

COUPLES COPING WITH STRESS

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COUPLES COPING WITH STRESS

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Edited by
Mariana K. Falconier, Ashley K. Randall,
& Guy Bodenmann

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He has been involved in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. His affiliation also includes Guangdong Construction Vocational Technology Institute, China.

FOREWORD

Love—this desire or need we have to connect, to nurture, and to be nurtured—is powerful, and our perpetuation as a species demands that it be universal. So many of the uplifting experiences, which we have or learn about every day attest to these simple facts, and yet each day also brings us face to face with another simple fact: compassion, comfort, and nurturing are sometimes in short supply, even within the intimate relationships where we might expect it to be unusually strong and enduring. We cannot blame modern life entirely for the plight of our relationships, of course, yet neither can we dismiss the idea that our ability to connect and stay connected is affected by the many responsibilities, commitments, and demands, which we each face as we lead our lives and long for authenticity and purpose.

Couples Coping with Stress: A Cultural Perspective begins not just with the idea that stress can intrude into our relationships, but with the even better idea that stress and responses to stress can and should be conceived explicitly as a dyadic process—a team sport of sorts. This is a far better idea because it goes well beyond the common notion that communication is all that matters in relationships, and because it draws our attention to our relationships as dynamic systems, partly under our control, but often destabilized by all manner of stresses and strains that life sends our way. In this way, *Couples Coping with Stress* marks a critical moment in our scientific efforts to understand relationships, as it fully acknowledges that two otherwise identical relationships, situated in different circumstances, will grow to become markedly and perhaps irrevocably different.

If we take seriously the idea that circumstances matter to our relationships, then we cannot proceed by simply asserting this and administering a few questionnaires to show that we were right all along. We have to ask, how does this universal experience of love manifest itself in different cultural settings? To

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find out, we need to start thinking about all of the ways in which cultural circumstances differ and begin to wonder about exactly how those differences might operate to make relationships better and worse. And this is the second point on which *Couples Coping with Stress* excels, as it embeds intimate connection explicitly in a range of different cultural contexts. The complexity here is staggering—we are just beginning to learn about stress in relationships, much less about how stress and relationships are individually and jointly affected by culture—but the editors and authors of this book prove to be excellent guides. Thanks to their unusually fine set of chapters, the curious reader will learn a great deal not just about diverse cultures, and not just about how couples in different cultures enact mutual support, but about the very essence of love itself.

Thomas Bradbury
Los Angeles, California



FOREWORD

When couples form their relationships they commonly begin with a vision that being together will be a source of numerous rewards, whether those be meeting emotional needs or establishing a partnership in achieving instrumental goals such as a comfortable home and financial security. That's not to suggest that members of couples are routinely naïve about the fact that over the course of their life together they will face a variety of challenges and obstacles, but the amount of time that they spend thinking individually about how they will cope with the stressors they may encounter most likely is limited. Sooner or later, those challenges do occur, and as described so effectively by the chapter authors in *Couples Coping with Stress: A Cultural Perspective*, the ways in which a couple responds to them have major consequences for their individual physical and psychological well-being, as well as the quality of their relationship.

Researchers and clinicians have long recognized that some forms of coping with stressors have positive effects, whereas some other approaches can be ineffective at best or even harmful. However, until recently most attention has been paid to coping at the individual level, even though for decades couple and family therapists have conceptualized intimate relationships as social systems in which the members mutually influence each other. The ground breaking theoretical, empirical, and clinical work on dyadic coping reviewed in this volume finally takes our understanding of coping to a systemic level, and the findings clearly indicate the advantages of dyadic coping for individual and relational well-being. A major strength of the book's chapters is their demonstration of both common elements across diverse cultures and socio-political environments, and significant variation in how stressors are experienced, what factors determine how couples cope, and what consequences result from those efforts. The reader can compare across the chapters that each describes

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couples' experiences in a different country, with two complementary take-home messages. On the one hand, couples around the world universally face a range of stressors to which they must respond effectively in order to flourish, and whether a stressor initially affects one or both partners, there is great potential for unsettling 'spillover' into the relationship. On the other hand, culture shapes meanings, which members of couples attach to life experiences; for example, a family member's illness may be perceived as a distressing burden among members of one culture but be accepted as a reasonable challenge in another. For researchers, this poses a problem of how to be culturally sensitive in asking people about stressors and how acceptable they consider various ways of coping. For clinicians, it requires educating oneself about belief systems, values, and traditions in a culture before venturing to intervene to enhance couples' coping. The chapters in this book provide an excellent resource for such efforts. The book is unique in that the same Systemic-Transactional Model is applied across all chapters, guiding the review of literature on stressors and how couples cope with them, and the same measure of dyadic coping is used. The authors frequently are reporting the first studies of dyadic coping to be conducted in a country, and they provide a guide for the design and implementation of sound cross-cultural research. This is a wonderful model for culturally sensitive research. Similarly, each chapter has sections on implications for practice (e.g., the design of relationship education programs that will be appropriate for members of a particular culture) and implications for research. Thus, this is an important book. It provides an overview of cutting edge work on dyadic coping and the promise of enhancing partners' abilities to navigate life challenges together and increase their chances of achieving their initial dreams for their relationship.

Norman B. Epstein
College Park, Maryland

PREFACE

We live in a world where, unfortunately, couples and families are facing an increasing number of stressors every day. Understanding how couples can cope with the variety of stressors they face, in an attempt to mitigate any deleterious effects on individual and relational well-being, is of critical importance. Beginning in the 1990s, researchers began to focus increasingly on how partners' experience of stress affects their own and their partners' outcomes. From these theoretical contributions and research activities emerged the new field of *dyadic stress and coping*, and the *systemic transactional model of dyadic coping* (STM; Bodenmann, 1995).

For a long time, research, utilizing the STM to help understand how couples can cope with stress, has been conducted in several Western countries, specifically in Europe and the United States. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in studying stress and coping processes in other countries and cultural contexts. The goal of this book is to bring together the international research applying the STM approach to understand how couples cope with stress in various cultural contexts. To do this, we present research from fourteen geographical regions, each of them focusing on a specific cultural group of couples: American, Latino couples in the U.S., Swiss, Portuguese, German, Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Romanian, Pakistani, Chinese, Japanese, African, and Australian couples. Each of these fourteen chapters is authored by a scholar from a specific country and addresses the relevance, appropriateness, and use of dyadic coping in their specific culture supported by the conceptual and empirical literature. Additionally, each chapter provides a conceptual review from empirical studies that have been conducted on dyadic coping in this cultural context to be able to provide clinical and programmatic recommendations. Furthermore, we have included a chapter on the measurement of dyadic coping for future research on dyadic coping applying the STM model to other cultural applications.

xxiv Preface

This book is the first to bring together dyadic coping researchers from different countries, while integrating empirical knowledge accumulated in each country to support the discussion of cultural considerations. Given this, the content in this book is relevant and of interest to social scientists and mental health professionals alike, who wish to expand their knowledge on how couples cope with stress in a specific culture. Specifically, this book will serve as an important resource for researchers interested in dyadic coping as it will provide them with an understanding of the advances in dyadic coping in different countries, measurement issues in studying dyadic coping, the applicability of STM cross-culturally to study dyadic coping, and areas of study that need further examination. Additionally, the book will help mental health professionals working with couples expand their cultural competence to be able to work with couples with different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, this book can be used as a reference book for those interested in couples' stress and coping processes and/or multicultural issues related to interpersonal processes. As such, this book would be appropriate for undergraduate or graduate courses in the social sciences related to the study of stress and coping, close relationships and interpersonal processes across cultures.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Editing a book that brings together scholars from different parts of the world with diverse cultural backgrounds has been an incredibly enriching and exciting experience. However, this work could never have been completed without the enthusiasm and openness to collaborate from each of the contributing authors. Unlike many other edited books, our book utilizes the same conceptual model throughout the different chapters and is consistent in the way the content is presented. This organizational consistency was achieved through an ongoing collaboration with all contributors to whom we are immensely grateful for their patience, flexibility, and willingness to cross cultural bridges to finish this book.

There are a few specific individuals whom we would like to acknowledge. We would like to thank Amy Wu, graduate student in the Marriage and Family Therapy Master's Program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, for her countless hours dedicated to administrative support and editing. With an international group of thirty-five authors and three editors, Amy's effort in checking not only format but also language across all chapters was simply invaluable. We would also like to thank Debra Riegert, Senior Editor at Routledge/Taylor & Francis, for all her help and guidance throughout this process. We would also like to thank the reviewers who provided input on our original book plan including Norman B. Epstein, University of Maryland, Carolyn E. Cutrona, Iowa State University, and one anonymous reviewer.

Lastly, and certainly not least, we would like to acknowledge all the participants across the world who made this research possible. We hope that the content in this volume and subsequent future directions will be enriching to their lives.



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