

Couples' We-Ness and Separateness During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: A Longitudinal Perspective

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Abstract

This 5-wave longitudinal study aimed to monitor the feeling of we-ness and separateness over one year of the COVID-19 pandemic by examining partners' natural pronoun usage when reporting couple interactions. Compared to the start of the pandemic, a general decline of we-ness was found after one year. Moreover, the changes in couple we-ness were non-linear, resulting in an increase at the end of the strict lockdown, followed by a decrease. No change in couple separateness was found.

Keywords

we-ness, separateness, pronoun usage, COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, couple

“We spend more time together.”

“My partner is always on his smartphone.”

These are typical comments partners made when asked for their relationship experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. When reporting, partners use natural language indicators (i.e., pronouns) that refer to a feeling of we-ness (i.e.,

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we-pronouns) or separateness (*he/she*- and *me*-pronouns) within their relationship. The current study aimed to monitor the trajectory of partners' feelings of *we*-ness and separateness over one year of pandemic by examining their natural language usage when reporting on daily couple interactions.

Intimate Relationships During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus a "pandemic". Many countries ordered a strict lockdown characterized by restrictive isolation measures. In Belgium, such strict restrictions were in place from March 18th to June 8th 2020 (i.e., strict lockdown). While some restrictions were removed after June 2020 (e.g., non-food stores reopened), some major restrictions were still present one year later. People were still confined to their homes and to the people with whom they lived. This created multiple challenges, including maintaining well-functioning intimate relationships.

Many -mostly cross-sectional- studies have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on intimate relationships (for a review, see Candel & Jitaru, 2021) and found that the pandemic might indeed pose a threat to people's intimate relationships, at least in the short-term. Our recent longitudinal work revealed that in the short-term (i.e., during the strict lockdown), couples reported lower levels of relationship distress, while relationship distress increased in the long-term (i.e., after one year of the pandemic) (Galdiolo et al., 2022a, 2022b). Our data thus seem to suggest that being faced with the strict short-time lockdown -as an acute stressor- initially brought most couples together, whereas the chronic stress exposure (i.e., one-year pandemic) began to break them apart.

This reasoning is in line with findings on dyadic coping (e.g., Bodenmann, 2005) and couple synchrony (see Pauly et al., 2021). According to Bodenmann's Systemic-Transactional Model of Dyadic Coping (Bodenmann, 2005), when partners deal with a stressor affecting them both directly and simultaneously, such as in the COVID-19 pandemic, the source of stress is defined as common, and dyadic stress is observed. To cope with dyadic stress, partners can initiate a dyadic coping process, that may lead to a feeling of *we*-ness. The Developmental-Contextual Coping Model (Berg & Upchurch, 2007) showed, however, that dyadic coping may be challenged by the duration of the stressful event, potentially resulting in a decrease in feelings of *we*-ness within the couple. Studies on couple synchrony indicated that life events experienced by partners around the same time (e.g., the pandemic) challenge the couple as an interconnected system and have the potential to increase couple synchrony (e.g., physiological indicators), which might in turn foster partners' feeling of *we*-ness (Pauly et al., 2021). On the contrary, chronic stress (as during the one-year lockdown) poses a particular challenge to couple synchrony that can ultimately carry a cost when it is overstrained (Saxbe et al., 2020). Consequently, the pandemic is a long-term stressor that could challenge the partners' feeling of *we*-ness. Although there are theoretical reasons, as well as indirect empirical evidence, on the longitudinal

influence of the pandemic on partners' sense of we-ness and separateness in their relationship, this topic has not yet received direct empirical investigation.

Pronoun Usage as an Indicator of We-ness and Separateness in Couples

We-ness has been shown to reflect a schema of interdependence, shared responsibility, and partnership in the couple, whereas separateness reflects one of independence and a focus on the individual spouses rather than the couple as a unit (Singer et al., 2015). Importantly, we-ness encompasses both a mutual internalization and interdependence of the partners as well as a sense of autonomy (Reid & Ahmad, 2015). Traditionally, measurements of partners' sense of we-ness rely on self-report questionnaires (Aron et al., 1992) or thematic analyses of partners' descriptions of memories of events within the relationship (Krokoff et al., 1989) or the relationship itself (Fletcher et al., 1987). A third measurement draws from psycholinguistic research, and involves analyses of couples' pronoun usage (e.g., Slatcher et al., 2008). Seider et al. (2009) described partners' usage of first-person plural pronouns versus the use of first- or second-person singular pronouns as a "reliable linguistic marker of an underlying shared versus separate dimension of identification" (p. 605). Pronoun analysis might be a particularly interesting approach as it is less biased than traditional self-report measures (Schwarz et al., 1998) and less controlled and suppressed than the content of their conversations or the behavior they display (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Therefore, in this study, we chose to use linguistic pronouns indicators of we-ness and separateness in couples.

Interdependence is a hallmark of couple relationships, and first-person plural pronoun use is assumed to indicate interdependence between oneself and one's partner (Karan et al., 2019). Partners who preferentially employed we-pronouns rather than separate-pronouns perceived their relationships as more intimate and of higher quality (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004). Highly committed partners used we-pronouns more frequently when writing about their couple relationship compared to less committed ones (Agnew et al., 1998). On the other hand, separate-pronouns may be indicative of other-focused attention and is negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Sillars et al., 1997) and positively correlated with negative relationship behaviors (Simmons et al., 2005).

The Current Study

What did people say about interactions with their partner during the pandemic? Did they use we-pronouns or separate-pronouns? And did this use of pronouns evolve during one year of lockdown? These questions were examined in a 5-wave longitudinal study examining we-ness and separateness by means of couple's pronoun usage during a one-year pandemic. At each wave, participants were invited to write about a recent positive and a recent negative interaction with their partner.

Our recent longitudinal work (Galdiolo et al., 2022a, 2022b) showed that couples reported lower levels of relationship distress during the strict lockdown, whereas after one year of pandemic, the latter returned to their baseline levels, or even increased, regardless of the duration of the relationship, the presence of children at

home, or the time spent together. Consequently, we hypothesized a quadratic effect of the one-year lockdown on we-ness and separateness, i.e., with higher levels of we-ness and lower levels of separateness at the end of the strict lockdown (i.e., in comparison to the beginning of the lockdown) as the couple's response to an acute stressor, and the opposite pattern after one year of lockdown as a response to a chronic stressor. Second, in line with our previous results, we expected that gender, relationship duration, and the presence of children at home would not be predictors of couples' we-ness and separateness trajectory. Finally, initial low levels of relationship distress could be considered a resource for couples when dealing with the challenges associated with the lockdown and serve a buffering function for partners' feelings of interdependence. So, we hypothesized that we-ness would decline less, and separateness would increase less over time if couple distress was low at the beginning of the strict lockdown.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were longitudinally collected from a sample of 186 participants ($N = 46$ men and $N = 140$ women) who were in a relationship (relationship duration: $M = 13.04$ years, $sd = 11.86$ years) and cohabited with their partner. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 74 years old ($M = 38.82$ years old, $sd = 12.14$ for the overall sample). Eighty participants (43%) lived with children at home. Participants were recruited via social networks. The questionnaires were completed online via Lime Survey 3.0 +. Participants had to (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) be in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months at Time 1, and (c) cohabit with their partner. Four waves of data were collected in a longitudinal intensive research program during the strict lockdown, i.e., Time 1 (T1, $M = 2.02$ weeks after the announcement of the lockdown, $sd = 1.89$), Time 2 (T2, $M = 3.41$ weeks, $sd = 2.25$), Time 3 (T3, $M = 6.13$ weeks, $sd = 3.01$), and Time 4 (T4, $M = 11$ weeks, $sd = 3.96$). One year later, a last wave has been collected, i.e., Time 5 (T5, $M = 54.63$ weeks, $sd = 0.96$).

Measures

We-ness and Separateness. At each measurement time, using an open-ended and spontaneous thought-listing procedure (Agnew et al., 1998), participants were asked to describe (a) a positive interaction and (b) a negative interaction with their partner, that took place within the last 7 days. Two trained researchers coded the we-ness and the separateness data in accordance with the coding procedure developed by Seider et al. (2009) (see appendix). This procedure resulted in two pronoun variables for each interactional context (i.e., negative vs. positive interaction). Inter-rater reliability ranged from 0.78 to 0.99.

Relationship Distress. Relationship distress was assessed by means of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory Revised (Brodard et al., 2015), with the following subscales, i.e., Global Distress (22 items), Difficulties in Problem-solving Communication (19 items), Aggression (10 items), and Conflicts over Children Rearing (10 items).

A 5-point Likert-type scale was provided, with higher scores indicating greater relationship distress. We used an aggregated score of the four scales to determine the global level of couple distress at Time 1 ($M = 1.98$, $sd = 0.63$); α s ranged between .76 and .97.

Analytical Strategy

The analyses were conducted using a multilevel modeling (MLM) framework with the HLM 8.00 software (Bloom et al., 2017). MLM capitalizes on the multilevel structure of the data, providing information about the variability of individuals over time—Level 1 (repeated measures, i.e., we-ness and separateness)—as well as between individuals—Level 2 (time-invariant predictors, i.e., gender, relationship duration, presence of children at home, and relationship distress) (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The unconditional growth models, in which time and quadratic time were the only predictors, were tested to examine the (non)linear changes of we-ness and separateness during one year of lockdown and to determine whether there was significant variability within individuals in the slope coefficient. The time variable was centered at the mid-point of the study to reduce collinearity between the linear and quadratic components. Because of the limited number of parameters that could be estimated with five time points, the linear slope was allowed to vary across individuals, but the quadratic slope was not allowed to vary. The time variable was expressed in the metric of months. Next, the conditional models tested for the effect of the predictors on the trajectory of we-ness and separateness.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Means and standard deviations for the pronoun variables were highly comparable with existing research (Galdiolo et al., 2016; Hinnekens et al., 2016; Seider et al., 2009) for separateness but not for we-ness (i.e., we-ness was higher at Time 1 and 2 in our sample). Non-significant or weak negative correlations were found between the we-ness and separateness indicators across measurement times and interaction contexts (i.e., positive versus negative interaction), i.e., $-.14$ ($p = .18$) $< r < .44$ ($p = .00$). Weak positive correlations were also found between we-ness/separateness indicators within a positive couple interaction and we-ness/separateness indicators within a negative couple interaction, i.e., $.04$ ($p = .72$) $< r < .30$ ($p = .01$). Such weak correlations, within and between interaction contexts, as well as between measurement occasions, led us to treat we-ness and separateness separately. T-tests showed higher levels of we-ness in positive as compared to negative interactions for all measurement points [e.g., $t(118) = 5.61$, $p < .001$ for Time 1], whereas higher levels of separateness were found in negative versus positive interactions [e.g., $t(96) = -4.73$, $p < .001$ for Time 1] (Table 1).

MLM Model

Four growth curve models were tested to investigate whether there were (non)linear changes in we-ness and separateness during the lockdown. Slope values were only

significant for we-ness, and only in the positive interactional context, indicating a linear decrease ($\beta = -0.002$, $p < 0.001$) and quadratic changes ($\beta = -0.0002$, $p < 0.001$; see Figure 1) in feelings of we-ness during positive couple interactions during the lockdown. We-ness tended to decrease at the middle point of the strict lockdown (Time 3) while increasing at the end of the strict lockdown (Time 4) and showing the lowest level after one year of pandemic (Time 5). Non-significant slope values indicated that separateness was stable over time (see Table 2). The conditional models showed that gender, relationship duration, the presence of children at home, and the couple's initial level of relationship distress were not predictors of change in we-ness and separateness.

Discussion

Our preliminary results indicated that the level of we-ness was systematically higher than the level of separateness in positive interactions, and the opposite was true for the negative couple interactions, which leads us to conclude that the language-based indicators proved useful to capture a person's feelings of (dis)connection with their partner when facing the lockdown. Partners did report feeling more connected than

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics—Mean (sd)—and Pearson Correlation Coefficients Examining the Stability of We-Ness and Separateness Indicators Over Time.

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4	Time 5	Correlation T1—T5
Entire sample						
We-ness +	.07 (.06)	.08 (.08)	.05 (.07)	.07 (.07)	.05 (.06)	0.26**
Separateness +	.03 (.04)	.03 (.06)	.04 (.09)	.04 (.07)	.04 (.08)	0.20**
We-ness -	.02 (.04)	.02 (.04)	.02 (.03)	.03 (.04)	.02 (.03)	0.09
Separateness -	.07 (.07)	.07 (.08)	.07 (.08)	.07 (.10)	.10 (.09)	0.14
Women						
We-ness +	.07 (.06)	.06 (.08)	.05 (.07)	.06 (.07)	.05 (.06)	0.24*
Separateness +	.03 (.05)	.04 (.06)	.06 (.09)	.05 (.08)	.04 (.08)	0.23*
We-ness -	.02 (.04)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.03 (.04)	.02 (.03)	0.09
Separateness -	.06 (.07)	.09 (.08)	.09 (.07)	.09 (.09)	.10 (.09)	0.14
Men						
We-ness +	.05 (.05)	.09 (.10)	.05 (.06)	.07 (.06)	.04 (.06)	0.37
Separateness +	.04 (.05)	.03 (.07)	.01 (.03)	.05 (.09)	.03 (.06)	0.02
We-ness -	.02 (.04)	.06 (.06)	.05 (.06)	.03 (.05)	.01 (.02)	0.06
Separateness -	.04 (.05)	.04 (.08)	.07 (.09)	.05 (.08)	.07 (.08)	0.07

We-ness + = Assessment of we-ness during a positive couple interaction; Separateness + = Assessment of separateness during a positive couple interaction; We-ness - = Assessment of we-ness during a negative couple interaction; Separateness - = Assessment of separateness during a negative couple interaction

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

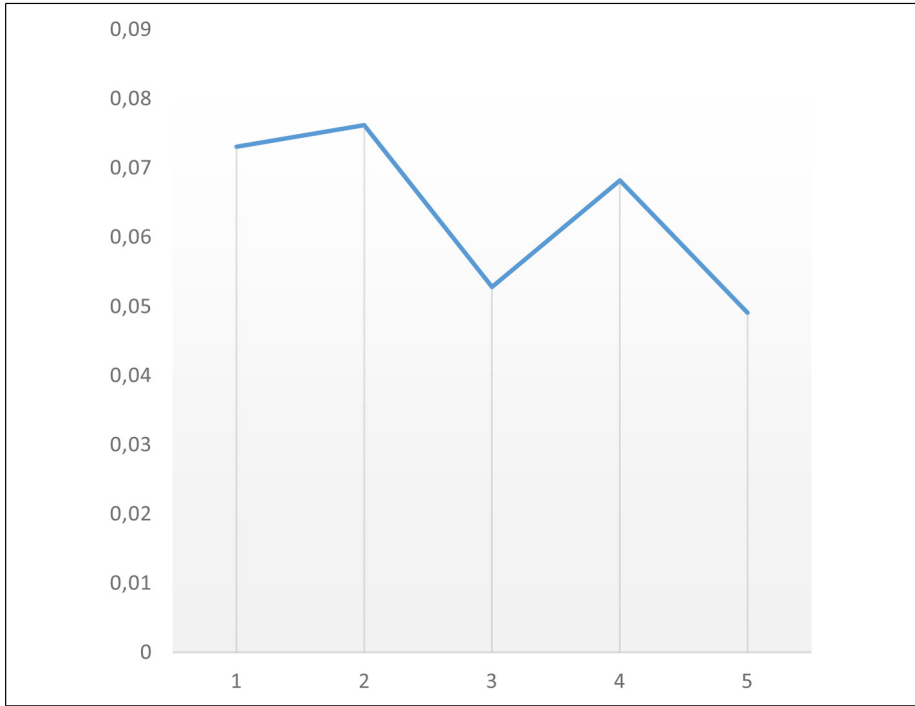


Figure 1. Quadratic changes in we-ness in the positive interactional context during one-year COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

isolated in the “good times” during the lockdown, and more isolated than connected with their partner during negative interactions. This remained the case over time, thereby adding a longitudinal perspective to the existing cross-sectional findings on couple we-ness/separateness.

Second, our results revealed that there were linear as well as quadratic changes in couple we-ness during the pandemic, although only during positive couple interactions, with higher levels of we-ness during the short-term lockdown and lower levels after one year of pandemic. First, this finding could indicate that there might have been an increase in we-ness in the beginning of the lockdown and then a progressive decrease. Since the intercept of our study was at the beginning of the lockdown, and no measure pre-lockdown was taken on our sample, we could not compare pre- vs. postlockdown measures of we-ness. The means of the we-ness for Time 1 and Time 2 were higher in our sample than these of previous research (e.g., Seider et al., 2009). Consequently, the level of we-ness at the beginning of the lockdown would be higher because of the activation of dyadic coping when facing an acute stressor. This level of we-ness would then return to its baseline after one year of pandemic. The second explanation is that the decrease in we-ness could result from couples facing a lack of a supportive network over time. All couples need external support

Table 2. Results of HLM Models for the Trajectory of We-Ness and Separateness During the Lockdown (with Robust Standard Errors).

	We-ness +		Separateness +		We-ness -		Separateness -					
	Coeff	SE	t (1,120)	Coeff	SE	t (1, 107)	Coeff	SE	t (1, 111)	Coeff	SE	t (1, 111)
Intercept	0.06**	.00	17.23	0.04**	.01	9.51	0.02**	.00	10.06	0.07**	.01	12.91
Slope (months)	-0.002**	.00	-3.63	0.00	.00	1.39	-0.00	.00	-0.26	0.00	.00	1.07
Quadratic slope	-0.0002**	.00	-3.53	0.00	.00	1.18	-0.00	.00	-0.31	0.00	.00	1.12
Gender	0.00	.00	0.28	0.00	.00	0.27	0.00	.00	0.78	0.00	.00	0.39
Age	0.00	.00	0.04	0.00	.00	0.62	-0.00	.00	-0.45	0.00	.00	0.40
Duration of the relationship	0.00	.00	0.80	-0.00	.00	-0.24	-0.00	.00	-0.30	0.00	.00	0.88
Children at home	-0.00	.00	-1.62	0.00	.00	0.72	0.00	0.00	1.76	0.00	.00	1.13
CD T1	0.00	.00	0.88	0.00	.00	0.37	-0.00	.00	-0.06	-0.00	.00	-1.07
Deviance			-1043.98			-1040.70			-1076.23			-626.46

We-ness + = Assessment of we-ness during a positive related couple interaction; Separateness + = Assessment of separateness during a positive related couple interaction; We-ness - = Assessment of we-ness during a negative related couple interaction; Separateness - = Assessment of separateness during a negative related couple interaction; CD T1 = Couple distress at Time 1

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

to grow together, to cope with the challenges of life, and to be interdependent (Schembri, 2020). The story of their relationships, as illustrated by how partners talk about their relationships, builds up in the relation with others. Consequently, the long-term absence of contact with the large community during the lockdown could lead the couples' feeling of interdependence to decrease. Third, a chronic stress may undermine dyadic coping and couple synchrony, affecting a couple's sense of we-ness (Pauly et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2021). Finally, the decrease in we-ness affected the positive couple interactions and not the negative ones and, as observed in our preliminary results, there were higher levels of we-ness in positive interactions than in negative ones. This could be because couple positive interactions are particularly we-ness fostering.

No increase in partners' feelings of separateness was found during the one-year lockdown, which disconfirmed our first hypothesis. Our preliminary results showed that we-ness and separateness were two independent and separate constructs. By extension, the trajectories of we-ness and separateness during the lockdown were also independent: It was not because partners' feelings of we-ness decreased over time that their feelings of separateness in their relationship increased as well. The reported levels of separateness did not change at all during the lockdown, perhaps because there were little possibilities to personally develop outside the home.

Finally, the impact of the pandemic on we-ness did not vary as a function of the presence of children at home, participants' gender, or the duration of their relationship, which was consistent with our previous study (Galdiolo et al., 2022b). The finding that there were no differences in our variables of interest between couples with or without children at home is, however, inconsistent with previous research (e.g., Sels et al., 2022) showing that partners without children reported higher levels of relationship quality than parents during the lockdown. One explanation for this inconsistency is that participants' reports about interactions during the lockdown often referred to couple as well as to family interactions. Because all family members were confined, it might have been difficult to disentangle couple vs. family moments. Second, while women were found to experience more relationship distress than men during the lockdown (Schokkenbroek et al., 2021), the trajectory of we-ness and separateness during the lockdown did not seem to differ between women and men. This finding is surprising but might be explained by the low representation of men in our sample, their underrepresentation limiting our ability to observe potential gender effects. Finally, there were no differences in trajectories of we-ness and separateness according to respondents' initial level of couple distress, certainly because the participants expressed in average low levels of couple distress.

The current study extended prior research in two ways: (a) using schemas of we-ness and separateness derived from written pronouns use during the lockdown and (b) employing this text analysis methodology in a longitudinal design. However, limitations included the absence of a dyadic approach and assessment of actor-partner interaction effects. To conclude, our longitudinal findings did shed light on how couples experienced the good and the bad moments in their relationship during one-year of lockdown and underlined the usefulness of the pronoun analysis methodology for this purpose.

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Notes

1. The current study was a part of a project on couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.
2. The paper focuses on the intraindividual trajectory of well-being and separateness, referring to within-person stability and change (Mroczek & Spiro, 2003).
3. With regards to ethical approval, institutional review board approval was obtained from the University of Mons for the project intitled “couple satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown” (no reference number available).

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Anthony Mauroy is a PhD student at the Department of Clinical Psychology of University of Mons, currently studying empathy in parents-child triadic interactions. Specifically, his current work focuses on the links between parents’ empathic accuracy, social behaviors, as well as the

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Lesley Verhofstadt is an associate professor of family psychology -at the Department of Experimental-Clinical and Health Psychology of Ghent University- and a certified couple and family therapist.

Appendix

Coding Procedure of We-ness and Separateness (Seider et al., 2009)

The first step consisted of identifying the pronouns used by each participant. Secondly, each pronoun was classified in one of three categories:(a) me-pronouns referring to the self, (b) he/she-pronouns referring to the partner, and (c) we-pronouns referring to the couple. The written context of participants' pronouns was considered as well, given its influence on the meaning of a particular pronoun. For example, "pronouns used as part of an idiomatic expression" (e.g., "I don't know...") were not classified in one of the categories above (for more details, see Seider et al., 2009). Finally, the number of we-pronouns was divided by the total number of words (i.e., we-ness). The number of me-pronouns and he/she-pronouns were summed and then divided by the total number of words (i.e., separateness). Scores ranged from 0 to 1.