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Psychology Hub (2021)
XXXVIII, 3, 27-36

Article info

Submitted: 15 October 2021
Accepted: 17 November 2021
DOI: 10.13133/2724-2943/17595

From the inside. How the feelings of the closeness and the remoteness from others changed during lockdown

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*«It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone)
that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative
is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli.» (Winnicott, 1958, p.418)*

Abstract

The study aims to explore the adolescents' affective dimension during lockdown, in particular how the perception and processing of the presence of others in adolescents' relational experience has changed and how their closeness and remoteness was experienced during the period of limitation of social relations. If lockdown forced young people to share spaces and times with family members, we asked if this forced stringency has favoured psychic closeness at home, or rather if it contributed to create new forms of remoteness, changing the perceptions of significant others. Moreover, the study intends to probe how and to what extent the health emergency impacted on school experience of young people. The participants were 113 middle and high school students aged between 11 and 18 years. Adolescents completed an ad hoc questionnaire to investigate their feelings of closeness and remoteness during lockdown and their experience to come back to school. Our results show that the closest affectional bonds during lockdown were with both family and friends. Pre-adolescents still rely on family ties, while adolescents are working on the construction of the social world outside the home, despite enforced confinement. To confirm the importance of the emotional experience lived through during lockdown, we observed that the return to school was strongly oriented by the most significant relationships perceived during lockdown that supported to come back to normality.

Keywords: adolescents; COVID-19; feelings of others; closeness/remoteness; experience of school.

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The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on adolescents' experience: family, school, and friends.

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the global pandemic due to the Covid-19 virus and consequently Italy, like many other countries, decreed a general lockdown leading to the closure of companies, public places, and schools. Prolonged physical isolation and the interruption of social life linked to school were and still are a reason for grave concern, generating numerous studies of the effects on the physical health and psychological well-being of young people (Chambonniere et al., 2021; Minozzi et al., 2021; Orgilés et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2020). As also Capurso and colleagues (2020) report, Compas (1987) had already highlighted how the way in which children and adolescents react to stressful events depends on various factors such as: the level of exposure, age, sex, psychological functioning and the influence of the adults closest to them. Shaffer & Kipp (2013) also highlighted how children are used to rely on adults and other "influential" figures who take care of their basic needs, those same adults whom the virus forced to cope with the difficult emergency between domestic closeness and social distancing once outside the home (Chu et al., 2021; Cimino et al., 2021; Westrupp et al., 2021). A recent study (Bülow et al., 2020) showed how the daily routine of families with teenagers changed during lockdown and how the imposition of new rules that forced them to forego seeing friends was experienced by most of the adolescents as legitimate, a legitimacy that they were able to justify with the need to contain the spread of the virus. In this sense, the article proposed by The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health (2020) also highlighted the other side of the pandemic: if on the one hand it was an opportunity for young people to develop and refine their resilience and adaptability, on the other hand, it has also allowed them - according to the criterion of "protection of the most vulnerable" - to appreciate more the value of social responsibility and self-sacrifice. Despite this, Minozzi and colleagues (2021) reported in their recent systematic review of the literature that for adolescents, rather than for adults, the closure of schools and social distancing entailed great difficulties and sacrifices, especially in light of the fact that it is precisely during adolescence that a sense of self is built through social relations with peers as they seek their own independence from the family. School closures was associated with significant lifestyle changes in all the students, regardless of age and gender, with consequent repercussions on mental and physical health in older children and adolescents (Esposito et al., 2021; Rundle et al., 2020). With the unexpected interruption of school, in fact, young people lacked the privileged place for the construction of social skills and relationships with peers (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009; Weeks & Asher, 2012); the impossibility of putting themselves to the test outside their own family has deprived them of the possibility of making that typical adolescent affective shift: from family as a source of safety and protection to peers as a source of social and emotional support (Moretti & Peled, 2004; Yang et al., 2020). Of the school experience, only Distance Learning remains, a teaching and study methodology perceived by adolescents as qualitatively distant from the experiences they had during face-to-face teaching (Izzo & Ciurnelli, 2020; Yates et al., 2021).

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to be felt even after returning to school: although the children have shown a good capacity for resilience by accepting the new school reality governed by measures to contain the virus, insecurity and nervousness accompany the return to in-presence schooling (Branquinho et al., 2021). In addition to the more direct effects of forced isolation and quarantine, loneliness as an unintended consequence of the containment measures of the virus appears to have been particularly problematic for young people. The impossibility of seeing their peers in person can in fact generate loneliness and bewilderment leading to even depressive and anxious affective responses in the most serious cases (Loades et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Minozzi et al., 2021). Good relationships with peers are, in fact, an important protective factor against the risk of feelings of social disconnection (Parent et al., 2021); in this case the network has been a useful resource for adolescents to cope with feelings of isolation due to the restrictions (Boursier et al., 2021; Cauberghe et al., 2021), but its use has not always proved adaptive: in some cases, lockdown has rather favored the compulsive use of the Internet and its functions, exacerbating the feelings of loneliness and avoidance with a negative impact on the psycho-social sphere (Dong et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2020). In their recent study, Musso and Cassibba (2020) highlighted how, during the Italian lockdown period, 35% of adolescents experienced feelings of anxiety and unease, 32% felt low levels of optimism and 50% had low expectations for the future. Can we then, to use the words of Aime and colligie (2020) speak of a «theft of the future» committed to the new generations? Of course, as Nocentini (2021) point out, younger generations may be less aware of the implications of such a crisis and, enjoying family protection and resilience mechanisms, they may be more effective trying to make the best of the stressful impact of the pandemic. If young people are credited with good resilience skills, other essential dimensions must also be recognized such as planning and control, social competence in the use of resources and backing but also self-efficacy and hope and trust in the future (Peirone, 2020).

Method

Aims

Based on what has been said so far, the present research study aims to explore how adolescents' feelings have changed during the lockdown. In particular, it intends to probe how the perception and processing of the presence of others in their relational experience has changed and how their closeness and distance was experienced during the period of limitation of social relations imposed by the pandemic. Through a qualitative methodology, the experiences of adolescents relating to their affective relationships with family and friends, during the confinement to which they were forced as a containment measure of COVID 19 were analyzed.

Lockdown imposed a forced closeness within the home on the young people: they were forced to share spaces and times with the people closest to them. We can ask ourselves if this forced stringency has favored psychic closeness, if it has

increased relationships within families, if it has strengthened relationships within the home. Or rather it may have contributed to exacerbate or reveal frictions and conflicts.

At the same time, this confinement prevented the adolescents from being with their friends, relatives and acquaintances. We can ask ourselves if other people further away, those who lived outside the home, have really remained at a distance even in psychic terms or have they not gained psychic ground where the virus drastically took it away from them in “flesh and blood”.

In this way we probe the affective dimension of the lockdown and in particular that one linked to the presence of others, their closeness and their distance, others in the family and those outside the family. We also ask ourselves if and how the lockdown changed the affective dynamics of otherness, typical of the period of adolescence, when, others who live outside the home, first and foremost friends, are put into the foreground, while those of the family seem to be relegated to second place.

Did adolescents know and were they able to maintain this reversal of affective priorities during the confinement imposed by the pandemic or did they have to fall back on the family not having friends available? Does this possible withdrawal resemble an emotional regression or did it offer the opportunity for an unexpected reconciliation?

We also wondered how and to what extent the health emergency from Covid -19 impacted on school experience. In particular, has distance learning succeeded in being a valid, although partial, substitute for the days spent in class? Did the feeling towards school, which collected up the previous in-presence experiences, influence the experiences related to distance learning? What affective connotation accompanied the return to school, shaped and regulated by the new containment measures? Did returning to in-presence schooling have the same affective resonance in adolescents as pre-adolescents?

Participants

The research involved 113 lower secondary school and upper secondary school students from central Italy in order to compare the experiences of pre-adolescents (11-13 years; 25 females and 18 males) and those of adolescents (14-18; 30 females and 40 males). The entire sample is made up of 55 girls and 58 boys with an average age of 14.02 years and s.d. 2.303.

The data were collected in-presence both in the lower secondary school (April 2021) and in the upper secondary school (May 2021). The anonymous questionnaire was dispensed during school hours by two school psychologists after obtaining informed consent from parents.

Instruments

In line with the qualitative analysis conducted by other studies relating to the pandemic on the experiences of young people (Branquinho et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2021; Montanari, 2021; Scott et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2021), an ad hoc questionnaire was used to investigate, in the first part, the feelings of closeness and distance of adolescents in the moment of lockdown, through 4 open questions (With whom did you go through the lockdown

period? Who did you perceive as closest? From whom did you feel the most distant? Who did you lose sight of?), while the second part concerns the young people’s experience of school through the completion of sentences relating to:

- school moments (entrance, oral testing, recreation);
- school figures (relationship with classmates and teachers);
- emotional experience of returning to school;
- experience of distance learning;
- planning for the future.

Data collected in the second part of the questionnaire were used for a comparative analysis with the feelings of affective closeness and remoteness.

All responses were classified as “very positive”, “positive”, “neutral”, “very negative” or “negative” by two independent observers-raters. Any disagreements regarding attribution were discussed until a consensus was achieved. The raters were psychologists: one of them was a female clinic psychologist and one was a male developmental psychologist; their average-age was 38,5; their professional experience post-degree about psychological research was respectively five years and twenty years.

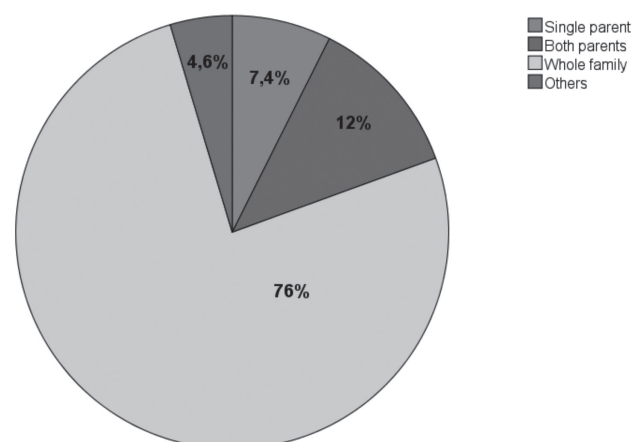
Data analysis

Psychometric analyses were conducted through the IBM SPSS Statistics statistical software version 25.0. In the present study the following statistical operations were performed: frequencies, Chi², Anova, Pearson correlations.

Data and Results

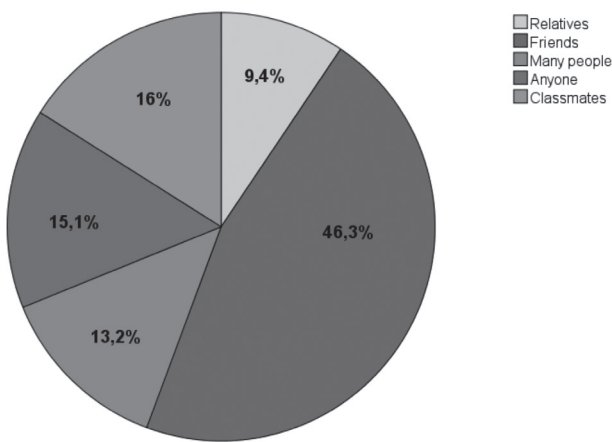
Our results showed that almost all adolescents and pre-adolescents spent lockdown with their family members (Fig. 1): 76% spent it in the company of the whole family made up of parents and siblings, 12% with their parents alone, 7.4% with one of their two parents, while only a small percentage of the children (4.6%) said they shared this period with people outside the family. Friends make up the group of people that adolescents and pre-adolescents lost sight of most (46.3%) followed by classmates (16%).

Fig. 1. With whom



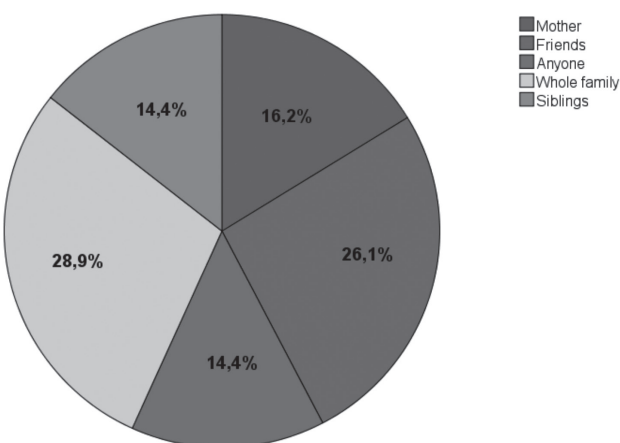
Only 9.4% of kinship relationships were penalized (Fig 2). 13.2% claim they have lost relationships with more people in their life, without specifying who they are. We can read this lack of specification as a resistance to recognize which relationships have been most penalized by the pandemic restrictions. Data relating to a modest percentage of young people (15.1%) also deserve attention, for they declare that the period of restriction does not seem to have influenced their social contacts. If we put together who limit themselves to declare that they have lost sight of many people and of those who claim not to have lost anyone, we can observe that almost a third of the sample (28.3%) responds to the affective impact of the lockdown by not configuring it in detail.

Fig. 2. Lost from sight



Among the relationships perceived as being the closest (Fig. 3), those with family members stand out (28.9%) to which, the addition of both siblings (14.4%) and the maternal figure (16.2%) results in their being the family members who occupied an important position during the lockdown period, while the grandparents are the most remote (Fig. 4). Immediately after the family, friends (26.1%) were indicated for their proximity. Only the 14% declared they felt that nobody had been affectionately close to them.

Fig. 3. Closeness



The experiences relating to the dimension of friendship show important percentages both in terms of closeness and remoteness: if for 26.1% of the children the mandatory restriction of being obliged to stay at home favored a sense of psychic proximity towards friends (Fig. 3), for 29.9% (Fig. 4), the latter were instead perceived as the most distant figures, confirming that friendships suffered the hardest blow during quarantine.

A more specific consideration can be reserved for classmates, who appear only among the lost figures (16%) or among people perceived as being more distant (9.6%), while they have never been mentioned among the figures perceived as closer, indicating that the lockdown heavily affected the school experience.

Among family relationships, grandparents (22.1%) were perceived to be the most distant, corresponding to the impossibility of visiting them imposed by the restrictions. But how can the statement of children who declare the distance from one of their parents (11.5%) or siblings (7.7%) be read? A feeling of distance was felt despite the forced proximity.

The results also show the presence of significant differences in the perception of psychic closeness (Fig. 5) and remoteness (Fig 6) between middle school pre-adolescents and high school adolescents during lockdown. If for pre-adolescents the other felt as being closest was undoubtedly one of the family members, in particular the maternal figure (28.6%) or fraternal (31%), for the high school teens the feeling of closeness towards

Fig. 4. Remoteness

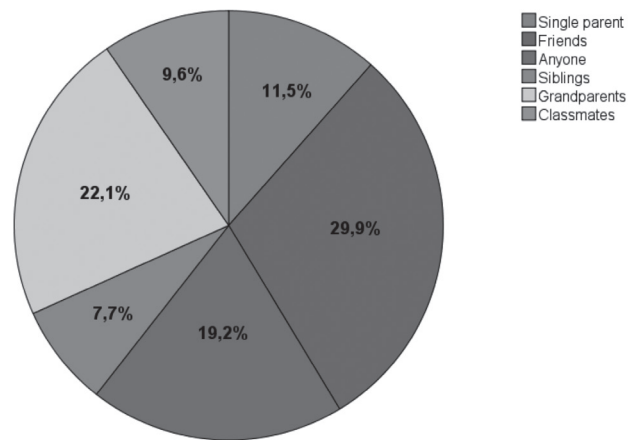
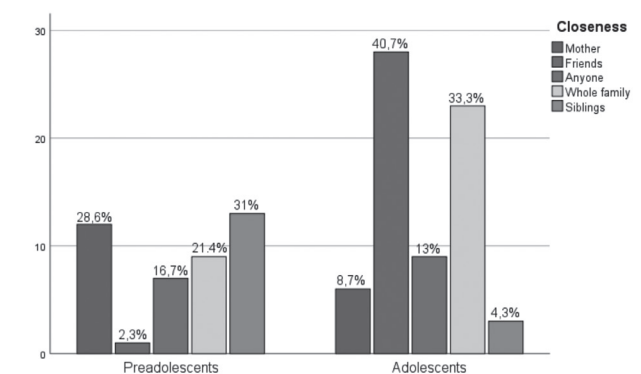
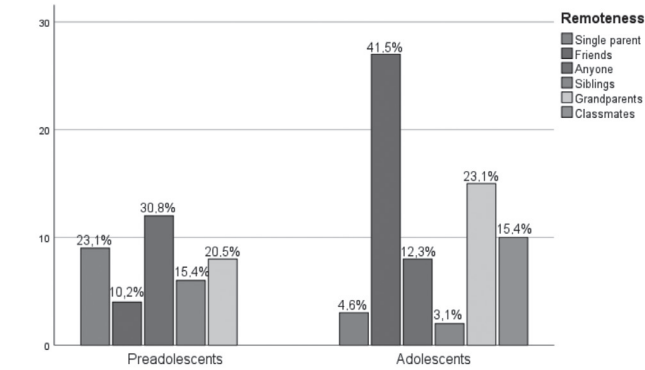


Fig. 5. Age * Closeness



$\chi^2=35.283$ $p=.000$ $df=4$

Fig. 6. Age * Remoteness



$\chi^2=30.395$ $p=.000$ $df=5$

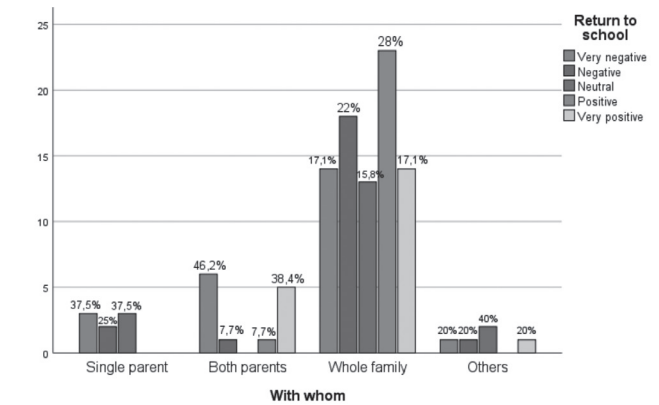
family members was matched by that experienced towards friends (40.7%). If the common experience for both groups was the perceived distance from the grandparents (20.5% for pre-adolescents, 23.1% for adolescents), adolescents, unlike the younger children, say that their affective dimension of distance is mostly occupied by friends and school ties (Scott *et al.*, 2021).

We wondered if the emotional experiences during lockdown influenced the teens' feelings about going back to school (Fig.7). In the table we observe feelings related to the return to school regarding the people with whom the lockdown period was shared. Those who experienced confinement in the company of parents, brothers and sisters experienced a positive (17.1%) or very positive (28%) return to school, confirming the family as a factor of resilience even in the COVID-19 emergency. On the contrary, those who experienced lockdown with only one parent found it very difficult to return to school, experiencing very negative (37.5%), negative (25%) or neutral (37.5%) feelings. Even the only child who shared lockdown with both parents seems to have struggled to return to school. Most of them experienced very negative (46.2%) or negative (7.7%) feelings.

Here are some adjectives that adolescents and pre-adolescents used to describe their return to school that reveal their feelings, both positive (the return to school was: exciting; motivating; quite challenging) and negative (it was: muddle-headed; eventful; useless; strange; unsettling; heavy going; difficult; quite complicated; very traumatic). Their phrases reveal also their ambivalence in dealing with the return to school: "It was very traumatic, it quite shook me up"; "The difference with and without the pandemic was immediately felt and many things changed, especially the relationship with school"; "It was quite challenging with all the new rules and it was difficult to get used to the pace of being in presence"; "it was harder than previous years"; "It was different from what I expected"; "It was motivating but it didn't last long".

As far as the return to school is concerned, our results highlight significant differences between adolescents and pre-adolescents (Fig.8): while on the one hand most of the middle school students experienced the return to school as a positive moment, barely touched by the lockdown experience, on the other hand high school students describe the lockdown as a delicate moment, finding themselves divided between intense positive experiences, full of enthusiasm, and deeply negative

Fig. 7. With whom * Return to school

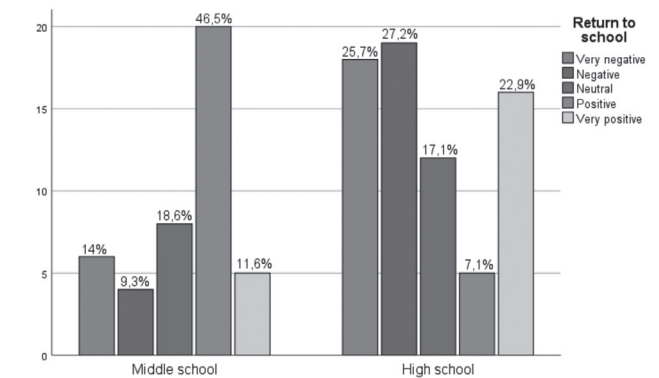


$\chi^2=22.055$ $p=.037$ $df=12$

experiences, crossed by feelings of strangeness and distrust. Middle school children were enthusiastic about going back to school, reaffirming the centrality of the school experience in the social life of pre-adolescents. The high school teens instead projected their tendency towards affective polarization on back to school: if we add up the very negative feelings and the negative ones, we find that 52.9% perceived the return to school negatively against the 30% of positive and very positive feelings.

In general, our results didn't show any significant differences based on gender.

Fig. 8. School attended * Return to school



$\chi^2=26.400$ $p=.000$ $df=4$

Discussion

Our results showed that most adolescents and pre-adolescents of our sample spent lockdown with their family members as we expected. Observing instead who was lost from sight during lockdown is possible to point out a percentage of young people declaring that the period of restriction does not seem to have influenced their social contacts. Here we could read a certain tendency towards affective neutralization that struggles to take note of the turmoil brought about by lockdown in the relational field. If we put together the tendency towards the generalization of those who limit themselves to declaring that they have lost sight of many people and of those who claim not to have not lost anyone – and in doing so avoid considering how their relational life has been modified by restrictions - we

can observe that almost a third of the sample responds to the affective impact of the lockdown by not configuring it in detail.

The place of closest proximity is therefore disputed by family and friends (Field et al., 1995). Among family members the role of siblings appears to have been particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic. We can think that for many adolescents, siblings served as the only “peers” consistently present in-person in their daily lives, and they would be able to help each other cope with stress from the pandemic (Campione-Barr et al., 2021). A significant dispute that could show the attempt of these young people to broaden their relational horizon beyond the home, even during the period that the pandemic compelled them to an enforced confinement within the family. If adolescence indeed represents the stage of gradual independence from the family and the establishment of new emotional support and social development through peer interactions, according to Ellis & Zarbatany (2017), the enlargement attempt we are observing could be read as resilience in maintaining the relational needs typical of adolescence beyond the family. This enlargement is, however, balanced by the massive perception of the closeness of the family, which is gladly given a place of honor, with a predilection for siblings and for the mother figure. This closeness could be interpreted as a containment of the conflictual forces that typically affect the original emotional relationships during the period of adolescence (Holmbeck et al., 1995; Michael & Ben-Zur, 2007; Paikoff et al., 1993; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Smetana, 1989). We prefer not to ignore a little percentage that declares they felt that nobody had been affectionately close to them, it could refer to a certain tendency to neutralize the affective impact of the lockdown, as already observed about who was lost from sight during lockdown.

According to other research studies (Daniunaite et al., 2021; Loades et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021) our results show that friendships suffered the hardest blow during quarantine and that lockdown heavily affected the school experience (Esposito et al., 2021; Klootwijk et al., 2021; Sabato et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2021)

Among family relationships, grandparents were perceived to be the most distant, corresponding to the impossibility of visiting them imposed by the restrictions. But about remoteness the more interesting results were obtained by children who declare the distance from one of their parents or siblings. Here we found feelings of distance experienced despite the forced proximity. We could interpret these feelings as the apparently weak signal of the latent conflict that teens were actually forced to live with their family members with whom they shared spaces and times (Chung et al., 2020; Orgilés et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2020; Romm et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2021; Westrupp et al., 2021). This may have been the field of conflict that teens were forced to rework during lockdown: *too close to agree, too close to share*.

Forced proximity has therefore not strengthened family relationships tout court, nor has it exacerbated conflicts in a clear way. Rather, the very close sharing has called into play the work related to the affective elaboration of relationships and their emotional meaning: the construction of affective closeness does not rely on the mere sharing of times and rooms (Aljunaidy & Adi, 2021). On the one hand, according to

Prime (2020) and Cimino (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic could have influenced children’s affective environment by cascading effects based on parents’ stress and worries associated with the consequences of restrictions in their social and work life. On the other hand, the enforced lockdown was a delicate moment that forged affective relationships even inside the home, indicating that to accept the other is a competence that does not rely on proximity or living under the same roof as such - for months we shared times and spaces with family members -, but it requires sharing the thoughts of the other and the esteem for the affective construction of the difference that the other always represents, even the most significant one, even the one with whom we have lived side by side all day for two long months (Chu et al., 2021; Laible et al., 2000; Liang et al., 2021)

Even the emotional experiences during lockdown show the characteristic differences between pre-adolescence and adolescence: pre-adolescents still rely on family ties, cultivating specific bonds of attachment with the mother figure and with siblings, while adolescents are working on the construction of the social world outside the home, despite enforced confinement (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Noller, 2005; Paikoff et al., 1993).

An aspect relating to the feelings of closeness experienced by adolescents deserves special reflection. Individual attachment figures such as the mother and siblings do not seem to maintain high investments, while the family as a whole maintains its centrality, although the affective primacy is taken by friendships. Adolescents maintain bonds with a complex object called “family”, which is perceived in terms of emotional proximity. A “compacting” that could be read as an indication of a latent conflict, shown through weak signals, with parental and fraternal figures. The attachment figures seem to dissolve into a general entity called “family”, perceived as a coalition to be contrasted with another coalition, that of “friends”. friends and family tout court compete for the affective attention of adolescents (Bülou et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2020).

We can wonder how these young people were able to foster the perception of closeness with friends while they were confined at home: while it was impossible to meet people in person, online exchanges supported the perception of closeness. The online /offline dialectic has been resolved entirely in favor of cyber-relationships that have allowed teens to continue living and perceiving social relationships beyond the family circle (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2020; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). Adolescents found themselves constricted between the distance from significant others and the reduction of social life because of people lost from sight. A difficult period that was explored also from research studies about dreams during the lockdown. Their results show that if adults’ dreams point out both pleasant memories linked to experiences forbidden during lockdown (i.e., traveling, meeting friends), adolescents’ dreams are focused on relationships with others, with specific relation to home confinement, the school, friends and family members in danger (Somantico et al., 2021).

Our results show feelings related to the return to school related to the people with whom the lockdown period was shared. Those who experienced confinement in the company of family members the return to school was

positive, confirming the family as a factor of resilience even in the COVID-19 emergency (Cimino et al., 2021). On the contrary, those who experienced lockdown with only one parent found it very difficult to return to school. A fact that could be read as a resistance of these teens to come out of a kind of regressive affective shell, a tête-à-tête that confinement may have fueled. For these teens, the return to school seems to have represented the breaking of a symbiosis which, however, denounces regressive impulses that risk slowing down the conquest of emotional independence. Even the only child who shared lockdown with both parents seems to have struggled to return to school. Even the only child therefore seems to have compensated the narrowness of confinement with a surplus of attachment to parental figures, suffering a backlash of shyness when it was possible to return to extended social relations. For the only child and for those living in a single-parent family it was therefore not easy to return to normality, confirming that the impact of the pandemic has left significant marks in the processing of affections and not only because of the practical constraints it introduced into family life.

The different attitudes about return to school between preadolescent and adolescents show what role the school experience plays among the pre-teens: middle school teens experience a profound extension of social and emotional relationships thanks to school. For pre-adolescents, friends outside the home coincide with schoolmates, confirming the centrality of the educational institution in fostering their growing up. Adolescents, on the other hand, cultivate friendships outside the home in different environments, and school is only one of the social and emotional contexts in which adolescents explore. School, therefore, becomes a field for adolescents to test their emotional experience and success where school is concerned. Thus going back to school for the older ones means going back to facing new questions, adults and professors who ask them for new learnings and peers who call them for new interchanges (Scott et al., 2021).

The affective dynamics that we have detected can be traced back to the psychodynamic terms with which Winnicott describes the ability to be alone as a sign of affective maturity. “*The basis of the capacity to be alone is the experience of being alone in the presence of someone.*” (Winnicott, 1958, p. 417 our emphasis). Lockdown imposed a forced closeness within the home on the children; at the same time, the confinement kept the children away from friends, relatives, and acquaintances. On the one hand, our results show that the forced stringency with family members did not accentuate the conflict with parental figures typical of the adolescent period. Rather, the students in our sample seem to have maintained the aspiration to an expansion of affective investments in friends despite the impossibility of spending time with them in presence. Indeed, they recognized that the closest affectional bonds during lockdown were with both family and friends. The pre-adolescents relied mainly on family ties, cultivating specific bonds of attachment with the mother figure and with their siblings, while the adolescents continued to work on the construction of the social world outside the home, thanks to the usage of technological devices, despite the forced confinement. According to Winnicott (1958), affective maturity can take the form of the ability to be alone in the

company of reliable significant others. Where the children were able to rely on supportive significant others at home, they were able to experience the capacity to maintain their own autonomy and their own subjectivation even in conditions of very close proximity. In this sense, the period of emergency also represented an opportunity to strengthen what Winnicott calls ego-relatedness, which happens when «the relationship between two people, one of whom at any rate is alone; perhaps both are alone, yet the presence of each is important to the other» (Winnicott, 1958, p.418).

Conclusions

The present research explored how pre-adolescent and adolescent feelings changed during lockdown. In particular, we noted how the perception and elaboration of the presence of others in their relational experience changed and how their closeness and remoteness was experienced, despite the social restrictions caused by the pandemic. For these purposes, the experiences of pre-adolescents and adolescents, related to their family and friend relationships in the period March-May 2020, the experiences related to distance learning and their return to school in September 2020 were analyzed.

Our results show that our sample of students during lockdown did not live in solitude, but had the opportunity to have an unprecedented experience of their affective competence. An experience that, on the one hand, strengthened the relational preferences typical of the adolescent transition, and on the other hand tested the supportive strength of family and friend relationships.

The closeness to loved ones is therefore distributed between family and friends, confirming the affective dynamics of otherness typical of the period of adolescence which tend to favor friendships, in an attempt to put family members in second place. The feelings of closeness, therefore, seem to document a continuity of the experience that has not been turned upside down by the pandemic. A continuity that could also be read as the emotional resilience of young people in coping with the emergency.

On one hand, the children in our sample, despite not being able to socialize with their friends face-to-face, have worked to cultivate friendships without giving in to a regressive withdrawal towards family members. On the other hand, it was precisely the relationships at home that were affected by the remoteness of affectional bonds interpreting a sort of emotional paradox that we could summarize as follows: *too close to share*. Physical proximity was not automatically transformed into psychic proximity but provided the opportunity to interpret both directions of emotional processing: a possible terrain of closeness or, on the contrary, a time for conflictual distance.

To confirm the importance of the emotional experience lived through during lockdown, we observed that for the majority, the return to school was strongly oriented by the most significant relationships that supported the return to normality. However, there was no lack of regressive temptations for the only child and for children who experienced the lockdown with only one parent. Two relational circumstances that risked

transforming closeness into adhesiveness, producing a sort of resistance to returning to social life in presence.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. One of these is the small sample sizes; a bigger sample would allow for a more sophisticated statistical analysis. The second limitation regards the fact that the participants were recruited through convenient non-random sampling. Thus, generalizations cannot be made about the whole population. In addition, the number of lower and upper secondary school is not equally distributed. It would be interesting in future research to conduct an exploratory factorial analysis of the answers to the questionnaire to identify the factors that constitute the affective school experience of young people. Moreover, to analyse the emotional aspects could contribute to current research (Tambelli et al., 2021) about a possible model of the pandemic on PTSD symptomatology COVID-19 related.

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.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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