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Prison or paradise? Perceptions of communication between cohabitating couples during COVID-19 restrictions

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Abstract

Background: Due to the immediacy of the COVID-19 phenomenon, researchers recognized a need to examine the effects of restrictions on communication patterns between committed, cohabiting partners. Prior literature investigated factors contributing to communication satisfaction; however, a substantial gap remains within the occupational therapy (OT) literature. The study explored perceived satisfaction of quantity and quality of communication before and during COVID-19 restrictions between cohabitating, committed partners and its relation to occupation.

Methods: A questionnaire sent via e-mail recruited subjects from an occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) program who self-identified as having quarantined with a committed partner during COVID-19 restrictions. A mixed-methods design consisted of two phases: a questionnaire which measured perceptions of quantity and quality of communication before and during COVID-19 restrictions and a virtual focus group which gathered information on lived experiences regarding communication during the same time periods.

Results: The questionnaire provided quantitative data ($n=12$) on demographics, communication satisfaction, communication frequency, and frequency of media use. Paired sample *t*-tests did not show a significant difference in means before or during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Four themes emerged from the focus group ($n=6$) including change in routines, personal reflections, and quantity and quality of communication.

Conclusion: Findings suggested that quarantining with a committed partner during COVID-19 restrictions had mixed effects on quality and quantity of communication, however, satisfaction remained consistently high. Participants reported adapting to challenges created by COVID-19 restrictions by altering habits and routines specific to communication with their committed partner. The study presents information on the patterns of communication in intimate partner relationships vital to the profession of OT.

Keywords: communication, mixed-methods, COVID-19, intimate partner relationships, occupational therapy

Introduction

Situations that cause changes in daily occupations may directly result in disruption to a person's everyday routines. The profession of occupational therapy (OT) seeks to support individuals' participation and engagement in meaningful occupations with a specific interest in the contextual and environmental factors. An exemplary illustration of these changes to daily occupations occurred in the year 2020, when coronavirus, abbreviated COVID-19, triggered a global pandemic resulting in 16,523,815 confirmed cases and 655,112 confirmed deaths as of July 29, 2020 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). In an effort to contain the spread of disease, governments around the globe enacted restrictions including social-distancing measures, stay-at-home orders, and closure of public spaces. These restrictions had the potential for substantial impact on individuals' routines and habits due to limited engagement in activities outside of the home. De Haas et al. (2020) reported major changes in people's daily routines in response to COVID-19 restrictions directly impacting activities such as grocery shopping, volunteer participation, work participation, and community mobility.

Recent literature demonstrates that COVID-19 restrictions not only impacted participation in activities of daily living, but also impacted regular and repetitive communication routines within social relationships (GlobalWebIndex, 2020; Sorokoumova et al., 2020). Individuals are social beings and naturally desire to connect with others to preserve social relationships (Aziz et al., 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that communication habits secondary to COVID-19 restrictions showed an increase in the use of digital technologies to "check in on friends and family" (Pennington, 2021, p. 6).

A specific social relationship impacted during COVID-19 restrictions included romantic relationships. Sorokoumova et al. (2020) demonstrated that forced self-isolation during COVID-19 restrictions produced unique situations for many romantic couples directly impacting communicative interactions. Bavel et al. (2020)

noted forced proximity may have a significant effect on interpersonal relationships, both by altering relational patterns and potentially increasing relational stress. It is important to note that communication routines significantly contribute to relationship satisfaction (Pearson et al., 2010). Therefore, COVID-19 restrictions, which may have altered routines for many, likely also affected communication and perceptions of relationships between intimate partners.

OT practitioners possess a unique role in addressing the habits and routines of daily life including social interactions (Graff et al., 2006) and romantic relationships (Aziz et al., 2021). However, a simultaneous assessment of such topics is relatively non-existent in the OT literature. Therefore, the current study sought to examine communicative routines while in forced cohabitation specific to perceived quality and quantity of communication between committed partners to expand the OT literature.

For the purposes of this study, Routines were defined as "patterns of behavior that are observable, regular, and repetitive and that provide structure for daily life" (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020, p. 41; Segal, 2004). Communication was defined as the exchange of thoughts, feelings, and ideas between two individuals via technological or face-to-face interactions. Committed partners were defined as any couple who identifies the relationship status as either committed dating, engaged, or married. Cohabiting was defined as couples who lived in the same dwelling for at least one continuous month. Furthermore, quantity of communication was defined as the frequency and duration of communication between committed partners where quality of communication was defined as the type, content, and satisfaction with communication.

Research Question

The purpose of the study was twofold: (a) to examine if COVID-19 restrictions elicited changes in communicative routines; (b) explore the perceived quantity and quality of communication before and during COVID-19 restrictions between cohabiting, committed partners and its relation to

occupation. The following research questions were examined in the current study:

Research Question 1: Did COVID-19 restrictions have a perceived effect on communication interactions between cohabiting, committed partners?

Research Question 2: How did COVID-19 restrictions affect the perceived quantity and quality of communication between cohabiting, committed partners?

Literature Review

Communication Routines

Past literature showed that couples in a committed relationship developed many routine behaviors related to communication. Pearson et al. (2010) found the use of everyday verbal communication rituals predicted, in part, perceptions of better quality of the relationship. Daily routines provided opportunities for meaningful communication and many couples demonstrated specific routines surrounding communication (i.e., use of pet names, patterns of heart-to-heart conversations, timing of communication, idiosyncratic language, etc.). Thus, rituals were built on daily routines that held significant meaning. Both rituals and routines are frequently addressed performance patterns within the OT literature (AOTA, 2020; Rodger & Umaibalan, 2009; Segal, 2004).

Quality of Communication

Quality of communication has predicted relational satisfaction and can significantly impact the intimacy of committed partners (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Toma & Choi, 2016). Emmers-Sommer (2004) highlighted various indicators of communication quality, including "relaxed, smooth, and in-depth" communication (p. 405). Interestingly, smoothness of interactions (e.g., without communication breakdown or conflict) was found to be an important indicator for relationship satisfaction (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). Communicative interactions that include the expression of thoughts between partners (i.e., self-disclosure) additionally serve as an important

variable to the quality of communication (Montgomery, 1988; also see Emmers-Sommer, 2004 for discussion).

Quantity of Communication

While quality of communication appeared advantageous for romantic relationships, literature varied regarding the importance of quantity of communication (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Taylor & Bazarova, 2018; Toma & Choi, 2016). Kingston and Nock (1987) revealed a positive relationship between the frequency of talking and marital quality. A more recent update of these findings by Emmers-Sommer (2004) found longer face-to-face communication had a positive correlation with relational intimacy. Even so, quantity of communication was not limited to in-person communication, but also included multimedia forms. Taylor and Bazarova (2018) found the frequency of multimedia use, including text messaging, email, instant messaging, and social media, was a significant mediator to relational closeness. Physical distance between committed partners also mediated the type and quantity of communication. Geographically close couples more frequently sent information via multimedia compared to long distance couples (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Furthermore, higher frequency of communication was associated with more intimate disclosures between committed partners (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). On the contrary, Miczo et al. (2011) found relationally close individuals did not require increased frequency of communication to maintain perceived relational satisfaction. In addition, Toma and Choi (2016) found that the amount of time spent in social interaction was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) makes clear the profession has a role in addressing the activities, habits, and routines that affect committed partners. The 4th edition of the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF-4) defines a specific category of social interaction between "intimate partner relationships" as "activities to initiate and maintain a close relationship, including giving and receiving

affection and interacting in desired roles" (AOTA, 2020, p. 34). Within these activities, communication patterns and routines are a vital component to maintaining that intimate relationship. However, despite the importance of communication in committed relationships, minimal evidence addressed communicative routines specific to the profession of OT. Furthermore, effects of COVID-19 restrictions require further exploration of the implications of everyday occupations specific to communication between intimate partners. Based on this need, the authors aimed to contribute an understanding of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to the OT literature more broadly.

Methods

Study Design

With approval by the university's Institutional Review Board, the current study utilized mixed methods with a self-designed questionnaire and a virtual focus group. An exploratory approach made use of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to evaluate the data. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Sample

Data collection from a convenience sample of occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) students at a small midwestern university occurred in July 2020. Recruitment of participants occurred online via email. After completion of the questionnaire (Appendix A), purposive sampling aided the recruitment of participants for a focus group. Inclusion criteria for the current study consisted of participants 18 years of age or older who identified as being in a committed relationship and had quarantined with their committed partner during the COVID-19 pandemic for at least a continuous one-month period. Continuous was defined as leaving the house only for necessities per state and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines at the time referenced by the survey. Exclusion criteria included participants under 18 years of age, those who did not identify as being in a committed relationship, and/or those who had not quarantined with a committed partner for at least a

continuous one-month period during the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

Questionnaire (Phase I)

Participants provided voluntary consent and provided demographic information. The survey method differentiated participants and directed those who met inclusion criteria to a self-designed 36-item questionnaire through Microsoft Forms. This questionnaire measured the perceptions of the quantity and quality of communication before and during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (Appendix A). Participants indicated the level of overall change in communication with their committed partner based on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from some negative change to strong positive change. A five-point Likert scale measured communication satisfaction with 1 representing not at all satisfied and 5 representing extremely satisfied. Frequency of communication types were measured via a five-point Likert scale with 1 representing never to 5 representing very often. Questionnaire submissions were anonymous, and each participant completed the questionnaire one time with an average completion time of approximately 15 minutes. Two expert and six peer reviewers who were not participants reviewed the questionnaire. Reviewers' input afforded modifications to increase face validity.

Focus Group (Phase II)

Participants who completed the questionnaire, met the inclusion criteria, and willingly responded with an interest to participate in the focus group were provided an external link for anonymous collection of email addresses. Focus group participants consisted of the first six respondents who volunteered via email. The focus group utilized a semi-structured, open-ended interview format with a phenomenological approach. A set of prompts with follow up questions generated information on lived experiences regarding communication before and during COVID-19 restrictions (Appendix B). A total of two expert and three peer reviewers who did not participate in the current study reviewed the focus group prompts. Reviewers' input afforded modifications to increase face validity.

Completed at a small midwestern university, the focus group lasted approximately 30 minutes. This setting afforded privacy to the researchers and the participants. Researchers and participants complied with the current COVID-19 policy as mandated by the CDC, the state of Indiana, and the associated university. Policies included completion of (a) the COVID-19 screening form prior to entering the building, (b) requirement of wearing a mask, (c) disinfection of surfaces, and (d) maintaining six feet of distance between all participants. Participants received two copies of the consent form (one for the researchers' records and one for the participants' records). After a moderator read an opening statement, participants had the opportunity to ask questions or withdraw from the study at any time. The authors acknowledged the potential for emotional discomfort during the focus group and perceived the risks to be minimal. One moderator conducted the focus group with an assistant moderator. Each moderator recorded objective and reflective observations during the focus group session. An audio recording of the focus group collected data for later analysis.

Data Coding and Analysis

During data collection and analysis processes, assignment of a numerical identifier afforded the removal of personal information. Additionally, researchers engaged in bracketing through means of reflexive journaling (Ahern, 1999) to acknowledge personal judgements, beliefs, and practices to reduce bias. This process took place at all phases of the research process (Rolls & Relf, 2006).

Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics of demographic and questionnaire responses consisting of percentages and means. Additionally, two-tailed paired t-tests for significance were calculated for the questionnaire data at 95% significance level. Qualitative analysis consisted of content analysis of the focus group audio recording. Each researcher transcribed an assigned portion of the audio recording. All six independently reviewed the full transcript twice while listening to the audio recording to verify accuracy. Content analysis included the following steps: (a) independent reading of the qualitative data, (b) independent

coding of content through highlighting key words and phrases, and (c) independent generation of potential themes. Triangulation of data occurred through (a) collective review of individualized themes and review of labels, (b) each individual theme and label was reviewed through an intersubjective approach in which researchers clarified ideas and challenged others' perceptions to deduce concepts and create themes and subthemes with at least 80% consensus, (c) integration of quantitative and qualitative findings. Triangulation of the focus group transcription occurred during two, three-hour collaboration sessions with all six researchers present.

Results

Demographics

Of 49 e-mails sent, 35 participants responded to the survey, representing a 71% response rate. Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample including age, gender, relationships status, and length of relationship. Participants indicated perceptions of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic in the city in which they quarantined. Six percent of participants indicated a "high" severity, 37% indicated a "medium-high" severity, 23% indicated a "medium" severity, 23% indicated "medium-low" severity, and 11% indicated "low" severity. Sixty percent (n=22) of participants identified as being in a committed relationship. Of these, 12 participants noted having quarantined with their partner for at least one continuous month during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Questionnaire data measured communication satisfaction, communication frequency, and frequency of media usage. Twelve participants met the inclusion criteria and responded to the full questionnaire (Appendix A). Ninety-two percent (n=11) reported a positive change in overall communication. One participant indicated some negative change, three indicated no change, four indicated some positive change, and four indicated strong positive change.

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Age		Gender		Current Relationship Status		Length of Current Relationship					
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%				
22	7	20	Male	4	11	Single	13	37	Less than 6 mo	-	-
23	16	46	Female	31	89	Casual Dating	1	3	6 mo to 1 yr	1	3
24	4	11				Committed Dating	15	43	1 yr to 2 yr	8	23
25	4	11				Engaged	2	6	2 yr to 5 yr	9	26
26	2	6				Married	4	11	5 yr to 10 yr	3	9
27	2	6							10+ yr	-	-

Note. N = 35. All dashes represent a zero.

Communication Satisfaction

Data in Table 2 revealed that 91% of the sample reported no change in overall relationship satisfaction. Participants indicated an increase in satisfaction with quality of communication from before to during COVID-19 restrictions (prior M=3.92; during M=4.17). Frequency of communication remained relatively constant (prior M= 4.00; during M= 4.08). Satisfaction related to variety of conversation topics decreased (prior M=4.17; during M=4.08). Overall, participants did not demonstrate a statically significant difference in any component in communication satisfaction from before to during COVID-19 restrictions (p > 0.05).

Communication Frequency

As shown in Table 3, frequency of communication with a committed partner decreased from prior to during COVID-19 restrictions (prior M= 4.67; during M= 4.50) as did frequency of meaningful and deep conversations (prior M= 4.17; during M= 4.08). Furthermore, participants’ responses suggested a slight increase in confrontation from before to during COVID-19 restrictions (prior M= 2.67; during M= 2.83). Notably, the results did not demonstrate a statically significant difference in any three areas of communication frequency from before to during COVID-19 restrictions (p > 0.05).

Frequency of Media Use

Table 4 reports frequency of media use, which was measured on a five-point Likert scale with 1 representing never to 5 representing very often. Participants reported no change in face-to-face communication. Frequency of communication via phone calling decreased (prior M= 3.25; during M = 2.50) while texting and instant messaging increased (prior M= 4.25; during M = 4.67). Social media use displayed a decrease in frequency, with 58% using it sometimes, rarely, or never during the restrictions. While the mean results demonstrated changes in frequency of media use before to during COVID-19 restrictions, there were no statically significant differences in any areas of frequency of media use (p > 0.05).

Qualitative Data Analysis

A virtual focus group provided insights on participants’ personal experiences specific to COVID-19 restrictions. Six of the 12 (50%) participants who met inclusion criteria volunteered to be a part of the qualitative focus group. Focus group members represented diverse relationship statuses and living situations. Four major themes emerged from the qualitative data. Table 5 presents these themes with representative quotes in order of prevalence as determined by coding frequency.

Table 2
Communication Satisfaction Before and During COVID-19 Restrictions

Question	Not at all satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied	Mean	t-test
	Before/ During %; n	Before/ During	p-value				
Overall relationship satisfaction	-/-	-/ 8% (1)	-/-	33% (4)/ 25% (3)	66% (8)/66% (8)	4.67 / 4.50	0.58
Quality of communication	-/-	-/-	16% (2)/16% (2)	75% (9)/ 50% (6)	8% (1)/ 33% (4)	3.92/ 4.17	0.54
Frequency of communication	-/-	-/ 8% (1)	16% (2)/16% (2)	66% (8)/ 33% (4)	16% (2)/41% (5)	4.00/ 4.08	0.81
Amount of time spent communicating	-/-	8% (1) / 16% (2)	-/-	75% (9)/ 33% (4)	16% (2)/50% (6)	4.00/ 4.17	0.67
Ability to express emotions in conversations	-/-	-/-	16% (2)/16% (2)	58% (7)/ 58% (7)	25% (3)/25% (3)	4.08/ 4.08	1
Partner's ability to understand your views	-/-	8% (1)/ 8% (1)	-/-	75% (9)/ 58% (7)	25% (3)/33% (4)	4.25/ 4.17	0.76
Variety of conversation topics	-/-	-/ 8% (1)	12% (2)/8% (1)	41% (5)/ 50% (6)	33% (4)/33% (4)	4.17/ 4.08	0.80

Note. N = 12. All dashes represent a zero.

Table 3
Communication Frequency Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic Restrictions

Question	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Mean	t-test
	Before/ During %; n	Before/ During	p-value				
Communication with partner	-/-	-/-	-/-	33% (4)/ 50% (6)	66% (8) / 50% (6)	4.67/ 4.50	0.43
Deep, meaningful conversations	-/-	-/ 8% (1)	16% (2)/ 8% (1)	50% (6)/ 50% (6)	33% (4)/ 33% (4)	4.17/ 4.08	0.80
Experience confrontation	8% (1)/ -	25% (3)/ 25% (3)	58% (7)/ 50% (6)	8% (1) / 8% (1)	-/-	2.67/ 2.83	0.56

Note. N = 12. All dashes represent a zero.

Table 4
Frequency of Media Use Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic Restrictions

Media Type	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Mean	t-test
	Before/ During %; n	Before/ During	p-value				
Face-to-face	-/-	-/-	-/ 8% (1)	33% (4)/ 16% (2)	66% (8)/ 75% (9)	4.67/ 4.67	1
Handwritten	41% (5) / 58% (7)	58% (7)/ 41% (5)	-/-	-/-	-/-	1.58/ 1.42	0.44
Phone Call	- / 25% (3)	33% (4)/ 25% (3)	25% (3)/ 25% (3)	25% (3)/ 25% (3)	16% (2) -	3.25/ 2 .50	0.13
Email	50% (6)/ 91% (11)	8% (1)/ 16% (2)	-/-	-/-	-/-	1.25/ 1.08	0.41
Video-chatting	16% (2)/ 58% (7)	50% (6)/ 16% (2)	8% (1)/ 16% (2)	8% (1)/ -	16% (2)/ 16% (2)	2.58/ 2.08	0.42
Text/Instant messaging	-/ 8% (1)	-/ 16% (2)	25% (3)/ 16% (2)	25% (3)/ 16% (2)	50% (6)/ 41% (5)	4.25/ 4.67	0.24
Social media	8% (1)/ 16% (2)	25% (3)/ 33% (4)	25% (3)/ 33% (4)	25% (3) /8% (1)	16% (2)/ 8% (1)	3.17/ 1.42	0.25
Online gaming	83% (10)/ 83% (10)	8% (1)/ 8% (1)	-/-	8% (1)/ -	-/ 8% (1)	1.33/ 2.50	0.85

Note. N = 12. All dashes represent a zero.

Change in Routines

Participants noted many behavior changes related to COVID-19 which affected daily habits and routines including new communicative prioritizations between couples and the times of day which communication occurred in the home environment. Thus, subthemes of change in routine included altered performance patterns, behavioral adjustments, and socialization opportunities.

Personal Reflection

Subthemes of personal reflections included increased challenges, changes in emotions, and satisfaction. Participants repeatedly characterized the experience of forced proximity as challenging and noted experiencing negative emotions toward their partner.

Quantity of Communication

Participants indicated an increase in both duration and frequency of communication while quarantined

with their committed partner. Additionally, type of communication emerged as a subtheme. Multiple participants expressed an increase in face-to-face communication and a decrease in texting and phone calls.

Quality of Communication

Subthemes under quality of communication included the content of conversations and improvement in overall communication. Many participants noted that changes associated with COVID-19 restrictions also caused changes in the topics of conversations particularly associated with future endeavors between the romantic couples (i.e., traveling and weddings) and the occurrence of global issues. The majority of participants noted an overall improvement in communication with their committed partner. Participants expressed overall high levels of satisfaction related to communication with their committed partner during COVID-19 restrictions.

Table 5
Qualitative Data Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quote(s)
Change in Routine	Altered Performance Patterns	"... we were both working from home um or doing school from home so it was nice to get to talk and process through everything that was going on and the transition that he was facing as well um just maybe the stress that I was feeling with school being online so being home together and being able just to talk those things out was really nice rather than one of us maybe going to our more traditional work and then the other one being at home" (p. 5, line 148-153)
	Behavioral Adjustments	"I prioritized the time that he would get home I made sure that I was available to have the conversations with him, um which hasn't necessarily been the priority in the past" (p. 7, line 211-213)
	Opportunities	"..like it gave oppor - more opportunities to have more meaningful conversations... sometimes it just becomes monotonous and it's just kinda one day over the next um so it was nice to kinda have more time than normal to *pause* ah have meaningful conversations I guess" (p. 4, line 141-145)
Personal Reflection	Emotions	"we kinda got um a little tired of each other like a little bugged by each other at times" (p. 4, line 127-128)
	Challenges	"...it was extremely challenging with him constantly on the phone and um not having separate work and study areas for both of us in the house was um I think a big challenge for us" (p. 3, line 88-90)
Quantity of Communication	Duration and Frequency	"Frequency definitely increased like everyone else was saying it was just more convenient for when we were both home together to talk between classes or on breaks, or things like that. Um and I also think that our length of conversations increased as well. um just 'cause we had more time to talk together" (p. 7, line 232-235)
	Type	".. I think that the physical communication happening face-to-face uhm *brief pause* is a lot more beneficial for me than only being able to text or talk on the phone" (p. 9, line 303-304)
Quality of Communication	Content	"our personal discussions *pause* changed a lot because we just didn't have as much to talk about" (p. 3, line 103-104)
		"we talked more about what was happening in the world and the issues that we were facing then so in that sense we had deep conversations" (p. 4, line 134-135)
	Improvement	"...I think we learned just not to sweat the little things, um, and just to be able to talk things out better. So, I think our communication definitely improved" (p. 6, line 193-195)
		"I think as it went on uhm as the stay-at-home order went on we like learned how to be more effective communicators and in a weird way we'll probably like really treasure that going forward" (p. 9, line 296-298)
Satisfaction	"Yeah I'd say in kinda like a weird way I'm really thankful for that time that we had where I wasn't worried about going into class and he wasn't worried about being at work like it just freed up those little minutes throughout the day and I feel like we'll look back on it and just be really grateful for the extra time that we had together..." (p. 9, line 291-294)	

Note. N = 6. Each theme, subtheme, and quote which best represented the subtheme were determined with at least 80% consensus

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceived effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the quantity and quality of communication between self-identified cohabiting, committed partners from an OT perspective. Novel to the current study is the examination of communication routines prior to and during the COVID-19 restrictions. Paired sample t-tests did not show a statistically significant difference in perceived communication satisfaction or frequency before or during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The small sample size and potential bias toward previously developed good communication skills may account for the lack of statistical changes. Nevertheless, the qualitative data revealed trends in changes in perceptions of quantity and quality of communication between committed partners with participants reporting improved communication skills which are worth exploring.

While the quantitative data did not reveal statistically significant changes, the qualitative responses from participants suggested consistent high levels of relationship satisfaction both before and during the COVID-19 restrictions. Qualitative data suggested increased satisfaction as demonstrated by participants' perceived bonding with their committed partner. Perhaps the questionnaire was not sensitive enough to measure increases in satisfaction as participants rated relationship satisfaction so highly prior to participation in the study. Research participants noted generally high levels of satisfaction with communication quality potentially influencing this trend toward higher relational satisfaction. Research showed less conflict was associated with high levels of relationship satisfaction (Knapp et al., 1980). Quantitative data from the current study showed 75% reported low levels of conflict, which is supported by our qualitative data in which conflict was rarely addressed. Perhaps these results reflect that study participants were already good communicators with previously developed skills to positively resolve conflict.

Our findings are also consistent with previous work indicating quality of communication as an

important component for relationship satisfaction (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Toma & Choi, 2016). Quantitative trends suggested a possible increase in satisfaction with overall communication quality. Qualitative responses emphasized participants' gratefulness for increased communicative time and ability to express oneself to their committed partner. Emmers-Sommers (2004) identified content as a significant contributor to quality of communication. Some focus group participants mentioned having less to talk about, a trend reflected in the quantitative data regarding variety of conversation topics. The quantitative data also showed a decrease in frequency of deep, meaningful conversations. However, focus group participants mentioned having more meaningful conversations due to more time and opportunities to discuss topics including current events, future directions of the relationship, and daily activities.

Past scholarship was contradictory regarding the importance of quantity of communication for romantic relationships (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Taylor & Bazarova, 2018; Toma & Choi, 2016). The current study hoped to delineate important quantitative factors; however, results regarding the frequency and duration of communication were mixed. Quantitative data suggested overall perceived frequency of communication with a committed partner decreased slightly, yet qualitative data showed participants communicated more frequently with their committed partner. Potential factors which may have increased frequency as identified by participants included: forced proximity, fewer social options, and more time. Quantitative data showed a decrease in phone calls and an increase in texting, even though focus group data revealed a decrease in texting. Meanwhile, qualitative data showed an increase in face-to-face communication and a decrease in phone calls. Differences in personal circumstances, such as a partner continuing to work outside the home, seemed to be a major contributing factor to how media use changed.

While significance levels do not provide evidence of an increase in satisfaction regarding frequency

and amount of time spent communicating, analysis of means may better represent participants' satisfaction due to the small sample size. Means provided by quantitative data are suggestive of an increase in satisfaction. A qualitative finding worth noting included expressed changes in the duration of communication. Focus group participants reported an increase in the amount of time spent communicating, as they were able to have longer conversations with their committed partner due to more available time. Consistent with our data, Sánchez et al. (2017) suggested that perceptions of communication were subjective. Thus, the inconsistency in our data may reflect that each relationship determines satisfactory frequency and duration for themselves. Overall, despite changes in factors which contribute to quality communication, our findings suggest that participants experienced an overall positive trend in quality of communication.

The data reflected changes in daily routines due to the COVID-19 restrictions, which participants characterized as challenging. Examples included limited physical environment within the home, being “stuck together,” and having limited social interaction. Thus, participants revealed that COVID-19 restrictions disrupted habits and routines of daily life, job performance, and social participation. As anticipated, participants acknowledged the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 restrictions, including stress, increased negative emotions (Pfaff, 2012), and feeling “bugged by” their partner. Previous findings also suggested that change in routine could lead to a decrease in the quality of the relationship (Bavel et al., 2020; Pearson et al., 2010). Despite noting significant changes in habits and routines, relationship satisfaction seemed relatively consistent for study

participants. This may further imply committed partners represented by the current study had established effective communication patterns prior to COVID-19 restrictions, which enabled adaptation during the restrictions.

Despite these challenges, participants illustrated positive behavioral adjustments to adapt to the challenges and embraced opportunities created by the quarantine. Specifically, participants disclosed improved communication skills. Participants also mentioned embracing opportunities to improve communication routines, as represented by a participant's desire to prioritize time to communicate with their partner (refer to Table 5). Thus, participants' modified behaviors reflected personal values of a prioritized relationship.

Patterns, habits, and routines of communication are important to the occupation of social interactions between committed partners. Thus, OT practitioners wishing to address relational satisfaction should consider implications for effective communication including skills, habits, and routines established between committed partners. Further, OT practitioners should consider not only the methods of communication and the frequency, but also how the committed partners perceive the quality of communication. Our findings suggest that committed partners were able to adapt some of their own behaviors to communicate more effectively during the COVID-19 restrictions. Using a client-centered approach when working with committed partners, OT practitioners could recognize strengths and barriers to establish or restore skills related to communication, as well as helping to establish meaningful and effective habits and routines of communication.

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