

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS AT WORK



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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, caused a global health crisis affecting physical and mental well-being, exacerbating stress and anxiety while disrupting economies and education systems. The crisis led to changes in interpersonal relationships, increased reliance on technology, and highlighted the need for new ethical attitudes in the workplace.

Keywords: Pandemic, Relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in China in late 2019, spread globally, resulting in an unprecedented health crisis. Preventive measures such as social distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination were adopted to control the virus. The pandemic had a profound impact on the physical and mental health of the population, exacerbating stress, anxiety, and depression, especially among the most vulnerable. The global economy suffered from layoffs and business closures, while education faced significant challenges due to school closures and remote learning.

Remote work became common, bringing both autonomy and isolation, leading to interpersonal conflicts upon returning to in-person work. The pandemic also increased instances of moral and sexual harassment at work. In May 2023, the global health emergency was declared over, thanks to advances in prevention and vaccination, although the virus still posed a threat. The return to social life and in-person work required significant adjustments, with technology playing a crucial role in maintaining relationships and facilitating processes during social distancing.

This study aims to discuss interpersonal relationships in the workplace, shedding light on the pandemic context, considering that it could have significant impacts, modifying relationships, increasing technology integration, and facilitating access to information and communication through technologies. However, it also discusses new forms of establishing human and personal relationships, the willingness to understand others, changes in communication, and ethical attitudes toward others and work.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Changes in Human Relationships

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE GLOBAL POPULATION

The identification of COVID-19 dates to late 2019 in the city of Wuhan, located in Hubei Province, China. The virus was initially recognized as a new strain of coronavirus, named SARS-CoV-2, due to its similarity to the coronavirus responsible for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which emerged in 2002 (PAHO, 2022). The first recorded cases of the disease, later termed COVID-19, were linked to a seafood market in Wuhan, suggesting a possible zoonotic origin, meaning transmission from animals to humans. Initial symptoms of COVID-19 included fever, cough, shortness of breath, and, in more severe cases, pneumonia, resembling other viral respiratory illnesses (XAVIER et al., 2020).

The global spread of COVID-19 occurred primarily through person-to-person transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The main identified transmission mechanisms include respiratory droplet transmission, produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or breathes, which are inhaled by nearby individuals, entering the respiratory tract and causing infection. Additionally, contact with contaminated surfaces was identified as a potential transmission mechanism. Research indicates that the virus can survive on surfaces for several hours or days, depending on the material (FIOCRUZ, 2024). When a person touches a contaminated surface and then touches their face, especially the eyes, nose, or mouth, transmission can occur. Asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission also posed significant concerns, as many infected individuals could spread the virus without showing symptoms, making detection and control more difficult (WHO, n.d.).

International travel control was also a crucial factor. The global spread of COVID-19 was accelerated by international travel, with infected individuals transporting the virus to new geographical areas, where they initiated new transmission chains. Preventive measures, such as controlling and canceling large gatherings, were implemented to mitigate super-spreader events, where an infected person could transmit the virus to many individuals in a short period (SACRAMENTO, 2022).

These combined factors resulted in the rapid spread of COVID-19 around the world, leading to a global pandemic. The response to the pandemic was and continues to be challenging, with countries adopting measures such as social distancing, mask-wearing, mass testing, contact tracing, and travel restrictions to control the spread of the virus and protect public health. Since then, scientists, researchers, and health professionals worldwide have worked tirelessly to understand the virus, develop vaccines, treatments, and control strategies to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. International collaboration has been essential in this effort, with data sharing, information, and resources aimed at addressing this global health crisis (SIPPERT, 2023).

Although significant advances have been made in combating COVID-19, the pandemic continues to pose substantial challenges for public health and society. The rapid spread of virus variants, issues related to mass vaccination, and the ongoing need for public health measures underscore the complexity and persistence of this global crisis. To contain the spread of COVID-19, widely implemented public health measures such as social distancing, mask-wearing, hand hygiene, and isolation have been adopted worldwide. These measures, while essential, have also had a significant impact on global

economies, leading to business closures, job losses, and financial difficulties for many (IPEA, 2023).

CHANGES IN FAMILY AND FRIEND RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the immediate effects on physical health, the pandemic also had a profound impact on the mental health of the population. Social distancing, fear of illness, and uncertainty about the future contributed to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression globally. People in already vulnerable situations, such as the elderly, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions, and marginalized communities, were particularly affected. The COVID-19 pandemic had significant repercussions on almost all aspects of life, both individually and collectively (DAL PAI et al., 2021).

Various significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were observed globally. In terms of physical health, aside from those infected with the virus, there were interruptions in preventive care and treatments for other health conditions due to the redirection of resources to combat COVID-19 (PAHO, 2022). Additionally, pandemic-related stress and lifestyle changes may have contributed to the emergence or worsening of health issues, such as sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression (PAHO, 2022).

Economically, the pandemic triggered a global economic crisis, significantly affecting employment, income, and financial stability (WORLD BANK, 2022). Many businesses were forced to temporarily close or reduce their operations, resulting in mass layoffs and job losses. Sectors such as tourism, hospitality, entertainment, and small businesses were especially hard hit (DALONSO et al., 2021).

The closure of schools and universities during the pandemic disrupted the education of millions of students around the world. The transition to remote learning presented challenges such as lack of internet access, scarcity of technological resources, and difficulties adapting to the new learning format, primarily affecting the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society (DIAS; RAMOS, 2022). Moreover, students faced emotional and social challenges due to isolation and lack of in-person interaction with peers and teachers.

In the realm of social life and emotional well-being, social distancing and travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic impacted people's social lives, resulting in isolation, loneliness, and lack of human contact. There was an increase in family conflicts, divorces, and domestic violence in Brazil, reflecting negative consequences for emotional

and mental well-being, with increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (HEILBORN et al., 2020; SANTOS, 2022; ORNELL et al., 2020; SOUZA and FARIAS, 2022).

The new lifestyle and behaviors adopted also underwent significant changes in the context of the pandemic. The use of face masks, social distancing, frequent hand hygiene, and other preventive measures became part of everyday life.

ADJUSTING WORK TO SOCIAL DISTANCING

Beyond the changes adopted across all aspects of individuals' personal lives, alterations were also necessary in the work context for a large part of the workforce. Changes in work patterns, such as the increase in remote work and a reduction in social and leisure activities, altered routines and habits during this period. There was also an impact on physical activity and dietary routines, promoting a higher adoption of behaviors harmful to health (MALTA et al., 2020).

For workers who were able to adapt to remote work, either in a home office or hybrid format, the changes had significant impacts on the restructuring of their routines and the integration of the work environment into personal life, considering that most of them developed their activities at home. Thus, there are reflections on the difficulties in ergonomic adaptation, aiming to ensure workers an adequate space for executing their activities while maintaining an appropriate work schedule, as well as using equipment and tools that guarantee their physical and emotional health. In this regard, the dysfunctionality of integrating work into the family environment also reflects changes in the relationship between work, family, and home, which interferes with the balance between work and personal life, including leisure and rest for workers (TENÓRIO, 2021).

In the context of work during the pandemic, significant changes were observed, profoundly affecting the lives of workers. A study conducted by Zanuzzi and Villela (2024) in 2020 indicated that, of the 756 questionnaires submitted, the statistics indicated that:

53.4% reported that their lives had gotten "worse" since the pandemic began. 25.5% could not control their levels of worry, about 10% reported that their relationship with their partner was not good, and 4.7% stated that their relationship with their children was strained. 40% reported watching more television, 60% spent more time online (outside of work), 56.2% spent more time on social media (outside of work), 60.5% exercised less, 32.2% rested less, and 25.6% slept less (ZANUZZI; VILLELA, 2024).

The Kubler-Ross (1996) theory addresses important aspects of grief, which can be used to understand the changes affecting an individual's life and emotional state and can be applied to the situation that occurred during the pandemic. The author (1996) establishes five stages: denial, where the individual, often in shock, as a defense mechanism, cannot believe in the situation, refusing to experience it and possibly isolating for a period; anger, when the individual begins to understand and accept the situation but tends to seek blame in themselves or others, showing heightened irritability and aggressiveness, potentially leading to interpersonal conflicts; bargaining, a stage where the individual, after dealing with denial and anger, understands they cannot change the situation they are in and tends to make deals and seek means to access a "middle ground" to mitigate the negative effects of the situation or at least compensate for the losses it brings; depression, identified as one of the lowest points in the process, when the person truly accepts the situation and sees no prospect of changing or compensating for it, leading to predominant feelings of sadness, loss of interest, and negative emotions, which is an important process for arriving at the next stage, acceptance, when the individual finally understands and accepts the situation in its real mode, opening themselves to new possibilities and reinterpretations, making themselves available for the new and the future, and whatever comes from it in a more conscious and hopeful way.

Considering Kubler-Ross's theory, alongside the data collected by Zanuzzi and Villela, it is evident that the changes adopted in the execution of remote work proved to be significant and challenging elements in the lives of workers and families. This required attention to both deal with the pandemic issue that occurred worldwide and manage the adaptations adopted and necessary for the preservation of oneself and containment of the virus. Considering these changes, there was an urgent need for adjustments to preserve family relationships, which began to be experienced more intensely due to remote work conducted at home, highlighting and/or generating conflicts and needs for adaptation and resilience in the realm of communication and interpersonal relationships.

Another relevant factor to note is the recorded increase in cases of moral and sexual harassment at work during this period. According to the Superior Labor Court (TST), at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a decline in reports, a situation that quickly changed, as it was noted that throughout the year 2021, 3,049 cases of sexual harassment and 52,936 cases of moral harassment were recorded in the country. For comparative purposes, it is noted that in 2019 and 2020, there were 12,349 and 12,529 cases,

respectively, throughout the entire year. A possible reason identified for this increase is "the management's lack of boundaries regarding the alleged high availability of the employee, who was accessed at any time, exceeding their daily workload due to being in home office," as well as "the imposition of camera use, for example [...] Requiring the use of cameras can constitute moral harassment when a person does not want to expose their home privacy. Conversely, this can also facilitate sexual harassment" (PIAI, 2022).

A 2023 study published by Stanford University pointed out that fully remote work was associated with productivity around 10% lower than fully in-person work. According to the authors, among the associated factors, key issues included challenges in remote communication, barriers to guidance, culture building, and motivation problems (Barrero, Bloom & Davis). These factors highlight a crucial aspect regarding interpersonal relationships and how they changed during the distancing period, not only as a personal, family, and institutional concern but also implicating the culture of institutions and the performance of its employees.

Regarding positive aspects, during the pandemic, it was found that the adoption of remote work allowed companies to reduce expenses and gain some benefits. Being in their personal spaces permitted some employees to experience greater autonomy and freedom in task execution, as well as a better balance between family and work. Furthermore, the integration of digital tools as a critical part of task execution showed positive outcomes for the technological advancement of institutions, leading to updates and modernization of processes.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORK CONTEXT RETURNING TO IN-PERSON WORK AND READAPTING TO DAILY INTERACTION

After more than three years of global emergency measures initiated in January 2020, the global health emergency of COVID-19 was declared over in May 2023. Many institutions had already returned to in-person work, adopting measures to relax isolation. Although the spread and threat of health concerns posed by the virus had not entirely ceased, it was understood that health prevention and care measures had advanced sufficiently to minimize cases; as well as a boost in sanitary surveillance and vaccination led to a progressive decrease in hospitalizations and deaths due to COVID-19 worldwide (SENADO FEDERAL, 2023).

The return to social interaction spaces demonstrated significant impact due to the prolonged period of distancing. In education, for example, a notable increase in aggression and violence was identified, as indicated by a national survey conducted in 2022 by Nova Escola, a social organization that supports basic education teachers. The survey showed that 65.8% of teachers perceived those students exhibited more violence that year, associating factors such as increased psychological issues due to isolation (50.6%), worsening family vulnerability during the pandemic (46%), and a lack of socialization during the pandemic (40.5%) as the main reasons for this scenario (FOLHA DE LONDRINA, 2023).

In the work context, returning to in-person work may have triggered a mix of feelings and expectations, depending on how individuals experienced the pandemic. Some sectors, particularly essential services, maintained their activities while implementing protective measures for employees. However, other services, which allowed for remote work, largely remained distanced during this time, gradually returning according to global and institutional flexibility measures, as well as current labor laws, allowing them to experience a return to in-person work along with the interpersonal interactions and challenges that came with it.

The return to in-person work required many institutions to adapt both physical and subjective work environments to safely reintegrate their employees, considering their experiences and new perspectives stemming from the pandemic, as well as ensuring the safety of employees, particularly in companies that returned from remote work during periods of flexibility.

Resuming in-person work became challenging, especially for families without childcare options, as schools continued remote learning for a significant period. These concerns, combined with the fear of virus transmission—whether through contact with colleagues or during commutes, alongside any situation that could expose employees or their families to risk—made returning to the workplace particularly difficult. Additionally, many employees developed mental health issues during the pandemic. In this context, support from family and colleagues played a significant role in providing security and assistance for individuals to cope with the changes more calmly.

IMPORTANCE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE INTEGRATION AND PROMOTION OF TECHNOLOGIES

Based on the previously discussed data, it is essential to emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships and communication throughout the distancing period and upon returning to in-person activities. Some institutions dedicated resources for emotional support during the distancing phase and worked on reintegrating teams. It is important to note that many activities during distancing were developed individually, promoting a degree of isolation among individuals while providing them with autonomy and oversight over their actions and decisions. With the return to in-person work, colleagues and supervisors became more directly involved in work tasks, leading to interpersonal conflicts. The lack of in-person social interaction experienced during isolation, combined with inadequate communication management, exacerbated these conflicts.

During the pandemic, there was an increase in the use of technological tools for interpersonal communication, including communication applications, social media engagement, video calls, and collaborative writing tools, significantly impacting personal and work relationships. It is understood that as a result, interactions became increasingly individualistic, with communications influenced by algorithms, becoming more controlled, where individuals engaged with those who shared similar opinions while easily distancing themselves from opposing viewpoints, imposing boundaries when they deemed necessary. Escaping from communication through comments or "blocking" individuals when unavailable for conversation became common. Consequently, individuals created a safe space for themselves and experienced a sense of freedom and power—a dynamic that differs from in-person interactions yet can be damaging to interpersonal relationships and mental health (ESPÓSITO, 2022).

Despite the concerns raised, it is necessary to remember that technology proved to be a significant ally, especially during the social distancing period, becoming an indispensable tool for social integration and interpersonal communication. Additionally, they facilitated bureaucratic processes by allowing greater flexibility for their completion, bringing about important updates and introducing new ways to execute tasks and modernize processes. In the realm of communication, they also provided valuable perspectives, acting as vital tools for preserving bonds and contact during social distancing (CASTRO, 2020).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is widely acknowledged how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of the global population, from its onset to the present day, where we continue to experience the effects of all the necessary mobilization for its containment and the ramifications left in its wake. In daily life, one often hears discussions referring to the period of social distancing as a "pause in life," while others describe it as a "rebirth." Everyone has stories to recount about their experiences, often tied to fear, uncertainty, insecurities, and many other feelings that this period fostered in the lives of the population at large.

It is crucial to reflect on the substantial push towards the utilization of technological tools, the production of content and scientific studies, and the opening for secure and considerably rapid digitalization of processes. Nonetheless, it is important to note that every usage must be evaluated and executed responsibly to prevent these tools from becoming weapons that harm the lives of users and those around them, contributing to the spread of fake news, violence, and cyberbullying, for example.

In the workplace, considering all technological and behavioral changes, as well as the challenges these transformations may present, it is emphasized that leaders and managers must stay updated on the conscientious use of communication tools, whether mediated by technology or not. Fostering positive interpersonal relationships through training and updates on communication can facilitate assertive communication, effective feedback, and conflict mediation. Another relevant point is the importance of physical and mental health care, which includes focusing on emotional intelligence, setting boundaries, self-awareness, and self-care. These factors can positively affect both individuals and organizations, fostering a positive organizational climate that enhances motivation and self-esteem among employees. Such practices can create a sense of purpose and achievement at work, minimizing the negative effects of occupational stress and illnesses, particularly in the post-pandemic context. Emotional support and care can be valuable tools in addressing mental health issues for employees and their families.

A workspace that is both physically and emotionally secure can contribute to a positive organizational climate and, consequently, may be an essential factor in promoting health, fulfillment, satisfaction, and cooperation. Although some challenges from the pandemic period persist regarding the construction of collaborative and integrated environments, there is a general understanding of the potential of workplaces as productive

environments that influence individual subjectivities, acting as transformative spaces for individuals and their realities, serving as significant sources of health and quality of life.

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