Stress Processes in Families and Couples

Yoav Lavee

How do families cope with natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or tornados that destroy their homes? How do they cope with chronic illness, life-threatening health problems, or the death of a child? How do families handle unemployment and prolonged financial hardship? How do they deal with normative life transitions such as the birth of a child, the launching of young adults, or retirement? How do daily demands and hassles affect couples and families?

Describing and explaining the ways in which people, as individuals and families, as systems of interacting personalities respond to stressful situations has attracted much scientific attention in the social and health sciences. Scientists within the fields of physiology, psychology, sociology, and family studies have investigated and developed theoretical models to address these issues. The goal of these efforts is to explain which people and families, under what conditions and with what capabilities, are adversely affected or successfully manage stressful situations. Despite variations in the foci of research, three major components have been included in all models: the *sources* of stress, such as the physical, psychological, or social conditions, and the stimuli arising from the internal or external environments; the *outcomes* of stress, such as the

physical, emotional, behavioral, functional, or relationship consequences; and the factors that mediate between them (Patterson, 1988). Most theoretical stress models in the social sciences agree that such mediators as personal, psychological, and/or community *resources* have significant roles in preventing adverse outcomes and can help manage turmoil. In addition, another class of mediators involves the importance of *appraisals* of stressful encounters for understanding the outcomes of the process of stress. These factors appear to have dominated the development of family stress theory and research for more than half a century.

The present chapter is devoted to the study of families under stress. Because the family is a system of *interacting personalities* (Boss, 2002; Burgess, 1926; Hill, 1958), family stress theory shares explanations derived from theoretical models having psychological and sociological origins, but also has unique characteristics beyond these disciplinary origins. We begin with a brief review of the emergence, development, and basic concepts of family stress theory.[1] We then review theory and research on interactional patterns in *couples* under stress, an area of study that has developed more recently and holds promise for the continuing development of family stress theory.

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[1]A more detailed review can be found in the previous edition of this Handbook (Boss, 1987) as well as in other publications (e.g., Boss, 2002; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson, 1988; Price, Price, & McKenry, 2010).

Family Stress Theory and Research

The Founding of Family Stress and Crisis Theory

The study of families under stress and theorizing about them can be traced back to the works of Angell (1936/1965), Cavan and Ranck (1938), and Koos (1946), who studied the effect of the Great Depression on families in the 1930s. A primary question that motivated these studies was which families, under what conditions, are adversely affected by stressful experiences. Hill (1949) built on these initial studies in his classic work on the family's response to war separation and reunion, in which he advanced the first major family stress framework: the ABC-X model of family crisis:

> A (the stressor event) interacting with B (the family's crisis-meeting resources) interacting with C (the definition the family makes of the event) produces X (the crisis) (Hill, 1949, p. 29).

In this and a later article, Hill (1958) described the unique features of families that make them crisis prone: the average family, he argued, is "badly handicapped organizationally," poorly manned to withstand stress. Yet most families face troubles in the course of their life cycle and manage to work out procedures for meeting problematic situations.

Hill's theoretical formulation guided family stress studies for the next 3 decades. Numerous variables were introduced to explain differences in family response to stressful circumstances. Burr (1973) advanced the ABC-X formulation into a *bona fide* deductive theory by synthesizing theoretical discussions (e.g., Angell, 1936/1965; Hansen & Hill, 1964; and others) and research. First, he clarified the definition of crisis (the X factor), suggesting that it is a continuous variable, the *amount of crisis*, denoting a variation in the amount of disruptiveness, incapacitation, or disorganization of the family social system. He elaborated that "no crisis" does not mean that there are no problems in the system; it merely means that the problems are of a routine nature.

Next, Burr clarified the definition of the stressor event (the A factor) to denote any event that produces change in some aspect of the family social system, such as its boundaries, structure, roles, processes, goals, or values. Some of the stressor events produce a large amount of disruption in the system; others produce little change.

A major contribution in Burr's (1973) theorizing is the identification of variables and the formulation of formal propositions concerning the mediating and moderating factors between the source of stress (the stressor event) and the outcomes for the family social system. He synthesized the theoretical and empirical literature around two central concepts: *family vulnerability to stress*, i.e., factors that may impair the resistance capabilities of the family and increase its proneness to crisis; and *family regenerative power*, i.e., factors that help a family recover from crisis. Included in the former are variables such as the family's definition of the seriousness of the change (Hill's C factor), externalization of blame for the change, and the amount of time over which changes were anticipated. The family's regenerative power, which affects its level of reorganization, is influenced by such variables as internal family resources (e.g., marital adjustment, relative conjugal power, similarity of sentiments) and by external resources, such as the extended family. Some variables were theorized to influence both vulnerability to stress and regenerative power in opposite directions. Of these, *family integration* (cohesion) and *family adaptability* (i.e., the ability of the family to change its ways of operating with little organizational discomfort) received the most attention in subsequent research and theory (Lavee & Olson, 1991; Olson & McCubbin, 1982; Price et al., 2010).

The Double ABC-X Model of Family Stress and Adaptation Over Time

The next major step in the development of family stress theory is attributed to McCubbin and Patterson (1982, 1983). Based on observations of families responding to the absence of a husband–father who was a prisoner of war or missing in

action, McCubbin and Patterson extended the theory-building efforts of Hill and Burr into the Double ABC-X model. The model emphasizes the postcrisis adjustment and adaptation of families over time. Families deal with multiple sources of stress, both normative development and nonnormative events, over periods of change and readjustment, described as the *roller-coaster* of family crisis and adaptation. The Double ABC-X model redefines precrisis variables and adds postcrisis variables in order to describe (a) the additional life stressors and strains, before or after the crisis-producing event, resulting in a pile-up of demands; (b) the range of outcomes of family processes in response to the pile-up of stressors (maladaptation to bonadaptation); and (c) the intervening factors that shape the course of adaptation: family resources, coherence and meaning, and the related coping strategies.

The pile-up of demands (aA factor) refers to the cumulative effect, over time, of pre- and postcrisis stressors and strains. It views stress as a process, a complex set of changing conditions that have a history and future, and views the family as dealing with a cluster of normative and nonnormative events rather than with a single stressor. Additional sources of stress, such as required role changes, prior unresolved intrafamily strains, and boundary ambiguity may all place demands on the family while it is struggling with a major stressor event.

The family adaptive resources (bB factor) refer both to existing and expanded resources developed and strengthened in response to the demands imposed by the stressor event and pile-up of demands. These resources can either reduce the effect of demands on the family or help the family adapt to the required changes. Family adaptive resources may include first *personal resources* or characteristics of individual family members that are potentially available to the family in times of need. Second are *family system resources* or internal attributes of the family unit such as cohesion and adaptability. Finally, *community resources* or capabilities of people or institutions outside of the family, on which families can draw, primarily social support from formal institutions and informal support networks (e.g., the support provided by extended family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors).

Family perception (cC factor) involves not only the family's view of the stressor event, but also the meaning families attach to the total situation, including the pile-up of demands, the amount of change in the family social system, the resources and support available to the family, and the family belief system and worldview. The notion of family perception and meaning was criticized on the basis that perception is a cognitive process that resides within individuals and cannot be attributed to a social system (Hansen & Hill, 1964; Walker, 1985). Other scholars, however, argued that perception and meaning may be shared by family members, and that shared perception and meaning is in itself an important variable in the stress process (Ben-David & Lavee, 1992; Boss, 2002; Hennon et al., 2009; Reiss, 1981).

Family adaptation (xX factor) reflects the outcome of the family's efforts to achieve a new, postcrisis balance in functioning. McCubbin and Patterson (1983) described this concept as a continuum, ranging from maladaptation to bonadaptation, which reflects the degree of fit between three units of analysis: individual family members, the family unit, and the community of which the family is a part. At the positive end of the continuum, a fit between the demands and capabilities of any two units enables strong family integrity, enhancing the development of family members and of the family unit.

The process of adjustment and adaptation: The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model. In conjunction with the Double ABC-X model, McCubbin and Patterson (1983; see also Patterson, 1988) described a more elaborate model, the FAAR process. In this model, families achieve stability in the face of stressful life events across two phases: adjustment and adaptation. The adjustment phase is an attempt by the family to resist major disruption in its

established patterns of behavior and structure by using *avoidance* coping strategies to deny or ignore the stressor and other demands; *elimination* strategies to change or remove the stressor; or *assimilation* strategies to accept the demands into existing patterns of interaction. These efforts may lead to successful adjustment, or if resistance efforts fail, to maladjustment and crisis. After the crisis, the adaptation phase is geared toward restoring stability by making changes in the family's existing structure, modifying its established patterns of interaction, and consolidating the new patterns to achieve a new balance.

Family Resilience

Whereas early theorizing and research on families under stress focused on the deleterious effects of stressful events on families, more recent scholarly writings have shifted the focus to family *resilience*. The concept is rooted in studies on children who have strived under adversity (Cichetti & Garmsey, 1993; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Applied to the family, resilience is used to describe the strengths of families that seem to benefit from the challenges of adversity (Cowan, Cowan, & Schulz, 1996; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; Patterson, 2002). Also included in the concept of resilience is the ability of families to be flexible in response to the pressures and strains of life (Boss, 2006) and to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful (Walsh, 2006).

Families Under Stress: Concluding Remarks

The development of family stress theory seems to have reached a peak in the mid-to-late 1980s. Additional contributions during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century have focused on specific components within the model, especially on delineating and clarifying the mediating and moderating factors in family stress management (Boss, 2002).

Despite the abundance of scholarly literature, the basic assumptions and the major components of the theory have not changed over the years. Nearly all research in this area has continued to be guided by the A, B, C, and X components of the model. Most often it supported the hypothesis that the extent of family crisis (variously operationalized as disorganization, dysfunction, dissatisfaction, etc.) or family adaptation can be predicted based on the precipitating events, the perception of the situation, and the resources available to the family.

The continued reliance on the ABC-X or Double ABC-X models in family stress research attest to its strength: it is simple, relatively easy to operationalize and test, and useful for explaining a wide range of situations affecting families—both normative transitions and unexpected, nonnormative or traumatic events. Even well-articulated and reasoned critiques of the model (or of research guided by it) have not significantly altered the line of research in this area.

In the past 3 decades, various nondeterministic, nonlinear, and systemic processes have been suggested as operating in families under stress (Boss, 2002; Hansen & Johnson, 1979; McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Price et al., 2010). Burr and Klein (1994) noted, however, that these systemic formulations may not have been integrated into the mainstream theory because they conflicted with the basic positivistic assumptions of the ABC-X theory. The ABC-X model also fits well with linear statistical reasoning and is therefore easy to employ in the data analysis of quantitative research. Its weakness lies primarily in that it ignores interpersonal interactions altogether. Thus, the ABC-X model allows for the prediction and explanation of long-term outcomes, but it does not foster an understanding of the systemic processes that take place when the family faces a stressful event.

The generalized and abstract nature of the ABC-X model is most apparent in its focus on the *family* as a total unit. Unfortunately, family researchers have lacked adequate methodologies for studying and analyzing *family* phenomena under stress. Whereas theoretical models of family stress and coping describe the family as a unit, most research continued to focus on the individual (e.g., perception, distress, well-being, satisfaction)

as a unit of research and analysis. More recent developments in theory and methodology for the study of interpersonal interactions under stress offer another perspective to understand *interactional processes* in families.

Couples Under Stress: Theory and Research[2]

Several scholars (e.g., Boss, 1987, 2002; Menaghan, 1983; Walker, 1985) have stressed the need to consider subsystems within the family. Nevertheless, the marital unit, however central as it may be to the family's functioning, has received only scant attention. In family stress theory, only a few dyadic variables have been considered (e.g., marital adjustment, relative conjugal power, amount of consultation, amount of similarity of sentiments; see Burr, 1973), but they were theorized primarily as intervening factors, that is, as determinants of the family's regenerative power.

In some respects, in its generalized formulation as *family* stress, the theory may be adequate for explaining marital relations under stress (cf., Williams, 1995). Indeed, much of the research about the effect of stressful situations on couple relationships was guided by components of family stress theory and supported the claim that stressful events have a deleterious effect on marital relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Lavee, 1997). Negative associations between stressful situations and marital outcomes were found with regard to a variety of stressful life events and transitions, including income loss and economic distress, physical illness or psychological symptoms of a spouse, fertility problems, child's developmental disorders and disability, pregnancy loss, and death of a child.

In contrast, several studies have documented the resilience of couples, showing that stressful experiences may *strengthen* the relationship and

result in increased cohesiveness and a more tightly bonded partnerships. This has been found with regard to certain life cycle transitions, as well as coping with a serious illness of family members (Barbarin, Hughes, & Chesler, 1985; Dahquist et al., 1993; Gritz, Wellisch, Siau, & Wang, 1990). Other researchers have argued that the marital relationship outcomes may be more complex, involving different patterns of change. For example, Belsky and Rovine (1990) reported four patterns of change in marital relationship after transition to parenthood: accelerating decline, linear decline, no change, or positive change.

Relationships may also change in certain dimensions but not in others, or they may be negatively affected in some aspects and positively in others. For example, in a study of marital adjustment among couples with chronic illness, Carter and Carter (1994) found that marital cohesion was significantly higher than the norm, whereas the levels of consensus were significantly lower. In another study (Lavee & Mey-Dan, 2003), parents of children diagnosed with cancer reported a significant deterioration in their sexual relationship, but increased satisfaction with their affective communication, better role relationships, and an increase in mutual trust.

Couples may also experience waves of increased or decreased emotional closeness and marital cohesion at various stages of coping with a stressful encounter, with more effective communication and support some of the time and increased partner withdrawal at others (Lavee, 1997, 2005). In a series of studies on couples coping with various stressors, Burr and Klein (1994) found that marital cohesion "rollercoasted" in more than 50% of the couples, and the authors concluded that "considerably more variation is seen in the way family systems respond to stress than is generally recognized in the stress literature" (p. 123).

To summarize, although most studies indicate that experiencing stress has a deleterious effect on marital quality, studies also show a more complex pattern of relationship changes. First, stress may have a differential effect on various aspects of the relationship. Therefore, conceptualizing and measuring marital quality as a unidimensional

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[2]Although I focus the discussion on the marital dyad, the processes discussed here may be valid for other forms of committed relationships as well, including cohabiting and gay/lesbian couples.

outcome variable may obscure important differential influences of stress on the marital unit. Second, there may be changes in the relationship along various stages of the couple's coping, including changes in interpersonal closeness and an array of interactional patterns. These findings suggest that a closer look is needed to understand what interactional and transactional processes take place in couples under stress, and what determines changes in relationships.

Explaining Interactions in Marriages Under Stress

The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model

Reviewing theory and research about changes in marital quality and stability over time, Karney and Bradbury (1995) concluded that crisis theory addresses some important changes in marital relationships that are not well explained by other theories. Crisis theory was criticized, however, for its failure to specify the mechanisms of change because its constructs have not been linked to specific processes within the marriage.

In response to these limitations, Karney and Bradbury (1995) presented a vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model (Fig. 8.1), which posits that stressful events, combined with the couple's enduring vulnerabilities, explain adaptive processes. These processes in turn affect and are affected by marital quality. Enduring vulnerabilities refer to background variables and traits that spouses bring to the marriage, such as perception of the family of origin, attitude toward marriage, social skills, personality, and others. The adaptive processes themselves need to be further specified.

Systems Perspective on Couple Interaction Under Stress

From the perspective of family systems theory, the question is not what variables affect an outcome, but rather what are the processes (rules of transformation) that take place between the components of a system (i.e., members of the marital dyad) when an environmental stimulus, namely, awareness of an event, enters that system. Systems-based analysis (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988) directs our attention to the effect that spouses have on each other, the fit between the spouses' behaviors, and the effect of this fit on the functioning of the marital unit. According to systems theory, the components of a system affect each other through a feedback and control mechanism, so that the output from one subsystem (member A) serves as input to the other subsystem (member B) and *vice versa*.

Unlike mechanical systems, human systems are self-reflexive (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), that is, they behave according to the *meaning* that the input has for them. Based on one's perceived meaning of the environmental input (stressor event) and on their internal rules of transformation, individuals output a signal to the other member of the dyad. Whitchurch and Constantine noted that this communication involves more than simply an exchange of information in the sense of literal content. "Human communication… facilitates humans' creation of meaning and their simultaneous activities of sending and receiving messages of symbolic content" (pp. 329–330). Kantor and Lehr (1975) maintained that the information processed by the system is *distance-regulation* information: family members continuously inform other members what constitutes proper and optimal distance in their relationships.
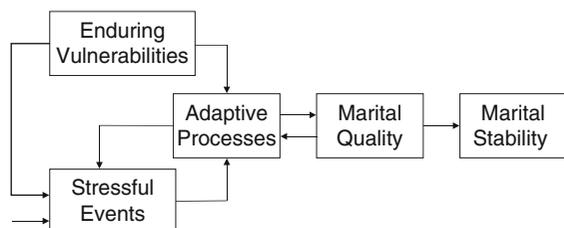
Fig. 8.1 The vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)

The information is processed through *acts*, *sequences* of acts, and *strategies* (recurrent patterns of interaction sequences) that are meaningful only in the context of interdependent relationships (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Acts, the basic units of interaction processes, are manipulations of the environment that have "meaning" within the context for others. "[They] function simultaneously as a signal to others, a response to an antecedent signal, and a signal to the self. In other words, the social act is not an isolated event, but a relation taking place in a specific field of shared experience…" (Kantor & Lehr, p. 12).

Thus, in response to a stressful situation (i.e., an input to the relationship system), each member (a) acts upon the environmental input (the event), (b) reacts to the other spouse's reaction to the input, and (c) reacts to the other spouse's reaction to his/her own reaction and so on. Kantor and Lehr (1975) suggested that these sequences of acts should be understood within the distance-regulating strategies that characterize the relationship. Because people, as "mindful components of living systems," have memories of past experiences, interaction is continuous so that it fits with interactions that occurred previously and affects interactions to come (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). When an event takes place, the spouses' actions are based on each person's idiosyncratic meaning attached to the event (including memories of interactions in other interpersonal systems) and on memories of past experiences with the spouse. Kantor and Lehr (1975) also maintained that

members of a system respond to each other's verbal and nonverbal cues in a predictable way, "a fact that leads us to believe that members know the kinesic, motoric, or cognitive level the parts they are expected to play in family strategies" (p. 18).

Although strategies of distance regulation may characterize a system in a steady state, both the needs for closeness/distance and the strategies used to regulate them can change as a result of environmental input and of its meaning. For example, an anxiety-producing event may alter one's need for closeness, which then shapes behavior so that distance is renegotiated. The partner's reaction may be influenced by the first member's behavior, but also by the partner's own need for closeness or distance, which may or may not change in response to the new stimulus. This distance renegotiation may have different outcomes for the couple's relationship.

A Process Model of Couple Stress Management

The study of couple stress management draws on several areas of scholarship, including psychological and family stress theories, communication, emotions, social support in close relationships, dyadic coping, and others. I use a *process model of couple stress management*, shown in Fig. 8.2, as a framework for integrating several theoretical models and research to describe couples' processes under stress.
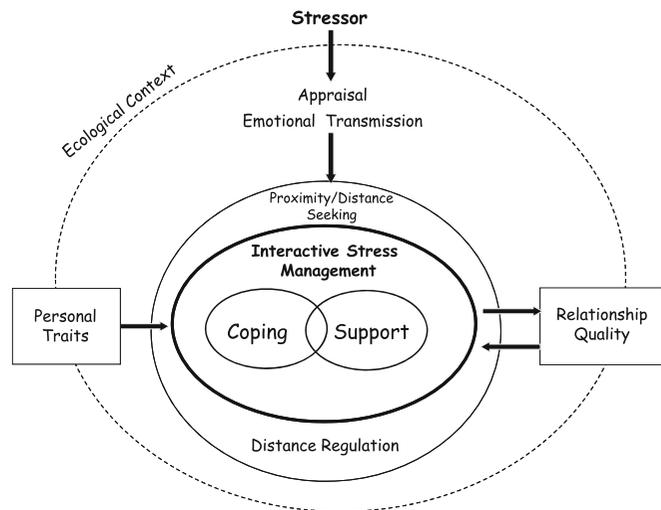

Fig. 8.2 Process model of couple stress management

At the core of the model is a process of *interactive stress management*, composed of two interrelated processes, coping and support. These processes are shaped by the partners' proximity-distance seeking, and more generally, by the couples' distance regulation, which are affected by enduring vulnerabilities, primarily personality variables and relationship quality, and may in turn strengthen or weaken the quality of the relationship in the long term. The process of stress management is also shaped in part by a larger ecological context, including the couple's cultural, environmental, social, and familial context.

Appraisal, Emotions, and Emotional Transmission

When couples or individual members of the couple face a stressful encounter, they first evaluate its meaning for them, individually or collectively (Boss, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal involves not only the event but also an evaluation of the resources at the disposal of the individual or couple. The stressful encounter also involves emotional reactions. Lazarus (1991) described stress as a form of emotion because events or situations that are perceived as stressful elicit a variety of emotions, including anxiety, fear, despair, and depression.

In the context of couple processes, stress emotions are communicated both verbally and nonverbally (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). The expression of emotions by one person often affects other people who are exposed to it, and the observer's emotions, attribution, and behavior are influenced by the expressed emotions (DeRivera & Grinkis, 1986; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). Such patterns of emotional transmission in couples may explain how the emotions of one partner influence the emotional and behavioral reactions of the other (Larson & Almeida, 1999). The term *stress crossover* refers to the situation in which a stress emotion experienced by one spouse leads to emotions experienced by the other (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). Westman and Vinokur (1998) suggested that the crossover process

may involve two mechanisms: empathic reactions and an interaction process. *Empathic crossover* implies that stress is transmitted from one partner to another as a result of empathic reactions, that is, sharing another's feelings by placing oneself psychologically in that person's circumstances(Lazarus, 1991). *Interactional crossover* is explained by negative interactions, especially social undermining directed against the partner. In support of this conceptualization, Lavee and Ben-Ari (2007) found that negative emotions were passed from one spouse to the other more strongly among couples characterized by high-quality relationships than in distressed couples, suggesting that empathic reactions are more prevalent in high-quality relationships.

Emotions play an important role in other segments of the stress management process, including approach and withdrawal in coping and support.

Interactive Stress Management: Coping and Support

Dyadic-level stress in couples is conceived as "a process of mutual influence in which the stress of one partner affects the other" (Revenson, Kayser, & Bodenmann, 2005, p. 6). In the process model of dyadic interaction under stress (Fig. 8.2), we conceptualize the couples' interactions of coping and support as sequences of acts shaped by distance regulation, more specifically, by the partners' proximity and distance seeking. Although coping and support in couples under stress have been described as two separate processes, they have much in common and are conceptualized here as interrelated: dyadic support facilitates coping, and coping behaviors may be directed at seeking and providing support.

Dyadic Coping

Bodenmann (1995, 2005) presented a theory of dyadic coping, in which he expanded Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory to systemic-transactional process in which both partners are involved. Bodenmann distinguished between *individual coping efforts* in the context

of couple relationships, where stress is mastered independently by each partner alone, and a *dyadic coping process*, in which both partners are involved in the coping process. Dyadic coping may take several forms: (a) *common dyadic coping*, in which both partners participate using strategies such as joint problem solving, joint information seeking, or sharing feelings; (b) *supportive dyadic coping*, in which one partner helps the other deal with such activities as helping with daily tasks, providing advice, helping reframe the situation, or expressing empathic understanding and solidarity; and (c) *delegated dyadic coping*, in which one partner takes over responsibilities in order to reduce the stress experienced by the other partner (Bodenmann, 2005).[3]

Several forms of dyadic coping have been identified. Coyne and colleagues (Coyne, Ellard, & Smith, 1990; Coyne & Fiske, 1992; Coyne & Smith, 1991) identified two broad classes of relationship-focused coping: *active engagement*, in which one partner involves the other in constructive problem solving and inquires about the feeling of the other partner; and *protective buffering*, in which one partner hides concerns, denies worries, and yields to the other partner to avoid disagreements. Similarly, DeLongis and others (DeLongis & O'Brien, 1990; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997; Preece & DeLongis, 2005) described coping as an interpersonal regulatory processes aimed at enhancing or maintaining relationships, including *empathic coping*—attempts to perceive the emotional experience of others involved in the situation, and *interpersonal withdrawal coping*—behaviors aimed at keeping the partner from knowing about one's problem or feelings. Revenson (2003) conceptualized couples' coping as a congruence or fit between individual partners' coping efforts, noting that these efforts may involve either similar or complementary coping styles to reach the desired goals.

The common theme in all models of dyadic coping is that the dyadic relationship provides an essential context for viewing the efforts to manage stress. They also share a common view of the relationship as a psychological and behavioral interdependence, in which the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors of each person in an intimate relationship affect those of the other.

Couple Support

Social support within couple relationships is closely related to the various forms of dyadic coping. Social support has been conceptualized as coping assistance (Thoits, 1986), and supportive relationships have been conceptualized as resources that can aid the individual's coping by providing instrumental assistance, emotional sustenance, esteem support, information, and feedback about the partner's coping choices (Cutrona, 1996; Revenson, 2003). Although individuals may receive support from various sources, spouses have been reported to be the most important source of support at times of heightened distress (Barbarin et al., 1985).

Support within the couple may be asymmetrical, with one spouse providing support to the other, or mutual, when both spouses provide support to each other (Lavee & Mey-Dan, 2003; Smart, 1992). Although spouses may provide each other different types of support (e.g., informational, tangible, emotional, esteem), it appears that emotional, nurturing support exchanged between partners is most significantly associated with couples' satisfaction with their relationship (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Emotional support from the spouse has been associated with an increase in closeness, whereas lack of support has been associated with a deterioration of the relationship (Hughes & Lieberman, 1990).

Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Joseph, and Henderson (1996) described couple support on three levels: *schemata* of support, *availability* of support, and supportive *behaviors*. The first level refers to an individual's general attitude toward the self and others regarding social support. It takes shape in the course of the individual's development and contains internalized working models and expectations about support relations. The second level describes the sense that the spouse will be available and ready to provide support in times of need. It includes a specific conception of

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[3]Bodenmann and others (e.g., O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997) also described negative forms of dyadic coping, including hostile, ambivalent, and superficial forms.
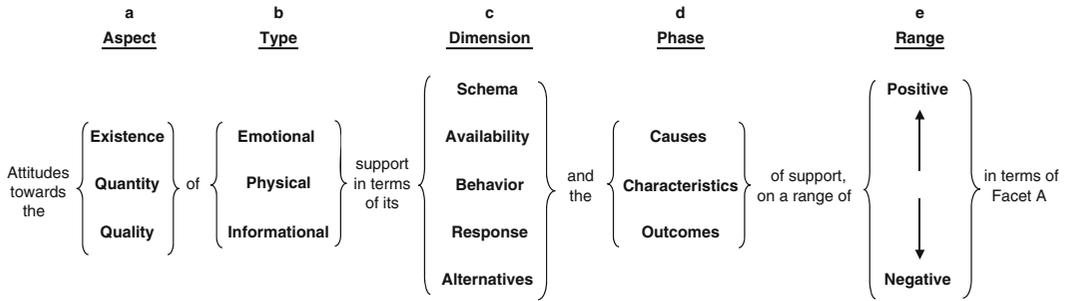
Fig. 8.3 Couple support: a mapping sentence

the relationship involving the interpretation of *potential* supportive behaviors (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). The third level refers to specific supportive behaviors in times of need. The assumption is that each of the three levels contributes to the interaction of the couple.

Support transactions are described as giving and receiving assistance within an exchange framework, in a cyclical process: providing support represents the individual's reaction to the other's need for support. The recipient tends to request support on the basis of previous support experiences, and in turn provides support to the assisting spouse, and so on. All supportive transactions rely on the sense of availability, and shape it in turn (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992).

Based on theory and research on couple support, Gilad, Lavee, and Iness-Kenig (2009) developed a comprehensive definition of couple support using a mapping sentence (see Fig. 8.3).[4] This definition served as a basis for constructing a detailed inventory for assessing *attitudes* about mutual support in couple relations, the sense of support *availability*, support *behaviors* of giving and receiving, the degree to which the support meets one's needs, *responses* to received support, and preference for support from within the couple

and from external sources. Smallest space analysis showed the various structures of the relations between elements of support among men and women living with and without disability, as well as a core element of reciprocal support in couples.

Coping and Support as Distance Regulation

Dyadic processes under stress involve an interplay between the stress signals, coping strategies, and support-seeking and giving of both partners, all of which may reflect strategies of distance regulation. Although couples tend to reach a certain level of intimacy and closeness that characterizes their relationship, dyadic closeness can fluctuate in response to interpersonal and external events (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007). In this "dance of closeness and distance" (Rosenblatt & Barner, 2006), the partners are closer at sometimes, farther apart at others.

Closeness and distance may also reflect patterns of dyadic coping—engaging vs. withdrawing from interaction (Story & Bradbury, 2004). As a form of relationship-focused coping (Coyne & Smith, 1991), active engagement includes attempts to engage in interpersonal interactions, whereas protective buffering includes attempts to withdraw from interaction. In a similar vein, *empathic coping* (Preece & DeLongis, 2005) represents dyadic closeness, whereas *interpersonal withdrawal* coping is manifested by decreasing closeness.

The process of distance regulation in coping and support is further described in the Sensitive Interaction Systems Theory (Barbee & Cunninghan, 1995; Barbee et al., 1993; Barbee,

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[4]A mapping sentence is a tool used in *facet theory* to define the basic parts of the domain under investigation. It consists of facets representing the major conceptual components of a domain, each facet containing elements that define the variations within it, which together characterize the content universe. It then provides a template for the operationalization of the concepts (e.g., questionnaire items).

Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998). This model assumes that the partners' emotional states influence the type of strategy used by both the seeker and the supporter in supportive episodes. The tactics used to activate social support may be direct or indirect, and it may be carried out verbally or by nonverbal means. In response, the partner's behavior may be avoiding or approaching, using problem-focused or emotional-focused support. The support seeker then reacts to the support-giver by either accepting or resisting the support in a verbal or nonverbal way. Emotions play a significant role in this process, because people in a positive mood tend to use more approach strategies than people in a negative mood, who tend to use more avoidance strategies (Barbee & Cunninghan, 1995; Barbee et al., 1993, 1998).

This interactional sequence exemplifies the couple's distance regulation: direct requests are more likely to attract approach rather than avoidance strategies, whereas indirect forms of help seeking often lead to avoidance strategies by the supporter. Furthermore, support seekers more often employ direct support activation behavior following a supporter's use of approach behavior and employ indirect support activation in response to avoidant behavior. A partner's comprehension of the nonverbal behavior and the cues of the other partner have a significant effect on interpersonal interactions and the quality of the couple's relationship (Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005). Perception of a partner's choice to seek distance in times of stress as an acceptable coping strategy also has ramifications for the couple's relationship. One's interpretation of the partner's withdrawal as a need to be alone (*moving inward*) tends to have a positive effect on the relationship, whereas the perception of the spouse's withdrawal as signaling a wish to distance oneself (*getting away*) tends to create relationship distress (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007).

Such forms of approach and avoidance are not isolated in the course of couple relationships: couples "remember" previous interactions in stressful situations, and there are repeated sequences of interaction under stress (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). Over time, partners may develop a sense of their wish to seek closeness in times of stress (seek proximity), or to withdraw (seek distance).

Closeness vs. distance seeking can also vary by the type of stressor, its source (i.e., from within or from outside the couple), its severity and duration, and personal and couple characteristics (see Moderating Factors below). Research on couples facing critical life events shows various patterns of closeness and distance related to the partners' emotional reactions in times of heightened vs. low levels of distress, the degree of comfort with the partners' behaviors, and their approach or avoidance strategies in support seeking and giving (Lavee, 2005). Research on couples' coping with daily stressors, such as high levels of work stress, commonly predicted increased withdrawal from dyadic interactions (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007; Repetti, 1989, 1992; Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004; Story & Repetti, 2006). Research on various sources of daily stressors (self-related, relational, and external sources; Lavee, 2010) revealed that, on average, daily stress is associated with decreased desire for physical proximity and perceived dyadic closeness on the given day. Moreover, the desire for proximity and dyadic closeness varies with the type of stress and whether the stress is experienced by the self (*actor effect*) or by the other spouse (*partner effect*).

Moderating Factors of the Stress Process

Two types of moderating factors that shape the process of stress managements in couples have been most commonly examined: personal resources and the couple's relationship quality. *Personal resources* include such attributes as sense of mastery, optimism, sense of coherence, and other background and personality attributes that were conceived as *enduring vulnerabilities*, the relatively stable intrapersonal characteristics in Karney and Bradbury's (1995) VSA model. Such characteristics play an important role in determining how stressful encounters are interpreted, reacted upon, and processed.

Neuroticism

Neuroticism is a personality trait defined by a general negative affectivity and a reduced positive emotionality in positive contexts (Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Keltner, 1996). It is considered to be a predisposition for negative feelings such as distress, frustration, and anxiety (Costa & McCrae, 1980) and is associated with decreased adaptive resources, including sense of mastery, self-esteem, and optimism.

There is ample evidence of the effect of neuroticism on couple relationships. Neuroticism was found to be negatively associated with various measures of marital adjustment, and the most consistent and powerful personality predictor of relationship outcomes (Bouchard et al., 1999). Karney and Bradbury (1995) suggested that the decline in marital quality associated with neuroticism may be explained in part by the effect of personality traits and by negative affectivity in particular, on the adaptive process: "[they] may exert longitudinal influence on marital outcomes through their effects on spouses' ability to adapt to the challenges they encounter" (Karney & Bradbury, p. 4).

Negative affectivity may have an effect on various components of the stress process. It has been associated with experiencing life events as more stressful and with the spouses' maladaptive attributions for relationship events (Bouchard, 2003; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994); with negative emotional expressiveness (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2004); with distancing/avoidance coping (Bouchard, 2003); and with decreased reciprocity of social support in couples (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997).

Attachment Security

Attachment theory is concerned with the ways in which individuals regulate emotions and behaviors in their relationships with significant others (attachment figures), especially when they feel distress. Because the theory explains why and how individuals differ in their support-seeking and support-giving behavior under stressful situations, it sheds light on couples' interactions under stress and on the various patterns of change in marital relationships in response to stressful events.

A fundamental assumption of the theory is that individuals internalize their early experiences with caretakers by forming *internal working models* of their own self-worth and of their expectations for care and support from others (Bowlby, 1969). As cognitive-emotional schemata of one's interpersonal world, the internal working models continue to regulate the individual's tendency to seek and maintain proximity and contact with specific individuals who provide the potential for physical and/or psychological safety and security (Berman, Marcus, & Berman, 1994). Indeed, adult relationship researchers have provided robust evidence in support of Bowlby's claim and that adults in romantic relationships manifest behaviors similar to the attachment styles identified in childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Under stress and threat, the attachment system is activated and influences the adaptive process (Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Attachment security is associated with emotional regulation and control (Feeney, 1995), with the expressing emotions and sensitivity toward the partner's emotional cues (Noller & Feeney, 1994; Schachner et al., 2005), with empathic reactions to others' needs (Mikulincer et al., 2001) and with care-seeking and care-giving (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Hohaus, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, Orina, & Grich, 2002). Secure persons tend to calibrate the amount of support to their partner's needs, whereas avoidant persons provide support inversely related to the level of their partners distress, particularly when they or their partners experience greater distress (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

It appears that the combination of the spouses' attachment patterns is important in explaining marital processes and outcomes (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005). Cobb, Davila, and Bradbury (2010) provided evidence that the attachment security of both spouses and their perceptions of the partner's security play a key role in couple interactions and relationship outcomes: each spouse's attachment security influences their partner's perception of them, which in turn influences their support behavior and marital happiness.

Relationship Quality as Moderator of the Stress Process

Whereas most research investigated the effect of stressful situations on marital outcomes, the quality of couple relationships in itself plays a key role in the stress process. Distressed marriages are at increased risk of experiencing internal family stressors (e.g., children's problem behaviors, parent–child conflicts, physical and psychological disorders, alcohol and drug use). They are more likely to attribute negative intentions to each other's behavior, and their dysfunctional relationship may diminish their capacity to engage in effective problem solving, to provide support, and to adapt to stressful situations (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In contrast, higher marital quality is associated with more supportive interactions, better fit in the spouses' coping efforts, and a stronger sense of "we-ness" in struggling with life challenges.

The Ecological Context of Stress Management

Until recently, the body of literature on stress in couples has not given adequate consideration to cultural variations, and researchers of cultural variations have largely disregarded the effect of stress on couples' adaptational outcomes. It must be recognized, however, that the couple is a social system that exists within other interdependent social systems (Revenson, 2003), and that every aspect of the couples' stress management is influenced by the sociocultural, religious, situational, and temporal context. Culture and the larger social context may play a role in how individuals experience daily hassles, including the occurrence of events, their appraisal, the coping strategies used, and the adaptational outcomes (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2004; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2008; Slavin, Rainer, McCreary, & Gowda, 1991). Cultural perspectives thus provide important insights into psychological and relationship processes (Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

Contextual factors, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the proximal environment, influence the *exposure to stressors* of individuals and couples by creating or alleviating threats, demands, or constraints (Revenson, 2003; Story & Bradbury, 2004). Culture shapes the family's values and belief system, which influence the *appraisal and meaning* of the significance of stressor events, thereby predicting vulnerability to stress (Boss, 2002). Certain types of events may be perceived as stressful in widely different cultures, but they may also be shaped by living and social conditions that are culture-specific (Laungani, 1995, 2001; Scherer, 1997). The sociocultural context also affects *coping strategies and support* in couples in a way that reflects coping resources, culturally acceptable emotional expression, and preferred and acceptable coping behaviors (Hobfoll, Cameron, Chapman, & Gallagher, 1996; Revenson, 2003).

Families and Couples Under Stress: Concluding Remarks

This chapter began by describing the roots and development of family stress theory and its components. We noted that the development of family stress and crisis theory seems to have peaked in the mid-to-late 1980s, with only relatively minor additions and revisions thereafter. The ABC-X and Double ABC-X models have influenced much of the research in the field of family studies for more than half of a century. Until recently, however, we have gained only little understanding of what actually transpires in families in times of stress and of the interactional processes between family members.

Since the 1990s (and growing rapidly in the beginning of the twenty-first century), two developments in research and theory have contributed to a better understanding of the stress and coping process: (a) the study of family subsystems, particularly relationship partners, with a focus on relationship processes; and (b) the shift from studying the effect of major life events to managing daily hassles.

The Study of Couple Relationships

The theory development and research of couple processes under stress has benefitted from its

interdisciplinary nature. Whereas the study of family stress was dominated initially by sociological theory and research (and later by students of family studies), couple *relationships* have been studied by researchers in a variety of disciplines, including family science, social psychology, communication, philosophy, and others. A larger number of scientific associations, journals, and conferences have given a platform for presentation of research and theoretical models related to couple interactions in general and couples under stress in particular. This development has given us an opportunity to move from the study of variables predicting the *outcomes* of stressful events on couples and families to a closer look at the *processes* that take place when couples encounter stressful situations. It is the author's belief that what has already been learned about couple processes will serve in the future to fine-tune research and understanding of families as social systems.

Methodological Advances in Research Design and Analysis

The study of family stress has commonly focused on coping with major life events and transitions. As described above, the family stress and crisis theory was found useful for predicting which families, with what resources, and under what circumstances would experience crisis, or alternatively, rise to the occasion to adapt to the new situation and even flourish. One common problem in this type of study was that families (and couples) were often investigated *after* the event had occurred. Thus, typically researchers were able to associate family outcomes with theoretically derived predictor variables, but were unable to examine *change* in family functioning and well-being that was due to the stressor event and associated pile-up of demands.

More recently, there has been a growing interest in the effect of *daily hassles*, the small everyday concerns and challenges on more immediate dyadic processes (i.e., coping), and short-term relationship outcomes (Helms, Walls, & Demo, 2010). Empirical evidence from several studies has shown that such daily occurrences have

adverse consequences on people's psychological well-being and family relationships and that relationship functioning is more strongly associated with daily hassles than with critical life events (Bodenmann, Ledermann, & Bradbury, 2007). Additionally, whereas the focus on perceived relationship quality and stability in traditional stress research provide data on whether stress is generally associated with marital relationships, daily diary data allow researchers to examine more closely how fluctuations in partners' feelings about their relationships covary with daily stresses and strains (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005; Thompson & Bolger, 1999).

The study of couple relationships, particularly relationship processes associated with daily diary data and other time sampling methods, have been accompanied by the development and application of more accurate research methods and data analysis approaches to the study of partners' interdependence and of the repeated sequences of effects that relationship partners have on each other when they encounter stress. Examples of such approaches include the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenney, 2005), the application of multilevel approach to the study of between-couples and within-couple effects across days (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005), and the use of diary and related statistical methods to analyze various questions of interest in the study of marital and family processes (Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). Review of research and theoretical articles in the past 5 years clearly shows that researchers are becoming more focused on understanding couple processes, and that the study of couples under stress is expanding rapidly.

A yet unresolved issue awaiting better clarification has to do with the link between short-term relationship processes (i.e., approach vs. avoidance, proximity vs. distance seeking) and relationship outcomes (i.e., dyadic closeness and distance) on one hand, and the long-term outcomes of relationship quality and stability on the other. Does greater dyadic distance in times of stress reflect relationship-focused coping that may strengthen the relationship over time? Does it reflect withdrawal from interaction that may

lead to relationship deterioration? For whom and under what circumstances?

Another important task for the years to come is a better integration of couple stress models with family stress theory and research. Continued focus on interpersonal processes in families who encounter stressful circumstances will move our understanding of family stress management a significant step forward. We are looking forward with great anticipation to what future trends will bring.

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