

## **“The Corona-Virus and its impact on family and society in Austria”**

*by Dr. Sabine Buchebner-Ferstl*

“The Corona-Virus and its impact on family and society in Austria” was the name of the first presentation for the seminar “Impact of Covid-19 on Society”. The seminar took place at Kyoto University from 12<sup>th</sup> September to 14<sup>th</sup> September 2022. Dr. Sabine Buchebner-Ferstl was the first lecturer and she opened with the results of various online-surveys.

Dr. Buchebner-Ferstl is not a lawyer or law-professor herself, but a psychologist. She works with the Austrian Institute for Family Studies (ÖIF - Österreichisches Institut für Familienforschung) and the main focus of her research is education, parental education and school.

At the seminar she spoke about the following topics: Pandemic and Demography, Areas of life and life events, pandemic and partnership and Children and adolescents. The main data sources were from Statistics Austria, the University of Vienna and from her own institute ÖIF. The University of Vienna had a project called “Austrian Corona Panel Project” which was an online-panel. It had 1500 participants aged 14 and older. The Panel was open from March 2020 and will be finished in Autumn 2022. The online-survey “Pandemic and partnership” from the ÖIF is, in comparison with the aforementioned panel, not representative because it had only 772 participants aged 18-81. It was open from March 2021 to May 2021.

The first focus of her presentation was on “Pandemic and Demography” and on the question “More time together – more babies?”. Dr. Buchebner-Ferstl presented three hypothesis and concluded that while in November 2020 there was a small break in birth rates, they started to have a catch-up effect in the following months. It is visible that during the first year of the pandemic the birth rates stagnated, but they eventually recovered. The answers from her questionnaires on the topic of family planning also showed, that the Covid-19 pandemic had little to no influence on the wish for a child in the Austrian society. Hardly anyone voiced a strong impact of the pandemic and a sudden wish not to have a child. The crisis only postponed the pregnancy. One 30-year-old woman stated that she would have decided against a child, if she would have known that there would be a second and third lockdown. During the pandemic family became more important for a lot of people. In addition to that, time spent with loved ones and/or relatives was seen as a great gift. These aspects were given by the participants on the ÖIF-survey, that voiced an increased wish for a child. For those who postponed the pregnancy or developed a decreased wish to have a child gave mainly the stressful impact of Covid-19 on their lives as the main reason for not expanding their family. The value of freedom to travel and to explore the world was also mentioned by a 27-year-old woman, who had before the pandemic wished to get pregnant in summer 2021 but postponed it for at least two more years.

During the pandemic it was restricted to have big parties like e.g., weddings. In the chart by Statistics Austria a drop in marriages of almost 50% can be seen for March 2020. The rate has gone up again in March 2021, which shows that weddings were only postponed when big gatherings of people were forbidden by the law. Divorces were hardly negatively affected by the pandemic. The results show that the marriage got more stable throughout the lockdowns.

Since men in certain jobs were able to do home-office, they were able to see the amount of housework that their wives/partners did and that led to more appreciation of this unpaid work. In addition to that there was also more time to talk with your significant other about problems in the relationship and their solutions. However, being stuck together for such a long time during lockdown can also show the deficiencies in the relationship. This resulted in divorces and break-ups or sped up the decision-making to finally get separated.

The second section of the speech was dedicated to areas of life and life events. According to the research of the Corona-Panel, friends were very important during the pandemic, as well as own family and the children. Religion and the church had a small increase of importance, mainly because they provided a safe haven in these turbulent times. Most people were glued to the television to hear the daily press conferences of the Austrian politicians about the status of the pandemic or new laws and restrictions. This led to more political debates within society and led furthermore to more interest in politics. Most private activities got cancelled e.g., meeting friends, others were never scheduled at all e.g., marriages. As mentioned before the stress regarding the birth of a child increased for women, because most of the medical examinations and the birth itself was subject to many precautions e.g., how many people are allowed to be present and under what circumstances.

In the third section of her speech Dr. Buchebner-Ferstl focused on partnerships during the pandemic. She highlighted some positive aspects first, like the strengthening and validation of partnerships, but also more positive time together and a reflection on the essentials. These aspects were mentioned by participants of the ÖIF-research. On the other hand, some stated that the pandemic led to too much closeness and prevented couple development. However, there was a neutral side too, because some people did not experience any changes or mentioned that their relationships got more intense in both ways. This was the point where the term “burning glass theory” was first used. One woman (46) wrote that she sees the pandemic as a magnifying glass which makes everything visible in a partnership. The term “burning glass” was afterwards frequently used in the seminar, to describe a dominant characteristic of Covid-19 on society. The research of the ÖIF shows further the change of feelings towards partners during the pandemic. Experiencing these difficult times together led to an increase in togetherness, intimacy, trust, and emotional closeness. Talking increased too, which can end up in quarrelling. Interestingly enough, while talking about politics increased, the quarrelling about the same stayed low. It can be generally observed that arguments did not increase significantly. The online-questionnaire by the ÖIF showed furthermore that the thoughts of separation did not increase due to Covid-19. Most couples mentioned joint activities, joint plans, and their children as the main reason for sticking together. Speaking of children and housework: One main issue was the division between paid and unpaid work, which is still unequal in Austria. Due to home-office it got clearer that if the male partner works from home, the gap between said division gets smaller. This represents a positive side of the pandemic and should be helpful for the future in terms of working hours and working place. To single women the importance of friends rose, same as self-development and happiness about being single.

The last and final part was dedicated to children and adolescents. Due to the long closure of schools many pupils had to stay at home and do home-schooling. The pandemic showed major deficiencies in the current school system as it was not prepared to offer online-schooling satisfactorily. Many teachers, pupils and parents were overwhelmed by the situation and needed

some time to adapt. Especially children with the risk of poverty could not afford a laptop or other needed material to be able to catch up with their peers. “Rat auf Draht”, a help-hotline for children in need, experienced a surge in calls due to the overload of home-schooling and stress.

The discussion that followed was centred on the main topic of friendships and regulations. In Austria the Covid-19 laws were often confusing and very hard to understand. One participant of the seminar said that technically she violated the law because she met a friend that did not fall under the definitions of allowed people by the law. That was a statement on which most Austrian participants could agree on, since we all felt the burden of restrictions at a certain time during the pandemic. There was also general agreement on the duration of the regulations, which were too long in Austria. The motivation to act according to them is the highest for 3 to 5 months. After that timeslot you can feel a decrease and a certain reluctance towards the restrictions. Finally, the lack of programmes and help for mental health problems for children in need was brought into awareness.

In conclusion, I learned a lot because of the presentation of Dr. Sabine Buchebner-Ferstl as it highlighted major aspects about our society and problems which were faced by everyone during the Covid-19 pandemic. For me this was a relief to see that I am not alone with my fears and worries. The presentation showed on the one hand positive impacts of the pandemic and on the other hand made us all aware of the undersupply in certain areas e.g, mental health emergency hotlines.

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