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The Coronavirus Effect –

Marriages peak amidst uncertainty and shifting relationship priorities

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The coronavirus pandemic has affected every part of societal life, especially social relationships. Starting in October, I had the chance to collaborate with eharmony on creating a coronavirus effect report for relationships in 2020. Each year, eharmony teams up with academics in conducting original research on predictions in the dating scene. This year, the report focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected romantic relationships. Key questions related to the pandemic's impact on the population's *relationship behaviour and ideals*. Would people be more (or less) likely to marry? Would there be another "baby boom" following the crisis? Would we see a spike in divorces? Would people shift their relationship priorities and ideals? Especially interesting for me was a further question about which (personality) factors might increase couples' *resilience to COVID-induced stress.*

Relationship behaviour and ideals

To answer the first set of questions around marriages, child-rearing intentions (as children conceived during the pandemic would not all be born yet), and divorces, we sought to compare results from data gathered at the end of 2020 to predictions generated from data from previous years, without COVID-19. If data from 2020 does not fall in line with what would be expected based on previous data, chances are that the pandemic has had an impact (although, of course, 2020 was a turbulent year, characterised by societal change differentiating it from previous years – all of which might have played a role).

I looked at the historical trends using previous UK population-level data on marriages and divorces obtained from the Office of National Statistics and the National Records of Scotland. Child-bearing intentions were captured by representative samples from the Office of National Statistics' General Household Survey and the University of Essex's Understanding Society Innovation Panel.

Figure 1

Number of marriages per 1000 singles in any given year

Marriages per 1000 Singles
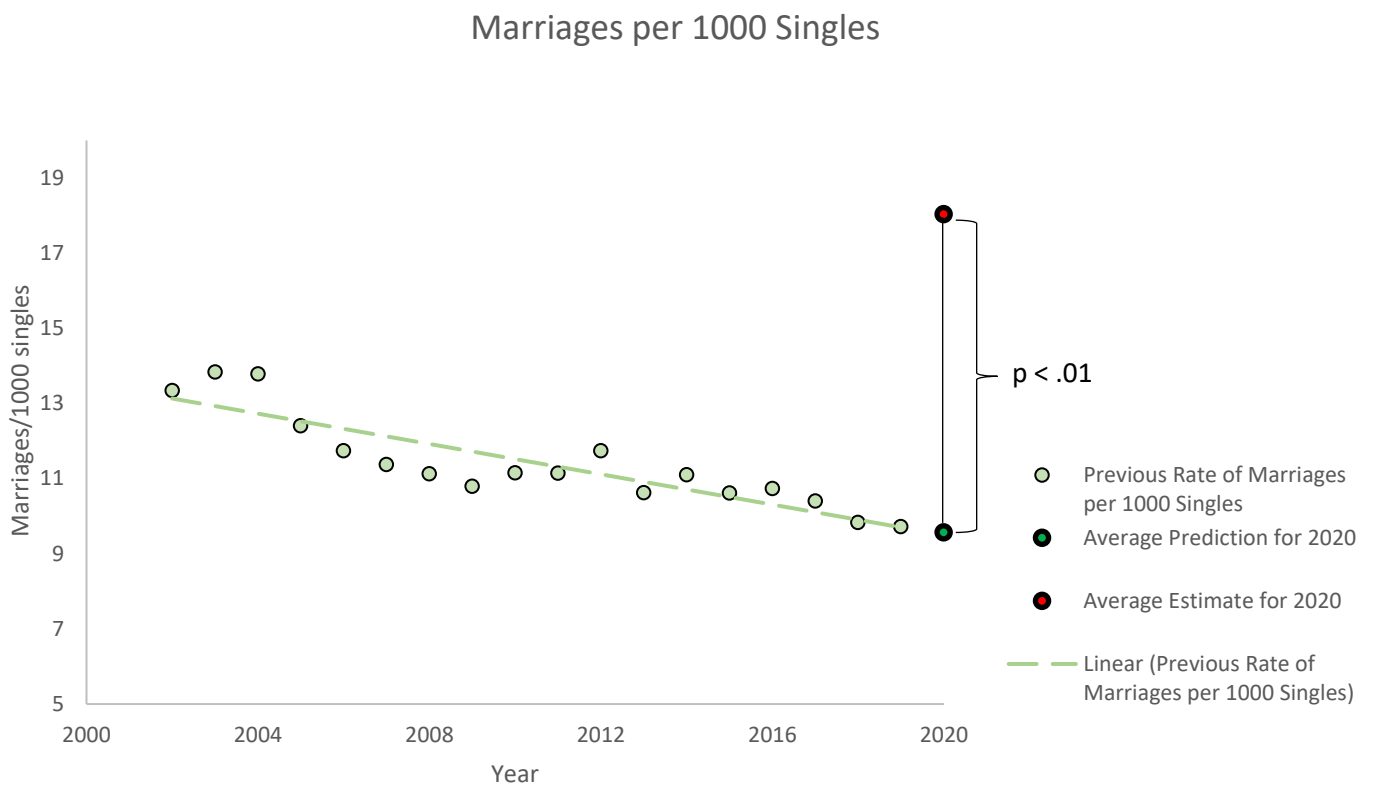
I then estimated trends in the current year from a sample of 2000 population-representative UK adults (1023 women, 977 men). They were asked whether they had married in 2020, whether they desired more children than they currently had, or whether they had experienced a divorce in 2020. We converted all these absolute numbers (of marriages, intended births, and divorces) to per capita ratios, so that they could be compared to the larger numbers obtained from the entire UK population in previous years. The number of marriages became the number of marriages per 1000 singles, child-rearing intent was converted to the ratio of people (women between 18 and 44) who want further children, and divorces became the number of divorces per 1000 marriages. To identify a perceived shift in relationship/partner ideals, respondents in our 2020 survey were also asked whether they felt like the pandemic had affected how important it is for a partner to have prosocial tendencies, athleticism, financial security, relationship commitment, and to like children.

Compared to predictions based on pre-COVID 19 data, this sample showed a significantly higher rate of marriages per 1000 singles (Figure 1). Marriages per 1000 (non-

married) singles were on a downward trend in the UK before 2020. Based on these predictions, the 2020 data set (containing roughly 1000 singles out of 2000 respondents), should have contained about 9-10 reported marriages. Yet, almost twice the amount of people (18) in the end-of-2020 sample reported that they had married this year. There was only a 0.3% likelihood (p = .003) of obtaining such a divergent result if we assume that marriages in 2020 actually followed the trend of previous years.

Meanwhile, there was little evidence for a change in child-rearing intention or divorces. Based on previous data, we would have predicted that about 45% of women between 18-44 would desire more children. The actual number obtained from our sample came close, with about 50%. This estimate represents a non-significant increase (p = .170), showing a continuation of the previous upwards trend. Even closer to the prediction were divorces, where we would have expected only 2-3 out of 1000 marriages to fail based on pre-COVID data. With roughly 1000 married individuals in our sample, we observed 3 divorces in 2020.

In terms of relationship/partner preferences (figure 2), our respondents consistently reported that they now placed more importance on having a kind and supportive partner, while they perceived the importance of physical fitness and success to be (slightly – but significantly) less important. However, they did perceive the financial security of their partner to have increased in importance during the pandemic. Likewise, our respondents indicated that they would now place more importance on having a committed relationship (mirroring the increase in marriages), and whether or not the partner likes children (mirroring smaller, tendential increase in child-bearing intentions). Gender differences showed in almost all preference categories, with women mostly perceiving more severe change across the board. The only exception to this pattern is the partner's level of success, which men reported to be slightly less important to them now than it was before the pandemic, while women reported no change in importance.

Figure 2

Average perceived changes in partner preferences by respondents (N = 2000)
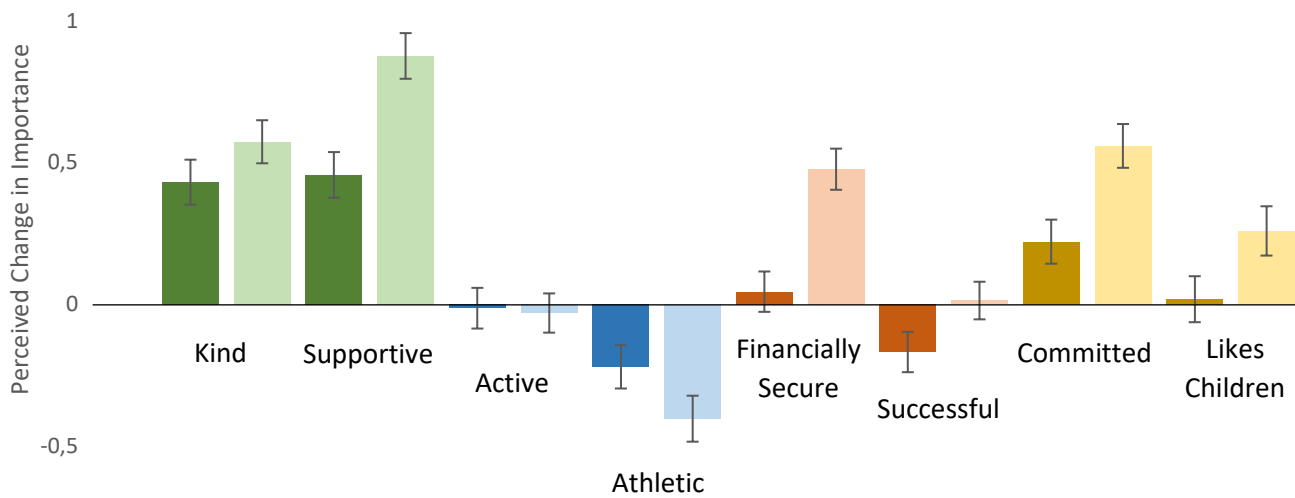
Note. Colour coding indicates the content classes of the partner ideals. Green represents prosocial ideals, blue represents fitness ideals, red represents financial ideals, and yellow represents ideals that might function to buffer uncertainty. Results for men are represented by darker colours, while results for women are shown in lighter colours. Error bars indicate the 95% Confidence Interval. If the interval does not encompass the horizontal line of zero change, the perceived change in importance is statistically significant.

Resilience to COVID-induced stress

To find out which factors might make couples resilient to COVID-related stress, we needed to obtain data from both partners in a couple. We asked both members of 473 UK couples (946 individuals) about their values and traits, the amount of COVID-related conflict they experienced in their relationship, and their own and their partner's adherence to Infection Prevention Behaviours (IPBs; e.g., hand washing, mask wearing, social distancing). Questions about IPB-adherence were asked because I assumed that disagreement in this area might be a potent source of COVID-stress. Further, I believed that certain values and traits might predict the adherence to IPBs, thus making a match in these values and traits more important now than before the pandemic. To investigate these questions, I used an advanced statistical technique that plots the effects of matches between partners (response surface analysis).

Despite expectations, this analysis did not reveal effects of matching values or traits on COVID-related conflict. Replicating some of my earlier findings, the only effects that emerged were obtained for individuals own values, and not for matches between their values and their partners. That is, people who more highly cherished self-transcendence values (i.e., the importance of helping others in society) reported higher levels of IPB adherence, which in turn related to lower levels of COVID-related conflict in their relationship.

However, there was an effect of matching in IPB-adherence itself. While the lowest amount of COVID-related conflict was reported by people who are more likely to adhere to IPBs, similarity and matching also played a role in addition. Regardless of the extent to which a person complied with IPBs, having a partner who reports (roughly) similar levels of compliance was always better than a having a partner who reports vastly different levels of IPB compliance.

Conclusion

These findings raise a couple of intriguing questions. First, why were unmarried people more likely to tie the knot in 2020 than would have been expected based on the downward trend from previous years? I realise that this might seem counter-intuitive. After all, lockdown restrictions made it more difficult to get married in 2020 than it was in previous years. However, an increase in marriages following natural or man-made disasters has been seen before. Similar effects were observed following a multitude of natural disasters from all across the world (Cohan & Cole, 2002; Xu & Feng, 2016), as well as acts of terror such as the 9/11 attacks (Hansel et al., 2011).

Combined with the perceived increase in the importance of prosocial behaviours, financial security, commitment, and child friendliness in a partner, our finding suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered processes of *terror management* in the population. Terror management theory suggests that people seek to buffer themselves against the anxiety and uncertainty evoked by being aware of their own mortality (Greenberg et al.,

1990). Committed relationships and children have been shown to buffer against this anxiety (Florian et al., 2002; Zhou et al., 2008). Disasters - such as the COVID-19 pandemic - can highlight human mortality, thus reaffirming social commitments and values that help to psychologically buffer against the associated fear and uncertainty. This process has been theorised to be behind population-level shifts seen after other disasters (Zhou et al., 2008).

Second, why does the lowest amount of COVID related conflict in couples occur when both partners adhere to IPBs to a higher extent? I suspect that several mechanisms are at work. One factor is that adhering to IPBs is a societally expected norm, meaning that people who adhere to it will always face less conflict than people who do not adhere to it (Calarco et al., 2020). Another factor is that the discussion around IPB compliance has been increasingly become politicised. Political opinions are very similar within most couples. In fact, only 9% of couples in the US are bipartisan (Rosenfeld & Reuben, 2015). Accordingly, it would be expected that strong politization of these IPB behaviours would lead to conflict in disagreeing, dissimilar couples.

Ultimately, this research has shown that COVID-19 has had an important role in relationships during the pandemic. Putting the findings together, we can see a process wherein people felt increasing uncertainty and insecurity as the pandemic spread. These feelings likely caused people to prefer more stable and committed relationships, leading to a shift in partner preferences and a spike in marriages. Meanwhile, a reliable way to have lower COVID-related stress and conflict within existing couples was to agree on a higher level of IPB-adherence. Together, the findings of this project show that the pandemic motivated us to pair up, but also to pair up sagely and safely.

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