

THE AFTERMATH OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FAMILIES IN POLOKWANE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Several studies show that during natural disasters, individuals within some families face challenges such as exacerbation of existing family problems or new difficulties accompanied by stress related to job loss, injury or illness, and parenting concerns. It is from this background that the researchers developed a hunch to explore the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic on families in Polokwane, which is in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The researchers adopted a qualitative approach wherein a case study design was used to explore the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in the selected families. Convenient and Snowball sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth information from the respondents. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings of the study show families were disoriented due to issues such as loss of family bonds, Job loss, and domestic violence. The study provides conclusions and recommendations.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Families, Natural Disasters, South Africa

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profoundly negative impact on many individuals within some families. This has caused disruptions not only in those families but also in society. According to Otitoloju, Okafor, Fasona, Bawa-Allah, Isanbor, Chukwudozie and Ogbeibu (2020) the COVID-19 affected countries differently. Yeo (2020) studied the impact of the pandemic on relations amongst countries. For the education sector, Alex (2022) and Ramoshaba and Kgarose (2022) found that the pandemic has caused disruptions in the learning activities of students. Munyeka and Munzhedzi (2022) and Sennoga and Balma (2022) studied the impact of COVID-19 on the economies of various countries. According to Ramoshaba (2023a), the COVID-19 pandemic caused great harm despite governments across different institutions having legislation and policies for mitigating natural disasters. Abdulai and Salifu (2023) are of the view that the COVID-19 outbreak, which emerged in the early part of 2020 and spread across the world, exposed the governance and decision-making processes. In the same breath, Esteves and Staden (2020) state that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was worsened by the lack of a coordinated global response. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions to many institutions and sectors, such as the economy and the health sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has left many families battling with issues, ranging from mental health issues to the loss of their loved ones. This is in line with a study, which highlights that the pandemic has changed the lives of many individuals and the structure of their families by bringing changes in their everyday routines (Fisher, Languilaire, Lawthom, Nieuwenhuis, Petts, Runswick Cole & Yerkes, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of individuals should be zoomed beyond the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, as some issues, such as losing a family member, cannot be forgotten overnight. This is also in line with Ramoshaba (2024), who found that some families lost their loved ones, while other family members who are breadwinners lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ramoshaba also reported that some families that were included in his studies reported that challenges such as losing loved ones and job loss caused disorientation in their families.

According to Botha & Booysen (2014), families contribute to the promotion of solidarity and the building of good societies. The Department of Social Development in South Africa reported that the process of family functioning in South African families is significantly influenced by diverse family structures (Department of Social Development, 2021). In other words, a child-headed family cannot function in the same way as a single-parent family. The Department of Social Development further reported that a well-functioning family, which provides its members with opportunities for social identity and economic support, facilitates and promotes good family outcomes and well-being. Some families may still face challenges because they are not receiving the necessary support from their family members. Family members are key as they can offer support during difficult times. This is supported by a study that states that the absence of an enabling and supportive environment also impacts the well-being and functioning of families (Walsh, 2015). The importance of support systems, such as one's family, cannot be overlooked.

Literature review

COVID-19 pandemic and Family Functioning.

The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in numerous individuals within certain families struggling with problems while attempting to maintain their family's functionality. As stated by Gambin, Woźniak-Prus, Sekowski, Cudo, Pisula, Kiepusa, Boruszak-Kiziukiewicz, and Kmita (2020), the COVID-19 lockdown offered significant chances for certain families to bond, express emotions, and provide mutual support. Conversely, Roos, Salisbury, Penner-Goeke, Cameron, Protudjer, Giuliano, Affi, and Reynolds (2021) argue that the South African lockdown did not create favorable circumstances for all families, as certain families faced disputes and tensions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a similar vein, the lockdown and its social distancing measures prevented families from meeting with their relatives, friends, and neighbors (Ammar, Chtourou, Boukhris, Trabelsi, Masmoudi, Brach, Bouaziz, Bentlage, How, Ahmed & Mueller, 2020). In other words, the social interactions of various individuals from distinct families were adversely impacted by COVID-19 regulations like social distancing and isolation policies, which deprived certain families of social and emotional support, potentially leading to further negative effects, including psychological problems.

Family members lacking support from others during challenging times encounter feelings of loneliness and distress (Luchetti, Lee, Aschwanden, Sesker, Strickhouser, Terracciano & Sutin, 2020). In other terms, people who were unable to receive assistance from their family and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced negative impacts. Due to the effects and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals from different households faced a huge challenge in juggling their lives while nurturing their connections with loved ones, including family and friends. According to Chen, Zhang, Yin and Yáñez (2022) and Ramoshaba (2023b) such circumstances may cause mental health issues such as depression and anxiety for some individuals. Waite and Creswell (2020) argue that in South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic led to certain family members facing difficulties, such as managing work-related pressures while striving to uphold their well-being and connections with family and friends.

Theoretical framework

Vulnerability theory

The Vulnerability theory was adopted in this study due to its nature of being deeply rooted in the field of natural hazards and poverty according to Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon and Davis (2014). The theory states that vulnerability represents the physical, economic, social proneness of individuals, families and communities to damage in the case of misfortunes (Cardona, 2006; Emrich & Cutter, 2011). The outbreak of COVID-19 not only in South Africa but globally has led most families to become vulnerable to socio-economic conditions such as job loss, domestic violence and excessive alcohol use just to mention a few. In the same breath, Van Barneveld, Quinlan, Kriesler, Junor, Baum, Chowdhury, Junankar, Clibborn, Flanagan, Wright and Friel (2020) found that the majority of the people who were employed before the COVID-19 outbreak became unemployed as many businesses closed down and were unable to sustain their businesses due to the national lockdown.

In addition, Adger (2006) posits that vulnerability can be fostered by an individual's inability to cope with a difficult situation such as natural disaster which affects their physical, social and economic aspects. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families differed from one family to the other. On the same wavelength, Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon and Davis (2014) aver that how some individuals, families and communities become prone to natural disasters is not a one-size-fits-all situation as people differ in strength and communities are influenced by different environmental factors. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families became apparent wherein families not only in Polokwane but in South Africa as a whole had to develop resilience strategies. This is supported by Weichselgartner and Bertens (2000) who avow that people who are exposed and vulnerable to dangers are forced to develop coping strategies for such dangers. It can thus be deduced that COVID-19 affected families in many ways.

2. Method

The study followed a qualitative approach to understand the disorientation of families by the COVID-19 pandemic in Polokwane. The approach was relevant in this study as qualitative approaches are always about understanding the social life as well as the meaning that people attach to everyday life (De Vos, St. rydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2011). This was a case study of selected families in Polokwane which is in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The use of a case study was motivated by Yin (2009) who posits that a case study design is mostly useful when researchers have a hunch to launch an enquiry of occasions. This was key as the researchers wanted to understand how COVID-19 disoriented families in Polokwane. The researchers used convenience and snowball sampling techniques to select eight families to share their experiences on the impact of the pandemic in their

families. Data in this study was collected through semi-structured interviews wherein family members were interviewed individually to allow them to express themselves freely. Privacy and confidentiality were considered in this study. Data collection was guided by data saturation. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. To ensure the quality of the findings, prolonged engagements, member checking and peer examination was ensured, and field notes were written directly after each interview with each respondent for auditing purposes. Data was correctly coded.

3. Findings and Discussion

Demographics of the respondents

Twelve Males and Twelve Females from Eight (8) selected families that were affected by the COVID-pandemic were conveniently selected for participation in the study. Most respondents (N=12) ranged between the ages of 45-55 years and have made 50% of the sample representation, followed by respondents (N=8) who are aged between 18-25 years and made 33% representation. Four (4) respondents ranged between the ages of 35-45 years and made 17% of the sample representation. The following themes and sub-themes emerged from the findings of the study.

3. THEME 1: LOSS OF FAMILY BONDS

A number of respondents highlighted loss of family bonds as some of the disorientation that was experienced by their families during the COVID-19 lockdown. The assumption that lockdown was supposed to strengthen bonds for some families was not a one size fits all, as some families lost their bond during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is supported by Luttik, Garcia-Vivar, Konradsen, Mahrer-Imhof, Imhof, Brodsgaard, Ostergaard, Dieperink and Kolbrun-Svavarsdottir (2020) who assert that families in many countries lost bonds and freedom of movement due to the quarantine and lockdown measures that were imposed by several governments across the globe. In the same breath, Evans, Mikocka-Walus, Klas, Olive, Sciberras, Karantzas and Westrupp (2020) avow that the restrictions that came with lockdown led to many families experiencing challenges in their relationships and having some of their existing relationship difficulties being exacerbated by pandemic-related stressors. In relation to the loss of family bonds in Polokwane, some of the respondents said:

"We existed in dread as a family and struggled to connect or be united." My relatives began to live in seclusion due to the anxiety of catching the virus, particularly from my mother who is employed at the hospital.

"To be honest, as a family, we were uncomfortable with the idea of our mother working in a dangerous environment." We were afraid she might contract the virus and then pass it on to everyone. There was no joy as we had to watch the time we spent with her, and I needed to steer clear of becoming close to her. Once, she had to quarantine, which caused us to panic and feel fearful. "You can observe that COVID-19 impacted and transformed many aspects of my family."

4. Additionally, other respondents said:

"COVID-19 and the lockdown disrupted our family dynamics by weakening our family connection." Certain family members would rather sleep, whereas others favored watching TV constantly. We found it hard to have food available, so I can't claim it influenced us positively. It was dreadful for my family and me because it altered our lifestyle and the way we did things.

"My mother lost her job, and we could tell it truly affected her." She would always choose to sleep instead of sitting with us in the dining room as she used to. "This caused me to live in anxiety because observing my mother in that state worried me."

The study's findings indicated alterations in the relationships among family members, resulting in weakened family connections because of the fear of COVID-19 exposure. Family connections are essential for providing individuals with a feeling of belonging, affection, and assistance. This aligns with the findings of Evans et al. (2020), who claim that family members can receive support and opportunities for growth and closeness during difficulties due to robust family connections. Thogersen and Anru (2008) state that robust family connections enable family members to depend on their relatives for care and assistance during times of need. Therefore, it can be concluded that robust family connections are vital for family stability. Some respondents noted that they refrained from spending time with their families because they feared catching the virus from those who are active.

5. THEME 2: FAMILY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Instances of domestic violence were reported in Polokwane, leading to confusion among the families impacted by COVID-19. Several respondents indicated that they encountered violence within their families during the COVID-19 lockdown, while others reported having observed violence in their own homes. Ndlovu, Mulondo,

Tsoka-Gwegweni and Ndirangu (2022) and Tisane (2020) discovered that domestic violence arose and surged during the COVID-19 lockdown. Tisane also disclosed that the number of women reaching out to domestic violence support services rose in multiple countries during the national lockdown's enforcement. Leslie and Wilson (2020), who researched violence amid the COVID-19 pandemic, discovered that domestic violence cases rose by around 10% during the lockdown. This highlights the frequency of violence during the COVID-19 lockdown. Roesch, Amin, Gupta, and García-Moreno (2020) assert that instances of domestic violence rise during humanitarian emergencies like pandemics and natural disasters. This was not unusual with the COVID-19 pandemic. Incidents of domestic violence surged during the South African lockdown because of various factors, including individuals being compelled to stay in their own homes. The researcher contends that while domestic violence in South Africa is not a recent issue (Mpani & Nsiband, 2015), the emergence of COVID-19 in the nation led to an increase in family violence cases. This is supported by Ramoshaba and Singwane, (2023) who posit that home confinement contributed to the increase in domestic violence cases.

Presented below is the discussion on the breakdown of family ties and the occurrence of domestic violence, along with its sub-themes that surfaced in response to the initial inquiry regarding family disorientation in Polokwane as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Theme 2: Subtheme 1: The effects of home lockdown on domestic abuse

Home isolation has been identified as one of the factors contributing to domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown. A number of respondents reported experiencing violence due to increased time spent with their abusive partners. Several respondents have mentioned that they have observed family members mistreating one another within their households during the COVID-19 lockdown. The results of this research align with those of a study conducted by Roesch, Amin, Gupta, and García-Moreno (2020), which revealed that incidents of intimate partner violence became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the home confinement measures were imposed to reduce the virus's transmission, it was regrettable that they led to adverse outcomes for certain people and families. Among the negative outcomes are being confined at home with an abusive father, mother, or partner. Tisane (2020) supports this by stating that movement restrictions during the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in some individuals being confined at home with their abusive partners. A respondent mentioned that:

"My home situation was somewhat challenging and troubled since my parents often fought due to not being accustomed to living together for an extended period. My father was abusive toward my mother, and this was a daily occurrence." "He would strike her in our presence."

7. Other respondents echoed that:

"My spouse is a violent individual that I have agreed to stay with for the benefit of my children." During the Lockdown when we were required to remain at home, he grew increasingly aggressive and abusive; to add to the situation, he would also physically attack me in the presence of my children. After spending additional time at home and with my husband, the situation deteriorated. My kids endured the trauma and hurt of witnessing their dad mistreat their mom. I can't honestly say that our family's functioning was positive during the lockdown.

"Being required to remain at home has presented difficulties for some of us, as we missed out on quality family time." I was constantly subjected to physical abuse by my husband. Sometimes I sensed that my husband was directing his frustrations from losing his job towards me.

The results indicate that home confinement led to a rise in domestic violence cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher believes that domestic violence has long been a problem in South Africa, and the increase may be due to home confinement restrictions that limited movement and compelled individuals to remain at home with their abusive partners. This is backed by Mohler, Bertozzi, Carter, Short, Sledge, Tita, and Brantingham (2020) along with Piquero, Jennings, Jemison, Kaukinen, and Knaul (2021) who indicate that the rise in domestic violence cases resulted from the lockdown, which confined individuals to their homes, providing both opportunity and time for abusers to harm victims. The researcher is aware that additional issues, such as the anxiety of handling lost income and jobs, as well as being restricted at home, may have also played a part in the increase of domestic violence. This aligns with research indicating that the national lockdown led to significant income and job losses, resulting in additional issues like mental health challenges and domestic violence (Austrian & Abuya, 2020; Rahman & Matin, 2020; Sumner, Hoy, & Ortiz-Juarez, 2020).

8. Theme 2: Subtheme 2: Alcohol consumption and domestic violence

Alcohol consumption was found to be high within families affected by domestic violence in Polokwane, reported as another contributing factor. Several respondents noted that their partners mistreated them following alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown. Simultaneously, Mittal and Singh (2020) discovered that elements like alcohol use have led to an increase in domestic violence incidents during the lockdown in South Africa. Research indicates that drinking alcohol beyond moderate levels is strongly linked to the increasing incidents of domestic violence (Mpani, 2015 & Mpani & Nsiband, 2015). One respondent echoed that:

"When my husband has been drinking, we turn into his targets in this home." Even now, I am unaware of how he was able to purchase alcohol during the COVID-19 lockdown, but whoever provided him with it put us at risk with a more aggressive and intoxicated individual in the household".

9. In support another respondent said that:

"I have a problem when I am drunk; I do things that hurt other people. I am not abusive when I am sober, but the minute I touch alcohol, I always wake up to stories of taking out my frustrations on other people like physically abusing either my wife or my children".

South Africa ranks among the nations with the highest alcohol consumption globally, and the accessibility and sale of alcohol significantly contribute to domestic violence (Nduna & Tshona, 2021). Results indicate that in certain families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in Polokwane, partner violence linked to alcohol use was both experienced and observed. During the COVID-19 lockdown, there was a prohibition on illegal alcohol sales, which allowed some individuals to sell and purchase alcohol even with the government restrictions announced and enforced. Tisane (2020) supports this by stating that many locations selling alcohol and homes in South Africa were unmonitored during the lockdown, resulting in the alcohol sales ban not stopping people from drinking. It should also be mentioned that the South African government has relaxed certain restrictions during the lockdown, allowing alcohol to be sold at designated times in specific establishments (Matzopoulos, Walls, Cook & London, 2020).

10. Theme 3: Unemployment due to COVID-19 Lockdown

Some people in Polokwane lost their employment due to the enforcement of the South African lockdown, impacting their family dynamics. The outcomes of this research align with earlier global investigations that revealed the COVID-19 pandemic caused some people to lose their employment, struggle to provide for their families, and face mental health challenges such as stress and depression (Mojtahedi, Dagnall, Denovan, Clough, Hull, Canning, Lilley & Papageorgiou, 2021; de Miquel, Domènech-Abella, Felez-Nobrega, Cristóbal-Narváez, Mortier, Vilagut, Alonso, Olaya & Haro, 2022). Several participants reiterated that:

"When the government implemented the lockdown, some companies had to lay off employees; sadly, I was among those who lost their jobs, which severely impacted my family and me, causing us difficulty in providing meals."

"My husband consistently subjected me to physical abuse. Sometimes I sensed that my husband was venting his job loss frustrations on me".

11. Furthermore, additional respondents mentioned that:

"COVID brought us significant suffering; my employers instructed me to refrain from coming to work because of the COVID-19 regulations." This impacted my family's earnings. "I needed to depend on my grandchildren's support to survive."

"When we learned about COVID, my concern was about losing my job; sadly, I did lose it because, at the onset of the lockdown, alcohol sales were banned, and my employer had to let me go." "I truly found it difficult to provide meals."

The results indicate that certain people in Polokwane experienced job loss during the COVID-19 lockdown, impacting their family dynamics. Some respondents reported that losing their jobs led to difficulties in providing meals for their families. It can be inferred that certain respondents encountered frustrations due to job loss, which may indicate a potential risk of mental health issues. Guerin, Barile, Thompson, McKnight-Eilly, and Okun (2021) argue that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous individuals in various communities faced hardships due to unemployment and insufficient health and safety resources, leading to various emotional disturbances and mental health issues. Moreover, research indicates that elevated job loss rates are linked to a rise in behavioral health issues, resulting in greater suffering and fatalities, a higher incidence of suicides, and

distress during humanitarian emergencies (Paul & Moser, 2009; Milner, Page, & LaMontagne, 2013; Milner, Page & LaMontagne, 2014; Case & Deaton, 2020).

12. Conclusions

It can be deduced that some families lost their bond as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown which disorientated their families. On the other hand, domestic violence has contributed to the disorientation of some families wherein it was fuelled by home confinement restrictions and alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some families were disoriented by loss of jobs of some of their family members as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and regulations. Therefore, the following recommendations are provided by this study:

- Families need to be empowered on ways of strengthening their family bonds during humanitarian crises through the services of professionals such as social workers.
- The government must develop programmes that are going to address domestic violence during natural disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, programmes may include effective online reporting platforms
- It is recommended that the South African government develop more and improve their strategies for responding to loss of jobs during natural disasters, this may be done by keeping and increasing relief grants and supporting companies to retain jobs.

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16. References

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