“We Helped Each Other Find Our Way in the World”: The Narrative Co-construction of Couple Identity and Wellbeing

By

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Abstract

The present work consists of two qualitative studies that examined how romantic couples co-construct their identities and wellbeing through their relationship narratives. Study 1 involved a theoretically informed inductive thematic analysis of $N = 95$ relationship origin stories from an age-diverse community sample of romantic couples. Study 2 included a combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis of $N = 40$ relationship challenge narratives from college-aged participants involved in romantic relationships. Together, these studies established the relevance of relationship identity continuity, or the level of temporal coherence between a couple's past, present, and presumed future identities, for relationship narrative identity and couple wellbeing. The act of co-constructing narratives about relationship challenges revealed how couples established continuity in their relationship identity, often drawing on shared norms of dyadic coping (e.g., framing challenges in terms of acceptance or redemption) to navigate present and future adversity. The studies presented here underscore the value of using data-driven, idiographic approaches when researching relationship narrative identity.

Keywords: romantic relationships, relationship narrative identity, wellbeing, dyadic coping, acceptance, redemption

"We Helped Each Other Find Our Way in the World":

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"So, how did you two first meet?" Romantic couples are often prompted to tell the story of how their relationships developed. In doing so, they might vividly illustrate certain relationship-defining scenes or mention salient themes. For instance, romantic partners might highlight how they faced relationship challenges and made meaning of adversity together (Dunlop et al., 2021). Furthermore, they may describe how they were ultimately able to manage or overcome these challenges by engaging in dyadic coping. Notably, analyzing the stories that couples tell about their relationships—especially scenes involving relationship challenges—may offer key insights into couples' identities and wellbeing (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019).

As a relatively new field of inquiry, the study of the psychosocial implications of relationship stories is rooted in an extensive body of work examining the identity implications of individuals' personal life stories (e.g., Adler et al., 2017; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; McAdams, 1985; McAdams, 2021; Singer, 2004). Overall, these studies have primarily used deductive rather than inductive methods (i.e., by centering pre-established narrative themes instead of data-driven, emergent themes). Deductive, nomothetic analytic approaches are valuable in that they enable researchers to identify and build upon patterns across datasets. However, in prioritizing the generalizability of established themes, existing work may have overlooked the nuanced, contextualized relationship processes that are revealed through more idiographic analytic approaches. Although the narrative identity approach was designed to integrate idiographic (i.e., focusing on individuals or cases) and nomothetic (i.e., focusing on generalities) approaches, existing narrative work tends to fixate on the latter, which is consistent with American social psychology's historical positioning of itself as a nomothetic science (Syed, 2024). Syed

advocates for greater appreciation of idiographic approaches in psychological research, highlighting that deep (idiographic) description is an important yet often deprioritized step in the construct development process. The study of relationship narrative identity, which involves making sense of highly specific personal experiences (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019), would especially benefit from incorporating idiographic approaches. Studies of relationship narrative identity have also overlooked the existing literatures on co-nostalgia and dyadic coping (e.g., Evans et al., 2022; Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Fetterman & Evans, 2022), both of which may help elucidate how relationship narrative identity is intertwined with positive dyadic outcomes.

The current work consists of two qualitative studies that integrate idiographic, inductive, and deductive approaches to delve deeper into these nuanced processes. To lay out the conceptual groundwork of my studies, I begin by presenting the background literature that inspired this work. First, I briefly review the theoretical origins of narrative identity and its existing research applications to the study of individual wellbeing. Next, I outline the more recent applications of the narrative identity approach to the domain of romantic relationships. Finally, I incorporate insights from research on romantic co-nostalgia, couple identity, and dyadic coping to add nuance to our understanding of previously established connections between relationship narrative identity and positive relational outcomes.

Theoretical Origins of Narrative Identity

Narrative identity refers to an individual's subjective interpretation of their life story that evolves with time and serves as a meaning making resource (McAdams, 2021). This construct has origins in Erikson's concept of identity integration, which posits that a healthy identity is coherently integrated over time and across life contexts (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Syed &

McLean, 2016). Accordingly, narrative identity involves the integration of one's past, present, and future views of themselves, and its construction can facilitate identity coherence. Narrative identity is also grounded in earlier psychological theories that highlight the role of stories in meaning making and identity construction. For instance, Bruner (1987) conceptualized narrative as one of the two primary modes of thought—narrative or paradigmatic. Unlike the paradigmatic mode, which focuses on assessing the physical world's objective features, the narrative mode fosters meaning making of one's personal experiences (i.e., connecting events meaningfully to the self; Bruner, 1987).

On the basis of Erikson's work on identity, McAdams (1985) proposed the life-story model of identity, which describes how individuals begin envisioning their lives as dynamic stories in late adolescence. These dynamic stories represent a subjective integration of key autobiographical events within an overarching plot that is linked to how one defines themselves over time (Dunlop et al., 2021). From a theoretical perspective, narrative identity is recognized as a key feature of personality (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Researchers have increasingly focused on assessing individual differences in narrative identity and how these may relate to other self-reported variables via the narrative identity approach (McAdams, 2021). In sum, narrative identity represents a construct (i.e., one's dynamic, evolving life story), a theoretical framework (i.e., the conceptualization of narrative identity as a key facet of personality), and a method (i.e., the narrative identity approach; Bühler & Dunlop, 2019; Dunlop et al., 2021).

Narrative Identity and Individual Wellbeing

One context to which the narrative identity approach has been applied extensively is the study of how individual differences in narrative identity relate to self-reported wellbeing. In general, studies of narrative identity and individual wellbeing first elicit individual participants'

narrative responses using instruments like the Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams, 2008), which instructs participants to narrate key autobiographical scenes. Participants often also complete self-report measures of wellbeing and other individual differences. Next, the narrative responses are typically coded for certain quantifiable attributes and themes (e.g., structural qualities such as coherence). Then, researchers compute the relationship between the presence or levels of the coded attributes and participants' self-report data. For instance, coded narrative affective quality has been found to relate to self-reported health and wellbeing (Adler et al., 2016; Singer, 2004). Similarly, narrative processing and coherence have been linked to improved psychological functioning (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Meaning making through narrative also has implications for emotion regulation later in life. For example, when examining participants' high and low point life story episodes, Cox and McAdams (2014) found that positive (versus negative) meaning making predicted positive (versus negative) self-reported emotion regulation two years later. Importantly, this finding suggests that certain aspects of narrative framing in the present might influence individuals' coping strategies in the future. In all these cases, researchers took a deductive approach in which they analyzed the association between pre-established narrative attributes and self-reported health and wellbeing.

Researchers have also identified several narrative themes that have implications for individual wellbeing. For example, extensive work has investigated how the presence of redemption and contamination sequences in life stories relates to self-reported health and wellbeing (Adler et al., 2017; Adler et al., 2016; Dunlop et al., 2021; McAdams, 2021). In redemption sequences, protagonists derive positive outcomes and meanings from difficult life experiences. In contrast, contamination sequences involve a negative event erasing or spoiling the effects of a positive event (McAdams, 2021). While the former has been found to predict

self-reported health and wellbeing, the latter is linked to outcomes such as depression, low life satisfaction, and low self-esteem (Adler et al., 2017; Adler et al., 2016; Dunlop et al., 2021; McAdams, 2021). Complimenting these well-studied themes, McAdams et al. (2022) recently investigated what they termed acceptance sequences, in which protagonists recall adapting to (rather than overcoming) adversity, accepting life's uncertainties, and finding peace in the current moment. While direct empirical research on acceptance narratives and wellbeing is limited, in a related line of work, Reischer et al. (2021) found that self-transcendence (i.e., feeling connected to something greater than oneself) in life narrative accounts of late-midlife adults was positively associated with psychological wellbeing. Motivational themes of agency, or the degree to which the protagonist can affect their own life, and communion, or the degree to which the protagonist is driven to pursue social connection, have also been studied extensively in relation to wellbeing (Adler et al., 2016). Overall, studies of narrative identity and individual wellbeing have primarily assessed the extent to which certain theory-driven narrative attributes and themes relate to self-report data. However, there may be more to the story than what these deductive methods are able to reveal, particularly in the context of dyadic relationship narratives.

Relationship Narrative Identity and Couple Wellbeing

Recently**,** researchers have attempted to generalize findings from studies on individual narrative identity and wellbeing to the context of romantic relationships. As a result, the nomothetic, deductive approaches considered normative in these studies have also been tested in the relationship context. Drawing upon the extensive findings establishing the existential function of individual narratives, Bühler and Dunlop (2019) theorized that relationship narratives may also serve as a meaning making psychological resource and contribute to relationship functioning. Bühler et al. (2017) developed the Relationship Narrative Interview (RNI), an

adaptation of McAdams' (2008) LSI, to assess how couple members make meaning of and integrate certain relationship events into their couple identities. The RNI prompts individual participants to reflect on specific scenes from their relationships. Numerous studies have examined how certain coded attributes of relationship narrative responses (collected via prompts like the RNI) relate to self-reported couple wellbeing. For example, Alea et al. (2010) found that higher vividness, positive valence, emotional intensity, and rehearsal frequency of first encounter memories were associated with self-reported marital satisfaction. Similarly, Frost (2013) found that the degree of affective positivity of relationship story endings was positively associated with self-reported relationship quality and mental health. More recently, Dunlop et al. (2021) discovered a positive relationship between coded affective positivity in individuals' relationship narratives and relationship satisfaction.

Researchers have also analyzed the extent to which narrative themes that are relevant to individual wellbeing demonstrate the same pattern in a relational context. Specifically, relationship narrative studies have primarily measured the association between the presence of narrative themes and self-reported relational outcomes. So far, the results of these studies have largely called the relational relevance of these established themes into question. For instance, Dunlop et al. (2018) found that the presence of redemption and contamination themes was unrelated to self-reported attachment tendencies and adjustment in love life narratives. Analogously, Dunlop et al. (2019; Study 1) found that after accounting for participants' personality traits, only themes of communion (but not agency, redemption, or contamination) significantly predicted self-reported authenticity within the romantic domain. Likewise, high communion (but not agency, redemption, or contamination) significantly predicted relationship contingent self-esteem (Dunlop et al., 2019; Study 2). Dunlop et al. (2021) acknowledged that,

contrary to the existing findings linking redemption, contamination, and agency in life narratives to individual wellbeing, the presence of these themes in relationship narratives may be less relevant to relational wellbeing. Incorporating inductive analyses that center data-driven themes focused on relational dimensions may help illuminate these nuanced psychological processes and shed light on this discrepancy. For example, through taking a theoretically driven inductive approach (Terry et al., 2017), researchers might incorporate theoretical influences from research on co-nostalgia, couple identity, and dyadic coping to identify specific themes that capture how these processes unfold in a dyadic context.

Co-nostalgia and Couple Identity

Integrating theory from research on nostalgia may further clarify the established association between narrative identity and wellbeing. Nostalgia, a deeply social emotion characterized by sentimental longing for one's past, has been theorized to help individuals cultivate meaning and wellbeing (Sedikides et al., 2023; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). According to Sedikides and Wildschut (2018), experiencing nostalgia promotes wellbeing by eliciting feelings of social connectedness, which enhance self-continuity. The concept of self-continuity has inherent narrative implications, as it has been defined as a type of autobiographical coherence that links the past to present and future strivings (Baumeister & Landau, 2018). Similarly, the act of narrative identity construction involves integrating an individual's reconstruction of the past, present, and imagined future into a single narrative arc (McAdams, 2021). In other words, engaging in narrative identity construction may enhance one's feelings of self-continuity. Notably, individuals' nostalgic reflections typically contain more redemption than contamination sequences (Wildschut et al., 2006), highlighting narrators' propensity to make positive meaning of nostalgic memories.

The concepts outlined above may extrapolate to the dyadic context and inform our understanding of how relationship narratives influence couple wellbeing. Influenced by Sedikides and Wildschut (2018), Fetterman and Evans (2022) theorized that the act of co-nostalgizing on relationship events with one's romantic partner may promote relationship functioning by reinforcing the partnership's developmental trajectory. Like most existing relationship narrative studies, studies of co-nostalgia have tested these questions using a deductive quantitative approach. For example, in a series of studies directly testing whether romantic nostalgia confers relationship benefits, Evans et al. (2022) found that self-reported romantic nostalgia significantly predicted self-reported closeness, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment. The effect remained significant even when romantic nostalgia was experimentally manipulated (Evans et al., 2022). However, the exact mechanisms driving this process remain unknown. Conducting descriptive, idiographic studies that implement inductive qualitative methods may help address this gap in the co-nostalgia literature.

One might also draw upon the construct of couple identity clarity to explore how romantic co-nostalgia and relationship narrative identity may promote positive relationship outcomes. Couple identity clarity, defined as the extent to which one couple member feels like the two of them know who they are as a couple, has been found to predict relationship commitment (Emery et al., 2021). This construct encompasses a holistic reflection on one's partnership, including their relationship status, compatibility, and common interaction patterns (Emery et al., 2021). This holistic reflection may also include one's relationship narratives.[1] Perhaps, then, experiencing romantic co-nostalgia might promote positive relational outcomes by

[1] The following item in Emery et al.'s (2021) couple identity clarity scale has direct implications for relationship narrative identity: "When my partner and I try to figure out the 'story' of us as a couple, how our past led into what we are like today, we don't seem to have the same sense of what we were like in the past".

conferring meaning to the trajectory of relationship events (i.e., by enhancing couple identity clarity).

Narrative Implications for Dyadic Coping

Relationship narrative identity may also be intertwined with couple wellbeing due to its potential influence on couples' abilities to cope with future challenges. In outlining the contours of their relationship trajectories, couples might elect to highlight certain relationship challenges and low points. Accordingly, they may describe scenes of engaging in mutual support and dyadic coping to face these challenges. Feeney and Collins (2015) conceptualize support provision in close relationships as a dyadic, emergent process—much like the co-construction of relationship narratives. Furthermore, in a direct application to research on relationship narrative identity, close others can assist us in the process of cultivating a sense of purpose by helping us reframe or redefine adversity in a positive manner (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Similarly, as they co-construct their narratives, romantic couples engage in the ongoing process of dyadic meaning making to negotiate the implications of certain events for their collective identities.

Another important element of narrative co-construction is responsiveness—the process through which relationship partners support each other's needs and goals (Reis & Clark, 2013). Together, dyadic coping and responsiveness function as distinct interpersonal processes that develop alongside narrative co-construction. Both dyadic coping and responsiveness rely on if-then behavioral contingencies based on prior interactions with one's partner (Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Reis & Clark, 2013). When these if-then behavioral contingencies are solidified (e.g., "If a challenge occurs, then we find a way to frame it in a redemptive manner"), they give rise to norms of narrative framing within a relationship and influence future dyadic coping abilities (see Cox & McAdams, 2014). The act of co-nostalgizing on these solidified if-then contingencies

may promote couple wellbeing by reinforcing the temporal arc of couples' narratives (i.e., enhancing their couple identity clarity) and establishing the foundation for future dyadic coping strategies. Overall, based on prior research, relationship narrative co-construction may have implications for couple identity and wellbeing in both the present (i.e., by evoking feelings of co-nostalgia that potentially influence couple identity clarity) and future (i.e., by forming and solidifying if-then behavioral contingencies that contribute to future dyadic coping abilities).

The Current Studies

To date, studies assessing narrative identity have prioritized examining established narrative themes over developing idiographic, data-driven themes. Accordingly, in attempting to apply findings from the study of individual narrative identity to the domain of romantic relationships, researchers have discovered that some narrative themes that are associated with individual wellbeing may not extend to relationship functioning (Dunlop et al., 2021; Dunlop et al., 2019; Dunlop et al., 2018). This discrepancy illuminates the need for idiographic, inductive work to explore the nuanced psychological processes that may evade solely nomothetic, deductive methods. To address this gap in the literature, I conducted a series of two qualitative studies in which I utilized idiographic, theoretically informed inductive and deductive methods to delve deeper into romantic couples' relationship narratives. In Study 1, I conducted a theoretically informed inductive thematic analysis of $N = 95$ dyadic relationship origin stories from an age-diverse community sample of romantic couples. In Study 2, I conducted a combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis of $N = 40$ relationship challenge narratives from a sample of undergraduate students involved in committed romantic relationships. My first study explored the following research question: *How do romantic couples co-construct their dyadic identities and wellbeing through their relationship narratives?* My second study delved into the

following research question: *How do individuals in romantic relationships construct storied relationship identity continuity through the authorship of relationship challenge narratives?*

Study 1

Methods

Participants

Participants were a community sample of $N = 95$ romantic couples from the midwestern United States (total $N = 190$ individuals; age $M = 36$ years, $SD = 12.64$, range = 24-76 years; 49.07% women, 49.07% men, 1.39% nonbinary; 55.56% European-American, White, Anglo, or Caucasian, 22.22% African-American, Black, African, or Caribbean, 8.32% Biracial or Multiracial, 5.56% Asian-American, Asian, or Pacific Islander, 5.56% Hispanic-American, Latino(a), or Chicano(a), 2.78% another race or ethnicity; 78.70% heterosexual, 6.02% gay or lesbian, 5.56% bisexual, 5.56% queer, 2.32% pansexual, and 1.39% another orientation. The average duration of participants' relationships was 8.78 years ($SD = 8.78$, range = 5 months–50.58 years) at the time of assessment. In addition, 44.44% of participants were in a committed life-long partnership, 37.04% were married, and 18.52% were dating seriously.

Procedure and Materials

During this phase of the larger study,[2] couple members were videotaped answering a series of five open-ended discussion questions together either in their own places of residence or in a lab. Discussions were led by teams of research assistants. The current study assessed couples' responses to the following prompt:

> *Cast your mind back to when your relationship was just beginning. Please talk about the major developments that transpired from the moment you first became aware of each*

[2] The data presented in Study 1 are derived from one wave of a longitudinal dataset collected by Dr. Lydia Emery and her research team at a large Midwestern university.

other to the moment when you first became an established couple. For example, how did you first notice each other, when did you first kiss, when did you first meet each other's families, and so forth? As you consider these developments, make sure to give a sense of how much time passed from one to the next: Was it minutes? Weeks? Years?

Data Preparation

All 95 videotaped responses, each about 8 minutes in length, were transcribed using the software Descript, an online AI-based tool. Files were uploaded, transcribed, and analyzed in a randomized order. A team of six research assistants then verified the accuracy of the AI-generated transcripts. Specifically, each transcript was reviewed by two research assistants, who independently compared its content to the video recordings and edited any discrepancies. Research assistants were instructed to check the accuracy of each transcript's content and speaker labels (i.e., differentiating content spoken by the speaker on the left of the frame from content spoken by the speaker on the right). Next, I reviewed the transcripts a third and final time, making corrections as needed. Finally, I downloaded the amended transcripts from Descript and compiled them into a single Word document for analysis. Each transcript was comprised of an average of 1,283 words, including all speaker labels.

Data Analysis

Familiarization & Coding

Whereas prior research has primarily examined how narrative attributes relate to self-reported measures of wellbeing, I implemented a purely qualitative approach to explore potential narrative indicators of couple wellbeing. I decided that a theoretically informed inductive thematic analysis would be the most suitable method to accomplish this aim and adhered to the methodological guidelines outlined by Terry et al. (2017; see also Braun & Clarke, 2022). I

constructed the following research question, inspired by my own interests, life experiences, and research background: How do romantic couples co-construct their dyadic identities and wellbeing via the co-authorship of their narratives? First, I initiated the data familiarization stage, which involved an in-depth read-through of all 95 transcripts. At this time, I added notes in the margins where I noticed overarching patterns or had questions about the data. I also noted instances where I made connections to relevant theory in close relationships research.

Once I was familiarized with the data, the coding process began. I uploaded the Word document of compiled transcripts to Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. Next, I systematically analyzed each data item line by line in Dedoose, giving equal attention to each transcript. Coding at the phrase level, I noted and labeled excerpts that were particularly relevant to my research question. Specifically, I focused on how couples framed and interpreted relationship events (e.g., relationship challenges) to create their couple identity, and how this process might contribute to wellbeing. Both semantic codes (i.e., descriptive, surface-level analyses regarding the explicit, spoken content of the transcripts) and latent codes (i.e., deeper analyses regarding the implicit meaning behind couples' words) were generated, with a focus on the latter. As instructed by Terry et al. (2017), I refined my codes as I advanced through the transcripts, taking a comprehensive and iterative approach rather than zeroing in on a few specific couples' anecdotes.

At this stage, I reviewed and collated any overlapping codes. I also drafted tentative definitions for each code. Next, I reviewed the excerpts linked to each code and ensured that they adhered to my definitions. If they failed to do so, I either: a) relocated them to a more suitable code classification, b) refined the code to better represent the data, or c) created an entirely new code or subcode. By the end of this process, I had generated a tentative list of parent codes and

subcodes, each with its own definition and set of linked excerpts. Some excerpts were linked to multiple different codes. I took an iterative analytic approach, in which I recursively refined my analyses as I read the transcripts, reviewed relevant theory, and returned to the transcripts with new insights in mind. This flexible approach ensured that my interpretations accommodated all 95 transcripts.

Theme Development

I then embarked upon the process of developing themes. Guided by my codes, research question, and background knowledge, I constructed themes that represented patterns across the data set. At this phase, I produced a list of provisional themes and thematic definitions, as well as a preliminary thematic map that displayed the relationships between themes and subthemes (Terry et al., 2017). I verified that the themes were "internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive" (Terry et al., 2017, p. 29), and edited my list and map accordingly. Finally, I reviewed the compiled transcripts to ensure that my themes represented the data set as a whole and were relevant to my research question.

Positionality & Reflexivity

Overall, my analytic process was active, organic, and remained in flux as I repeatedly acquired new theoretical knowledge, returned to the data, and refined my analyses. This process is consistent with the guidelines for thematic analysis outlined by Terry et al. (2017) and Braun and Clarke (2022). I took an inductive approach to coding and theme development, based on my assumption that effective coding requires immersion in the data. That being said, I must acknowledge my reflexivity as a researcher of close relationships. My knowledge of specific topics, in addition to certain experiences and observations from my own relationships, clearly contoured my interpretation of the data. Furthermore, I take a critical realist ontological

orientation in my work (Terry et al., 2017). This orientation views people's words as providing access to their idiosyncratic versions of reality, and research as interpretations of this reality. In other words, my analyses represent my interpretation of participants' realities based on the stories they construct, rather than an objective reality. Ultimately, I, as the researcher, play an active, biased role in this work; my analyses were constructed through the lenses of my own background knowledge, ontological orientation, and life experiences.

Results

To review, my analyses were guided by the following research question: *How do couples co-construct their identities and wellbeing through narrative?* I focused on how couples derived integrative meaning of relationship events in their origin stories, and the themes that I developed were both data-driven and influenced by the existing literature. My thematic map (see Figure 1) displays the theoretical origins of my analyses, the themes that I constructed in the current study, and how the themes relate to their theoretical origins. The "Individual Level" row presented in Figure 1 depicts the established theoretical link between nostalgia, self-continuity, and individual wellbeing (Sedikides et al., 2023; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). The "Dyadic Level" row conveys Fetterman and Evans' (2022) theory that the act of co-nostalgizing on relationship events might confer meaning and promote couple wellbeing. However, the mechanisms by which co-nostalgia may be intertwined with couple wellbeing (i.e., the center element of the "Dyadic Level" row) remain underexplored, thus prompting the need for qualitative idiographic studies. Fetterman and Evans (2022) hypothesized that co-nostalgia may promote couple wellbeing by reminding partners of the developmental trajectory of their relationship. Considering this hypothesis and my readings of the narrative transcripts, I propose that relationship identity continuity may contribute to the theorized association between the

experience of romantic co-nostalgia and couple wellbeing. As a dyadic analogue of self-continuity (Baumeister & Landau, 2018), relationship identity continuity refers to the extent to which a couple's identity of the past chronologically connects to their present and presumed future identities in a coherent manner. Thus, my thematic analysis is centered on the following question, which is rooted in my primary research question: *How might the experience of co-nostalgia (as evoked by the study prompt) be intertwined with storied relationship identity continuity and couple wellbeing in the current sample*?[3]

Brief Overview of Themes

The taxonomy of themes that I constructed explores the dynamic "doing" of relationship identity continuity. Each theme in the taxonomy (depicted as light green elements in Figure 1) represents a different way in which couples co-constructed storied relationship identity continuity when experiencing romantic co-nostalgia. Themes will be discussed in order of increasing specificity (i.e., the more generalized methods of establishing relationship identity continuity will be presented first). I will first provide a brief overview of the themes that corresponds with the order in which they are presented in Figure 1: When reflecting on the overall arcs of their relationship origin stories, numerous participants simultaneously reflected on their experiences responding to the study prompt and their perceptions of time passing. Couples frequently highlighted scenes in which they experienced relationship challenges and engaged in dyadic coping to face adversity together, suggesting that these events may have been central to their identities. Accordingly, participants often made meaning of these scenes by reflecting on their resilience as a couple and framing these stories in terms of either redemption or

[3] I did not code for co-nostalgia, relationship identity continuity, or couple wellbeing as explicit themes. Rather, I conceptualized co-nostalgia as an underlying dimension of what couples experienced as they responded to the narrative prompt. I conceptualized relationship identity continuity and couple wellbeing as my holistic, subjective interpretations of these constructs based on each couple's narrative.

acceptance.[4] The following section will present detailed descriptions, key excerpts, and analyses of each theme in the taxonomy.

In-Depth Descriptions of Themes

Reflecting on the Relationship as a Whole

This broad theme represents the most comprehensive way in which couples developed relationship identity continuity in response to the process of co-constructing their origin stories. Specifically, it involved sequences in which couples outlined the overall progression of relationship events and made integrative meaning of this based on their current perspectives. The first part of the definition parallels the study prompt (i.e., "please talk about the major events that transpired…") and evoked more semantic codes, whereas the latter evoked evaluative, latent content. Interestingly, the prompt itself did not explicitly instruct couples to make meaning of relationship events; rather, this evaluative component emerged organically. Relatedly, most couples extended the time span of their reflections to the present, which diverged from the prompt's stated end point (i.e., when they first became established as a couple). Participants' propensity for meaning making and initiating temporal links underscores the existential functions of nostalgia and narrative processing (Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 1985; McAdams, 2021; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018).

Couples varied in the extent to which they focused on the entire narrative arc of their partnerships or 'zoomed in' on a selection of key scenes. However, all excerpts linked to this theme included an evaluation of the meaning of events. For example, Couple 160 expressed:

[4] The subthemes of acceptance and redemption were established in prior work. I took a theoretically informed inductive approach, and some of my themes were consistent with existing research on narrative identity.

Left: I think if anything, that first year was kind of like, you know, us kind of figuring out what we wanted in a relationship and understanding each other and what we needed to work on or fix.

And then after that it was just like, we're both on the same boat. We both feel the same way. We both want the same things.

We're both in it together, and it's just kind of been a constant strive towards that since then.[5]

In this excerpt, the couple took a holistic view of their relationship timeline and then divided it into two distinct time points. The first year of the relationship is framed as having been an adjustment period (i.e., getting "on the same boat"), while subsequent years mark the period when their identities and goals reached alignment (i.e., "We both want the same things"). Notably, the couple then made meaning of this progression and oriented their story towards the future by identifying the "constant strive" that motivates them towards their shared goals. In doing so, the couple explicitly connected their past, present, and future strivings (Baumeister & Landau, 2018). Therefore, the act of narrating this story and initiating these temporal links may function to enhance this couple's sense of relationship identity continuity.

Reflecting on the Act of Narration & Passage of Time

This theme represents another method by which couples co-constructed relationship identity continuity and is comprised of two interrelated subthemes related to temporality.

Reflecting on the Act of Narration. Here, couples reflected on the act of responding to the prompt and narrating their co-authored relationship origin stories. Yet another layer of evaluative content is added, as couples are essentially reflecting on their experience of reflecting.

[5] Excerpts have been edited slightly for brevity. "Right" and "Left" denote the positioning of the speaker in the video recording from the viewer's perspective. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Couples tended to highlight perceived change over time, story rehearsal frequency, the subjectivity of accounts, and the revisability of these narratives. Furthermore, numerous couples described memories that marked pivotal moments in their stories and commented on the relational value of reminiscing. To illustrate, Couple 5 reflected:

Right: In seven minutes, you do realize we've been married 41 years, right?

Left: Way back. Oh, we, yeah. Way back. We know the beginning.

First, the speaker on the right directly addressed the experimenter, seemingly amused by the prompt's instructions to think back to the beginning of such a lengthy relationship timeline. Next, the speaker on the left conveyed that the beginning of their story from "way back" should be easy for them to recall (i.e., "we know the beginning"). The couple's confidence in their ability to accurately reconstruct this early scene suggests that they frequently rehearsed it together. Perhaps the early years of their narrative are particularly vivid, relationship-defining memories and have thus become deeply solidified into their collective identity. Reflections on the ease with which one can recall and narrate early scenes were common throughout the dataset.

While many couples emphasized specific relationship events, others elected to deemphasize certain events. For example, Couple 151 concluded their story with the following quote:

Yeah. We left some things out, but that's okay.

It is key to examine the negative space evident in this quote. Why did the couple feel compelled to acknowledge that they "left some things out"? Here, the couple took ownership of their narrative, expressing their power to decide which events to highlight or omit as they co-authored their story. For some couples, effective dyadic coping may involve deliberately excluding certain events from one's relationship narrative, rather than attempting to integrate or

reframe them. This quote reflects the dynamic and co-constructed nature of these storied responses, which are likely reflective of individuals' underlying personalities and couple-level identities (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019; Dunlop et al., 2021; McAdams, 2021; McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Numerous couples also commented on the relational value of reminiscing. For instance, Couple 52 remarked:

> *And then you were like, "Well, I don't know what you're expecting, but I just want someone to co-narrate my life with". And I was like, that's exactly…*

In this excerpt, the couple highlighted the pivotal moment when they realized that their relationship aspirations (i.e., to find a partner to "co-narrate [their] life with") aligned. This realization is framed as a turning point during which the partners began orienting their stories to a shared path. Rehearsing this key memory together may function to reinforce the couple's shared path, thus highlighting the identity-affirming function of romantic co-nostalgia. Indeed, the recursive process of developing and internalizing a shared narrative with one's romantic partner may promote a sense of continuity regarding how a couple perceives itself over time.

Reflecting on the Passage of Time. Given the temporal nature of storytelling, the processes of reflecting on narration and the passage of time are closely intertwined. There was a substantial degree of content overlap between these two subthemes. Responding to the prompt's instructions to "give a sense of how much time passed from one [event] to the next", couples' excerpts in this subtheme focused on their experience of time in relation to their narratives. Numerous couples described their early years as turbulent yet passionate, with "firsts" occurring relatively quickly. Most couples recounted vivid memories from the distant past, with some providing detailed descriptions of scenes of "love at first sight". Finally, some couples identified

external factors that either accelerated or delayed the progression of their relationships over time. Several components of this subtheme were illustrated in the following excerpt from Couple 103:

> *I could say the one thing that will be nice for our boys would be me being able to tell them that their mother was the one that I chose to be [with]… from the second I saw her, I knew it…We were sitting at college, and I can remember what you were wearing. This is 24 years, 23 years, and I can still remember it vividly, and everything changed that day.*

Here, the speaker illustrated a vivid turning point from the couple's past: the moment when they first met in college. Even though twenty-three years had passed at the time, he was still able to recall exactly what his wife was wearing. This memory is particularly meaningful to the couple, as it represents the inflection point when they experienced love at first sight and their paths began to align (i.e., "everything changed that day"). Couples frequently preserve relationship-defining memories when co-constructing and retelling their relationship narratives. Furthermore, the speaker explicitly connected this vivid reflection from the distant past to the present (i.e., "I can still remember it vividly") and to their future by commenting that he looks forward to narrating their origin story to their children. The explicit interweaving of past, present, and future as illustrated in this excerpt highlights how the experience of romantic co-nostalgia may promote storied relationship identity continuity.

Dyadic Support & Coping with Stress

This theme represents another way in which couples established relationship identity continuity through their narratives, with a specific focus on scenes in which partners faced relationship challenges and other stressors. Participants often highlighted instances in which either one or both couple members experienced adversity and the couple engaged in dyadic

support to cope. Excerpts linked to this theme frequently described moments of vulnerability and self-disclosure followed by enhanced feelings of emotional intimacy. Additionally, couples often redefined their individual stressors as dyadic stressors. Through this process, an individual's "problems" that fostered loneliness were reframed as manageable "challenges" for the couple to address together. For instance, Couple 186 reflected:

> *Right: I was like, I'm either gonna have to tell him everything that's going on or nothing at all. And I feel like when we had that time when it was just the two of us…I was just like, all right, I'm gonna tell it all.*
>
> *Left: Yeah, I feel like that was a major development, to be honest…*
>
> *Right: Yeah… We had that serious conversation and then the way that you responded to it was like, "That was really hard. I'm sorry that you're going through this, but I hope that I can be the best coworker and friend for you during this time". And then we hugged and I was like, oh my gosh!*

Here, the couple illustrated the turning point in which one partner first engaged in self-disclosure. Notably, her partner responded by reappraising her individual stressors as dyadic stressors (i.e., "I hope that I can be…the best…friend for you during this time"). This quote also highlights the emergent nature of dyadic support. The scene's progression from self-disclosure to support provision and emotional intimacy is likely central to the couple's identity and may have established the foundation for future positive interaction sequences and norms of interpersonal support. Similarly, Couple 31 expressed:

> *Yeah. And being displaced from where you were living for two weeks. And going through that with you, at the time I felt like that's no big deal. Like not to me was it like ever a burden, but looking back on it, that's so a big deal. But it didn't feel like it then 'cause it*

was just like, oh, whatever I can do to be supportive and help you. Just kind of my mantra…

Here, the speaker redefined her partner's eviction-related stressors as her own by incorporating her desire to support him into her self-concept and "mantra". As she reflected on this chaotic period, she noted that she was so focused on supporting him that she never felt overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation. The couple clearly framed this period of unwavering support through adversity as a key scene in their relationship narrative. In fact, later in their story, her partner commented that her act of staying by his side during this tumultuous period convinced him that she was "the one". This experience taught him that he could count on his partner for support—a realization that likely extrapolated to future adversity that the couple faced. Ultimately, the act of co-nostalgizing on memories of engaging in dyadic support to navigate challenges likely promotes relationship identity continuity by bolstering couples' abilities to face future stressors together.

Reflecting on Resilience as a Couple

In this closely related theme, couples recalled memories of experiencing adversity together and then either adapting to or overcoming these challenges. This theme also has an evaluative component: partners frequently discussed the extent to which they defined their couple identities in terms of their resilience through adversity. The theme's two subthemes, acceptance and redemption, represent two theoretically informed narrative sequences that participants drew upon to frame their resilience stories. Each of these subthemes also represents different ways in which couples developed relationship identity continuity by co-constructing their origin stories.

Acceptance. The acceptance subtheme is derived from McAdams et al.'s (2022) concept of acceptance narratives. In acceptance narratives, protagonists recall adapting to adversity, accepting life's lack of predictability, and finding peace in the present moment (McAdams et al., 2022). Excerpts associated with this theoretically informed subtheme involve couples coming to terms with and learning to navigate life's challenges together. For example, Couple 44 commented:

> *Because that's the way it happened with my mom and dad. They met… they married, and then they started having all of us, and then now it's not like that. Life's not perfect, but you know what, [it's] what happened.*

In this excerpt, the couple reflected on how their relationship timeline diverged from their parents' more normative timeline. Whereas the speaker's parents progressed from meeting to getting married and having children, Couple 44's trajectory was less traditional. With their realization that "life's not perfect, but…[it's] what happened", it is evident that the couple has grown to accept their less conventional relationship origin story. The couple's framing of their resilience narrative illustrates that their acceptance mindset is a salient feature of their collective identity. The practice of framing resilience in terms of acceptance is also illustrated in the following excerpt from Couple 33:

> *Left: We moved a lot because of first the military and then John's work… But we've always made it work. I have always liked every place we've lived. I just say, this is where I am and this is what I'm gonna like, and we just make it work.*

Here, an elderly couple reflected on how they came to terms with their frequent relocation. Instead of expressing resentment at the sense of uprootedness that could be evoked by repeatedly moving, the wife described how she acclimated to new environments by accepting

that “this is where [she is] and this is what [she’s] gonna like”. Furthermore, the speaker’s mantra-like repetition of the phrases “we’ve always made it work” and “we just make it work” conveys that the couple views their acceptance of challenges as a key facet of their couple-level identity. For this couple, the act of narrating this scene likely fortifies important coping-related if-then contingencies. In turn, the couple may extrapolate this framing to address future challenges (i.e., “we *will* make it work”). According to McAdams et al. (2022), acceptance narratives are likely more relevant and adaptive for protagonists in late life. My findings were consistent with this prediction, as most acceptance narratives were told by elderly participants like Couple 33.

Redemption. The redemption subtheme is a dyadic application of McAdams’ expansive body of work on redemption sequences in individual life narratives. In narratives of redemption, protagonists frame their challenges such that they are transformed into positive outcomes and meanings. In the current study, couples recalled overcoming challenges together and then made positive meaning of their experiences. McAdams’ (2022) discussion of how redemption sequences are likely more relevant and adaptive in midlife (rather than late life) was supported by the current study. Specifically, the redemption subtheme was much more common across all 95 transcripts than the acceptance subtheme, which makes sense given that the average age of the participants was thirty-six years old. McAdams et al. (1997) compiled the following list of specific types of redemption sequences: “Sacrifice, Recovery, Growth, Learning, and Improvement”. Several of these examples were illustrated in the following excerpt from Couple 119:

> *Left: But we recovered from that storm… And I think when you're given that second chance… to redo a relationship of what it could have been…I mean, it really does make it*

stronger at the end of the day. So I think that was a major groundbreaker in us proceeding our relationship as we did.

Right: The problem we had with my family really acted as a catalyst for me to say, okay, Jack, do you really love him? Or is this just a fling? And we worked through it, and it isn't an issue. As I said to you a long time ago, there's ways to fix everything and I think we fixed this as best as it can be fixed.

In this excerpt, the couple reflected on the interpersonal difficulties they faced in the wake of familial conflict. Rather than fixating on the negative aspects of this challenging scene, the couple focused explicitly on positive outcomes and meanings. The speaker on the left initiated this meaning making process by reflecting, "But we recovered from that storm", which illustrates the "Recovery" type of redemption sequence (McAdams et al., 1997). The couple then framed their challenges as an inspiration for positive change in the relationship, stating that their disagreement precipitated a "second chance…to redo [the] relationship". Similarly, the speaker on the right identified this period of adversity as the catalyst that inspired him to look inward and recommit to the partnership (i.e., exemplifying "Learning" and "Growth"). "Improvement" is also illustrated because the couple was able to work through their challenges and fix their relationship. The couple's internalization of this relationship-defining redemptive narrative will likely influence how they cope with future challenges together (i.e., by fortifying their redemptive mindset that "there's ways to fix everything"). The redemption subtheme is also illustrated in the following excerpt from Couple 41:

Right: "Drugs, parties...people...Evictions. Lost jobs, lost family…

Left: But then we realized that we were obligated to take care of one another, and then through an application we realized that we loved being with one another. And that we

didn't wanna be with anybody else. 'Cause it was like you felt obligated to take care of me. Not financially, but a way of guiding me to health. What do I say? I say we were two damaged people that healed each other. We helped each other find our way in the world.

Here, Couple 41 reflected on and made meaning of the profound adversity that they experienced early on in their timeline. After listing the numerous stressors that they faced together, the couple framed their story in a way that redeems these challenges. Specifically, they learned through their struggles and subsequent need to support and care for one another that they loved being together. One partner helped "guide [the other partner] to health", and ultimately, this ongoing dyadic support contributed to them healing one another (i.e., illustrating "Recovery", "Learning", "Growth", and "Improvement"; McAdams et al., 1997, p. 694). I am also reminded of the interconnected nature of dyadic support and couple resilience in the following quote: "I say we were two damaged people that healed each other…We helped each other find our way in the world". This couple's redemptive framing of the hardship they faced exemplifies another way in which participants tended to build storied relationship identity continuity through narrative co-construction. Specifically, the act of reflecting on relationship-defining redemptive sequences may promote couples' perceived relationship identity continuity by reinforcing the connection between their past challenges and present wellbeing, while also orienting them towards a redemptive future.[6]

Discussion

In the current study, I conducted a fully qualitative thematic analysis of $N = 95$ relationship origin stories to explore how couples co-construct their identities and wellbeing through narrative. Prior research has established that certain aspects of couples' relationship

[6] See Table 1 for theme definitions and additional example excerpts.

narratives are associated with positive relational outcomes (Alea et al., 2010; Bühler & Dunlop, 2019; Bühler et al., 2017; Dunlop et al., 2021; Dunlop et al., 2019; Frost, 2013). This research is rooted in the expansive body of work assessing how aspects of individuals' life narratives relate to their self-reported health and wellbeing (Adler et al., 2017; Adler et al., 2016; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; McAdams, 2021; Singer, 2004). However, certain themes that were developed in the context of individuals' life narratives have not extrapolated to the domain of romantic relationships, thus highlighting the limits of solely nomothetic approaches (Dunlop et al., 2019; Dunlop et al., 2018; Syed, 2024). This discrepancy illuminated the need for descriptive, qualitative studies to explore the co-constructed relationship narrative themes that may hold relevance for couple-level wellbeing. Indeed, the idiosyncrasies of meaning making likely extend beyond most preestablished themes, especially in a dyadic context in which meanings are continuously (re)negotiated between romantic partners. To directly address this gap in the literature, I implemented a theoretically driven inductive, idiographic coding approach to construct themes that may be intertwined with couple-level wellbeing in a sample of dyadic relationship narratives.

Incorporating theoretical influences from the existing literature on nostalgia, co-nostalgia, and self-continuity, I posited that the act of relationship narrative co-construction (which elicits feelings of romantic co-nostalgia) may be intertwined with couple wellbeing due to its potential role in enhancing relationship identity continuity, or the degree of chronological coherence between a couple's past, present, and presumed future identities (Baumeister & Landau, 2018; Fetterman & Evans, 2022; Sedikides et al., 2023; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). The taxonomy of themes that I constructed comprises the methods by which couples developed storied relationship identity continuity through the narration process. To review, most couples outlined

their relationship timelines as a whole and then reflected on the identity-related implications of certain scenes. By verbally mapping out the progression of events in their origin stories and connecting them to their broader couple-level identities, participants reinforced the temporal integration between their past experiences, the present moment, and their imagined futures (McAdams, 2021; Syed & McLean, 2016). Similar themes have been explored by studies implementing the RNI, which includes a prompt that broadly assesses individual participants' relationship narrative storylines prior to delving into specific key scenes and their identity-related implications (Bühler et al., 2017).

Another way in which couples established relationship identity continuity involved reflecting on their experience completing the narrative task. Here, couples commented on the process of co-constructing their narratives and discussed the value of reminiscing on these scenes. Co-nostalgizing on relationship turning points, which frequently involved the moment when partners began defining themselves as a couple, functioned to preserve these co-created dyadic identities. This meta-reflection on the relationship narrative storytelling process has been assessed in an individual context via the RNI, which includes a prompt in which the interviewer asks participants to reflect on their experience completing the interview (Bühler et al., 2017). However, to my knowledge, this experiential component has yet to be assessed in the dyadic context. Furthermore, couples' reflections on the narration process were often intertwined with their reflections on temporality in relation to their origin stories. Numerous couples were able to narrate key relationship scenes with a remarkable level of detail despite the passage of several decades. In addition, disagreements on the timing, order, or meaning of relationship events prompted discussions on what "actually" happened and when, providing dynamic snapshots of identity co-construction that are only accessible with dyadic assessments. The act of reflecting on

the temporal experience of the narration process likely prompted couples to (re)negotiate the temporal orientation of relationship events, thus fostering a sense of storied identity coherence.

One type of relationship event that frequently inspired identity-related reflections involved scenes of engaging in dyadic coping to face relationship challenges. Many couples identified these scenes as turning points in their narratives, suggesting that they might frame their abilities to successfully cope with challenges as a key facet of their couple-level identities. Couples often recalled having redefined their individual stressors as dyadic stressors to face adversity, which aligns with Feeney and Collins' (2015) finding that close others can help us cultivate a sense of purpose by helping us positively-redefine our stressors. Moreover, some couple members remarked that early coping-related experiences with their partners taught them that they could rely on each other for support during future challenges, thus demonstrating the emergent nature of dyadic support (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Rehearsing memories in which couples successfully engaged in dyadic coping may enhance storied relationship identity continuity by orienting couples towards their shared future, as the support-related norms that were established in the past may help them navigate future challenges. These support-related norms arise via the solidifying of if-then behavioral contingencies that occurs as relationships develop and evolve (Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Reis & Clark, 2013). Accordingly, the act of co-constructing one's relationship origin story may help facilitate the solidification of these norms.

Relatedly, couples frequently discussed either adapting to or overcoming challenges together. These stories of couple resilience took the form of either acceptance or redemption sequences, which are rooted in the narrative identity literature. Here, acceptance and redemption framing served as different pathways by which couples established storied relationship identity continuity. Specifically, couples' tendencies to utilize either acceptance or redemption framing

may highlight the support and coping-related norms and strategies that have been most adaptive for them over the course of their timelines (Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Reis & Clark, 2013). Thus, these established norms may influence how couples face challenges in the future. In this manner, the act of reflecting on stories of resilience likely reinforces how partners see themselves as a couple over time. This result is consistent with Cox & McAdams' (2014) finding that the valence of how narrators made meaning of high and low points in their life stories predicted their self-reported emotion regulation two years later.

Studies have yet to test how the presence of acceptance framing relates to wellbeing in both individual and relationship narrative contexts (McAdams et al., 2022). In contrast, ample research has established that the presence of redemption framing in individuals' life stories is associated with self-reported health and wellbeing (e.g., Adler et al., 2017; Adler et al., 2016; McAdams, 2021). Recent applications to the relationship domain have found that the presence of redemption framing in individuals' relationship stories is unrelated to self-reported relational wellbeing (Dunlop et al., 2019; Dunlop et al., 2018). The current work builds upon these studies by illustrating that couples' framing of relationship challenges in terms of redemption (and acceptance) is likely intertwined with holistic narrative impressions of their relational wellbeing. Ultimately, this finding highlights the value of using a dyadic design and a theoretically informed inductive analytic approach when exploring the nuances of relationship narrative identity co-construction.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study exhibits numerous strengths. First, the community-based method of recruiting a large sample ($N = 95$ couples) resulted in the elicitation of a dynamic body of qualitative data. The present sample is especially unique due to its diversity in age range (i.e., 24-

76 years). Furthermore, the study's dyadic design allowed us to capture both partners' contributions to the co-construction of their relationship origin stories. Accordingly, we were also able to capture dynamic moments of disagreement and negotiation between couple members. Most existing studies of relationship narrative identity have assessed individual (rather than dyadic) relationship narratives. In terms of methodology, my fully qualitative, theoretically informed inductive analytic approach was especially suitable here given my focus on emergent meaning making processes in romantic dyads. This analytical flexibility allowed me to construct data-driven themes and revise them as I progressed through the transcripts, thus expanding the scope of themes that are typically assessed in narrative studies. The present work also differs from prior studies of relationship narrative identity in that its prompt assessed relationship origin stories in-depth rather than focusing on specific key scenes. Accordingly, the current study complements our understanding of how couples derive integrative meaning across diverse relationship experiences. The prompt's broad scope allowed participants to more spontaneously reveal the scenes that were particularly meaningful in the context of their relationship narratives, which aligns with my inductive analytic approach. Finally, the current study integrates the literature on (co-)nostalgia, self-continuity, and dyadic coping in a novel way.

It is important to acknowledge that the current study also has several limitations. For instance, while my analyses were primarily centered on couple resilience and coping, these topics were not explicit aspects of the study prompt. As a result, several couples did not discuss coping-related scenes, and thus, their data did not relate to these analyses. While counting frequencies of themes across participants is not a primary goal of inductive thematic analysis, utilizing data derived from such a broad prompt may have impeded my ability to understand how all couples' responses might relate to my research question. To capture more in-depth, relevant

responses from a wider array of participants, future work may benefit from prompting participants to specifically reflect on memories of facing challenges with their romantic partners. Relatedly, given that participants were not explicitly instructed to make meaning of their relationship timelines, some couples did not reflect on any identity-related implications of events. With this limitation in mind, it would be advantageous for future studies to complement this work by directly asking participants to discuss the meanings they derive from certain scenes in their narratives.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the present analyses have enhanced my understanding of how couples co-construct their dyadic identities and wellbeing through the co-authorship of their relationship narratives. The iterative process of narrative co-construction facilitates a sense of storied relationship identity continuity by reinforcing the temporal integration between couple members' shared past, the present, and their imagined futures. In particular, the act of rehearsing scenes in which partners accepted or overcame challenges reinforces the connection between partners' past struggles and current resilience, while also solidifying coping-related norms that may extrapolate to future adversity. Future qualitative studies should incorporate data-driven methods to explore the unique narratives of romantic couples.

Study 2

To review, my Study 1 analyses centered on scenes in which couples coped with and made meaning of relationship challenges within their broader, co-constructed relationship origin stories. In other words, participants were not asked to narrate relationship challenges directly. In contrast, Study 2 involved directly prompting individual participants who were involved in romantic relationships to describe how they coped with and made meaning of their greatest

relationship challenges.[7] In the current study, I used combined inductive and deductive methods to delve into the following research question, which is rooted in my Study 1 findings: *How do individuals in romantic relationships develop storied relationship identity continuity through the authorship of relationship challenge narratives?*

Methods

Participants

Participants were $N = 40$ UC Davis undergraduate students (age $M = 21.08$ years, $SD = 5.14$, range = 18-47 years;[8] 77.5% female, 22.5% male; 70% heterosexual, 17.5% bisexual, 7.5% multiple sexual orientations, 5% lesbian; 30% White, 25% Biracial, Multiracial, or Mixed, 25% another race, 7.5% American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.5% Japanese, 2.5% Korean, 2.5% Asian Indian, 2.5% Chinese; 37.5% of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin) who reported current involvement in a committed romantic relationship (i.e., 97.5% of participants were involved in an official relationship and 2.5% were married). The average duration of participants' relationships at the time of assessment was 21.14 months.[9] Participants signed up for the online study via SONA and received Psychology course credit in exchange for their participation.

Procedure and Materials

Each study session took approximately 30 minutes to complete. After signing up for the study on SONA, participants received an anonymous link to the Qualtrics survey. Following the consent form and a brief introduction, the survey prompted participants to enter either the first

[7] Ideally, romantic partners would co-narrate their relationship challenges for this study. However, due to constraints in study resources, I used individually constructed relationship challenge narratives as proxies for dyadic relationship challenge narratives.

[8] To broaden the age range of my Study 2 sample, I sent recruitment emails advertising my study to all SONA participants who were at least 26 years old and involved in a romantic relationship ($N = 22$). Approximately two weeks later, I expanded the pool of eligible participants to include all SONA participants who were at least 18 years old and involved in a romantic relationship.

[9] An assessment of relationship duration was missing from the initial survey, so I sent a single-question follow-up survey to participants via SONA one week later. 57.5% of participants ($N = 23$) provided a response.

initial of or a pseudonym for their current romantic partner. The Qualtrics survey was programmed to embed this text response into future questions to personalize each participant's survey experience. Next, participants were instructed to take their time responding to each short answer question and include as much detail as possible in their responses (i.e., at least three full sentences per question). The survey required participants to remain on the page for at least five minutes before advancing to the next. In total, the survey was comprised of the following two short-answer questions (adapted from the RNI; Bühler et al., 2017):

> ***Theme:*** *Looking back over your entire relationship story with [Partner], with all its scenes and challenges, extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your relationship story?*
>
> ***Challenge:*** *Looking back over your entire relationship with [Partner], what do you now consider the single greatest challenge your relationship has faced? How did you and [Partner] deal with this challenge? What is the significance of this challenge for your relationship story?*[10]

Next, participants answered a brief series of demographic questions. Finally, participants were thanked for their time and automatically received Psychology course credit through SONA upon submission of their responses.

Data Preparation

First, I exported the data from Qualtrics to Excel, where I randomized the order of participants' responses based on randomly generated ID numbers. Then, I compiled the relationship challenge narrative text responses into a single Word document organized by

[10] The current study only analyzed participants' responses to the relationship challenge prompt.

participant ID. Participants' responses averaged 173 words in length, with a range of 101 to 399 words.

Data Analysis

Familiarization & Coding

I conducted a theoretically informed, combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis of the text response data, adhering to a similar analytic procedure to that used in Study 1 and inspired by Terry et al.'s (2017) and Braun and Clarke's (2022) methodological guidelines. I crafted the following research question to expand upon my Study 1 findings: *How do individuals who are involved in romantic relationships establish storied relationship identity continuity through the construction of relationship challenge narratives?* My analyses focused specifically on how participants coped with and derived integrative meaning of challenges with their romantic partners. To familiarize myself with the data, I began with an in-depth reading of all 40 challenge narratives, noting where I found discussions of dyadic coping, framing of challenges in terms of acceptance or redemption, or noticed other patterns specific to this data set.

After several rounds of in-depth review and extensive notetaking, I uploaded the Word document of compiled responses to Dedoose and began the coding process. While Study 1 involved a more emergent coding process with some theoretical influences, my combined inductive and deductive analytic process for Study 2 involved applying a selection of theoretically driven Study 1 themes. I systematically proceeded through each participant's response and coded for the presence of the following Study 1 themes, which are rooted in prior narrative identity research: 1) reflecting on couple resilience using an acceptance framework, and 2) reflecting on couple resilience using a redemption framework.[11] I also constructed novel data-

[11] See Table 1 to review definitions and examples of these Study 1 themes.

driven themes regarding dyadic coping and resilience. Responses were coded at the excerpt level (i.e., each excerpt was treated as a whole unit of analysis) for acceptance and redemption framing[12] and coded at the phrase level (i.e., each line was analyzed independently) for dyadic coping-related themes. Like Study 1, I focused on both latent and semantic narrative content, as I was primarily interested in exploring how participants framed and made integrative meaning of their relationship challenges. I refined my new codes as I advanced through the transcripts and gained a more holistic understanding of the data set. For my pre-established codes, I reviewed each linked excerpt to ensure that it adhered to my Study 1 definitions and applied to my research question.

Theme Development

Like Study 1, the process of theme development in Study 2 was rooted in my codes, research question, theoretical knowledge (including my initial findings), and subjective life experiences.[13] Importantly, however, my Study 1 themes informed the development of themes in Study 2, with some of the exact same themes being coded across studies. Once I ensured that each theme and definition was relevant, clear, and distinctive, I reviewed the entire set of challenge narratives to ensure that all themes comprehensively represented participants' responses.

Results

My fully qualitative thematic analyses were centered on the following research question: *How do individuals in romantic relationships construct storied relationship identity continuity*

[12] This coding approach allowed me to build upon my initial findings by identifying the prevalence of Study 1 themes (i.e., acceptance and redemption framing) among Study 2 participants.
[13] See "Theme Development" and "Positionality & Reflexivity" from Study 1.

through the authorship of relationship challenge narratives?[14] The current work builds on my Study 1 finding that the act of reflecting on scenes in which couples successfully engaged in dyadic coping to face relationship challenges may fortify their storied relationship identity continuity by reinforcing the temporal connection between their shared pasts, the present, and their imagined futures. Specifically, the present study further explored the idea that the co-construction of relationship challenge narratives might encourage the solidification of if-then behavioral contingencies over time, as couples often reflect on support-related norms from the past to inform their coping strategies in the present and future (Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Reis & Clark, 2013).[15] My thematic map (see Figure 2) depicts the theoretical origins of my analyses, the themes I derived from Study 1, and the novel Study 2 themes.

Brief Overview of Themes

I will first provide a brief overview of each theme in the taxonomy. Like Study 1, each theme (denoted by light green elements in Figure 2) represents a different method by which participants established relationship identity continuity through their narratives. Themes will be discussed in temporal order, such that the order of my results aligns with the order of the prompt's instructions for participants to 1) identify their most significant relationship challenge, 2) discuss how they and their partners dealt with this challenge, and 3) describe the significance of the challenge to their overall relationship stories. When reflecting on how they coped with their greatest relationship challenges, participants frequently discussed how the process of developing norms of open communication with their partners was their most effective dyadic

[14] Like Study 1, I did not code for storied relationship identity continuity as an explicit theme. Rather, I conceptualized it as my holistic, subjective interpretations of this construct derived from each participant's challenge narrative.

[15] Although individual participants (rather than couples) provided relationship challenge narratives in the current study, my assumption here is that these narratives were co-constructed to a certain extent.

coping strategy. Most participants were able to successfully cope with these challenges by developing healthier communication norms, which inspired reflections on one's couple-level resilience and was intertwined with acceptance and redemption framing in the current sample. In contrast, a few participants stated that they were unable to cope with these challenges, which evoked feelings of doubt regarding their couple-level resilience and was intertwined with contamination framing. Participants who provided narratives featuring acceptance or redemption sequences often framed these stories as evidence of the couples' love and resilience that would guide their behavior when coping with future challenges. Before providing in-depth descriptions and examples of these themes, I will first present a descriptive snapshot of the different types of relationship challenges that Study 2 participants wrote about in their challenge narratives.[16]

Descriptive Overview of Challenge Types

In the first part of the prompt, participants were instructed to reflect on their entire romantic relationships and identify the single greatest challenge that they faced with their partners. As I reviewed participants' responses, I established a data-driven coding scheme to classify the excerpts into six distinct challenge types. I coded each response at the excerpt level for challenge type, and only the primary challenge was coded for (i.e., each excerpt could only be linked to one challenge type).

The most common challenge type identified by participants involved difficulties related to individual partners' stressors, anxieties, or mental health struggles ($N = 12$). An additional $N = 10$ participants described challenges that were rooted in romantic partners' conflicting goals, priorities, and communication styles. $N = 6$ participants wrote about how navigating the long-

[16] I acknowledge that counting the frequencies of themes is not a necessary component of inductive thematic analysis. The relationship challenge type data presented here is for descriptive purposes only and is separate from the analyses represented by my thematic map.

distance nature of their relationships was their most significant relationship challenge. In addition, $N = 5$ participants' responses identified the conflict between total immersion with their partners and preserving their individuality as their primary challenge. Another $N = 5$ participants wrote that their primary challenge involved the interference of ex-partners, family members, and other individuals who were external to the relationship. Finally, $N = 2$ participants described how breaking up and getting back together with their partners was their greatest relationship challenge.[17] Overall, participants predominantly discussed challenges related to the early stages of establishing their romantic relationships, which aligns with the relatively brief average duration of relationships reported by this sample.

In-Depth Descriptions of Themes

Coping with Relationship Challenges

In the next section of the prompt, participants were instructed to describe how they dealt with the challenges they identified. Across the entire data set, participants most frequently discussed how the act of establishing open norms of communication with their partners was their most effective dyadic coping mechanism.

Dyadic Coping through Open Communication. In outlining how they coped with their most significant relationship challenges, participants frequently highlighted the value of openly discussing their thoughts and feelings with their partners to gain a greater understanding of one another's idiosyncratic experiences. While this theme is related to my Study 1 theme dyadic support & coping with stress, it also delves deeper into the mechanisms of communication as a specific dyadic coping strategy within this sample.

[17] See Table 2 for definitions, frequencies, and examples of each relationship challenge type.

Participants often described how establishing healthy norms of communication with their partners was an ongoing process that involved "trying out" their personal communication styles and reinforcing those that were most adaptive. Similarly, participants described discussing hypothetical scenarios and establishing boundaries with their partners to build a "foundation" for future challenging interactions. For example, Participant 3 wrote:

> *This challenge was extremely significant to our relationship story because I felt like we connected better than ever before. Many agreements were made on the future of our communications and just mutual understandings [of what] should be said and done.*[18]

In this excerpt, Participant 3 reflected on how facing the challenge of breaking up and getting back together with their partner reinforced the connection between them by creating an opportunity to establish healthier communication norms. Specifically, the participant highlighted how this emergent process involved discussing hypothetical communication-related scenarios (i.e., "agreements were made on the future of our communications") to form behavioral norms and expectations (i.e., "mutual understandings [of what] should be said and done").

Similarly, Participant 20 stated:

> *The greatest challenge my relationship has faced was coming to terms with the idea that if there is an issue or problem, it is us that is against the problem rather than being against each other. We dealt with this challenge by communicating with each other more and setting goals for ourselves which would overflow into our relationship. These obstacles have almost brought our relationship to a close but [by] changing our mindsets in terms of how we approach certain issues, we looked at it as a problem we have to work through together rather than determining someone being right or wrong.*

[18] Excerpts have been edited slightly for brevity.

Here, Participant 20 described how their greatest relationship challenge involved facing problem-solving and communication difficulties with their partner. Specifically, they illustrated how their tendency to frame problems as "it is us…against each other" often resulted in conflict. Ultimately, the couple was able to overcome this challenge by developing norms of open communication at both the individual and dyadic levels (i.e., "setting goals for ourselves which would overflow into our relationship"). One of these communication norms involved framing challenges as "it is us against the problem" instead of immediately placing blame on the other partner. The adaptive if-then behavioral contingencies that the couple developed through facing this challenge (i.e., "if we have a disagreement or face a challenge, then we work together to overcome it") might solidify over time as the couple members navigate additional challenges. This prediction is rooted in my Study 1 finding that the act of reflecting on narratives of successfully engaging in dyadic coping may build storied relationship identity continuity by fortifying coping-related if-then contingencies. Study 2 participants' (unprompted) tendency to frame the co-construction of coping and communication-related norms as emergent processes further supports this key finding.

Making Meaning of Relationship Challenges

The final section of the prompt asked participants to describe the significance of their relationship challenges to their overall relationship stories. Participants in Study 2 frequently framed their narratives in terms of either acceptance or redemption sequences to highlight their couple-level resilience. Like Study 1, each of these theoretically informed narrative frames served as a distinct pathway by which participants established storied relationship identity continuity through the construction of their challenge narratives.

Reflecting on Couple Resilience (Acceptance). Directly derived from Study 1 and rooted in the existing concept of acceptance narratives, the acceptance subtheme involved participants reflecting on their couple-level resilience by coming to terms with and learning to navigate (rather than overcome) relationship challenges (McAdams et al., 2022). For example, Participant 23 wrote:

> *A lost his job in 2023 and it took him 18 months to find another. During that time, my sole income was not enough to maintain our expenses, and so we quickly ran out of savings and started accumulating debt… I became very stressed, but felt like he was not taking the situation as seriously as I was. We're still paying off the debt, and our relationship is still suffering from it… But we're talking a lot, and we've sought the help of a marriage counselor who is helping us have meaningful discussions without each getting so wound up in our own feelings that we can't communicate.*

Here, Participant 23 described how their partner's job loss and their ensuing financial struggles contributed to extreme relationship stress. Despite making progress towards paying off their debt, they still experienced interpersonal conflict related to this challenge (i.e., "our relationship is still suffering from it"). However, with the phrase, "But we're talking a lot," it is apparent that the couple is learning to adapt to their circumstances and establish healthier communication norms with one another. Specifically, they expressed seeking the help of a marriage counselor to learn how to navigate their emotions and conflicting communication styles. This excerpt exemplifies the concept of acceptance framing because the participant described learning how to manage their ongoing financial and interpersonal struggles. Rehearsing this narrative might reinforce their acceptance mindset (i.e., "we can manage

adversity if we have ‘meaningful discussions without getting so wound up in our own feelings’”), thus influencing how the couple frames and copes with challenges in the future.

Reflecting on Couple Resilience (Redemption). Participants in Study 2 most frequently framed their relationship challenges in terms of redemption. To review, redemption framing entails protagonists narrating their challenges such that they are transformed into positive outcomes (McAdams, 2021). For instance, Participant 24 wrote:

> *I was terrified that I'd somehow find a way to jeopardize my relationship with D. She could feel my hesitation, and it would only strike a greater divide between us. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was the only thing making my life difficult… I decided to take a leap of faith and fully emerge myself in my relationship. Things have been perfect ever since. This challenge reflects our dedication to each other, and highlights the theme of opportunity/2nd chances. We both made mistakes in our past, yet this relationship allowed us to apply what we've learned. Self-reflection is best when applied to practice, and this relationship is our proving ground.*

In this excerpt, Participant 24 discussed how their greatest relationship challenge involved their own relationship insecurities “strike[ing] a greater divide between” them and their partner. Realizing that these fears were rooted in their own low self-esteem, they decided to “take a leap of faith” and fully commit to the partnership, which ultimately improved their relationship (i.e., illustrating the “Growth” and “Improvement” redemption types; McAdams et al., 1997). Here, the participant made redemptive meaning of their struggles by framing the challenge narrative as 1) proof of the pair’s dedication to one another and 2) a second chance to apply lessons learned from previous relationship experiences. Interestingly, Study 2 participants frequently discussed how some of the coping-related if-then contingencies they co-constructed

during these challenges were established in direct contrast to prior negative relationship experiences with ex-partners. Specifically, respondents often recalled intentionally forming healthier if-then contingencies and norms of communication with their partners based on mistakes made in prior relationships. Reflecting on this relationship turning point (and thus reinforcing its underlying redemptive framework that redefines challenges as opportunities for growth) may influence how this couple faces future challenges together. In this manner, redemptive framing of challenge narratives served as a method by which Study 2 participants established storied relationship identity continuity.

Reflecting on Ineffective Coping (Contamination). While most Study 2 participants framed their relationship challenges in an affectively positive manner, a few participants provided challenge narratives that involved contamination sequences. Contamination sequences entail protagonists framing their stories such that an affectively neutral or positive event is spoiled by the effects of a negative event (McAdams, 2021). In the current study, participants who provided contaminated narratives reflected on their relationship challenges in a manner that underscored the negative meanings they derived from these experiences. Furthermore, participants who wrote contaminated challenge narratives tended to highlight feeling "stuck" in cycles of reoccurring adversity. For instance, Participant 39 reflected:

> *The greatest challenge in my relationship with A has been his ex and how she cannot get over the past relationship. This makes me feel disrespected and emotionally unsettled. No matter how much love and care exist between us, this unresolved issue keeps resurfacing making me question my worth and the future of our relationship…This challenge is the defining conflict of our relationship, shaping the biggest struggle between love and self respect. It has tested my emotional limits, highlighted our differences in values and forced*

me to question whether our love is strong enough to overcome unresolved issues or if it's a cycle that will never truly change.

Here, the participant described how their partner's ex-partner's inability to emotionally move on from the prior relationship is a reoccurring challenge that is detrimental to their current relationship. The participant wrote that despite the extent to which they "love and care" for one another, this challenge feels insurmountable and even caused the protagonist to question their own self-worth (i.e., "shaping the biggest struggle between love and self respect"). This excerpt exemplifies a contamination sequence in that the protagonist highlights how the couple's love for one another is spoiled by the unresolved challenge of their partner's ex-partner's unhealthy fixation on the ended relationship. Furthermore, the participant's expression of doubt regarding whether their relationship is strong enough to overcome this cyclical issue suggests that the act of reflecting on this challenge might cause them to question their resilience as a couple. Accordingly, couples' contamination framing of relationship challenge narratives may foster (negative) storied relationship identity continuity by reinforcing a sense of temporal identity coherence that is rooted in negative meaning making (i.e., framing relationship challenges as insurmountable).

Participants in Study 2 also derived integrative meaning of relationship challenges in ways beyond acceptance, redemption, and contamination framing. For example, participants who utilized acceptance or redemption framing also tended to redefine these challenging experiences as narrative "proof" of their love and strength.

Reflecting on Facing Challenge as Proof of Love and Strength. When discussing the significance of their relationship challenges, participants frequently highlighted how these experiences served as evidence of couples' love, commitment, or strength. In other words,

numerous participants framed these narratives as key scenes of their relationship stories because they illustrated couples' resilience and commitment to one another through periods of adversity. For instance, Participant 38 expressed:

> *Overcoming miscommunication made our bond stronger and showed us that we can work through difficulties together. It became a turning point that shaped our relationship, proving that trust and effort can help us grow and stay connected to one another.*

In this excerpt, the participant reflected on how the process of overcoming their communication challenges with their partner ultimately improved their relationship. Specifically, they framed this story as evidence of their couple-level resilience (i.e., "overcoming miscommunication…showed us that we can work through difficulties together"). Thus, the couple may refer to this "turning point" memory as a notable feature of their dyadic identity. Participant 38 also discussed how their challenge narrative served as proof of the effectiveness of their dyadic coping strategies involving "trust and effort". Overall, this excerpt highlights how individuals in romantic relationships may preserve specific relationship-defining challenge narratives to reflect on as narrative evidence of partners' abilities to effectively face adversity together. As suggested in Study 1, the act of co-nostalgizing on these preserved challenge narratives may promote storied relationship identity continuity by reinforcing the temporal connection between couples' experiences of these challenges in the past and their present resilience.

Participant 1 conveyed similar sentiments when discussing the significance of their relationship challenge:

> *The significance of this challenge in our relationship story was proving that we really did love each other and genuinely wanted to stay together and build a future with one another.*

This participant's relationship challenge involved breaking up and getting back together with their romantic partner. Like Participant 38, Participant 1 framed their challenge narrative as proof "that [they] really did love each other", suggesting that the couple may reflect on this memory as narrative evidence of their resilience. Furthermore, the participant discussed how this narrative also served as proof of their commitment to one another (i.e., "proving that we…genuinely wanted to stay together and build a future with one another"). As this quote suggests, in addition to temporally interweaving couples' past struggles with their present resilience, the preservation of relationship challenge narratives may have significant implications for couples' futures. Specifically, participants in the current study frequently discussed how they would apply lessons learned from their challenge narratives when encountering future adversity with their partners.

Applying Support-related Norms to Future Challenges. Participants often mentioned or implied that the support and communication-related norms that they established with their partners during these challenging experiences would build the foundation for later instances of effective dyadic coping. This theme builds upon the theme dyadic coping through open communication, as participants frequently described testing out different communication methods and actively preserving those that were most adaptive. For example, Participant 17 wrote:

> *Starting off in this way outlined how we would use honesty and understanding together to strengthen our relationship…I really wanted to be understood, so I communicated*

honestly with him. He was incredibly understanding and made it clear I should take all the time I needed to feel okay. He wanted to make sure above all else, that if we started a romantic relationship, it would be because it was right for both of us…Because of our honesty and effort to understand the other person, we started off our relationship on a very good note.

In this excerpt, the participant reflected on the interpersonal challenge of navigating their hesitancy in the early stages of the relationship. They framed this experience in a manner that highlights how establishing norms of honest communication early on fostered the solidification of these norms for use during future relationship challenges. It is evident that this relational if-then contingency involving open, honest communication followed by understanding became a key process in how this couple addressed relationship challenges, as they were able to "[start] off [their] relationship on a very good note". Accordingly, the couple likely reflects on this challenge narrative as a guide for how to successfully cope with additional challenges that arise.

Likewise, some participants highlighted how they curtailed problematic communication habits rooted in negative experiences with ex-partners so that they wouldn't become normative in their current relationships. For instance, Participant 35 expressed:

This challenge is significant because now that we went through that, we are now able to handle any little problem that comes our way with respect. I am now fully over what I went through in my last relationship. I now know that toxic relationships are worse than I ever imagined and I would not let my new relationship end up that way.

Here, the participant described how their experience overcoming a toxic relationship with the support of their current partner built the foundation for the couple to "handle any little problem that comes [their] way with respect". This quote suggests that they will likely preserve

the coping-related norms that they established (i.e., respectful communication) for use during later challenging experiences. Additionally, they discussed how they reflected on their experience with their toxic ex-partner to prevent similar deleterious behavioral patterns from forming in the current relationship. Taken together, these examples illustrate how Study 2 participants tended to 1) preserve adaptive dyadic coping strategies established with their romantic partners for future use and 2) discard problematic dyadic coping strategies rooted in negative experiences with ex-partners. Thus, this theme underscores how couples have the agency to co-author their own (challenge) narratives and contour their storied relationship identity continuity based on the coping strategies that are most effective for them. Overall, the data presented here suggest that the act of reflecting on relationship challenge narratives in which obstacles were successfully faced may strengthen storied relationship identity continuity by providing a narrative roadmap for couples to follow when navigating future adversity.

Discussion

In the present study, I conducted a combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis of $N = 40$ relationship challenge narratives among young adults to delve deeper into how individuals in romantic relationships construct storied relationship identity continuity. This work was designed to further advance my goal of incorporating idiographic, inductive methods to expand the scope of narrative themes that hold relevance for couple-level wellbeing. My coding approach provided both analytical structure and flexibility in that it allowed me to assess the relevance of certain theoretically informed Study 1 themes in a new sample and establish novel, data-driven themes.

The current analyses are rooted in my Study 1 finding that the act of relationship narrative co-construction may be intertwined with couple-level wellbeing due to its potential role

in fortifying relationship identity continuity. Specifically, Study 2 expands upon my finding that couples' tendencies to frame their challenges in a certain manner might signify the coping strategies that have been most adaptive for them, and that these norms might guide future coping. Mirroring Study 1, the themes that I analyzed in Study 2 represent the different processes participants used to establish storied relationship identity continuity through the authorship of their challenge narratives.

To review, participants were prompted to 1) identify their most significant relationship challenge, 2) discuss how they and their partners dealt with this challenge, and 3) describe the significance of the challenge to their overall relationship stories. Participants frequently highlighted how their most effective dyadic coping mechanism involved establishing norms of open communication with their partners. Furthermore, their responses emphasized the emergent nature of these processes (e.g., communication styles were sampled, and boundaries were established to inform how they dealt with future challenges), which reflects Feeney and Collins' (2015) conceptualization of dyadic support as an emergent process. For these participants, the act of reflecting on narratives in which challenges were successfully faced through open communication may fortify their storied relationship identity continuity by reinforcing this adaptive coping-related if-then contingency (e.g., "if a challenge arises, then we engage in open communication to face it"; Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Reis & Clark, 2013). This theme aligns with Feeney and Collins' (2015) finding that close others can help us cultivate a sense of purpose by helping us redefine challenges in a positive manner (i.e., as opportunities for growth that can be overcome through open communication). In the current study, participants' challenge narratives were assessed using a prompt adapted from the RNI (Bühler et al., 2017). However, beyond the RNI, assessments of relationship challenge narratives that also delve into

participants' coping and meaning making processes remain limited. Future research would benefit from incorporating narrative assessments of these key psychological processes.

When prompted to derive integrative meaning of their relationship challenges, some participants who were successfully able to face these challenges framed their stories in terms of acceptance sequences. In Study 1, I posited that acceptance framing might serve as a pathway towards establishing storied relationship identity continuity because it is an example of a coping-related if-then contingency that may be reinforced over time if proven to be adaptive. My analyses in Study 2 supported this finding. Other than Study 1, no studies have directly assessed how acceptance framing coincides with individual or couple-level wellbeing in narratives, as the framework is a relatively novel concept in the realm of narrative identity research (McAdams et al., 2022).

Other participants derived integrative meaning of their relationship challenges by framing their stories in terms of redemption sequences. Redemption framing was the most common narrative frame utilized by Study 2 participants. Notably, the most common co-occurrence of themes in the current study involved redemption and effective coping through open communication, which emphasizes how participants tended to redeem their challenges by reframing these experiences as opportunities to improve their dyadic communication skills. Extensive studies have established the association between the presence of redemption framing in individuals' life narratives and their self-reported wellbeing (e.g., Adler et al., 2017; Adler et al., 2016; McAdams, 2021). However, as discussed in Study 1, the presence of redemptive framing in individuals' relationship narratives has been found to be unrelated to self-reported relational wellbeing (Dunlop et al., 2019; Dunlop et al., 2018).[19] Study 2 extends this body of

[19] See General Discussion for potential explanations for these discrepancies.

work by illustrating that participants' framing of their narratives in terms of redemption (and acceptance) sequences may be related to their relational wellbeing in the specific context of relationship challenge narratives.

A small quantity of Study 2 participants framed their relationship challenge narratives in terms of contamination sequences, which underscored the negative meanings they derived from their experiences. Participants who provided contaminated narratives often highlighted feeling trapped in cycles of reoccurring challenges with their partners, which called their couple-level resilience into question. Here, I suggested that contamination framing may function as a method of building (negative) storied relationship identity continuity, in that it may reinforce a sense of negatively valenced identity coherence over time. This finding aligns with existing research demonstrating positive relations between contamination framing and depression, and negative relations between contamination framing and life satisfaction and self-esteem (Adler et al., 2017; Adler et al., 2016; McAdams, 2021). However, the current findings diverge from and build upon those of studies that have examined the usage of contamination framing in relationship narratives. Specifically, previous studies found that the presence of contamination framing in individuals' relationship narratives was unrelated to participants' self-reported relational wellbeing (Dunlop et al., 2019; Dunlop et al., 2018). Although the current study did not assess self-reported relational wellbeing, I expect that participants' contamination framing of their relationship challenge narratives might be intertwined with poor relational outcomes due to the negative valence of relationship identity continuity that may accrue from repeatedly using this frame over time.

Numerous participants who provided challenge narratives involving acceptance or redemption sequences also framed their stories as evidence of their love, commitment, and

resilience. These participants described how they preserved their challenge narratives as proof that they could effectively face adversity with their partners. Thus, the act of reflecting on these preserved memories might establish storied relationship identity continuity by reinforcing the connection between couples' past challenges and current resilience. Notably, participants frequently discussed reflecting on the challenges that they had narrated and how they provided a template for navigating future challenges. This finding supports my Study 1 finding that the support-related norms that couples establish with their partners during challenging experiences may build the foundation for future effective dyadic coping (Falconcier & Kuhn, 2019; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Sometimes, this foundation-building process involved establishing if-then behavioral contingencies that were in direct contrast to harmful behavioral patterns rooted in previous relationship experiences. In other words, participants in the current study were able to cultivate their challenge narratives and contour their relationship identity continuity based on the utility of the coping strategies they used to face past relationship challenges. Future studies investigating how romantic couples cope with and make meaning of relationship challenges should incorporate data-driven methods to further expand the scope of these themes.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study exhibits several strengths. For example, the sample's relative homogeneity in age (i.e., college students) enabled me to gain unique insights into the relationship challenges faced by young adult couples. In addition, the focused nature of the relationship challenge narrative prompt facilitated the collection of data that was directly relevant to my research question. Specifically, the prompt clearly delineates three components of challenge narratives (i.e., identifying the challenge, discussing how one coped with the challenge, and integrating the challenge into one's relationship story), which elicited highly

structured, cohesive narrative responses. Furthermore, the focused scope of these narratives permitted me to analyze coping and meaning making processes in-depth, which diverges from the more traditional narrative approach of averaging analyses across multiple scenes. Finally, my theoretically driven, combined inductive and deductive analytic process was suitable for the aims of the current study, as it allowed for deeper exploration into themes from Study 1 while also facilitating the construction of novel data-driven themes.

Importantly, the present study also has numerous limitations. For instance, the Study 2 sample was comprised of a convenience sample from the UC Davis Subject Pool. Accordingly, the narratives analyzed here may not generalize beyond college-aged young adults.[20] Future researchers should consider adopting a community-based recruitment method like Study 1 to ensure that diverse perspectives and relationship experiences are represented. In addition, I used individually constructed relationship challenge narratives as proxies for dyadic relationship challenge narratives due to constraints in study resources. This methodological choice may be problematic due to my assumption that these stories were co-constructed by participants and their partners to some extent, which might not be the case. Dyadic designs that involve romantic partners actively narrating their challenges together are arguably better able to capture the emergent, co-constructed aspects of these narratives than individual, written assessments.

Conclusions

Overall, Study 2 expanded my knowledge of how individuals in romantic relationships construct their storied relationship identity continuity through the authorship of relationship challenge narratives. Participants in the current study established storied relationship identity

[20] My goal was not to generalize my results to other samples, but to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship challenges of college-aged individuals. Therefore, the lack of generalizability of my findings is a minor limitation.

continuity by reflecting on the emergent process of developing healthier communication strategies and framing their challenges in terms of acceptance, redemption, or contamination. Those who provided acceptance or redemptive narratives also tended to frame their challenges as evidence of their love or resilience and commented on how they would refer to this evidence when facing future challenges with their romantic partners. The present work thus reinforced my Study 1 finding that the act of reflecting on successfully overcoming relationship challenges with one's romantic partner reinforces the temporal connection between couple members' past adversity and current resilience, while also paving the way towards future effective dyadic coping.

General Discussion

The current studies represent a novel integration of the existing literature on relationship narrative identity, co-nostalgia, and dyadic coping. Broadly, I found that the acts of co-constructing relationship challenge scenes (Study 1) and constructing personal romantic challenge narratives (Study 2) may be intertwined with couple-level wellbeing due to their potential role in fortifying storied relationship identity continuity (i.e., the level of temporal coherence between couples' past, present, and presumed future identities). Specifically, co-nostalgizing on memories in which partners successfully faced challenges together may reinforce their relationship identity continuity by solidifying relevant coping and support-related if-then contingencies. In turn, these solidified norms might influence how partners face future adversity. One such coping-related if-then contingency involved participants' tendencies to frame their challenges in terms of acceptance, redemption, or contamination sequences.

Study 1 involved a theoretically informed inductive thematic analysis of $N = 95$ romantic couples' relationship origin stories. Couples were recruited from the community and filmed

narrating the major developments of their relationship timelines together, from the moment when partners noticed one another to when they first became an established couple. Despite the broad nature of the study prompt, I primarily analyzed scenes in which couples discussed facing challenges together. In Study 2, I conducted a combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis of $N = 40$ relationship challenge narratives provided by young adult college students who were involved in romantic relationships. Study 2 was designed to 1) assess the relevance of certain Study 1 themes in a new sample using a more focused narrative prompt and 2) create data-driven themes that expand upon my Study 1 findings.

Both studies' thematic maps represent taxonomies of methods by which participants co-constructed storied relationship identity continuity through their relationship narratives. However, the Study 2 thematic map delves deeper into several elements of the Study 1 thematic map. For example, while Study 1 examined dyadic coping as a broad construct, Study 2 focused on a specific dyadic coping strategy frequently mentioned by participants (i.e., dyadic coping through open communication). In addition, while both studies examined how participants reflected on their resilience through acceptance and redemption framing of relationship challenges, Study 2 also examined contamination framing as a form of questioning one's couple-level resilience.[21] Relatedly, Study 2 builds on Study 1 by suggesting that storied relationship identity continuity may be negative in valence if couples' contamination framing of challenges becomes normative within the relationship. Finally, the Study 2 themes reflecting on facing

[21] In Study 1, I was focused on coding for positive meaning making and thus did not attend to or code for contamination framing.

challenge as proof of love and strength and applying support-related norms to future challenges are related to concepts I explored in Study 1 yet also specific to the Study 2 sample.[22]

The differences between the current work and existing findings may suggest that redemption and contamination framing within relationship challenge narrative scenes may be especially predictive of relational wellbeing and ill-being, respectively. One methodological distinction to consider is the variation in narrative scenes analyzed. Dunlop et al. (2018) calculated each participant's proportions of redemptive and contaminated narratives by averaging their presence across a series of six key relationship narrative scenes (i.e., a high point, low point, turning point, positive early memory, negative early memory, and an additional vivid memory). Similarly, Dunlop et al. (2019) summed each participant's counts of redemption and contamination sequences across three narrative scenes (i.e., a high point, low point, and turning point). In other words, both studies involved coding for redemption and contamination based on aggregations of positively and negatively-valenced relationship narrative scenes. Therefore, it may be the case that the strength of the relationships between framing type and relational wellbeing outcomes was diluted across these scenes. Moreover, none of the prompts used in prior studies explicitly elicited relationship challenge narratives. The relationship challenge narrative prompt used in Study 2 directly asked participants to reflect on how they coped with and made meaning of adversity, which might be inherently more likely to evoke redemption and contamination framing than narrative prompts that do not involve these meaning making processes.[23]

[22] These results supported my Study 1 prediction that participants would allude to or discuss the emergent nature of dyadic support, such that reflecting on early memories of dyadic coping would inform future instances of dyadic coping.

[23] Prior research has discussed how variation among narrative prompt types (including the practice of aggregating narrative features across prompts) might impact participants' responses (see Westberg & Syed, 2024).

Another key distinction between current and past findings involves the methodological differences in the assessment of relational wellbeing. While prior studies assessed participants' self-reported relational wellbeing based on a series of quantitative scales, the current studies conceptualized this construct as my subjective, qualitative impressions of relational wellbeing that I constructed from each individual narrative. In other words, it might be the case that the relationship between narrative framing and relational wellbeing may be stronger when utilizing inductive, qualitatively derived narrative impressions versus quantitative, self-reported assessments of relational wellbeing. In sum, the increased relevance of redemption and contamination framing to relational wellbeing within relationship challenge narratives, paired with the differences between quantitative and qualitative assessments of relational wellbeing, may account for these divergent findings.

Overall Strengths and Limitations

The present studies exhibited numerous conceptual and methodological strengths. For instance, the work presented here introduced relationship identity continuity as a meaningful construct for researchers to consider when studying relationship narrative identity. Future work should further develop this construct and examine how it relates to couple-level wellbeing using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In terms of methodology, both studies incorporated idiographic, inductive and deductive qualitative analyses to delve deeper into the nuanced processes that may underlie the established association between relationship narrative identity and wellbeing. This unique approach builds upon and diverges from the field's more nomothetic, deductive, quantitative methodological tendencies. Finally, the studies' temporal progression from a large-scale, exploratory thematic analysis to a smaller-scale, in-depth thematic analysis allowed me to both explore a variety of meanings and interpretations across an age-diverse

sample and focus deeply on challenge-related scenes and narratives. Future qualitative studies of relationship narrative identity would benefit from incorporating similar idiographic, inductive methods and study designs.

There are also limitations of the current studies that may inform the design of future research. One such limitation involves the stark demographic contrasts between the Study 1 and Study 2 samples. Study 1 participants were older than Study 2 participants (i.e., age M = 36 years, range = 18-47 years versus M = 21.08 years, range = 24-76 years) and thus involved in more established relationships on average (i.e., relationship duration M = 8.78 years versus M = 1.76 years). These differences in age and relationship duration likely influenced the types of relationship challenges that were discussed, such that Study 1 participants more frequently outlined challenges associated with established relationships and Study 2 participants tended to describe early relationship challenges. Thus, I was unable to generalize my Study 1 themes to another sample of midlife adults. However, given the idiographic nature of these studies, the lack of generalizability between the samples is a minor limitation. Importantly, through focusing in-depth on the romantic challenges faced by midlife (Study 1) and young adult (Study 2) participants, I was able to determine how relationship identity continuity may be intertwined with narrative themes across a range of relationship experiences.

Conclusions

The work presented here thus extends the conceptual and methodological scope of the existing research on relationship narrative identity. Specifically, I established relationship identity continuity as a construct that is worthy of further study when investigating the association between relationship narrative identity and couple-level wellbeing. The current studies also highlighted the value of using theoretically driven inductive analyses in combination

with deductive analyses to explore the nuanced psychological processes that may evade solely nomothetic, deductive designs. Ultimately, this qualitative research approach centers participants' unique stories and lived experiences, which is essential to gleaning a holistic understanding of the process of relationship narrative identity co-construction—the process by which romantic partners help each other find their way in the world.

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Table 1

Definitions and Examples of Study 1 Narrative Themes

Narrative Theme	Definition	Example
Reflecting on the relationship as a whole	Couples outline the overall progression of relationship events and make meaning of this based on their current perspectives.	Left: Okay. So when our relationship was just beginning, well, we've had two relationships that I think are significant enough to talk about. Right: Do you think that they're separate? Left: Yes. I treat them as separate entities. I don't look at one flowing into another 'cause there was so much time in between. Right: Hmm. Okay. Left: Um, and I think that because we've had two separate relationships, that that's significant and it's made us who we are. [Couple 178]
Reflecting on the act of narration	Couples reflect on the act of narrating their co-authored stories and responding to the study prompt.	Left: So, I guess that we move on to the next week when you just stop talking to me. Right: It's not a milestone though. Left: I think it's a milestone. Right: No, it's not a milestone. Left: I think it's, it's significant that you just like, would not speak to me or acknowledge me. Right: That's not a milestone, that's- Left: You like, cut me out of your life. That's a milestone. [Couple 43]
Reflecting on the passage of time	Couples describe their experience of time passing in relation to their relationship narratives.	Left: When I met him, it was like we just automatically got all meshed into each other. And it moved really, really fast because we really liked each other. You know how it is when you first meet somebody. [Couple 73]

Table 1 (cont.)

Definitions and Examples of Study 1 Narrative Themes

Narrative Theme	Definition	Example
Dyadic support & coping with stress	Couples describe memories of experiencing stressors and supporting one another.	Left: You know, you really were there for me through a hard time, you know? Right: I know, babe. Left: And, uh, I love you for that…I mean, you were there like nobody was there. And I just love you and I appreciate you so much. Right: Somebody should've been there, baby…I felt your pain 'cause of my father and my mother. They passed. Left: You've been there for me and I love you. [Couple 81]
Reflecting on resilience as a couple (Acceptance)	Couples recall adapting to (rather than overcoming) adversity, accepting life's uncertainties, and finding peace in the current moment.	Left: I think also, like you were grieving your two-year relationship. Right: Yeah. In the beginning. Left: And so there was a lot of like, me being concerned that we were jumping into a relationship too quickly after you had ended the relationship with your very serious partner. Right: Yeah. Left: So there was a lot of navigating that, that I think was really important. [Couple 115]
Reflecting on resilience as a couple (Redemption)	Couples' challenges are redeemed into positive outcomes and meanings. Couples recall overcoming challenges together, and then making positive meaning of the experience.	Right: Joseph got hit by a car in 2017. That was a pretty scary thing that happened, [he was] in the hospital for five days. That I think maybe might have jolted us into…I mean, we were already kind of planning on getting engaged…Like just taking the next step. And I think moving to Chicago, like doing what we really wanted to do, like being near our family, starting the life we always envisioned… I think it suddenly just became necessary to do that. Like, stop f****ng around. Like, go do this 'cause we're wasting time. Left: I would agree. We're doing that now. [Couple 26]

Note. Excerpts have been edited slightly for brevity. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Table 2

Definitions, Frequencies, and Examples of Study 2 Relationship Challenge Types

Challenge Type	Definition	Frequency	Example
Individual stressors, anxieties, or mental health struggles	Individual psychological struggles influence the current relationship. These struggles may have roots in past relationship experiences or participants' upbringing.	*N* = 12 30%	"Trusting one another was hard as I come from unstable household and did not feel I could let my guard down. It took a while for me not to overanalyze a change in mood as for me, it meant there was something going on that I did not know of or that they just did not have interest in a relationship." [Participant 11]
Differing goals, priorities, views, and communication styles	Participants describe coming into conflict with their partners due to differing goals, priorities for the relationship, viewpoints, and communication styles.	*N* = 10 25%	"The biggest challenge our relationship has faced is getting to the same page. This is a recurring problem, as we both have different outlooks and opinions. This results in conflict." [Participant 7]
Long-distance relationship	Participants outline the struggles of being involved in a long-distance relationship.	*N* = 6 15%	"The biggest challenge my relationship has faced is long distance. He lives in Canada, so we face some time zone difficulties as well as feel lonely at times." [Participant 8]

Note. Excerpts were coded on the excerpt level for primary challenge type and are edited slightly for brevity.

Table 2 (cont.)

Definitions, Frequencies, and Examples of Study 2 Relationship Challenge Types

Challenge Type	Definition	Frequency	Example
Relationship immersion versus preserving individuality	Participants describe struggling to maintain a sense of individuality (versus completely immersing themselves in the relationship).	*N* = 5 12.5%	"I think for me personally, the biggest challenge was balancing the relationship with my personal goals and interests. When I would have free time, I would have to sacrifice my hobbies for spending time with my partner. Oftentimes, I felt like I was losing touch of myself…" [Participant 9]
External interpersonal	Challenge involves interpersonal difficulties with people who are external to the relationship, such as ex-partners or family members.	*N* = 5 12.5%	"I think the single greatest challenge is the involvement of other people such as crazy exes and other people trying to go after us because we chose to not tell anyone about this." [Participant 25]
Breaking up & getting back together	Participants identify that their greatest relationship challenge was breaking up and getting back together with their partners.	*N* = 2 5%	"The single greatest challenge our relationship has faced is breaking up and getting back together. It was challenging to rebuild our trust in one another while getting back together." [Participant 1]

Table 3

Definitions and Examples of Study 2 Narrative Themes

Narrative Theme	Definition	Example
Dyadic coping through open communication	Participants outline the process of establishing healthy communication norms and interaction patterns with their partners.	"My previous relationship had not ended in a bad way, so it was difficult for me, at first, to understand how A was feeling and what I could do or say to help him. However, hearing his honest thoughts and talking through our feelings has helped me understand him as well as myself significantly better. I think a lot of couples distrust each other because they are afraid of scaring each other away with uncomfortable topics, but I think it brought A and I closer together." [Participant 6]
Reflecting on facing challenge as proof of love & strength	Participants discuss how their relationship challenges serve as proof of couples' love, commitment, or strength.	"Being able to overcome this, simply shows how strong we are. We don't let distance affect us." [Participant 8]
Applying support-related norms to future challenges	Participants discuss how the support and communication-related norms established during these challenges would inform how they coped with future challenges.	"We dealt with this challenge by creating boundaries and going through different scenarios. This helps us build a foundation and meet in the middle for our needs. We also speak up whenever we are bothered and don't hold it in…It really shows with our differences we can meet in the middle and work it out. Our story shows that there will be problems 'cause everyone is different, but it can work out because everyone has love." [Participant 31]

Table 3 (cont.)

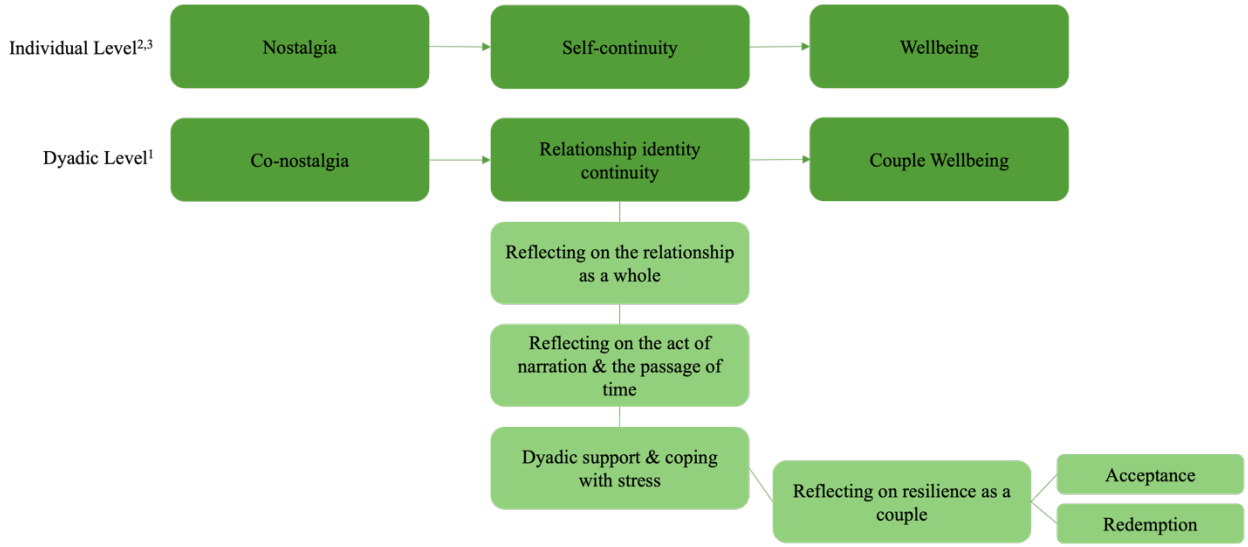
Definitions and Examples of Study 2 Narrative Themes

Narrative Theme	Definition	Example
Reflecting on resilience as a couple (Acceptance)*	Participants recall adapting to (rather than overcoming) adversity, accepting life's uncertainties, and finding peace in the current moment.	"Timing has been our greatest challenge. We are both pretty busy, so it can be hard to find time to spend together in our schedules. I'm doing a lot academically and they have so many friends and clubs and organizations it's been a bit tough to see each other sometimes. We've been working on planning ahead more and making sure we let each other know what we're going to be up to. It's still a work in progress but our communication has gotten better…. It is related to how we're very different and we're learning how to work with that…It's both fun and challenging to date someone who is very different from you because of this." [Participant 15]
Reflecting on resilience as a couple (Redemption)*	Couples' challenges are redeemed into positive outcomes and meanings. Participants recall overcoming relationship challenges and then making (positive) meaning of the experience.	"The biggest challenge for me and A has definitely been long distance. While we weren't long distance when we met, we've been long distance for over a year and it's proved to be very difficult at times. We deal with this challenge by always knowing when we can see each other next and planning visits whenever it's possible. We give each other reassurance and plan weekly date nights and activities over the phone to mimic the feeling we get in person together. This challenge makes us all the more appreciative of getting to see each other in person. Overall, it's made the relationship more difficult at times but it has definitely helped us mature and grow stronger." [Participant 16]
Reflecting on ineffective coping (Contamination)	Participants frame their challenges such that an affectively neutral or positive event is spoiled or overwhelmed by the effects of a negative event.	"The greatest challenge faced is knowing that [partner] has issues I can't help solve. They have a depression I try to help with, but they refused to ask for help or admit it for months until they let it bottle up and cause them to do something they shouldn't have… It's gonna take more time to deal with this challenge... All I can do is try to understand why and see what I can do better for them. The significance of this challenge for our story is that it affects the way I feel that I have to interact with her. I can't risk being myself in some aspects or brushing off signs that I previously ignored because they told me to do so. This will make me more careful and overprotective regarding what they say and do." [Participant 14]

Note. *Denotes that theme & definition originated from Study 1. Excerpts are edited slightly for brevity.

Figure 1

Study 1 Thematic Map

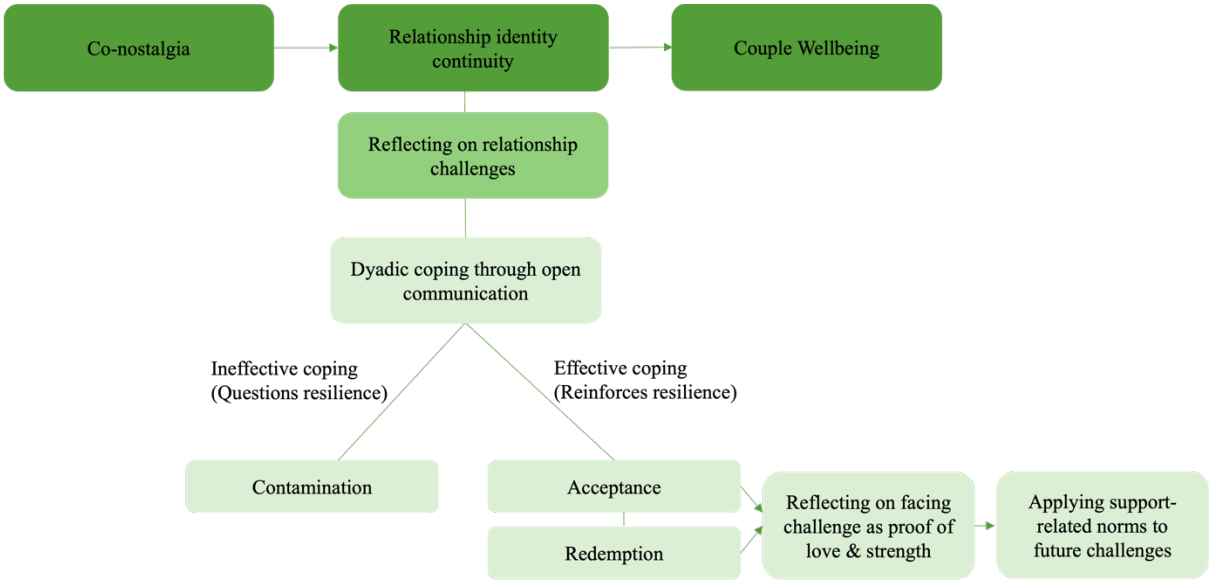


[1]Fetterman & Evans, 2022; [2]Sedikides et al., 2023; [3]Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018

Note. Dark green elements represent background information and theory, while light green elements represent the themes I constructed in Study 1.

Figure 2

Study 2 Thematic Map



Note. Dark green elements represent relevant Study 1 theory that forms the foundation of Study 2. Medium-green elements represent the study prompt. Light green elements represent the themes I constructed in Study 2. Acceptance, redemption, and contamination are deductive themes rooted in the established narrative literature. Acceptance and redemption were also derived from my Study 1 findings.