

Couple Resilience

Karen Skerrett • Karen Fergus
Editors

Couple Resilience

Emerging Perspectives

 Springer

Editors

Karen Skerrett
The Family Institute/Center
for Applied Psychological Study
at Northwestern University
Evanston, IL, USA

Karen Fergus
Department of Psychology
York University
Toronto, ON, Canada

ISBN 978-94-017-9908-9

ISBN 978-94-017-9909-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-9909-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015945027

Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Printed on acid-free paper

Springer Science+Business Media B.V. Dordrecht is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

*To my family, for their love
and inspiration – KS*

*To Ken, for your love and support,
day in and day out – KF*

And to the resilience of couples everywhere

Preface

The capacity to deal effectively, even creatively, with the challenges life brings our way is a topic of endless interest to scholars, clinicians, and researchers from a wide variety of disciplines. Over time, the focus has expanded from how one adapts in the face of adversity to how one might thrive. This book broadens the focus even further by applying the concept of resilience to relationship dyads and, specifically, to the ways in which resiliency expresses itself within an intimate relationship. Also of interest are the processes underlying this ability for relationships to endure adaptively and for partners to grow together in the face of life's ups and downs. A primary motivation for embarking on this project was a keen interest in the ways in which committed relationships impact coping and the ways in which coping efforts shape a relationship. It reflects the shared passion of two academics with originally independent interests in couple adaptation and the relational forces that promote coping. Over 10 years ago and in two different countries (USA and Canada) we had been individually studying couples who were coping with a breast cancer diagnosis. We discovered that we were both intrigued by a similar finding that couples with better outcomes on a variety of dimensions approached the cancer challenge from a unified, 'team' perspective. Our interests have since developed into an ongoing collaboration, one that is nourished by the desire to explore new ground in the couple relationship literature. The goal of this volume is two-fold: (1) to identify dynamics and properties unique to relational resilience and (2) to showcase the cutting edge thinking of scholars who are investigating these dynamics in various contexts. This book is intended for relationship scholars, those interested in deepening their understanding of resilience in intimate contexts and is suitable for courses in counseling, health, psychology, and social work.

Decades of work have examined resilience – the ability to transform challenge and adversity into adaptive outcomes – as an individual trait or characteristic. Despite the vast literature on individual resilient processes and outcomes, little has been done to examine qualities specifically involved in couple resilience. We have long known the profound impact close relationships have for the health and well-

being of partners in committed relationships. However, the couple literature, like psychology in general, has been skewed toward an emphasis on the more problematic, as opposed to life affirming, aspects of relational dynamics. This oversight has, in turn, contributed to a tendency to underestimate the human capacity to thrive and grow through challenge, as well as the capacity to grow as a relational entity in response to a shared challenge. This volume is our initial attempt to address such a gap by expanding current understanding of dynamic, growth promoting processes, as well as to identify resilient qualities that may be exclusive to the couple relationship. Ideally, this will lead to further investigations of the specific relational variables that can be identified and linked to resilient outcomes among couples.

Over the course of the past decade, one relationship process has emerged with greater frequency and clarity as critical to couple resilience. This process has to do with the couple's ability to approach life's challenges with a collective orientation that draws upon the couple's unique resources (both shared and individual). Variously referred to as 'communal,' 'dyadic' or 'collaborative' coping, and 'we-ness', this is the first volume to focus on this dynamic specifically, and to explore its promise and potential for relationship functioning. Accordingly, the construct of we-ness serves as an organizing principle for the volume with each contributor speaking either to an *integral facet* of the 'we' such as sexual intimacy, mutuality, shared memory, the capacity to forgive, or to the *holistic integrity* of the 'we' as in the 'essence' of a marriage, the intersubjective processes that bind partners together, or an examination of interpersonal coping within its broader sociocultural context.

It is important to situate the notion of committed partnerships within a broad historical, cultural and economic context. During the last half of the twentieth century, for the first time in human history, divorce replaced death as the most common endpoint of marriage. Since then, new options have evolved for the establishment of mutually exclusive and enduring dyadic relationships, or pair-bonding. These alternatives include but are not limited to cohabitation and non-married co-parenting. The factors behind the death-divorce shift are associated with and driven by three changes: the increased lifespan in western civilization, the shift in biopsychosocial roles of women, and legal and social value changes (Pinsoff, 2002). Because these shifts are likely to endure as long as the motivating conditions continue, Pinsoff (2002) calls for marital theory development to be replaced by the more inclusive notion of 'pair-bonding theory' as a way to acknowledge and address the viability of these multiple arrangements. In the spirit of such clarity, this volume locates marriage as a permanent pair bond and a relationship that is predicated on a love based, mutual value commitment to a lifelong often monogamous partnership. We acknowledge here that some long term, intimate partnerships also entail sexual agreements where it is normative and acceptable for partners to engage in sexual relations with others outside of the relationship. Such relationships would still fall within the scope of this work because there remains an intentional commitment to a particular other as the primary attachment and love figure. It reflects a Western civilization perspective, essentially North American and Euro-American and Euro-Canadian.

Specifically within the last 40 years, marriage and family life has been destabilized by two powerful forces: progress toward equality between men and women, and the growth of socioeconomic inequality and insecurity. These trends have changed the risks, rules and rewards of marriage (Coontz, 2014). The many alternatives to marriage referred to earlier, coupled with greater expectations for mutuality and equality, have resulted in the institution of marriage being more intimate, fairer and less violent but also have made it less likely that individuals will stay in unsatisfactory marriages (Coontz, 2006). In general, African Americans have experienced the same trends as White and Hispanic North Americans but only more so. Individuals are increasingly pairing off along class and education lines (Coontz, 2014). For example, the college educated are currently more likely to get married and stay married. Finkel (2014) argues that today's average marriage is weaker than the average marriage of yore in terms of satisfaction and divorce rates, but that the best marriages are much stronger. In describing the evolution from the companionate to the self-expressive marriage, he claims Americans have gradually elevated their expectations of marriage. The expectation that marriage will contribute to one's personal growth has resulted in unprecedented high levels of marital quality. The caveat is that such high quality is only possible for those able to invest a great deal of time and energy into the endeavor. Given that 'being married' is no longer sufficient motivation for staying married, and that there are socio-cultural and legal structures in place now that make it more acceptable and easier for partners to separate, efforts to unpack the components of the venerated 'optimal marriage' are needed. It is a good time to reexamine those components empirically and conceptually, something we have endeavored to do here under the umbrella of 'couple resilience.'

We have organized the volume in the following way. The initial chapters offer an overview of the domain of resilience in couples, defining the territory and summarizing significant literature. The topic is introduced from two sides of the coin: exploring the resilience afforded couples through this mutual self-sense or 'we-ness,' and then examining what it is about this 'we-ness' that promotes resilience. We then go on to elaborate on particular processes that contribute to, or underlie, couple resilience such as neurobiological and sexual processes, and how the concept of resilience applies to specific populations such as gay and lesbian couples, or couples where one partner is HIV positive or affected by cancer. The final section of the book focuses on empirical investigations or programs of research that examine resilience through a particular lens such as the importance of partner identification with the relationship, partners' mutual prioritization of the relationship, and the relevance of 'we-talk' in relationship-defining memories and its association with marital satisfaction. The final chapter in this section on the process of forgiveness was intentionally selected also to be the concluding chapter in the sequence of contributions – for where would 'we' be without the ability to forgive ourselves as well as our partners in our bumbling attempts to adapt to life and the unsavory array of challenges it throws our way, each time anew.

References

- Coontz, S. (2006). *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage*. New York: Viking Press.
- Coontz, S. (2014). The new instability. Retrieved from www.NYTimes.com.
- Finkel, E. (2014). The suffocation of marriage: Climbing Mt. Maslow without enough oxygen. Retrieved from www.NYTimes.com.
- Pinsoff, W. (2002). The death of “Till death us do Part”: The transformation of pair-bonding in the 20th century. *Family Process*, *41*, 135–215.

Contents

Part I Couple Resilience and We-ness

- 1 **Resilience in Couples: A View of the Landscape**..... 3
Karen Skerrett
- 2 **Theoretical and Methodological Underpinnings
of Resilience in Couples: Locating the ‘We’** 23
Karen Fergus

Part II Resilient Processes and Applications to Specific Populations

- 3 **Resilience in Lesbian and Gay Couples** 45
Arlene Istar Lev
- 4 **Sexual Resilience in Couples**..... 63
Andrea M. Beck and John W. Robinson
- 5 **Dyadic Adaptation to Chronic Illness: The Importance
of Considering Context in Understanding
Couples’ Resilience**..... 83
Kristi E. Gamarel and Tracey A. Revenson
- 6 **Relationships and the Neurobiology of Resilience** 107
Brent J. Atkinson

Part III Investigations into Facets of Couple Resilience

- 7 **Mutuality and the Marital Engagement – Type of Union
Scale [ME (To US)]: Empirical Support for a Clinical
Instrument in Couples Therapy**..... 123
Jefferson A. Singer, Beata Labunko, Nicole Alea,
and Jenna L. Baddeley

8 Identification with the Relationship as Essential to Marital Resilience: Theory, Application, and Evidence..... 139
David W. Reid and Saunia Ahmad

9 “We-ness” in Relationship-Defining Memories and Marital Satisfaction..... 163
Nicole Alea, Jefferson A. Singer, and Beata Labunko

10 Forgiveness: A Route to Healing Emotional Injuries and Building Resiliency..... 179
Catalina Woldarsky Meneses and Leslie S. Greenberg

Part IV Looking Back, Moving Forward

11 Resilient Couple Coping Revisited: Building Relationship Muscle 199
Karen Fergus and Karen Skerrett

Contributors

Saunia Ahmad, Ph.D., C.Psych. York University Psychology Clinic (YUPC), Toronto, ON, Canada

Odette Cancer Centre, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Toronto, ON, Canada

Nicole Alea, Ph.D. Department of Behavioural Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago

Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D. The Couples Research Institute, Geneva, IL, USA

Jenna L. Baddeley, Ph.D. The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Charleston, SC, USA

Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, USA

Andrea M. Beck The Tom Baker Cancer Center, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

Karen Fergus, Ph.D., C.Psych. Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Odette Cancer Centre, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Toronto, ON, Canada

Kristi E. Gamarel, Ed.M., Ph.D. Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

Leslie S. Greenberg, Ph.D., C.Psych. Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Beata Labunko, M.A. Clifford Beers Guidance Clinic, New Haven, CT, USA

Arlene Istar Lev Choices Counseling and Consulting, University at Albany, Albany, NY, USA

David W. Reid, Ph.D., C.Psych. Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Tracey A. Revenson, Ph.D. Department of Psychology, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

John W. Robinson, Ph.D. R. Psych. The Tom Baker Cancer Center, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

Jefferson A. Singer, Ph.D. Department of Psychology, Connecticut College, New London, CT, USA

Karen Skerrett, Ph.D. The Family Institute/Center for Psychological Study, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

Catalina Woldarsky Meneses, Ph.D. Private Practice, Geneva, Switzerland

About the Contributors

Saunia Ahmad, Ph.D., C.Psych., is a postdoctoral fellow in the Patient and Family Support Program, Odette Cancer Centre, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. She is a licensed clinical psychologist at the York University Psychology Clinic and in private practice. Her research interests include evaluating psychological interventions with couples coping with mental or physical health problems, identifying factors that contribute to resilience in relationships in the context of an illness that afflicts one or both partners, and cultural sensitivity in psychotherapy.

Nicole Alea, Ph.D., is a psychology lecturer in the Department of Behavioural Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, in Trinidad and Tobago. Nicole has a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Florida, with a focus on adult development and aging. She has over 30 manuscripts published in international peer-reviewed journals and book chapters focused on the relation between memories of the personal past and present-day personal and social well-being in adulthood and late life, with a recent emphasis on cross-cultural comparisons. Her first coedited book, *Ageing in the Caribbean*, was published in 2014. Nicole is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Gerontological Society of America, and the Society for Applied Research in Memory and Cognition. She is the director of the Adult Development and Ageing Lab in Trinidad and Tobago (ADALTT).

Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D., is the principle architect of the *Pragmatic/Experiential Therapy for Couples*, an approach that translates new scientific findings about the brain into practical methods for improving relationships. He is author of *Developing Habits for Relationship Success* and *Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy: Advances from Neurobiology and the Science of Intimate Relationships*. A licensed marriage and family therapist and approved supervisor of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, Dr. Atkinson is professor emeritus of marriage and family therapy at Northern Illinois University and director of postgraduate

training at the Couples Research Institute in Geneva, Illinois. Dr. Atkinson's pioneering work has been featured in professional journals and news outlets such as the *Oprah Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Psychotherapy Networker*.

Jenna L. Baddeley, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and codirector of postdoctoral training in the couples and family clinic at the Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Charleston, SC, and a clinical assistant professor at the Medical University of South Carolina. She has published multiple articles and book chapters on the relational dynamics of bereavement and depression. Her current clinical work and research focuses on couples' therapy.

Andrea Beck, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who studied at Dalhousie University in Halifax and the University of Calgary. In Calgary, she examined the intimate sexual relationships between men and women after prostate cancer, which led to the development of the Physical Pleasure – Relational Intimacy Model of Sexual Intimacy (PRISM). Based on this model, Dr. Beck collaborated on the development of a workshop that helps couples to restore satisfying sexual relationships after prostate cancer. The workshop is currently offered several times per year in both Calgary and Edmonton. Dr. Beck also carries out clinical work with women who have had breast cancer and delivers CBT to individuals with multiple sclerosis.

Kristi E. Gamarel, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University. She received her Ph.D. in social psychology from the Graduate Center at the City University of New York in 2014 and her Ed.M. in psychological counseling from Teachers College at Columbia University in 2009. Her research focuses on social psychological and dyadic theories and analytic methods to study how couples and family functioning affect health behaviors, particularly among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities and those disproportionately affected by HIV. She has received awards for her research from the Society for Behavioral Medicine, American Psychological Association, and American Public Health Association.

Leslie S. Greenberg, Ph.D., is a distinguished research professor emeritus of psychology at York University in Toronto. He is the author of *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Theory and Practice* (2010) and has coauthored *Emotion in Psychotherapy* (1986), *Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples* (1988), and more recently *Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy: The Dynamics of Emotion, Love, and Power* (2008) and *Working with Narrative in Emotion-Focused Therapy* (2011). He has received the Distinguished Research Career Award of the International Society for Psychotherapy Research and the Distinguished Professional Contribution to Applied Research Award of the American Psychological Association as well as the Canadian Psychological Association Professional Award for distinguished contributions to psychology as a profession. Dr. Greenberg is a past president of the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) and an originating member of the Society of the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration (SEPI). He conducts a private practice for individuals and couples and trains people in emotion-focused approaches.

Beata Labunko graduated with M.A. in psychology from Connecticut College. She is a research analyst at the Clifford Beers Guidance Clinic in New Haven, CT. She is currently working on an integrated care program for families with children affected by complex medical and mental health problems. She coauthored a chapter on utilizing self-defining memories in couples therapy for older adults published in *Storying Later Life: Issues, Investigations, and Interventions in Narrative Gerontology* (with Jefferson Singer; NY: Oxford University Press).

Arlene Istar Lev, LCSW-R, CASAC, is a social worker, family therapist, educator, and writer. She is a part-time lecturer at the University at Albany, School of Social Welfare, and is the project director of the *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Project (SOGI)*. She is also an adjunct professor at Smith College School for Social Work, Empire College, and the Rockway Institute at Alliant International University. Ms. Lev is the founder and clinical director of *Choices Counseling Consulting* (www.choicesconsulting.com) and *TIGRIS: The Training Institute for Gender, Relationships, Identity, and Sexuality* (www.tigrisinstitute.com) in Albany, New York. She is also the clinical supervisor for *Center Support Counseling Services*, at the Pride Center of the Capital Region. She has authored numerous journal articles and authored two books: *The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Guide* and *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender-Variant People and Their Families*, winner of the APA (Division 44) Distinguished Book Award, 2006.

David W. Reid, Ph.D., C.Psych., is a professor in the Department of Psychology at York University in Toronto. Dr. Reid has published and taught widely across topics in gerontology, personality, health psychology, and social psychology and been a consultant in the health sciences sector. That diverse background in basic and applied/consulting psychology led to the development of a graduate course called Complex Systems Approach to Interpersonal Change that provides a way of integrating various psychological interventions as methods for studying and treating clinical issues. That approach guided programmatic studies of how married couples function and from that knowledge create change that is calibrated to include features unique to a couple including culture, personal idiosyncrasies, and health issues, so the changes are intrinsic to the couple and self-sustaining. Dr. Reid was recipient of the Graduate Teaching Award from the Northeast Association of Graduate Schools in Boston, 2003, and from York University.

Tracey Revenson, Ph.D., is professor of psychology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and director of the health psychology and clinical science area. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from New York University and a B.A. in theater and psychology from Yale University. Professor Revenson is well known for her research on stress and coping processes among individuals, couples, and families facing serious physical illness. She is the coauthor or coeditor of nine volumes, including the *Handbook of Health Psychology* and *Couples Coping with Stress*. She is the senior associate editor of the journal *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* and is on the editorial board of the journal *Health*

Psychology. Dr. Revenson is a past president of the Division of Health Psychology of the American Psychological Association. In 2013 she was awarded the Nathan Perry Award for Career Contributions to Health Psychology by the Division of Health Psychology.

John W. Robinson, Ph.D., is an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Oncology in the Cumming School of Medicine and the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary. He is an active member of the clinical research team at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre (TBCC), which is internationally recognized for psycho-oncology research. Dr. Robinson is a registered psychologist, specializing in treating sexual dysfunction associated with gynecological and genitourinary cancer treatments, for the past 25 years. He has developed programs designed to help couples maintain intimacy after cancer treatment. He serves as a consultant to sexual health and rehabilitation programs at several cancer centers. He was the 2010 recipient of the Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology's Award for Clinical Excellence. He is a founding member of the Canadian Androgen Deprivation Therapy working group, an interdisciplinary group of health-care practitioners and researchers, aiming to improve the quality of life of men with prostate cancer treated with androgen deprivation therapy. He is widely published and the coauthor of the recently published book *Androgen Deprivation Therapy: An Essential Guide for Men with Prostate Cancer and Their Loved Ones*.

Jefferson A. Singer, Ph.D., is the Elizabeth H. Faulk professor of psychology at Connecticut College. He has authored five books *Positive Couple Therapy: Using We-Stories to Enhance Resilience* (with Karen Skerrett; NY: Routledge), *Personality and Psychotherapy: Treating the Whole Person* (NY: Guilford Press), *Memories that Matter* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger), *Message in a Bottle* (NY: The Free Press), and *The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in Personality* (with Peter Salovey, NY: The Free Press) and coedited a fifth, *At Play in the Fields of Consciousness: Essays in Honor of Jerome L. Singer* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; again with Peter Salovey). Professor Singer serves as an associate editor for the journal *Qualitative Psychology* and formerly for *Contemporary Psychology* and *Journal of Personality*. He is on the editorial boards for *Journal of Personality; Imagination, Personality, and Cognition*; and *Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy*. He also has a private practice in clinical psychology.

Catalina Woldarsky Meneses, Ph.D., completed her doctorate degree in clinical psychology at York University under the direction of Dr. Leslie S. Greenberg. She has extensive training in emotion-focused therapy (EFT) for individuals and couples and has been intrigued by understanding the process of forgiveness since beginning her graduate studies in 2004. Dr. Woldarsky Meneses is currently based in Switzerland where she works in private practice while also dedicating herself to training colleagues learning EFT.

About the Editors



Karen Skerrett is a clinical psychologist and affiliate of the Family Institute/Center for Applied Psychological Studies at Northwestern University and adjunct clinical associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Northwestern University. She most recently was an associate professor at the University of San Diego, where she designed and implemented their advanced practice program in Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing. She is a longtime faculty member at the Chicago Center for Family Health, an affiliate of the University of Chicago. She maintains ties to her dual training as a nurse and a clinical psychologist through a long-term clinical and consulting practice specializing in the treatment of couples and families, particularly those challenged by illness and disability. Her research focuses on resilient processes in couples across the lifespan and strength-based approaches to couple treatment. She is the author (with Jefferson Singer) of *Positive Couple Therapy: Using We-Stories to Enhance Resilience*, 2014, Routledge Press, and has contributed numerous book chapters and articles to

professional journals. She reviews for *Family Process* and the *Journal of Family Nursing*, among others. She presents nationally and internationally on adult development, life cycle transitions, innovative approaches to couple treatment, and the unique processes of relational resilience and growth in couples across the lifespan. Her work has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Parents Magazine*, *Psychology Today*, and the *San Diego Union Tribune*.

Karen Fergus, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and associate professor with the Department of Psychology at York University in Toronto. She holds a cross-appointment as a clinician-scientist at the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Odette Cancer Centre, where, in addition to her research activities, she has had a clinical practice since 1998. Karen's research interests include couple resilience and couple adjustment to life-threatening illness, differential impacts of cancer across the lifecycle, illness-related loss and grief, and developing and evaluating innovative programs to address these issues. She is the principal investigator for a national trial examining the efficacy of "Couplelinks.ca," a strength-based online intervention for young couples facing breast cancer. She has traveled across Canada giving talks and workshops on relationships and cancer to general and professional audiences. Her research has been recognized by the National Council on Family Relations, Anselm Strauss Award (2002), and the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, Cause Leadership Award (2013).