

A Comparison of Mothers' and Fathers' Reports of Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Analysis of Gender Differences

Background

Throughout the life course, many individuals decide to start families which has been commonly viewed as a transition to adulthood, a time for self-exploration, development of personal and intimate relationships with their partners, and a time associated with defining social roles within intimate relationships such as marriage. Particularly, the demands of motherhood during the early adulthood life stage includes the stressors of having multiple children (Nash et al., 2020). Parenting has also been linked to adults' sense of life purpose and fulfillment. Additionally, the well-being of the parent is also linked to the well-being of their children. In contrast, a negative well-being of a parent is also linked to negative developmental outcomes of their children (Nomaguchi et al., 2020).

In relation to COVID-19, there have been unknowns about the impacts of mental health and well-being of parents and how it affects their relationship with their children. Previous research suggests that stressors of parenting still remain gendered, specifically in mothering. Historically, mothers demonstrated greater feelings of pressure and stress when transitioning to parenthood and other duties related to mothering, which includes housework and childcare (Nomaguchi et al., 2020). This study aims to investigate how COVID-19 has impacted parents' mental health and how mothering may play a role in anxiety and stress response. Previous research has indicated that feelings of attachment between parents and their children will create a strong parent-child bond.

Additionally, having children can create more demands on the parents' daily routines, such as their own physical and mental energy being drained. The focus shifts to caring for their children and making sure they are staying healthy. Thus, they can experience an overload of

demands from both working and parenting (Nomaguchi et al., 2003). Furthermore, the family needs to cope with the various changes that COVID-19 has caused, such as family-work conflicts and their own well-being. Fewer studies have emphasized the role of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the anxiety of parents, and how gender roles can affect their anxiety.

Research Questions

From the current research in this field of study, this study aims to add to this line of research and to answer: (1) Are there differences between mothers' and fathers' anxiety since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) Do mothers demonstrate more anxiety due to their social roles within the family? (3) How do parental social roles play a part in keeping their children and families safe during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Data Collection

The study used a collection of 9 interviews from the Wave Seven Qualitative Interviews for COVID-19 and Social Distancing from the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS) conducted in the Sociology Department at Bowling Green State University. The average participant age was 33.6 years old. The sample composed of three men and six women. Some of the participants had no children, however, the average number of children across the sample was 2. The interviews were products of TARS study which were later transcribed. The transcriptions were used for qualitative analysis in this study. Each of the transcriptions were condensed into an abstract which discussed the participants' background information, as well as a summary of running themes in the transcript such as anxiety, job loss, and other experiences. Specifically, anxiety was analyzed, and useful quotes were made note of in the abstracts. The abstracts were used to assess the differences of anxiety between men and women.

Mothers' Reports of Anxiety During COVID-19

Four out of the six women in the sample were mothers. Three out of four of these mothers reported experiencing anxiety and/or stress as a result of COVID-19. Across these women, there were five main themes that their anxiety stemmed from. The women discussed how they were afraid that their children would catch COVID-19 and get sick. Women also reported more excessive cleaning around the house, such as leaving shoes outside and changing clothes in the garage when coming back from the store or a walk. One woman stated that they would bleach their floors. Another running theme was avoiding other people, especially in public. One participant stated that if they were at the store and someone would walk down the same aisle, she would back out and come back when there were no other people around. Another theme the women followed was that they felt like their husbands or spouses were not as worried about COVID-19 as they were. One woman also shared that she would ask her spouse to take care of the children from the exhaustion she felt from worrying about COVID-19 and taking care of her children at home.

Fathers' Reports of Anxiety During COVID-19

Two out of the three men in the sample were fathers. One out of the two fathers reported experiencing anxiety and/or stress as a result of COVID-19. The father that reported anxiety mentioned that there were increased cleaning efforts within the home, and he would often mop the floors and ask his children to take their shoes off outside and wash their hands. A main theme overall for the men in the sample was that they were worried about their finances and the economy. One father shared that he had lost money since he was not going to work due to COVID-19, and he lost some income that he was planning to save for his childrens' college funds.

Non-Parent Reports of Anxiety During COVID-19

Three out of the nine participants had no children. Two out of nine participants were not mothers, and one out of nine participants were not fathers. Despite not having children, there were still concerns and anxieties that stemmed from COVID-19. One woman reported that she had symptom anxiety. She stated that if she coughed or sneezed, she worried she had contracted COVID-19 and that she would get sick. One male participant reported experiencing anxiety which resulted from listening to the news and seeing social media posts on Facebook. He noted that once he stopped scrolling and listening to some of the news, his feelings of anxiety improved. The last theme among non-parents was being worried about their aging parents catching COVID-19, as well as the economy.

Importance

Based on these findings, there are some implications in regard to mental health, idealized motherhood and gender socialization. Based off of the participants' interviews, it was reported that anxiety has increased in individuals since the start of COVID-19. There was an increase in worrying about one's health, aging parents, as well as experiencing anxiety due to news and social media reports about COVID-19. When looking at the concept of idealized motherhood, women reported more anxiety around children compared to fathers' reports, who focused more on economic stressors. This relates to how mothers feel an increase in stress when transitioning to motherhood and in keeping their children safe. Gender socialization was evidenced in these reports when men reported more worries about their finances, the economy, and the news while mothers reported more anxiety about their children catching COVID-19. Participants who were not parents reported similarly along the lines of fathers' reports.

References

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