

An Exploration of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships Experienced by Emerging Adults During the Covid-19 Lockdowns in England

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Abstract

Romantic and intimate relationships are crucial for the socio-emotional development of young adults. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting ‘lockdown’ restrictions imposed by the UK government limited opportunities for in-person relationships in England during 2020–21. This paper discusses young adults’ experiences of their relationships during lockdown, based on findings from 36 qualitative interviews conducted during 2021–22. The data suggests that relationships were shaped by socially and contextually contingent processes of meaning making and experience. Lockdown served as a defining condition, which constrained and reshaped these processes. The findings emphasise the importance of understanding relationships as entailing dynamic interactions between individual subjectivity, interpersonal experiences, and social norms. Identifying the evolving contextual conditions in which these processes occur is vital. While this study specifically examined the impact of lockdown, its implications extend beyond through shedding light on how young adults navigate social conditions and make choices for themselves and their relationships.

Keywords

relationships, lockdown, covid-19, qualitative interviews, young adults

Introduction

Romantic and intimate relationships are an important part of socio-emotional development for young adults (Collins et al., 2009) and can be beneficial for health and wellbeing (Pietromonaco & Beck, 2019). Yet, it is important to identify the meanings and experiences of relationships between young adults, with studies finding that stable and committed relationships may be challenging to navigate and, if unfulfilling, to end and exit (Jamison and Beckmeyer, 2020, 2021). Moreover, ‘staying single’ or experimenting with casual or uncommitted relationships may be a normative and beneficial project for young adults as they pursue personal goals and identity exploration (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023). Regardless of their hopes and expectations for relationships, opportunities for young adults to conduct relationships in-person were limited in England during 2020–21, due to ‘lockdown’ restrictions imposed by the UK government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions included limitations on the legal right to leave one’s home and to associate in public space with people outside the home, and the requirement to ‘socially distance’ (i.e., to maintain a distance of at least two meters from others outside the home). Young adults’ existing and prospective relationships were significantly affected by these regulations (Wignall et al., 2021) and many were home-confined with

families and thus experienced reduced independence and autonomy, including in relationships (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021). Lockdown is, therefore, likely to have disrupted this period of development (Lindberg et al., 2020).

This paper discusses findings from a qualitative study conducted during 2021–22 with young adults aged 18–23 in England to explore how lockdown affected their relationships. Typically, young adult relationships are conceptualised in terms of traits and behaviours, with studies examining associations between individual, relational, and social factors, experiences, and outcomes (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). We instead foreground how participants constructed meanings about relationships and their experiences of relationships, including during lockdown. We identify how relationships unfolded through socially and contextually contingent processes of meaning making and experience for and between individuals and, where applicable, their partners. Lockdown

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acted as a ‘condition’ in which these processes took place and were constrained and reshaped. The findings suggest that it is important to identify the ever-evolving contextual conditions in which these processes occur. In these regards, lockdown was a meaningful and influential condition in this study, but the findings have broader relevance for making visible the ways in which young adults have always been and will continue to be required to negotiate social conditions as they make choices for themselves and their relationships.

Literature Review

Romantic relationships are central to young adults’ developmental experiences, wellbeing, and outcomes (In Laursen & Collins, 2012). These relationships are characterised by intimacy and affection, including of a sexual nature, which distinguishes them from other relationships (e.g., friendships) (Collins et al., 2009). Healthy romantic relationships are associated with beneficial outcomes for young adults (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Davila et al., 2017; Dush & Amato, 2005; Meier & Allen, 2008; Montgomery, 2005; Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). They require ‘cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills’, mutuality, empathy and perspective-taking, and a secure attachment style, with there likely being a bidirectional relationship between healthy relationships and personal and interpersonal wellbeing (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019, p. 24).

Unhealthy relationships, meanwhile, are associated with poor wellbeing and psycho-social functioning (Boyle & O’Sullivan, 2013). They may involve arguments, ‘transgressions’, and power imbalances, as well as a disconnect between (potentially maladaptive) relationship beliefs and expectations and ‘reality’ (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019). They may also feature physical, sexual, and/or emotional/psychological abuse, with both young men and women reporting experiences of relationship abuse (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Collins et al., 2009; Fincham et al., 2014; Mulford & Giordano, 2008). Sexual coercion and regretted and unwanted sex are common (Garcia et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2014; Skinner et al., 2008), while ‘break-ups’ can be challenging and distressing to cope with (Leitz & Theriot, 2014) and may lead to depressive symptoms (Davila, 2008; Welsh et al., 2003).

Young adults’ relationships may be short- or long-term and vary in levels of commitment and stability (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Stable and committed relationships are considered most beneficial (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019) and occupy a valorised position in the ‘charmed circle’ of what is deemed ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ in relationships (Rubin, 1984). Emotional bonding and ‘love’ can have positive effects on personal, mental, and social wellbeing (Blanca et al., 2018; DeWall et al., 2011; Meier & Allen, 2008; Montgomery, 2005; Park et al., 2004). Committed relationships may offer social support (Coombs, 1991) and may reduce the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours (Braithwaite et al., 2010) compared to more ‘casual’ relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).

Yet, the experience and effect of ‘committed relationships’ for young adults is heterogenous and not necessarily always positive or beneficial for wellbeing, with these relationships sometimes being experienced as burdensome. For those whose relationships are meeting a need of some kind or whereby they feel entangled in the relationship (e.g., due to shared commitments), it may feel difficult or impossible to leave the relationship notwithstanding their satisfaction (or lack of) with the relationship (Jamison & Beckmeyer, 2021). Some young adults who are single, meanwhile, described feeling empowered and more able to focus on personal goals (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023).

Moreover, most young adults engage in some kind of sexual interaction or intimacy outside of committed relationships at some point (Garcia et al., 2012; Heldman & Wade, 2010). Some young adults also experience ‘relationship churn’ whereby they reconcile with partners and/or have ongoing ‘sex with an ex’ (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Casual, short-term, and otherwise non-committed relationships have been linked to negative physical and mental health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., Grello et al., 2003; Paul et al., 2000; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). Despite this, Weaver et al. (2011) conducted interviews with 26 young adults and reported that positive aspects of casual sex between friends (‘friends with benefits’) included appropriateness for their life situation, safety, comfort, and trust, gaining confidence and experience, closeness and companionship, freedom and having control, and easy access to sex. Similarly, Owen and Fincham (2011) found that of 500 young adults describing their experiences of ‘hook-ups’, most described the experience as largely positive. Casual/uncommitted relationships may, therefore, indicate or cause poor functioning or wellbeing but seemingly only for *some* young adults and the effects relate to individual, interpersonal, and social factors (Sandberg-Thoma & Kamp Dush, 2014), with some evidence that the effects may unfold differently for young women than for young men (e.g., Owen & Fincham, 2011; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012).

Casual/non-committed relationships may represent a normative way for young adults to experiment with different relationships without expectation of full ‘adult-like’ commitment (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Heldman & Wade, 2010). In general, moving in and out of relationships is part of how young people learn about relationships (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Shulman & Connolly, 2013) as a ‘critical developmental task’ (Snyder, 2000, p. 161). Relationships support self-reflection and the development of knowledge and skills for future relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). While some young adults find ending a relationship difficult and require skills to do so (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2020), most young adults report ending relationships when deemed no longer fulfilling (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009) and develop more realistic and less idealistic expectations of themselves, their partners, and their relationships as they get older (Montgomery, 2005), with propensity toward stable and committed relationships

increasing over young adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Connolly et al., 2014; Shulman et al., 2011).

Relationships are not necessarily linear, however, and lifecourse perspectives emphasise how they are (re)defined and (re)negotiated through transitions (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). Lifecourse theories explicate how ‘individuals exist and develop over time’ through ‘sequential stages’ that involve ‘dynamic, interconnected unfolding of trajectories and transitions over time’ (Shulman & Connolly, 2013, p. 33). Young adulthood typically entails transition from parental to cohabited households (Arnett, 2004; Billari, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Young adults must manage personal ‘goals’ for relationships alongside other developmental tasks as they gain independence (e.g., Arnett, 2004; Ranta et al., 2014; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Shulman and Connolly (2013, p. 31) suggest that ‘[f]or a relationship to be sustained... both partners must first address their respective life tasks and integrate them with those of a partner’ which involves inter- and intra-personal ‘deliberation... discussions and resolution...’. Gomez-Lopez et al. (2019, p. 23) argue that the skills required to sustain healthy relationships do not exist in a ‘vacuum’; they posit an integrated model of romantic wellbeing encompassing ‘relationship quality, need fulfilment, the achievement of personal and relational goals, romantic attachment, and the development of individual skills’ (p.24).

It is, therefore, important to identify what is defined and experienced as un/healthy by individuals, the conditions in which meanings are created, how choices and decisions about relationships are made and which skills are required to best support these processes. Shulman and Connolly (2013) argue that young adults exercise ‘a calculated response to the realities and recent complexities’ of their lives and young adulthood should be understood as a ‘stage where young adults are expected to coordinate among the different facets of their lives in order to settle into a long-term partnership’ (p.35). They describe this argument as ‘speculative,’ however, and suggest that it is necessary to ‘examine how emerging adults perceive the different tasks they face and how they balance them’ including through ‘in-depth interviews’ that can help identify:

‘...the dilemmas young people face in making their decisions and deciding to commit... This will allow us to learn from about the adaptive and less adaptive trajectories on which young people embark on this developmental stage.’ (p.35)

During the pandemic, lockdown restrictions meant relationships unfolded in unusually constrained circumstances and, therefore, the ways young adults participated in and experienced their relationships were likely to have been altered and affected. Existing research attests to the oftentimes detrimental consequences for young adults of the restrictions on in-person interactions and physical contact during lockdown (e.g., Lehmillier et al., 2021). Lockdown may have triggered ‘role confusion’ for young adults (Velutic et al.,

2021, p. 585), with Dotson et al. (2022, p. 546) identifying a ‘developmental mismatch’ between expectations and experiences because expected ‘increasing independence and autonomy’ did not occur or regressed. LGBT + young people may have been particularly adversely affected, including those home-confined with unsupportive relatives. (Broner et al., 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2020). Hanna-Walker et al. (2023) argue that LGBT + young people require ‘developmental assets’ to develop healthy self-concepts and relationships, with personal autonomy being vital for those living in oppressive environments. These arguments may apply to all young adults albeit in different, contextually contingent ways.

Current Study

The extant literature suggests relationships play an important role in young adults’ lives. Young adulthood is an expected time for exploring and developing relationships, with implications for personal development and expectations and models for future relationships. These processes were disrupted by lockdown with studies attesting to the negative impact of restrictions on in-person intimate and social interaction for young people. While previous research identifies correlations between healthy relationships and wellbeing for young people, studies about relationships in lockdown are typically limited to short survey responses. In the current study, we aimed to understand young adults’ experiences of relationships during lockdown through in-depth interviews designed to explore the ‘ambivalence and feeling in-between that characterizes emerging adulthood’ (Schwab & Syed, 2015, p. 388) We explicate how different experiences and perspectives on relationships were shaped by individual and social meanings and how these meanings were (re)created and (re)negotiated through the conditions in which participants found themselves during lockdown. We identify how healthy relationships can be supported through addressing the meanings that relationships hold to young adults and the contexts in which meanings are created, sustained, and re-worked by individuals and within relationships. The findings provide insight into the implications of lockdown for relationships but also more broadly regarding the roles that relationships play in young adults’ lives and the conditions in which they form meanings about and embark on and experience relationships, as articulated by them through their narratives produced in interviews.

Methods

Interviews with 38 young adults (aged 18–24) and 14 focus groups with 80 adolescents (aged 18–20) were conducted in England during late 2021–May 2022. This paper discusses findings from the young adult interviews regarding the meanings and experiences of relationships for this sample. It was not necessary for participants to define themselves as

being in a relationship either at the time of the interview or during lockdown; instead, any young adult who wanted to talk about lockdown and intimate relationships was eligible to participate. While most were in a relationship or had been for part or all of lockdown, some participants were and had been single and spoke about how lockdown affected their interest in and/or pursuit of a relationship, including for example through 'dating.' Participants' self-described relationship status is provided in the 'findings' section to contextualise the analysis.

The sample comprised both university and non-university educated young people recruited via social media ($n = 15$) and university communication channels ($n = 23$). More females ($n = 26$) than males participated, though the sample was diverse regarding ethnicity (BAME: $n = 21$) and somewhat regarding sexual orientation (LGB + $n = 10$). Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, with most at least 45 minutes. The majority were one-to-one ($n = 34$) although one heterosexual couple and two female friends requested paired interviews. Most were held virtually on Teams (one paired and 31 one-to-one) and some in-person (one paired and three one-to-one), based on participant location and preference.

Interviews followed a relatively unstructured narrative format designed to give the participant, as 'narrator', agency and space to tell their story (Jackson & Russell, 2018). The interviewer facilitated this process by asking participants to describe their circumstances when lockdown was first imposed, prompting them to elaborate on their ensuing experiences. Participants spoke freely and on their own terms, and shared personal thoughts and experiences. Kartch (2018) argues that individuals enjoy telling stories and that narratives can help them make sense of their experiences. While they were constructed, participants' narratives were fundamental to identity and to how they 'discursively construct their experiences' (Kartch, 2018, p. 3). Their narratives entailed reflexivity and reflection and were situated, relational, and often not constructed in a linear fashion (Jackson & Russell, 2018), which helped reveal perceptual changes within individuals across time (Dziewa & Glowacz, 2021).

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Data analysis was undertaken manually, and we analysed transcripts independently before meeting to discuss emergent themes. After coding, we examined differences and commonalities within and across code categories to highlight instances of coder disagreement and, once resolved, to identify systems of meaning. Codes were grouped to form overarching themes that expressed the latent content of transcripts. To illustrate the coding process, an example of a theme was 'Young adulthood as a time of independence and exploration,' which was derived from the category: 'frustration expressed about having to spend time home-confined with relatives rather than meeting or spending time with actual/potential partners,' which included the codes 'wanting' to spend time with partners and 'ready' to start dating. Another theme was 'personal and interpersonal pains of a loss of control and uncertainty,' which was derived from the category:

'distressing/to not know or be able to control when it will be possible to spend time with actual/desired partners in-person again,' which included the codes 'missing' partners, 'not knowing' when it will be possible to meet again.

Coding was iterative and inductive as we continued to refine codes with each analysed transcript. A constant comparison approach was adopted, where segments coded with the same code were compared to ensure they reflected the same concept. For example, the codes 'missing' partners and 'wanting' to spend time with partners involved identifying in repeated segments of coding the distinction between the feelings expressed regarding the state of being physically apart and the desire to be physically co-present, which were inter-related but distinct. When participants spoke about how they felt about being apart, it was coded as 'missing' and when they spoke about the prospect of being together again, it was coded as 'wanting', with these orientations being common in the data. Coding was finalised when no new concepts were identified in the data, suggesting that theoretical saturation had been achieved. We did not quantify perspectives or experiences because the fact that a theme was not raised in an interview does not mean it was not of importance, but perhaps that the conversation had taken a different direction. We acknowledge, therefore, that we cannot make any claims regarding prevalence of any of the findings; instead, and in alignment with qualitative epistemology, we explicate the significance of the narratives produced by participants for understanding their experience of relationships during lockdown.

Theoretically, we adopted a critical realist approach when interpreting the data. Critical realism understands reality as existing beyond subjective experience; Clegg (2006, p. 316) describes it as identifying 'what mechanisms, structures or powers are producing the outcomes.' This approach allows for an identification of structure while avoiding being overly deterministic or reductionist. Adopting Archer's (1995) concept of 'analytical dualism', Clegg (2006, p. 317) locates 'causal powers at both the level of person and society', which, she argues, makes it 'possible to look through time at the processes of change.' From this perspective, lockdown did not *cause* or *determine* experiences or outcomes for participants. Instead, it created conditions for action and experience shaped by interplays between the 'reality' of the restrictions on in-person physical and social contact, the socially shaped and contextually contingent understandings of relationships constructed and shared by participants (that unfolded during but ultimately transcended and were affected by lockdown), and individual and interpersonal identity projects, needs, and goals for relationships (i.e., what participants were striving for in their relationships, including before, during, and after lockdown). Lockdown structured how these processes played out for participants and their accounts of relationships during the period.

The research was conducted in line with professional ethical principles for research with human participants and received ethical approval from our respective institutional

boards. Participants gave informed consent to participate. Identities have been kept anonymous; participants chose pseudonyms and identifying details in the data have been omitted. Confidentiality was upheld with exceptions for safeguarding, although no disclosures were made that required a safeguarding response.

Findings

The findings are organised in terms of the following themes: 1) Young adulthood as a time of independence and exploration in relationships; 2) The personal and interpersonal pains of uncertainty and a loss of control; 3) Negotiating new rules and regulations for physical spaces; 4) Ambivalence about expedited transitions; 5) Relationships as emotional validation/support; 6) Social isolation and unhealthy or abusive relationships; 7) Healthy relationships requiring skills and experience; 8) Lockdown as creating new forms of learning and experience in relationships; 9) Reluctance for a relationship where deemed to conflict with personal life goals and projects.

Young Adulthood as a Time of Independence and Exploration in Relationships

Several participants constructed young adulthood as a time where they expected (or, at least, had been expecting) to be participating in relationships, with increased independence from their families of origin. John (23, M), for example, said that as a:

‘20-something year-old lad... I want to be with my mates... out doing stuff, but I can’t. I’m stuck at home with my family... And I’d just met a girl as well, so I want to go out and do things with her.’

Some participants intended to start dating upon starting university, with Caroline (23, F), for instance, feeling that lockdown disrupted her plans to do so:

‘I was really... ready to... meet people... because I’d never had an opportunity to do that. And then lockdown hit, so that, kind of, stagnated that a little bit for more.’

A loss of control and autonomy regarding relationships was also described by those who felt unable to make free choices within existing established relationships during lockdown. Ellie (22, F) said she would rather have stayed with her long-term boyfriend than be ‘at home’ with her family but they did not move in together because:

‘...everyone was doing the same thing; everyone was staying as a family. It [moving back with family rather than staying with her boyfriend] felt like the right thing to do.’

The reduction in control and autonomy as a young adult occurred two-fold for Ellie; first, regarding the constraints on in-person interaction and second, regarding the normative pressures to return home to her family. Cecilia (20, F), meanwhile, had been planning to live with her partner, but was unable to due to lockdown. She said that ‘lockdown sort of only intensified that desire’ to live together and was, therefore, somewhat beneficial to her relationship in terms of re-affirming their commitment to each other.

While Cecilia would have preferred not to have delayed moving in with her partner, others narrated a sense of relief that budding relationships were given more time and space to develop during lockdown. Ben (20, M) and Jasmine (21, F), who participated in a paired interview, for example, said that because of Jasmine’s relative inexperience in relationships, it was beneficial for their relationship, which started early in the pandemic, to have ‘moved more slowly’ (Jasmine). Ben suggested to Jasmine that the relationship ‘could have easily been scuppered... if something went too fast or, you know, you weren’t sure about something. It was all at your pace, wasn’t it?’ Jasmine agreed, suggesting that the mutual positive framing of their circumstances benefited their relationship.

While reduced autonomy and control in relationships was troubling for participants because of their goals and expectations for themselves as young adults, some reframed these conditions in positive terms. Expectations were, therefore, not static but (re-)interpreted and (re-)constructed by individuals personally and interpersonally within their relationships.

The Personal and Interpersonal Pains of Uncertainty Arising from a Loss of Control and Autonomy

Loss of control and autonomy was not just jarring to participants from a role perspective but also due to the feelings of uncertainty it created for some in their relationships. Participants in ‘committed’ relationships recounted some postponement of and uncertainty in their relationships, notably those already managing their relationships ‘long distance.’ These participants typically felt confident interacting online with their partners, because they had been doing so as part of their long-distance arrangement and, therefore, the ‘virtual boundaries’ (Dotson et al., 2022, p. 550) around relationships were initially not as troubling for them. Yet, they struggled with the inability to plan or be confident about their plans to see each other in-person. Ellie (22, F), for example, referred to feeling less and less ‘optimistic... I just missed him [her boyfriend] a lot... I think it was mainly upsetting that I didn’t know when I’d see him again.’

Some participants described significant challenges due to their loss of control and autonomy. Mae (20, F), for example, was a lesbian woman whose parents did not accept her sexuality. Lockdown was challenging for Mae and exacerbated her existing difficulties with her parents and, ultimately, with herself:

‘... [I] just retreated further because I was surrounded only by the people [her parents] who had those [homophobic] views... I just didn’t have that chance to really push to be who I wanted to be. It felt like I was becoming more what they [her parents] wanted me to be because they had that time to just keep preaching what they wanted.’

Mae had intended to spend the summer before starting university going to LGBT + events and getting to know the community. She felt that because she had been unable to do so, she did not feel comfortable with herself when she started university. She recounted having pursued romantic connections with men to:

‘...convince myself... that I wasn’t gay... maybe my parents are right because if my parents say it, then it must be right because your parents want what’s best for you... I felt like a massive imposter in my own skin. I still felt like I had no clue what I was doing.’

Mae defined lockdown as a contributing factor to her current situation because: ‘I feel like I would have been in such a different position if I was able to find other people that were like me.’

Negotiating New Rules and Regulations for Physical Spaces

Some participants described challenging experiences of negotiating the new rules and regulations for physical spaces present during lockdown. Jasmine (21, F) and Ben (20, M), for example, were cautious about meeting in-person because they did not want to put people’s health at risk. They also perceived ‘a lot of shame’ (Ben) and that if they passed covid to others, people ‘would be so annoyed’ (Jasmine). Ben described an ‘anonymous reporting’ mechanism on the university campus which gave people ‘huge amounts of power’ to get each other into trouble. Others shared similar perspectives. Lexi (22, F), for example, felt she had to be ‘careful’ when spending time with her partner, but was able to negotiate this with her housemates because they ‘understood the mental toll it was taking on all of us... so they were happy with me having him over as long as it wasn’t too spread around the house...’, suggesting a shared understanding of the needs of young adults to participate in their relationships.

Some participants were concerned about the risk to relatives if they saw their partner and, therefore, refrained from doing so despite finding this challenging. John (23, M), for example, said that even when in-person contact was allowed, he and his partner refrained from meeting due to concerns for their parents. John experienced increasing tension with his parents as the pandemic continued and he wanted to see his partner. John eventually did so, however, and:

‘...we were just as careful as we could be... we wouldn’t have the physical touch, but we were like physically close in proximity to each other... it was obviously scary. You don’t want to put anyone in danger.’

Others constructed rule-breaking as an expression of commitment and intimacy because it was undertaken despite, or perhaps because of, risk. Mikey (20, M), for example, said he ‘couldn’t stay away [from his partner]. I decided to see her. I had to sneak out [from his family home] to see her.’ Lexi (22, F) felt that partners would only meet in-person if they were genuinely interested in one another because otherwise the ‘risk’ would not be deemed worth taking. Alex (22, M) described his partner’s willingness to break lockdown rules as making him feel ‘very happy. I felt loved, and I think, oh god, that if she could do this, then she could do anything for me.’

These decisions could be due to feeling pressure to sustain one’s relationship. Canq (22, F) described her relationship as imbalanced because she made extensive communicative efforts that were not reciprocated by her partner. He was unresponsive to text messages and other requests to interact so Canq felt she had to see him in-person, despite concerns for her mother’s poor health:

‘...our relationship... was going bad and I thought if I see him, it will be better but also at the same time... he’s going out, he’s not really caring about this lockdown, and I need to protect my mum.’

Her boyfriend ultimately ended the relationship, and she described resenting the sacrifices she had made and the ‘loss of agency’ she felt in the relationship after taking the risk to see him in-person.

Ambivalence About Expedited Transitions

Some participants responded to lockdown conditions in ways that entailed expedited transitions in their relationships. A notable example related to decisions to live with partners during lockdown which happened sooner than anticipated or intended. Some participants expressed ambivalence about this decision and/or its effects. For example, Lizzie’s (21, F) boyfriend asked her to stay with him during lockdown. She said they would not have lived together otherwise at that point, and while she was ‘excited’ about it:

‘...we hadn’t been serious the last time we saw each other [in-person], and we’d only seen each other physically for about two months... it just felt a bit much.’

She described living with him as both ‘really nice’ and ‘weird’, because the decision was made ‘suddenly’ and ‘we wouldn’t usually do that [have moved in together].’ She

described living as a ‘married couple in a way’; yet, in the end it ‘just felt a little bit too much... we did want to go back and be with our families a little bit.’ Lockdown offered an opportunity to experiment with living together, coupled with a mutual understanding that it was not to be sustained.

Amber Valentine (21, F), meanwhile, was in a ‘fresh relationship’ when they ‘decided to just move in together for the lockdown.’ She found the experience valuable because it represented:

‘...a great way of finding out whether I could live with them [her boyfriend] in the most extreme way, compared to just seeing them every day and maybe staying over.’

She said that the experience ‘really strengthened my relationship... I’m deciding to move in with them permanently.’ Whilst they endured problems living together during lockdown, Amber attributed these to pandemic-related issues with their housemates and landlord, again suggesting that lockdown created unique contextual challenges to navigate as a couple.

For some participants, the decision to live together was driven by the stress of the pandemic. Ivy (21, F), decided to move in with her boyfriend because she was experiencing problems with her housemates. She did not class it as ‘properly’ living together because ‘there was just so much going on that we couldn’t really enjoy it as much as we’d wanted to’, suggesting that the conditions under which they moved in together—of constrained choice—conflicted with Ivy’s expectations regarding how romantic couples should experience living together.

Others described living together as arising organically due to lockdown. Millie (22, F), for example, described it as ‘natural’ to move in with her boyfriend because ‘he was scared for me, and I was also scared... We didn’t really discuss it’. Pepe (23, F) was staying at her boyfriend’s house when lockdown was announced and remained there due to restrictions on movement. Their period of cohabitation was longer than initially anticipated due to lockdown extensions. She described some difficulties living together; he became distant and ‘reserved’ while she became ‘clingy’ and wanted his attention. She said their problems were resolved through her giving him ‘space’ and ‘time’ despite it being ‘hard because I felt bad. He was the only one I had around... the only one I could be truly close to.’ When she shared her feelings, he ‘apologised’ and, on reflection, she felt she ‘got to learn about him’ during the ‘trial’ of living together.

Similarly, others who positively recounted their time living together identified the importance of individual ‘space.’ Cecilia (20, F), for instance, said she and her partner ‘were so good at that... we never really had issues... We never felt we had to demand the other person’s attention.’ Interestingly, however, Ben (20, M) and Jasmine (21, F) said they assumed ‘it was normal to give each other space’ (Ben) but ‘that actually didn’t work for us really’ (Jasmine), suggesting that

normative expectations for healthy and positive relationships may be re-worked interpersonally.

Relationships as Emotional Validation/Support

Some participants received emotional support through their relationships during lockdown. Lucy (20, F), for example, described co-habitation with her boyfriend as vital for her wellbeing. She felt she was demanding of his support and that:

‘...he was very patient with me... I was way more sensitive, just way more angry all the time, and I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t have him... he was my rock at that time.’

This dynamic may have taken its toll on her partner, as Lucy described:

‘...periods where I was really nasty... I couldn’t get my anger out with anyone else... I realised I was hurting him a lot... I didn’t bother to think about how he was doing, which sounds really bad actually now that I’m saying that out loud.’

Lucy also benefitted from gaining support from her partner’s family through co-habitation, referring to his mother as ‘the mother figure I never had.’ Such interpersonal dependency may, however, entail ambivalence, with Pik (21, M) stating that he:

‘...needed somebody to be close to me... it really helped me a lot [but] I felt it was also too much for me, like all the time having somebody by my side.’

Some participants who struggled during lockdown recounted a desire for emotional reciprocity from partners during lockdown, which seemed important to garner feelings of security in their relationship. Ellie (22, F), for example, found her boyfriend’s lack of emotional expressiveness troubling. She described herself as ‘a lot more emotional than he was about it [not being able to see each other in lockdown] ...I reckon I missed him more’. This became increasingly concerning for Ellie whereby:

‘...toward the end, it became less of me being upset because I missed him and more upset because I felt like we weren’t on the same page in terms of missing each other.’

Ellie’s insecurities related to the illegibility of her partner’s emotional expression, which caused her to question his feelings for her. She felt that her partner should have understood and responded to her feelings more effectively and that this was symbolic of a ‘good’ relationship:

‘I was getting annoyed that he didn’t know how to react to me... we’ve been together... over a year and a half, two years and he just didn’t know what to say to me when I was upset.’

Anna (22, F), similarly, felt that her partner's lack of legible emotional reciprocity regarding her 'sadness being unable to see him' implied that he was not missing her. She said that she:

'...wanted him to suffer more about not seeing me for that long period of time... it was really hard for me, and it didn't seem hard for him.'

It may be disconcerting to engage in the kind of emotional openness deemed functionally and symbolically important to relationships and to feel it is not reciprocated. Yet, Francesca's (23, F) descriptions of having to support her partner 'like, keep my partner calm on the phone... you would have to have loads of patience', suggests that individuals may adjust their communication in response to their partner's emotionality, whilst not necessarily reciprocating emotionally.

Social Isolation and Unhealthy or Abusive Relationships

Some participants' stories indicated that staying in relationships for support and wellbeing, including during lockdown, may prevent identification of or lead to toleration of unfulfilling or unhealthy relationships. Lexi (22, F), for example, felt she ignored problems in her relationship during lockdown because she wanted to avoid feeling 'lonely and isolated.' She said she 'chose to ignore... red flags' which, when 'restrictions started to ease, and I saw my friends a little bit more' became more obvious. She described having been somewhat aware during lockdown that the relationship:

'...was not going anywhere, but I chose to ignore it almost because it was like this is the only other social interaction that I'm getting, and I didn't want to lose that.'

Some participants seemed vulnerable to abusive relationships during lockdown because of isolation and a desire to be with someone. There was reference to 'something was better than nothing' (Sarah, 18, non-binary), with some LGBT + participants living with abusive partners during lockdown due to non-accepting family relatives.

It was apparent that wider familial and peer networks are relevant to how individuals perceive and experience their relationships. Others attested to the importance of friends supporting them to identify and end unhealthy relationships. Millie (22, F) recounted her friends helping her realise that her ex-partner was harassing her. They told her to:

'...report him because I was trying to be understanding and loving... my friends told me... that's too much... he shouldn't be insulting you that much, you need to report him.'

Lily (24, F) said that living with friends post-lockdown led to the realisation that her partner was mis-treating her. She worried that she was 'overreacting... being dramatic' when she thought her partner was doing something 'unreasonable',

but her friends validated her concerns, helping her trust her judgment and 'feelings toward a situation.'

Healthy Relationships as Requiring Skills and Experience

Several participants experienced lockdown as an opportunity to reflect on behaviours and dynamics that could signal an unhealthy relationship and they highlighted the importance of acquiring skills and experience in identifying and navigating unhealthy relationships. Millie (22, F), for example, said her boyfriend became increasingly downbeat during lockdown. She struggled initially because:

'I didn't really comprehend the situation... I couldn't comprehend my feelings as well, because this was my first time in a long-term relationship, so I didn't know how I was meant to feel and what I was meant to do.'

The relationship was not meeting her expectation for what relationships should be like in young adulthood, because, as a '22-year-old girl', she felt she should not have to:

'...babysit a grown man and I'm not ready for that yet... to become like almost a wife to someone... I did feel at some point that I was dating an old man because he'd turned into a grumpy old man in my eyes.'

Anna (22, F) also reflected on a lack of awareness during her lockdown relationship: 'when I'd had enough time to reflect on it, I realised there were some moments when he was manipulative.' She described the relationship as 'toxic' which, she felt, was partly 'because of me... he was like my first love ever and I was very much in love with him.' She believed a desire among inexperienced young adults for a relationship increases the risk of not identifying, or tolerating, unhealthy relationship dynamics and behaviours, which, in turn, meant she considered herself somewhat culpable or responsible.

Hindsight also pertained to positive life changes experienced following the end of a relationship. Millie, for example, said she realised her relationship had been problematic because afterwards she:

'...was building better connections with my friends and with family and I was generally just enjoying myself more, having more fun... better experiences. So, I did realise that my relationship issues... were stopping me from connecting with other people in my life.'

Gary (18, M) described his previous relationship as 'like a trauma' and compared it to feeling 'very free and definitely happy with my girlfriend now...'. Reflecting on his personal growth, Gary said that he is 'learning from the last mistakes.' Both he and Millie framed lockdown as the catalyst for ending their relationship. For Millie, it prompted the change in her

partner's demeanor. For Gary, prior to lockdown if there was a problem he would:

'...go to her house... we would sit down and discuss and maybe settle the issue... but when the lockdown period came... can't go anywhere, so that was how it became obvious.'

This again suggests relationship strain emerged from, was exacerbated, or made visible by, the restrictions on in-person contact. Lily (24, F) also felt lockdown highlighted that she made more effort in the relationship than her partner and she realised 'that's not fair and that's not right.' At first, the 'pandemic prolonged [the] relationship' because they stayed together so as not to be alone but ultimately lockdown 'inevitably made it end' because of what she learnt, or realised, during this period.

Lockdown as Creating New Forms of Learning and Experience in Relationships

Several participants felt lockdown had, in different ways, constrained or re-shaped experiential learning in their relationships, with implications for future relationships. Jimmy (20, M), for example, said that since the break-up of his relationship in lockdown, he has:

'...abstained from relationships because of the phobia of something like covid happening again... I don't want to put myself in that position. I feel vulnerable... I don't want to go through that [not being able to see a person in-person and potentially losing the relationship] again.'

Mae (20, F) attributed her negative feelings about her sexuality to not being able to distance from her family and acquaint herself with other LGBT + young adults during lockdown:

'I feel there's been such a fear built that's just kept blossoming, growing since that first lockdown and it's just not getting any better.'

Evelyn (22, F), meanwhile, referred more broadly to her age cohort and felt that:

'...our whole formative interaction years just weren't there... we didn't have any of the prior experience... social skills... life experience... love life experience... there's only so much that us individuals could do... There's no way that we can just go back to before.'

There were, however, also narratives of relationships and selves having emerged stronger and wiser from lockdown. Some participants felt lockdown had strengthened their relationships and had been a test of their perseverance. Ben (20, M) and

Jasmine (21, F) reported that lockdown had made them stronger and more 'resilient' as a couple. Mikey (20, M), similarly, felt lockdown had been a 'test... it made us stronger... what doesn't break you makes you', while John (23, M) said:

'...it proved to us both that we could make it work in something that's out of both of our control... it was a challenge that neither of us wanted... but we did it and we're better people for it.'

Cecilia (20, F) also felt she was in a strong relationship and said they were more appreciative of each other following lockdown:

'...we're closer and stronger because we had to go through such an event together... and sort of come out the other side still together, feeling the same way that we did.'

Some felt lockdown had improved their ability to communicate about their feelings and empathise with partners. Amber Valentine (21, F), for example, felt lockdown had 'forced' her and her partner 'to have these conversations' about whether they want to be together and how to make it work. Ben (20, M) and Jasmine (21, F) shared an example of how communication had helped them strengthen their relationship. Ben recounted that whilst he is:

'...not a jealous person per se... I think that when everything started opening up, I started getting really worried about like clubbing... I just had this sort of image that you [Jasmine] were going to meet someone.'

Jasmine said she could understand his concern and they agreed they were 'pretty good at reassuring each other. If the insecurity is expressed' (Jasmine). Ben felt that 'reassurance' was important but necessitates openness about insecurities and they described being more open during and following lockdown. Ivy (21, F) spoke similarly about the benefit of her and her partner being:

'...a lot more open on mental health now after lockdown, because we found if we can be there to actually support each other, then it's so much easier than braving it on your own.'

Reluctance for a Relationship Deemed to Conflict With Personal Life Goals and Projects

Some of those in relationships described feeling positive about their current relationship, others questioned what they wanted going forward. Pepe (23, F), for example, described wanting to 'establish myself... work myself out', because she is:

'...still young and I don't have to revolve my life around just one particular person. I just want to give myself time to explore and just get to meet new people.'

Alyssa (24, F) wanted to remain in her relationship, but her and her partner were also ‘... just kind of focusing on our individuality and doing whatever makes us happy.’

Echoing the notion of having learnt and developed self-knowledge over lockdown, Amber-Valentine (21, F) described ‘slowly realising’ during the period that she ‘wanted to do things with’ her boyfriend but is ‘not fully happy just always doing things with him’ and so is spending more time with other people. Grace (19, F) described herself during lockdown as ‘a bit too co-dependent’. Having realised she was too ‘...dependent on [her boyfriend] for my happiness and how I felt about myself and what I was doing...’. She now feels:

‘...more independent... I don’t see him as much and I don’t stay with him as much. We’re much more like we both have our own lives now that our relationship fits into rather than our lives fitting into our relationship.’

Some of those not in a relationship questioned whether a relationship was right for them at the current time due to other personal goals, for example regarding education or career. Some were open to, but non-committal about, a relationship; Alison (19, F) intended to ‘meet with new people and decide.’ Lily (24, F) felt similarly; while she ‘might go on a date with a guy next week’ for her, she also wanted to ‘spend time with myself and with my friends and nurturing other connections.’

While some participants were sometimes critical of casual relationships because they deemed them ultimately disappointing and fruitless regarding their desire to meet a stable and committed partner, others were explicit about their preference for such relationships at that point in time. Millie (22, F) was ‘dating a guy in a non-serious way’ and described herself as:

‘...a bit too young still to jump into that [a caring, loving and serious relationship] ...I just want to live my life to enjoy myself, enjoy my time with men instead of constantly thinking about marriage and the future.’

Conversely, Christine (20, F) was interested in a relationship but in addition to feeling ‘a bit too young’ she had:

‘...seen from my friendships that on that level sometimes things feel that relationships mean a lot more to me than they do to the other person. I don’t feel that that’s something I want to pursue right now.’

Discussion

Participants differed in their relationship status and experience before, during, and since lockdown, as well as their expectations and hopes for future relationships. Across participants, however, lockdown acted as a contextual influence over the meanings, enactments, and experiences of relationships

(see Laursen and Collin, 2012), which unfolded in terms of both individual differences and cohort effects (see Chow et al., 2011). The changes and developments that participants recounted may have occurred irrespective of lockdown but were meaningful to participants *because* they happened during lockdown. The findings underscore the importance of a lifecourse approach to understanding relationships as part of expected transitions to and through young adulthood (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017) but also of examining how context and (inter)personal subjectivity shapes expectations for and experiences of those transitions (Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Lockdown was experienced by participants as constraining their agency and autonomy; they felt unable to have the experiences in and with relationships that they deemed an expected part of young adulthood (see Collins et al., 2009; Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). There ensued ‘role confusion’ (Velutic et al., 2021, p. 585) and ‘developmental mismatch’ (Doston et al., 2022, p. 546) between participants’ expectations and the realities in which they found themselves during lockdown. Relationship progress was disrupted and stalled for many, with the ability to plan and look forward to spending time in-person with partners being important to participants. For some, the strain on their relationships was unwanted but reworked into a test of their relationship and, therefore, was defined and experienced as beneficial. Others valued the opportunity to slow down the progress of their relationship.

While navigating normative contexts and social ‘rules’ regarding relationships is not a unique challenge for young adults as they participate in their relationships, the feeling of being unable to associate with partners in-person due to the risk of legal and social censure is unprecedented. Some participants shared accounts of breaking the rules, with doing so potentially holding expressive functions in their relationships. Others described managing their concerns about infection and virus control alongside their desire to spend time with their partner in-person. Unhealthy relationship dynamics in these regards seemed related to feelings of obligation to subordinate personal concerns to the perceived needs of the relationship. While subordinating personal needs may not always be unhealthy, it may be if decision making is not mutual or stems from insecurity and feels obligatory, which may entail reduced feelings of autonomy and agency in the relationship. For young adults like Canq, for example, lockdown may have constrained agency, but the meaning and experience of the agency exercised in response then related to the relationship dynamic between Canq and her partner.

Some participants experienced expedited or unanticipated transitions in their relationships due to moving in together during lockdown. Several of these participants did not hold themselves to a linear process of relationship progress (Shulman & Connolly, 2013) or lifecourse transitions (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017) and were content with ‘regressing’ to their pre-cohabitation state following the perhaps too ‘adult-like’ experience of living together (see Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009;

Heldman & Wade, 2010), while others intended to continue co-habiting. Ambivalence about moving in together during lockdown featured in some accounts, suggesting that reduced control and autonomy may be (inter)personally responded to in somewhat beneficial ways but any agency occurs within or through feelings of reduced autonomy, whereby the individual exercises some power but lacks the usual or expected range of choices and flexibility (see Bay-Cheng, 2013). Some of these participants indeed held beliefs and expectations regarding what decisions about and experiences of moving in with partners *should* be like, which jarred with their experiences of doing so during lockdown.

For some participants, their relationships were a source of support during lockdown; yet, seeking support through relationships in this way may result from or create feelings of reliance, dependence and/or intensity because the relationship addresses an important, perhaps even vital, need. It may also create pressure for the partner, while making it difficult to identify and/or exit an unhealthy relationship because of the perceived (or real) psychological and, in the case of Canq, familial, support received via the relationship. As Jamison and Beckmeyer (2021) found, such dynamics may create a feeling of being ‘stuck’ in the relationship, notwithstanding the level of relationship satisfaction that is present. Lockdown may have exacerbated these potentialities because of how different the period was to the ‘norm’, for example regarding decisions to stay in an unfulfilling relationship to stave off feelings of loneliness and isolation or regarding confinement to abusive or otherwise unhealthy relationships due to isolation from wider networks. There were stories of increased awareness and perceived ability to end relationships once the pressures of lockdown, and reliance on partners, had rescinded and re-acquaintance with wider networks in-person made possible, which is consistent with Jamison and Beckmeyer’s (2021) findings regarding young adults’ greater tendencies to end unfulfilling relationships as they gain greater insight and awareness of alternatives.

Emotional reciprocity was important to some participants as they navigated the constraints of lockdown. Mutuality has indeed been identified as important in relationships (Holt et al., 2016) and ‘emotional interdependence’, whereby partners’ emotions are linked to one another over time, is a feature of healthy and positive relationships (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019). Empathetic engagement between partners (Holt et al., 2016) may, however, entail identifying one another’s needs and feelings and then mirroring emotionality or responding in a supportive rather than similar manner. Discordant beliefs about what mutuality and emotional interdependence *should* be like can be problematic for relationships (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019).

There was a commonly expressed belief that healthy relationships require practice and experience, with stories of awareness about unhealthy dynamics increasing during and after participants’ relationships. While several participants described having learnt something about themselves, their

partners, and their relationships during lockdown, others felt that the period had been traumatic or otherwise damaging to their outlooks on relationships. Jimmy, for example, said that he was fearful of having another relationship because the pain of breaking up with his partner in lockdown was such that he would not take the ‘risk’ of another relationship lest lockdown is imposed again. While ending relationships is difficult for some young adults irrespective of lockdown (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2020), Jimmy framed his ‘vulnerability’ in terms of lockdown.

There was some perception that young adults had ‘lost out’ on experience during lockdown; although it seemed less that they had not learnt or experienced anything, more that it was different from their hopes and expectations for what they *should* have been learning and doing at that stage in their lives. Some participants in relationships, meanwhile, felt they had become ‘stronger and wiser’ as a result of lockdown, including within their relationship. These displays of resilience—in terms of the ways participants negotiated the conditions in which they found themselves without detrimental effect to themselves or their relationships—seemed enabled and supported by intra- and inter-personal reflection, and identification and re-alignment of needs, wants, and meanings.

Yet, it is important to identify the wider contextual conditions that create demands for resilience (Farris et al., 2021). For Mae, for example, her experience of ‘minority stress’ (Broner et al., 2022) was acute because of the homophobic rejection she had experienced from her parents and how she internalised that into at best, an unease with her sexuality and at worse, a personal concealment or denial of her sexuality. Moreover, it is necessary to identify whether and how people adjust to or learn from their experiences, including when unhealthy or negative patterns and dynamics become entrenched and repeated. Unhealthy relationships are not unique to lockdown, but participants’ accounts demonstrate the importance of contextual conditions and supportive networks, or the ‘external assets’ required for healthy relationships, as well as personal awareness and skills (Ewing et al., 2022; Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019; Hanna-Walker et al., 2023). In other words, relationships require personal, interpersonal, and social learning, experience, and ‘assets’ to ‘get right.’ A ‘social-ecological’ framework captures this multidimensional nature of relationships (Dotson et al., 2022, p. 554), which may help address the individualistic narratives of self-blame that can arise when young adults reflect on their experiences of unhealthy relationships without diminishing their agency regarding their relationships as they move forward.

Finally, there was a commonly held view that relationships entail, or require, commitment and sacrifice. Perhaps, if based on mutuality and reciprocity, the perceived norm of subjugation of individual needs to the needs of the relationship can entail fulfillment, supporting the wellbeing of both individuals. Yet, if unbalanced or exploitative, it may be unhealthy or dysfunctional and, in turn, detrimental to the relationship and

one or both partners. The ability to identify and address such dynamics, as well as the likelihood of such dynamics unfolding, may be shaped by the experiences and perspectives each person brings to the relationship and how their respective life biographies and self-concepts interact in healthy or unhealthy ways (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019).

Participants varied in their stated willingness and readiness for relationships characterised by commitment and sacrifice. For many, an interest in and pursuit of 'casual' relationships was deemed a normative and positive part of young adulthood (see Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Others intended to continue in existing committed relationships or wanted such relationships. The findings suggest that committed relationships may support or constrain individual identity projects; some participants' identities were interlinked with their relationships while for others, 'staying single' or mutually co-negotiating an independent self and life beyond their relationship was deemed to facilitate the pursuit of personal identity projects that were defined as currently incomplete. These findings echo Beckmeyer and Jamison's (2023) suggestion that attitudes to relationships differ across individuals, with young adults identifying both benefits and costs to being in committed relationships. As some of the young adults said in this study, Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023) found that not being in a committed relationship was experienced as empowering for some young adults and supported the pursuit of identity projects and personal goals.

As a result, it is important to identify what individuals are striving for and how they relate this to their expectations of themselves and others as young adults. In other words, socially constructed age-related 'role expectations' intersect with individual subjectivity. An interest in casual relationships may, therefore, be part of the pursuit of intimacy – also defined by some participants as a normative and beneficial project in young adulthood – without the full commitment that was deemed to jeopardise individuality and the pursuit of other goals and transition-related considerations for some young adults.

Implications

While this study investigated experiences during lockdown as a 'condition' specifically, the findings explicate the importance of autonomy to enabling young adults' agency in their relationships and, in turn, the troubling personal and interpersonal implications of constrained autonomy. Autonomy in relationships is intra- and inter-personal, while also being shaped by wider social contexts. Constraints on autonomy may, however, be responded to actively, including within relationships, insofar as young adults rework their experiences and meanings regarding relationships in line with personal and interpersonal goals and life projects. Important to identify is how individuals form their personal and interpersonal goals,

the expectations they have for and of themselves and their partners, and the way learning and experience unfolds in ongoing and fluid ways as individuals transition to and through young adulthood.

The present study has identified that participants' choices as they negotiated lockdown and the meanings relationships hold to them relate to a dynamic, fluid, and heterogeneous interactions between subjectivity, interpersonal experiences, and wider socio-cultural norms and 'role expectations' about relationships in young adulthood. The findings are, therefore, not just specific to young adults' relationships during lockdown but make visible the ways that individual, interpersonal, and socio-cultural levels of meaning and experience unfold through the wider conditions and circumstances of young adults' lives (in this case, lockdown), as has always been and will continue to be the case. Young adults' expectations for and experiences of relationships are not, therefore, just individual or interpersonal endeavours, nor arise just from socio-cultural norms and meanings. They are also rooted in the wider contexts that young adults inhabit. Supporting young adults to have healthy and positive relationships therefore requires attention to multiple levels of meaning and experience.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Participants had a variety of stories to tell and their readiness and willingness to do so suggests that the perspectives of those unable or unwilling to participate may not have been captured in the study. While there was some diversity in sexual orientation, most interviews focused on heterosexual relationships and experiences. The participant-led, unstructured, and iterative approach employed in this study was intentional, but more targeted work is needed to include other samples and to further explore themes of interest, as well as issues that were not raised by participants. The data discussed here suggests there are gendered dimensions of disclosure, communication and intimacy and age-gradations regarding meanings and hopes for relationships which are important to investigate further but are beyond the scope of this paper to address in sufficient depth. Moreover, while the process of developing understandings of healthy/unhealthy relationships during early adulthood suggests there are critical social moments which may influence later behaviour, as suggested by life course theory, this perspective should be explored in more detail.

Finally, utilising narrative interviews means that the data pertained to subjective understandings and perspectives, which cannot be generalised beyond this sample, nor used to infer cause-and-effect. While many participants referred to wider social contexts and relational networks, we were reliant on their personal perspectives and cannot situate their accounts in terms of the significant others to whom they referred. Group interviews and ethnographic methods may be beneficial in these regards.

Conclusion

Relationships are not fixed entities about which individuals need to learn an objective truth or achieve an objective standard of health and wellbeing. They are made meaningful in fluid and dynamic ways, with meanings being personally held but also shaped by normative contexts and conditions. Post-lockdown, it is important to capture the moment of reflexivity around change that has occurred to identify the contexts and conditions required for the development and experience of healthy and positive relationships. There is, seemingly, little guidance about how to address healthy and positive relationships as skills and as contextually contingent. Hancock and Barker (2018) argue that it is important to first focus on self-knowledge and relationships with oneself, before moving on to relationships with others. While it may then be tempting to seek to quantify the extent to which individuals have absorbed and can re-articulate what they have learnt and know about healthy and unhealthy relationships, we suggest that additional metrics are required regarding awareness of and critical reflexivity about oneself, others, and contextual conditions, with the view to supporting agentic self-determination and autonomy within interpersonal relationships not just through a focus on the individual but also their wider circumstances that may constrain or enable their agency and autonomy (see Paiva, 2005).

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Transparency and Openness Statement

1. Are the raw data contained in this manuscript openly available for download?

1. Not at present, but we are able to provide raw data on request.

2. For quantitative analyses, is the analysis code/syntax used for the analyses openly available for download?

1. N/A

3. For qualitative analyses, are the list of questions and coding manuals openly available for download?

1. Not at present, but we are able to provide on request.

4. Are all materials used in the study openly available for download?

1. See above.

5. Did this study include a pre-registration plan for data collection and/or analysis?

1. No.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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