

# *Introduction*

## Challenges and Resilience Among Later-Life Couples

*By Rosemary Blieszner*

The educational video, *For Better or For Worse* (Collier, 1993), introduces five couples who have shared 50 or more years together. Their stories are funny and sad, heart-wrenching and heartwarming, surprising, and familiar. The featured pairs vary by race/ethnicity, class, culture and religion, and sexual orientation. They reveal a range of approaches to showing love and commitment and handling disagreements. All are captivating. These five couples represent only a tiny microcosm of the older adults who are partnered in the United States and around the world, but the five provide a glimpse into the broad diversity of late-life couples and the kinds of experiences they share. My students love this video, so I include it on the syllabus every time I teach our introductory course on aging.

Dan and Sophie, Chet and Vi, and Howard and Cecile are white couples with different marital histories, communication patterns, and approaches to challenges related to family, work, and sexuality. They represent the majority of late-life married couples in the U.S., where about 78 percent of young-old men and 66 percent of

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*For better and for worse.*

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the old-old ones are married, as are about 54 percent and 25 percent of women in the same age groups (see Table 1 in

Calasanti and Kiecolt, this issue, p.12). Paul and Inez are emblematic of African American married couples, who are found in smaller proportions (young-old = 60 percent of men and 29 percent of women, old-old = 45 percent of men and 11 percent of women [Calasanti and Kiecolt, this issue, p. 12]) and are more likely than white couples to be challenged by financial issues and health disparities as they move through old age. All four women, particularly Inez, are atypical in still being married at their respective ages. Finally, Bruhs and Gean exemplify the experiences of some three million gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender elders (see de Vries, this issue), showing the same kinds of relational emotions and concerns exhibited in any committed couple.

The joys and struggles experienced by these five couples reflect the complex contradictions inherent in all human relationships. We can learn a lot from their extensive, long-lived experiences, and from those of the couples with whom

we live and work. Here I will highlight some of the issues older couples face and the strengths they carry along as they navigate the final years of their journey together.

#### A PREVIEW OF CHALLENGES IN COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Given the declining prevalence of long-term marriages and a high divorce rate (see Wu and Schimmele, this issue), not to mention the frequency of remarriage in middle and old age (see Calasanti and Kiecolt, this issue), clearly, entering and sustaining intimate relationships requires commitment, skill, and perseverance at any age. Some individuals bring a wealth of interaction and communication abilities, pleasing personality traits, and optimistic attitudes to their relationships. That set of characteristics positions them well for creating positive relationships and meeting life's challenges successfully. But pathways through life do not depend solely on personal strengths. As the authors in this issue show, social locations—gender, race and ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation—also are important determinants of life's opportunities and constraints. This means that typical old age experiences and challenges, whether they pertain to declining health or increasing concern about making sense of one's life, are encountered differently by couples having more or fewer personal and societal advantages. In addition, long-standing habits and interaction patterns are hard to relinquish or change, even when they are no longer effective (or even if they never were effective).

As in any life stage, couples in old age face numerous challenges that threaten their well-being and suggest the need for professional support and interventions. For example, conflict in marital (and presumably, marital-like) relationships not only is unpleasant, it has serious implications for the partners' psychological well-being (Whisman et al., 2006). One of the most difficult circumstances older couples face is deterioration of physical health or cognitive functioning to the extent that their role relationships change from companionable partners to caregiver and care recipient. The stresses and burdens of coping with such difficulties are well documented (see Carpenter and Mak, this issue)

and the latest research shows that these effects not only have psychological impact on the caregiver and care recipient, they also threaten the caregiver's immune system (Damjanovic et al., 2007), placing the person at risk for illness and premature death. Other kinds of challenges appear in this issue as well, and the authors are generous with their statements of practice implications and suggestions for professionals.

#### COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS AS SOURCES OF RESILIENCE

Paradoxically, the same intimate relationship that can be a source of challenges and distress generally enables coupled elders to enjoy better health, greater life satisfaction, and fewer depressive symptoms than is the case for those living alone (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001). Long-standing relationships tend to foster interdependence, which reflects mutual emotional and social support, shared interests and companionship, and good communication. This kind of interdependence contributes to feelings of satisfaction with the intimate relationship and with one's life (Depner and Ingersol-Dayton, 1985; Ingersol-Dayton et al., 1996).

The beneficial dimensions of marital and marital-like relationships are affected by social locations just as the challenges are. Personal and social characteristics that minimize difficulties probably enhance chances of reaping relational benefits. This is not to say, however, that those who are socially disadvantaged are not resilient or do not experience positive aspects of couple relationships. We know that meeting challenges successfully can yield strength and resilience (Masten, 2001; Ramsey and Blieszner, 1999) and that people with high levels of mastery, hardiness, and positive emotions are more likely than others to be resilient (Bonanno, 2004; Carver, 1998). Just as they can assist older couples who are dealing with challenges, gerontologists have many opportunities to help partners discover and celebrate the advantages of growing old together.

#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

This issue of *Generations* presents state-of-the-art information about American couples like those interviewed in *For Better or For Worse*.

The issue is organized into three sections, including discussion of the wide range of couple experiences, challenges faced by couples in the later years, and policy and program issues along with resources for practitioners. Together, these readings offer insight into a variety of late-life couple experiences, aimed at informing gerontology professionals, researchers, and students about many dimensions of intimacy in the old age.

The first section highlights the vast diversity of couple relationships and issues in the later years. Calasanti and Kiecolt use detailed data from recent census reports in analyzing the effects of gender relations on older couples pursuing marriage, remarriage, dating, cohabitation, and other forms of intimate relations. In underscoring the wide range of life experiences and outcomes among older couples, this article sets the stage for the remainder of the issue. Next, de Vries focuses attention on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender relationships in late life, providing an in-depth view of the opportunities and constraints facing these couples. Then Yarry and her colleagues address cultural influences on couple relationships, showing how health and caregiving, for example, are experienced differently among couples from racial/ethnic minority groups as compared to those in the majority. Next, Skultety examines experiences of sexuality in terms of sexual behavior and attitudes as well as barriers to sexual relationships. This section closes with evidence from Rosowsky's clinical practice with older adults, wherein she has discovered several varieties of "supplementary spouses" who hold significant and often complicating roles in the lives of some elders.

The second part of this issue concerns challenges faced by late-life couples. One of these is uncoupling, so Wu and Schimmele provide extensive details about separation, divorce, and widowhood. Another set of challenges revolves around caregiving. Carpenter and Mak give a detailed assessment of how caregiving affects the caregiver and the couple, with special attention to caring for a partner with dementia and caregiving issues faced by nontraditional couples. Stephens and Qualls continue this theme with guidelines for providing therapy to aging couples who are dealing with dementia. Shifting to a different but perhaps related challenge,

Ramsey thoughtfully considers the importance of being able to forgive oneself and one's partner, and offers suggestions about helping couples to do so. Retirement presents a key transition in the lives of couples. Dennis explains best practices in assisting couples to prepare for retirement in the areas of finances, identity, and role changes, and impact of retirement on the couple's relationship. The last article in this section is a discussion of influences on how bereaved individuals deal with the death of their partner by Hansson and Stroebe. Their model, which encompasses both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented emotional and practical challenges, is a useful tool for helping grieving people understand their reactions and identify effective ways of dealing with them.

In the third part of this issue, we consider a variety of ways that policies and programs affect older couples. Harrington Meyer and Roseamelia identify policy issues related to protecting income and assets, rights to intimacy, and end-of-life decision-making as they pertain to different types of couples and the situations they face. Piercy and Schempp in their respective articles introduce us to couples who are adjusting to assistance from formal service providers in their everyday lives. These case studies illustrate strategies that can be used to help older couples to make effective decisions about their care needs. Finally, Roberts presents an overview of books, articles, and Internet resources that help expand readers' perspectives on this fascinating topic and provide materials and tools for working with older couples.

The authors of the interesting and useful articles in this issue all show us that, for better or for worse, intimate relationships in late adulthood are full of challenges, and they also can promote physical and psychological resilience. An important point is that older partners, as individuals and in their relationships, generally are amenable to receiving assistance from gerontology health workers, program planners, policy advocates, and community service providers. These articles contain background information and strategies for those professionals so that they can work more effectively with couples in later life. ❧

*Rosemary Blieszner, Ph.D., is Alumni Distinguished Professor of Human Development, Center*

for Gerontology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Va.

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