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For better or worse: Economic strain, furlough, and relationship quality during the Covid-19 lockdown

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RELATIONSHIP QUALITY: WHY DO WE CARE?

Relationship quality is linked to

- Partnership duration or divorce and dissolution (Boertien and Härkönen 2018)
- Economic productivity and behaviour (ten Brummelhuis et al, 2010)
- Health and wellbeing (Robles et al, 2014)
- Children's health and future outcomes (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Knopp et al., 2017)

Policy priority

- UK Department of Work and Pensions, 'Troubled Families Programme' (Bate, 2019; DWP, 2017)
- Programmes aimed at improving couples' relationship quality

ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Economic hardship is harmful for relationship quality (Hardie & Lucas, 2010; Merolla, 2017; Blom and Perelli-Harris 2020, Hardie et al 2014)

Family Stress Model (Conger et al 2010)

- Adverse economic events lead to communication breakdown, resulting in relationship strain

Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) (Karnery and Bradbury 1995)

- People with pre-existing vulnerabilities (low education, lower household income) have fewer cognitive and financial resources to buffer adversity

COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

The Covid-19 lockdown placed unprecedented strain on couples

Focus on first lockdown, starting in March 2020

Study takes place in June 2020, when some lockdown restrictions had been relaxed

- Nurseries, primary schools and non-essential shops partially reopened
- Groups of six were allowed to meet outdoors
- Many individuals still working from home

Economic bust

- 20% decline in GDP in spring 2020, largest on record

Based on prior research, we would expect relationship quality to become worse due to heightened economic uncertainty, particularly among the disadvantaged

UK GOVERNMENT FURLOUGH POLICIES DURING COVID-19

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme & Self-Employment Income Support Scheme

- Started March 2020
- Paid 80% of salary
- 30% of UK employed population was furloughed (approx. 12 million people)

Similar to job loss?

- Lack of structured activity, regular routine
- Some loss of income
- May not have alleviated worries about future job loss

Similar to “Staycation”?

- Eliminated work stressors and commute
- Time for relaxation and for partners to spend together

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Did **couples' relationships** become **better** or **worse** during the first lockdown?
2. How is **socioeconomic status** associated with **changes in relationships**?
3. How is **change in employment situation**, including **job loss** and **furlough**, as well as **worries about future financial situation** associated with **changes in relationships**?
4. Is there a **gender difference** in response to the **change in employment situation**, including **job loss** and **furlough**?

DATA & METHOD

■ Data

- Understanding Society COVID-19 survey w1 (Apr 2020), w2 (May 2020), and w3 (Jun 2020).
- Main sample: 5,794 individuals, including men and women aged 18-64 in married or cohabiting relationship
- Couple dyad sample: 1,357 couples (2,714 individuals)
- Weights provided by Understanding Society are applied to all analyses

DATA & METHOD

- Method

- Multinomial logistic regression

- Dependent variable

- Changes in relationships (asked in wave 3, June 2020)

“How has your relationship with your partner changed since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic?”

Better than before, about the same, worse than before

MEASUREMENT

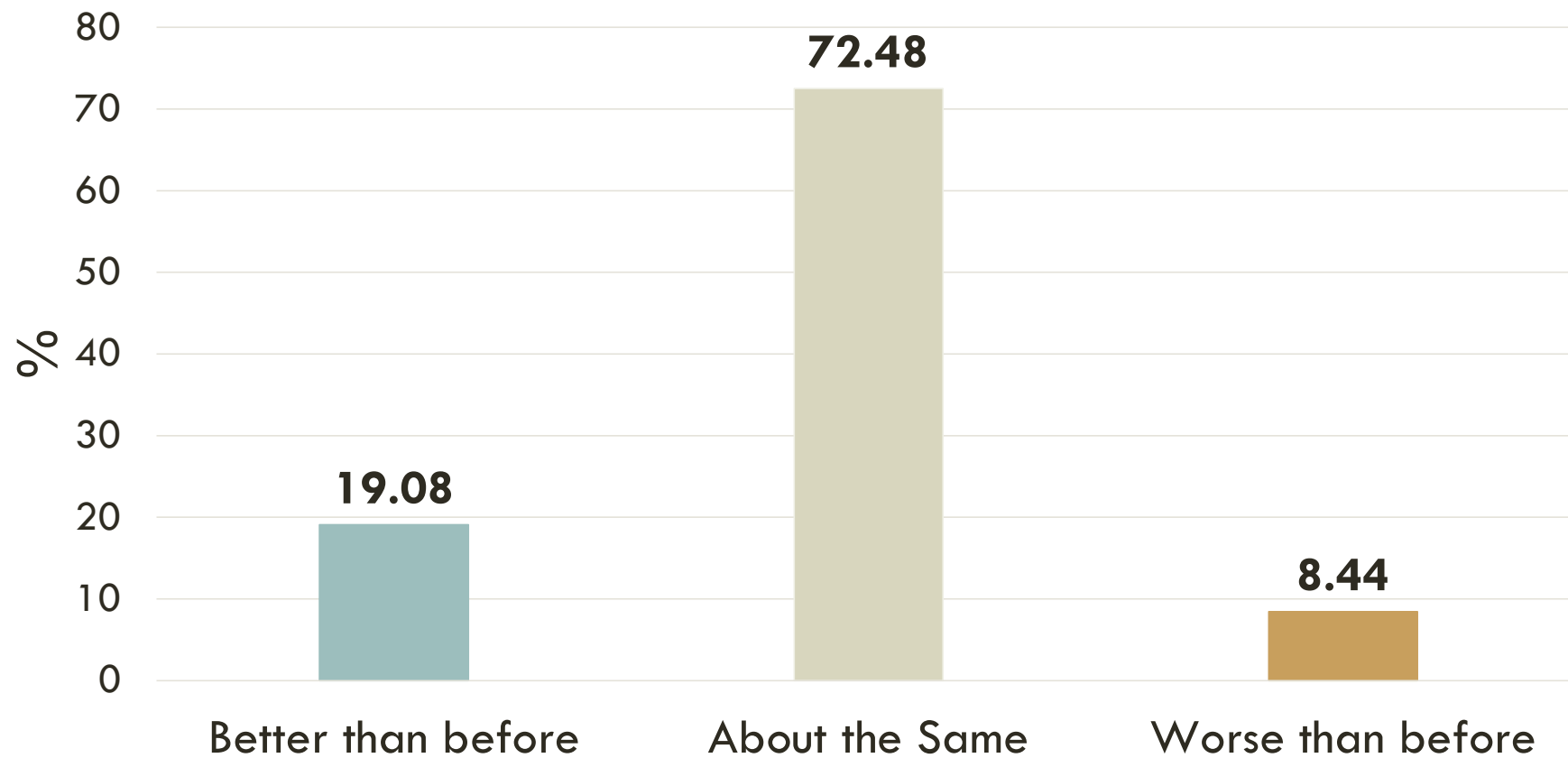
■ Main independent variables

Variable	Category
Socioeconomic Status	
Education	0 Less than secondary (GCSE or lower) 1 Advanced or secondary (A level) 2 University degree (degree)
Household earning quintile in Jan/Feb	1-5 (low-high)
Change in Employment situation	
	0 Same/more work hours 1 Furlough 2 Job/work hour loss 3 Continuously not working
Expect worse future financial situation	
	0 Better/same, and 1 worse

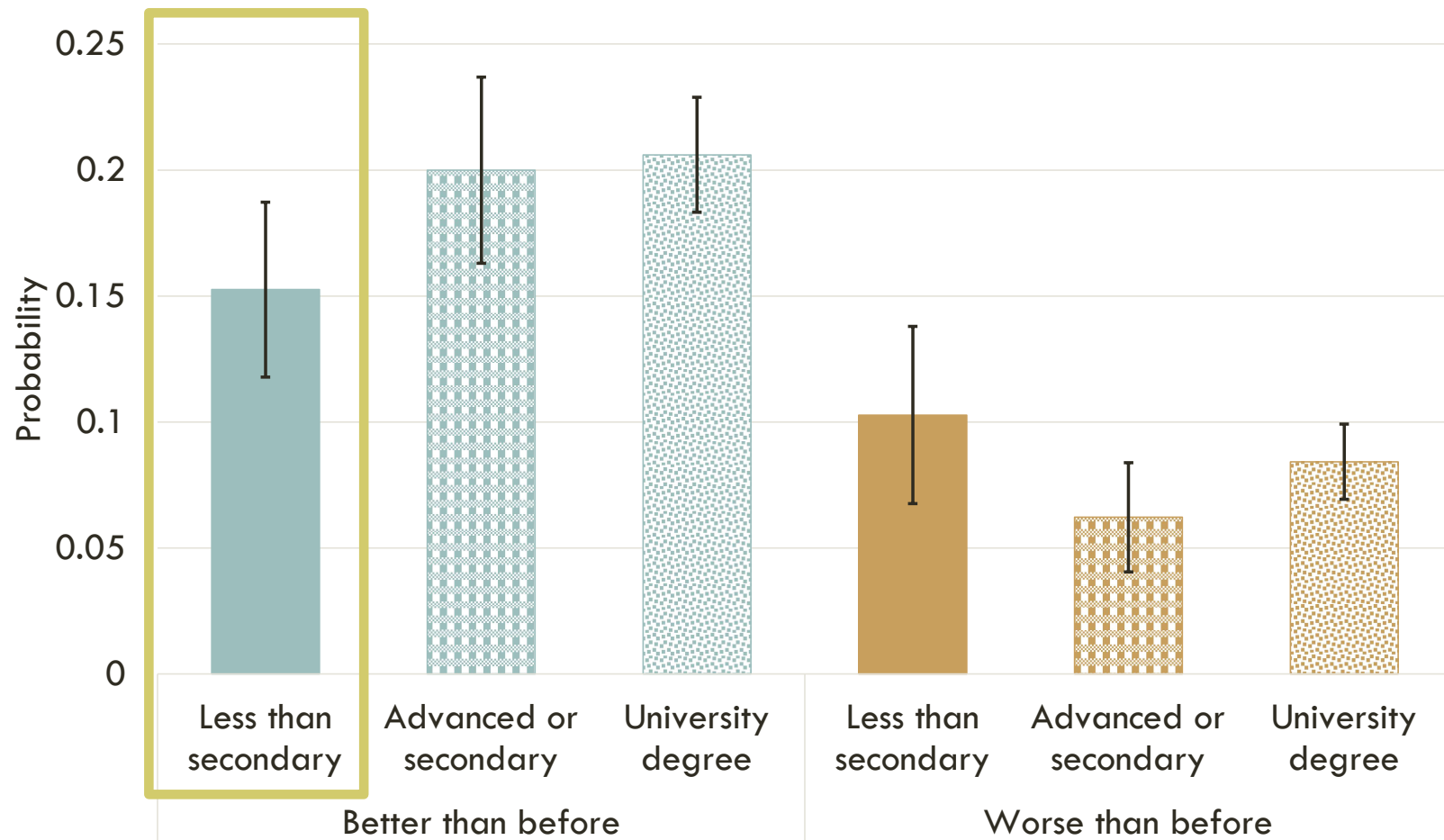
■ Controls

Household situations & Sociodemographic factors

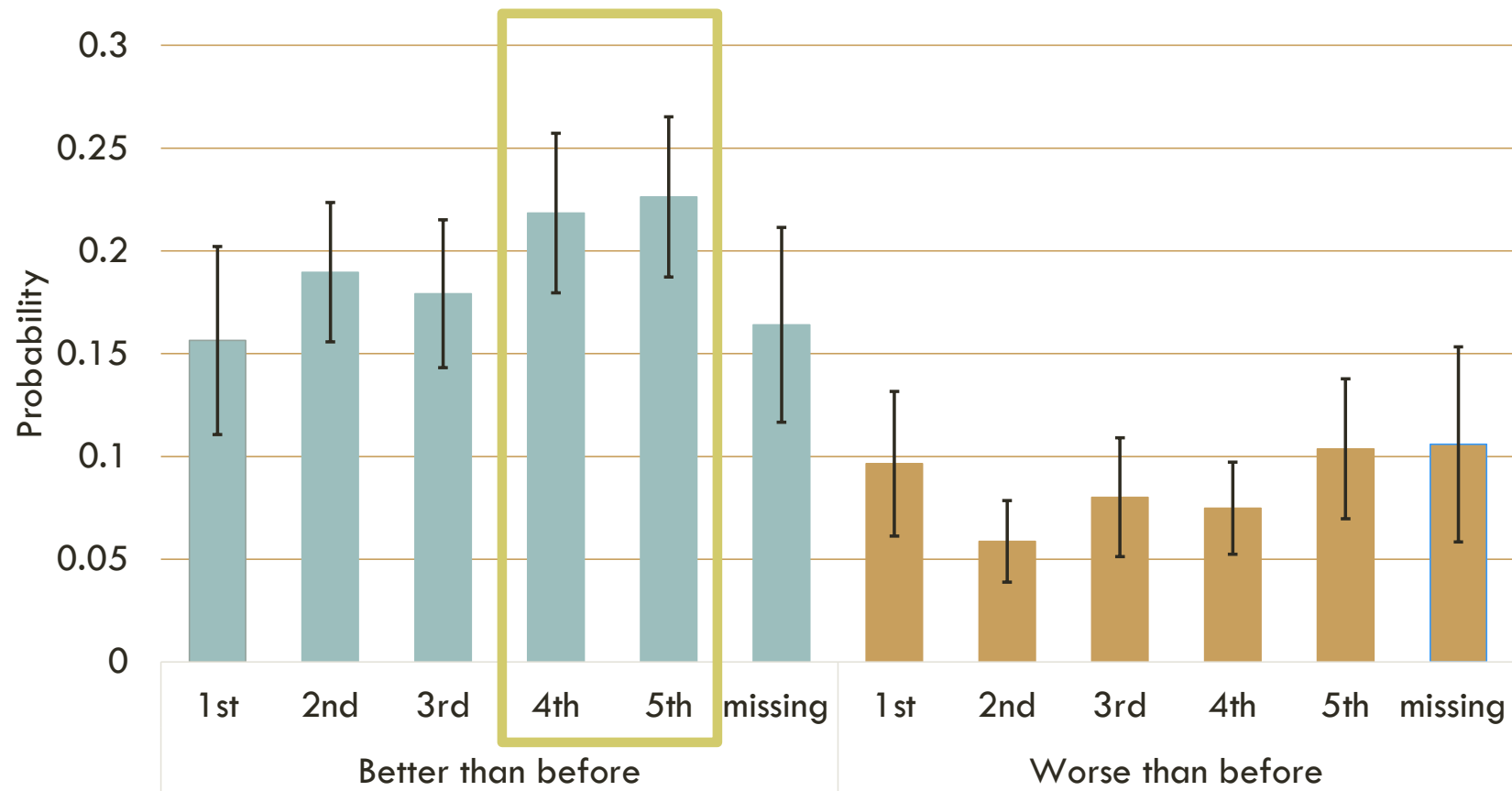
RESULTS: THE CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS



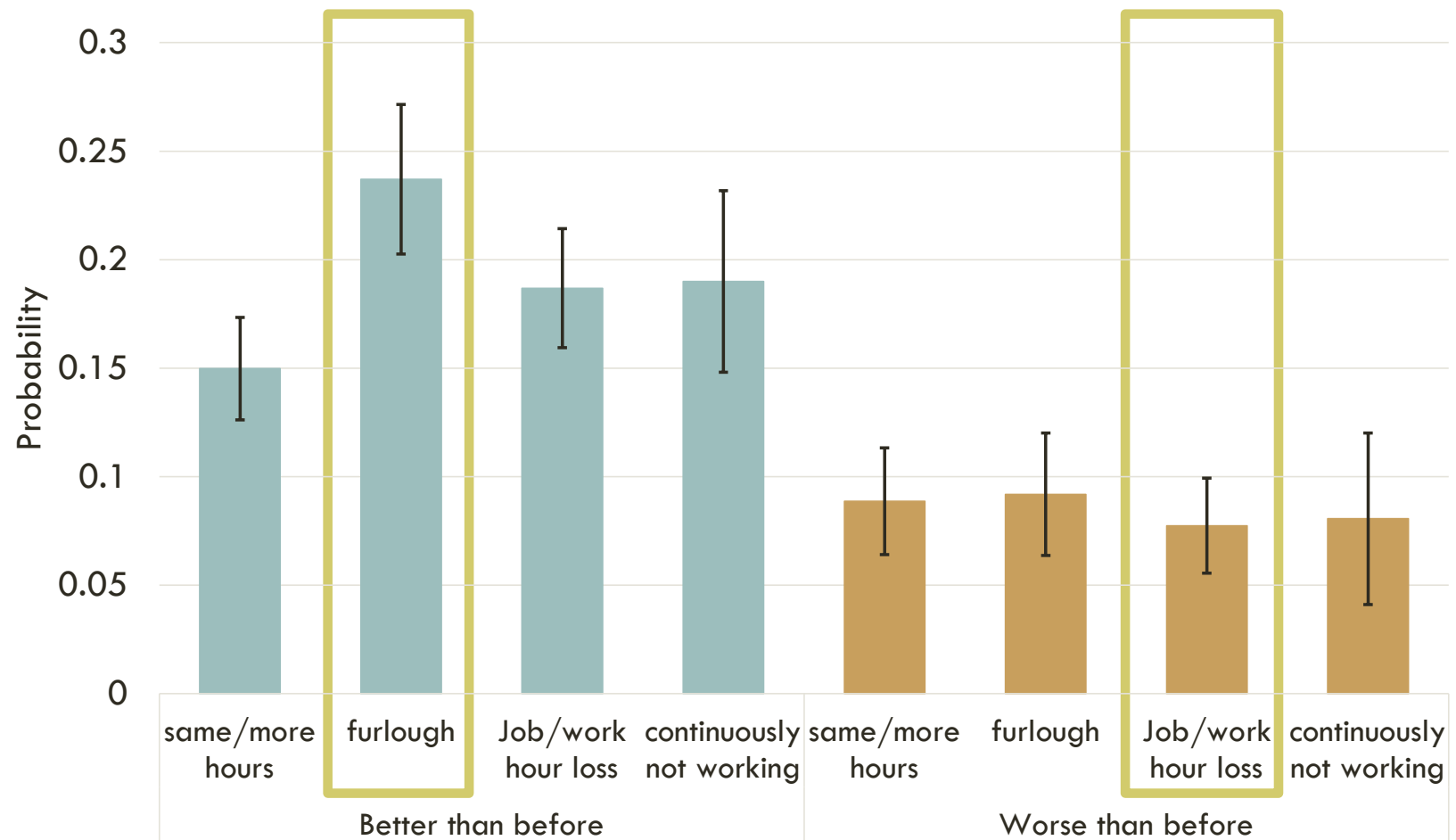
RESULTS: THE PROBABILITY OF CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS BY EDUCATION



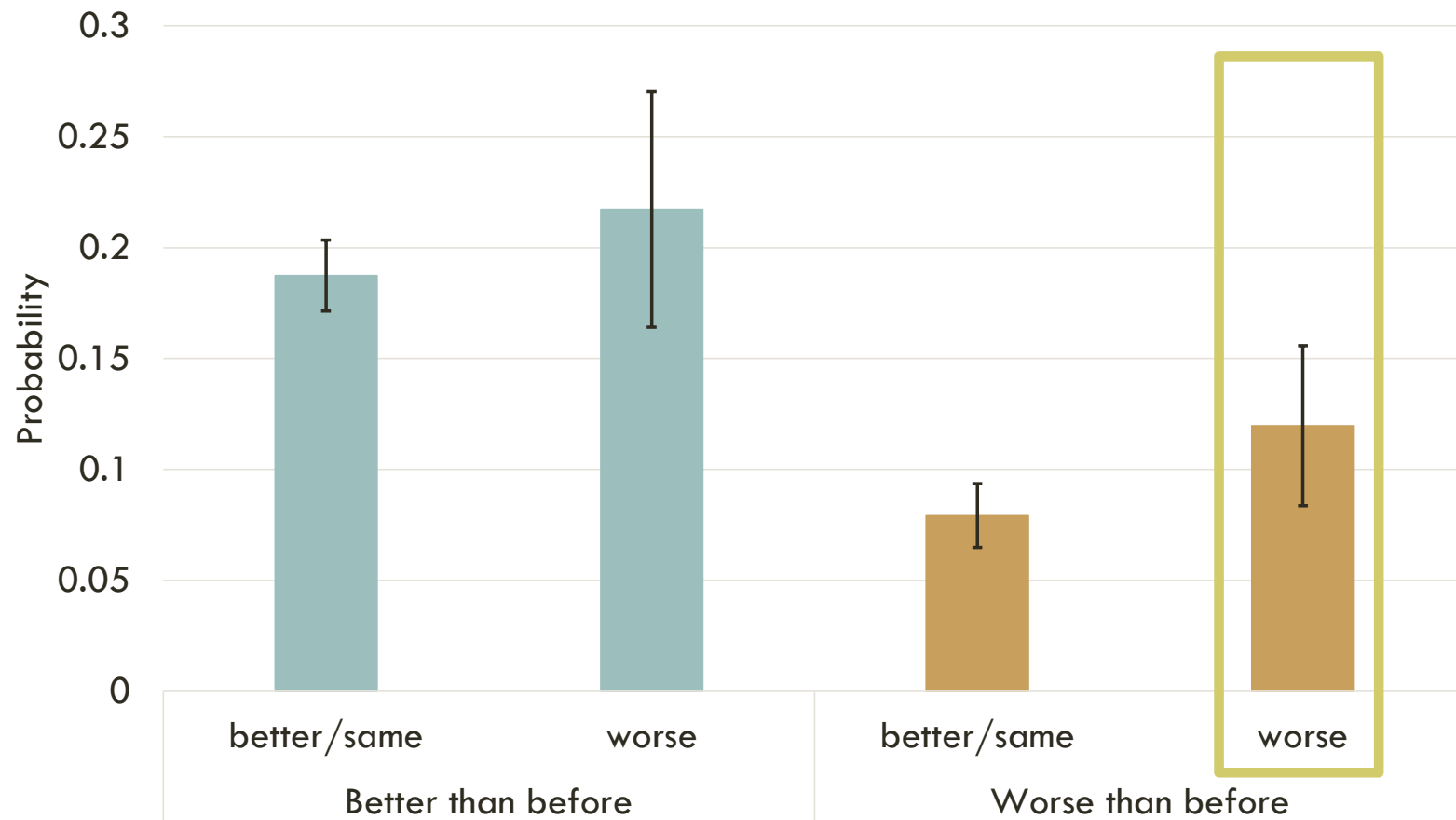
RESULTS: THE PROBABILITY OF CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS BY HH EARNING QUINTILE



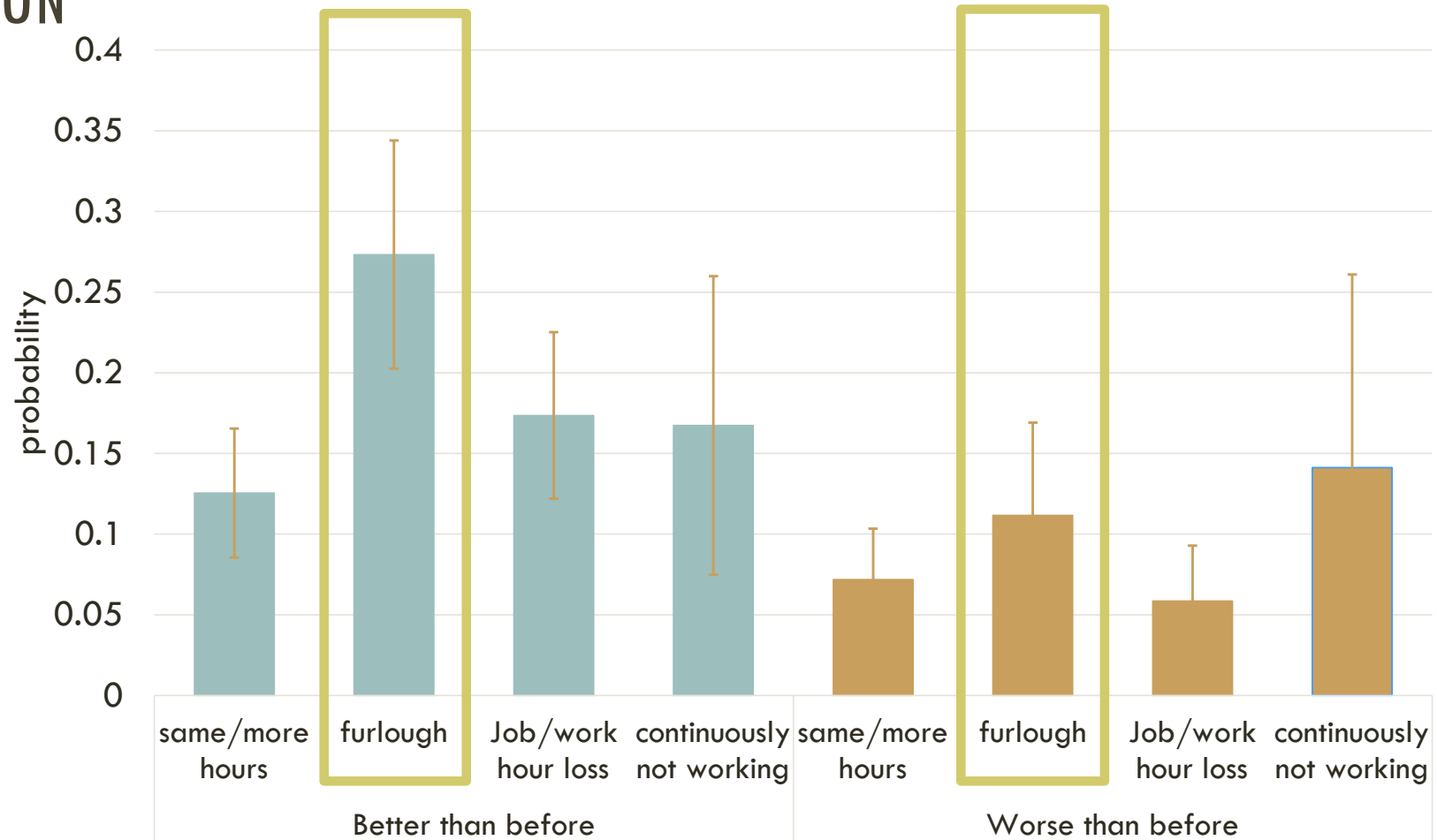
RESULTS: THE PROBABILITY OF CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS BY EMPLOYMENT SITUATION



RESULTS: THE PROBABILITY OF CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS BY FINANCIAL EXPECTATION



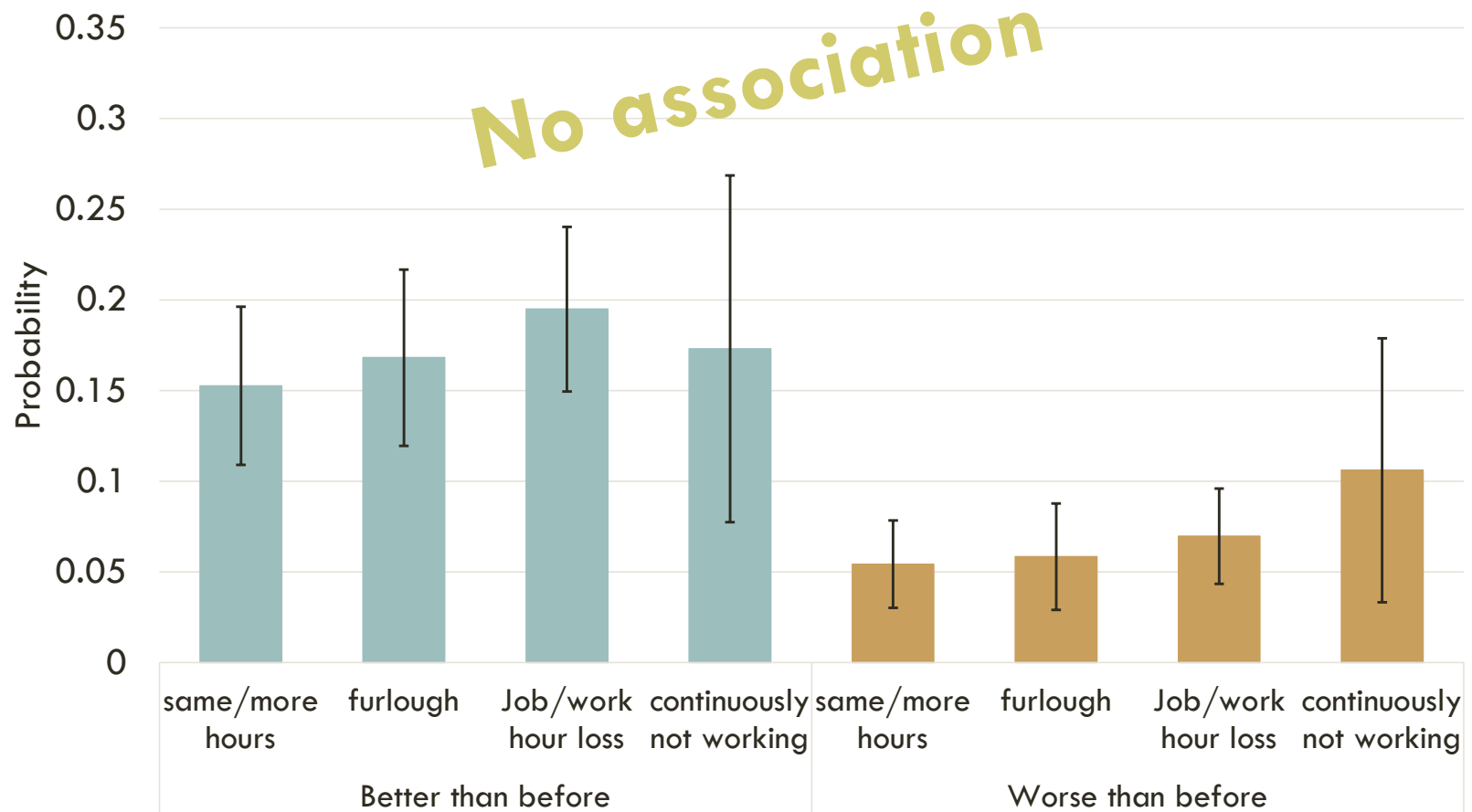
RESULTS: MEN'S RELATIONSHIP CHANGE BY THEIR OWN EMPLOYMENT SITUATION



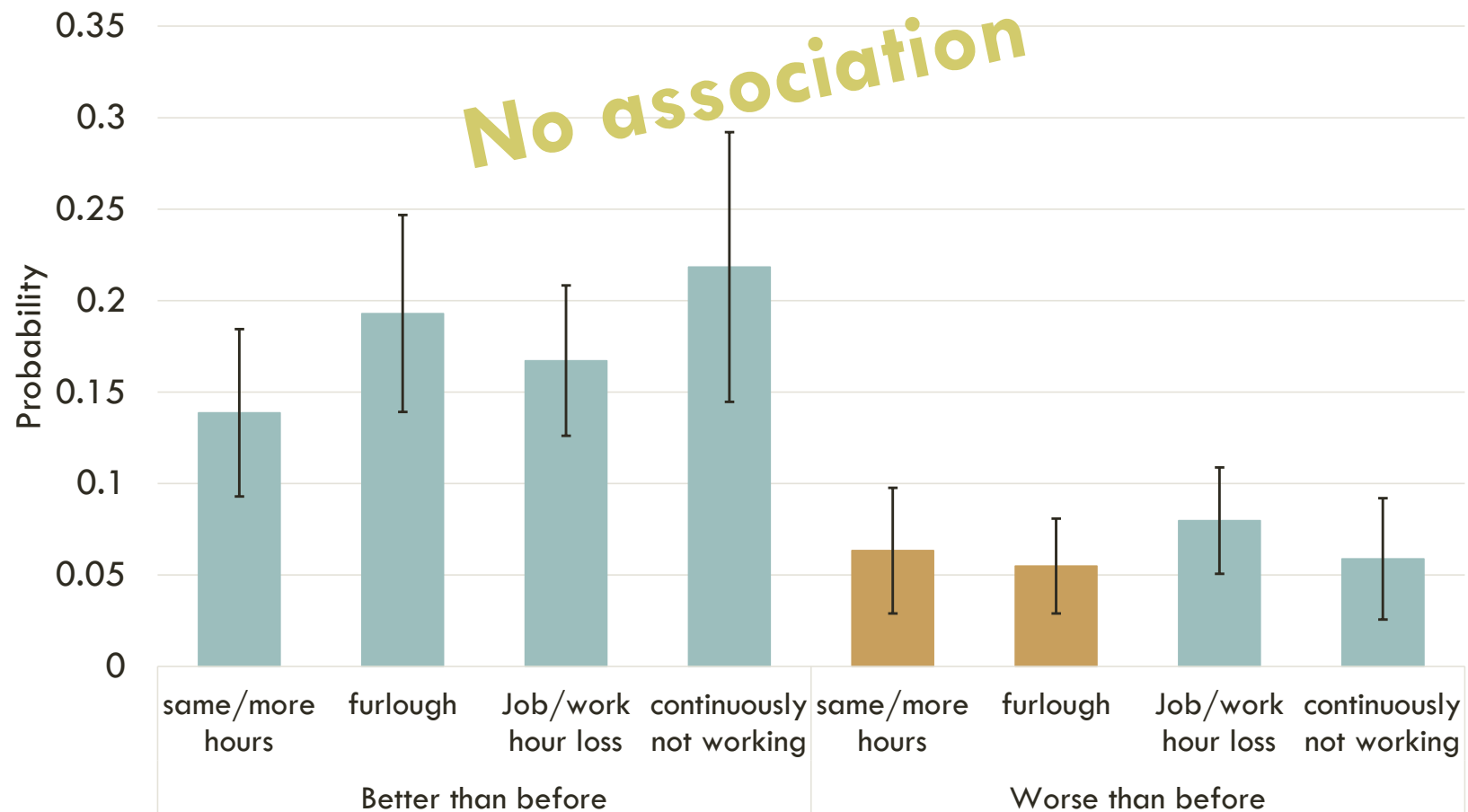
RESULTS: MEN'S RELATIONSHIP CHANGE BY THEIR WIFE'S EMPLOYMENT SITUATION



RESULTS: **WOMEN'S** RELATIONSHIP CHANGE BY **THEIR HUSBAND'S** EMPLOYMENT SITUATION



RESULTS: **WOMEN'S** RELATIONSHIP CHANGE BY **THEIR OWN** EMPLOYMENT SITUATION



CONCLUSIONS: SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

- During the pandemic, nearly **20%** experienced an **improvement** in their relationship; **8%** reported a **worse** relationship.
- The **socioeconomic advantaged** were more likely to report an **improvement** in their relationship.
- Subjective **concerns about future finances**, but not job loss, was associated with a **worsening** of relationships.

As found in other studies, **economic crisis** strains relationships.

CONCLUSIONS: POLICY RELEVANCE

- Those who were **furloughed** experienced an **improvement** in their own relationships.
- **Men's perception of their relationship**, more than women's, benefitted from **furlough** policies.

Employment policies mitigated the worst effects of the crisis on families.

Thank you

Original	N	Collapsed	N
Same hours	948	Same/more hours	1,490
More hours	542		
Furlough or paid leave	826	Furlough	1,358
Paid annual leave	215		
Paid sick leave: company	68		
Paid sick leave: statutory	10		
Business affected, self-employed scheme	239		
Laid off	96	Job/work hour loss	2,045
Employer cut hours	206		
Business affected, no self-employed scheme	185		
Care for others	144		
Sick leave, no pay	14		
Self-employed_illness	6		
Self-employed_isolation	5		
Avoiding becoming sick	15		
Quit	13		
Bereave	8		
Variation	831		
Other	522		
Continuously not working	899	Continuously not working	899
Education or unpaid/voluntary work	85		
Unemployed	59		
Sick/disable	99		
Looking after home/family	267		
Retire	369		
Others	20		
Total	5,792		

MAIN SAMPLES: GENDER INTERACTIONS

	1		2	
	Better	Worse	Better	Worse
Women	1.363	0.965	1.118	1.109
	(0.256)	(0.304)	(0.126)	(0.216)
Employment Situation (rf. same/more work hours)				
Furlough	2.190**	1.093		
	(0.464)	(0.387)		
Job/work hour loss	1.519*	0.850		
	(0.322)	(0.293)		
Continuously not working	1.180	0.908		
	(0.353)	(0.446)		
Furlough * women	0.711	1.132		
	(0.191)	(0.547)		
Job/work hour loss * women	0.747	1.099		
	(0.195)	(0.471)		
Continuously not working * women	1.105	1.072		
	(0.370)	(0.554)		
Expect worse future financial situation			1.383	2.095*
			(0.423)	(0.752)
Expect worse future financial situation * women			0.872	0.683
			(0.323)	(0.300)

** p<0.01, * p<0.05. All models control age of the youngest child, insufficient working space, fairness of chore split, age, partnership status, vulnerable to Covid-19, ever separated, and relationship duration.

COUPLE SAMPLE: MEN & WOMEN

	Men		Women	
	Better	Worse	Better	Worse
Couple employment status (rf. both same/more)				
M same/more, W furlough	0.897	1.126	0.863	0.728
	(0.522)	(0.826)	(0.478)	(0.577)
M same/more, W job/work loss or not work	1.319	1.287	1.108	0.644
	(0.574)	(0.761)	(0.468)	(0.388)
M furlough, W same/more	3.567*	3.012	0.664	0.744
	(1.855)	(2.493)	(0.372)	(0.669)
Both furlough	3.234*	4.370*	1.530	0.226
	(1.603)	(3.033)	(0.748)	(0.199)
M furlough, W job/work loss or not work	3.335**	1.382	1.393	1.280
	(1.533)	(0.971)	(0.627)	(0.751)
M job/work hour loss, W same/more	1.824	0.101*	1.165	0.485
	(0.986)	(0.115)	(0.512)	(0.399)
M job/work hour loss, W furlough	1.347	0.751	1.795	1.516
	(0.639)	(0.518)	(0.824)	(0.884)
M job/work hour loss, W job/work loss or not work	1.710	1.391	1.511	1.460
	(0.731)	(0.829)	(0.615)	(0.795)
M continuously not work, regardless of W's situation	1.886	3.097	1.391	1.775
	(0.999)	(2.317)	(0.714)	(1.171)

N=1,356. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05. All models include age of the youngest child, insufficient working space, fairness of chore split, age, partnership status, vulnerable to Covid-19, ever separated, and relationship duration.

Note. M stands for men; W stands for women.

COUPLE SAMPLE: COUPLE DYAD OUTCOME

	Better	Worse
Couple employment status (rf. both same/more)		
M same/more, W furlough	0.924	1.177
	(0.430)	(0.656)
M same/more, W job/work loss or not work	1.241	1.006
	(0.455)	(0.490)
M furlough, W same/more	1.619	2.118
	(0.751)	(1.525)
Both furlough	2.030	1.849
	(0.888)	(1.107)
M furlough, W job/work loss or not work	2.347*	1.159
	(0.906)	(0.616)
M job/work hour loss, W same/more	1.827	0.600
	(0.751)	(0.383)
M job/work hour loss, W furlough	2.033	1.151
	(0.806)	(0.607)
M job/work hour loss, W job/work loss or not work	1.781	1.523
	(0.629)	(0.769)
M continuously not work, regardless of W's	1.502	1.645
	(0.647)	(0.961)

Outcomes:

Better - either said better and neither said worse

Worse - either said worse

Same - both said stayed the same (reference)

N=1,356. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05. All models include age of the youngest child, partnership status, couple-dyad age, couple-dyad vulnerable to Covid-19, couple-dyad ever separated, and relationship duration.

Note. M stands for men; W stands for women