

Partnership quality in the Covid-19 pandemic: People in the second half of life are adaptable in their couple relationships

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**Partnership quality in the
Covid-19 pandemic: People in the
second half of life are adaptable
in their couple relationships**

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Oliver Huxhold

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Contents

Key messages..... 3

Background..... 4

Data and methods 8

Findings10

Conclusion14

The German Ageing Survey (DEAS) is a representative cross-sectional and longitudinal survey of people in the second half of life that has been conducted since 1996. Two DEAS surveys can now be used to examine the living situation of older people in the Covid-19 pandemic. These took place in summer 2020 and winter 2020/21. The present findings on partnership quality refer to people who participated in the DEAS surveys in 2017, summer 2020 and winter 2020/21. To examine the course of partnership quality, only people who did not separate from their partner between 2017 and the winter of 2020/21 are considered.

Key messages

- **The Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by a temporary deterioration in the perceived partnership quality of people in the second half of life. By winter 2020/21, the situation for couples had improved again.** Compared to the level of partnership quality before the pandemic (in 2017), a decline in (very) good partnership ratings was evident by the summer of 2020. In the winter of 2020/21 a recovery in partnership quality was evident, characterised by an increase in (very) good partnership ratings. However, the pre-pandemic level was not reached again until winter 2020/21.
- **The perceived partnership quality of people aged between 42 and 59 years deteriorated more during the first pandemic phase than the partnership quality of people aged 60 years or older.** All age groups saw a deterioration and then a recovery in perceived partnership quality when comparing the 2017, summer 2020 and winter 2020/21 surveys. The youngest age group of 42-59 year olds showed greater declines in partnership quality than the two older age groups (60-69 year olds and 70-94 year olds). However, this was only a temporary age difference. In winter 2020/21, people from all age groups again came to comparable assessments of their partnership quality.
- **The Covid-19 pandemic widened gender gaps in perceived partnership quality to the disadvantage of women.** Compared to men, women showed a stronger deterioration trend in perceived partnership quality between 2017 and the summer of 2020. Unlike men, women's assessed partnership quality had only recovered incompletely by the winter of 2020/21. Hence, developments in the first year of the pandemic exacerbated existing gender differences in the assessment of partnership quality.
- **People from different educational groups reported comparable changes in perceived partnership quality during the Covid-19 pandemic.** People with low to medium levels of education and people with high levels of education showed statistically significant deterioration and recovery trends over the study period. There was not a statistically significant difference in magnitude in these trends between education groups.

Background

About three quarters of people in the second half of life live in a couple relationship (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020). Living in a partnership is not only the most widespread form of life but also a central development context in middle and old age. Satisfying partnerships can make a meaningful contribution to avoiding loneliness (Moorman, 2016) and to promoting well-being (Gustavson et al., 2016) and mental and physical health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008; Liu & Waite, 2014; Robles et al., 2014). Conversely, conflictual partnerships can be a risk factor for social, psychological and health development in old age.

The aim of this DZA Aktuell is to examine what effect the Covid-19 pandemic had on the quality of partnerships among people in the second half of life. It can be assumed that the measures to contain the pandemic and the associated challenges – such as economic burdens due to the loss of jobs or short-time work, family burdens due to the limited availability of childcare, as well as social burdens due to the imposed contact restrictions – had a considerable impact on the quality of partnerships. For many couples and families, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic represented a considerable stress situation, necessitating an abrupt reorganisation of everyday relationship processes. Previous studies have shown that persistent external stress, for example due to economic uncertainties, endangers the relationship climate. On the one hand, external stress can be transmitted into the relationship, and on the other hand, the permanent exhaustion and mental distraction caused by persistent external stressors make supportive and constructive

togetherness in a partnership more difficult (Neff & Karney, 2004; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

Previous studies on the development of partnership quality during the Covid-19 pandemic have shown a rather inconsistent picture. A study by the German Family Panel found a decrease in relationship satisfaction in 40 per cent of men and women by the summer of 2020 (Schmid et al., 2021). A US survey, on the other hand, found no substantial changes in partnership quality until late spring 2020 (Williamson, 2020). However, these studies only dealt with the first months of the pandemic and only provided information on the relationship quality of younger adults.

The partnership situation of older people during the Covid-19 pandemic, however, has remained largely unexamined. It remains unclear how the quality of partnerships developed among older people after the first wave of the pandemic, and which people in this age group were more able to recover from the first months of the pandemic shock. It is to be expected that the partnership consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic do not manifest themselves in the same way in all population groups, as the burdens of the pandemic and the resources for dealing with it are unequally distributed in society. Whether older people were more able to adapt to the pandemic situation and to their partnerships is an open question. Older people – and especially people of retirement age – should have been less affected by economic uncertainties or a lack of childcare. This could have protected them from losses in partnership quality.

The course of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany

The Covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020 and took a wave-like course (Figure 1). The pandemic and the measures taken to contain it changed people's lives in many ways. From around mid-March 2020, far-reaching measures were enacted by the federal and state governments to contain the incidence of infection in the first wave of the pandemic. The period of validity of the individual packages of measures varied in part between the federal states (a detailed overview can be found in the IAB database on Corona containment measures at: http://doku.iab.de/arbeitsmarktdaten/daten_corona-massnahmen.xlsx; (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt und Berufsforschung, 2021)). The measures included contact restrictions as well as the closure of schools, day-care centres, the catering industry, various service facilities and retail businesses ('1st lockdown'). After the first wave of the pandemic had subsided, individual restrictions were eased at the end of April 2020.

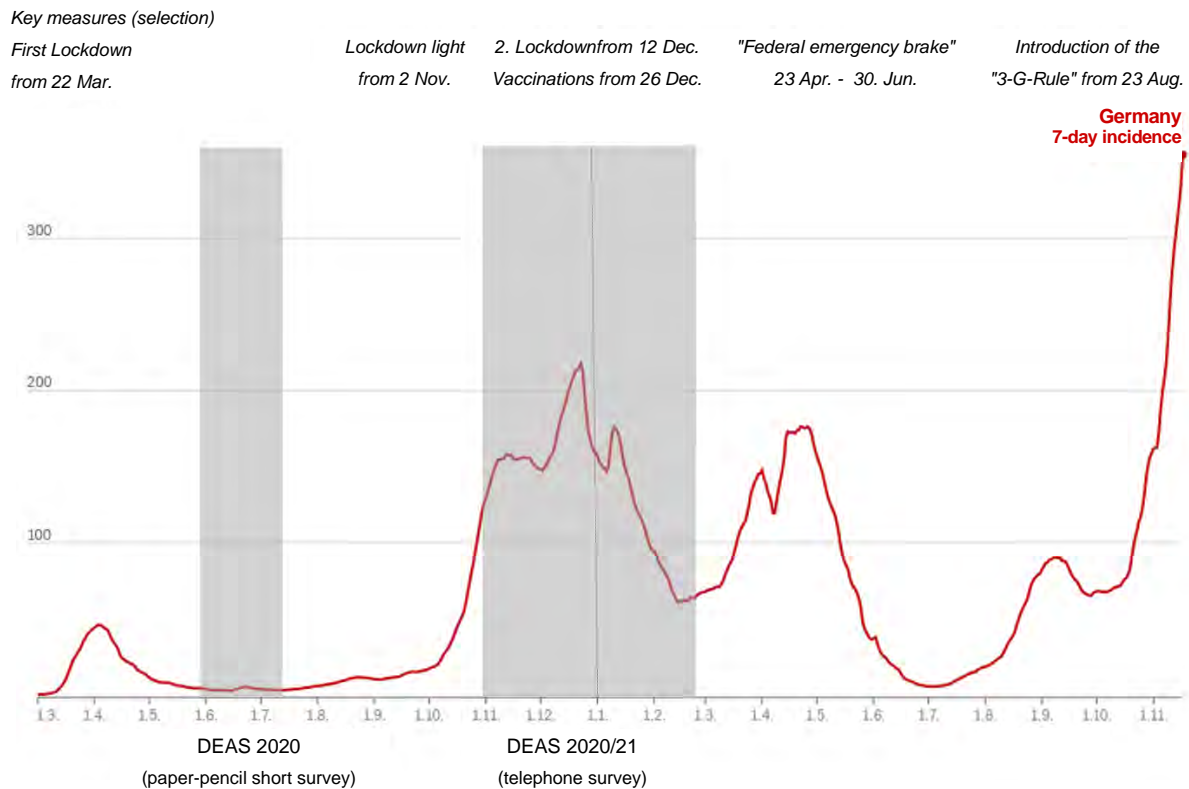
After a phase with low infection figures in summer 2020, there was a repeated increase in new infections in autumn 2020 and a second pandemic wave, that was countered with renewed contact restrictions from the beginning of November 2020 ('lockdown light'). From mid-December, contact restrictions were tightened and schools, day-care centres and parts of the retail and service sectors were again closed ('2nd lockdown'). The first vaccinations against Covid-19 took place at the end of 2020.

A decline in the number of infections at the end of February 2021 was followed by a further increase (third pandemic wave), accompanied by renewed or tightened contact restrictions. In April 2021, the Bundestag decided to use a uniform federal regulation ('federal emergency brake'), with uniform measures to contain the incidence of infection, coupled to regional incidence values.

Infection rates began to decline again from the beginning of May 2021, only to rise again from July 2021 until the fourth pandemic wave in winter 2021. To limit the number of new infections, so-called '3-G regulations' were introduced in August 2021 (access restrictions upon presentation of a convalescent, vaccinated or tested certificate), partly followed by '2-G regulations' (access only for convalescent or vaccinated persons).

The German Ageing Survey enables the study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of people in middle and older adulthood up to and including the phase of the second lockdown in winter 2020/21.

Figure 1: The German Ageing Survey (DEAS) in the Covid-19 Pandemic



Sources: Risklayer, CEDIM (KIT), Tagesspiegel, RKI: <https://interaktiv.tagesspiegel.de/lab/sars-cov-2-das-virus-in-echtzeit/> (18.11.2021). Own representation.

Older adults were among the risk groups for a severe course of COVID-19 disease. According to the Robert Koch Institute (2020), the risk of a severe course of COVID-19 disease increases steadily from the age of 50 to 60. Special efforts to avoid infection, the associated restrictions in everyday life and possible experiences of isolation could have put a particular strain on the relationship climate of older couples.

Men and women might also differ in the pandemic-related changes to their partnership quality. Gender differences (to the disadvantage of women) were already present before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (Jackson et al., 2014). During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an increased need for private care work due, among other things, to school and day-care closures and temporary restrictions to inpatient and outpatient care (Bünning et al., 2020; Klaus & Ehrlich, 2021). The additional need for childcare and care for relatives was assumed to a greater extent by women than

by men (Ehrlich et al., 2022; Hipp & Bünning, 2021; Klaus & Ehrlich, 2021). The unequal increase in the care burden and the re-traditionalisation of gender roles that emerged with it may have subsequently caused a further divergence in the perceived partnership quality of men and women in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Educational background may have also affected the extent to which partners were impacted by the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is conceivable that the better resources of people with higher education enabled them to deal with the economic, family and social challenges of the pandemic more easily than people with lower education. Previous studies have already documented clear socio-economic differences in partnership quality – to the disadvantage of people with scarce resources (Neff & Karney, 2017). It remains questionable to what extent such social inequality tendencies in partnerships further intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against this background, this report examines the following questions:

1. What changes in perceived partnership quality were seen for people in the second half of life during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How do changes in perceived partnership quality differ between certain population groups (age groups, gender and education groups)?

Data and methods

The German Ageing Survey (DEAS)

The German Ageing Survey (DEAS) is a representative cross-sectional and longitudinal survey of people in the second half of life. As part of the study, women and men have been regularly surveyed for more than two decades (in 1996, 2002, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020 and 2020/21) as they move into old age. This long observation period of more than two decades allows a comprehensive insight into ageing and the life situations of people in the second half of life. In addition, the cohort-sequential design of the study makes it possible to examine ageing in the context of social change. The German Ageing Survey is therefore the central study on age and ageing in Germany. More than 20,000 people have participated in the study so far. People who are 40 years and older at the time of their first participation are surveyed. The participants are selected on the basis of a sample of residents' registration offices stratified by age, gender and region. The data of the German Ageing Survey are therefore representative of the resident population of Germany living in private households in the second half of life. The German Ageing Survey can also provide insights and a better understanding of life situations in times of crisis - as we are currently experiencing due to the Corona pandemic.

Telephone interviews took place in winter 2020/21 (4 November 2020 to 1 March 2021) with 5,402 people aged 46. Directly after the telephone interview in winter 2020/21, the respondents were sent another questionnaire, answered by 4,419 people in writing or online. The surveys focused on questions about aspects of the respondents' current life situations, such as social relationships, well-being and employment.

In the analyses, weighted proportion values and weighted arithmetic means are presented using methods that take stratified sampling into account. Group differences or differences between survey waves are tested for statistical significance. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ is used. If a finding is statistically significant, it can be assumed with at least 95 per cent probability that a detected difference exists, not only in the sample but also in the population living in private households in Germany. If a finding is not statistically significant, it is possible that observed differences in the sample occurred only by chance.

The German Ageing Survey (DEAS) is funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ).

Further information on the German Ageing Survey (DEAS) can be found at www.deutscher-alterssurvey.de.

This DZA Aktuell uses data from the survey in 2017, the summer of 2020 and the winter of 2020/21. All analyses are based on a longitudinal dataset which only considers respondents who a) participated in each of the three surveys and b) lived in a mixed- or same-sex partnership with the same person between 2017 and the winter of 2020/21.¹

Based on these selection criteria, the following evaluations are based on information provided by 2,697 people.² We examine how the partnership quality of these individuals changed between the time before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (2017), the summer after the first pandemic wave (2020) and the winter in the middle of the second pandemic wave (2020/21). We also examine whether there are age, gender, or education differences in the levels and changes in partnership quality between 2017, 2020 and 2020/21.

To answer this question, information on the following survey questions was evaluated:

Perceived partnership quality. The quality of the partnership was assessed with the question: "Overall, how do you rate your partnership?", answered on a 5-point scale from 1 (very good), 2 (good), 3 (medium), 4 (bad) to 5 (very bad). Evaluations based on the DEAS data have shown that the risk of separation is already significantly increased from a medium partnership rating.³ In this study, a distinction was therefore made between people with a (very) good

partnership quality (values between 1 and 2) and people with a risky partnership quality (values between 3 and 5). Since both categories add up to a total of 100 per cent, only the proportion of (very) good partnership quality is referred to in the text. The respective proportion of risky partnership ratings can be taken from the figures.

Age. Three age groups were formed to examine differences in changes in perceived partnership quality by age (42- to 59-year-olds, 60- to 69-year-olds, 70- to 94-year-olds). 2017 served as the reference year. In 2017, 29.5 per cent (n = 796) of respondents were aged between 42 to 59 years, 35.9 per cent between 60 to 69 years (n = 969) and 34.6 per cent between 70 to 94 years (n = 932). It should be noted that respondents aged by about three years within the observation period: For example, people from the youngest age group were between 42 to 59 years old in 2017, whereas they were between 45 to 62 years old in 2020.

Gender. A distinction was made between women and men (men: 54.8 per cent of all respondents, n = 1,477; women: 45.2 per cent of all respondents, n = 1,220).

Education. Two groups were formed to examine educational differences: Persons with a low to medium level of education⁴ (46.9 per cent, n = 1,265) and persons with a high level of education (53.1 per cent, n = 1,432).

¹ 48 people were excluded because there was a separation between 2017 and 2020/21, and 108 people were excluded because the partner died between 2017 and 2020/21. A further 51 people were excluded because they entered into a partnership after 2017.

² Of the persons in the evaluation sample, 0.6 per cent lived in a same-sex partnership. The remaining proportion lived in a mixed-sex partnership.

³ For a very good partnership score in 2017, the probability of separation by winter 2020/21 was 3.1 per cent, for a good partnership score it was 6.6 per cent, for a medium score it was 13.6 per cent, for a poor score it was 25.9 per cent and for a very poor score it was 43.7 per cent (n = 2,938).

⁴ Low and medium education levels were combined among those with low education levels due to small case numbers.

Findings

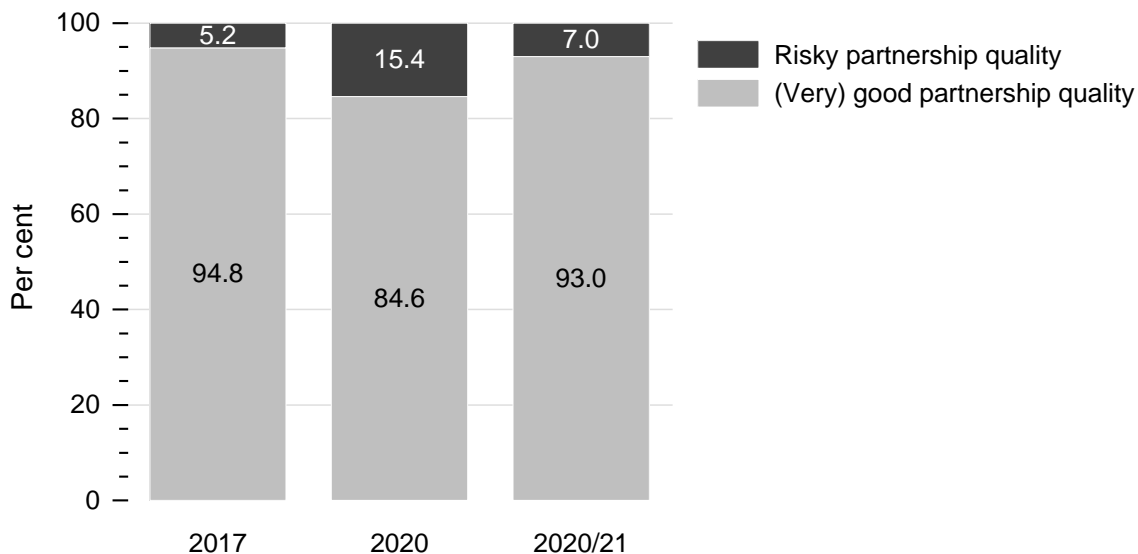
The Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by a temporary deterioration in the perceived partnership quality of people in the second half of their lives. By winter 2020/21, the situation for couples had improved again.

Comparing the partnership quality rating of respondents from 2017 with the partnership rating of the same people in the summer of 2020 (Figure 2), significantly fewer people arrived at a (very) good partnership rating. 94.8 per cent of people in the second half of life rated the quality of their partnership as good or very good in 2017; this proportion had dropped to 84.6 per cent by the summer of 2020. The observable deterioration trend

in partnership quality is statistically significant.

A look at the quality of partnerships in the winter of 2020/21 reveals that the deterioration due to the pandemic was largely temporary. Compared to the summer of 2020, a clear and statistically significant increase in the proportion of (very) good partnership ratings emerged again by the second pandemic wave in the winter of 2020/21. Nevertheless, during the second pandemic wave, fewer people rated their partnership as (very) good (93.0 per cent) than in 2017. This indicates an incomplete recovery trend in perceived partnership quality between summer 2020 and winter 2020/21.

Figure 2: Change in perceived partnership quality, total, 2017, 2020 and 2020/21 (in per cent)



Source: DEAS 2017 (n=2,697), 2020 (n=2,697), 2020/21 (n=2,697) weighted, rounded figures. The changes in the proportion of (very) good as well as risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020, between 2020 and 2020/21, and between 2017 and 2020/21 are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

The perceived partnership quality of people aged between 42 and 59 years deteriorated more during the first pandemic phase than the partnership quality of people aged 60 or older.

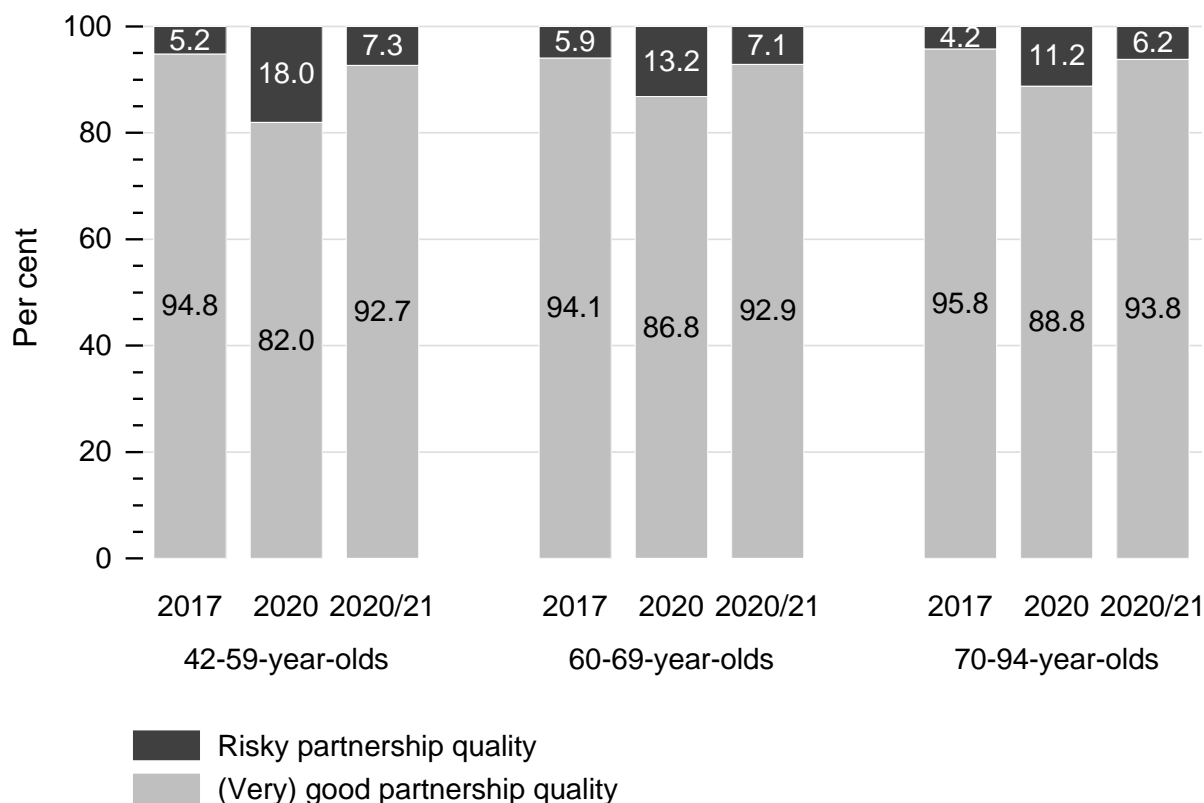
The deterioration trend in perceived partnership quality between 2017 and the pandemic summer of 2020 is also apparent in the changes in partnership ratings for people from different age groups (Figure 3). In every age group, the quality of the partnership was rated as (very) good less often in the summer of 2020 than in 2017.

The strongest deterioration was seen in the youngest age group (42 to 59-year-olds). There was a decrease in the proportion of (very) good partnership ratings of almost 13 percentage points (from 94.8 per cent in 2017 to 82.0 per cent in summer 2020). Among 60-69 year olds and 70-94 year olds, this proportion only changed by about seven percentage points over the same period. These different changes among age groups led to statistically significant differences in partnership ratings in summer 2020 – to the disadvantage of the youngest age group. In

contrast, before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2017, no correlations could be observed between the age of respondents and partnership quality. This suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic, at least in the first few months, posed a particular challenge for the relationship life of people in middle age. But how did the divergence in the partnership quality of people from different age groups evolve over the course of the pandemic?

By winter 2020/21, a recovery trend was evident in every age group. The share of (very) good partnership ratings increased again to a statistically significant extent. Finally, in winter 2020/21, the proportion of (very) good partnership ratings had again reached the respective comparison level of 2017 in every age group. The youngest age group not only recorded the strongest deterioration trend between 2017 and summer 2020, but also the strongest recovery trend up to winter 2020/21. Finally, in winter 2020/21, no statistically significant age group differences in perceived partnership quality could be found.

Figure 3: Change in perceived partnership quality, by age group, 2017, 2020 and 2020/21 (in per cent)



Source: DEAS 2017 (n=2,697), 2020 (n=2,697), 2020/21 (n=2,697) weighted, rounded figures. In all age groups, the changes in the proportion of (very) good and risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020 and between 2020 and 2020/21 are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Compared to the two oldest age groups, the youngest age group shows a) stronger changes in the share of (very) good and risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020 and between 2020 and 2020/21 and b) a lower share of (very) good partnership ratings and a higher share of risky partnership ratings in 2020 ($p < .05$).

The Covid-19 pandemic widened gender gaps in perceived partnership quality to the disadvantage of women.

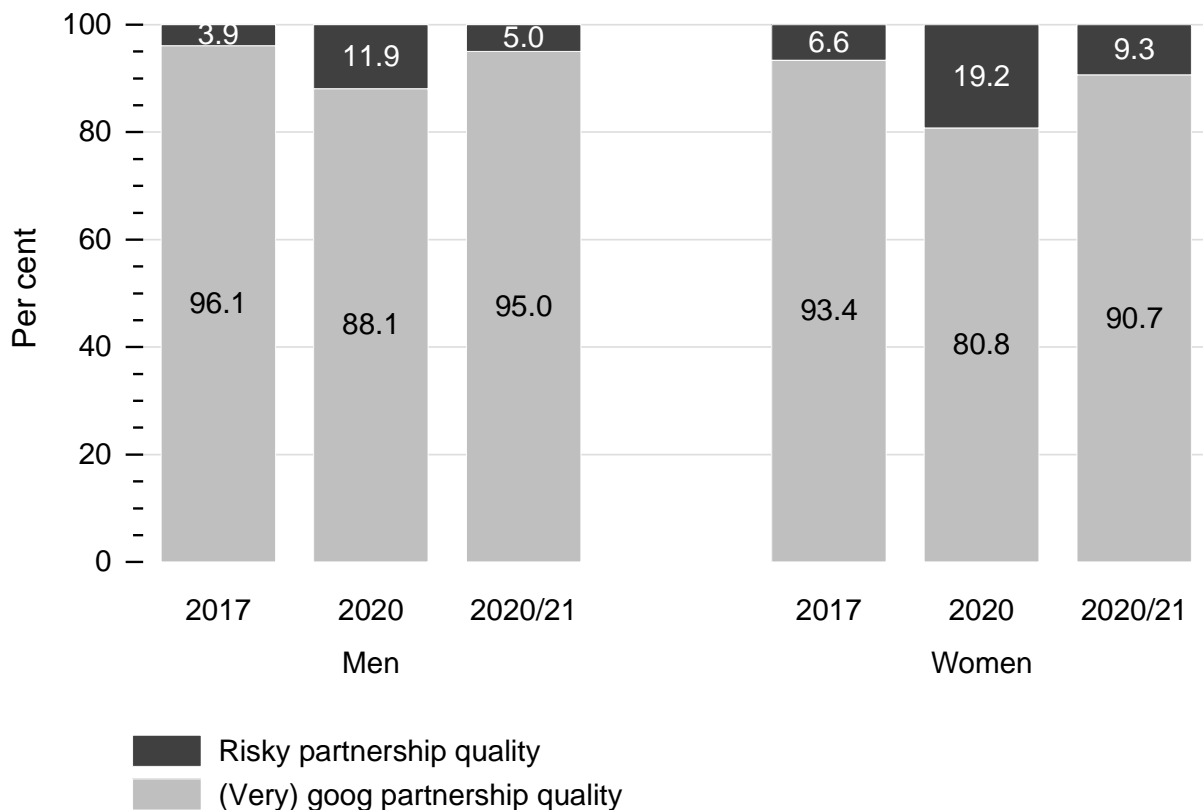
A separate analysis of perceived partnership quality by gender (Figure 4) shows that women came to less favourable assessments of their partnership quality at all survey times, i.e. before and also after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Between 2017 and the summer of 2020, these gender differences widened further, as women's partnership quality ratings developed particularly unfavourably compared to men during this period. Women experienced a 12.5 percentage point decline in (very) good partnership ratings (from 93.4 per cent in 2017 to 80.8 per cent in summer 2020). For men, the perceived partnership quality also deteriorated over the same period, but to a lesser extent. (Very) good

partnership ratings only declined by eight percentage points (from 96.1 per cent in 2017 to 88.1 per cent in summer 2020).

By winter 2020/21, a recovery trend in perceived partnership quality had set in for both men and women. However, the proportion of (very) good partnership ratings among women in winter 2020/21 (90.7 per cent) was still at a lower level than before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2017 (93.4 per cent). For men, on the other hand, partnership ratings in winter 2020/21 (95.0 per cent) had returned to levels comparable to 2017 (96.1 per cent). This indicates an incomplete recovery in women's perceived partnership quality and a full recovery trend for men. The Covid-19 pandemic thus affected men's and women's perceptions of partnership quality differently and promoted a further widening of gender differences.

Figure 4: Change in perceived partnership quality, by gender, 2017, 2020 and 2020/21 (in per cent)



Source: DEAS 2017 (n=2,697), 2020 (n=2,697), 2020/21 (n=2,697) weighted, rounded figures. For men and women, the changes in the proportion of (very) good and risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020 and between 2020 and 2020/21 are statistically significant ($p < .05$). For women: the changes in the proportion of (very) good and risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020/21 are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Compared to men, women show a) stronger changes in the proportion of (very) good and risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020 and b) a lower proportion of (very) good partnership ratings and a higher proportion of risky partnership ratings in 2017, 2020 and 2020/21 ($p < .05$).

People from different educational groups reported comparable changes in perceived partnership quality during the Covid-19 pandemic.

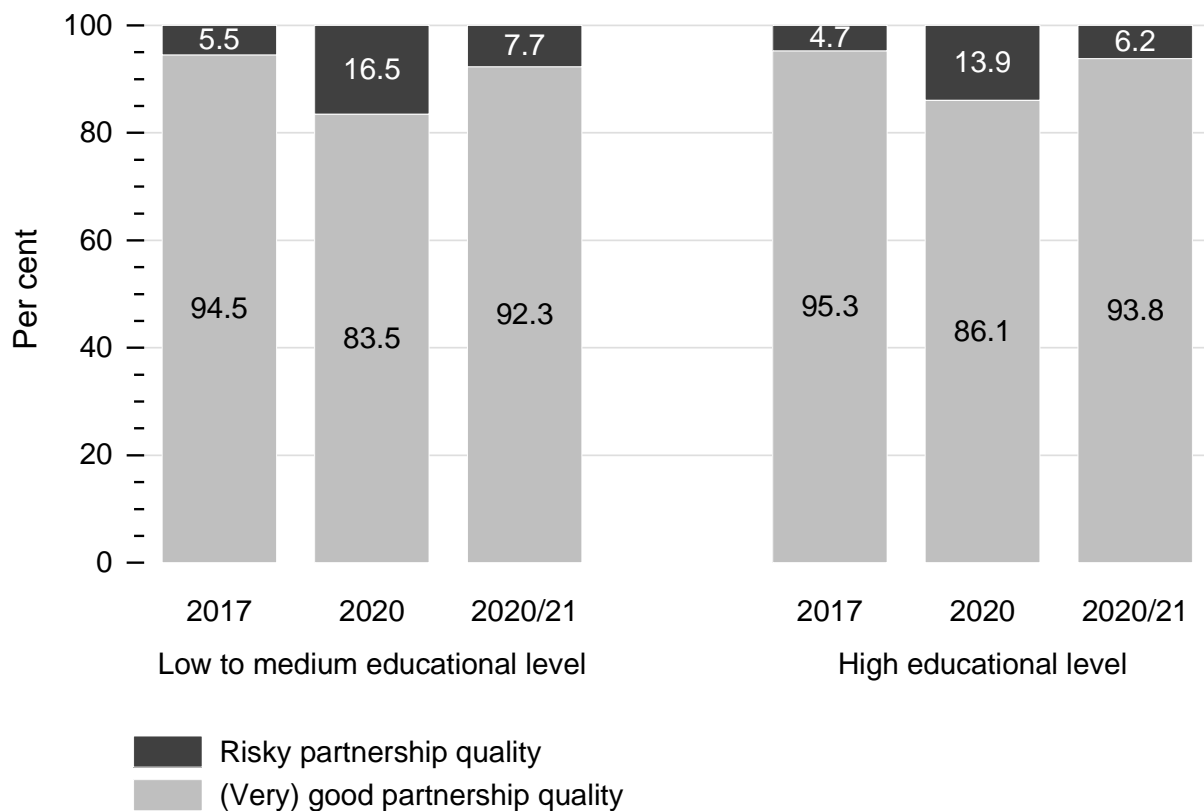
Neither before the pandemic in 2017, in the summer of 2020, nor in the winter of 2020/21 did the partnership quality differ in a statistically significant way between people with low to medium education and people with high education (Figure 5).

For people with low to medium education and people with high education, there was a statistically significant worsening trend in perceived partnership quality between 2017 and the summer of 2020. The decline in (very) good partnership ratings was eleven percentage points for people from the low to medium education group (from 94.5 per cent in 2017 to 83.5 per cent in the summer of

2020) and about nine percentage points for people from the higher education group (from 95.3 per cent in 2017 to 86.1 per cent in the summer of 2020). However, the apparent difference in rates of change between the education groups was not statistically significant.

The deterioration in perceived partnership quality was followed by a complete and statistically significant recovery trend in both education groups by the winter of 2020/21. By the winter of 2020/21, people in both education groups had returned to partnership ratings comparable to 2017. In our study, therefore, there was no correlation between education and the way people in the second half of life rated the quality of their partnership before and during the pandemic.

Figure 5: Change in perceived partnership quality, by education, 2017, 2020 and 2020/21 (in per cent)



Source: DEAS 2017 (n=2,697), 2020 (n=2,697), 2020/21 (n=2,697) weighted, rounded figures. In both education groups, the changes in the proportion of (very) good and risky partnership ratings between 2017 and 2020 and between 2020 and 2020/21 are statistically significant ($p < .05$). There are no statistically significant educational differences for the levels and changes in partnership quality in the study period.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic, family and social stressors significantly challenged partnership structures, at least temporarily. In the summer of 2020, that is in the immediate aftermath of the first lockdown, people in the second half of life were significantly less likely to have (very) good partnership ratings than they were before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2017. However, the deterioration in the wake of the first pandemic shock did not continue to worsen. On the contrary, the partnership situation of people in the second half of life seems to have improved again somewhat by the pandemic winter of 2020/21. The quality of partnerships was assessed significantly

more favourably again at this time than after the first pandemic wave in the summer of 2020.

Considering that Germany was in the midst of the second lockdown in the winter of 2020/21, with strict measures in place to contain the Covid-19 pandemic and significant restrictions on public life, the recovery in perceived partnership quality could indicate that most couples had found effective ways to adapt their daily lives to the changed living conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also possible that demands regarding partnership quality were downgraded during the first year of the pandemic, so that, for example, everyday

conflicts were less important under pandemic conditions than in pre-pandemic times. People become more lenient with their partner during temporary periods of stress, and upsets during such periods have less of an unfavourable effect on the assessment of partnership quality (Thompson & Bolger, 1999). Nevertheless, by winter 2020/21, the partnership ratings of people in the second half of life had not yet returned to the baseline levels of 2017, so it was still an incomplete recovery trend up to this point. It should also be noted that in this study we were only able to observe couples that remained together throughout the entire period. Part of the encouraging recovery trend towards the winter of 2020/21 could therefore be due to the selective drop-out of separating couples who could not adapt to the new circumstances or were less forgiving with each other.

It is remarkable that the initial pandemic shock and the subsequent recovery in partnership quality can be found in every population group studied: among people from different age groups, among women and men and among people with different educational backgrounds. However, a closer comparison reveals that two population groups were particularly affected by the partnership challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic: Middle-aged people and women experienced deeper drops in their partnership quality by summer 2020 than people aged 60 and older and men.

These findings are quite in line with expectations. Middle-aged people were particularly affected by economic insecurity – for example, due to the threat of job loss or short-time work measures – as well as by additional family burdens in the wake of the limited availability of childcare. This stress pattern demanded a particular degree of adaptability from working-age couples and probably provided plenty of fuel for relationship conflicts. By the winter of 2020/21, however, age differences to the disadvantage of the youngest age group had been reversed. The dynamics of the Covid-19 pandemic thus seem to have contributed

only to a temporary inequality in the quality of partnerships between people of different ages.

The particularly unfavourable development trend in women's perceived partnership quality could in turn be related to women taking over pandemic-related additional childcare, care and support needs to a greater extent than men in the first months of the pandemic (Ehrlich et al., 2022; Hipp & Bünning, 2021; Klaus & Ehrlich, 2021). The additional burdens associated with this could also have influenced the assessments of partnership quality and could ultimately explain the more pronounced deterioration trend in women's relational well-being. It should also be emphasised that women, unlike men, had only partially recovered from the losses in perceived partnership quality by winter 2020/21. The unequal increase in care burdens and the resulting tendency towards re-traditionalisation thus seem to have fuelled a divergence between men and women in the assessment of partnership quality that went beyond the initial pandemic shock.

With regard to educational background, it was assumed that the greater resources of people with higher education would mitigate the unfavourable partnership consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this resource advantage did not emerge in the development trends of perceived partnership quality. Instead, people with low to medium education and people with high education appear to have experienced similar levels of relationship strain in the summer of 2020, and they had been similarly successful in recovering from it by the winter of 2020/21. Hence, the Covid-19 pandemic does not appear to have acted as a burning glass for exacerbating socioeconomic differences in the quality of couple relationships. It should be noted, however, that due to low case numbers in the low education group, people with low and medium education had to be summarized into group. Possible educational disadvantages for people without a school-leaving certificate or vocational training (low education group) who could have been

particularly at risk due to their precarious financial circumstances and unfavourable starting position in the labour market could therefore not be uncovered.

When interpreting the results, it should also be noted that the perceived partnership quality was recorded in different ways in 2017, summer 2020 and winter 2020/21. While respondents in 2017 and winter 2020/21 provided information on their partnership quality within the personal and telephone interview respectively, the question on partnership quality in summer 2020 was answered within the written questionnaire. Both, the change in the type of interview (oral vs. written), and the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, could have had an impact on the reports of partnership quality.

This study shows how vulnerable even the closest relationships can be to strong external crises. However, the findings also point to the high resilience and adaptability of couples. More in-depth analyses are required to uncover which individual resources and which external conditions favoured the recovery of relationship quality and how policy can support these capacities in times of crisis in the future. New DEAS surveys will allow us to trace further development trends in partnership quality for people in the second half of life and for different population groups. Given that satisfying partnerships are a significant source of health and well-being in old age, these findings provide important clues to potential intervention needs at the individual and couple level.

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