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The Relational Domains of Adolescence : Changes and Possibilities During Covid Era

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The Relational Domains of Adolescence: Changes and Possibilities During Covid Era

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic experience had a major impact on adolescents' relational lives. The abrupt change in habits led adolescents to revise their relationships with respect to family, friends, and school; they suffered greatly because of this but, at the same time, were able to discover new resources and possibilities. The present paper aims to give adolescents a voice by exploring their experiences of the change that the pandemic period brought about in their life and significant relationships as well as by examining whether quarantine and social isolation provided opportunities for personal growth and transformation. The participants were 66 adolescents (between 16 and 19 years old). A qualitative method was adopted with a semi-structured interview that investigated changes in the main relational areas.

The results offer an insight into the lives of adolescents during the lockdown in Italy, allowing us to “hear their voice.” The results highlight the adolescents’ struggle to cope with the change, suffering from the many limitations but also experiencing increased self-awareness, reflectivity, and responsibility.

Keywords: adolescents, relationships, Covid-19, personal change, interdependence, responsibility

Statements of Relevance

The pandemic has led to numerous changes in the way adolescents experience relationships (with friends, family and school). The results show that the experience of lockdown due to the pandemic is very complex and multifaceted. While the adolescents suffered from changes in their relationships, they also experienced increased self-awareness, reflectivity and responsibility.

The results of this work open up new scenarios for studying the effects of the pandemic on the relational world of young people.

The Relational Domains of Adolescence: Changes and Possibilities during Covid Era

Introduction

Adolescence is a life period in which the individual has to cope with various developmental tasks (Palmonari, Pombeni, & Kirchler, 1989) – the construction of identity, in the first place - and acquires the requisites and skills necessary in order to assume adult responsibilities. In this phase of life, adolescents find themselves having to respond simultaneously to multiple requests and demands that come from the different contexts of life to which they belong and in which they enjoy different degrees of autonomy (Modell et al., 1990; Sherrod et al., 1993). In line with Lewin (1951), we can affirm that the adolescent transition can be considered a "group phenomenon," revealing the relationship between the person and the groups to which he or she belongs, for example: family, school, peer group (Scabini et al., 2007). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development underlines how the micro-systems of belonging in which adolescents are inserted (family, school, etc.) contribute directly or indirectly - through the processes that occur within them - to their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In line with Bronfenbrenner's theory, the Positive Youth Development perspective also underlines the importance of relations between individuals and their real world ecological settings as bases of variation in the course of human development (Lerner, 2005). The life contexts usually considered in these theoretical approaches are the same: first, the family, which plays the important role of care and socialization: it is the privileged context for the formation and learning of beliefs, attitudes, models, values, and norms and is a powerful mediator between people and the community (Scabini et al., 2007). **In the period of adolescence, relationships with parents begin to become more equal, and this is often accompanied by an increase in conflict (Branje et al., 2012; Laursen & Collins, 2009). Similarly, parents gradually tend to reduce control over their children and promote**

more autonomy (Keijsers et al., 2009). The drive for autonomy should not, however, distract from other needs that are still very present in adolescents: the need for support, containment, and safe guidance (Branje et al., 2002).

Emancipation from the family leads the adolescent to engage in a second important context of growth: the peer group. In adolescence, peers become important confidants, a source of support and a "testing ground" for experimenting and refining one's relational skills. For many teens, peer relationships are the most important aspect of their life (Santrock, 2019). School is a third important microsystem for adolescents. Here, boys and girls experience both vertical and horizontal relationships, with teachers and with classmates.

Another context in which adolescents can experience both peer and adult relationships is prosocial participation, or the behavioral component of civic engagement (Scabini & Rossi, 2006). These are activities that foster an understanding and awareness of the characteristics of the life context, the acquisition of civic skills and values, and the development of citizenship. All of these contexts influence the construction of the adolescent's identity, can be a source of support - emotional and instrumental - or a source of stress, offering symbolic categories to help read and give meaning to the events that punctuate life.

On the basis of all the above, it becomes clear how important it could be to examine the role that COVID-19 has played in such crucial relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic situation, and specifically the lockdown period, forced adolescents to spend all day in their own homes, in constant contact with their families, but at a physical distance from school, friends and relatives.

Adolescents' Relational Domains and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic in Italy was addressed with blocking measures that differed in time and intensity in different areas of the country (Vinceti et al., 2020). Lombardy, for example, due to the high number of infected people, was defined by the Italian state as a "red zone" in early March. Initially, several preventive "social distancing" measures were taken at the local level, and then, from March 11, urgent measures were taken to contain the spread of the infection throughout

the country. The Italian government also imposed more restrictive blocking conditions and effective controls in central and southern Italy. During that time, all schools were closed, and teaching took place at a distance (online schooling). At the same time, Italy was divided into zones according to the intensity of the contagion. The red zone was identified as the zone with the highest risk of contagion, the orange zone was the zone with a medium risk of contagion, and the green zone was the zone with the lowest risk.

Adolescents, in particular, lived through an unprecedented experience that subverted habits and rules of life pertaining to their personal, family, and social heritage without being able to take time to orient themselves with respect to what was happening; it should not be forgotten that habits, through transgenerational transmission, represent the solid ground on which new generations can build their existence (Catone et al., 2020).

While the restraining measure of lockdown prevented further infections and eased the pressure on the hospital system, it has not been supported by an equal assessment of the psychological and mental health outcomes associated with lockdown in younger people, especially adolescents and children (Catone et al., 2020). The group of teenagers was almost forgotten.

Physical distancing led adolescents to experience many of their relationships differently. On the family level, for example, the significant increase in time spent with parents and the nuclear family brought different scenarios: on the one hand, the family was able to enjoy the newfound time to be together and invest in relationships. Previous studies had found that after the 2004 south-east asian tsunami, which like Covid had forced many families indoors for a long time, the sense of cohesion in many families increased significantly. Many families in that situation had offered more support to their children, especially by monitoring the emotional aspect of reaction to what had happened (Lindgaard et al., 2009). On the other hand, however, it is well known that anxiety and insecurity negatively impacted the parent-child relationship (Masarik & Conger, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017), and the stress related to COVID-19 and the changes brought about by the lockdown

(such as working from home while home schooling or supervising children) may have increased anxiety levels.

With reference to family relationships during COVID-19, Monker and colleagues (2021) found that adolescents experienced less parental support during that period compared to before. Also, parents reported a decrease in their positive parenting. Confinement in the home can exacerbate relationships with family members, especially for adolescents who aspire to increasing autonomy and therefore usually spend a lot of time outside the home (Fioretti et al., 2020). It is likely that both parents and children experienced a deprivation of the normal 'escape routes' that enable them to cope better with moments of anger and conflict, as they were forced to deal with them in a space that was too small (Keijsers & Bülow, 2020; Shockley et al., 2021).

On a social level, adolescents may feel disappointed for missing birthday parties, school plays, dances, hanging out with their friends, sport activities, as well as not being able to visit their grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, and cousins (Imran et al., 2020). Often, adolescents have amplified energy, thirst for novelty, motivation, curiosity, and enthusiasm that make it hard to isolate them at home. Not being able to hang out with friends in free time and classmates at school can generate significant consequences in terms of self-perception, sense of belonging to the peer group, and lack of social and emotional support (Ellis et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020). Teens may feel frustrated, nervous, disconnected, nostalgic, and bored because of social distancing during this pandemic (Imran et al., 2020). A study by Campione-Barr et al. (2021) focused on adolescents' relationships with parents, siblings, and best friends and found that the relationship with siblings and friends was much more affected by the effects of the pandemic than the relationship with parents. The reason probably lies in the fact that the relationship with siblings was highly stimulated during the pandemic, often replacing the relationship with peers outside the home. Friends, on the other hand, suffered the reverse fate: they were far away for a long time, and online relationships replaced face-to-face ones, effectively changing the pre-existing relational dynamics.

Serious concerns about the mental health of children and adolescents during the pandemic related to quarantine and school closures have been raised (Golberstein et al., 2020; Wang & Su, 2020); the debate over whether the benefits of the mandatory measures outweigh the psychological costs continues (Rubin & Wessely, 2020; Viner & Whittaker, 2020). The public health measures, although necessary, can not only impact the health and well-being of adolescents but can also affect their development, as a result of the restricted face-to-face relationships with their peer group; the cancellation or postponement of plans; the uncertainty about the future; and the potential threat that the virus may pose to themselves and their family (Branquinho et al., 2020; The Lancet Child Adolescent, 2020).

The present study: rationale and aims

Several studies have focused on the mental health and physical and emotional well-being of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (The Lancet Child Adolescent, 2020).

Although the impact of the pandemic is clearly evidenced on all sides, not all adolescents, nor all families, had the same type of reaction when faced with COVID -19 (Ameis et al., 2020; Kalil et al., 2020). For some of them, implementing effective coping strategies made them more resilient by counteracting the impact of stress in their relationships (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Polizzi et al., 2020; Walsh, 2020).

Little space has been devoted to in-depth analysis of the changing relationships of adolescents and to investigate whether and how the crisis situation can be considered as an opportunity for growth for adolescents (Fioretti et al., 2020). It is well known that times of crisis and disruption can offer opportunities for resilience, growth and extraordinary development (Mark et al., 2010; Mark et al., 2013). Some exposure and experience with challenges or adversity are important for developing resilience processes and growing youths' capacity and skills for handling stressful experiences (Shi et al., 2020).

Clinical experience over these months shows that the changes imposed by social restrictions have also led to a reduction of daily stress and sensory exposure and changed family routines. These

changes, in some cases, seem to reduce child and adolescent mental illness symptoms and even improve well-being (Dvorsky et al., 2020). Some adolescents can experience alleviation of social pressure and enjoy the more intensive family life. In this context, the crisis may provide a unique window of opportunity to explore the resilient response of children and adolescents.

As Bruining et al. (2020) noted, at the individual level, the crisis, home confinement, and remote learning may provide opportunities for youth who often struggle in a traditional school environment to succeed at an individualized pace of learning, facilitating higher self-efficacy, perceived competence, and persistence. Staying at home offered youth more time to discover new passions, hobbies, or talents, which can provide a greater sense of control and meaning in their lives (Zhou et al., 2020). Moreover, it is very important to consider the lockdown experience as a heterogeneous episode and consider 'positive' hypotheses and questions in addition to those testing negative expectations (Bruining et al., 2020). We suggest that a diverse range of potential effects of the crisis, such as self-awareness, sense of responsibility and awareness of interdependence, can be explored.

The emergent situation experienced through Covid can therefore offer an opportunity to rethink adolescence in our time, marked as it is by great uncertainty, the absence of well-defined rites of passage, and the massive use of technology (White, 2017). It can be an opportunity to listen to adolescents and grasp the needs that they experience to attempt to design interventions that can respond to them. At the same time, useful guidance could also be provided for families and teachers as points of reference guiding their growth. While no definitive conclusions can be drawn yet about the effects that the pandemic has had on the growth trajectories of younger people, it is certainly useful to start with their own perceptions of their experiences to try to better guide supportive and preventive interventions.

Indeed, based on previous empirical evidence (Di Napoli et al., 2021; Migliorini et al., 2021), it is highly important to build knowledge about both the positive and negative issues engendered by the COVID-19 experience especially during the age of adolescence. Accordingly,

the present study had a twofold aim: (a) to examine the experience of adolescents, **in their own words**, in relationships that take place in their key significant life domains - namely, family, school, friends and civic/voluntary organizations - during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency in Italy; (b) to examine whether quarantine and social isolation have provided opportunities for personal growth and change. Regarding the goal of gaining in-depth knowledge of adolescents' experience of the pandemic, a qualitative approach was privileged as it made it possible to access personal elaborations and insights. The qualitative method was especially suited to investigating the complexity of changes generated by the COVID-19 emergency in adolescents' relational domains.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 66 teenagers (35 female, 53%). Age ranged between 16 and 19 years ($M=17.74$; $SD=.66$). The 75,8% of participants attended the **high school (e.g., humanistic, scientific, art)**, 21.2% vocational-technical high schools, and 3% were outside of the educational system (i.e., workers). **Almost half (48.4%) belonged to associations (i.e., sports, religious, scouting).** **The diversity of migrant or ethnic backgrounds was not taken into account as a criterion for inclusion in the study.** **No information about the social and economic background of the participants and their families was solicited during the interviews.** The majority of participants lived with their parents and one or more siblings (72.7%), 4.5% with parents only, and 22.7% in different family configurations (e.g., grandparents, mother or father, parents and grandparents). The majority of participants lived in towns (65.2%), 4.5% in cities, and 30.3% in metropolitan areas in Italy's northern (54.5%) and southern (45.5%) regions. **The cities where the young people interviewed in this study reside belong to the three risk zones identified during the pandemic: (a) Milano and Torino in the red zone, (b) Bologna in the orange zone, and (c) Napoli and Lecce in the green zone.** For all participant characteristics, see Table 1.

[INSERT Table 1 around here]

Procedures

A qualitative method was adopted as the best way to investigate the complexity of changes generated by the COVID-19 emergency in adolescents' relational domains. The inclusion criteria for the participants were: gender distribution, age range (16-19 years), city of residence which had to be one of the five universities involved (Milan, Bologna, Turin, Naples, Lecce). The interviewees were recruited with the help of junior researchers. Each junior researcher recruited adolescents partly through their private contact network (sampling of convenience); the contacted adolescents then suggested other peers willing to participate in the interview (snowball sampling). None of the selected adolescents was interviewed by his/her recruiter.

All participants were provided with oral and written informed consent information and gave written consent. Interviews took place online and were audio-recorded. Specifically for adolescents under 18 years, the informed consent was signed by parents who were properly informed of the aims of the study. Interviews were conducted between March 2020 and May 2020, so during the lockdown phase, by trained interviewers who followed a semi-structured interview guide and probed for additional demographic information. Each interview lasted almost fifty minutes.

The project was reviewed by the members of the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples, Federico II and was certified as conforming to ethical norms. The data collection procedure fully complied with the Research Ethical Code of the Italian Association of Psychology and the ethical recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki, as well as the American Psychological Association (APA) standards for the treatment of human volunteers.

Instrument

The interview was a semi-structured interview. The interview grid touched on: (a) demographics; (b) reorganization of one's personal and relational life (e.g. How have you reorganized your day? How have your family relationships changed? How have your friendships

and romantic relationships changed? How has the instruction at school and relationships with teachers and classmates changed?).

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data organization and analysis were aided by the software Atlas.ti. A qualitative methodology based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, 2015), adopts earlier grounded theory strategies but differs from its predecessors by: (a) assuming a relativist epistemology; (b) acknowledging the researcher and their research participants, multiple standpoints, roles, and realities; (c) adopting a reflexive stance toward background, values, actions, situations, relationships with research participants, and representations of them; and (c) situating research in the historical, social, and situational conditions of its production. We adopted a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) as a strongly inductive method useful for deriving conceptual categories from the data: it was deemed a good choice for explorative research of this kind. In fact, researchers needed a method to deepen their understanding of how this new and global health emergency impacted the lives of adolescents. The coronavirus emergency was a global situation that needed to be explored carefully, in the absence of pre-defined specific hypotheses about the issues to investigate. As suggested by Bronk (2021), this method is very useful for exploring a new area of research (Bronk 2012). Moreover, following Charmaz and Thornberg's epistemology (2021), we took reflexivity as an important aspect of our research process. According to Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021), the data collection and analysis phase was characterized by a constant reflexivity-based iterative process. In particular, a constant dialogue on the findings that emerged from the data was activated both at the level of the local units and within the national team.

The research team was made up of five teams from different universities¹. The research team consisted of 15 researchers: first, senior researchers, with a wide experience in understanding the close interaction between individual and collective dimensions of individual and community well-being, participation, and togetherness issues; and junior researchers who were PhD students in community psychology. The heterogeneity of the research team with respect to age (junior and senior) and their roles in their respective families (whether as a child or a parent) allowed for greater dialogue and understanding of the textual material collected.

Each research unit was made up of a maximum of three people who worked on the collection of interviews in their own territorial area and carried out the open coding (i.e., attribution of codes) of the textual material collected. The collected codes were discussed in the nationwide research team (i.e., made up of all the research units). The national team identified categories and subsequently macro-categories which were adopted in the subsequent coding phases. Every two weeks, the national team met to discuss the coding process and difficulties arising from the application of the selected categories and macro-categories; moreover, identification of further categories and macro-categories were discussed. Whenever discrepancies were found, they were discussed with the research team and integrated into the analysis of the data. To better finalize the coding of the data, each local research unit shared and discussed its preliminary results, obtained through the interviews, with groups of first and second year university students because they were closer in age to the adolescents involved. The codes, categories and the sub-categories were inserted in a shared code book on Google drive to which all the researchers involved had access. All interviews' texts were coded following the shared codebook.

Results

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The results can be grouped into four categories of changes in: family relationships, friendship, school relationships (peers and teachers) and personal changes. Table 2 presents the categories, sub-categories and their description in a synoptic way.

[Insert Table 2 around here]

Changes in Family Relationships

As already mentioned above, the family remains the adolescents' main context for growth and the one most exposed to the effects of the pandemic. The adolescents had to severely limit their external relationships; as a result, they were able to enjoy family relationships for longer periods of time than is usually available to them. In the category of family relationships, we found negative and positive feelings and thoughts that can be collected in three sub-categories: distance from extended family; forced coexistence; and rapprochement and dialogue.

Distance from Extended Family

The negative aspects regarding family relationships refer primarily to the distance from the extended family, especially from grandparents. Even those who live nearby have given up on seeing them to protect them: *"I'm sorry not to see my grandparents, who may feel very lonely"* (M, Mi²); *"With respect to the family, things have changed, first of all because I have not seen my grandparents since the proclamation, I haven't seen them for two months"* (F, Le).

Another aspect of distance from family members might have to do with the condition of separated parents, which in some cases meant not seeing a parent (usually the father) for a long time: *"Having separated parents, for example, I spent three months without seeing my father. So, it was a sacrifice for everyone"* (F, Mi);

Forced Coexistence

² In the brackets there are two notations, the first refers to the gender of the respondent (Male or Female); the second shows the city of origin of the respondent: Milan (Mi), Lecce (Le), Turin (TO), Bologna (Bo), Naples (Na).

The second sub-category highlighted by many interviewees has to do with the effort of sharing the spaces of the residence. In some cases, there is a structural limit linked to insufficient space:

With my family, however, there are many of us, that is, very many. There is my mom, my dad and four of us, so it was very difficult, in the sense that in any case to agree, we have never found ourselves in the situation of having to agree, I don't even know how to call it (F, Mi).

In other cases, the difficulty concerns the condition of coexistence experienced as “forced” to which one was not accustomed:

It was quite trying due to several aspects, and precisely because of true coexistence even because in any case maybe you became ill, or maybe you were sad, and this sadness was passed on to everyone, because in any case living together, always being together between of us there is no moment when you can isolate yourself, you do not isolate yourself because in any case we are always together, always, there is no longer that moment [when] I become ill, I am pissed off and I go for a walk, no I stay at home so let's say that it is not just me who suffers from it anymore but everyone suffers from it, because maybe I begin to talk back in a bad way (F, Mi).

Forced coexistence has in some cases exacerbated conflicts, especially between siblings: *"It was difficult with my sister ... I love her but it often happens that we fight. Spending a lot of time together made us fight a little bit, because there are aspects of me that she can't stand"* (F, Bo).

Rapprochement and Dialogue

In general, if, on the one hand, the lockdown imposed a "forced coexistence," on the other hand, it offered opportunities for "rapprochement" or reinforcement of existing relationships:

"Before, for example, I was not in contact with my father very much, I did not speak, I did have a dialogue with him, while now we have conversed,, we've joked, played around, it was a great challenge" (M, Na).

The closeness was also expressed through the sharing of common projects that fostered exchange and dialogue between parents and children: from shared online sports training, to gardening, to mutual help for the management of online education.

I started working in the vegetable garden. Basically, my brother and I, and here my mom was a bit complicit, we said we had to help my grandmother with the vegetable garden. My grandmother has a giant garden and so my brother and I went to the back of my grandmother's garden and started gardening from scratch (F, Bo).

The possibility of being all together at home for a much longer time than they were used to thus offered a unique opportunity for dialogue, exchange and sharing that all children recognize as positive. The amount of time spent together increased and, with that, the possibility of getting to know each other better and rediscovering the pleasure of being together: *“I enjoyed being with my family, which may seem trivial anyway, but I liked it. In the bad part of the quarantine, there was a positive side and that was to be with them” (M, Mi).*

Changes in Relations with Friends

For adolescents, the most important developmental stage takes place precisely in the transition from the family as the primary place of investment (during childhood) to the peer group. Adolescents start to seek out peers as their primary sources of social support, first, with close friends, and later, with romantic partners (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). In this category, there are three sub-categories that describe how the relationship with friends changed during the pandemic emergency: (a) ‘True’ and ‘false’ friends; (b) Lack of physical contact; and (c) Dissatisfying online interactions are.

‘True’ and ‘False’ Friends

Distance from friends, imposed by the lockdown, represented for many of the interviewees an opportunity to perceive which are the true friends within their friendship group, or friends with whom they feel an authentic and sincere bond: *“This situation helps you to see the fact that one, the sincerity of the friendship one can have with people” (M, Mi).*

At the same time, for some the period of lockdown represented an opportunity to recover some friendships that were not so strong and present in their pre-lockdown daily life: *“During the lockdown period I got in touch with many people with whom I had had no relationship for a long time”* (F, Bo).

Lack of Physical Contact

The lack of friends is common to many interviewees, and they reported a sense of suffering due to the impossibility of physical contact: *“For me this thing that we can't really touch really makes me feel very strange”* (F, Mi).

For some, speaking through video calls increased the feeling of nostalgia for the lack of contact and hence the decision to withdraw from contact with friends. The absence of contact with friends and real life for some interviewees was also a reason to feel that they have nothing to share because the absence of life and daily activities does not make it possible to share anything: *“Now you have nothing to tell your friends or family members because you are locked up at home doing nothing. At the least, you are studying, so after a while it became a bit hard to take”* (F, Mi).

In this condition of estrangement, some of the interviewees also felt the difficulty of exchanging thoughts and concerns deriving from this particular period of a health emergency in a more intimate way:

I felt that in this period everyone had their own things to think about, no one among us went in depth. I felt that people were protecting themselves a little from this, maybe at times they even pretended that "come on, maybe it's nothing (M, Bo).

Disappointing Online Interactions

The absence of physical contact is not fully compensated by online interactions, which instead seem to generate disappointment in adolescents. While acknowledging that being online offered a great opportunity to meet and made up for many of the shortcomings of the pandemic period, the adolescents interviewed express some misgivings about the use of online platforms in friendships. Opportunities for meeting and sharing were recreated by watching films together and

staying in constant contact during the day; for many this made it possible to cope with the sense of loneliness and greatly strengthened bonds and sharing: *"It was a bit tough but we got used to trying to stay in touch whenever we could. Perhaps we have become a little closer than before"* (M, Bo).

Video calls made it possible to stay in touch, and, in some cases, the bond of friendship was strengthened, but the feeling remained strong that this modality is completely unsatisfactory because it does not respond to the need for physical contact, for which many highlight a strong need: *"What I miss most is being able to see my friends up close, being able to joke with them, being able to hug them, being able to be in contact with the people I love"* (F, Na).

Changes in School Relationships (with Peers and Teachers)

The school was by far the context most affected by the pandemic and had to change its functioning, in some cases radically. The migration to online learning took place abruptly, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, so that students had to deal with the anxiety related to technological innovation along with the life change and health risk for themselves, for their families, and for entire populations. When speaking about changes that occurred in school relationships during the pandemic, our interviewees explicitly referred to three sub-categories: (a) negative emotional state about online environment; (b) lack of informal contact with peers and teachers; and (c) new relational patterns.

Negative Emotional State

Distance learning forced adolescents to experience a different kind of school, interviews reveal that this change in social relationships at school is associated with a predominantly negative perception. Adolescents speak of boredom, tension between peers, loneliness, and emotional detachment from teachers: *"It is much more boring to sit in front of the computer, maybe not being able to have a conversation with other classmates"* (F, Mi).

The main reasons for this perception can be basically traced back to the lack of physical contact that happened daily before the pandemic; the physical space was replaced by an online environment that for many was experienced as hostile to relationships, as repulsive: *"There's a much, much tenser climate, everything gets under your*

skin" (F, To); "it is not just the teacher's way of doing things... it's really the environment that's completely repulsive... it's really the environment that has rejected me pretty much completely, at least in my case" (M, To).

Lack of Informal Contacts with Peers and Teachers

Among the relational features, those that seem to be particularly missing are the informal contacts, apparently superficial and trivial, that adolescents used to have on a daily basis with classmates and parents. Forced to stay home, they no longer see each other when they enter school, at the coffee machines or during breaks. What is missing are those brief but positive social contacts that keep the broad social network adolescents experience in their school experience alive.

I prefer a hundred thousand times to go to school because there you see classmates, old classmates from other classes, you say hello, there is break, you go out, you go to the coffee machine and meet people, you say hello (M, Le).

Even regarding ties with teachers, the lack of daily contact in their presence marked distances that sometimes became real ruptures. The students interviewed noted as a critical point the fact that they were not able to talk to teachers in unstructured moments of school life: after class, during breaks, in the hallways.

The teacher was the reference point, but not at a distance. It was a contact reference, so there was really just the contact, the voice, the talking, relying on the person. But right now, you can't trust them because you can't have a private conversation with the teacher, I mean you can, but I'm saying it's not like you can stop after class and ask for advice (F, Bo).

New Relational Patterns

In this context of important critical issues, some participants highlight a few improving elements referring to relationships both with classmates and with some teachers. In fact, in some cases, distance learning upset the group organizations of the class, proposing *new relational patterns*: in the online class, students find themselves all together on the screen and discover that some classmates they had previously ignored can be interesting social partners with whom to study

but also to share personal thoughts not linked to school. In addition, relationships were strengthened with those teachers who were able to maintain individualized contact with their students, showing that they were interested in them and in the unusual experience they were experiencing: “*I have established some relationships that I didn't think I could create before and I'm glad, it was really nice...*” (M, Na); “*Some teachers write you directly, emails and messages, there are private exchanges, and with some teachers, those with whom I am more "friendly" it's okay, they are more human, you see them close-up...*” (F, Mi).

Personal Change

The dimension of personal change was extrapolated from the interviews across the adolescent interviewees' reflections on relationships. In talking about what had changed, improved, or worsened in their relational lives during the lockdown period, the adolescents reported some aspects of personal change. These changes concern aspects of personal maturation and growth related to the way they perceive themselves and their relationships with others and with the community. As we reported in the introduction, it is quite understandable that in times of crisis, a reflexive and resilient function can be activated that allows one to learn 'something good' from the negative experience one is going through. In Personal change category we can find three sub-categories that describe how adolescents have changed: (a) changes in mood and emotions; (b) change in self-awareness and; (c) change in responsibility/interdependence.

Change in Mood and Emotions

At the psychological level, the quarantine affected our adolescents' mood in a variety of ways, mostly negatively, resulting in increased anxiety, fear, solitude, depression, apathy, and exhaustion. As to how the quarantine affected their *mood*, our adolescents mostly described staying at home as a monotonous routine, characterized by repetitiveness and *mental states* such as exhaustion, sense of emptiness, feelings of being suspended in an indefinite time. They defined it as a prison-like situation: “*I have to say that the first few days were really weird. I felt like a prisoner in a prison that was still your home, but all together, then it is very very strange*” (F, Bo).

They also highlighted the difficulty in resuming the pre-quarantine routine and habits (such as dressing, going out, etc.):

Getting dressed, because I was in my pajamas for 3 months. Every now and then I forced myself to get dressed to get used to it again, there after I re-started. But there was a period in which I said "why do you have to get ready to go out? What's the point?" I couldn't remember anything anymore. It seems absurd to say it like that (M, Bo).

Effects on mood were mainly named as depression, apathy, mental stress, and the most mentioned emotions were anxiety and fear, along with boredom, oppression and helplessness:

How do I feel? The restriction thing has made more room to think, I wouldn't have got certain things if it hadn't been for the quarantine, that's for sure... it's a feeling, I must say I'm not an anxious guy but lately I'm feeling it a little bit, I mean in a certain sense, not negatively anxious, but like, at a certain point you can't take it anymore, you feel a weight inside you that I don't know how to describe, like an agitation... (F, Na).

Loneliness was also a common feeling. This was the consequence of staying home, but it was also due to the prevalence of technological activities within the house, with family members all interacting with digital devices. Loneliness was not mitigated by digital relationships. On the contrary, online interactions were experienced as cold and incapable of conveying warmth, so that our adolescents felt lonely even though they could socialize through the Internet:

The most valuable thing is physical contact. Social networks will never be enough, that is, they will never achieve anything, the Internet will never achieve anything. I've reached a point where making a video call makes me feel lonely. (M, Bo).

Change in Self-Awareness

The quarantine experience was also a time throughout which our respondents increased self-awareness and learned something about themselves. Some reported that because of physical distancing, they could look more clearly into themselves and their emotions and check up on

relationships, both friendship and romantic relations. This made them able to make choices that they possibly wouldn't have made in an ordinary situation:

Above all I've discovered that I need it. Before, until a couple of years ago, I thought I was an introvert who didn't like being with people so much, but now I've discovered that it's not true: I actually like being with people, hanging out with friends. I realized that I'm actually able to choose them well (F, Mi).

Forced to stay at home, most of our teenagers discovered new *interests and passions*: gardening, cooking, painting, playing music, working out, meditation are examples of activities in which they engaged. In doing so, they not only mitigated the dullness of their daily routine, but also developed their abilities and improved their mood. For some of them, it was a way to discover something of themselves of which they were not already aware, to reinvent themselves, even to take an “inner journey”:

Oh my gosh, look... at the beginning it was hard not to go out, being cooped up in the house all the time. Then I got used to it, and I'll tell you I developed other interests, like I got into other things like personal meditation, I got into learning Spanish, right? It was something I always enjoyed. I mean, it didn't weigh on me that much. Of course, I missed what I was doing before, but I made do... In my spare time I reinvented myself and I was fine (M, Le).

One more implication of quarantine was that our young people could take time for themselves, and this was appreciated, at least for the first weeks. Some reported that by stopping the usual routine of their pre-quarantine life, they could finally take care of themselves, focus on themselves, reflect, and rest: *“To think, to stay still and think about what I want from life, I never had the time to do that.”* (F, Mi).

A number of our teenagers reported that after the quarantine experience, they felt they had undergone some personal change, or felt that something had changed in the way they perceived themselves and their relations with other people. Some expressed positive feelings, and reported being satisfied with themselves and more self-efficient and responsible:

I feel I'm a different person than the one I was before, I feel much stronger, I feel grown up, I've learned to take responsibility, to manage my time in a totally autonomous way, to appreciate the little things. I feel I've grown up much more than I would without this quarantine. I've learned a lot of lessons ...in five years I think they will all be useful, invaluable resources (M, Mi).

While some of our teenagers reported positive personal changes and outcomes from the quarantine experience, some also expressed opposite views and feelings, and felt a threat. These adolescents perceived that the quarantine had made weaker and frightened, and undermined their sense of agency and self-esteem:

Maybe this quarantine has changed a lot the relationship I have with myself. Meaning that I have noticed that once, that is, before this quarantine, I was stronger, but now the quarantine has made me uncertain, it has made me weaker. Like, I absolutely wanted to get my license, I absolutely wanted to go to this driving school. But now that my mother and I have gone there to check, I am afraid of not being able to do this, that I am not up to the task. This is something that I really could not imagine, I mean I was like "I'm going to go there and get my license, for sure." And instead, this situation has brought me more fear, maybe it has made me weaker (F, To).

Change in Responsibility/Interdependence

Our interviewees mostly complied with the restrictive measure out of a sense of responsibility towards others. Almost none complied with the measures out of a general sense of duty and obedience to authority, without elaborating on the content and motives behind the restrictions. They felt responsible for their own safety, but also for their family's safety and for the relatives who were more vulnerable (namely, grandparents living with them). They believed that they were contributing to protecting the community's health by respecting the rules and that those rules made sense: they revealed knowledge of the contagion's dynamics and did not underestimate it, even though some of them confessed that at the very beginning they were not fully aware of the

risks. They understood the rationale for the quarantine measures, and this understanding was key in making them compliant. Some of them also recognized that they were part of a global scenario, and that they felt that their individual behavior was interdependent with others' behavior.

Concern for family and the most vulnerable people was one of the primary drivers of responsible conduct, especially concern for their older relatives (such as grandmothers living in their household). It was quite clear in their mind that protecting themselves was also the way to protect others, and vice versa:

I used to think about it when I had to go out. It wasn't so much "oh my God, what if I get it but then I'll pass it to my dad, he'll pass it to all the people he sees, I'll pass it to my sister, to my mom who might have to take the groceries to my sick grandmother, because she had breast cancer, and what if she dies? All because of me, because I simply couldn't go without seeing anybody for two months". That was my main fear (M, Bo).

Many of our adolescents expressed criticisms of friends and acquaintances who showed non-compliant behaviors and the tendency to minimize risks. They distanced themselves and showed that they could make their own decisions, *resisting the pressure of peers*:

I often fought with my friends, when we were seeing each other often and even in groups, not just two people keeping a safe distance, because I think that in a period like that you should not think only of yourself. It's a difficult time for everybody, so you have to not only take precautions and be careful of yourself and your family, but also for the people around you, who maybe respect the precautions. So yes, it's something that affects everyone, not just myself, my family circle, my friends (M, To).

Sense of responsibility and concern transcended the small network of primary relations and expanded to community well-being. Even if a direct impact on the community and the wider society was difficult to perceive directly, a group of our interviewees showed that they felt responsible not only for those for whom they cared, but also for the good of a larger collectivity. Some of them

voiced the belief that individual behavior can make a difference for larger societal issues, such as health or the environment:

However, everyone can understand that we must continue to do what is good for the country and humanity and that they should not overlook this situation, saying “well it's just this year, then next year we are all happy and content”. If next year this virus is over and I hope so, still we must continue to keep the rules alive (F, Na).

A few of our interviewees also highlighted how the quarantine period had made them see the big picture and made them shift their focus from themselves to the society at large, experiencing a sense of societal interdependence. This shift implied the cognizance of being part of a collectivity, of being inter-connected, and the awareness of their own situation based on social comparison processes. To some of our teenagers, sense of responsibility extended from the individual to family, and then up to community, country and the entire world:

Of course, in these situations you realize how much we are ... how the world is one, there are no more barriers, there are no more borders, if something happens in China it gets here, if something happens here it gets to America and China, now there are really no more borders. We are all on the same earth, we are all the same, well you know, the usual platitude, but you realize that it is true that if you stay at home you can stop this virus that is really bringing the whole world to its knees, because ... now in America ... yes, it's bringing the whole world to its knees because it has now spread throughout the world. So yes, you realize that one forms the collective, and how you alone, as a single person can change the whole situation around us. This is true, absolutely true (F, Mi).

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore adolescents' experience of living through the COVID-19 emergency and national lockdown in terms of changes in their relations. Regarding children and adolescents, several studies have specifically explored psychological experiences related to the global emergency and lockdown experience of COVID-19 (Guessoum et al., 2020), but evidence

from narratives is lacking. The results of this work offer an insight into the lives of adolescents during the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy, making it possible to “hear their voices” regarding a situation that has seen them excluded from most of the public debate. Considering this lack of scientific evidence of adolescents’ voice during the lockdown experience, the present study explored the experiences of adolescents by giving them a voice and putting their relational world at the center of attention.

This study confirmed that the relationships of adolescents has been considerably impacted by the lockdown. Distance learning, as well as the inability to go out and hang out with people outside the home, has changed the daily life of adolescents. In any case, we must always consider that the effects of the pandemic affected everyone differently: for some adolescents it entailed more substantial changes while for others it involved just minor adjustments. Taking up the classification of Branquinho et al. (2020), we can identify positive changes, negative changes and neutral changes. The response to the pandemic is anything but homogeneous. It is multifaceted.

Adolescents were forced to re-organize their daily routine, access personal and social resources, and face the necessity of finding new ways to accomplish their developmental tasks. This impacted them at a threefold level at a minimum: personal relationships and social contexts, psychological well-being and individual trajectories, and a new role for interdependence and responsibility. As reported in the results, forced coexistence with family is experienced in an ambivalent way: on the one hand, it implies a compromise of one's autonomy; on the other hand, it allowed for a rediscovery of the value of family relationships and of time spent together (Fioretti et al., 2020).

Likewise, the relationship with friends also underwent significant changes. Compared with children and adults, social relations are very important among adolescents, triggering them to rely heavily on peers—to gain approval, feel good about themselves, and reduce uncertainty (Laursen & Hartl, 2013). Relationships with peers are invested with the same ambivalence found in family relationships. If, on the one hand, physical distance generated a great deal of distress in friendships,

on the other hand, there is a higher quality in relationships: the interruption of routine allowed adolescents to become aware of their relationships and recognize the most significant ones.

Technology certainly made it possible to partially compensate for the physical absence of friends through the reorganization of relationships through the internet. During the lockdown, social media was a primary resource used by adolescents to cope with the lack of social relations (Cauberghe, Van Wesenbeeck, De Jans, Hudders & Ponnet, 2021). Most of the adolescents indicated a heightened social media use during the lockdown. Although participants reported using social media and online instruments for communication to actively cope with the ongoing situation, compensation by means of online tools is judged not entirely effective by adolescents, who highlight the lack of face-to-face encounters, confirming the crucial importance of the relationship with peers in the developmental path of adolescents. The numerous quotations referring to physical spaces and contacts seem to suggest the importance of paying attention to the conditions that make the creation of relationships more likely or less likely. The context in which relationships develop determines their nature. For example, among the interviewees it emerges that the absence of informal contact due to non-attendance at school makes peer relationships more difficult. Similarly, adolescents highlight how not sharing a physical space can undermine trust and the degree of depth of exchanges between friends by limiting conversations to lighter, less personal and private aspects. Adolescents show great awareness of the difference between online and face-to-face relationships. It is not possible to draw an unambiguous assessment with respect to whether they are better or worse, but it is certainly clear that they recognize the differences. They feel they have gotten so much from online interactions, and they appreciate its potential and the effectiveness with which it has quickly allowed them to replace basic environments such as school as well as to keep relationships with friends and classmates alive. Likewise, however, they miss the relationship with bodies that inevitably gives rise to a different experience. Research prior to Covid (Mesch & Talmund, 2006) reported that adolescents noted that friendships born online, for example, had a shorter acquaintance period than face-to-face friendships, just as with online friends they discussed

fewer topics and participated in fewer shared activities. These results seem to indicate that online friends play a reduced and probably more specific role in some experiences than do friends who meet face-to-face during extracurricular activities and at parties. With regard to the content of topics discussed with online friends, not only does it emerge that there is less discussion, but there is also evidence that the topics discussed tend not to be of a personal nature, such as romantic relationships and personal problems. A more recent study (Marinucci, et al. 2022) showed that online connections could benefit individuals under stressful conditions (like strict isolation) and for a limited period, even though face-to-face interactions remained the most effective and preferred source of well-being. While it is true that appropriate online relationships can help provide an answer to the psychological need to be in relationship, the research likewise highlighted the power and limitations of online social relationships by defining them as surrogates for face-to-face ones. Certainly, online relationships have helped avoid the harms of social isolation, but the protective effect of these online relationships wanes the moment offline ones are available. The authors' conclusion (Marinucci, et al. 2022), which seems to confirm what the young people interviewed for this study also say, is that the benefits of online exchanges are subordinate to those derived from face-to-face interactions.

Overall, the research findings show that, if the relational and social life of the interviewed adolescents has been negatively impacted by quarantine and social isolation, the majority of them reported that spending time with themselves and their loved ones represented a valuable opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth. Specifically, the content analysis of interviews revealed that the adolescents' experience of the lockdown measures changed over time as a result of their ability to create unique life trajectories (Zittoun, 2016). In particular, the adolescents recounted how they relate and cope with the ruptures engendered by the pandemic by constructing alternative meanings that led to personal changes. In fact, as the pandemic broke out, the experience of the quarantine intensified negative feelings, in particular, fear and anxiety, depression and exhaustion together with a pervasive sense of loneliness and boredom due to the sudden and drastic changes in

lifestyles. These findings dovetail with the international literature on adolescents' mental health throughout the first months of the pandemic (Golberstein et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020) and corroborate, along with existing studies involving Italian adolescents (Fioretti et al., 2020), that the abrupt change was related to serious psychological issues, such as lack of purpose in life and powerlessness (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Ezpeleta et al., 2020; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021; Rens et al., 2021).

However, in the context of the COVID-19 emergency, there was also potential for amelioration in the resilient response of adolescents to the crisis. Indeed, young interviewees were vulnerable to their proximate environment and highly affected by the sense of uncertainty engendered by the experience of COVID-19. At the same time, they also had unexpected resources to cope with the stress of the situation, showing adaptive coping strategies and greater self-reflection (Hawke et al., 2020). Although social isolation interrupted the possibility of exploring relationships with significant environments beyond family—especially, peers and schools which assist adolescents in the accomplishment of identity development and personal autonomy tasks (Lerner, 2005)—physical distancing measures created opportunities for adolescents to focus on personal goals and preferences, interests and capabilities. In line with Fioretti et al. (2020), we contend that the positive psychological changes that the adolescents experienced after the initial struggle with the lockdown measures point to Post Traumatic Growth. Indeed, the significant life disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which somehow resulted in stress-related growth, allowed adolescents to gain some benefits and acquire a deep personal sense of self (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The pandemic provided a sense of belongingness and raised the sense of interdependence with others and society at large. Participants' narratives account for a sharpened ability to take on the perspective of significant and generalized others (Fett et al., 2014): their own loneliness seems small compared to that of their grandparents; lack of physical togetherness does not impact only young people's relationships; they see how it affects the general population causing more

individualism and reduced orientation toward others. In contrast with this generalized social drift, participants mentioned their own “increased responsibility” as a major effect of experiencing the pandemic, which contributed to their awareness of the multiple interconnections that exist (also) between them, their immediate environments (family, school), and their local and global community. It would be important to enhance this increase in responsibility and offer adolescents interventions that can promote an increase in their sense of community responsibility. Sense of community responsibility refers to the feeling of obligation to the obligation to protect or enhance the well-being of a community and its members (Nowell & Boyd, 2010). Compliance with the rules appears to be the concrete translation of youth’s sense of community responsibility, as it is not based on motives of self-interest, but on a (common good) norm prevailing over their own will and needs (e.g., protecting community health vs. enjoying time with peers) and on a clear understanding that individual behaviors have consequences on the community. The pandemic and its “suspended time” seem to have offered adolescents the opportunity to reflect on interdependence and develop a clear awareness of contextual influences on human behavior; it seems that the pandemic boosted youth’s capacity for social perspective taking but also for appreciating the power of individuals in the community, discovering influence as part of being a community.

The study has some limitations. First, only a small percentage of interviewees represent adolescents who are not currently involved in education. A second limitation may be related to the sampling method, which does not allow the results to be generalized. A convenience sampling such as the one carried out in this study may in fact have overrepresented certain characteristics of the selected adolescents. Since this was a qualitative work, it nevertheless offered the opportunity to take an in-depth look at the reality of youth in the period of Covid. A third limitation is that the study did not include personal characteristics and possible vulnerable conditions of the adolescents, nor their economic and cultural backgrounds, which will be considered in future studies. An additional limitation may be the fact that the adolescents interviewed all live in families, but not all have the same family configuration: some have divorced parents, some live with siblings, and some

are only children. These differences in family configuration may affect the levels of well-being and adjustment that are possible. It might make sense in the future to take this into account and explore it further.

This work has multiple applicative implications for all those who do research or promote interventions with adolescents. The results of this work highlight the ambivalence of online relations for adolescents. Although they are recognized as a generation that lives much of their lives online, even before the advent of the pandemic, they nevertheless show some awareness of the limitations of this world. It seems important, therefore, to be able to work on a plane of awareness about the use of online resources that takes into account the positive aspects, enhancing and implementing them, but can also recognize the negative or limiting ones. Speaking of online use, one thought goes to the world of education, which had to face a digital revolution during the pandemic for which it was not prepared. In the case of schools, too, it is important to be able to gain awareness of which aspects of digitization are worth preserving and implementing and which aspects of more traditional forms of relationships are worth enhancing, instead. While some content can be easily transmitted online, the emotions associated with peer exchange and teacher charisma cannot find substitutes online.

Another practical aspect to highlight is the importance of "signifying" experiences. Indeed, we know that the most difficult part of facing a trauma or emergency is not so much living it as making meaning of it: understanding what is happening and what meaning it can take on for me. Making sense of experiences means being able to recognize those personal changes that enable one to better direct one's life. This introspective and simultaneously orienting function is very important in adolescence. Listening to these adolescents meant making sense of their experience through their words. Giving adolescents a voice as protagonists of their lives and times is not only a methodological direction for researchers but becomes a political commitment. It cannot be forgotten that these are the citizens of today and tomorrow.

Finally, it seems useful to remember that the possibility of learning something good from an experience that is in itself negative is an experience of resilience that is not only played out on an individual level but needs a group and a community. Community resilience looks at how people overcome stress, trauma, and other life challenges by drawing from the social and cultural networks and practices that constitute communities (Kirmauer, et al. 2009). Resilience understood in both individual and community terms is a complex construct requiring several levels of analysis to be adequately addressed (Norris et al., 2008; Procentese, et al. 2022). The experience of physical distancing and greater restrictions in certain periods of the year in light of what emerges from the study invite us to imagine an initiative for the creation of new relational spaces in which exchanges and opportunities, while safe, can be spaces for elaboration and growth. Greater synergy between the third sector, educational institutions and local administrations that works to build styles of responsible coexistence (Procentese & Gatti, 2019) and community resilience could be an essential prevention and social protection path.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Age	M = 17.74 (SD = .66)
Sex	N (%)
	Female 35 (53%)
	Male 31 (47%)
Employment status	Student 64 (97%)
	Employee 2 (3%)
Students of High school	Specialized in Humanistic, scientific, art 50 (75.8%)
	Vocational-technical 14 (21.2%)
Family Configuration	
	Parents 3 (4.5%)
	Parents and sibling 48 (72.7%)
	Other familiar 15 (22.7%).
Participation to association	
	Member in association 31 (48.4%)
	Non participation 35(51.6%)
Territorial area	
	Metropolitan in North Italy 35 (54.5%)
	Metropolitan in South Italy 31 (45.5%)
Level of risk of the territorial area	
	Red zone 26 (39,4%)
	Orange zone 12 (18.2%)
	Green zone 28 (42.4%)

Table 2. Category, Sub-category and Description

Category	Sub-category	Description
Family relationships	Distance from extended family	Complaining about not visiting or being visited by grandparents and other relatives
	Forced coexistence	Need for more privacy and personal space; complaining about having to share domestic spaces with other family members
	Rapprochement and dialogue	Appreciating spending more time with family, talking, getting emotionally closer
Friendship	‘True’ and ‘false’ friends	Recognizing genuine and non-genuine relationships
	Lack of physical contact	Losing intimacy and closeness because of physical distancing
	Dissatisfying online interactions	Reporting overall dissatisfaction with online contact, even though it helped to cope with loneliness
School relationships (peers and teachers)	Negative emotional states	Reporting feelings of boredom, loneliness, emotional detachment experienced in the online learning environment
	Absence of informal contacts	Missing small talk and informal interactions with classmates and teachers

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Category	Sub-category	Description
	New group relational patterns	Discovering until then unnoticed classmates
Personal change	Change in Mood and Emotions	Feeling exhausted, empty, bored because of the new routines; Reporting feelings of anxiety and fear; Facing the experience of solitude and coping with it
	Change in Self-Awareness	Elaborating on significant relationships; Discovering new hobbies and interests; Appreciating having the time to focus on the self and take care of it; Feeling weaker, frightened; threatened in self-efficacy and self-esteem; hampered in future projects
	Change in Responsibility/interdependence	Being concerned for the health of family members and motivated to protect them; Being concerned for the health of community members and feeling responsible for it; Acknowledging the global scale of the problem and feeling part of an interdependent collectivity