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# Capturing the "We-ness" of Happy Couples through Narrative Analysis

Sara Gildersleeve
*Connecticut College*, sgilders@conncoll.edu

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Sara Gildersleeve

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Abstract

"We-ness" refers to a couple's mutual investment in their relationship and in each other, involving reciprocity and prioritization of the relationship. The goal of this study was to examine We-ness through relationship narratives called "We-Stories" constructed by couples, and to develop a coding system to identify the core thematic elements that make up these narratives. Couples who self-identified as "happy" ($N = 53$) generated We-Stories and completed measures of relationship satisfaction and mutuality. These stories were then coded using the We-Stories coding manual developed by the researcher in conjunction with their supervising professor. Findings indicated that security, an element that involves aspects of safety, support, and commitment, was overwhelmingly present, appearing in 58.5% of all narratives. This element was followed by the elements of pleasure (49.1%) and shared meaning/vision (37.7%). The frequency of these particular elements suggests that the relationship aspects that happy couples value most are a solid trusting foundation, a genuine enjoyment of and love for their partners, and the visualization of a larger shared purpose in their lives. Number of "We-ness" elements was also correlated with and predictive of discrepancy scores on measures of relationship mutuality, indicating the validity of the We-Stories coding manual. Limitations and future directions are discussed.

*Keywords:* We-Stories, positive couple therapy, relationship satisfaction, narrative psychology

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"We-ness" is a crucial component of resilient relationships, consisting of a couple's shared investment in each other and the extent to which they act in the best interest of their relationship (Skerrett & Fergus, in press). Singer and Skerrett (2014) have asserted that We-ness constitutes a fundamental shift from individual consciousness (focusing on what each partner wants) to a "consciousness of the relationship." It is a mindset that involves reciprocity and the ability to take into account the perspective of the other (Skerrett, 2003, 2004). Rather than suggesting a complete merging of two individuals, a healthy sense of We-ness emphasizes two distinct "I's" in addition to the prioritized third entity—that is, the relationship. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the specific elements that comprise this sense of We-ness in the context of relationship narratives that couples construct together.

In a society where much emphasis is placed on independence and individual success, a sense of the "We" may often become subverted or obscured in the shadow of an "I"-oriented consciousness. However, it is crucial for couples to be able to cultivate a sense of shared investment in each other and their relationship. We-ness plays an important role in the couple's capacity to generate positive emotion and to diffuse conflict. Research has shown that couples with a We-orientation experience greater relationship satisfaction and benefits in mental and physical health (Bodenmann et al., 2008; Fergus, 2011; Godwin, Swank, Vaeth, & Ostwald, 2013; Kayser, Watson, & Andrade, 2007; Rohrbaugh, Mehl, Shoham, Reilly, & Ewy, 2008; Rohrbaugh, Shoham, Skoyen, Jensen, & Mehl, 2012). Research in clinical and social psychology suggests that constructing and maintaining a sense of We-ness is a strong predictor of marital stability (Bodenmann et al., 2008; Gottman, 2011; Siegel, 2012). This literature review will begin with an examination of the ways in which We-ness can be defined and operationalized,

followed by a review of its role in couple therapy. We will then explore the language of We-ness and its connection to narrative psychology, focusing on a specific kind of "We"-oriented narrative known as a We-Story and examining the elements of relationship mutuality that might comprise these narratives.

**Defining We-ness**

We-ness has been studied in various contexts, and it has been labeled and operationalized in different ways; for example, one study defined a similar phenomenon called cognitive interdependence as "a mental state characterized by a pluralistic, collective representation of the self-in-relationship" (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998, pp. 939). Cognitive interdependence was quantified using three measures. First, participants were presented with an open-ended request in which they were asked to indicate their thoughts regarding their current relationships and asked to rate the positivity and negativity of each thought. Thoughts that contained only plural pronouns were considered indicators of cognitive interdependence. Second, the researchers used the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS), a measure of relationship closeness, as an indicator of cognitive interdependence. Finally, centrality of the relationship was assessed with four self-report items (e.g., "Among the things that give your life meaning, how important is your relationship with your partner?"). Responses were recorded on a 9-point scale, with 0 being "other things are of some importance" and 8 being "nothing else is of any importance," and the average of these centrality measures were used as a third indicator of cognitive interdependence. Results indicated that more romantically committed partners had perceived overlap in mental representations of self and partner, and that committed partners tended to consider their relationships an essential, central part of their lives. These aspects of

commitment and mutuality are indicative of a sense of We-ness, quantified in this case through measures of plural pronoun use, inclusion of other in the self, and relationship centrality.

Another heading for a similar phenomenon is "minding," which includes five components: behaviors that facilitate the knowledge of one's partner, such as self-disclosure, listening, and observing; emphasizing attributions about behaviors that enhance the relationship; acceptance and respect for what is self-disclosed; reciprocity between partners so that each is involved in minding and caretaking; and understanding that the minding process is ongoing (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). The importance of the mutuality of self-disclosure coupled with the emphasis placed on acceptance and respect are also reflected in this concept of the "We." The researchers suggest possible variables that would reflect a high degree of minding, including expressed feelings of trust and commitment; sense of togetherness, also referred to as "We-ness"; and behaviors which acknowledge other's preferences/concerns, among many others (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). The researchers expect these elements of mutuality, trust, acceptance, and respect to be indicative of high-minding relationships; in other words, relationships that reflect characteristics of a We-oriented mindset.

**We-ness in Couple Therapy**

Contemporary approaches in couple therapy, including behavioral and emotion focused interventions, also integrate aspects of "we"-oriented thinking. (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). Emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT) focuses on partners' emotional responses to their attachment and security concerns in their relationship; it helps facilitate compassion and understanding between partners by addressing the negative interactions associated with these attachment concerns and vulnerabilities (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004). EFCT makes four assumptions: that it is best to consider intimate adult relationships in terms of an

attachment process; that interactional patterns and emotional responses must both be attended to in therapy; that partners are viewed as "stuck" in negative patterns and in need of support to promote secure bonding; and that emotion plays a critical role in close relationships (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). Interventions work to assess and de-escalate negative interactional cycles, to promote acceptance and foster emotional engagement, and to facilitate new solutions and behavioral cycles (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999).

To examine emotion-focused couple therapy in a randomized trial, a group of couples who participated in eight weekly sessions of EFCT was compared to a group of couples placed on a waiting list for the eight-week period (Denton, Burleson, Clark, Rodriguez, & Hobbs, 2000). Measures included the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), which assesses marital adjustment; the Positive Feelings Questionnaire (PFQ), which measures amount of positive affect toward one's spouse; Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR), which measures various facets of intimacy (social, emotional, sexual, recreational, and intellectual); and the Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ), which examines interpersonal cognitive complexity. The therapy was shown to effectively improve marital satisfaction, indicating that identification and discussion of emotions in a relationship is a significant contributor to relationship satisfaction. This component of emotional support and disclosure between romantic partners is strongly reflected in a "we"-oriented mindset. Another concept examined through the study of EFCT is "softening," a change event in which a critical partner expresses vulnerability and asks the other partner for connection and comfort (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). Expressing a sense of vulnerability to one's partner is indicative of a certain level of trust in addition to a strong emotional connection.

Another method of couple therapy, integrated behavioral couple therapy (IBCT), is a cognitive-behavioral approach that incorporates behavioral skills training while placing heavy emphasis on acceptance of vulnerabilities and emotional concerns. One of IBCT's concerns is to focus on broad themes in the relationship in order to produce long-term gains in relationship satisfaction that remain present in follow-up assessments after completion of the therapy. In a study examining traditional (more change-focused) and integrative (more acceptance-focused) behavioral couple therapy, both treatments showed similar levels of improvement in marital satisfaction and communication for significantly distressed married couples, with the main difference being that TBCT couples improved more quickly at first and then leveled off, whereas IBCT couples did not experience a similar plateau effect (Christensen, Atkins, Berns, Wheeler, Baucom, & Simpson, 2004). In a follow-up study conducted two years later, results indicated that there were no dramatic differences in outcomes between traditional and integrative treatments, and that satisfaction scores of couples who stayed together in the follow-up period were higher than couples who separated, as expected. However, the satisfaction score differences were greater in the IBCT group (Christensen, Atkins, Yi, Baucom, & George, 2006). Another randomized clinical trial found that couples receiving integrative behavioral couple therapy showed greater increases in marital satisfaction than couples receiving the traditional behavioral couple therapy, and a greater percentage of couples improved or recovered in the IBCT group than the TBCT group (Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, & Elridge, 2000). These findings provide support for the importance of increasing emotional acceptance in couple therapy, a core aspect of the "We"-mindset.

Several studies have demonstrated a correlation between We-ness and various positive relationship elements. Not only has a sense of We-ness been associated with relational positivity,

but it may also be predictive of marital stability, as evidenced in the following study. Married couples engaged in an oral history interview, a marital laboratory visit to sample the interaction style of the couple during a "high-conflict task" (discussion of two problem areas in the couple's marriage), and a three-year follow up to complete marital satisfaction questionnaires and indicate whether they were separated or divorced at the time (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). The oral history interview was coded for fondness/affection, negativity toward spouse, expansiveness versus withdrawal, We-ness versus separateness, gender stereotypy, how couples reported dealing with conflict, and marital disappointment and disillusionment. The husband's We-ness in the interview positively correlated with his positive portrayal of problem areas and with his wife's humor, assent, and positive listening, and negatively correlated with his wife's defensiveness and complain/criticize measure. The husband's We-ness also negatively correlated with his contempt and belligerence, and his wife's contempt and belligerence. The wife's We-ness in the interview positively correlated with her own humor and the husband's positive portrayal of problem areas, and negatively correlated with her own defensiveness and complain/criticize measure. The wife's We-ness also negatively correlated with her anger in the marital interaction. Additionally, couples who separated or divorced within the 3 years between the initial study and the follow-up had expressed less We-ness than those with stable marriages. Other research has found a negative correlation between depression and mutuality, and positive correlations between measures of mutuality and relationship satisfaction, adequacy of social support, and cohesion (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992). Baddeley, Berry, and Singer (2013) found that mutuality was a strong predictor of marital adjustment and individual well-being and health in military couples, providing further support for the importance of relationship mutuality.

**The Language of We-ness**

Several studies have focused on We-ness by examining the specific language couples use, comparing "I-talk" (first-person singular pronouns) to "we-talk" (first-person plural pronouns). One study investigated the personal pronouns used during a couple's marital conversation (Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009). Couples who were middle aged and older had a 15-minute "conflict conversation," and their emotional behavior and physiology were monitored throughout. The conversations were then coded into two categories: We-ness (pronouns that focused on the couple, such as "we" and "us") and separateness (pronouns that focused on the individual, such as "me" and "you"). Results showed that higher levels of We-ness were associated with more positive emotional behavior, less negative emotional behavior, and lower cardiovascular arousal. Higher levels of separateness were associated with more negative emotional behavior and lower marital satisfaction. Additionally, older couples used more we-pronouns than middle-aged couples. The researchers concluded that the emotional components of marital quality are expressed in the language that couples use in conversation. Another study also examined "We-ness" and "I-ness" by counting the first-person plural and singular pronouns in narratives provided by the participants (Alea, Singer, & Labunko, 2013). The researchers found a correlation between We-ness in negative memories and marital satisfaction, suggesting the importance of a couple's ability to put a redemptive spin on negative events. Additionally, women showed a positive association between marital satisfaction and We-ness in their positive relationship-defining memories.

In light of previous evidence suggesting that quality of marriage can predict the survival of patients with heart failure, one study interviewed heart failure patients and their spouses about how they coped with the patients' health conditions (Rohrbaugh, Mehl, Shoham, Reilly, & Ewy,

2008). The researchers found that the use of first-person plural pronouns ("we-talk") during the couples' discussion about the coping process predicted positive changes in the patients' symptoms during the next 6 months. This result was only observed for we-talk used by the spouse, but not we-talk used by the patient, indicating a statistically significant partner effect with no corresponding actor effect. Additionally, the spouse's use of the active pronoun ("we") more heavily contributed to predicting symptom change than the use of passive pronouns ("us" and "our"), but did not predict change in the overall health of the patient. These findings indicate that an active "we"-orientation by at least one partner can have adaptive benefits for the other partner's health. In another study investigating pronoun use, participants consisted of couples in which at least one of the partners continued to use tobacco despite having a heart or lung problem (Rohrbaugh, Shoham, Skoyen, Jensen, & Mehl, 2012). The intervention used was aimed at promoting communal coping—addressing and tackling the issue as "our problem" rather than "my problem" or "your problem." Pre-treatment we-talk used by the patient's spouse predicted the patient's abstinence 12 months after quitting. Increased we-talk by both partners during the intervention predicted cessation as well, suggesting that communal coping can be successfully used in couple-focused therapy as a mechanism for change.

**We-ness in Narratives**

The previous studies have touched upon a language of "We-ness," specifically through analyses of couples' pronoun use. We can extend this function of language into the context of telling a story by examining We-ness from a narrative perspective, a more recent movement in the study of personality and identity processes in psychology.

McAdams (2001) has argued that identity itself can be viewed as a story; individuals construct an integrative life narrative, involving various characters, settings, and themes. While

life stories have their basis in factual events, McAdams states that "they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful" (pp. 101). Stories help people integrate their experiences into a coherent whole, generating meaning and a sense of purpose. Narrative psychology emphasizes that stories are moral-driven, framed within a cultural context, and integral in meaning-making. The concept of identity as an ever-evolving internal life story is rooted in theory and empirical findings in multiple fields of psychology, including cognitive, cultural, developmental, and personality psychology.

The narrative perspective explores a deeper level of personality that is inaccessible by examining traits and characteristic adaptations alone; it examines how people create a sense of identity through the construction of stories, integrating episodic memories and goals (McAdams & McLean, 2013). These stories can be used to guide us, elevate our moods, influence and connect with others, and provide us with insight about ourselves (Singer, 2004). McAdams and McLean (2013) have stated that "through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future" (p. 233). Narrative identity research also places an emphasis on a lifespan development perspective, positing that over the course of peoples' lives, their ability to construct and derive meaning from narratives grows and changes (Singer, 2004).

Due to the nature of an ongoing and constantly evolving life narrative, a common theme is the growth story, which describes personal development. One of the subtypes of growth stories supported in previous research is the communal growth story, which reflects themes of intimacy and sharing (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2006). In a study conducted by Bauer and McAdams

(2004) where participants had either engaged in a career or religion change, themes of communal growth in participants' narratives predicted their general well-being more strongly than did agentic growth, which focuses on themes of self-understanding and self-mastery. The following excerpt from this study exemplifies a communal growth narrative, since the purpose of the individual's religious conversion was to facilitate a relationship rather than to fulfill an intrinsic sense of religiosity:

> I knew how important her religion was to her and that if I wished to love her completely I would have to accept that part of her for us and our future family. She was the more religious of the two of us and I knew I would be the one to eventually convert.

The themes of acceptance and accommodation in this narrative reflect the individual's sense of communal growth, enacting change for the sake of the relationship and love for his partner. Another study supporting the importance of growth stories showed that older adults, who were generally more likely to see past events in terms of growth than younger people were, reported a greater sense of well-being than the younger group (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005).

Another theme present in personal narratives is the redemptive sequence, in which the individual transforms a bad event into a positive outcome; the flipside of this is the contamination sequence, in which a positive event takes a negative turn. McAdams has shown that people who are able to view their narratives as redemptive sequences tend to report greater life satisfaction, life coherence, and self-esteem. Redemption sequences were also negatively associated with depression (McAdams, 2001). Being able to reflect uplifting elements of growth and renewed possibility in these personal narratives has been linked to more effective functioning in society and better mental and physical health (McAdams, 2013). A study

examining narrative reports of meaningful events from the past in midlife adults and college

undergraduates revealed that for both age groups, redemptive sequences correlated positively

with psychological well-being (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001).

Conversely, contamination sequences were negatively correlated with self-esteem and life

satisfaction and were positively correlated with depression in the sample of midlife adults. Thus,

an individual's ability to interpret and frame past hardships in a positive light and to understand

that good outcomes can emerge from bad circumstances may be an indicator of overall well-

being. Additionally, using narrative in a positive way can aid in mood repair; individuals have

been shown to recall positive memories in order to combat negative memories and moods

(Josephson, Singer, & Salovey, 1996).

Given the importance of the life story and the benefits of recalling positive memories for

individuals, narrative techniques have been carried into the realm of couple therapy. Gottman

and Silver (2012) have emphasized the importance of couples being able to share stories and find

meaning together, which results in the development and sustainability of trust. These stories may

manifest in the form of a metaphor or phrase that serves as an "emotional handle," a placeholder

for more complex psychological concerns that the couple can hold onto (Greenberg, 2010). One

study found that recalling meaningful and often-rehearsed relationship memories in the absence

of one's partner resulted in greater feelings of warmth and closeness (Alea & Bluck, 2007). By

sharing narratives amongst themselves and with other people in their lives, couples are also able

to express the defining elements and themes of their relationship.

While one's memories are deeply personal, they are also constantly shared with others,

and people often remember and reconstruct events in social groups, a process that is referred to

as collaborative remembering (Reese & Fivush, 2008). One study on collaborative remembering

that focused on older couples found that some couples were able to use a process of collaborative remembering to facilitate recall of information that both partners had forgotten (Harris, Keil, Sutton, Barnier, & McIlwain, 2011). However, although some advantages for the joint retelling of narratives have been indicated, collaboration is not always superior to individual performance and thus warrants further study in order to identify the conditions in which the benefits of collaboration can be maximized (Gagnon & Dixon, 2008).

**We-Stories**

We can investigate the interplay of narrative identity and aspects of collaborative remembering by examining the types of stories couples tell about their most meaningful shared memories. Stemming from the assumption that each individual has an overarching life story, Singer and Blagov (2004) have argued that people consider certain memories especially critical to their personal development and life stories. These self-defining memories are "vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern in an individual's life" (Singer & Salovey, 1993, p. 13). Similar to self-defining memories, which enable individuals to maintain a sense of self-coherence (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004), "relationship-defining memories" have been proposed to fulfill similar roles in the context of intimate relationships. In a study conducted by Alea and Vick (2010), relationship-defining memories that were more vivid, positive, intense, and frequently rehearsed were associated with greater marital satisfaction. The most predictive quality of marital satisfaction was the valence of the memory; positive memories correlated with greater marital satisfaction. It was also noted that this relationship is likely bidirectional, suggesting that couples with greater marital satisfaction selectively recall events, discounting the negatives and more often rehearsing positive relationship-defining memories.

Combining the research supporting the benefits of relationship mutuality, positive narratives, and aspects of collaborative remembering, a more recent evolution in our understanding of the "We" examines how We-ness can be captured through shared memories and stories, with an emphasis on the narrative content couples use to describe their relationship. This approach involves couples recounting examples of We-ness in their relationship through the telling of "We-Stories." A We-Story is a type of couple narrative composed by both partners that describes a vivid shared memory. These stories often provide an important image, metaphor, or phrase that serves as a touchstone for the relationship, and they embody the love and commitment each partner feels for the other.

Individual autobiographical memory serves three primary functions: a self-knowledge function, which allows for continuity of one's self concept and the ability to recall past events; a social function, which involves sharing personal memories and enables people to empathize with and understand others; and a directive function, serving as a guide for behavior, problem solving, and the development of opinions (Bluck, 2003). In a similar fashion, Singer and Skerrett (2014) have proposed that We-Stories serve the following four functions.

1. We-Stories shape the identity of the couple. Often the best descriptors of the relationship as a whole are macro-stories: general, big-picture stories that often describe a large part of the relationship or the relationship as a whole. While not focusing in-depth on a single event, macro-stories usually convey the defining features and overall identity of the couple. They may describe the couple's customs, conventions, and values.

2. We-Stories are a source of meaning-making and purpose for the couple. The previously discussed research in narrative psychology has shown the benefits of being able to draw meaning from personal experiences. We-Stories are a way in which the couple can

articulate a sense of shared vision and positive meaning in their lives. Couples who were able to construct mutual meaning when confronted with a breast cancer diagnosis—conceptualizing it as "our problem"—demonstrated optimal functioning, and were also able to use this system of meaning to direct their coping efforts (Skerrett, 2003).

3. We-Stories act as guides for current interaction and as vehicles for future growth. Being able to return to a positive story in times of conflict can serve as reassurance or validation of a couple's love and commitment. Singer and Skerrett (2014) assert that stories "are a rulebook of sorts, establishing what will work, what won't, what the parameters are for connection and disconnection" (p. 49). We-Stories are a resource for directing action and change, helping couples construct and maintain a "culture of positivity."

4. We-Stories act as a repository of the couple's wisdom and a way by which the couple can transmit their legacy. Singer and Skerrett (2014) state that characteristics of self-reflection, attunement to oneself and one's partner, interpretations of rules in a situation-by-situation basis, and balancing conflicting interests are all qualities reflected in relational wisdom—the ability to cultivate and maintain a We-consciousness. These qualities appear in the telling of We-Stories, which establish the basis of what is most important to the couple. These stories can then be shared with others outside the relationship, carrying the couple's legacy forward to future generations.

**Defining the We-Story**

To systematically define what constitutes a We-Story, we must consider previous efforts to define relationship mutuality and the concept of a "we"-orientation. Taking into account the various elements that have been studied in social and clinical contexts, Singer and Skerrett (2014) have proposed seven fundamental elements that constitute We-ness. These elements

include security, empathy, respect, acceptance, pleasure, humor, and shared meaning and vision (SERAPHS).

**Security.** The element of security has its roots in emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT), which views severe marital distress as a reaction to a threat to each partner's attachment bond, indicating concerns about the safety and security of the relationship. EFCT has been shown to improve marital satisfaction by addressing these attachment concerns and vulnerabilities and promoting secure bonding (Denton, Burleson, Clark, Rodriguez, & Hobbs, 2000; Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). Emotional support and disclosure, the ability to safely share fears and vulnerabilities with one's partner, and a belief that when one partner reaches out to the other during a negative relational cycle, their efforts will be reciprocated indicate the level of trust that constitutes the foundation of a resilient relationship (Johnson, 2004).

This critical element of trust has been the subject of much research and is an essential component of well-functioning relationships (Simpson, 2007). Trust involves a willingness to self-disclose and refrain from keeping secrets from one's partner; a study that investigated the relationship between self-concealment and trust in close relationships found that perceiving one's partner as engaging in self-concealing behavior resulted in a loss of trust, and that lower levels of trust in one's partner were associated with an increase in the individual's own self-concealment (Uysal, Lin, & Bush, 2012). Additionally, the study found that on days when one partner reported greater self-concealment, the other partner reported lower levels of trust. These findings indicate the reciprocal nature of self-concealment and trust in close relationships; if the cycle remains unbroken, trust continues to deteriorate and partners become more distant, leading

to a potential decline in relationship satisfaction. Thus, promoting these elements of self-disclosure and trust has the potential to positively impact close relationships.

Buyukcan-Tetik, Finkenauer, Kuppens, and Vohs (2013) have examined how the element of trust also comes into play concerning intrusive behaviors in relationships, which consist of actions that invade one's privacy, such as reading a partner's text messages or email without permission. Rather than a simple matter of trust, the researchers found that self-control also played a significant role in predicting intrusive behaviors. The results showed that self-control could prevent intrusive behaviors, but only for partners exhibiting high levels of trust. Since intrusive behaviors may be harmful and destructive in close relationships, building trust and self-control may also be beneficial for bolstering relationship resilience and satisfaction.

In addition to aspects of trust, Singer and Skerrett (2014) have asserted that a key component of security is the willingness of both partners to prioritize their relationship and acknowledge that it is the most important commitment in their lives. This outlook involves a mutual understanding that each partner is "all in."

**Empathy.** As is the case with the element of security, empathy is also a key component of emotion-focused couple therapy, which focuses on the emotional responses to the concerns and negative interactions associated with relationship vulnerabilities. Empathy is an understanding and sharing of another person's feelings; in a relationship, it refers to each partner maintaining an awareness of the other's emotions. A central tenet of EFCT is that emotion plays a critical role in intimate relationships, and that facilitating compassion and understanding is one of the keys to a positive relationship (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). Hendrix (1988) has described a process of "stretching," in which each partner engages in behavioral shifts

that acknowledge the needs of the other. Skerrett (2013) refers to the understanding and support of differences within the couple as the deepest form of empathy.

Another method for fostering empathy in couple therapy is the use of a one-way mirror, a technique in which one partner describes their emotional experiences, while the other listens and observes from behind a one-way mirror (Shi, 2006). This method enables the speaker to access emotional experiences without interruption while also allowing the observer to take in the information from a new perspective. In a case study example, this technique enabled a couple to develop an appreciation of each others' emotional struggles in the wake of an affair. Both partners agreed that the experience was constructive, opening empathic connections and fostering a better understanding of each other.

Research has shown that it is possible to develop and cultivate empathy, and that increased empathy is positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Couples who engaged in a 10-hour empathy training program increased general empathy scores over a six-month follow-up, reported an improvement in expression of empathy, and reported increases in partner empathy expression (Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto, & Kalso, 1999). Results also showed that these changes in expression of empathy were associated with greater relationship satisfaction. This study indicates that empathy can be learned, and that it is indeed beneficial in close relationships. Perrone-McGovern et al. (2014) have also found that individuals with higher levels of empathy toward their romantic partners reported greater relationship satisfaction than participants with lower levels of empathy. Additionally, individuals who employed more positive conflict resolution strategies had greater empathy and greater relationship satisfaction, indicating a facilitative connection between empathy and problem solving in close relationships.

Cramer and Jowett (2010) have examined the concept of perceived empathy, defined as the "extent to which a person perceives they are understood by another" (pp. 328). Perceived empathy was found to have a strong positive association with relationship satisfaction, indicating the importance of feeling understood by one's partner. Additionally, perceived empathy between partners was positively correlated; the more one partner perceived being understood, the more the other perceived being understood, indicating the reciprocal nature of perceived empathy.

Pistrang, Picciotto, and Barker (2001) have identified various themes indicating high empathy and low empathy responses through a qualitative data analysis of reported helping behaviors of couples expecting their first child. High empathy themes included checking out or exploring meaning by asking questions for clarification, acknowledging the importance of the discloser's concerns, conveying an understanding of the discloser's concerns by summarizing them or articulating meaning, offering solutions to problems expressed by the discloser, and providing indication of a mutual experience—that is, using "we"-language indicating that the discloser did not have to shoulder the concern alone, or providing an indication that the helper had the same concern as the discloser. Low empathy themes included the helper missing the point (either misunderstanding or not acknowledging the importance of the concern to the discloser), dismissing or belittling the concern, offering an unwanted solution, redirecting the conversation, and trying to persuade the discloser to feel that they should not be worrying about their expressed concern. These themes indicate the importance of the facets of mutuality, understanding, and acknowledgement of concerns that underlie the element of empathy.

**Respect.** In a healthy relationship, both partners should feel free to grow individually as well as together; a true "We" is made up of two "I"s (Singer & Skerrett, 2014). In order for both partners to grow independently, they must harbor mutual respect for each other, allowing room

for self-expression backed by a sense of security and support. Hendrix's (1988) notion of stretching and accommodating the other applies to respectful behavior as well.

In an exploration of respect in close relationships, Eckstein, Eckstein, and Eckstein (2014) have described the "four Rs" of respect: *respect for differences*, which includes acknowledging gray areas and engaging in compromise; *responsibility*, which consists of two factors—responding to one's partner in a respectful manner and accepting personal responsibility for one's behavior; *review*, which emphasizes the importance of communicating one's feelings in a climate of understanding and awareness and engaging in reflection; and *release*, which refers to a willingness to forgive and to let go of negativity (conflicts, arguments, and negative emotions).

Frei and Shaver (2002) assert that respect is an important component of relationship resiliency since contempt, defined as "a view of one's partner as beneath dignity and essentially beyond the reach of rational discussion" and considered the opposite of respect, is a major predictor of divorce (pp. 122). In their attempt to develop a definition of respect in the context of close relationships, these researchers used an open-ended questionnaire that asked participants to list as many features of "respect" as they could. Results indicated that participants viewed a respect-worthy partner as someone who is considerate, accepting, honest, and who listens to the other partner's viewpoint; together, these elements paint a picture of a "security-enhancing attachment figure"—that is, someone who reliably provides support, comfort, and encouragement (pp. 125). Using a measure they developed by using this information, the researchers found a very high correlation between respect and relationship satisfaction, providing further support for the critical role respect plays in close relationships.

**Acceptance.** Each partner brings their own set of imperfections and vulnerabilities into the relationship. Acceptance is the mutual awareness of each partner's vulnerabilities, the amount of care needed to maintain this awareness, and the ability to come to terms with one's own self-perceived flaws. The element of acceptance is rooted in the principles of Integrated Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT), which has been shown to be effective in improving marital satisfaction. IBCT's effectiveness indicates that acceptance, one of its critical elements, plays an important role in relationship satisfaction (Christensen, Atkins, Berns, Wheeler, Baucom, & Simpson, 2004; Christensen, Atkins, Yi, Baucom, & George, 2006; Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, & Elridge, 2000).

An IBCT intervention was used in a case study in which one partner was experiencing chronic pain (Cano & Leonard, 2006). Prior to the husband's injury, the couple had been very close, engaging in frequent social activity and active vacations. Both partners reported marital distress, including verbal fights, sexual dissatisfaction, and very few shared leisure activities due to the husband's pain. Following the 12-week IBCT intervention, which involved behavioral change, communication training, and promotion of emotional acceptance, the couple exhibited considerable progress, still below the marital satisfaction mean but no longer indicating marital dissatisfaction. Positive outcomes included fewer arguments, more constructive problem-solving, increased comfort for emotional self-disclosure, and increased positive exchanges including expressions of affection and an increase in shared activities. Both partners exhibited greater acceptance and understanding following the therapy and were able to improve several aspects of their relationship, providing further support for IBCT as a promising intervention for distressed couples and the role of acceptance in facilitating these improvements.

One study that focused on couples coping with multiple sclerosis examined the effect of acceptance and mindfulness on a person's own adjustment (actor effects) and the effect of their partner's mindfulness and acceptance on their adjustment (partner effects) (Pakenham & Samios, 2013). Results showed that both acceptance and mindfulness positively correlated with better adjustment in terms of actor effects. Although acceptance was not related to relationship satisfaction for the MS patients themselves, higher levels of acceptance were associated with greater relationship satisfaction for the patients' partners, suggesting that acceptance plays an important role in caregiving. In terms of partner effects, partner acceptance was shown to positively impact actor relationship satisfaction, suggesting that when one's partner exhibits greater acceptance, the individual perceives greater relationship satisfaction.

**Pleasure.** Pleasure involves elements of enjoyment, excitement, and passion, including sexual intimacy. A study investigating pleasurable behavior in marriages, in which married couples were instructed to report the frequency and pleasantness of various behaviors, showed that well-adjusted couples reported a significant increase in marital happiness after self-monitoring these behaviors (Robinson & Price, 1980). These results suggest that attending to positive interactions may help boost happiness even further in already satisfied couples. Additionally, low-adjustment couples underestimated the occurrence of pleasurable behaviors by about 50%, suggesting that the ability to identify and respond to such behaviors also plays an important role in close relationships.

Gottman and Gottman (2008) have found that partners who perceived their sex lives as going well three years after the arrival of a child tended to display various positive behaviors, including letting their partners know that they were sexually desirable; giving their partners surprise gifts, compliments, and daily messages that made their partners feel special; frequently

showing verbal and physical nonsexual affection; and having agreed-upon ways of discussing, initiating, and refusing sex. McCarthy (2003) has argued that the integration of intimacy, pleasuring, and eroticism is key for marital sexuality, with an emphasis on an establishment of mutually acceptable, realistic expectations. It is also important for both partners to feel that their sexual needs are respected and validated. Metz and McCarthy (2007) have presented the "Good-Enough Sex" model, which emphasizes mutual emotional acceptance and posits that intimacy should be the ultimate focus of sex in relationships. In this model, relationship and satisfaction are viewed as inextricably connected, and the couple is viewed as an "intimate team."

A study that examined sexual satisfaction in committed couples from Brazil, Germany, Japan, Spain, and the United States assessed facets of the participants' sexual history and behaviors, health, demographics, and mood using the International Survey of Relationships (Heiman, Long, Smith, Fisher, Sand, & Rosen, 2011). Results showed a significant correlation between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, higher levels of sexual functioning were related to both greater sexual and relationship satisfaction. For male participants, physical intimacy and health predicted relationship satisfaction in addition to sexual functioning, whereas sexual functioning alone predicted relationship satisfaction in women.

Empirical support has also identified low intimacy as playing a mediating role between depression and relationship satisfaction (Finkbeiner, Epstein, & Falconier, 2013). Using the Beck Depression Inventory, the Positive Partner Behavior Scale, and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the researchers found that depression symptoms for both males and females were associated with less pleasure in response to the intimate behavior of their partners, and these lower levels of pleasure were associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Additionally, less intimate behavior was correlated with lower partner-reported relationship satisfaction. By linking

depressive symptoms to fewer intimate behaviors in couples and, in turn, lower relationship satisfaction, these results provide support for the important role of intimate behavior in close relationships and suggest that intimacy should be addressed in therapeutic intervention.

In an investigation of marital sexual interaction and marital disruption, Dzara (2010) found that marital sexuality may influence marital disruption, but the role it plays is limited, especially when overall marital quality is taken into consideration. The results suggest that a combination of both marital sexuality and marital quality result in higher likelihood of staying married. The study also revealed that husbands' satisfaction with physical intimacy early in marriage was a stronger predictor of whether or not the couples would stay together than any facets of wives' sexuality. Taken as a whole, these results suggest that sexual intimacy plays a role in relationship satisfaction, but it is only one piece of the puzzle.

**Humor.** Humor goes hand in hand with aspects of pleasure, has a positive association with relationship satisfaction, and aids in tension reduction (Murstein & Brust, 1985). Researchers have been able to predict whether newlyweds will be together and happy, together and miserable, or divorced six years in the future based on differences in positive emotion during a 15-minute "conflict discussion" during the couple's first year of marriage (Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998). Positive affect during the conflict discussion was associated with both marital happiness and stability. Happy, stable couples are able to use positive emotion to deescalate conflict via affection and humor.

Aune and Wong (2002) investigated the role of play in close relationships. They theorized that self-esteem and humor orientation would predict playfulness, producing positive emotion, which in turn would predict relationship satisfaction. Results of self-esteem, humor orientation, playfulness, positive emotion, and relationship satisfaction measures supported this

model. Based on these results, the researchers suggest that when one partner initiates play, the other partner tends to respond in a positive way, encouraging the partner to continue the playful behavior in a continuous positivity-fostering loop. They also detail the possible benefits of play in close relationships: facilitating disclosure, providing a sense of novelty or spontaneity, and providing reminders of the bond the couple shares.

One study examined how reminiscing about laughter affected relationship satisfaction (Bazzini, Stack, Martincin, & Davis, 2007). Both partners completed a measure of relationship satisfaction prior to the manipulation, in which couples were prompted to recall instances of shared laughter within the last three months. Results showed a positive correlation between couples who reminisced about shared laughter and reported increases in relationship satisfaction relative to the control groups, whose reminiscing activities involved shared positive events that did not involve laughter, or events that involved independent laughter. The researchers also found that the recalled events involving shared laughter were not necessarily more positive than events recalled in the group that recalled explicitly positive events, suggesting that having the ability to laugh about neutral or negative events may positively affect relationship satisfaction.

Research has also targeted specific styles of humor, examining how they relate to relationship quality and marital stability in divorced and married couples (Saroglou, Lacour, & Demeure, 2010). The five humor styles investigated in this study included affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, self-defeating, and earthy humor. Men's self-enhancing humor correlated with high marital satisfaction for both men and women. For both men and women, high scores for self-defeating humor and low scores for constructive humor (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) predicted divorce. These results suggest that certain positively-oriented styles of humor may have a facilitative effect in close relationships. Caird and Martin (2014) have also found a

positive association between affiliative humor and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, they found that participants evaluated their relationships more positively on days in which they reported more joking and laughter with their partner. Campbell, Martin, and Ward (2008) found that, while both affiliative humor and aggressive humor were related to funniness, greater affiliative humor and less aggressive humor were associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Greater use of affiliative humor during a problem discussion was associated with increased feelings of closeness between partners and partners' perceptions of the conflict being solved to a greater degree. Additionally, there was no relationship between one's own humor style and relationship satisfaction, suggesting that humor styles impact partner satisfaction only. These studies reveal the importance of specific kinds of humor; while affiliative humor enhances interpersonal relationships and reduces tension, negatively-based humor styles such as aggressive humor, which may involve sarcasm and ridicule, can be quite detrimental (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008).

**Shared Meaning and Vision.** One focus of narrative couple therapy is to help couples find a sense of new meaning through the retelling of stories (Freedman & Combs, 2008). Janoff-Bulman and Yopyk (2004) have found that people who are able to find meaning after trauma or adversity have better reported outcomes than people who do not, providing support for the facilitative role of meaning-making. Finding meaning by way of redemptive sequences has also been associated with greater life satisfaction (McAdams, 2001). Gottman and Silver (2012) have identified the ability to share and draw meaning from stories as a key component of couple functioning and the ability to maintain a sense of trust. Creating meaning is also a critical component of couple resilience (Walsh, 2006). Discovering a sense of meaning enables couples to visualize a larger purpose in their lives and to view their relationship as a lifelong project with

shared goals. Research has supported the association between shared relationship goals and relationship quality, indicating that the quality of relationships is linked to perceptions of shared goals (Avivi, Laurenceau, & Carver, 2009).

Hendrix (1998) has described the process of developing a relationship vision, a statement about how couples would like their marriage to be. He states that "defining this vision turns their energy away from past and present disappointments toward a more hopeful future" (pp. 103). Couples are instructed to define their visions separately, and then combine the elements they have in common into a shared vision. By returning to this written statement on a daily basis, couples are able to unconsciously incorporate it into their lives over time. Gottman and Gottman (2008) also emphasize the construction of a shared meaning system in their "sound relationship house" theory, including the establishment of shared values and goals. Finding a sense of meaning through an understanding of life themes enables couples to better understand and invest in each other, demonstrating a link between shared meaning and relationship resiliency (Skerrett, 2013).

**Present Study**

Drawing upon past research on narrative perspectives, couple therapy, and empirical support for the connection between relationship satisfaction and the SERAPHS elements, the present study examined these elements in We-Stories co-written by couples. The goal of this study is to demonstrate the validity of a We-Stories coding manual developed by the first researcher and thesis advisor and to determine the degree to which each of the SERAPHS elements correlates with marital satisfaction and a couple's sense of overall We-ness. It is hypothesized that couples whose We-Stories contain higher levels of the seven components of We-ness will score higher on measures of relationship mutuality and marital satisfaction than

will couples whose We-Stories express fewer of the seven elements. The present study also seeks

to investigate the extent to which redemptive themes emerge in the collected We-Stories.

## Method

### Participants

The final sample consisted of 53 couples for a total of 106 individuals (52 women, 54

men, $M_{age}$ = 52.22, age range: 25-91 years). One couple's relationship scales were later omitted

due to apparent confusion with the rating scales (responding to an ad for "happy couples" but

providing extremely negative ratings for measures of relationship satisfaction, perhaps

accidentally reverse-scoring). Although their relationship satisfaction and mutuality scores were

excluded from statistical analyses, their We-Story was scored and included in the We-Story

descriptive statistics. The sample was overwhelmingly white, highly educated, and heterosexual,

with the exception of one gay couple (see Tables 1-3). Additionally, the dropout rate was 46.55%,

with 59% of the total dropouts exiting the study at the informed consent page and 41% dropping

out at the We-Story request (the first item in the survey after informed consent).

Participants were recruited through multiple sources, including an advertisement placed

in the New London newspaper *The Day* offering participants a $30 gift card to a local pizzeria, a

talk given by supervising Professor Jefferson Singer at The Universalist Church of West

Hartford, a link placed on the main page of the We-Stories website (http://www.we-stories.com),

and posters placed around local stores in downtown New London. Additionally, a snowballing

method was used by the Personality and Clinical Research Group at Connecticut College to

contact and recruit participants via email.

Table 1

*Sample Composition: Individual Demographics*

|  | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Female | 52 | 49.1 |
| Male | 54 | 50.9 |
| **Race/Ethnicity** | | |
| East Asian | 1 | 0.9 |
| Black | 2 | 1.9 |
| Latino | 1 | 0.9 |
| Mixed | 3 | 2.8 |
| South Asian | 4 | 3.8 |
| White | 95 | 89.6 |
| **Education** | | |
| Some High School | 3 | 2.8 |
| High School | 4 | 3.8 |
| Some College | 13 | 12.3 |
| BA/BS | 31 | 29.2 |
| MA | 39 | 36.8 |
| PhD | 5 | 4.7 |
| Professional Degree | 11 | 10.4 |
| **Religious Background** | | |
| Atheist | 2 | 1.9 |
| Catholic | 43 | 40.6 |
| Christian | 14 | 13.2 |
| Congregational | 2 | 1.9 |
| Hindu | 4 | 3.8 |
| Jewish | 4 | 3.8 |
| Methodist | 3 | 2.8 |
| N/A | 10 | 9.4 |
| Other | 14 | 13.2 |
| Protestant | 10 | 9.4 |
| **Times Married Previously** | | |
| Zero | 91 | 83.5 |
| One | 9 | 8.3 |
| Two | 3 | 2.8 |
| Three | 3 | 2.8 |

Table 2

*Sample Composition: Couple Demographics*

|  | *N* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| Children |  |  |
|     Yes | 44 | 83 |
|     No | 9 | 17 |
| Married |  |  |
|     Yes | 48 | 90.6 |
|     No | 5 | 9.4 |
| State of Residence |  |  |
|     California | 1 | 1.9 |
|     Connecticut | 28 | 53.8 |
|     Georgia | 1 | 1.9 |
|     Maryland | 1 | 1.9 |
|     Massachusetts | 17 | 32.7 |
|     New York | 4 | 7.7 |

Table 3

*Demographics: Descriptive Statistics*

|  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 106 | 25 | 91 | 52.22 | 13.768 |
| Years Together | 53 | 2 | 64 | 25.25 | 14.458 |
| Years Married | 48 | 0 | 64 | 24.04 | 14.430 |
| Estimated Household Income | 49 | 36,000 | 550,000 | 161,918.37 | 93,954.740 |

**Measures**

   **We-Stories Request.** The We-Stories request prompt (Singer & Skerrett, 2014) consisted of the following:

     The first part of this survey needs to be completed together. It involves writing down and recalling a particular memory of a special time in your relationship. This memory is called a "We-Story" and it is an account of an event or sequence of events in your relationship that serves as a reminder of your mutual love and commitment to each other and the relationship. It can be a moment of romance, a challenge that you faced together, or any experience that expressed strong connection and/or compassion between the two of you. It should be a story that is familiar to both of you and one that you have shared with each other over the years. We think of We-Stories as touchstones and valuable symbols of the bond that you hold with each other. You need not write in great length about the memory, but please write at least 150 words.

   **Marital Engagement – Type of Union Scale.** The ME (To US) (Singer & Labunko, 2005) is a 10-item scale that measures relationship mutuality, the degree to which couples place the importance of the relationship (the "We") over their individual needs, while also being aware of each other's individual concerns (see Appendix A). The scale focuses on how this mutuality presents in everyday behavior and includes questions regarding division of chores, financial decisions, child rearing, sexuality, communication, future planning, and interactions with extended family. A sample question is "We discuss and agree on major time commitments before making them (e.g., work schedules, business trips, social events, appointments, separate outings with friends, etc.)." Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very much"), with a maximum score of 70. Each partner completed this scale separately.

Reliability and validity of this scale have been demonstrated by Singer et al. (in press). Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .68.

**Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale.** The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Jurich, & Boliman, 1990) is a 3-item assessment of the extent to which partners are satisfied with their marriage, their partner as a spouse, and their relationship with their spouse (see Appendix B). The language of the scale was slightly modified for the purposes of this study in order to include participants who were in a long-term committed relationship but were unmarried ("spouse" was changed to "partner" and "marriage" was changed to "partnership"). A sample item is "How satisfied are you with your partnership?" Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very much"), with a maximum score of 21. The scores for the individual items were summed to produce an overall measure of relationship satisfaction. Each partner completed this scale separately. Cronbach's alpha ranges from .84 to .98 in various studies assessing this scale (Schumm, Jurich, & Boliman, 1990). Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .90.

**Demographics Questions.** Partners were asked to provide the following information together: how many years the couple had been in their relationship together, whether they were married (and, if so, for how many years), whether they had children (and, if so, how many), and their estimated household income (see Appendix C).

Each partner was asked individually to provide their age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious background, education, and whether they were married previously (and, if so, how many times).

**We-Stories Scoring Manual.** In order to code We-Stories for a connection to the overall definition of We-ness, a scoring manual was developed to measure the various components of

SERAPHS described by Singer and Skerrett (2014). Each element was researched in a literature review by the first researcher in collaboration with Jefferson Singer (thesis adviser and third We-Story rater) and Karen Skerrett. Existing We-Stories drawn from Singer and Skerrett's book, *Positive Couple Therapy*, their past clinical work with couples, and a submission form on their website were also used to develop criteria and provide examples for each element (see Appendix D). Common keywords, phrases, and themes were identified in these pre-existing stories and were used as criteria for scoring. For example, highly emotional shared experiences were determined to fall under the element of empathy, based on empathy research regarding the importance of couples sharing and understanding their feelings. In one We-Story collected in the present study, the couple uses the phrase "share our sadness," which contains the emotionally charged word "sadness" and the indication that this was a mutually experienced feeling; empathy would therefore be scored as present in this narrative.

The first researcher then trained a second rater in use of the manual. The second rater was first given the manual to read over, and the two raters engaged in a one-hour session clarifying uncertainties about the manual and rating several practice We-Stories together. The two raters then coded twenty practice We-Stories separately and met with a third rater for a one-hour session to compare ratings and clarify discrepancies in order to improve inter-rater reliability in anticipation of coding the We-Stories collected through the online survey. SERAPHS elements were coded as either present or absent, and each We-Story was coded as a macro- (big picture) or micro-story (isolated event). Additionally, the most pervasive element in each story was rated as the "dominant element," identified by whichever element had the highest number of corresponding key words, phrases, and themes. All three raters coded the collected We-Stories, but only the first and third raters' codes were used for the final calculations, Kappa = .706.

**Procedure**

Participants were given a link to the online Qualtrics survey, where each partner individually provided their electronic signature to the Informed Consent document by selecting "Yes" to both the Partner 1 and Partner 2 "I agree" statements (see Appendix E). Participants were then instructed that the following portions of the study were to be completed together, and were presented with the We-Story request followed by the demographic information to be completed together. Next, the participants were given the following instructions:

Next you will be presented with a series of questionnaires that each of you should fill out **separately.** Please decide which of you will be Partner 1 and which of you will be Partner 2, and make sure that you fill out the following questionnaires in the same manner. That is, Partner 1 should always fill out Partner 1 questionnaires and Partner 2 should always fill out Partner 2 questionnaires.

First, all three questionnaires will be consecutively presented to Partner 1. Once Partner 1 is finished, all three questionnaires will be consecutively presented to Partner 2. Please do not share your responses until the survey has been fully completed.

In addition to being told that these items must be completed separately, once Partner 1 finished all their items, they were presented with the following statement: "By clicking "submit," you will have fully completed your portion of the study and will not be able to go back and change your answers. If you need to make any changes, you may use the "back" button in the survey now (not your browser's back button). When you are satisfied with your answers, you may click "submit."" Following this protocol, each partner was asked to fill out the Marital Engagement – Type of Union Scale (see Appendix A), the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

(modified, see Appendix B), and the Demographics questionnaire (see Appendix C). Participants received debriefing information upon completion of the survey (see Appendix F).

Participants recruited through the advertisement in *The Day* provided their mailing addresses to the experimenters and were mailed their gift certificates upon completion of the study.

## Results

**Relationship Measures**

High scores of relationship satisfaction ($M = 19.49$, $SD = 1.76$ for women, $M = 19.83$, $SD = 1.58$ for men) out of a highest possible score of 21 and high ME (To US) scores ($M = 57.84$, $SD = 6.43$ for women, $M = 56.66$, $SD = 7.29$ for men) out of a highest possible score of 70 indicate that we were successful in our goal of recruiting happy, stable couples (see Table 4).

In the context of the heterosexual couples, several significant correlations were found (see Table 5). Men's and women's total ME (To US) scores were positively correlated, $r(51) = .62$, $p < .01$. A positive correlation was also found between men's and women's relationship satisfaction scores, $r(51) = .58$, $p < .01$. Additionally, women's total ME (To US) scores were positively correlated with their own relationship satisfaction, $r(51) = .37$, $p < .01$, and men's relationship satisfaction, $r(51) = .44$, $p < .01$. Likewise, men's relationship satisfaction scores were positively correlated with their total ME (To US) scores, $r(53) = .50$, $p < .01$. Men's total ME (To US) scores were also correlated with women's relationship satisfaction, $r(51) = .28$, $p < .05$.

No significant correlations were found between the ages of the individuals and any other measures; however, the "couple age," calculated by averaging both partners' ages together, was positively correlated with women's relationship satisfaction, $r(51) = .30$, $p < .05$, but not men's.

Discrepancy scores were calculated for each couple by subtracting the second partner's score from the first partner's score item-by-item, then summing the absolute values of these discrepancies to get a total discrepancy measure. A negative relationship was found between the number of SERAPHS elements present in We-Stories and the ME (To US) discrepancy, $r(52) = -.29$, $p < .05$. No correlations were found between any demographic information and ME (To US) discrepancy or number of SERAPHS elements.

Table 4

*Relationship Measures by Gender*

|  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ME (To US) – Female | 51 | 45.00 | 69.00 | 57.84 | 6.43 |
| ME (To US) – Male | 53 | 40.00 | 70.00 | 56.66 | 7.29 |
| ME (To US) Discrepancy | 52 | 0.00 | 24.00 | 8.63 | 5.17 |
| Relationship Satisfaction – Female | 51 | 14.00 | 21.00 | 19.49 | 1.76 |
| Relationship Satisfaction – Male | 53 | 15.00 | 21.00 | 19.83 | 1.58 |

Table 5

*Correlations of Relationship Measures*

| | | ME (To US) Total Score (Female) | ME (To US) Total Score (Male) | ME (To US) Discrepancy | Relationship Satisfaction (Female) | Relationship Satisfaction (Male) | Age of Couple (Averaged) | Number of SERAPHS Elements |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ME (To US) Total Score (Female) | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .62** | -.19 | .37** | .44** | .014 | -.06 |
| | N | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 |
| ME (To US) Total Score (Male) | Pearson Correlation | .62** | 1 | -.24 | .28* | .50** | .19 | -.11 |
| | N | 51 | 53 | 52 | 51 | 53 | 52 | 52 |
| ME (To US) Discrepancy | Pearson Correlation | -.19 | -.24 | 1 | -.06 | -.22 | -.03 | -.29* |
| | N | 51 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 52 | 52 | 52 |
| Relationship Satisfaction (Female) | Pearson Correlation | .37** | .28* | -.06 | 1 | .58** | .30* | -.05 |
| | N | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 |
| Relationship Satisfaction (Male) | Pearson Correlation | .44** | .50** | -.22 | .58** | 1 | .07 | -.12 |
| | N | 51 | 53 | 52 | 51 | 53 | 52 | 52 |
| Age of Couple (Averaged) | Pearson Correlation | .01 | .19 | -.03 | .30* | .07 | 1 | .00 |
| | N | 51 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 52 | 52 | 52 |
| Number of SERAPHS Elements | Pearson Correlation | -.06 | -.11 | -.29* | -.05 | -.12 | .00 | 1 |
| | N | 51 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 52 | 52 | 52 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A linear regression was calculated to predict ME (To US) discrepancy scores based on the number of SERAPHS elements in the couple's We-Stories, men's marital satisfaction, and women's marital satisfaction (heterosexual couples; see Table 6). Results of the overall regression were not significant, $R^2 = .128$, F(3, 47) = 2.31, $p = .089$; however, within this analysis it was found that rather than the male or female partner's individual relationship satisfaction, the number of elements present in a couple's We-Story was the only significant predictor of ME (To US) discrepancy, $\beta = -.30$, $t(47) = -2.18$, $p = .034$.

**We-Stories**

Each couple was able to successfully generate a We-Story, and all SERAPHS elements were found to be present (see Table 7). The average number of elements in a given story was 2.28 ($SD = 1.03$). Results showed a nearly even split between type of We-Story, with 49.1% ($N = 26$) coded as macro-stories and 50.9% ($N = 27$) coded as micro-stories.

Table 6

*Predictors of ME (To US) Discrepancy*

| | $\beta$ | $t$ | $p$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of SERAPHS Elements | -.30 | -2.18 | .034 |
| Relationship Satisfaction (Female) | .10 | .59 | .557 |
| Relationship Satisfaction (Male) | -.29 | -1.73 | .090 |

*$F = 2.305$ ($p = .089$); $df_1 = 3$, $df_2 = 47$; $R^2 = .128$.

Table 7

*SERAPHS Elements in We-Stories*

|  | *N* | % | Dominant (*N*) | Dominant (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Security | 31 | 58.5 | 18 | 34.0 |
| Empathy | 10 | 18.9 | 1 | 1.9 |
| Respect | 14 | 26.4 | 4 | 7.5 |
| Acceptance | 10 | 18.9 | 4 | 7.5 |
| Pleasure | 26 | 49.1 | 14 | 26.4 |
| Humor | 10 | 18.9 | 3 | 5.7 |
| Shared Meaning and Vision | 20 | 37.7 | 9 | 17.0 |

N represents the number of We-Stories containing a given element.

% represents the percentage of We-Stories containing each element.

**Security.** Security was by far the most common element, present in 58.5% ($N = 31$) of all We-Stories. It was also the most frequently noted dominant element, coded as such in 34% ($N = 18$) of the stories.

Representative passages:

> But through it all, though it sounds so hackneyed, my husband was my rock, my unwavering support. He was the one trying to maintain her dignity by cleaning her up before anyone could see her, he was the one sitting there at her bedside with me watching another mother die. And that's our marriage...while it can feel like there have been more bad times than good sometimes...I was there for him when he needed me and he's been there for me.

This couple was faced with the devastating loss of the narrator's mother soon after her husband's loss of his own mother. Throughout the experience, the couple stuck together and provided support for each other—aspects that are representative of security's themes of overcoming obstacles or challenges as a team.

> When you are meant to be with each other, you will make it work no matter what! We met when we were 19 and 24. At 19, I was beginning my sophomore year in college, 6 hrs away from where we both lived. For my remaining three years in college, we committed ourselves to each other (even though others doubted our ability to do so)! Today, 17 years together, 6 years married, and three children later we can both adamantly say it was the best decision we made.

In spite of the naysayers, this couple was able to commit to each other throughout their long-distance relationship and stuck together over the years "no matter what." These aspects reflect the themes of loyalty, commitment, prioritization of the relationship, and the sentiment of being "all-in" that lie at the heart of this element.

**Empathy.** Caught up in a three-way tie for least common element along with acceptance and humor, empathy was present in 18.9% ($N = 10$) of the We-Stories and was identified as the dominant element in just one story (1.9%).

Representative passages:

> When our nephew committed suicide five years ago we were thrown into shock and grief. We sought support from each other, from our friends, and as an extended family we stuck close together for many months. As a couple, we also found a counselor to help us deal with our loss. With her we were able to share our sadness. She helped us find a way to talk about our loved one's life and death. At some point the intimate nature of those conversations shifted to focus more on our marriage, our feelings for each other, and the challenges any couple face, notwithstanding our terrible loss. After really listening to each other, we grew even closer as a couple and more supportive of each other. Our bonds and affection deepened. At the end of a year of this counseling, we decided to host a recommitment ceremony as part of a twenty-fifth anniversary celebration for our extended family and closest friends, an event that featured live jazz, wonderful food and high spirits, as we shared our love and the joy of being alive and together.

This We-Story is heavily steeped in emotion; first the couple experiences a tragedy, sharing their grief and sadness. The keystone of empathy as a SERAPHS element is an awareness of the other partner's emotions, which includes patience, compassion, and sharing one's feelings. The couple's description of their counseling sessions, growing closer and more supportive "after really listening to each other" is deeply indicative of these themes of compassion and emotional understanding.

> Angelique was running the Boston Marathon and Tom was waiting at the finish line with her parents line when an explosion went off. Luckily, he was able to quickly call Angelique who runs with her cellphone to tell her to stop running. She usually wouldn't answer but figured something was up when Tom was calling. Tom was scared and Angelique could sense the fear in his voice. After a harrowing ordeal of seeking shelter in a hotel on Boylston street and being evacuated, Tom made the journey to their apartmet accompanying her parents home and anxiously awaiting Angelique get home safe. Meanwhile Angelique was stranded over by Fenway, not knowing what to do. When they were finally reunited it was such a powerful moment of love, after such a terrifying experience. It remains one of the most emotional moments in their relationship.

This We-Story is once again a highly emotional experience, from the events portrayed in the narrative itself to the couple's use of language such as "such a powerful moment of love" and even stating outright that the moment they reunited was "one of the most emotional moments in their relationship."

**Respect.** The element of respect was present in 26.4% ($N = 14$) of all We-Stories and was the dominant element in 7.5% ($N = 4$).

Representative passages:

> When I announced to my husband that I wanted to go back to school with two young kids at home and a full-time job, he said, "Great!" In the last few years, I have commuted over an hour away at least once a week to attend classes. In addition, I have to be gone from my family for eight hours nearly every Saturday as part of the program. Instead of complaining about my absences and the craziness of taking care of two kids without me, my husband welcomes the time with them – he plays sports with them, takes them roller skating, and plays with them. He knows that earning this advanced degree is important to me and he shows his love for me by supporting me and our family throughout my coursework. I am reminded of my love for him when I see how great he is with the kids and how willing he is to be an active part of their life.

We-ness involves allowing both partners to grow individually as well as together. The narrator's husband completely supports her decision to go back to school and demonstrates an understanding of how important earning the degree is to her; rather than complaining, he helps take care of their kids and provides support for the family.

> Elise will never forget the first time George asked her to read his work. She knew if it was good enough, she'd continue dating him, but if it was pretentious or boring, she'd lose respect for him and the relationship would be over. She was relieved when it was better than she expected, and from that summer afternoon on considered him a serious writer. By the end of the summer George decided to move to Boston permanently and on a starry night in Maine told Elise he loved her.

Another important aspect of respect is the elevation of one's partner through acknowledgement of their capabilities and strengths. Elise's recognition of George's skills as a writer appears to have formed the foundation of their relationship, as the couple states that if she had been disappointed, "she'd lose respect for him and the relationship would be over."

**Acceptance.** Acceptance was present in 18.9% ($N = 10$) of all stories and was the dominant element in 7.5% ($N = 4$).

Representative passages:

> The story of our engagement pretty much sums up our relationship together. We headed to Freeport, Maine for the weekend. One of us had no idea an engagement was coming and the other one was totally prepared and anxious. I was under dressed and didn't want to go to the fancy restaurant he was dressed for and reserved for dinner. I reluctantly got out of the car and we enjoyed our dinner. After dinner, the sun was just about ready to set as we drove away from the restaurant and he was headed to a special spot by the ocean he had scoped out to "pop the question". I announced that I had left my pocketbook under the table at the restaurant and had to head back. By the time we had headed back to the "spot" it was pitch dark and cold. He pulled over and wanted me to get out for the view. At first I refused but reluctantly got out...he proposed and I was thrilled!! He had many opportunities to call the whole thing off but I realized if he put up with all the speed bumps, and I had agreed to do things because they were obviously important to him (even though I didn't realize HOW important!) that was going to set the course for a happy marriage.

In this We-Story, one partner puts up with the other's "speed bumps" (being underdressed and not wanting to go to the restaurant, forgetting her pocketbook), and she in turn indulges him despite not knowing how important her compliance actually was until after the fact. This mutual acceptance "set the course for a happy marriage."

> Our "We-Story" is our continuing devotion to our blended families. We married 13 years ago, both having raised 7 children between us. Our unconditional love and support for

each other's children and grandchildren has been a very real part of our relationship and deepened our love for one another.

The fact that both partners give their "unconditional love and support" to each other's children is highly indicative of the element of acceptance—and their relationship has flourished because of it.

**Pleasure.** Many couples expressed how much they enjoyed each other's company and indulged in shared activities; 49.1% ($N = 26$) of all We-Stories contained the element of pleasure, making it the second most common element after security, and it was the dominant element in 26.4% ($N = 14$) of narratives.

Representative passages:

> Our first trip to Austria and Italy was a magical 10 day event full of surprises, warmth and shared experiences. The weather was stunning and the medieval cities we explored provided the perfect backdrop for our relatively new relationship. We gladly ignored cost, and treated ourselves to a moonlit gondola ride in Venice. The city was deserted and ours, and the gondolier serenaded us as we wrapped ourselves under a blanket. It was clearly the most romantic event that either of us had ever experienced.

This is a fond memory of an enjoyable, romantic trip; the language describing it as "magical" and "the most romantic event that either of us had ever experienced" is clearly indicative of how much the couple enjoyed the vacation and each other's company.

> Sydney and I were working at the same film production company in New York City. We initially didn't seem too fond of one another, in spite of being from similar WASPY backgrounds. I, in particular, was trying on a new skin – reading the Village Voice and acting very Bohemian. Sydney saw right through me and one day shocked me by kissing my neck at the Xerox machine. He said he just couldn't resist kissing me. I was taken aback but flattered. It was the first time I realized I felt a connection to him. The next weekend we attended a company baseball game and he noticed I wore a top and was bra-less. I had done this on purpose and it served as a big fat green light that I was interested. And that was the beginning of our romance.

The element of pleasure also involves intimacy, exemplified by the very forward action of kissing Sydney at the Xerox machine at work and Sydney's choice to go bra-less to the baseball game.

**Humor.** This element was present in 18.9% ($N = 10$) of all We-Stories and was the dominant element in 5.7% ($N = 3$).

Representative passages:

> After dating for only a year, we decided to move in together into our first apartment.... For some unknown reason, Marie had decided to make a homemade chicken soup (from scratch) for dinner. When it was time to eat, we sat down at our new table, which was set with our new flatware and dishes. The soup was literally steaming in our faces. Brian had beads of sweat coming down his face and was trying his hardest to enjoy this meal. He could see the look on Marie's face – she had tried so hard to make this delicious home cooked meal and it was a total flop in the 90+ degree weather. At that moment, we just looked at each other and burst out laughing. It totally wasn't perfect, and the conditions weren't ideal, but we enjoyed being with each other so much and felt so lucky to be in this beautiful apartment together that it just didn't matter at all. We will always remember that meal.

This dinner-gone-awry indicates a time of shared laughter and provides the couple with a humorous anecdote to look back on and share, both of which are central themes in the SERAPHS element of humor.

> On the day that we married, the weather was beautiful. It was a wonderful day and all that we could hope for. Of course there was some family drama, but what's a wedding without that? The next morning we got on a plane and left for our honeymoon. Once we reached our destination, we put down our bags and one person sat down on a nice, big, comfy couch and the other person settled into a recliner. When we both woke up, we had no idea where we were or what time it was. Turns out we slept for eighteen hours straight. What a way to spend a honeymoon!

This couple also recollects a humorous anecdote, amused by the fact that they woke up disoriented after spending eighteen hours sleeping during their honeymoon.

**Shared Meaning and Vision.** The third most common element, shared meaning was found in 37.7% ($N = 20$) of We-Stories and was dominant in 17% ($N = 9$).

Representative passages:

> Our we-story is our shared experience of climbing to the base camp of Mt. Everest. My husband's parents had made the trek several years before I had met him. My mother-in-law had cancer during her climb. Several years later on her death bed she told her son, my husband that one of the most important experiences in her life was her climb to base camp of Mt. Everest. She knew that by accomplishing this she could face any other challenge in her life. When I met my husband (seven months after my mother-in-law's death) he told me this story. Within three months of our meeting we became engaged. My husband and I wanted to climb to base camp knowing that if we accomplished this feat we could do anything in our lives together. We trained and supported each other throughout the climb. This was our honeymoon. We started our life in the best of health at the top of the world.

Shared meaning and vision involves meaning-making and focusing on a greater purpose in the couple's life. The couple draws strength from the husband's mother's declaration that climbing to the base camp was "one of the most important experiences in her life," and they work together to reach this same goal, knowing that if they could accomplish it, "we could do anything in our lives together."

> Our greatest married adventure so far is our first stay at our newly purchased cabin in the Rocky Mountains. We had been married for 13 years and living happily in Connecticut. Cheryl's life-long dream was to own a cabin in her native Colorado. After many visits to her home state and family, and Cheryl's years of research and enthusiasm about owning property in Colorado, Andy began to share the dream. We hired a realtor and began our serious hunt for a cabin. But, before continuing, it was necessary to discuss our future goals and possible retirement plans. This discussion and search brought into focus our deep love for and commitment to each other. This would be the first home we would

>purchase together, so we had a chance to more deeply explore each other's personal
>priorities and life-style preferences.... The special little cabin in the Rockies has now
>become a romantic and relaxing retreat for an extremely grateful and blissful couple.

Both partners derived meaning from Cheryl's "life-long dream" of owning a cabin in Colorado (a dream that Andy comes to share), and they cooperate in order to achieve this goal. Sharing dreams and working together to accomplish goals are both themes that fall under the category of shared meaning and vision.

**Other Themes**. A majority of 58.5% ($N = 31$) of We-Stories were tied into family affairs (parents and children often played important roles in the couples' stories). This number rises to 66.04% ($N = 35$) if friends are included. These data indicate the importance of community and themes of interconnectedness in many couples' We-Stories. Themes of redemption, in which the narrator reconciles or puts a positive spin on an initially negative event, emerged in 24.5% ($N = 13$) of the We-Stories, suggesting that it is not uncommon for couples' We-Stories to arise out of initially challenging or unpleasant circumstances that they are able to overcome together.

## Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was fourfold: to define the critical elements that comprise a We-Story, to develop a reliable rating system for coding the elements, to determine whether couples would be able to generate written We-Stories, and to determine the most prominent elements emphasized by the couples, as well as potential relationships of these elements to measures of relationship satisfaction and mutuality.

The primary goals of this study were met; all stories produced by participants contained at least one element, and all elements of SERAPHS were found in the sample. The most common element by far was security, present in 58.5% of all narratives. The defining features of this element include prioritization of the couple's relationship, partners having each other's backs,

supporting each other through challenging experiences, teamwork and accomplishing tasks together, and expressions of commitment, trust, and loyalty. These qualities often served as the foundation of the relationships and the "big picture" idea to which the We-Stories often returned. Many of the narratives culminated in an expression of strengthened commitment, trust, or general security; for example, "Being together right through reiterated the fact that we are there for each other at all times." The high frequency of this element is consistent with the literature indicating the importance of trust in relationships (Buyukcan-Tetik, Finkenauer, Kuppens, & Vohs, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Simpson, 2007; Uysal, Lin, & Bush, 2012). It is also consistent with Singer and Skerret's (2014) emphasis on prioritization of the relationship and the idea of being "all-in," aspects that are indicative of a high level of commitment to one's partner and the relationship.

The second most commonly emphasized element was pleasure, appearing in 49.1% of all We-Stories. Although the coding of this element does include sexual intimacy, the vast majority of stories in which it was identified focused predominantly on happy, romantic memories of good times spent together, or indulgence in a mutually gratifying shared activity. Only one narrative made explicit mention to sexual activity. These results suggest that one of the most important aspects of happy couples' relationships is simply the ability to enjoy each other's company. These results are consistent with previous research that places an emphasis on pleasure and positivity in relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Robinson & Price, 1980).

The third most common element, shared meaning and vision was present in 37.7% of the narratives, indicating that many of the satisfied couples in the sample visualized a larger, shared purpose in their lives and described or made reference to the act of working together to reach that goal or vision; interestingly enough, the act of working as a team to accomplish a task or

overcome a challenge has its roots in the element of security. The importance of shared meaning and vision supports previous research emphasizing the importance of constructing a shared meaning system (Gottman & Gottman, 2008), the development of a relationship vision (Hendrix, 1998), and the connection between shared meaning and relationship resiliency (Skerrett, 2013).

The large percentage of We-Stories involving connections to family or friends (66.04%) suggests that many couples derive meaning in their relationships from their connections to others aside from their partners. Many stories revolved around taking care of each other's parents and children and indicated the importance of family. This finding lends credence to the idea that We-Stories are tied into networks of relationships rather than being isolated to the couple alone, and that the individuals in a couple derive great meaning from these relational connections. Future work might explore these connections more deeply by inquiring about whether the couple has shared their We-Story with family and friends. One of the functions of We-Stories identified by Singer and Skerrett (2014) is their use in transmitting a couple's legacy, especially to younger generations in the family. We-Stories are meant to be shared, and they may provide aging couples with a sense of generativity.

The We-Stories coding system was validated in part by the negative correlation between number of SERAPHS elements and ME (To US) discrepancy scores. The ME (To US) is a measure of mutuality, and greater discrepancy between partner's scores is indicative of a lower degree of mutuality in the relationship. This mutuality lies at the core of We-ness, so the fact that more elements of We-ness corresponded with less discrepancy indicates that the coding system was able to capture this sense of mutuality. Additionally, the finding that number of elements, rather than either partner's relationship satisfaction, was a predictor of ME (To US) discrepancy served as further validation for the manual's purpose. Rather than comparing a single

individual's self-report measures to each other, the discrepancy score between partners indicates a more dynamic variable. The finding that number of elements was both correlated with and predictive of discrepancy suggests that We-Stories are also able to capture this dynamic—a measure of mutuality that goes beyond simple measures of individual relationship satisfaction.

**Implications**

Singer and Skerrett (2014) have demonstrated the usefulness of We-Stories in couple therapy, but these uplifting narratives can be useful for any couples to rediscover the fond memories they share, regardless of their degree of relationship stability or satisfaction. Since all our "happy" couples were able to produce We-Stories containing at least one SERAPHS element, determining whether distressed couples produce different numbers or are skewed toward different elements may prove useful in identifying the underlying causes of relationship dissatisfaction. If, for example, a couple's narratives reflect a lack of acceptance, approaches that center around increasing acceptance and understanding of vulnerabilities, such as Integrated Behavioral Couple Therapy, might be especially effective in combating these deficits. Conversely, therapy could also focus on the most prominent elements of couples' We-Stories and work on developing and cultivating those already present elements to increase relationship resiliency. The multifaceted nature of mutuality, demonstrated through the various elements that have been identified in We-Stories, has the potential to both help couples work through their weaknesses and play to their strengths. Thus, We-Stories can be useful for assessment of couples in therapy as well as a way for couples to remind themselves of the meaningful aspects of their relationships, serving as valuable tools that act as touchstones for what it means to be together.

**Limitations**

Of particular note is the extremely high dropout rate (46.55%), suggesting that the task of constructing a We-Story was either too difficult or time-consuming for participants to complete. The logistic challenge of getting both members of a couple to sit down together for an extended period of time may have contributed to the dropout rate as well.

Additionally, the demographics of our sample were skewed; the majority of the sample was White, highly educated, and affluent (see Tables 1 and 3). Future work with a less homogenous sample may help paint a richer picture of the types of We-Stories couples construct.

A possible confounding variable may lie in the fact that the researchers had no way to view the participants' actual processes of writing the We-Stories; it is possible that only one member of the couple actually wrote the story. This issue could be avoided by conducting future We-Story studies in a face-to-face interview format. In addition to eliminating this particular confound, the researcher would also be able to confirm that participants understood the prompt and would be available to answer any questions about it. Being present during the construction of the We-Story could also provide insight into the actual process by which couples negotiate and write their narratives.

**Future Directions**

The goal of the present study was to work with couples who self-identified as happy in their relationships and to use their narratives as foundations for our understanding and coding of We-Stories. Future research could focus on a wider sample with a range of relationship satisfaction scores; for example, attempting the study through therapy when treating distressed couples might provide a useful comparison between the types of We-Stories and elements generated by happy versus unhappy couples. Future work may also involve interviewing couples

so that they are able to elaborate on their stories and provide deeper context for the role that the stories play in their lives. Alternatively, if studies continue to use written narratives of We-Stories, it might be valuable to apply automated scoring systems that identify key phrases that correspond to the SERAPHS elements.

Generating and sharing We-Stories has shown promise in bolstering relationship resilience (Singer & Skerrett, 2014). The more we explore the specific thematic and linguistic elements that comprise these We-Stories, the better we will be able to understand the role they play in relationships, and the more effective their use will be in couple therapy.

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*Appendix A*

ME (To US)
Marital Engagement – Type of Union Scale

This scale should be filled out by Partner 1/Partner 2 **only**. Try to rate each item with your most honest and realistic answer.  Do not answer how you wish the relationship could be, or how it has been at previous times, but how it has been within the **last 6 months.**  Each item asks you to make a generalization, so do your best to think in overall terms from the last 6 months rather than about one or two specific instances.  Please fill out all items and use the 1-7 rating scale provided below.  Please circle the numerical rating that best applies to each item.

**1=not at all, 4=somewhat, 7=very much.**

1) We discuss domestic chores and make a fair division of duties.

**1          2          3          4          5          6          7**

2) We discuss and agree on major time commitments before making them (e.g., work schedules, business trips, social events, appointments, separate outings with friends, etc.).

**1          2          3          4          5          6          7**

3) We openly discuss and agree on **all** financial resources and decisions (e.g. joint checking, big ticket purchases, shared mortgage, pooled investment, mutual beneficiaries, etc.).

**1          2          3          4          5          6          7**

**IF YOU HAVE CHILDREN PLEASE ANSWER QUESTION 4. IF YOU DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN PLEASE ANSWER QUESTION 4A.

4) We discuss, reach agreement, and present a unified front about child-rearing decisions (e.g., discipline, privileges, academic goals, etc.).

**1          2          3          4          5          6          7**

4A) We have discussed and are in agreement about our current stance toward having children.

**1          2          3          4          5          6          7**

5) We communicate about and share a mutually satisfying sexual relationship.

**1          2          3          4          5          6          7**

6) We have achieved a balance between pursuing recreational activities together and also giving each other space to pursue independent activities.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

7) We communicate about our deepest fears and vulnerabilities to each other.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

8) We regularly (i.e., at least once a week) set aside time of 30 minutes or more that is exclusively for us as a couple, to talk, share an activity, or simply hang out together.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

9) We discuss and continue to develop plans for how our life together might be over the next 10 years and beyond.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

10) We discuss and reach agreement about how to relate to and interact with extended family (e.g., in-laws, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.).

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

Singer, J. A., Labunko, B., Baddeley, J. L., & Alea, N. (in press). Mutuality and the Marital

     Engagement –Type of Union Scale [ME (ToUS)]: Empirical support for a clinical

     instrument in couples therapy. In K. Skerret & K. Fergus (Eds.), *Couple resilience across*

     *the lifespan – emerging perspectives.* Springer.

*Appendix B*

Modified Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

| Item | Extremely Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied | Somewhat Dissatisfied | Mixed | Somewhat Satisfied | Very Satisfied | Extremely Satisfied |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. How satisfied are you with your significant other as a partner? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. How satisfied are you with your partnership? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Adapted from Schumm, W.R., Jurich, A.P., and Boliman, S.R. (1990). Kansas Marital

Satisfaction Scale. In J Touliatos, B. F. Perimutter, and M.A. Straus (Eds.), *Handbook of*

*family measurement techniques*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA.

*Appendix C*

Demographics Questionnaires

Partners should complete the following items together.

Years together: _____

Are you currently married? Yes/No

     If yes, for how many years? _____

Do you have children? Yes/No

     If yes, please indicate number and ages: _____

Estimated Household Income: _____

These items should be completed separately by each partner.

Partner 1:

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

Religious Background: _____

Education (select the education level that applies):

     Some High School     High School     Some College     BA/BS

          MA     PhD     Professional Degree

          Other: _____

Married Previously? Yes/No

     If yes, how many times? _____

Partner 2:

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

Religious Background: _____

Education (select the education level that applies):

  Some High School   High School   Some College   BA/BS

      MA    PhD   Professional Degree

       Other: _____

Married Previously? Yes/No

  If yes, how many times? _____

*Appendix D*

We-Stories Coding Manual

This is a manual used to score the seven elements of the "We" as described in Jefferson Singer and Karen Skerrett's book *Positive Couple Therapy: Using We-Stories to Enhance Resilience*. Each of these elements will be defined and examples will be provided to assist in scoring. Scoring is done by carefully reading each We-Story and highlighting words and phrases that relate to each element. In addition to indicating the presence of each element, a fundamental distinction should be made between **macro-stories** and **micro-stories**.

**Macro-stories** are broad, big-picture stories that may describe a large segment of the relationship or the relationship as a whole. These stories do not focus in-depth on a single incident, but they convey the defining features and overall identity of the couple. Macro-stories may express the couple's customs and conventions, but they may also reveal areas of division that frequently recur in the relationship.

**Micro-stories** are specific episodes that connect to larger themes in the relationship; examples include the couple's first encounter, wedding day, and birth of a child. A micro-story is a rich, well-defined narrative that pinpoints a particular incident or moment.

Each example below will be marked as either a macro- or micro-story.


# I. Security

Security refers to the willingness of both partners to prioritize their relationship and acknowledge that it is the most important commitment in their lives. It includes the mutual understanding that both partners are "all in" and thus should prioritize the partnership above other responsibilities.

This element can also draw on stories that highlight teamwork, working together, "having each other's back," and mutual support during challenging experiences. Expression of loyalty and commitment to one's partner also fall under this element.

Examples: "Softening process"—expressing a willingness to trust the other and to believe trust will be reciprocated (Johnson, 2004); putting the couple first; language indicating a sense of trust, faith in one's partner, safety, openness, support, stability, togetherness, loyalty, and a full commitment to the relationship.

Sample narratives:

- Driving down the highway, I saw the hibiscus as a metaphor for our relationship. It is always there; ready to bloom, even when weeds of discord and intemperate elements threaten to destroy it. What sustains us during the ugly, spindly moments is our trust – our faith in each other – that we will be there for the other person, that we will provide the support that is needed. Beneath all the daily efforts lies this deep red layer. (Micro-story)

- We decided to put an addition on our home. We had been married 13 years and our two children were 7 and 9. We agreed to put a new kitchen and family room addition. Mike was very hesitant to handle such a large project due to our limited budget, time, and complexity of it. Nancy was the one that had the spirit to go ahead and tackle it. We had to act as our own General Contractor to get the work done with the money we had. We knew it would be a huge undertaking since we were both working, Mike going to grad school and coaching too and had active young kids. We designed it, hired an architect, excavator, concrete, plumbers, roofer, electricians, landscapers, carpenter, cabinet maker. We got 3 estimates for each tradesman, drew permits. Mike did the demolition, and installed the kitchen himself. We remember working together, eating family dinners each night in the basement, having our Xmas morning on a plywood floor and when it was done a great sense of accomplishment. Mike still knows he never would have had the nerve to go ahead with that undertaking without Nancy's faith that they could get it done. We supported each other through the entire 8 month ordeal and did it together relying on each other's strengths. We are proud of what we did and how we did it together. (Micro-story)

- A turning point for me and maybe us was when my boss to really sick and didn't come back to work. Then he did come back but everything had changed-he obviously was going through something. Maybe he felt insecure, maybe he felt mortal, maybe alota different things. But here I am, not even wet behind the ears as a lawyer & in charge of things I shouldn't have been. We didn't collapse, we didn't fall apart, but it became very clear that I was incredibly unhappy. So after long discussions with J., I decided I wasn't going to be a victim or victimized, and although I wasn't 100% sure what I was going to do as evidenced by my next job transition, I actually approached him at the end of the year around Christmas time and said I was leaving. And it was the first time in my life I think, where I really took the bull by the horns with a lot of support from J, and said I'm not going to be a victim and we can move on from this experience taking the positives along with the negatives and move it to whatever the next chapter was in my professional life. (Micro-story)

- Something that really comes to me is how we shine when the chips are down. For some of our friends, that's when things hit the fan but looking back on it, it seems like we can really focus, let go of whatever has been on our plates & just deal with what has to happen. Whether it's our parents' problems, health our kids, whatever…weirdly, we are our best in a crisis. (Macro-story)

- I know that I'm a more secure person because of our relationship…just the constancy of it, knowing that no matter what, we are there for each other. I can take more risks in life because I have our marriage to count on & rely on. (Macro-story)

## II. Empathy

Empathy is an understanding and sharing of another person's feelings. In a relationship, this refers to each partner maintaining an awareness of the other's emotions. Empathy also involves both partners feeling that their emotions and their personal differences are acknowledged and respected.

When coding for this element, it is important to note that explicit mention of feelings is made and often that behaviors shift in response to awareness of the partner's feelings.

Examples: Compassion; patience; mention of feelings and awareness of emotions; stepping out of oneself and expressing an understanding of the other's point of view; language indicating emotional connection and understanding.

Sample narratives:

- My re-enlistments have been a big thing between us; I never felt like she got why I did it or how much I was trying to keep our family afloat. It got to where we couldn't even talk about the Army or any of what happened to me over there—she just had such an attitude. Then one day she came out wearing my dogtags that I'd given her when we first started going out—it was the first thing I gave her that showed I was getting serious about her. The fact that she took that out and wore them made me feel like she still cared and like she did know me after all and would understand what that meant to me. Now it's like a symbol between us—she's gone back to wearing them a lot and we both just smile because we remember what it means. (Micro-story)

- For so long, I had been doubting that Ted still loved me. We had both retired and I thought that meant we would spend more time than ever with each other. Instead, he was out several nights a week at political meetings and events. I begged him to ease up on his schedule, but he told me that I was nagging him, and it wasn't as bad as I made it out to be. He kept saying, "It's no big deal." But it was a big deal to me and nothing I could do seemed to change his mind. I really started to withdraw after a while, and we did less and less together. Then one night, he woke me up, and he was crying. I had barely ever seen him cry and I asked him, "What's wrong?" He told me that he was frightened that I didn't love him any more—that he would lose me. Well, I started to cry too and my heart just melted. We talked for a long time, and he said that he saw where he was wrong and would cut back to have more time with me. That was a year ago and we have been so much happier since then. He still goes to meetings, and I am happy that he does, but he definitely has made our time together a priority. (Micro-story)

- We call this story "The Story of the Car Ride and Katie Crying." We were visiting Will's mother for dinner, and all through dinner Will's mom kept comparing Will to his brothers. She told him he was the smartest one, but they were the ones who went to college. Even when he pointed out how well he's done with his business, she still said, "But you could have been an engineer." Driving home, Will was silent, and I could see how hurt he was. Later, when I told this story in our couple session, I began to cry. Will noticed it, and it was huge for us that he could see how much I care despite all our differences. (Micro-story)

- This past weekend, Kyle had an opportunity to go to a Red Sox game with his friends, but he knew how dead tired I was from the kids being sick that week, so he turned it down. Sure enough, I got sick that night. I could not believe how helpful he was the next day. It was so great that he had thought of my needs and feelings because I could not have managed the kids that day without him. We are really learning to check in with each other and not make decisions without knowing where the other person's at. (Micro-story)

- After I had the baby, I was just so sore & tired all the time. One night, after a really bad day, he came over to me & without my saying one word, he started to massage my back. I can't tell you what that meant, especially not even having to ask. (Micro-story)

## III. Respect

In order for We-ness to flourish, partners should feel free to grow individually as well as together. A true "We" is made up of two "I"s, and for these "I"s to grow independently, they must harbor respect for each other. This allows room for self-expression backed by the support and security provided by one's partner. Partners must develop an awareness of their own needs and the needs of their partners, and be able to express them in a respectful way.

Examples: Acknowledging partner's autonomy, capabilities, and strengths; supporting individual expression and growth; acknowledgement of partner's needs, values, goals, and beliefs.

Sample narratives:

- We faced a real dilemma when Fatima was no longer happy in her medical practice. As the only woman among six partners, she was simply not advancing and we sensed that there was some discrimination. Once she sampled all the possible opportunities in our local area, it looked like we were facing the necessity of moving. She had a great offer from the hospital where she had done her residency. The problem was that Ali loved his teaching job in the local high school, and we both loved the Muslim community that we had cultivated in our town. Fatima felt heartbroken to force us to move, but we both agreed there was no choice. She spent hours looking into the best community for us near her new job, and ultimately we were able to find a new school for Ali to work in. It took a while once we were settled in our new neighborhood, but we have both found our way to fulfilling jobs again. This story reminds us how much we have to work to respect each other's goals and personal aspirations. (Micro-story)

- We both were enrolled in graduate programs in different cities, about two hours apart. Since Cliff didn't have a car, Megan would often drive down to visit him on weekends. During one particular week where we had planned to see each other, Cliff called Megan on Friday and broke the news that he had too much work and studying to do, so we would have to cancel our plans. Despite feeling initially upset, Megan was understanding about the situation and did not give Cliff a hard time because she respected Cliff's academic ambitions and his need for space to get his work done. She also knew that Cliff had a similar respect for her career goals. (Micro-story)

- I am not an outdoors person by any means. I'm perfectly content to sit and read a book for hours. My wife loves to be outside and especially likes kayaking. Since we have retired, I have been happy to see her go on week-long trips to kayak with a group of her friends. Some people think it's strange that we don't do these vacations together, but I enjoy the time alone with a good long novel, and she likes being out on the water. When we get back together, we share the stories of our week. In a strange way, I think this time apart has helped us get even closer. (Macro-story)

- Whenever I'm really listened to I feel so good about both of us, even if she doesn't always agree with me, I know that she will listen to what I have to say. Having your opinion actually matter to another person is the best feeling in the world! (Macro-story)

- It is hard for him to let other people know he disagrees; he has a lot invested in being the 'good guy'. Whenever he intentionally takes that risk, my opinion of him just soars & I always try to tell him so. (Macro-story)

## IV. Acceptance

Each partner brings imperfections and vulnerabilities into the relationship. Acceptance refers to the mutual awareness of each partner's fragility and the amount of care needed to maintain this awareness. Acceptance also includes coming to terms with one's own self-perceived flaws.

Examples: Acknowledgement and understanding of each other's flaws; giving second chances; forgiveness; showing a weakness or limitation while trusting that the other person will respond with acceptance.

Sample narratives:

- My partner is an absolute musical genius. He plays multiple instruments and has nearly perfect pitch. In the band that he plays in, he's the one who does most of the arrangements. Since we are both Jewish, we decided to have a Sabbath dinner together at my house early in the relationship. I heard him sing and play music at temple many times and knew how good a musician he was. I, on the other hand, have a tin ear for carrying a tune. So when I began to sing the Friday night blessings, I knew that I was going to be out of tune. But what surprised me was that he also didn't sound very good. I asked him what was going on, and he said, "I'm just trying to find your key." And that says a lot about what a kind and giving person he is. (Micro-story)

- My wife and I were cross-country skiing in the first year of our relationship, and it turned out that she was a much better and more experienced skier than I was. Normally I would have felt very self-conscious and embarrassed not to seem in control, but I realized that she was so kind and understanding that I could relax about the difference in our abilities. I remember that day when we took a break from the skiing, it was the first time that I told her that I loved her and explained how comfortable she made me feel. Three years later

during the summertime, I took her back to that same hill, and that's where I proposed to her. (Micro-story)

- I have more or less always been haunted by a tremendous fear of abandonment. My father walked out on my family when I was young, and my stepfather was constantly critical of me. As a result, I have never quite felt secure in my relationships. For the longest time I kept this insecurity and fear of abandonment hidden from my husband. I was afraid that admitting my fears would only push him away, but when I finally took that leap and told him, he reassured me rather than withdrawing or rejecting me. This brought us much closer together, and it was the point at which I realized that he would stand by me no matter what. (Micro-story)

- One important memory is how I finally learned to separate my father from B. The fact that I would look at B. sometimes and see the hurt that we're both causing each other and the way we felt about things and the way things happened, and the blaming because we were both pretty burnt out at this time. And then just looking at him one day and thinking, why are we doing this, I mean I'm crazy about you, I love you, you're the most important person in my world and yet I'm projecting on to you all the things that my father was because I just couldn't somehow come to reconcile his death and the way he died and the guilt I felt. And I was projecting a lot of that onto our relationship and so that was a turning point for me, the day that I saw him walk down this one little walkway in a mall when we were meeting to have dinner and have the kids pictures taken and I just looked at him and though, this is craziness, I don't know what's going on but it's not about him. It really is about me and all the things that I never resolved and all of that was being projected onto someone that I cared the most about who just happened to be the person that was there. The only person that was open enough to let me express those feelings. (Micro-story)

- When we first decided to get married, when I knew we were serious, I told him about my dad & all his problems. Up until that one time, my dad was usually on his best behavior & I never was sure Bruce didn't think I was making stuff up or just being hard on my dad. Then, he really got to see his true colors when my dad had a meltdown in the middle of a nice restaurant & insulted everyone in our family, including him. I was just mortified & I could tell Bruce was angry & a couple times, wanted to tell him off. But he kept his cool, which meant a lot to me & I'll never forget the talk we had later…I felt so relieved in a way that the secret was out & that Bruce understood & didn't think less of me. Now we both better understand that my dad has an illness & when he's off his meds, he is very unpredictable. That was such an important time for me in realizing the character of the man I was about to marry; I love to remember how understood, loved and cherished I felt by him. (Micro-story)

## V. Pleasure

We-ness involves elements of pleasure and passion, including but not limited to sexual intimacy.

Examples: Expression of good times spent together; enjoying each other's company; positive language indicating intimacy and/or fun; expression of a shared activity.

Sample narratives:

- Do you remember, Heather, that time in Lincoln Park looking out toward the lake when Ellie and Will were like 3 and 5? We had planned a picnic and it started to rain. Ellie stuck out her tongue and started to chase the raindrops. You grabbed her hand and I grabbed yours and Will grabbed mine. We made a ring, catching raindrops with our mouths open. We were just dancing around. (Micro-story)

- After a long period of feeling estranged from each other, there was one night over the kids' February break that we found our way out to the hot tub and one thing led to another, and we were intimate with each other for the first time in a long time. It surprised both of us, but it was really nice to see that there was still some romance and spark between us. Ever since, we refer to that time as "The Hot Tub Night," and it's a signal to us about being close again. (Micro-story)

- We know that this story sounds a bit silly, but it says something about the private fun that we have with each other. Steve really loves his Star Wars action figures collection, and Pete thinks they're a little bit childish but loves seeing Steve smile when he gets a new one. Sometimes Pete will take out the whole collection and set them up in the dining room to surprise Steve with a great meal and all his figures assembled on the table. We call these our Star Wars Banquet Nights, and they're one of the ways that we use to cheer each other up. (Micro-story)

- I can remember when we didn't have that much money and we wanted to do something special for Valentine's Day, so we went to the supermarket and got some food to cook for dinner that was just a little bit fancier than we usually would buy. We cooked up the food and then set it up in front of our fireplace with our best tablecloth, wine glasses, and plates. We put on some nice romantic music and pretended we were at a four-star restaurant. We even slow danced after the meal. We've gone to many expensive restaurants since that night, but it's still one of the highlights of all our dinners. (Micro-story)

- I'll never forget the night he tried to teach me to play black-jack. We had this trip planned to Vegas with our good friends & they all know that I never move from the penny slots so he got this idea we'd surprise them with my learning how to play at the black jack table. I don't think we've ever laughed so hard. I just loved the 'hit me again' move & kept doing it no matter what my count was. It was crazy nuts & I was afraid he'd get mad at me for being so dense but he was cracking up too. We were so relaxed and comfortable with each other. (Micro-story)

## VI. Humor

Couples should keep humor alive and express gratitude for the acts of kindness they perform for each other. It is important for them to rediscover the humor and fun that helped bring them together in the first place.

Examples: Shifting toward positive aspects in negative situations to defuse conflict; jokes; playful teasing; making each other laugh; language indicating amusement.

Sample narratives:

- So my girlfriend set us up, I was almost out of high school, not sure of my next step and I liked the idea of going out on a date with an older man. (I was 27.) We double-dated with my girlfriend and her boyfriend and had an okay time, but I can tell you it wasn't love at first sight for me. (It sure was for me—I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.) ... So then, I never heard anything for like 5 years and I got married and forgot about him. (I never forgot about her—I thought about her every day and plotted how and when I could get back to Chicago.) So my marriage didn't really work out. Thankfully, we never had any kids, but I felt bad about myself and about what happened for a long time. One day, that same girlfriend says to me, "Hey, Jack is back in town and has been asking after you. Can I give him your number?" I told her why not and we went out for drinks and that was that. **That** was love at second sight we like to say! (It was always first for me 'cause I never stopped believing you were the one—I just had to convince you!) (Micro-story)

- During one of my weekend visits to Joe's university, we had this big fight. Neither of us remembers why I was so furious with him in the first place, but we both ended up shouting at each other. I was going through some difficult times and was very hard to handle - something stupid set me off and I was throwing out every complaint about him that popped into my head. He's normally an extremely patient guy, but it was enough to seriously piss him off. And then, while we were at each other's throats, we heard the rhythmic creaking of one of the school's notoriously squeaky beds coming from the floor above us. Being the juveniles that we were (and still are!) we both burst out laughing. It was good to know that even during times so distressing that we were turned against each other, we could find it in ourselves to laugh together - and once we finally stopped laughing, we realized that we were no longer angry with each other. (Micro-story)

- M is a great chef. He's always watching Food Network for recipes and cooking techniques, and sometimes when he's making dinner he'll let out an Emeril Lagasse "Bam!" One day, back when I was still living at my parents' house, he was tossing an egg up and down and catching it on the spatula, when he used a little too much force and sent it flying straight into the ceiling. Even though it took me a long time to clean up the splattered mess, I still look back on this moment and laugh. We've even shared this story with the kids. It's nothing profound or extraordinary, but I think of it and smile whenever we go out to our local teppanyaki restaurant and the chef does the egg-bouncing trick. (Micro-story)

- This sounds really terrible, but one of the things that has always bound us together is our general dislike for other people. We tend to think of most people in a negative light, and we are always able to find something about a person that we can make fun of (we have inside jokes and nicknames for just about everyone in our lives). Our relationship has been volatile, but one of the constants throughout the whole thing has been this love of laughing at others. In a strange way, it brings us closer together! (Macro-story)

## VII. Shared Meaning and Vision

A fundamental aspect of the "We" involves a couple's ability to draw meaning from their experiences and to visualize a larger purpose in their lives. They view their relationship, a structure that is uniquely theirs, as a lifelong project with a shared purpose.

Examples: Meshing individual stories together into a shared "We-story" through mutual accommodation; expressing a higher purpose or future goal and cooperating in order to achieve it.

Sample narratives:

- Every time we meet with our group, Mark and I feel like this has been such a terrific way to nourish our "We"—it reminds us of our very first vision statement. We've taken all the pain we all face every day and transformed it into something positive and way bigger than ourselves. And we literally feel like when we make a difference for those other couples, we're all solar powered . . . our group motto now is "Share your light." (Macro-story)

- We met during a meditation retreat at a Buddhist Center in Western Mass. and our commitment to meditation has been a guiding light in our relationship. Whenever things go awry, we know it is time to get back to our basics—whether it means going to a retreat or simply building in more time for meditation into our weekly routines. People always say how children screw your balance up, but we just threw them in carriers and pressed them to our chests during our reflection times. Now with kids at that middle school age, our friends ask us why they seem so quiet and stable. We tell them that they started meditating before they could speak. (Macro-story)

- One thing that has always brought us together is our passion for track and field. We both ran in high school and college; when our kids joined their high school team, we attended all the meets, bringing moral support, fuel and water, and advice for tackling difficult or unfamiliar events. Because of our knowledge and enthusiasm for the sport, many other athletes on the team approached us for advice, and we started to become what some of them referred to as the "team parents." As the years went on, we became deeply involved with the track program – Mike created a website for the team, where he posted meet write-ups and photos of the athletes in action. The site became a huge hit with the kids, and soon I was manning the video camera to record races and jumps. Mike handled all the technical aspects – uploading, managing the site, etc. – and we made a good team. After Mike's death, I've found a lot of meaning in continuing to run the website. I've

taken up the still camera and my daughter handles the videography and web management now. It's a way for me to be close to Mike, a continuation of a lifelong passion for track and love for this program that we shared and that brought us closer together. (Macro-story)

- We both come from very close and strong-willed families, and sometimes our parents could be quite heavy-handed, even intrusive, when it came to our marriage. Looking back, we often judged each other unfairly based on the value systems of our parents, which differed drastically from one another. (You name it – my parents probably disagreed with her parents.) It was only after we broke out of these molds, taking a step back and setting some much-needed boundaries with our families, that we were able to start forging our own identity as a couple, to find our own meaning and place in the world. (Macro-story)

*Appendix E*

Informed Consent

I hereby consent to participate in a research study conducted by Sara Gildersleeve at Connecticut College, under the supervision of Jefferson Singer, Professor of Psychology. I understand that this research will involve writing a "We-Story," which is a vivid narrative about a significant positive memory with my partner that emphasizes our shared investment in each other and in our relationship; answering questions about relationship satisfaction and mutuality; and responding to a background information questionnaire. While I understand that the direct benefits of this research to society are not known, I have been told that I may learn more about We-Stories and resilient relationships.

I understand that this research will take about 30 minutes. I have been told that there are no known risks or discomforts related to participating in this research. I have been told that Sara Gildersleeve can be contacted at sgilders@conncoll.edu, and that Jefferson Singer can be contacted at jasin@conncoll.edu.

I understand that I may decline to answer any questions as I see fit, and that I may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time. I understand that all information will be identified with a code number and NOT my name. I understand that while quotations from my We-Story may be used in published research, no uniquely identifying information will be used in order to maintain confidentiality.

I have been advised that I may contact the researcher who will answer any questions that I may have about the purposes and procedures of this study. I understand that this study is not meant to gather information about specific individuals and that my responses will be combined with other participants' data for the purpose of statistical analyses. I consent to publication of the study results as long as the identity of all participants is protected. I understand that this research has been approved by the Connecticut College Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB). Concerns about any aspect of this study may be addressed to Jason Nier, Chairperson of the Connecticut College IRB (at janie@conncoll.edu).

By selecting "I agree," I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age, and that I have read these explanations and assurances and voluntarily consent to participate in this research about We-Stories.

Partner 1 — "I agree" Yes/No
Partner 2 — "I agree" Yes/No

*Appendix F*

Debriefing Form

Thank you for participating in this research dealing with We-Stories. In this study, I am working on developing a system for coding and analyzing the seven elements of "We-ness" that have been identified by Singer and Skerrett (2014) in couple narratives. These elements are: security, empathy, respect, acceptance, pleasure, humor, and shared meaning and vision (SERAPHS). The sense of the "We" is a couple's shared investment in each other and the extent to which they act in the best interest of their relationship. We-Stories are vivid narratives that encapsulate this sense of the "We," reflecting the love and commitment that the partners feel for each other.

Although these seven elements have been identified in We-Stories, a formal coding system for SERAPHS has not yet been developed. The goal of this study was to collect and analyze couples' We-Stories for the both the presence of these elements and the degree to which each was emphasized in the narratives. In developing such a system, researchers will be able to better understand the elements that contribute to relationship mutuality and thus develop more effective techniques to help couples who are struggling to rediscover this important sense of the "We." When couples are able to find and share these unique stories, they are able to build stronger connections for more resilient relationships.

If you are interested in this topic and want to read the literature in this area, please contact Jefferson Singer (jasin@conncoll.edu).

Additionally, you can contact the chair of the IRB, Jason Nier (janie@conncoll.edu), if you have any questions or concerns about the manner in which this study was conducted.

Listed below are a few sources you may want to consult to learn more about this topic:

Singer, J. A., & Skerrett, K. (2014). *Positive couple therapy: Using we-stories to enhance*

    *resilience.* New York: Routledge.

Skerrett, K. (2010). "Good enough stories": Helping couples invest in one another's growth.

    *Family Process, 49*(4), 503-516.