements on the coding were resolved to reach a consensus. The codes were then distributed into subthemes. Fifth, A.K. grouped the subthemes into larger categories, which were identified as themes, before organizing the emerging themes under the three headings of social-ecological theory: macroenvironmental, relationship, and individual. Based on this thematization of the three distinct levels, a mind map of the analysis was constructed. Finally, the analysis framework, based on Huston's [10] theory, and its themes and subthemes were presented and discussed by the research group (M.S., A.K., M.H., and M.A.) In this article, quotes have been translated from Finnish to English.

3. Results

The major finding of our analysis was that families developed many means to cope during the COVID-19 lockdown. Eleven themes describing families' coping strategies were derived from the data: (1) flexibility of paid work, (2) services and support provided by society, (3) social relationships, (4) unofficial support, (5) agreements about everyday practices, (6) flexibility in everyday practices, (7) family time, (8) family conversation, (9) personal attitude, (10) personal time, and (11) flexibility regarding paid work standards. By adapting Huston's [10] social-ecological theory to structure the analysis, these themes were further situated into three levels: (1) macroenvironmental (flexibility of paid work, services and support provided by society, social relationships, and unofficial support); (2) relationship (agreements about everyday practices, flexibility in everyday practices, family time, and family conversation); and (3) individual (personal attitude, personal time, and flexibility regarding paid work standards). This three-level structure of families' coping strategies is presented in Figure 1.

Of the three levels of families' coping strategies, the relationship level was clearly the most pronounced, indicating that the role of marital and parental relationships, as well as that of the family as a whole, in coping with lockdown was seen as especially important. This pronounced role became evident in that respondents wrote most often about relationship-level themes. In a vast majority of answers, the themes of relationship level were mentioned whereas themes of macroenvironmental and individual levels were mentioned less frequently. However, it should be noted that the question wording might have affected this result: Respondents were asked to write their families' experiences

in everyday life during the lockdown, which could have led them to focus on certain aspects. Macroenvironmental-level coping strategies were less prevalent than relationship-level coping strategies but still clearly more prevalent than individual-level coping strategies.

Families' Coping Strategies

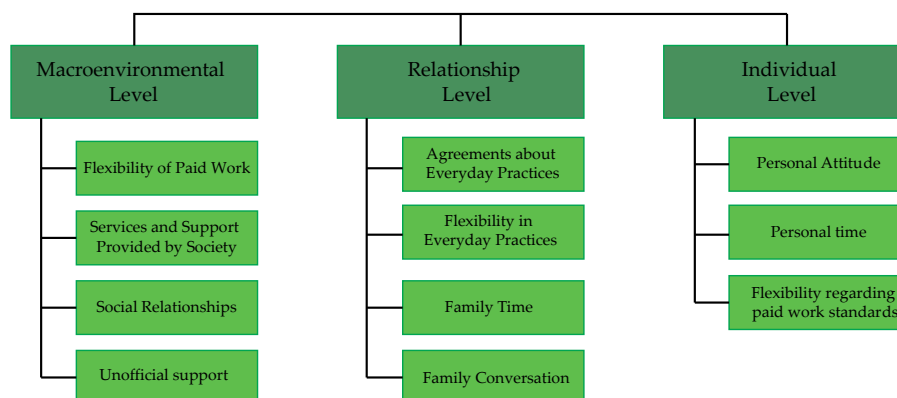


Figure 1. Three levels of families' coping strategies.

The model of families' coping strategies in Figure 1 is fluid in two ways. First, the boundaries between the levels of analysis are defined and connected. Hence, the results confirmed Huston's [10] idea of a strong interaction between the levels, and although a theme may have been situated on one level, it was often also reflected in other levels. For example, in Figure 1, personal attitude is situated at the individual level, referring to the personal attributes of a parent. At the same time, personal attitudes are often discussed and shared between parents, that is, they are also related to the relationship level. Next, we analyze families' coping strategies according to Huston's [10] three levels, beginning with the macroenvironmental level.

3.1. Macroenvironmental Level

3.1.1. Services and Support Provided by Society

For some parents, support from daycare or school was seen as essential. During the lockdown in Finland, daycare facilities were open for all children; however, parents were asked to keep their children at home if possible. Parents in jobs critical to the functioning of society and who had children in grades one to three (7–9 years old) could also send their children to school. The child attending daycare full- or part-time enabled parents to manage their work duties. In some families, children stayed in daycare from the beginning of lockdown, while in others, parents and children were at home at first, until balancing work and care became impossible and families decided that children should return to daycare:

"Our children went back to daycare because it was possible, and we are quite confident that the health risks are rather small."

Parents considered the support from schools, either from teachers and/or the school lunch provided for children, to be important. In Finland, schools organized remote teaching for children during the COVID-19 lockdown, although the extent of this remote teaching varied across schools, teachers, and according to the age of children. Families noted that virtual support from teachers, who ensured that school assignments were correct, was helpful. Many Finnish cities decided to provide takeaway school lunches during the lockdown. For some families, these meals relieved pressure from everyday life and released the time needed to cook for work and other obligations.

Sometimes, an essential coping mechanism was professional support, such as therapy or other welfare services. For people experiencing mental health problems, the stress and worry caused by the pandemic hindered their wellbeing. As one mother recounted:

“I was lucky to start my psychotherapy right before the coronavirus started to spread. I have been able to continue it virtually, although it is not the same.”

3.1.2. Social Relationships and Unofficial Support

In the data, social contacts with friends and relatives were often seen as vital for both children’s and parents’ wellbeing since the lockdown typically reduced or deprived face-to-face interactions with close contacts. Indeed, in several families, digital platforms were seen as an important means to maintain social contact. In particular, video calls were acknowledged as a good way to interact, and, in some families, several other digital platforms were actively used:

“We keep active contact with my family by phone, and we’ll probably start to make video calls soon. The teenager chats with my ex’s mother on WhatsApp and her own friends on different online services (Discord, etc.), I keep in touch with my friends and colleagues through different channels, such as IRC, Slack, and Facebook.”

Some families decided to let their children meet friends in person; however, they often limited the amount or space of these meetings to reduce the risk of their children infecting others or becoming infected with the virus. For example, parents may have agreed that their children could only play with children from one particular family or with a few children in the neighborhood. Several parents also restricted play to the outdoors. Interestingly, parents themselves did not mention that spending time with their own friends “in real life” would be an important resource for coping.

Unofficial support, such as help from grandparents (who did not belong to the high-risk group for COVID-19) and other relatives was also seen as beneficial and, for some, necessary in order to cope with everyday life during the lockdown. This unofficial support meant that a relative, most often grandparent, took care of the children while parents worked. Interestingly, unofficial support concerned merely childcare, not other chores such as helping with the housework. Taking care of the children was seen as a natural part of the extended family dynamics, and families did not pay for help, except for younger relatives for whom this was a way to earn some pocket money.

3.1.3. Flexibility of Paid Work

To cope with lockdown, many families emphasized the importance of their place of work. Interestingly, some experienced that the possibility of remote work was a vital factor in coping with everyday life, while for others it was important to work at the workplace. For many, remote work made it possible to organize and schedule work time from the perspective of the family. This meant that periods of work and free time alternated, and, in addition to “office hours,” parents often worked during the early mornings, evenings, or nights:

“Work duties are prolonged between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. because the work is done in small periods (these vary from seconds to minutes, excluding the meetings that I can sometimes do in peace).”

Besides working times, the specific workplace was also an important factor in remote work. Some parents described how the “home office” was an essential space to work from home. Others without a quiet home office had made creative settlements for remote work, such as organizing individual workspaces for each family member or holding work calls or video meetings from the quietest place possible, such as the car, bedroom, or sauna:

“I go to the car to have my work meetings because my home environment is not quiet enough, and there are interruptions.”

For some, working from home was burdensome, and the possibility to be at the workplace was seen to facilitate coping during the lockdown; these participants described how the workplace enabled more effective work. The workplace also offered the opportunity for a moment of one's own, while, at home, the family was together for long periods of time:

"Working alone at the workplace feels like a small holiday because you have your own privacy. My work is very simple and demands more physical than intellectual effort."

For some, the flexibility of their paid work meant the possibility of working part-time or using vacation days during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some employers recommended or made it possible for employees to take their vacations during this period:

"I was fortunate to have my spring holidays. It has also helped my partner's work a lot since he does not have to work and take care of the kids at the same time."

3.2. Relationship Level

3.2.1. Agreements About Everyday Practices

To cope with the lockdown, the importance of agreements regarding everyday practices was emphasized by many parents: Making exact and mutual pacts about how to organize and divide the practicalities of everyday life provided much-needed structure for families, as well as a certain kind of confidence that they could manage the various pressures of everyday life during the lockdown.

The theme of these agreements became evident in two somewhat different, but overlapping, subthemes: timetables and sharing responsibility. Having a concrete, transcribed timetable, for example, in an Excel spreadsheet, provided many families with a useful tool to take the needs of all family members into account. Timetables were also a way to keep track of everyone's everyday routines. Families used timetables primarily to organize parents' work schedules, for example, video meetings, but they were also used for child-related activities, such as children's school video meetings and homework duties:

"The night before, we make a timetable that includes everyone's video meeting times, the child's school duties, and eating times."

Another prevalent coping method employed to organize families' everyday practices was sharing responsibility. Sharing the responsibility of childcare between parents seemed to play a vital role in families' coping strategies: Many families stated that without responsibility sharing, they would have not managed the interplay of paid work and childcare. Responsibility sharing clearly overlapped with the function of timetables: When one parent worked, the other took care of the children and vice versa. Thus, childcare sharing enabled both parents to reserve part of the day for uninterrupted work without leaving children on their own.

"We have tried to divide workdays so that one adult works between 8 a.m. and noon and the other adult between 1 pm and 5 p.m. This way, we can provide attention and meaningful activities for our child who is under school age."

3.2.2. Flexibility in Everyday Practices

In addition to agreeing on everyday practices, flexibility emerged as a highly important coping strategy for families. In practice, flexibility meant downgrading the normal standards of family life. Downgrading was used in many aspects of the families' lives, the most prevalent being related to children's screen time. Downgrading children's normal screen time rules was used by parents as a way to enable time for paid work. It was widely employed in families, especially in situations where parents needed uninterrupted work time, for example, for important video meetings or work deadlines. Nevertheless, parents' stance toward downgrading screen time rules was highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they realized that allowing more screen time was sometimes necessary in order to get obligatory work done. On the other hand, they felt guilty about using electronic devices as a babysitter:

“We have increased the screen time allowed for children who are under school age to keep them occupied during our video meetings, and we try not to have a guilty conscience about this increased screen time.”

Flexibility was also used as a tool to concentrate on issues that were considered obligatory. Paid work and childcare were considered the tasks that “had to be done”; hence, to concentrate on these demands, many parents opted to downgrade housework duties, such as cooking and cleaning. In many families, cooking lunch during workdays in lockdown was considered a challenge; therefore, this was the most prevalently downgraded housework duty. Instead of home-cooked lunches, families turned to food delivery services, restaurants’ own home deliveries, and ready-made meals. This emphasis on lunch cooking is probably explained by the fact that families do not normally cook lunch at home during weekdays: Children receive a warm lunch at daycare, and schools and adults in paid work eat their lunch at staff/office canteens or in other restaurants:

“The solution was to lower [our] standards, do only what was necessary, and be outdoors a lot. We order food from home delivery services, and, once a week, we order food from a restaurant.”

3.2.3. Family Time and Conversation

In addition to the more concrete coping strategies of agreements and flexibility in everyday practices, the relationship level included two more general family-related coping strategies: family time and family conversation. Family time, that is, “doing things together,” was seen as an important way to cope with lockdown for nearly all the families. This is notable since lockdown itself increased the amount of time spent within the family; however, this family leisure time gave them counterbalance to the time spent together during work and school days and was seen as especially important during weekends. During weekdays after work and school, family time was seen as a substitute for children’s hobbies that had been interrupted during lockdown. The most emphasized form of family time was different types of outdoor activity: As the whole family spent their work and school days at home, getting out of the house became an important coping method, and outdoor activities were seen as a useful way to do so:

“We have spent time in nature and gone fishing, et cetera. During weekday nights, we have spent more time together as a family because [our] scheduled hobbies are on a break.”

Family conversations were a further important coping strategy. Families with functional dialogue stated that the ability to talk between family members enabled them to manage everyday challenges and to better understand other family members and their feelings during lockdown. On the one hand, family conversation was perceived as a good prevention method against different kinds of disagreements between family members since issues that could potentially cause arguments later were discussed beforehand. On the other hand, parents felt that family conversation functioned as a safe environment, especially for children, to talk about the emotions and fears caused by COVID-19 and the lockdown:

“Dialogical connections in our family and in our couple relationship are good, and they have proven to be a reserve of strength during coronavirus life.”

3.3. Individual Level

3.3.1. Personal Time

Having personal time, that is, having time alone, was the strongest theme among the individual-level coping strategies. In the vast majority of families, time spent together at home increased noticeably during lockdown; hence, it is unsurprising that, for many families, having one’s own time was emphasized as an important coping strategy. For many parents, the possibility—even a short one—to be alone without their children and spouse and “do whatever I want” enabled them to cope with the everyday challenges of lockdown. Many parents stated that their personal time ensured that they were able to cope with the increased time spent together at home. Having personal time was linked to leisure time,

and the role of sports activities was emphasized. In addition, to be able to do nothing and just take a break was accentuated:

“At times I need to go for a run alone, just to be able to be alone.”

3.3.2. Personal Attitude

As a coping method, “personal attitude” refers to a type of “where there is a will, there is a way” survival strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown were considered as something that a person themselves could not have an effect on; therefore, a personal attitude of taking one day at a time was viewed as a strategy to manage the lockdown experience. An important feature of this coping strategy was that families emphasized the temporal nature of lockdown: Challenges and hard times were seen as manageable because the confinement was considered a temporal phase that would not last forever, and a return to normal life would await in the (near) future:

“Luckily, this is only temporary, and that time you can even stand on your head to get this over with.”

3.3.3. Flexibility Regarding Paid Work Standards

Flexibility regarding paid work standards refers to the lowering of the standards of paid work; hence, this coping strategy is related to a relationship-level coping strategy, namely flexibility in everyday practices. Lowering paid work standards was related to both the quantity and quality of paid work: Parents either worked fewer hours or were less strict about completing their work as well as they could. Lowering paid work standards was not seen as a preferred coping strategy but rather as a necessary sacrifice in order to manage everyday life during the lockdown. Thus, parents struggled with their conscience for not doing their paid work as efficiently as normally and often stressed the temporal nature of lowering these work standards:

“I don’t do my teaching job that well, and I only hope that the older pupils can manage with less pampering. I also try to accept the fact that my paid work performance is not as good as it is normally.”

4. Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the coping strategies employed by families with children during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland by using Huston’s [10] social-ecological theory as an analytical framework. Our analysis showed that the framework of social-ecological theory [10] functions well in offering an understanding of families’ coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown. Our results reveal that their coping strategies were situated on three analytical levels: (1) macroenvironmental (flexibility of paid work, services and support provided by society, social relationships, and unofficial support); (2) relationship (agreements about everyday practices, flexibility in everyday practices, family time, and family conversation); and (3) individual (personal attitude, personal time, and flexibility regarding paid work standards). Therefore, the results of this study strongly support the argument that in order to better understand family coping strategies, the macrosocietal environment surrounding families, relationships, and interactions between family members, as well as individual decisions and attitudes, should be taken into account [10].

Another conclusion drawn from the results is related to the pronounced role of relationship-level coping strategies. For Finnish families, coping strategies at the relationship level were clearly the most important. The results also suggest that other levels of coping strategies—that is, macroenvironmental and individual—are often reflected through the relationship level. For example, the macroenvironmental-level strategy of flexibility of paid work (e.g., whether one of the partners should use their holiday days during the lockdown in order to take care of their children) was also negotiated between parents.

The importance of relationship-level coping strategies was somewhat surprising since actions and recommendations concerning the COVID-19 pandemic have mainly been employed at the macroenvironmental level by political leaders and medical experts. The prevalent role of the relationship-level coping strategies is

also interesting in light of earlier studies [20,22] that have not emphasized the importance of this level, but rather underlined the significance of the individual and macroenvironmental levels. Hence, revealing the relevance of the relationship level in families' coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown represents one of the present study's key contributions.

According to Huston [10], to better understand coping strategies, it is necessary to take into account the macroenvironmental, that is, societal, level, which constitutes the broader framework within which families function in their everyday lives. However, our results suggest that the national context is also important at the more general level when interpreting coping strategies. On a global, or even European, scale, the COVID-19 pandemic has not (at least for now) affected Finland particularly seriously: Compared to the total population, the number of people infected and the number of deaths from the virus have been very modest [26]. This naturally affects the coping strategies that are employed. Finnish families' coping strategies mainly related to how to manage their daily lives and practices, whereas coping strategies related to, for example, how to survive the grief caused by ill or deceased family members or relatives were absent.

Moreover, the question of how the Finnish welfare state, with the benefits and services it provides for families, affected coping strategies is also relevant. Our results showed that demands related to combining work and family life were rather prevalent among the families' coping strategies. It might be that these issues were especially evident because, normally, Finnish families with children can rely on full-time, high-quality childcare that enables parents—in particular, mothers—to focus on their paid work without worrying about who will care for their children.

When considering the conclusions of this study, a few limitations should be borne in mind. First, the question used to analyze families' coping strategies was listed last in our survey, and it is possible that the previous questions steered respondents' thoughts in specific directions, such as combining work and family life, causing related coping strategies to be so strongly present. Second, weaknesses related to convenience sampling include potential bias and outliers [23]. Women and highly educated parents were overrepresented in the data, which might have affected the results. In terms of gender, overrepresentation of women could have caused the pronounced role of combining work and family life as well as sharing the responsibility of childcare between parents. This might be due to the fact that women – also in Finland – still bear the main responsibility of childcare tasks and are more prone to suffer from the double burden of paid and care work [27,28]. What comes to the role of education, a question can be raised regarding whether highly educated parents have more opportunities for different kinds of flexible working arrangements: Such parents might find it easier to adjust their working time, for example, enabling them to work during non-office hours more easily. Moreover, the possibility of performing remote work in the first place is often more likely in jobs that require higher education. Earlier studies [29] have also shown that childcare responsibilities are more equally divided between highly educated parents, which could be the reason why sharing the responsibility of childcare between parents became an important part of families' coping strategies in this study. Third, it should be noted that our analysis included only families with two parents. Although the results highlighted the importance of relationship-level coping strategies, some of the strategies employed by two parent families, such as sharing responsibility, might not be available, at least as easily, for single parents. Hence, an interesting avenue for future studies would be to analyze what kind of coping strategies single parents developed during the COVID-19 lockdown. Finally, the qualitative data used poses some more general limitations. With any qualitative data, it is not possible to draw generalizations of the results. Moreover, as qualitative data, our data has problems in richness and profoundness: although the data is extensive in a sense that it includes large number of respondents, the nature of data is rather shallow as many of the respondents' writings are fairly short.

5. Conclusions

Results of this study revealed that all three levels of analysis: macroenvironmental, relationship and individual, should be taken into account in order to understand coping strategies employed by families with children during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland. Indeed, during societal crises,

such as pandemics, these three levels should be acknowledged also when welfare state policies and services are developed and employed. Based on the results of this study, we suggest that welfare state policies should support possibilities of flexible paid work practices (macroenvironmental level) and provide services that strengthen family interaction (relationship level) and personal wellbeing (individual level). In social work and counselling it would be beneficial to consider, whether the three levels of families' coping strategies presented in Figure 1 could function as a tool for discussion and assessment. When assessing families' needs for support during crises, it would be beneficial to examine, what kind of reserves and possible difficulties families face at these three levels. For example, at the macro-environmental level, whether families have functional social network; at the relationship level, what kind of practices families have concerning everyday life; and at the individual level, whether family members have opportunity to personal time.

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