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Working at home during the Covid-19 pandemic: impact on quality of working and quality of life

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Abstract

The restrictions implemented by governments in order to contain Covid-19 pandemic have forced millions of people around the world to adapt to new demands in their daily lives, work and studies.

Such reformulation of personal, work and social experiences has increased the perception of precariousness and instability, and has questioned the routines and the habits linked to the working and personal behaviours.

The aim of the study was to explore: (a) the psychological impact of the restrictions on work activity and on the perceived quality of life; (b) the way in which people using their psychological resources, adapted or changed their daily habits and behaviours according to the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

The survey used was composed as follows: satisfaction with life scale; flourishing scale; ad hoc questionnaire exploring quality of life and work during the pandemic, and personal resources.

Data were analysed through mixed methods. The results have highlighted the different impact of the restrictions on the quality of life, the quality of work and the perceived work performance according to the different psychological resources deployed by participants and to their perception of social distancing, time at home, and life-work balance. Furthermore, gender differences were explored.

Finally, the study provided useful insights for psychologists and career counselling professionals, who have to face new challenges in supporting their clients even in adverse conditions.

Keywords: Covid -19; smart working; psychological resources; work performance; quality of life.

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Introduction

The diffusion of Covid-19 and the subsequent restrictions imposed by governments to contain the pandemic have forced millions of people around the world to adapt to new, unprecedented demands quickly. The lockdown has led not only to a reconfiguration of daily routines, but also to a shift of social and work interactions to an almost exclusively 'telematic' level impacting on the quality of life of individuals (Epifanio et al., 2021; Italian National Institute of Statistics [ISTAT], 2020) and their mental well-being (Brooks et al., 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

Isolation, economic and job uncertainty, and psychosocial risks resulting from Covid-19 had severe consequences on the quality of work, increasing workers' stress (Venegas Tresierra & Leyva Pozo, 2020; Phillips, 2020), burnout (Restauri & Sheridan, 2020) and threatening workers' well-being (Phillips, 2020).

On the one hand, the transposition of usual working practices to remote allowed employees to discover that working from home was possible (Baert et al., 2020) and has allowed to maintain the supply of services and the production process; on the other, however, the 'work from home' has been implemented in an emergency way, suddenly and with little planning, hindering workers from adapting and equipping themselves appropriately, especially in times of psychological distress (Toscano & Zappalà, 2020). Therefore, even though the main strength of smart working lies in the possibility of carrying out one's work virtually anywhere, a remote form of work requires flexibility and adaptation according to the technological tools and to the workers' personal resources. Workers have been required to develop new skills, not only related to the massive use of technology, but also to the overall management of time, relationships, space and intra- and extra-work, personal and family balances. Several studies conducted before the pandemic, had already shown that managing the boundaries between work and life space is a potential element of tension in people's lives (Allen & Martin, 2017; Kossek, 2016); moreover, pandemic-related circumstances have forced most workers to reorganize work-life balance, often creating conflicts (Schieman et al., 2021; Phillips, 2020) and more imprecise and blurred boundaries (Anwer, 2020).

In addition, Landivar et al. (2020) pointed out that the 2019 coronavirus crisis was a potential element of gender discrimination in women's labour force participation. The results of their study illustrated that in the US, women, particularly mothers, are more likely than fathers to exit the labour force and become unemployed during the covid-19-related crisis. The closure of schools, in fact, has meant that parents had to take on more childcare responsibilities, even during working hours, which led to changes in working hours and weighed particularly on mothers (Collins et al., 2021; Cooper & Mosseri, 2020).

Considering these challenging conditions, we have decided to explore how individuals have coped with the difficulties linked to lockdown, starting from the psychological resources deployed, with the aim to better understand which elements are crucial to guaranteeing the maintenance of a good quality of life and work, even in adverse conditions.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore the psychological impact of the restrictions due to the pandemic on working activity, during the initial stage of the Covid-19 outbreak, in an Italian sample. In particular, this study aims to detect whether the changes in working routine had a positive or negative effect on the perceived quality of life.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from April 6th to May 25th, 2020, during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, through an online survey. The participants expressed their consent to the participation in the study and were free to abandon it at any time.

The participants were recruited with a convenience sampling. The respondents were 278 Italian adults (M = 74, F = 204), coming from different Italian regions, obliged to work at home due to the lockdown; they were aged between 18 and 65 years (M = 43.12; SD = 9.59). Most of them had a university degree (215, 77.3%); the remaining part had a high school degree (61, 22%) and junior high school degree (2, .7%). More than a half (58.1%) had children. The working activities are distributed as represented in Table 1.

Tab. 1. Distribution of the participants by professional activities.

Professional activity	Frequency	Percentage
Employee	80	28.8
Education	48	17.3
Psycho-social	49	17.6
Freelancer	17	6.1
Commercial	29	10.4
Other	55	19.8
Total	278	100.0

Instruments

Data were collected using an ad hoc survey, exploring the following aspects: socio-demographic information (gender, age, instruction, current location, and employment status); perception of the quality of life during the lockdown; perception of the working performance during the lockdown; skills and competences developed due to the smart work. Moreover, two validated scales were included: the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1995), that is the most used measure of the quality of life, composed of five items with

a 7-point Likert scale (Cronbach's alpha = .87; sample item: "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"); the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010), that is a brief measure of the meaningfulness of life; it is composed of eight items with a 7-point Likert scale (Cronbach's alpha = .87; sample item: "I am a good person and live a good life").

Due to the purpose of the current study, being a worker was the only inclusion criterion. Participants completed the questionnaires through an online survey platform (Google Forms). It took approximately 15 min to complete. To prevent double compilation, the respondents were asked to provide an individual code composed of the first three letters of the last name and the first three letters of the first name that, matched with other demographic information, permitted to check any eventual duplicate.

Data analyses

Data analysis was conducted through mixed procedures. First, we have analysed the texts of the answers given to the open questions through the assumptions of linguistic pragmatic, a particular sector of sociolinguistics, which deals with the text, with the "speech acts" that communicants exchange with each other (Austin, 1962; Searle et al., 1980). In answering the questions that investigate significant aspects of one's life, the use of different types of speech acts is related to the individual meanings and feelings related to the question. This type of analysis was conducted by two of the researchers that are experts in psycholinguistics. The coherence index (number of agreeing codes/total codes) between the two judges was 0.99 on their initial coding. Where differences emerged, an agreement was reached after a discussion between the two judges. Second, we have conducted a qualitative analysis of the content of the answers to the open questions, related to relevant categories and themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This type of analysis uses an inductive approach, based on data, that allows to draw conclusions without having any starting hypotheses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This procedure is consistent with the Grounded Theory Methods (GTM), making the theory emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The categorization was made by two of the authors; the coherence index between the two judges was 0.98 on their initial coding. Where differences emerged, an agreement was reached after a discussion between the two judges. Third, the relationships between some of the items have been explored through a correspondence analysis, a statistical technique aimed at examining the relationship between categorical variables, computing correspondences for two-way or multiway tables of categorical variables. Tables are decomposed into row and column coordinates, which are displayed in a graph; categories that are similar appear close to each other in the graphs (Greenacre, 1984). Descriptive analysis, contingency tables with Pearson's Chi-square, t test for independent samples for gender comparison, and Spearman's rho to analyse the correlations for ordinal variables were also computed. SPSS version 25 statistical package was used for performing the analyses.

Results

Quantitative analysis of the answers to the closed questions

The first part of the survey regarded the adjustment of the participants to the changes required by working at home. The respondents expressed their agreement to some questions – reported in Table 2 – using one of the options presented.

Tab. 2. Distribution of the participants by closed items

Do you have a personal device, with which only you work?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	251	90.3
No	27	9.7
Total	278	100.0
Have you already used smart work before?	Frequency	Percentage
Never	138	49.6
Sometimes	113	40.6
Always	27	9.7
Total	278	100.0
You adapted to the new way of working in ...	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 week	218	78.4
More than 1 week	38	13.7
More than 2 weeks	12	4.3
Not yet	10	3.6
Total	278	100.0

As reported in Table 2, even though the most part of the participant (49.6%) had never used working at home before the lockdown, the adaption to the new organization of working was quick (92.1% of the respondents employed less than two weeks; among them, the 78.4% felt to effectively manage the different way of working in less than one week). Probably, the possibility to use a personal device to work could be considered a facilitating factor. However, exploring the relationship between working performance and the times of adaptation to the new ways of working, we found a significant negative correlation ($\rho = -.26$, $p < .001$), indicating that the more time was employed to adapt to new working conditions, the worse the performance is perceived.

Regarding these two items, gender differences were explored: the results indicated no differences between men and women in previous experiences in smart working (Chi-square = 1.88; $df = 2$; $p = 0.39$) and in the adaptation of the new organization of working (Chi-square = 4.42; $df = 3$; $p = 0.22$). Moreover, the SWLS ($M_{men} = 24.26$, $SD_{men} = 5.16$; $M_{women} = 24.22$, $SD_{women} = 5.36$; $t = .06$; $p = 0.96$) and Flourishing ($M_{men} = 43.09$, $SD_{men} = 7.25$; $M_{women} = 44.50$, $SD_{women} = 6.53$; $t = -1.46$; $p = 0.15$) scores were not significantly different in the two subgroups.

Regarding the self-perception about the quality of working performance during the lockdown period, and the subsequent social restrictions and smart work, the most part of the participants perceived their working performance as stable or worse (73.8%);

no gender differences were found at this item (Chi-square = .52; df = 2; p = 0.77); the most part of them (60.1%) is convinced that some of the solutions applied to face with the social restrictions imposed by the pandemic could be extended in the future, changing the way in which the work organization is managed.

Regarding the self-perception about the quality of life during the lockdown period, the most part of the participants perceived their quality of life as stable or worse (76.3%); this perception did not significantly differ among men and women (Chi-square = 3.76; df = 2; p = 0.15). Relating the perception to the quality of life during the pandemic to the life satisfaction and meaningfulness of life – that can be considered as indicators of subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000) – through the Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, we found no significant relationships (SWLS: rho = 0.03, p = 0.67; Flourishing: rho = 0.07, p = 0.26), indicating that regardless the general subjective well-being, the specific circumstances had a negative effect on the perception of well-being during to the isolation period. The same results are confirmed analysing the correlations separately in men and women. Moreover, the perception of quality of life during the pandemic period is positively and significantly related to the perception of working performance (rho = .25, p < .001), and negatively to the time employed to adapt to working through the technological devices (rho = -.20, p = .001). Both men and women showed the same results.

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the answers to the open questions

The analysis of the open-ended responses was conducted in two steps: the first was focused on the form in which the participants gave their answers, the second was focused on the content of the answers.

First step

We analysed the two blocks or units of the answers given to two open questions: (1) Indicate three new things, related to your work, that you do today and that you did not do before; (2) What skills and resources of which you were not aware did you ‘discover’ during this period of isolation? The questions were designed to solicit the production of answers related to the participants’ representations of the elements of novelty associated with work and the skills and personal resources discovered during the period of health emergency. With respect to the form used by the participants in the two selected text units, three different types of answers can be identified: lists, complex answers, and minimal answers.

Type 1. The *lists* (numbered, with hyphens, with commas/dots and commas, with full stops, without punctuation) are the most numerous in both text units. Among the various syntactic forms that could be chosen, the lists are generally neutral, and the use of lists is related to a merely descriptive text, without any evaluation (Weber, 1974); on the contrary, our respondents, using the lists, take a position of value. For example:

“I work on a small monitor in place of two big monitors, 2. I do not manage paper anymore, 3. I no longer have telephone contacts, only emails”

In this response, the time seems to be divided in a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, and the after has a negative connotation.

“I don’t look at the agenda. I don’t look at timetables. I have no breaks”

In this response, the repeated use of negation indicated that the present is worse than the past.

Type 2. The *complex answers* report inner reflections on a problem; they contain more than was required. This type of answer indicates self-reflection, it is a discourse that the respondents make with themselves. For example:

“Give frontal lessons, monologues with no impact on students because communicating on the platform creates confusion, and they prefer to keep quiet by switching off the microphone. Also, there is no overall eye contact among the whole class”.

The analysis of this answer suggests that there are two opposite parts: me (the respondent) *vs.* them (the students); probably the answer overcame the intentions of the respondent but seems to be a reliable representation of a new experience related to the working activity, that has been lived worse than the past ones.

Type 3. The *minimal or “flash” answers* (one word, two words, one sentence) are superficial answers, indicating the lack of investigation or reflection, and often the lack of contextualization. For example:

“Nothing”
“The calm”

Second step

We analysed the content of the answers to the open questions identifying the following categories, as reported in Table 3.

Tab. 3. Categorization of the open items

Motivations for a worse or better quality of life	Frequency	Percentage
More time/tranquillity; less work/stress	43	15.5
Less time/tranquillity; more work/stress	25	9.0
Stay at home/with family	12	4.3
Social distancing/restrictions	58	20.9
Positive-negative imbalance	71	25.5
Other	20	7.2
N.r.	49	17.6
Total	278	100.0
In which way your work could change in the future?	Frequency	Percentage
Improvement smart work	61	21.9
Greater or better use of technology	35	12.6
Better time management	14	5.0
Change in social relationships	10	3.6
Other	42	15.1
N.r.	116	41.7
Total	162	100.0

What skills and resources you were not aware of did you 'discover' during this time of isolation?	Frequency	Percentage
Psychological resources	57	20.5
Organizational-behavioural strategies	51	18.3
Technological skills	47	16.9
Other	123	44.2
Total	278	100.0

Gender differences were explored in these three open items, showing the following results: no significant differences were found in the responses to the item "In which way your work could change in the future? (Chi-square = 3.70; $df = 4$; $p = 0.45$) and to the item "What skills and resources you were not aware of did you 'discover' during this time of isolation?" (Chi-square = 5.60; $df = 3$; $p = 0.13$); significant gender differences are shown in the responses to the item "Motivations for a worse or better quality of life" (Chi-square = 12.96; $df = 5$; $p = 0.02$); the most significant results are regarding the differences in the second category of responses "less time/tranquillity; more work/stress": with respect to the men, the women significantly perceived to have less time and more work and stress (13.77% *vs.* 3.23%); furthermore, men have the perception of a different work-life balance due to the life conditions during the pandemic, with respect to the women (41.94% *vs.* 26.94%).

Then, we have analysed semantic organizations between the responses to couples of items, with the aim to explore any eventual semantic association among them. More specifically, we have verified the association between the perception of quality of life during the lockdown and the related motivations, also comparing men and women. Correspondence analysis was used; in the men's subgroup, it was based on $n = 62$ categorized

sentences. The model has an inertia (i.e., distance from centroids of the dimensions) = 1.86, chi-square = 115.09 ($df = 10$, $p < .001$). The plot of the scores in two dimensions, with symmetrical normalization, is reported in Figure 1a.

The correspondence analysis in the women's subgroup was based on $n = 165$ categorized sentences; the model has an inertia = 1.73, chi-square = 285.91 ($df = 10$, $p < .001$). The plot of the scores in two dimensions, with symmetrical normalization, is reported in Figure 1b.

So, as we can observe in Figure 1a and 1b, a perception of a worse quality of life is associated with the social distancing, the restrictions in personal freedom, as well as the work loading perceived as more stressful. On the contrary, a better perception of the quality of life is associated with the possibility to stay at home and have more time that can be dedicated to the family, and to work in a less stressful way. Finally, the perception of an equal quality of life, respect to the 'normal' way of living is associated with a perception of imbalance between positive and negative aspects of the lockdown. Even though the semantic associations are similar in the graphics of the two subgroups, the position in the space is very different: in fact, whilst men tend to refer more frequently a positive experience related to the pandemic situation (high position in the graphic), in women's graphic, the high position is occupied by the negative experience related to the pandemic situation and its related motivations.

Subsequently, we have verified the association between the perception of quality of life during the lockdown and the resources developed, comparing men and women. The models tested on separate subgroups were not statistically significant. On the contrary, the correspondence analysis on the whole group of respondents, based on $n = 276$ categorized sentences was significant. The model has an inertia = 0.051, chi-square = 14.200 ($df = 6$, $p = .027$). The plot of the scores in two

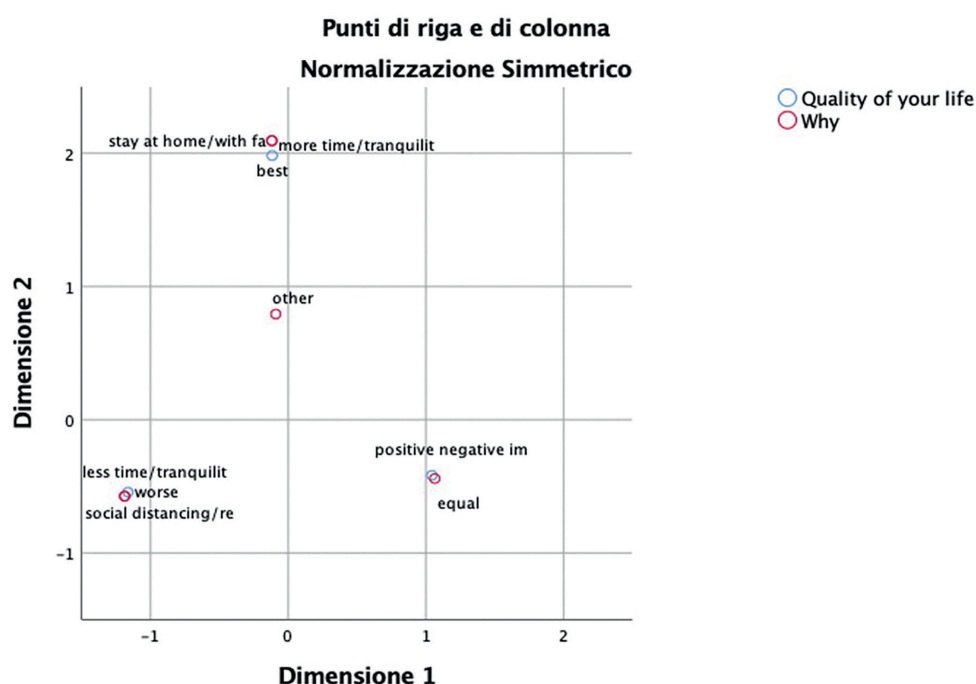


Fig. 1a. Results of correspondence analysis of quality of life and motivations, men's subgroup

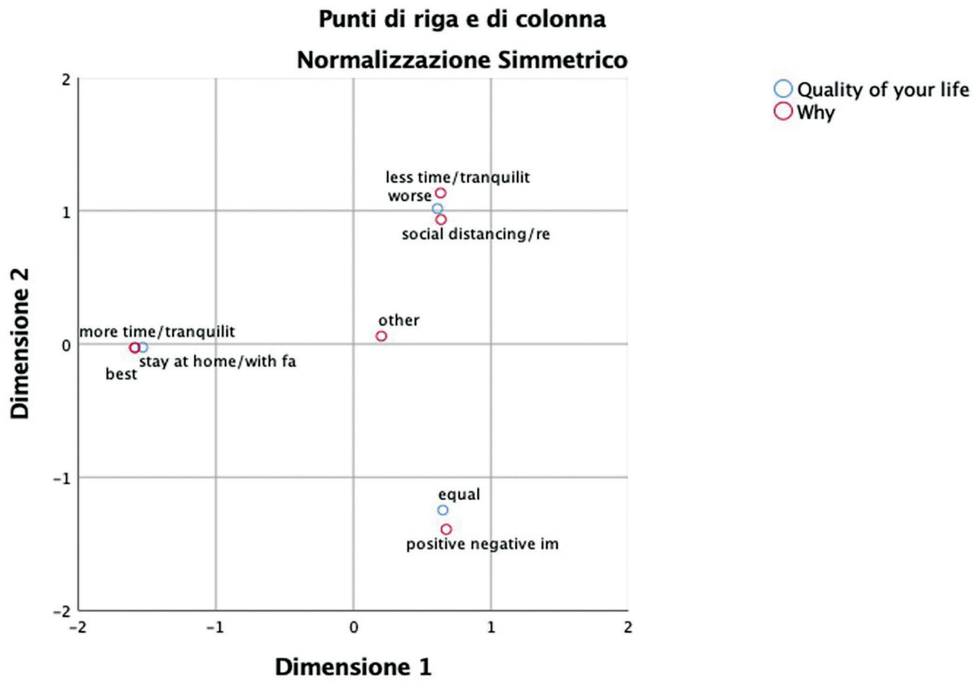


Fig. 1b. Results of correspondence analysis of quality of life and motivations, women's subgroup

dimensions, with symmetrical normalization, is reported in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that a best perception of quality of life is associated to the development of psychological resources to deal with the uncertainty related to the restrictions; on the other hand, a worse perception of the quality of life is related to any specific competence or resource, or with the development of competence or resources not specifically related to the management of the critical situation (e.g., cooking). The

development of technological skills has permitted our respondent to maintain the *status quo*.

A further correspondence analysis explored the association between the perception of quality of working performance during the lockdown and the resources developed. Correspondence analysis was based on $n = 276$ categorized sentences. The model (inertia = 0.043, chi-square = 11.84, $df = 6$, $p = .07$) was not significant, neither in the whole group of respondents, nor in the subgroups of men and women.

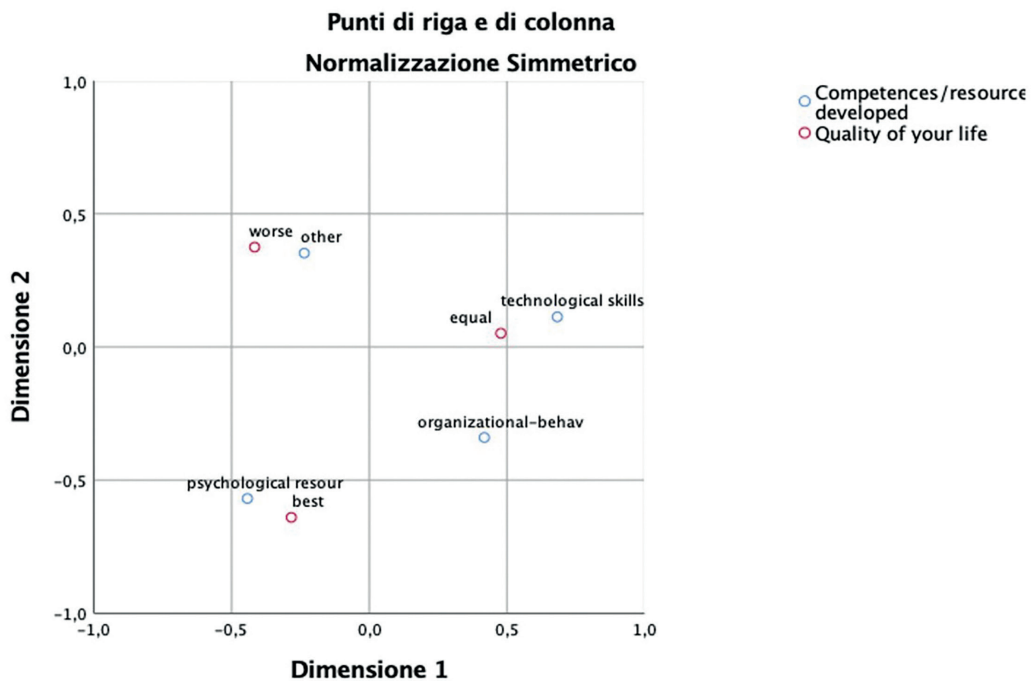


Fig. 2. Results of correspondence analysis of quality of life and competences and resources developed

Discussion

The present study aimed to detect the impact of the changes in working routines during the restrictions imposed by the pandemic on the quality of life of a group of workers. The results show that, even though the majority of the respondents have adapted quickly to new ways of working, they experience a worse quality of their working performance and a worse quality of life in general, independently from their general subjective well-being. Through the analysis of the form of the answers provided to the open questions, we have identified some vocabularies (words or typical language habits or idioms) that can be considered as barriers to the action, as they are a source of worry and anxiety. In fact, the position taken by the respondent on the linguistic plan (e.g., *before was better, now is worse*) is associated with a cognitive representation of the present; the dealing with a problematic present is possible only after having developed the awareness about it.

Furthermore, the analysis of the content of the same answers allowed to identify the categories of motivations that led to experience a better or a worse quality of life; the categories negatively characterized are, i.e., less time and more work, social restrictions, negative work-life imbalance; the categories positively characterized are, i.e., more time and less work, stay at home, positive work-life balance.

The gender differences explored showed some interesting results: although no significant differences were found with regard to life satisfaction and subjective well-being, women perceived - differently from men - that they have worse overall quality of life because of less time, more work and more stress; moreover, men have the perception of a different work-life balance respect to the past, due to the life conditions during the pandemic, with respect to the women. Furthermore, men and women differ in the amount of positive or negative experience and their related quality of life: in fact, though the semantic associations between worse quality of life and social distancing, restrictions, and more stressful work loading, on one hand, and better quality of life with staying at home having more time for the family, and with working in a less stressful way, on the other, are similar for men and women, the position of these association in the space is very different, pointing out that men refer more positive experiences related to the pandemic situation while women report more negative ones.

The gender differences that emerged in our study are presumably linked to the way in which childcare, homeschooling and increased housework have been allocated in the intra-family space during the pandemic, depending on smart working and the demands of employers. It has been shown that these responsibilities, which were traditionally placed more on women, increased during the pandemic period to fall on mothers rather than fathers (Collins et al., 2021; Qian & Fuller, 2020). Another probable reason for the gender differences could be found in the different intensity or frequency of negative feelings felt towards the pandemic situation by women and men. For example, recent studies have shown that women report more high levels of threat and fear of Covid -19 than men (Nino et al., 2021; Sánchez-Teruel et al., 2021). Moreover, the increased fear of Covid-19 could play an important role between people's negative affects and their wellbeing (Zammitti, et al., 2021),

being associated with the onset of PTSD symptoms during the pandemic (Di Crosta et al., 2020) and affecting people's quality of life (Ashraf et al., 2021).

Finally, the most represented skills and resources that the respondents are aware to have developed during the isolation are the psychological resources and the organizational-behavioural strategies. The first ones allowed our participants to deal effectively with the uncertainty and to experience a better quality of life.

Therefore, the different ways in which individuals have reacted to the pandemic by deploying their psychological resources can be a key factor in determining a more or less positive perception of their quality of life. Research in this direction has shown, for example, how being resilient and looking at challenges as opportunities for growth is linked to well-being under Covid-19 (Yamaguchi et al., 2020). Shek (2021) suggests that maintaining hope is an important factor in adversity in general as in the pandemic. Other studies have shown that higher levels of emotional intelligence correspond to greater social support seeking and lower levels of occupational stress during the pandemic (Valenti et al., 2021). In addition, resilience, hope, transcendence, and positive thinking seem to act as protective factors against chronic stress during the pandemic (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2021).

Conclusions

The health emergency, together with the consequent situation of uncertainty in the various areas of life, has led to significant changes in lifestyle and in work for many individuals: a re-balancing of times and working spaces and, sometimes, a redefinition of career path, and an increasing restlessness (Woolston, 2020). In a very recent article, Akkermans et al. (2020) have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered a career shock that will have a major impact on people's work and careers. A career shock is "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career" (Akkermans et al., 2018, p. 4). Specifically, the authors argued that the positive or negative direction of the impact will depend on the dynamic interplay between contextual and individual factors, differing for people across career and life stages. Subsequently, career counsellors are called to face new challenges in supporting their clients, helping them to undertake a sense making process; this means that a disruptive and extraordinary event is not necessarily a career shock in itself (Akkermans et al., 2020). Career counselling, moreover, can restrain the negative short-term consequences, transforming them into positive long-term effects and vice versa.

For these reasons, the career counselling contribution could be aimed: (a) to support workers in a new meaning-making process about their professional future, especially in the present times, as the emergency and its repercussions are not over (and probably will not be over for a long time yet); (b) to stimulate the deployment of positive resources to

manage a “new normality” (Šapal et al., 2021); (c) to make people reflecting on the personal and structural factors that hinder the person-work relationship (Blustein et al., 2020); (d) to help workers to connect personal life with work in a time perspective (Sarchielli, 2020).

Moreover, the advent of the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated previous inequalities in the workforce, has weighed more heavily on the most vulnerable groups of workers and on women, and has brought into sharp relief the extent to which, even today, there are substantial differences in access to technology or the availability of technological tools.

For these reasons, it is important that post-pandemic career counsellors focus their efforts more on promoting practices that take into account the social context by becoming advocates for the most vulnerable (Drosos et al., 2021), aiming at the reduction of the inequalities in the society (Hooley & Sultana, 2016), and “engaging this time of crisis as an opportunity to help shape a world where decent, supportive, and dignified work is possible for all who want it” (Autin et al., 2020, p.492).

The results of the present study should be read considering its limitations: the small number of participants, the convenience sampling, the lack of a second administration after the pandemic, to evaluate the impact of the social restrictions and the work at home on the quality of life in a medium and long term.

Author Contributions

The authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Ethical approval

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Kore University of Enna (UKE-IRBPSY-06.20.04).

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