

Original Article

Exploring impact on family functioning from self-isolation during early stage of COVID-19 pandemic in Japan

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Abstract *An increasing body of research indicates that the COVID-19 has significantly influenced family dynamics and overall well-being across various countries. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered our daily routines, with many working adults transitioning to telework and students adapting to home-based learning. It's essential to acknowledge that the pandemic might have adverse effects on family relationships. However, the shared confinement has also presented an opportunity for families to strengthen their bonds. In Japan, it is said to be the so-called "10th wave" of an increase in COVID-19 cases in early 2024, but globally, it can be said that COVID-19 is gradually moving towards resolution. However, we must not forget the experiences of that unprecedented "disaster" at the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. The disruptions such as lockdowns and self-isolation severed social connections, and it cannot be denied that there were impacts on family functioning. This study aimed to qualitatively analyze and understand family functioning during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. By using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, we found six themes: Anxiety for unknown threats, What changes or what remains the same, Resilience, Impact on children, Feeling helped by children, and Family cohesiveness enhancement. We can seek to propose strategies to maintain family functioning even in the face of unprecedented disasters, such as the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, ensuring resilience during such challenging times.*

Keywords: family functioning, COVID-19, self-isolation, Japan, qualitative study

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INTRODUCTION

In Japan, since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on January 16, 2020 (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, 2020), the country has been hit by an unprecedented pandemic. Japan did not experience a lockdown, but in the early stages, it faced three waves of increasing new infection cases (known as the first through third waves). Subsequently, there were further increases in new infection cases up to the ninth wave. Based on the existing Special Measures Law for infectious diseases, two State of Emergency declarations were issued at the early stages (Enomoto, 2020), and until 2021, a total of four were declared. During these declarations, Japanese citizens were required to practice self-isolation and stay-at-home. It is worth noting that the fourth state of emergency coincided with the summer of 2021 when the Tokyo Olympics took place without spectators, gaining international attention. Following WHO chief's declaration of "the end to COVID-19 as a global health emergency," on May 8, 2023, Japan finally transitioned COVID-19 to a Category 5 infectious disease, and society is gradually being liberated from the grip of COVID-19, although we have now been experiencing another the 10th wave in early 2024. The magnitude of the pandemic was such that at the early stages, the anxiety and fear among people were immeasurable, and the impact on family functioning can be assumed to be incalculable as well.

The COVID-19 pandemic, like any other major disaster, can have a significant impact on family functioning. (Chen et al., 2020; Elbay et al., 2020; Farra & Smith, 2019; Russell et al., 2020). The most direct impact of COVID-19 on family functioning is through its effect on physical health. If a family member falls ill with the virus, it can create anxiety, stress, and disruption within the household. Family members may need to take on caregiving roles or make adjustments to daily routines to accommodate the sick individual's needs.

The pandemic can take a toll on the emotional and mental well-being of family members (Lindert et al., 2021). The stress, fear, and uncertainty associated with the crisis can lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and overall emotional distress. These emotional challenges can strain relationships within the family, leading to conflicts, arguments, and difficulties in communication. Anxiety can be contagious within a family setting. When one family member experiences high levels of anxiety, it can inadvertently spread to others. Emotional contagion can intensify the overall anxiety within the household and create a cycle of heightened stress and tension. Anxiety about an unknown pandemic can also stem from concerns about the health and safety of loved ones. Family members may worry about the well-being of elderly or vulnerable relatives, children, or individuals with pre-existing health conditions. This fear and worry can affect family dynamics, leading to overprotective behaviors, increased conflict, or even a breakdown in communication. Heightened stress and frustration, coupled with limited personal time and space,

can escalate conflicts at home, resulting in abuse or violence. Simultaneously, restrictions on leaving one's home significantly impede victims' ability to seek help (Bouillon-Minois et al., 2020).

Different family members may have varying coping strategies to deal with the stress and challenges posed by the pandemic. These individual differences in coping styles can lead to conflicts or misunderstandings within the family if not adequately addressed. Some family members may engage in avoidant behaviors, while others may seek social support or express their concerns more openly. Anxiety related to an unknown pandemic can significantly impact family dynamics in several ways (Biden et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2021; Mohanty et al., 2022). The uncertainty and fear surrounding an unknown pandemic can lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety among family members. This can create a tense atmosphere in the household, making it more challenging to maintain open and effective communication. Family members may become more irritable, reactive, or withdrawn due to their anxiety, which can contribute to conflicts and strained relationships. An unknown pandemic can require families to take on new roles and responsibilities. For example, parents may need to juggle work from home while assisting with remote learning, or individuals may be tasked with providing care for sick family members. These changes can lead to role confusion and blurred boundaries, causing additional stress and strain on family dynamics.

Pandemic/disasters often bring about changes in family roles and responsibilities. During the pandemic, families have had to adapt to remote work, virtual learning for children, and the closure of schools and daycare facilities (Salin et al., 2020). This has led to increased demands on parents, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life. These changes can create additional stress and strain on family relationships, as well as potential conflicts arising from the redistribution of responsibilities. It is important to note that not all families experience the same impact. Factors such as pre-existing family dynamics, socioeconomic status, access to resources, and resilience can influence how a family copes with and adapts to the challenges posed by the disaster. Open communication, empathy, flexibility, and support from within and outside the family can play vital roles in maintaining and improving family functioning during times of crisis (Walsh, 2020). When faced with an unknown pandemic, families often need to adapt their daily routines and habits. This can involve changes in work schedules, school closures, remote learning, and restrictions on social activities. These disruptions can cause added stress and anxiety, as family members may struggle to adjust to new routines and find a sense of stability.

The pandemic has resulted in social isolation measures such as lockdowns, physical distancing, and reduced social interactions. This isolation can disrupt social support networks, limit opportunities for connection, and increase

feelings of loneliness and isolation within families. Lack of social support can impact family dynamics and exacerbate stress levels. During a pandemic, there is an influx of information from various sources, including news outlets, social media, and online platforms. While staying informed is crucial, excessive exposure to constant news updates and alarming headlines can contribute to heightened anxiety within the family. Conflicting information or misinformation can also cause confusion and further increase stress levels. The economic consequences of the pandemic, such as job losses, business closures, and financial instability, can have a significant impact on family functioning (Andrade et al., 2022). Financial stressors can lead to heightened tension, conflict, and increased pressure on relationships (Murakami et al., 2021). Families may also have to make difficult decisions about budgeting, prioritizing needs, and managing limited resources.

The early studies on family relationships during the pandemic provide valuable insights (Breux et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2020; Enlow et al., 2022; Feinberg et al., 2022; Helland et al., 2021; Hussong et al., 2022; JH, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2022; Marceau et al., 2023; Mohanty et al., 2022; October et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2020; Salin et al., 2020; Sheek-Hussein et al., 2021; Shoychet et al., 2023; Tso et al., 2022; Westrupp et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2022; Yates & Mantler, 2023; Zafar et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022), but more qualitative research is needed to understand key aspects of family functioning such as routines, rituals, and rules (Sheen et al., 2021). This research can enhance our understanding of how families function under severe and unexpected stress, informing future trauma interventions and responses. Additionally, studying the strengths and coping strategies unique to families during this disruptive time can offer insights for interventions and support both during the pandemic and beyond. The aim of the study was to explore Japanese parents' perspectives on changes in family functioning during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The period from around the end of the First Wave, through the Second Wave, and up to just before the Third Wave of the pandemic in Japan. All of these occurred before the emergence of variant strains of COVID-19. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate the impacts of the pandemic on family roles, routines, and dynamics, changes in family relationships and support, challenges experienced in family life, and the strengths and coping strategies employed by families during the pandemic and any other unknown human disaster.

METHODS

This study followed a research protocol created by an Australian research team. Interviews with participants were conducted using a semi-structured interview questionnaire developed by them. Additionally, discussions with researchers from Australia, USA, Norway, and Hong Kong, who were progressing with research based on the same protocol, were held as needed. The study

proceeded in collaboration with these researchers, fostering a comprehensive approach to the research.

Participants and Recruitment Procedure

A snowball sampling method, where participants were encouraged to pass on the information to others who might want to participate was employed. In parents' recruitment, we sent a research description and agreement form via email with a password protection and sent back the forms if they agreed to participate in the study. Eligibility of participation for parents is living with children under the age of 18. The average age of the participants was 43 years, and their ages varied from 33 to 58. All of the participants had experienced the Declaration of a State of Emergency resulting in social isolation before the interviews. However, none of them had been officially isolated or quarantined due to contact with COVID-19. See Table 1 for more demographic details.

Table 1. Demographic data

	n	%
Gender		
Female (mothers)	23	67.6
Male (fathers)	11	32.4
Age		
30-34	2	5.9
35-39	9	26.5
40-44	10	29.4
45-49	9	26.5
50-54	3	8.8
55-59	1	2.9
Relationship status		
Married*	34	100.0
Prefecture		
Tokyo	22	64.7
Kanagawa	9	26.5
Chiba	2	5.9
Saitama	1	2.9
Number of cohabiting family		
2 persons	1	2.9
3 persons	12	35.3
4 persons	14	41.2
5 persons	7	20.6

NOTE: Kanagawa, Chiba, and Saitama are adjacent to Tokyo, and these four prefectures together form the metropolitan area known as the Greater Tokyo Area.

Model

McMaster Model of Family Functioning, which considers perspectives of family functioning including problem solving, family role, communication, affective reaction, locus of control of behaviors, had been applied when the interview guide was developed.

Data Collection

The interview data were transcribed anonymously. We used the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) for qualitative analyzing verbatim data. The study was approved by IRB of the second author's affiliation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by HO (10), RU (12) or KT (10). Informed consenting participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, which ranged in duration from 23 to 62 minutes, with an average duration of 39 minutes. The interview questions were developed by the Australian team researchers (Sheen et al., 2021) and were informed by previous literature on the effects of disasters on family dynamics, as well as the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) (Epstein et al., 1983). The FAD, founded on the McMaster Model of Family Functioning, assesses various aspects of family functioning, including problem-solving, roles, communication, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control (Epstein et al., 1983). The FAD offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding family functioning, which can inform family support strategies and tailored interventions.

The interview questionnaire covered essential aspects of family functioning, such as family roles, routines, and rules; parenting practices; communication and relationships; as well as strengths, challenges, and tensions. Participants were asked to reflect on changes “since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic” and to specifically consider changes observed during early stage (from the first to third waves). Most of the participants resided in Tokyo metropolitan area and were under the Third Wave, when the interviews took place, which occurred between December 2020 and January 2021. The participants were asked to reflect on the period from around the beginning of the first wave until the second wave and up to the third wave during the interview. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted via the Zoom video conferencing app.

With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded on video and then transcribed, with any identifying details removed. Once the transcriptions were completed, they were cross-checked against the original recordings to ensure accuracy before being sent to the participants for member checks. Participants were given a 2-week period to review and provide feedback on their transcripts before the data were included in the group analysis.

Data Analysis

The study used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as described by Braun et al. in 2019, to identify meaningful patterns in the data. Authors analyzed transcripts, identified key concepts, and developed themes through discussions. In RTA, themes are seen as patterns imbued with meaning, apparent in both explicit and conceptual forms. Given the focus on capturing the unique lived experiences of an unusual event in this research, the thematic analysis was executed in an idiographic fashion to minimize the risk of overlooking individual experiences and viewpoints. While the interview questions were partially guided by the Family Assessment Device (FAD), the analysis was primarily inductive and driven by the data itself.

The interviews were recorded audibly and transcribed in their entirety. In the presented excerpts, "[...]" indicates that some content has been omitted. The data were analyzed thematically, taking a critical realist perspective as outlined by Willig (Willig, 2013). Our approach was inductive and data-driven, with a primary focus on identifying and discussing significant recurring themes within and across transcripts, following the methodology of Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The initial detailed coding of transcripts was carried out by HO. These codes were subsequently transformed into broader themes by HO, in consultation with RU, and referencing the original transcripts. A final round of coding was conducted by HO, with contributions from RU. To construct thematic narratives, the authors organized the themes and, for each participant, deliberated on the presence of related data, or conversely, data that contradicted the themes to ensure the preservation of individual perspectives. The first author drew upon this resource when writing, cross-referencing with the original transcripts to maintain authenticity.

Results and Discussion

In Japan, the term 'metropolitan area' refers to the seven prefectures of Tokyo, but more specifically to Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba and Saitama, where all of the participants lived. This means that in this study, all of them had been living in an urban area. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, among the participants in this study, 81% reported no change in household income, while 62% reported no change in working hours. Additionally, none of the participants had been infected with COVID-19.

Anxiety for unknown threats

The COVID-19 pandemic had triggered a general sense of anxiety. Many people expressed concerns related to the infection itself, such as worries about what would happen if they were infected by an unknown pathogen, being

cautious when people around them were infected, and feeling uneasy about not being able to go out.

“It's like something unseen, or rather, a kind of doubt. I'm feeling anxious, wondering if everything is alright with COVID-19. [...] It was mostly about disinfecting, things like that” (F, 46).

“I was doing things like disinfecting items that I had purchased, which was something I hadn't done before [...] Clinic staff were cautious about taking the train. Some people, even though it took them about an hour, preferred to come by bicycle, so I thought that if such people were being careful, I shouldn't casually take the train [...] At the clinic, there were times when we didn't have enough disinfectant, and there were discussions about where to source it from. Disinfection was indeed challenging at the clinic” (F, 37).

“For me, there were changes due to COVID-19, like needing to deal with stress and various things to be done, such as disinfecting [...] There was a burden of various things to be done due to COVID-19, but it was more of a physical burden” (M, 41).

Due to self-isolation, the increased time spent with family led to a loss of privacy as compared to before, which was also mentioned as a source of stress. This included stress related to everyday life and work within the household.

“Because I couldn't see what lay ahead and situations were uncertain about how and when they might change, it's not like there's a clear right answer [...] there were more uncertainties about how things would progress, such as whether schools would reopen or what would happen. It was similar with the nursery; I think there were more things we didn't know” (F, 44).

“Regarding infections, I think around March or May, I spent a lot of time feeling very tense. When there were instances of infections occurring nearby or familiar areas, there was a sense of concern and nervousness, especially about continuing to send my child to the nursery. I believe those anxieties were significant [...] I still have quite a bit of anxiety about how things will turn out this winter” (F, 40).

What changes or what remains the same

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were accounts of bewilderment about the drastic changes in daily routines. On the other hand, some people also mentioned that COVID-19 had no impact on their daily lives, meaning their lifestyle remained unchanged from before. What changed included the absence

of assistance that they used to receive from their own parents (or, from a child's perspective, grandparents). Additionally, there was an increase in alone time, an increase in time spent with family, and a shift in roles within the family, among other things, that were discussed.

“I end up staying up late at night and waking up late in the morning. Before, because there was a nursery, I used to wake up early since there was one, even earlier than elementary school, you know? So, I was really determined to put my child to bed early and wake up early, but that routine disappeared. It's been two months. I've started to think that maybe it's okay to watch TV a bit at night, too” (F, 38).

“As for meals and such, I used to eat quite a bit outside, and even when I returned home, there were about 3 to 4 pubs I'd stop by before getting home, so it was said that I hardly came home. At least for now, I no longer eat in Tokyo” (M, 50).

“Regarding time itself, I don't think my wife or child have changed much. They haven't changed that much, and though we started going to parenting support centers and such, we haven't really altered the routine of doing everything nearby [...] we primarily focused on playing outdoors. We didn't engage much in indoor activities or go to indoor facilities where people gathered” (M, 33).

“When my husband managed to take a bit of time off, during that period, he helped a bit more with household chores than usual [...] it felt like he took care of childcare and household chores while I was at work [...] It was very helpful in terms of dividing roles” (F, 44).

“There are things like not being able to see my grandparents, which is not something that happens on a daily basis” (F, 40).

“The inability to rely on my parents in my hometown has resulted in some changes [...] the occasions to ask for help have also diminished. Although the support structure to rely on at my parents' home has decreased, along with that decrease, the need for such support has reduced [...] it might be more of a matter of feelings than an actual problem. My child feels sad for not being able to see their grandparents [...] there's a desire to meet, and occasionally, since they aren't far away, we eagerly look forward to those times whenever we can meet” (F, 44).

In response to the changes, there were narratives expressing that they found the changes to be positive. Some mentioned that the self-isolation during the State of Emergency, reduced opportunities for going out, and increased time

spent at home made life more comfortable. There were also narratives from those who actually wished for such family time to continue.

“I have a wish for it to continue for a long time [...] Regarding my older sister, she seemed to be having fun. I don't know what she was doing though [...] I don't know about my husband, but everyone seems to be happy, right? It's about freedom” (F, 48).

“My elder child is in the third year of middle school, and being a middle school student is so busy. When there is school, the time spent at home becomes significantly shorter and hectic. So, conversely, because I've been staying at home this much, maybe it's also a good time as I've had the chance to be together this much, although it might not happen often” (F, 44).

Resilience

During the self-isolation period due to the COVID-19 pandemic, families discussed their own strategies to reduce stress, enjoyed the time spent together with their families, ensured privacy, and managed not to overly focus on the fear of infection. They shared their experiences of adapting to life with COVID-19 and described the process of family resilience within the adversity of the COVID-19 pandemic."

“Basically, I was very conscious of not disrupting our daily routine, so I had somewhat scheduled my day from waking up to bedtime. I thought it would be easier to navigate with a structured schedule. I was quite conscious of that aspect” (M, 44).

“I made sure not to change things. I mean, in some way, I really made an effort to keep things from changing as much as possible” (F, 42).

“I don't think there have been particularly significant changes in family roles” (F, 43).

Thus, there were no changes in parenting, nor did they feel affected. There were no concerns about the children, especially regarding their mental well-being.

“Well, I don't think my attitude or anything has particularly changed [...] we used to show YouTube a lot anyway, so nothing has really changed [...] there was a school closure, but even during that time, there was childcare available for parents who couldn't stay home due to work commitments, so it didn't really change things for us. This childcare service didn't offer any education, they simply looked after the kids, but it definitely made things easier for the children” (M, 38).

“Especially in terms of mental well-being, I don't think there were many concerns. My husband seemed quite lively and engaged in playing at home, so I don't think he was too worried” (F, 45).

By ensuring privacy and devising ways for family activities during the “stay-at-home” period, there were discussions about actually enjoying the situation of self-isolation.

“It has changed, hasn't it? With subscriptions, a lot has come in, and we all watched a lot of anime on U-NEXT (N.B. a Japanese video streaming service) together. It was enjoyable [...] It's like organizing and tidying up the room that had been left in a mess for a long time, and also watching anime that we had mentioned wanting to watch, introduced by such friends, together. Even now, it feels like 'Next, let's watch this,' and we all enjoy watching together. There are times when the family watches videos together, too. Thanks to the pandemic, there has been an increase in shared pleasures or interests” (F, 46).

“It's not like we're actively trying to find something for all four of us in the family to enjoy, but if we happen to find something that the four of us like, that would be great. We don't tend to take the situation with this pandemic too seriously to that extent [...] with those basic and proper infection prevention measures in mind, it's more like we're enjoying the thought of going to places that we can, you know? That's the perspective we have while having fun” (F, 35).

Besides being supported by the surrounding environment, some participants narrated expressing not just the feeling of a child's growth but rather feeling helped by the children. This indeed seems to embody the phrase “The progeny is a jewel” amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Even as a mother, in that sense, I felt a sense of growth. The time spent together made the attachment stronger, it seems. Just as if there was rapid growth, after turning three... [...] Children indeed go through changes or growth, so there's really no point of comparison [...] So, for him, it's just normal, or rather, a part of growing up” (M, 40).

“Exactly, like what Erikson describes as autonomy and individuation, observing the interplay between dependence and independence and realizing my own involvement as a variable [...] As my son grows, it's unclear if it's the answer, but it feels like each of us is slowly getting closer to an adult relationship, the relationship between the three adults, you know, that's the kind of feeling I have, but yeah, that's the realization. I suppose in this regard, I have to let go” (M, 58).

Impact on children

The participants narrated that going to school holds a significant meaning for children, and the speaker felt this once again. Concern was expressed about the academic aspect due to a lack of progress in studies while staying at home, as well as worries about the emotional and physical impact of being unable to meet friends in person. Furthermore, concerns were expressed about how staying at home has led to children developing a tendency to stay up late, spending increased time playing games, and dedicating more time to social media. This shift in behavior has disrupted their daily routines or raised worries about potential changes in their habits.

“As April began, there was a change where the child seemed to be feeling somewhat depressive or exhibiting depressive tendencies [...] maintaining one's mental health alone is difficult, it really is. It's not just difficult for adults but also for children, isn't it?” (F, 48)

“Not only events but also the loss of opportunities for learning in that sense feels a bit wasteful, such as overnight events. I often feel that way about such things. It's not so much about the academic subjects themselves, but rather, I feel concerned about how the experiences specific to each year for children are gradually becoming harder to achieve, which is regrettable” (F, 44).

“Having the children at home, especially the younger one, being a boy, staying at home all the time, started getting really irritable. Things have changed, haven't they? [...] The role of school is quite important, you know. Going to school as part of a routine is really a rhythm for children. It's a way for them to release energy. I've come to realize again how essential that was for them. [...] My daughter had various tasks to do on the computer, but since I handed her the computer, it seems she started watching YouTube and other things on it without permission. She's been browsing various sites and watching YouTube without permission” (F, 48).

As a result of spending more time at home with the children due to staying home, there was an increased tendency to pay more attention to them, leading to frequent admonishments and sometimes speaking too strongly to them. There has been some influence on child discipline, too. Consequently, it was mentioned that the children seemed to experience increased stress due to receiving constant admonishments. This naturally led to more conversations about parenting with my partner, and there was a greater inclination to contemplate the impact on the children compared to before.

“My husband has a tendency to be quite nagging, whereas I'm more laid-back [...] I've noticed an increase in being corrected on small, detailed matters. Things like having good manners or immediately

tidying up clothes after taking them off, those kinds of everyday trivial things [...] My daughter sometimes reacts a bit annoyingly when I say something in a slightly irritating way [...] there have been times when she's a bit like, "Dad, are you here, today?" A bit noisy" (F, 45).

"There's been a significant increase in phrases like 'Do this' or 'Don't do that.' I believe there has been a considerable rise in reminders such as 'Clean up your room' or 'Study more' [...] The tone has become much stronger. The longer the time we spend together, the more we tend to notice or feel the urge to comment on what the other person is doing [...] I've started saying various things myself" (F, 46).

"We started discussing more about the environment in which our child spends her daytime. It was around the time of the State of Emergency Declaration. We talked about how much going to the nursery and playing with children of the same age had an impact on our daughter, what positive influences it had [...] We discuss what kind of environment would be good for our daughter, regardless of where she spends her time [...] I think now we are getting closer to an environment that is closer to ideal for our child as well" (M, 39).

Feeling helped by children

It was mentioned that families receive "energy" from their children, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they felt that they were helped by observing their children's growth. This period provided an opportunity to truly appreciate the importance of parenting within family functions through the growth of their children. It was felt that spending more time with their children and being able to interact with them visibly moved the family in a positive direction.

"We also gain a lot of strength from seeing our children being cheerful and healthy. I think we receive a lot of support and energy from our children" (M, 39).

"Children are inherently flexible, and each of them is adapting in their own way, which helps alleviate the parents' anxieties. In the medium to long term, this adaptability may have prevented the parents from becoming overly anxious. It feels like we're being helped by the children's temperament. It's like they make things feel "very normal." (F, 46).

"I never really thought about family functions consciously, so when I reconsider something that seems so natural as a function, I wonder if it indeed becomes a function of parenting [...] There is the part of me that works and the part of me that spends time with my family and raises children" (F, 33).

Family cohesiveness enhancement

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been narratives highlighting newfound realizations within families regarding the importance of parenting in life. Some express that their families are functioning well in child-rearing, feeling supported by their children, and gaining energy and vitality from their kids. These accounts emphasize how parenting has been perceived as significant within the context of life.

“Probably when I talk about parenting, work is something that cannot be separated. Both are extremely important in my life. I don't want to neglect either because both are tremendously significant in my life. I don't want to compromise on either aspect” (F, 38).

“We also draw a lot of strength from seeing our children doing well and staying healthy. I believe there are instances where we receive support or gain strength from our children” (M, 39).

“I hadn't been consciously aware of the concept of family functioning, so when re-evaluating something so ordinary as a function, I wonder what it might be. Perhaps it's related to the function of parenting [...] I realized that I'm being supported by my family, which made me think about it all over again” (F, 33).

As the time spent together as a family increased, communication, family bonding time, and mutual support also increased. As a result, empathy among family members increased, allowing us to see the positive sides of family members that were not visible before and to re-acknowledge the importance of family. The cohesiveness of the family increased, leading to better understanding among family members, the ability to share common understanding, and improved family functioning.

“Before the pandemic, my husband used to be a bit isolated in a way. There used to be a sense of distance between me, my daughter, and my husband. But now, it feels more like the three of us—myself, my daughter, and my husband—have grown closer in terms of emotional and physical proximity. There's a sense of being together and a closer physical distance” (F, 45).

“It's been really nice, so I almost don't want the pandemic to end. I know many people are going through tough times. It would be great if the remote work format could remain even after the pandemic ends [...] My husband used to come back late on Friday nights, and I used to drive him partway on Monday mornings around 5:50 AM. That was the routine every week, but now that it's gone, it's been really great. Grateful for the

changes brought by the pandemic” (F, 48).

“With the increased time spent at home, I do think communication has increased, or at least it should have. I believe it's good for the individual. My daughter is at that age - well, she's not going through a rebellious phase much, but being at that age, there are times when she dislikes her father, complains loudly, and shows signs of being upset. Despite that, we are forced to be together. She doesn't really have the option to shut herself in her room, so personally, I feel like I've had a good opportunity to spend time with my daughter at her age” (M, 50).

“It feels like we're cooperating with each other and somehow managing to get through it. I'm not quite sure what exactly 'getting through it together' means, but in a way, everyone is cooperating, and even the children sometimes lend a hand. So, while we spend peaceful and calm days, each of us does what we can, and I think that's what 'getting through it together' might entail” (F, 33).

In the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explored how family functioning was affected from the first to the second waves of infections since early 2020 in Japan (i.e. after around the first declaration of a state of emergency). Naturally, participants experienced life changes, including shifts in family roles and routines, and the impact on work, such as the adoption of telework. The impact of COVID-19 on families has both negative and positive aspects, as highlighted in previous research (Fadda et al., 2023; Shoychet et al., 2022). Some families viewed the changes in their routines in a positive light, and despite the sensitive nature, a few families were found to have a positive outlook, hoping that the current situation of COVID-19 would continue. The “What changes’ were perceived as positive, leading to improvements in family functioning. This truly exemplifies resilience in the face of adversity (Yates & Mantler, 2023). Self-isolation and staying at home served to strengthen family cohesiveness and foster resilience. In Japan, there has been an advancement towards nuclear families, especially among families raising children in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Among those who do not live with their parents but have their parents' homes in the suburbs, many parents used to rely on their parents for childcare support. Although the data is somewhat dated, specifically in 2015 before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that nearly half of the nuclear families with mothers in Tokyo relied on their parents living nearby (approximately within an hour's distance) for childcare (Sankei ribingu shimbunsha, 2015) Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the inability to meet grandparents (parents' parents) and losing the ability to rely on them for childcare represents a significant change. This change is believed to have had a substantial impact on these families.

Families in Japan, while grappling with anxiety for the unknown threat, adeptly incorporated both the changed and unchanged elements into their family functioning. Although Japan did not experience a lockdown, families suddenly faced significant changes, such as the abrupt closure of schools and the immediate necessity of telecommuting. Amid these rapid changes, families found themselves living in adversity, navigating uncertainties related to the unknown infectious disease. Within the context of self-isolation, families devised their own strategies, viewed the changes in their lives positively, and enhanced resilience, thereby maintaining and improving family functioning. On the other hand, concerns were raised about the negative impact on children's mental health due to the inability to attend school, self-isolation leading to distancing from friends and relatives, and the confinement within the home. Some children showed signs of decreased energy, even though they were physically healthy, indicating that the impact on children's well-being was sometimes more significant than that on parents. While mental health care for children is undoubtedly essential, there were instances where children, adapting to self-isolation, visibly demonstrated "growth," providing glimpses of their resilience. Moreover, the heightened resilience in children positively influenced parents, contributing to the overall enhancement of family functioning. Self-isolation, despite creating a barrier to social connections and making social support more challenging, also strengthened family bonds. The increased time spent together due to the stay-at-home measures and the unified response of families facing an unprecedented disaster resulted in stronger family connections than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, this contributed to an improvement in family functioning, making families more resilient and effective in coping with challenges. While the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniably a disaster, within the pandemic, family functioning exhibited signs of improvement. Although the findings of this study may not be universally applicable to all families, seeking to provide family support based on the five themes identified in this research could serve as valuable clinical insights when facing unprecedented disasters.

LIMITATIONS

The methods employed for sampling in this study, such as snowball recruitment, might have led to bias favoring middle-class families with fewer vulnerabilities. For instance, the participants reported limited economic distress. This contrasts with existing research, which has indicated an increase in abuse, violence, and economic strain since the onset of the pandemic and lockdowns (referencing studies such as Bouillon-Minois et al., 2020; Fegert et al., 2020). Moreover, while the sample size of 34 participants is substantial for a qualitative study, it may restrict the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation concerns the timing of the sampling period. Conducting interviews between December 2020 and January 2021; i.e., between

the interim and the second declaration of a state of emergency. Japanese people might have been gradually acquiring knowledge about COVID-19. Moreover, the participants recalled their experiences during the interview, it wasn't a real-time one. However, participants may have experienced different circumstances at the time of their interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how family functioning in Japan was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic from the first to the second waves of infections. Participants experienced shifts in family roles and routines, including the adoption of telework. Previous research highlighted both negative and positive impacts of COVID-19 on families. Some families viewed the changes positively, showing resilience. Self-isolation and staying at home strengthened family cohesiveness. The pandemic disrupted the reliance on grandparents for childcare, impacting families significantly. Despite Japan not having a lockdown, families faced abrupt changes like school closures and telecommuting. Families adapted to these changes, viewing them positively, and enhancing resilience. Concerns were raised about children's mental health due to the pandemic's impacts. However, some children demonstrated growth and resilience during self-isolation. Overall, the pandemic led to stronger family bonds and improved family functioning, highlighting the resilience of families in the face of adversity. This study suggests that understanding these dynamics can inform effective family support strategies during crises, acknowledging the diverse experiences families face amidst unprecedented disasters like COVID-19.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

HO, the corresponding author, conducted data collection (interview), analysis, and played a major role in writing the paper for this study. Additionally, HO participated in discussions with researchers from various countries and contributed to advancing the research.

RU was responsible for data collection (interview) and analysis. Prior to conducting the research in Japan, RU submitted a research ethics application to and obtained approval from the institutional research ethics committee. RU also participated in discussions alongside researchers from different countries.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Japanese verbatim data were anonymously transcribed for RTA, but the data from the current manuscript are not publicly available due to including participants' personally sensitive contents; however, they are available from the corresponding author on a reasonable request.

CODE AVAILABILITY

No code was written.

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