

**COPRENEURS EXPERIENCING
ENTREPRENEURIAL FAILURE: A WE-NESS
PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

Scholars acknowledge that a substantial proportion of entrepreneurial activity involves couples in committed relationships; however, the effect and implications of their efforts remain under-investigated. Because couples share in entrepreneurship's success or failure, they are conceptualised as copreneurial couples.

The phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure is receiving increasing attention. However, the impact of this experience on copreneurs and how they cope with it in their relationship is not well understood. The lack of research at the dyadic level of copreneurs is surprising since entrepreneurial endeavours failing can significantly impact a copreneurial couple's well-being and even end their relationship. The primary aim of this thesis is to understand entrepreneurial failure from the perspective of copreneurs who have endured the experience.

This research draws principally on the concept of we-ness to reflect copreneurs' experience of shared identity and is understood as each person's sense of interdependent unity with the other. We-ness benefits couples by increasing their capacity to cope with difficult life events and sustain relationships. It provides a valuable lens through which this study can view the significant and challenging experience of entrepreneurial failure.

The overarching research question for this thesis is: "How do copreneurial couples experience entrepreneurial failure from their we-ness perspective?" The two supporting subquestions are: "How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness?" and "How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?" These questions are explored using the theoretical perspective of narrative identity to understand copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness conveyed through their storytelling.

This study explores how 12 copreneurial couples experienced entrepreneurial failure. Jointly told stories were the primary data source, but individual stories were also collected to enhance interpretation. This research extends the understanding of entrepreneurial failure to the level of copreneurs.

This study firstly shows how entrepreneurial failure can threaten and sometimes cause the loss of valued personal identities, leading to instability in the copreneurial relationship. Attempts by individuals to safeguard these important identities, or the personal consequences of identity loss, can lead to relationship tensions and subsidence of we-ness, hindering their ability to cope as a copreneurial couple.

Secondly, this research provides a theoretical understanding of how copreneurs can naturally use various identity work strategies to maintain and rebalance their sense of we-ness. These strategies allowed copreneurs to downplay the negativity of failure, align their social values and beliefs, reconcile conflicting individual needs, and reinforce how ongoing entrepreneurship is vital to their sense of we-ness.

Thirdly, this study shows that copreneurs endeavour to preserve we-ness as a location to construct new, positive shared meaning from their experiences of failure.

These findings can benefit entrepreneurs, policymakers, educators, and therapists by highlighting the importance of viewing entrepreneurial failure as a shared experience in copreneurial relationships. Some copreneurs can naturally access strategies to cope with failure at the level of we-ness, while others may require assistance. This study provides insight into how copreneurs can use various strategies to negotiate solutions helping to sustain their relationships.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



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ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval from AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC) was granted on 5 March 2018. The Ethics Application number is 18/57 (see Appendix A for the AUTEC letter of approval).

1 INTRODUCTION

Like many couples, we each constructed ways to be –strategies, and sometimes compromises, that would enable us to be part of a pair. Sometimes we lost a bit more than we were able to give, or gave up way too much, or felt abandoned. Sometimes we got really angry. But even when I was mad, I was never bored. We learned to forgive each other. And somehow, for 21 years, we tangled our minds and hearts together. (Anderson, 2013, para. 6)

1.1 Background

In a shared life, committed couples may experience happiness and hardships together.

When dealing with life challenges, such as serious illness, the death of a family member, or other highly disruptive events such as entrepreneurial failure, the intimate bond between spouses¹ can be a source of coping and resilience (Bodenmann, 2005; Singer et al., 2015). However, as in Laurie Anderson’s tribute to her late husband, the musician Lou Reed, in the opening to this chapter, being “part of a pair” is not a static concept—couples must work at strategies and compromises to adjust their relationship to life’s contingencies.

Unfortunately, some couples are unsuccessful at making adjustments, and their relationships may deteriorate to the point where they do not survive (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). This thesis explores how some couples experience and deal with one type of life challenge—entrepreneurial failure. The phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure is often studied at an individual level (Klimas et al., 2022), yet evidence shows

¹ The term spouse appearing in this thesis indicates individual members of a committed couple relationship and may include “wife, husband, partner or de-facto partner” (Kirkwood, 2009, p. 372).

that spouses are jointly impacted with potentially severe consequences for their relationship (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007).

The incidence of entrepreneurial activity is high in New Zealand. Past survey data from the early 2000s indicated that at 17.6 percent, New Zealand had an even higher incidence of entrepreneurship than the United States reported to be 12.4 percent (Corner et al., 2017; Minniti et al., 2005). Indeed, the pervasiveness of small businesses in New Zealand is so remarkable that this country has been called a “nation of small businesses” (Small Business Council, NZ, 2019, p. 1).

Committed couples owning a business as *copreneurs*² are a common form of entrepreneurial team and form a large subset of overall entrepreneurial activity (El Shoubaki et al., 2022; Farrington et al., 2011). However, it is difficult to be precise about the scale of copreneurial involvement in entrepreneurship since quantitative data about this distinctive pairing are seldom available. One useful indication is a survey conducted towards the end of the 1990s in the United States (Fitzgerald & Muske, 2002, Muske & Fitzgerald, 2006). At that time, almost 10 million of the estimated 23 million small businesses in the United States were family ventures. From the survey data it was estimated that, 30 percent of family businesses, or 3 million ventures, were copreneurial (Muske & Fitzgerald, 2006). As previously indicated, like the United States, New Zealand has a high incidence of entrepreneurship. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that copreneurial ventures in New Zealand are likely to comprise a similar proportion of overall entrepreneurial activity as in the United States.

² The term copreneur is used in its broad sense in this thesis to refer to committed couples owning a business, but where one spouse is not necessarily visible in the venture (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010; Fletcher, 2010). The history of this term and how it is conceptualised in this thesis is more fully explained in Chapter 3.

In light of the estimated size and significance of copreneurs in business it is surprising that this distinctive team is often overlooked in business data and research (Farrington, 2011; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Rodrigues & Franco, 2021). The significance of this omission is compounded by a growing acceptance that, even if one spouse is less visible in the business, they can still be highly influential in decision making and outcomes (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010; Fletcher, 2010). Additionally, the highs and lows of entrepreneurial endeavours can profoundly influence copreneurial couples' well-being (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007). If the entrepreneurial efforts of copreneurs fail, it may result in burdens that threaten, or even lead to the end of their relationship.

Entrepreneurial failure is defined in various ways in the literature, leading to a fragmentary understanding of the phenomenon (Walsh & Cunningham, 2016).

Recently, entrepreneurial failure has become distinguished from business failure since this latter term usually places attention on the organisation and assumes economic factors as primary criteria. On the other hand, entrepreneurial failure relates to subjective experience and can include emotional reasons (Czakoń et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2007; Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016). Since this thesis focuses on a copreneurial couple's subjective experience of failure as a negative life experience, the entrepreneurial failure definition developed in Chapter 4 emphasises discontinuance for reasons that have a significant negative impact on the personal lives of copreneurs.

Entrepreneurial failure is common (Boso et al., 2019; Tipu, 2020). In the United States, findings indicate that half of new small businesses fail within the first five years (Winrow, 2010). New Zealand has historically had high rates of entrepreneurial activity; unfortunately, evidence indicates that bankruptcy and venture failure rates are also high (Singh et al., 2015). For New Zealand businesses started in 2010 and with up to five employees, 43 percent ceased to exist by 2015 (Baker, 2018). The rate of business

failure reinforces entrepreneurship's risky nature, and management of uncertainty goes with the territory. Most successful entrepreneurs will experience failure at some point in their journey (Eklund et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2014).

Occasionally, *black swan* global events increase the risks and threats to businesses still further. Such an event is the recent COVID-19 pandemic which has led to an exponential increase in economic distress and business closures (Amankwah-Amoah, et al., 2021). In New Zealand, despite government support, some sectors have been hit particularly hard—such as hospitality, tourism, events management, and the fitness industry. In a recent Radio New Zealand story Nick Pointon interviewed a small business consultant, Geoff Neal, who highlighted that business closures due to the pandemic not only represent financial losses but can also lead to devastating costs to relationships, well-being, and sometimes even the lives of those directly impacted.

“What we are talking about is not just businesses here, these are people, this is a lot of partners, husbands and wives, and families impacted, often multiple generations.”

“Every time a business closes that's lost wealth, health, relationships and sometimes lives as well.” (Pointon, 2021, paras. 8-9)

Despite the individual and relational costs of entrepreneurial failure, there may still be a widely held notion that entrepreneurs are heroic individualists who are able to cope with venture failure and criticism (Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson, 2007). Perhaps this is why news stories such as Pointon's (2021) occasionally emerge and garner interest due to the contrast with the popular normative discourse of entrepreneurs in the media (Kirkwood & Warren, 2019; Smith & Warren, 2021).

Scholarly interest in entrepreneurial failure has been growing in recent years (Czakoń et al., 2022). Yet, despite acknowledgement that the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of entrepreneurial failure extend beyond individual entrepreneurs,

research to date has not yet directly involved spouses and copreneurial relationships. Based on the comments earlier in this introduction, not only is it reasonable to assume that New Zealand has a high incidence of copreneurial businesses, by implication, many copreneurs are also likely to experience entrepreneurial failure.³ However, the entrepreneurship literature has, thus far, paid little attention to the impacts on relationships or what changes may be taking place between spouses seeking to adjust their relationship following the failure.

Exploring these interactions and changes in this thesis may provide insight into how some relationships succeed, while others end.⁴ Stories copreneurs tell about critical experiences in their relationship can tell us how they knit together their past, present, and future as a meaningful whole (Fergus and Reid, 2001). This thesis uses a narrative identity perspective to understand how copreneurial couples can maintain a stable and coherent relationship during the stressful aftermath of failure (Caza et al., 2018).

Traditionally, entrepreneurial failure research has emphasised coping and sensemaking approaches to explore the potentially devastating financial, emotional, psychological, and social impacts, on individual entrepreneurs, and the subsequent trajectory back to a

³ It could be argued that, after their entrepreneurial failure, spouses are no longer copreneurs, so I should revert to calling them a couple. However, I consider that making this distinction would be confusing in this thesis. Moreover, there is a general convention in the failure literature to refer to failed entrepreneurs as “entrepreneurs” when considering how they experience the aftermath of this event (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Ucbasaran, 2013; Corner et al., 2017). This nomenclature can logically extend to copreneurs following failure. Therefore, participants in this thesis will be called copreneurs or copreneurial couples when considering their experiences following entrepreneurial failure. When considering individual spouses, they may sometimes be referred to as an entrepreneur.

⁴ It is important to note that it was a requirement of the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK) that this study would not include copreneurs whose relationships had ended as a consequence of entrepreneurial failure. This ethical requirement, along with the condition that the business must have closed no sooner than six months before participating in the research, were included in the recruiting criteria (See Appendix B). Evidence from copreneur stories of negative relationship changes and tensions provided insights regarding the potential for relationship failure.

state of normal functioning (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017).

Scholars have recently been calling for greater use of identity perspectives in entrepreneurship research (Caza et al., 2018; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). I argue that understanding identity threats and change triggered by entrepreneurial failure can enhance our understanding of this life challenging event (Maitlis, 2009; Saylor et al., 2021).

The concept of we-ness captures a person's sense of interdependent unity with their spouse (Ahmad et al., 2017; Badr et al., 2007, Fergus, 2011). How couples experience a life challenge from a shared identity perspective means viewing it from their sense of we-ness. We-ness can be difficult to investigate since it is highly personal to couples, but it is usually identified and studied through we-oriented language such as "we", "us" pronouns, and shared narratives (Ahmad et al., 2017; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). This construct has been implicated in a couple's relationship satisfaction and ability to cope with life challenges (Ahmad et al., 2017; Fergus & Skerrett, 2015). A narrative research approach is particularly appropriate since narrative identity theorists argue that couples use life-stories integrating key relationship memories to construct and maintain their sense of we-ness (Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

Scholars also indicate that a perception of balance between spouses' identities is important for relationship well-being (Walsh & Neff, 2018; Veroff et al., 1998). As a

life challenging event, entrepreneurial ⁵ failure can potentially threaten identities in a copreneurial couple's relationship (Miller & Caughlin, 2013). However, destabilising changes and strategies for restoring balance are unclear (Walsh & Neff, 2018).

Therefore, a copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness, and how they maintain and balance this shared identity in the aftermath of entrepreneurial failure plays a vital role in how the experience affects their relationship over time.

1.2 Research Purpose, Questions, and Design

The primary purpose of this study is to understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure from the shared perspective of copreneurial couples who have experienced it.

The overarching research question is: *How do copreneurial couples experience entrepreneurial failure from their we-ness perspective?* This principal question is elaborated by two subquestions which ask:

- *How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness?*
- *How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?*

⁵ The term *entrepreneurial failure* is used in this thesis instead of *copreneurial failure* for two reasons. Firstly, the term copreneur connotes the existence of a committed relationship and the importance of business ownership within that relationship (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010). The connection of these concepts means that readers might confuse the use of the term copreneurial failure, not just with notions of failed entrepreneurship but also of a committed relationship. Secondly, the term entrepreneurial failure is becoming well-established in the literature and need not apply to only individuals—it can apply to multiple levels including corporate project teams and family businesses (Khelil, 2020, p.7). Therefore, it is appropriate to continue using the term entrepreneurial failure to denote the failure of this activity when seeking to understand the subsequent experience of copreneurial couples.

To address these questions, I recruited 12 copreneurial couples who had experienced entrepreneurial failure together. The theoretical perspective used for this study to explore we-ness was intersubjective narrative identity (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This narrative identity perspective allowed me to comprehend copreneurs' sense of we-ness expressed by how they narratively talked about themselves as a copreneurial couple (Reid & Ahmad, 2015; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). I collected copreneurs' stories of their lived experience during entrepreneurial failure primarily through semi-structured joint interviews and supplemented with individual narratives. Thematic narrative analysis was used to analyse storied data so that narrative integrity could be retained for interpretation, while also allowing the generation of themes within and across a relatively large set of copreneurial couple dyads (Bryda, 2020; Maitlis, 2012; Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016).

1.3 Significance of the Study

As discussed, past studies of entrepreneurial failure have primarily examined the emotional, psychological, and social consequences experienced by individual entrepreneurs. However, it has long been acknowledged that copreneurial couples—even where one spouse is not visible in the business—share the experience and consequences of failure. Furthermore, copreneurial relationships can be a major resource for dealing with the consequences of failure, yet the relationship itself can be threatened and might not survive (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007). Hence, understanding entrepreneurial failure at the level of copreneurial couples through their sense of we-ness extends knowledge of this phenomenon. Moreover, this study offers vital insights into the effects of failure on spouses and how they maintain closeness and stability as a copreneurial couple.

Studies using an identity perspective are rare in entrepreneurial failure research, and, until this thesis investigation, none have been conducted at the level of copreneurial couples. The we-ness lens used in this study explores the intersubjective identity dynamics within and between spouses affecting how they cope together, construct meaning, and adapt to impacts on their relationship. These insights contribute to understanding how copreneurs maintain their sense of we-ness. To date, we-ness has primarily been used to explore life challenges experienced by couples such as health stressors, yielding useful findings including those relating to cancer, HIV, strokes, and drug addiction (e.g. Ahmad et al., 2017; Crowley & Miller, 2020; Huang et al., 2018; van Nes et al., 2009). Extending the shared identity of we-ness to research the context of copreneurs' lived experience of entrepreneurial failure, also a significant and stressful life challenge, is similarly likely to yield fresh insights.

This study also extends the understanding of well-being within the entrepreneurial failure literature. The study of well-being is nascent in the entrepreneurship literature. To date, scholars have investigated the negative individual well-being impacts of failure, with a focus on psychological and emotional outcomes (Shepherd et al., 2019; Wiklund et al., 2019). Studying copreneurs' experience of failure enables a broader perspective on well-being, including how failure affects relationship quality (Ryff, 2019).

From a practical perspective, this study will be valuable for copreneurial couples experiencing failure and endeavouring to safeguard their relationship while coping with stress. Such copreneurial couples may consider the experiences of other copreneurs described in this study and try the identified we-ness-maintaining strategies. Similarly, mentors, business advisors, financiers, or therapists assisting couples may also benefit

from these insights either at the outset to develop good strategies to maintain we-ness, or else post-failure in restoring we-ness and well-being.

1.4 Outline of Thesis

This thesis is organised as follows:

Chapter 1 is the present chapter. This chapter set the scene and introduced the thesis.

The background for the study was provided to outline the field of investigation leading to the research problem. Next, the research purpose and questions are described, along with brief comments indicating how the research design can support this inquiry.

Finally, the significance of this study is highlighted, followed by an outline of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2 is the first of three literature review chapters and is entitled “Narrative Identity Theories and Entrepreneurship”. This chapter provides an overview of narrative identity theories and establishes intersubjective narrative identity as the primary theoretical perspective for this thesis. The chapter then considers how theories of narrative identity and identity work have been applied in the entrepreneurship literature.

Chapter 3 is the second literature review chapter entitled “Entrepreneurship and We-ness”. This chapter provides a conceptual overview of we-ness before defining copreneurship for this thesis and considering how identity research has previously been applied to copreneurial couples.

Chapter 4 is the third literature review chapter entitled “We-ness in the Context of Entrepreneurial Failure”. A definition of entrepreneurial failure is provided, emphasising the subjective experience of copreneurs. The chapter also discusses the past literature concerning how entrepreneurs manage the experience of failure and

considers how narratives have been used to explore identity. The chapter concludes by discussing how identity work is used in copreneurial couple relationships.

Chapter 5 describes the methodology and methods used to obtain the storied data for analysis. The chapter clarifies the philosophical position adopted by this thesis before elaborating on the qualitative research design. Next, data collection considerations and procedures are discussed, including recruiting participants, participant profiles, and the methods used. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the data analysis method.

Chapter 6 is the first of the findings chapters and is entitled “When We-ness Subsides”. This chapter presents findings on the first subquestion: “How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples’ sense of we-ness?” There are three themes: *feeling burdened*, *breaching our arrangement* and *how others see us*.

Chapter 7 is the second findings chapter, entitled “Maintaining We-ness”. This chapter presents findings on the second subquestion: “How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?” There are four themes: *We won’t let failure define us*, *we have social integrity*, *finding our middle ground*, and *entrepreneurship is part of us*.

Chapter 8 is the discussion and conclusion chapter for this thesis. This chapter first provides a summary of the findings. Next is a clarification of the contributions of this thesis under three broad theoretical implications: implications for theory on entrepreneurial failure, implications for theory on identity in entrepreneurship, and implications for theory on we-ness. The chapter then considers the implications of the thesis findings for practice, the limitations of the study, and future research opportunities.

2 NARRATIVE IDENTITY THEORIES AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Narrative identity research is based on a complex and diverse set of theories linked by the fundamental assumption that identity develops in the act of storytelling (Crossley, 2000; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Within this broad assumption, narrative identity theories differ substantially in philosophical and socio-cultural emphasis. Theories can range from those that centre on a storied conception of identity privileging an individualistic and stable view of identity to those emphasising a strongly relational, fluid, and fragmented understanding of identity (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Vollmer, 2005).

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview of narrative identity theories. Following this, I discuss a useful socio-cultural typology and the distinction between more general discursive and narrative theories. Narrative identity researchers often draw on the concept of identity work to bring attention to identity construction, change, and maintenance; therefore, the next section considers how different identity work methods may complement particular narrative identity theories. Finally, I discuss how narrative identity theories are located and usually applied within the entrepreneurship literature.

2.1 Historical Overview

The 1980s and 90s saw a surge of interest in narrative theories and methods across many scholarly disciplines, giving rise to a broad organising principle for human life often referred to as the *narrative turn* (Atkinson, 1997; Clandinin, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Riessman, 1993). The narrative turn represented a growing interest in the proposition that storytelling is fundamental to both a personal understanding of self and also a way of being in the social world through socio-cultural linguistic conventions

(Bruner, 1986, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Smith, 2007; Somers, 1994).

The pervasiveness of storytelling as a fundamental human activity supports Sarbin's (1986) argument that we are storytellers by nature and routinely use storied structures to create meaning.

Bruner (1986, 1990) provided further momentum in the movement towards narrative conceptions of identity when he proposed that, as people, we have two ways of thinking to understand ourselves in the world—the paradigmatic and narrative modes of cognition. Bruner proposed that people use these distinct yet complementary modes to think about and understand the world.

Paradigmatic thinking uses logical reasoning, such as that characterising empirical observation and hypothesis testing. The paradigmatic mode emphasises objective precision, clarity, and rationality. In contrast, the narrative mode involves story creation which may not always be historically accurate but emphasises meaning. Therefore, while the paradigmatic mode of thinking is essentially concerned with facts, narrative thinking is primarily concerned with meaning-making. As such, thinking in the narrative mode provides us with a way to find and express meaning from our world experience.

The narrative mode is also concerned with identity since it provides a way to understand ourselves and others. However, narrative identity scholars regard narratives as more than abstract phenomena to be coded. Narrative scholars consider narratives to be “functional, occasioned and constitutive of identity” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 137). Thus, narratives assume an ontological nature for narrative identity theorists and researchers, whereby people are conceptualised as storied selves (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Mishler, 1999; McAdams, 1997b; Polkinghorne, 1996). For example, Riessman

(2003) argues that “we ‘become’ the stories through which we tell about our lives” (p. 7).

Moreover, storytelling about one’s own life or others provides a sense of identity and continuity through a storied structure. Polkinghorne (1991) uses the idea of emplotment to describe how selves are narratively constructed with particular stories that endow life events with meaning. He argues that “the plots of these stories make sense out of what had been an incoherent series of disconnected events in our lives and are incorporated into our self-concept” (pp. 148-149).

Narrative scholars also contend that when people experience a vital life disruption, it challenges their construction of self (Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 2001, 2011). These transition points provide insights into “how the dynamic element in a person’s identity is constituted by a variety of human experiences over time” (Foss, 2004, p. 81). Thus, life stories that focus on these critical changes or turning points are valuable for exploring changes in the construction of the self (Frank, 1997; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maitlis, 2012; McAdams & Jones, 2017; McAdams & McLean, 2013). For example, Crossley (2003a) found that exploring how people cope and adapt to serious illness allows insights into how this experience can fundamentally disrupt their sense of identity. She observes that people writing or talking about serious illness often describe themselves as becoming a different person.

Furthermore, narrative identity scholars argue that where traumatic events disrupt and fragment one’s sense of self, narratives may serve to restore meaning and identity (Crossley, 2000, 2003b). This active process of change or rebuilding identity through narrative is often conceptualised as *identity work* (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maitlis, 2012).

There is also a socio-cultural positioning aspect to narrative identity. Identity narratives draw from public narrative resources yet are still unique to the individual (Somers, 1994). For example, some scholarly depictions of an impoverished working-class identity in England during the 1950s suggested that such individuals would find compensation for their social disadvantages through their sense of independence, pride, and community (Somers & Gibson, 1993). However, a well-known autobiographical account of one such poor working-class individual's childhood instead provides a counter-narrative of class envy, desire, and exclusion from her preferred culture (Steedman, 1987). Thus, relational complexity and individual agency mean that available public narrative repertoires can both shape and be shaped to form unique narrative identities. Therefore, narrative identity satisfies our need to find coherent meaning in experience and to understand how and why we come to be ourselves within the world (McAdams, 1997b).

The evolving perspectives of researchers and theorists about how identities and selves are constructed in narratives lead to a complex and diverse range of theories in this field. To provide a framework for discussing the various theoretical similarities and differences in this complex field, I consider a narrative typology proposed by Smith and Sparkes (2008).

2.2 A Narrative Identity Typology

Increasing interest in a narrative approach to identity has spawned a range of philosophical assumptions (Elliot, 2005). These assumptions have led to theoretical perspectives ranging from those that conceptualise the self as an individual with a relatively stable, unified set of characteristics across time and situations, to postmodern

theories that view the self as fragmented, situational, and constantly changing. Thus, narrative identity is a field full of differences and tensions (Smith & Sparkes, 2006).

Smith and Sparkes (2008) provide a typology of five perspectives—psychosocial, intersubjective, storied resource, dialogic, and performative—that focuses on the differences emerging between narrative theories based on a socio-cultural dimension.

Each of these narrative identity perspectives are shown in Figure 1 and will be described in more detail following a short overview of how the typology is organised.

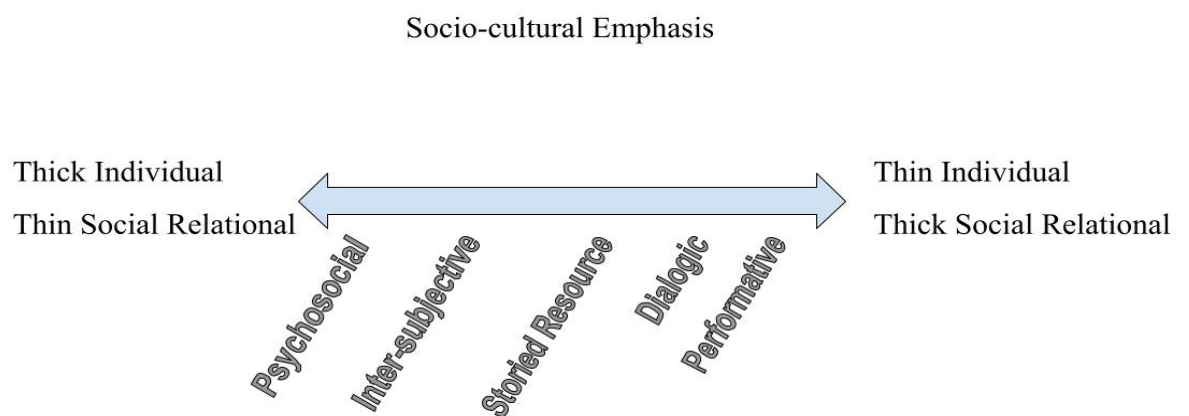


Figure 1. Narrative Identity Theories: A Continuum of Five Perspectives. Adapted from Smith and Sparkes (2008).

Since narrative theories overlap, instead of being easily separated, Smith and Sparkes (2008) determine the socio-cultural emphasis within each theory to place it on a continuum. This continuum ranges between theoretical perspectives with “a ‘thick individual’ and ‘thin social relational’ emphasis on selves and identities at one end, and

a ‘thin individual’ *and* ‘thick social relational’ focus at the other” (p. 7, italics in original).

Smith and Sparkes (2008) indicate that the boundaries between the five perspectives are blurry and non-hierarchical. Moreover, the authors highlight that scholars associated with different theoretical perspectives along the continuum may shift their interests and approach over time. For example, some scholars may produce work at a stage of their career that fits the psychosocial perspective, while the same scholar may produce later work that fits better with a dialogic perspective.

Further complications can arise with different readings of a particular scholar’s work. For instance, some might read Gergen (1999, 2001) as supporting a more individualistic psychosocial perspective, whereas Smith and Sparkes (2008) consider that Gergen’s work generally represents a more performative perspective. Given such moves and debates, Smith and Sparkes offer their typology as “an invitation to dialogue” (p. 8).

In addition, researchers applying narrative identity theories to their research can purposely overlap and blur boundaries between theoretical perspectives to find more reflexive interpretive models and novel insights (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Hamilton, 2006). Therefore, the typology offered by Smith and Sparks (2008) in the form of a socio-cultural theoretical continuum provides a helpful way to comprehend the complex and philosophically diverse narrative identity tradition. This typology begins at the far-left end with the more individualist formulations of narrative identity.

2.2.1 Psychosocial

This perspective acknowledges the interior world of an individual’s sense of self and that social interaction is essential for creating life stories. Scholars that advance this perspective privilege the interior, individual aspects of storytelling (e.g., Crossley, 2000,

2003b; McAdams, 1997b; Singer, 2004). Proponents of this view are sometimes described as *personologists*, emphasising that the origins of this thinking arise from personality psychology (Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1997b, 2001; Singer, 2004).

Characteristically, those following a psychosocial perspective consider that identities are an internal life story that, through self-reflection, develops over time. McAdams (1997b, 2001) is a key scholar associated with this perspective. He founded his theory of narrative identity based on Erikson's (1963) psychosocial life development stages. McAdams and McLean (2013) conceptualise narrative identity as "a persons internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (p. 233). This approach posits that narrative identity has an underlying continuity so that an evolving autobiographical life story provides an inner truth "that pre-dates its narrative rendering" (Vassilieva, 2016, p. 61). In this perspective, identity is consistent across different interactions because it exists independently (Riessman, 2008).

The psychosocial perspective is generally constructivist in its epistemology since, although there is an individual emphasis, there is still an acceptance that knowledge about the world is socio-culturally constructed. Hosking (2004) describes constructivism as a "'cognitivist' approach [that] assumes 'the world' provides sense data, and individual minds process this data to produce knowledge about the world" (p. 256). A social constructivist view assumes the social construction of knowledge, and therefore we can never finally know if we have an accurate depiction of the world.

However, some scholars with this psychosocial perspective still favour a unified and relatively stable self-view (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This stability can give rise to a critical philosophical nuance in how some scholars view identity from this perspective.

Some of these researchers consider that they are accessing a usually interior mental state showing an individual's usually hidden but foundational sense of self (e.g., Crossley, 2000, Lieblich et al., 1998; McAdams, 1997a, 1997b). Lieblich et al. (1998) argue that, although life stories are subjective, they contain a "narrative truth" that, "when properly used, may provide researchers with a key to discovering identity and understanding it—both in its 'real' or 'historical' core, and as a narrative construction" (p. 8). As a consequence, this perspective has sometimes been described as associated with "a sense of (neo)realism" (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p.178). This term highlights that some narrative researchers have realist assumptions underpinning their work (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 178; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). This stance has also been referred to as *critical constructivism* (Ronkainen et al., 2016b).

Therefore, among the various approaches to narrative identity McAdams' theory has been argued as more compatible with realism (Vollmer, 2005). Indeed, McAdams has often contested relational postmodern views of narrative identity (Vassilieva, 2016; Vollmer, 2005).

Researchers using this critical constructivist underpinning for narrative identity consider that events challenging one's life story create disorder and a lack of coherence that may interfere with normal psychological and social functioning. These studies, therefore, tend to assume an individual's need to find meaning to restore narrative consistency, integration, and coherence (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011). For this reason, McAdams's life story model emphasises that *identity work* is ongoing during the life course, causing change to occur in life stories reflecting particular transitional events (McAdams, 2001, 2011).

Despite a strong individualist emphasis within the psychosocial perspective, some researchers have recently advocated this approach to understanding married couple relationships (e.g., Bühler & Dunlop, 2019; Dunlop et al., 2020). These scholars rely on what they call a *narrative identity approach*, incorporating theory and method to analyse couple relationships by prompting for self-defining and key autobiographical memories. Data in this approach is usually collected using the Life Story Interview method (McAdams, 2008). A recent variant known as the Love Life Story Interview has also been developed (Dunlop et al., 2018).

Although this narrative identity approach concerns couple's storied perception of meaning and coherence in their relationship, it emphasises partners as individuals to evaluate the compatibility of their stories for relationship development (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019). As such, this approach is consistent with the highly individual emphasis in this psychosocial perspective and de-emphasises the value of co-constructed stories by couples compared to individual accounts (Dunlop et al., 2020). The next point on the socio-cultural continuum considers the intersubjective perspective, which, as will be explained, is more compatible with the approach in this thesis.

2.2.2 Intersubjective

An intersubjective perspective is the primary narrative identity commitment in this thesis. Theorists and researchers using this perspective remain vitally interested in what happens inside a person's head when he or she is interacting with others (Sparkes & Smith, 2006). However, compared with the psychosocial perspective, there is more emphasis on social and cultural influences.

Narrative identity from this perspective is often traditionally constructivist, adhering to a relativist position that multiple realities can exist (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016;

Lincoln et al., 2011). Researchers using this perspective view their data from an interpretivist standpoint (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Schwandt., 1994). However, like the psychosocial perspective, some scholars using intersubjective theories still become entangled with realist assumptions (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

The socio-cultural positioning of the intersubjective perspective can be seen in Gergen's (1999) argument that Mead (1934) and others from the symbolic interactionist traditions have a social and relational emphasis, yet there are still strongly individualistic aspects. One must experience another person as an individual and develop higher thought processes by mentally adopting the perspective of the other. Gergen (2009) argues that the process of a couple's initially "bonding" to consolidate their relationship has to do with how they develop their shared narrative. Successful bonding calls for a transformation in their narratives. "The 'I' as the centre of the story must gradually be replaced by the 'we.' The 'we' now becomes the major protagonist in the narrative of life, the central character to whom everything is related" (p. 177).

Accepting that an individual retains a strong sense of self-identity yet can also define themselves in a relationship with a significant other is at the heart of theories relating to couple identity or a sense of we-ness in their relationship (Fergus & Reid, 2001; Reid et al., 2006). Spouses can develop interdependence validating each person's sense of self while also establishing awareness of themselves as a couple (Reid et al., 2006). Skerrett (2015) contends that a secure, functional relationship incorporates the simultaneous development of coherent individual *and* couple narratives. Thus, for close couples, individual life stories overlap and combine to form shared meaning and an intersubjective sense of "we" in the relationship (Fergus, 2011, 2015). Similarly to the way that individual narrative identity can develop in life stories, Singer and Skerrett (2014, p. 52) contend that,

The couple's macro We-story reflects a mutual identity that couples describe as experiences of We-ness, the overall lived experience of their relationship accumulated over many years of events and episodes. It is evidenced by a kind of thinking that reflects reciprocity and integration of the other's perspective in one's own.

This approach focusing on intersubjective couple stories has been extended to work on we-stories and shared relationship memories that are essential to the story of the couple's narrative identity and sense of we-ness in their relationship (Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Alea et al., 2015).

2.2.3 Storied Resource

This perspective consists of theories emphasising cultural immersion (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Narratives from this perspective do not reflect a cognitive structure or interior phenomenon; instead, they are viewed as social actions. As Riessman (1993) argues, “culture ‘speaks itself’ through an individual’s story” (p.5). Stories are seen as socio-cultural phenomena, and researchers adopting this approach often consider that people are *doing* storytelling within particular situational interactions. Despite the apparent emphasis on the act of storytelling, this perspective is less concerned with embodied interaction—as in the performative perspective—than it is with the social situatedness of this activity.

Somers (1994) and her colleague, Gibson (Somers & Gibson, 1993), are often cited as key proponents of this perspective. Within this view, narrative identity shifts the focus from a traditional understanding of narrative as the historical representation of experience to what Somers calls “*ontological* narrativity” (Somers, 1994, p. 613, italics in original). Somers contends that the dimensions of time, space, and relationality allow researchers to avoid rigid or fixed views of identity and instead recognise its embedded and relational nature. She claims that placing narrative identity research in a setting with

“cross-cutting relational story-lines” affords an opportunity for new understandings of action and agency (p. 607).

Stability and self-coherence over time, which are a stronger focus in the psychosocial and intersubjective approaches, are regarded as less important for this perspective.

Instead, the emphasis is on how storytellers use repertoires of culturally available narratives with particular interpersonal situations (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This perspective considers that these narrative identities are a type of social practice using cultural story resources to assemble idiosyncratic personal stories. The balance between emphasising the individual and relational aspects of identity places this perspective at the mid-point of Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) continuum.

2.2.4 Dialogic

In the dialogic perspective, the focus shifts even further from the individual to emphasise ongoing social processes. The self-concept becomes more decentralised in favour of relatedness and collective voices. Bakhtin (1981) exemplifies this perspective. In his view, the authorial voice does not emerge from a single mind and embodied voice but from dialogical relationships with others (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

This perspective has strongly influenced several prominent narrative identity scholars, such as Frank (2005) and Hermans (2001). This view provides a deeply socialised account of self, wherein identity depends on dialogue with others. A dialogical self is not social in the sense of a self-contained individual entering social interactions; instead, the view is of an *extended* self. This approach provides an understanding of self “in which contrasts, oppositions and negotiations are part of a distributed, multivoiced self” (Hermans, 2001, p. 225).

While this dialogical accounting for self is a very thick relational and socialised view, Smith and Sparkes (2008) argue that there are still aspects of the individual to be found. They illustrate this by referencing Gergen (1999), who interprets a Bakhtinian dialogical perspective as still involving an individual to convey past dialogues to the present and think with dialogue. Effectively, “the individual mind remains central to the production and interpretation of meaning” (p. 131).

This perspective has significant implications for researchers since the extended view of self also considers the involvement of others—including the researcher (Frank, 2005). Research interviews are regarded as acts of mutual engagement between the researcher and the participant. A dialogical report accounts for the diverse effects on each person present in shared time and space. As Riessman (2008) explains, “one can’t be a ‘self’ by oneself” (p. 106).

2.2.5 Performative

Those scholars adopting a theoretical performative perspective occupy the thicker social relational end of the narrative identity continuum. While the storied resource and dialogic perspectives still retain distinct elements of the individual in their conceptualisation of identity and self, the performative view places individuality in the distant background. Much of Gergen’s work (e.g., 1994, 1999) offers a strongly performative account of self and identity. Gergen (1994) contends that self-narratives are conversational resources that people construct and continuously change through interaction with others:

Persons in this case do not consult an internal script, cognitive structure or apperceptive mass for information or guidance; they do not interpret or ‘read the world’ through narrative lenses; they do not author their own lives. Rather, the self-narrative is a linguistic implement embedded within

conventional sequences of action and employed in relationships in such a way as to sustain, enhance, or impede various forms of action. (p. 188)

Narrative theorists and researchers influenced by this approach include Bamberg (2011), De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011), Langellier and Peterson (2004), Mishler (1999), and Riessman (2003, 2008). This perspective centres on a view of identity and self as an interactional activity, or performance, between people.

The performance of self-stories extends beyond written and spoken language to participants' physical, embodied activities. Bamberg (2011) prefers to use the noun *narration*, in contrast to *story* or *narrative*, to emphasise the ongoing embodied activity of narrating rather than the final product. Moreover, the physical objects and setting of such interactions are also crucial for the meaning of these performances. Thus, as with the dialogic perspective, there is a focus on particular interactional sites as locations for constructing self and identity (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011).

Performative narrative identity strongly contrasts with the psychosocial perspectives that conceptualise the self as relatively stable and unified. Instead, the performative perspective emphasises the “multiple, fragmentary, unfinished and always changing” nature of self (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 24).

A view of identity as constant change seems to run counter to what some describe as a human need to feel a sense of continuity over time (Caza et al., 2018). However, proponents of a performative perspective argue that while identity is a process of constant change, the individual's repeated practice of doing storytelling creates the potential for a sense of consistency and uniformity (Bamberg, 2011).

2.3 Distinguishing Discursive and Narrative Identity Theories

For those narrative identity theories emphasising the relational aspects, discursive social interaction also becomes more critical (Ronkainen, 2016a). This relationship raises an important question about whether there is a clear distinction between identity theorised in narrative or more general discourse. Hjorth and Steyaert (2004) contend that narrative and discourse approaches are connected and can create a theoretical tension that researchers should address. Indeed, it has been highlighted that, in many respects, narrative and non-narrative discursive approaches to identity are theorised similarly (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

Despite the overlaps between narrative and more general discourse, fundamental distinctions separate these theoretical approaches to identity. Broadly, discourse theory concentrates on “social action mediated through language” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 232). A variety of discursive approaches exist. These can differ significantly in their conceptualisation of identity; however, discursive identity scholars generally agree on the crucial role of language in constructing identity (Ronkainen et al., 2016a).

Narrative identity theorists and researchers adopt a more limited view of the role of language in identity. They assume an ontological position that we live in a storytelling world and that identities are constructed in narrative (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Somers, 1994). In this approach, the act of storytelling is assumed to develop identity (Crossley, 2000).

Benwell and Stokoe (2006) point to two key features distinguishing the narrative construction of identity from non-narrative discourse theories. Firstly, the emplotment feature of narration can configure a series of otherwise disconnected events to create a

sense of temporal identity coherence and connectedness (Polkinghorne, 1991). Another critical feature is connecting personal stories and broader cultural stories and plotlines. However, researchers aligning with the strongly relational theories of narrative identity are more likely to be influenced by discursive approaches, which similarly view identities as multiple, fluid, and negotiated contextually (Ronkainen et al., 2016a). In practice, researchers adopting more relational narrative theories may come close to or even blur the boundaries between narrative and non-narrative-discourse theory to locate a more socially positioned and interactional view of identity (e.g., Anderson et al., 2019).

2.4 Identity Work and Narrative Identity

Identity work is involved with dynamic and agentic views of identity. Moreover, the shifting emphasis between general discursive and narrative conceptions of identity closely connects to the theoretical development of identity work (Caza et al., 2018). Narrative identity scholars often utilise the concept of identity work to bring attention to the dynamic relationship between the individual and their social interaction. Therefore, it is helpful to consider how various conceptions of identity work complement different socio-cultural theoretical perspectives of narrative identity.

Identity work emphasises activities that include “creating, presenting, sustaining, forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising identities” (Caza et al., 2018, p. 890). From a narrative perspective, Caza et al. (2018) indicate that identity work is the activity of storytelling to make sense of our experiences and incorporate them into our continuing story of self. Identity narratives “are the result of an interplay between internal factors and external influences and are constantly ‘in-progress,’ as multiple versions of reality tend to exist in tension” (p. 897). Thus, while events or issues in

people's lives may impact their identities, these circumstances may also trigger them to undertake purposeful identity work in their attempts to resolve internal and external tensions (Maitlis, 2012; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

The notion of identity work is not new to narrative identity theories. Scholars have used this concept for several decades to highlight identity activity during unexpected or change events (e.g., McAdams, 2001; Somers, 1994). However, since the early 2000s, several prominent management and organisational scholars have argued their particular theoretical versions of the concept. These scholars tacitly align their version of identity work with their preferred narrative identity perspective. Therefore, in order to select the most relevant approach for this thesis, it is important to understand how each of these scholars aligns to narrative identity theory. A short analysis of four prominent identity work scholars follows.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) offer a conceptualisation of identity work falling between *quasi-essential* and relational constructionist approaches. They bring attention to acts of shaping personal identity through discourse and the individual's efforts to create meaning and identity. In their view, identity work is a struggle consisting of an interplay between roles, discourses, and narrative self-identities. Sveningsson and Alvesson avoid privileging the concept of narrative self-identity (McAdams, 1997) but recognise its stabilising function.

Social interaction prompts ongoing cognitive activity by crafting a self-narrative that draws on cultural resources, memories, and desires. Thus, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) consider that self-identity can provide "a more fundamental and solid (though not static)" support when facing life challenges and uncertainty (p. 1185). These scholars regard narrative identity as more stable and coherent; thus, people will

generally only engage in identity work when triggered by a destabilising event leading to uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt (Alvesson et al., 2008). Therefore, Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) conceptualisation of identity work can be positioned somewhat towards the thinner social relational end of the Smith and Sparkes (2008) continuum through an emphasis on the individual and the stabilising role of narrative self-identity.

In contrast, in the field of entrepreneurship, Watson (2009) argues for a view of identity work that extends beyond a primary focus on the individual to encompass social identities emerging in relationship. He underscores the shifting and often ambiguous social interactions between people when using discursive resources to form, repair, maintain, and strengthen entrepreneurial-related identities. Watson argues that purposeful identity work is most apparent during a crisis—such as when an entrepreneur experiences bankruptcy.

Watson's (2009) identity work in entrepreneurship places a far greater emphasis on social interaction. This approach “brings together the ‘internal’ or ‘self-identity’ aspects of human identities with the more external, ‘social identities’ or discursive aspects of such processes” (p. 252). This conceptualisation emphasises the relational and dialogic nature of identity work. To achieve this focus, Watson highlights the interactional features of general discourse rather than just narrative. He sees identity work as “not something that is done outside dialogue and negotiation and, indeed, *contestation* with others” (p. 268, italics in original).

Similarly to Watson (2009), Beech (2008) also adopts a dialogical approach to identity work. Beech proposes a detailed initial model to show how self-meaning changes occur through external discourses, creating discursive resources leading to a micro-process whereby “utterances become absorbed into one's story of the self” (p. 65). The

emphasis that both Watson (2009) and Beech (2008) place on dialogical processes positions their theoretical perspectives on the thicker social relational end of Smith and Sparkes' (2008) socio-cultural continuum.

Thus, Watson (2009) and Beech's (2008) approaches to identity work emphasise discursive processes and resources for a strongly relational socially embedded conceptualisation of identity. However, others, such as the organisational theorists Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), choose to emphasise temporal processes by conceptualising a *narrative identity work* approach. They argue that such identity self-narratives provide a means to deal with discontinuities or turning points and to make sense of equivocal and transitional events in social interactions. Therefore, their model provides a framework to analyse identity construction and change in different relational settings based on the storied repertoire of a person's life experience.

Our model argues that people draw from an evolving narrative repertoire to engage in narrative identity work so as to bridge these gaps as they arise in social interaction. If the variant of "one's story" told in any given episode generates feelings of authenticity and is validated by its target audience, it is more likely to be retained and embellished for future use. (p. 148)

This assertion is similar to Somer's (1994) contention that people use repertoires of emplotted stories to locate themselves—or be located—when constructing identities. This understanding suggests that Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) framework should be located at the storied resource emphasis in Smith and Sparkes' (2008) narrative identity typology continuum.

In summary, each of the outlined conceptualisations of identity work maps onto different points of socio-cultural emphasis along Smith and Sparkes's (2008) narrative typology continuum. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) are more individually focused, so their approach is positioned towards thinner social relational end of the continuum.

Their narrative identity approach aligns most closely with the intersubjective theoretical commitment in this thesis. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) focus on storied repertoires, so their identity work approach is located at the storied resource mid-point of the continuum. Watson (2009) and Beech (2008) adopt a dialogical approach, so their approaches fall at the thickly social relational end of the continuum.

2.5 Locating Narrative Identity in the Entrepreneurship Literature

Various theoretical identity perspectives have been employed by entrepreneurship researchers, including role identity, social identity, and narrative identity. For several decades, social and role identity theories have been the two dominant traditions for identity study in entrepreneurship (Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Therefore, before discussing narrative identity theory in entrepreneurship, it is important to consider how these more commonly used traditions contribute to the identity conversation in this literature.

2.5.1 Social and Role Identity Theories

Social identity theory is essentially a collective approach to identity and argues that society provides us with the membership of groups or social categories. Membership in these groups provides us with particular meanings, and, as a result, we acquire associated values, beliefs, and attitudes (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). These social categories provide individuals with a feeling of belonging within the defining characteristics of a given category. These characteristics provide a self-definition that can be incorporated into the broader self-concept (Hogg et al., 1995). The social meanings associated with a particular religion, a parent, spouse, or entrepreneur are among the many group or collective identities we may adopt as we move through our lives.

Perceiving oneself as belonging to a particular group provides a source of motivation to maintain a distinctiveness from other comparator groups. This process of categorising oneself and making in-group and out-group comparisons is an important aspect of the theory since this enables the individual to derive meaning and value from social identification (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity theory is particularly useful when considering how the entrepreneurial self is situated in relation to others in their wider social context (Pan et al., 2019; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Role identity theory also assumes that complex social structures and patterns are important for the development of self; however, the emphasis is placed on these processes as they relate to individuals (Hogg et al., 1995). An individual's sense of self is reasoned to arise from the occupation of roles along with their associated meanings and expectations. A central aspect of the original identity theory is that each role relates to a paired counter-role (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). So, for example, the role of a wife exists as an identity because another person is a husband, and a person may be an employee because someone else is the employer. This theory also brings notions of competing interests that may require negotiation for effective role identity performance (Stets & Burke, 2000). Although identities are tied to roles in social structures, they are internalised in ways that create unique meanings for individual identity (Burke & Stets, 2009).

A further fundamental assumption in identity theory is that individuals can hold multiple role identities. The meanings applied to these roles by the individual are derived from social structures. Following this view, an individual might hold many roles in life, such as being a parent, spouse, and school board member. Each of these social roles can also comprise more idiosyncratic sub-identities that have particular meanings for an individual. For example, what we each believe it means to be an

entrepreneur derives from a society-level collective view and, more idiosyncratically, from personal meanings and behaviours we associate with being an entrepreneur (Cardon et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2014). In this way, a social identity feeds and shapes an individual's unique identity, which, in turn, reflects the social identity on itself (Nielsen et al., 2018, p. 359). The significance of wider social groups influencing multiple identities underscores arguments that social identity theory complements and overlaps with role identity theory. In many respects, the distinctions exist only in emphasis (Anderson et al., 2019; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Assumptions of multiple role identities have been extensively studied in entrepreneurship (Mmbaga, 2020). According to this understanding, being an entrepreneur is viewed as an overarching identity (Cardon et al., 2009; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009a). This plurality gives entrepreneurs a feeling of distinctiveness (Cardon et al., 2009). Over time, there may also be changes in the relative importance, meaning and activities associated with various entrepreneurial sub-identities, such as the roles of founder, inventor, or business developer.

The changing importance of different role identities touches on a further key conceptual development introduced in the early 1990s— the notion of subjective importance or psychological centrality (Thoits, 1991). Based on this notion, multiple identities can be organised into a hierarchy of importance, denoting roles held more strongly than others, creating an identity control system (Stets & Burke, 2014).

2.5.2 Narrative Identity Theories

Theories of narrative identity have recently been gaining ground in organisational and entrepreneurship research (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Ramarajan, 2014). It is now broadly accepted that entrepreneurial identity can be

constructed through discourse and narrative (Down & Warren, 2008; Foss, 2004; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Smith, 2014). As Johansson (2004) contends, “from a narrative point of view it seems natural to regard life stories as identity constructions” (p. 275). For entrepreneurship, the interest in narrative identity has often been for its temporal emphasis on exploring entrepreneurship and identity from a change perspective (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Moreover, narratives are important for researchers to understand an entrepreneur’s individual and social identities (Downing, 2005).

Most entrepreneurship scholars using narrative identity theories lean towards moderate or strong social constructionist perspectives (Kašperová & Kitching, 2014). In terms of the Smith and Sparkes (2008) socio-cultural typology, these perspectives are positioned from the moderately social relational storied perspective to thicker social relational dialogic and performative perspectives. This tendency towards thicker social relational perspectives may reflect a scholarly interest emerging from the late 1990s. Fletcher (2003) contends that this movement emphasises social constructionist thinking through language and discourse, providing a view of entrepreneurship that is “dynamic and constantly emerging, being realised, shaped and constructed through social processes” (Fletcher, 2003, p. 127). This understanding fits with a growing call for viewing entrepreneurship as a social-relational achievement of working together rather than primarily focusing on the entrepreneur (Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson, 2007; Fletcher & Watson, 2007; Garud & Giuliani, 2013; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009).

Some entrepreneurship scholars have adopted the label “relational constructionism” to emphasise a de-centring of individuals favouring a more socially interactive, relational perspective (Fletcher, 2006; Hosking, 2011). This perspective results in a view of identity that is socially constructed, embedded in discourse, fragmented and fluid (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). Fletcher and Watson (2007) argue that “there can be no

meaning attached to anything, entrepreneurial matters included, that is not derived from aspects of dialogue and relationship” (p. 13).

The emphasis on the more strongly relational theories of narrative identity among entrepreneurship scholars may reflect a desire for fresh alternatives to predominantly positivist assumptions in the field and the focus on the individual entrepreneur (Downing, 2005; Hamilton, 2014; Steyaert, 2007). However, the emphasis on relationality in narrative identity in entrepreneurship literature is not without criticism. Some have argued that these approaches place too much emphasis on socially interactive linguistic practices and performances, thereby undervaluing the individual and lack a theoretical explanation for causal power (Kašperová & Kitching, 2014; Kašperová et al., 2018).

The relational emphasis may also overlook the value of the more individually oriented narrative identity theories on the thinner relational end of the socio-cultural continuum of Smith and Sparkes (2008). For example, identity theories using an intersubjective narrative perspective may be helpful for research exploring how identities are dyadically co-constructed, maintained, and revised. This approach to narrative identity provides a foundation for this thesis research’s response to Caza et al.’s (2018) call for more dyadic entrepreneurship research. In particular, this approach’s internal view of a relationship can show how those involved see the situation (Blenkinsopp & Owens., 2010). This identity approach could also provide an understanding of individual identity impacts following failure and how these impacts might relate to tensions in their relationship.

This section aims to locate and summarise how narrative identity theories have been used in the entrepreneurship literature. As I discussed earlier, the tradition of narrative

identity is a collection of overlapping theories (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Since entrepreneurship is a wide field and scholars use different conceptualisations of identity theory, a full structured, systematic review would be overly complex and exceed the purpose of this section. Instead, I determined that a narrative review is a more appropriate strategy (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Snyder, 2019). Analysing key literature allowed me to surface several themes, detailed in the following subsections: *a concern for the “other”, mixing perspectives, identity work and change, and level of analysis*.

An essential criterion for selecting the relevant key empirical and conceptual literature was that the work must primarily focus on narrative identity. However, I found that the term “narrative identity” does not necessarily appear in article titles, the abstract, or among keywords used by entrepreneurship scholars employing narrative identity theories. For example, in a recent article, Saylor et al. (2021) have a central focus on narrative identity, but in their abstract, they refer to the “performative storytelling perspective” of narratives (p. 1). Also, while the term “narrative” is often a keyword for narrative identity articles, it frequently appears with a heterogeneous mixture of other narrative and identity-related keywords such as “authoring” (Gherardi, 2015), “entrepreneurial identity” (Bjursell & Melin, 2011, Hamilton, 2006), and “identity work” (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2020).

Therefore, I devised two searches to deploy in Google Scholar and Scopus; the first was a narrow search: “entrepreneur* AND ‘narrative identity’”, and the second used broader search terms: “‘entrepreneurial identity’ AND narrative*”. These searches were limited to articles published since 2002.

I was confident that this strategy would locate most of the relevant articles. However, I anticipated that the broader nature of the second search would include some articles where narratives were not constitutive of identity and were, therefore, not based on narrative identity theory (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Accordingly, I refined the list only to include articles that primarily dealt with narrative identity. This strategy also meant that I excluded articles dealing with narrativity more broadly than just narrative identity (e.g., Johansson, 2004). In addition, I excluded articles that covered a more heterogeneous mixture of narrative and discursive approaches to identity (e.g., Anderson & Warren, 2011, Anderson et al., 2019; Rae, 2006). The resulting list appears as Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1. *Narrative Identity in Entrepreneurship–Key Literature*

Author(s)	Type of research	Aim of study	Context(s) of empirical investigation	Level of Analysis	Key findings and contribution
Bjursell & Melin (2011)	Empirical	Explores the identity work in narratives performed by women entering family business.	Entering family business; gender.	Individual	Finds two contrasting narrative plot types relating to how individual women construct entrepreneurial identity by entering the family business either proactively (“Pipi Longstocking”) or reactively (“Alice in Wonderland”).
Down & Warren (2008)	Empirical	Ethnographic investigation of a small firm and the relevance of entrepreneurial clichés to entrepreneurial identity	Entering entrepreneurship and growing a business	Individual	Demonstrates how entrepreneurial cliches and metaphor as a narrative resource can allow for a more empowered, safer construction of entrepreneurial narrative self identities.
Downing (2005)	Conceptual	Argues for the value of a relational constructionist approach to the study of entrepreneurship and identity	-	-	Proposes a framework to highlight regular patterns of social interaction in narrative and dramatic processes when creating entrepreneurial identity.
Foss (2004)	Empirical	Explores life transition points of	Entering entrepreneurship,	Individual	Shows how narrative identity reveals challenges and meaning in life choices

Author(s)	Type of research	Aim of study	Context(s) of empirical investigation	Level of Analysis	Key findings and contribution
		an individual becoming an entrepreneur using an autobiographical approach.	temporal, spatial social and cultural life influences		leading to an entrepreneurial career. Highlights the potential of a life-story approach to revealing transition points and complex processes underlying identity construction and entrepreneurial decisions.
Garcia-Lorenzo et al. (2020)	Empirical	Explores identity work undertaken by older entrepreneurs during their transition into entrepreneurship.	Entering entrepreneurship; older age	Individual	Shows how paradoxical narrative identity tensions promote positive or negative responses which older entrepreneurs confront with strategies including “both ‘older’ and ‘entrepreneur’ identities as distinct yet mutually enabling” (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2020, p. 937). Intersubjective identity work is necessary to make the shift in social positions and identities.
Gherardi (2015)	Empirical	Explores the gendered connection to work-family life balance and identity work involved with how it is resisted, mobilized, and contested.	Women entering entrepreneurship; gender	Individual	Shows four ways of authoring female entrepreneurship in relation to gender and life: firm-creator, responsible co-author, wife, and part of a second generation. Entrepreneurship is seen as a “single life project”.

Author(s)	Type of research	Aim of study	Context(s) of empirical investigation	Level of Analysis	Key findings and contribution
Hamilton (2006)	Empirical	Explores the role of women in family business and the links between identity, gender, and power.	Women entering family business; gender	Individual and couple dyad	Entrepreneurial identity in family business is connected to leadership as a social practice in the daily lives of families. Subtle challenges to patriarchy are embedded in daily practice and show how power is distributed and shifting.
Hamilton (2014)	Conceptual	Argues for a fresh way to understand gender in entrepreneurship.	-	-	Proposes that narrative can shed new theoretical light onto entrepreneurial identity and gender by framing stories as an ontological condition of social life.
Mallett & Wapshott (2015)	Empirical	Explores older entrepreneurs use of narrative identity work when engaging with enterprise culture and ageing discourses to construct identity.	Entering entrepreneurship; older age	Individual	Finds that identity work highlights an ongoing struggle to maintain favoured identity positions when older entrepreneurs may lack narrative resources to support identity claims.
Phillips et al. (2013)	Empirical	Explores how an entrepreneur uses narrative identity work to construct homophilous ties	Co-construction of shared identity	Dyadic	Shows that entrepreneurs may engage in narrative identity work with narrative repertoires to emphasise similarities between tie portfolio partners. This can lead to the co-construction of shared

Author(s)	Type of research	Aim of study	Context(s) of empirical investigation	Level of Analysis	Key findings and contribution
Saylors et al. (2021)	Empirical	with business partners Explores how public failure narratives allow entrepreneurs to reevaluate identities and ideas, and their subsequent career choices	Entrepreneurial failure; public self-narratives	Individual	dyadic identity narratives and a cohesive sense of homophily in tie portfolios. Shows how public narrative types constructed by failed entrepreneurs reflect configurations of identity work and idea work (sense making). These configurations are then compared with career outcomes to show how entrepreneurs reconstruct identities and choose careers after failure.
Steyaert (2007)	Conceptual	Argues for a performative storytelling approach to entrepreneurial identity construction	-	-	Views storytelling in entrepreneurship as an embodied and embedded performance, drawing on available cultural resources. As such, Steyaert argues that the objective of narrative analysis should not “dissect the story but to further connect it, complexify and play with it ...” (p. 734).
Warren (2004)	Empirical	Explores negotiation of identity in women undergoing career transition to entrepreneurship	Women entering entrepreneurship, networks of social practice; gender	Group	Shows that the transition to entrepreneurship is a key stage in developing a professional identity. Communities of practice enable sense making and identity construction for individuals within family, business, and the broader community.

2.5.3 Concern for “The Other”

A stronger relational socio-cultural emphasis is common to several studies in Table 1 that explore gender in entrepreneurship (e.g. Warren, 2004; Bjursell & Melin, 2011; Gherardi, 2015; Hamilton, 2006). For example, Hamilton (2006) reveals women’s hidden, complex, and ambiguous roles in constructing entrepreneurial identity in patriarchal family businesses. These articles demonstrate the value of a relational approach to highlight what Gartner (2013) describes as “a concern for the ‘other’, so as to challenge the unspoken and often unrecognized ‘taken-for-granted’ aspects of what entrepreneurship is and what it might be” (p. 6). It has been argued that entrepreneurial discourse is grounded in idealised masculine conceptualisations that neglect women in entrepreneurship research. Consequently, some scholars call for epistemological and methodological changes (Ahl, 2006; Hamilton, 2013, 2014).

However, a strong relational emphasis in narrative identity theory is not necessarily applied to studies of “the ‘other’” in entrepreneurship. For example, in two key studies of older people transitioning into entrepreneurship, Garcia-Lorenzo et al. (2020) adopt a more individual emphasis, while Mallett and Wapshott (2015) use a storied resource perspective, indicating a moderate social relational emphasis based on the Smith and Sparkes (2008) typology.

2.5.4 Mixing Perspectives

Several of the key studies in Table 1, such as Hamilton (2006) and Foss (2004), employ a mixture of narrative identity theoretical perspectives (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Studies drawing from various theories are not unusual in narrative identity research. For example, Foss (2004) proposes to “make a synthesis between the post-structuralist and the humanistic view” (p. 81). This approach allows her to view her participant’s life story from a perspective that provides continuity, consistency and meaning for adult life

choices, while also applying a more relational lens to explore the dynamic, situated nature of a social self. This approach of *shifting ontology* has been described as a way to generate creative theoretical insights (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017). However, this mixing of narrative perspectives also brings the risk of *ontological drift* if the researcher fails to maintain alignment between changing ontologies and epistemologies. Moreover, there are risks that shifting perspectives in this way could confuse a reader, who may question the researcher's exact position on narrative identity (Ronkainen, 2016a).

It is possible for a narrative identity study involving identity work to also draw insights from role identity theory. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) provide an example of this eclectic approach to mixing different traditions in identity work. In addition to an ostensibly storied resource perspective to narrative identity (Smith & Sparkes, 2008), Ibarra and Barbulescu also incorporate aspects of role identity theory, including multiple identities and centrality (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In a recent study investigating the career paths of entrepreneurs following failure, Saylor et al. (2021) draw extensively from Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) approach to narrative identity work.

It has been argued that synthesising insights from studies using different theoretical perspectives helps provide a more complete understanding of the self (Vignoles et al., 2011; Wagenschwanz, 2021). This approach acknowledges the overlap between different theories of identity but also raises the problem that they often "do not seem to be speaking the same language" (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 8). Therefore researchers tend to be parsimonious in their references to other traditions outside their primary focus. A recent example of mixing theoretical perspectives from different traditions is Saylor et al. (2021), who principally adhere to a narrative identity perspective, but incorporate insights from role identity theory.

Drawing on insights from other traditions would seem more feasible when the philosophical assumptions are close, such as realist assumptions of identity continuity and stability. This view is consistent with the notion that narrative identity theoretical formulations based on notions of a reasonable consistency and continuity of identity (e.g., psychosocial, and intersubjective) are more compatible with the realist assumptions of role identity and social identity theories (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Indeed, when considering the various theoretical formulations of identity McAdams (1997a)—a key scholar for the psychosocial narrative perspective— accepts notions of multiple, changeable role identities, and that some can be more central to a sense of self than others.

2.5.5 Identity Work and Change

Narrative identity changes feature throughout the key literature presented in Table 1.

The increasing emphasis on narrative identity theory and identity work in the entrepreneurship literature reflects a growing call for dynamic identity change research (Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021 Wagenschwanz, 2021). Some of the literature in Table 1 conveys these dynamic changes through a life-story approach showing how identity change occurs during particular life changes (e.g., Foss, 2004; Warren, 2004). However, many explicitly use identity work in narrative identity to show dynamic shifts and interactions.

Studies with a stronger relational emphasis on narrative identity also draw from identity work scholars such as Watson (2009) and Beech (2008). Such studies include Bjursell and Melin (2011) and Gherardi (2015). Mallett and Wapshott (2015) adopt a storied resource approach to explore the tenuous nature of narrative identity resources for older entrepreneurs. They draw on Somers (1994) for their theoretical narrative identity position and develop the concept of narrative identity work. Their study investigates

how older entrepreneurs actively seek to create, maintain, and repair a sense of self through dynamic interpersonal processes.

A few key narrative identity studies have a thinner social relational emphasis. Garcia-Lorenzo et al. (2020) draw on scholars such as McAdams and Mclean (2013) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) for a more individual narrative identity and identity work positioning when exploring older entrepreneurs transitioning into entrepreneurship. This more individual approach to identity work may extend to intersubjective narrative studies such as Phillips et al. (2013), who explore homophily in entrepreneurship tie portfolios and the notion of co-constructing a shared identity with another person. However, Phillips et al. use the moderate social relational notion of narrative repertoires in storytelling to develop shared identities (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Somers, 1994; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). To a modest extent, therefore, Philips et al. also provide an example of mixing theoretical narrative perspectives.

2.6 Level of Analysis

In terms of the level of analysis, most studies in Table 1. focus on the individual entrepreneur. An exception is Warren (2004), who explores women entrepreneurs at a group level when developing their professional identities. Philips et al. (2013) provide a rare example of a dyadic-level exploration of an entrepreneur co-constructing a shared identity with tie-portfolio partners. Tie portfolios refer to the dyadic relationships entrepreneurs use to access the knowledge and resources necessary for creating and sustaining their businesses. Phillips et al. show how strategic identity work can build a sense of similarity and connection between two individuals and create a form of shared identity. Their study illustrates the value of researching dyadic pairs in entrepreneurship to understand identity interplay and connectedness (Caza et al., 2018). I argue that the significance of researching the construction of shared identity between tie partners

further highlights the importance of the distinctive and intimate bond between copreneurs (Bird & Zellweger, 2018).

The rarity of dyadic narrative identity studies in entrepreneurship is surprising, considering that copreneurs are a common type of business team (Muske & Fitzgerald, 2006). The shared connection between copreneurial couples and entrepreneurship in their lives makes them “an obvious site for research”, yet they are seldom researched (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010, p. 359).

Hamilton (2006) hints at dyadic research possibilities when she considers the role of women in copreneurial businesses. She indicates that including a joint couple interview in her study occurred almost inadvertently when a husband-and-wife team insisted on being interviewed together. However, this intersubjective aspect was not central to Hamilton’s study, which primarily focuses on women’s role in the family business. Thus, Hamilton’s study implicitly draws attention to the possibility of further dyadic narrative identity research with copreneurial couples—this is the challenge undertaken by this present thesis research.

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

Narrative identity theory applied to entrepreneurship tends to adopt a more strongly social relational emphasis. This emphasis has proven useful, but it may overlook the more individual, agentic aspects of identity maintenance and change. In terms of copreneurial research, an intersubjective narrative identity perspective is seldom used in entrepreneurship research but is well suited to exploring dyadic relationships such as copreneurs. This narrative perspective may provide me with insights regarding the impact of entrepreneurial failure on their sense of we-ness.

Moreover, some mixing of theoretical perspectives is encouraged by identity scholars for a more complete understanding of the self—particularly in relation to identity work

and change. An intersubjective narrative identity perspective is more compatible with the realist identity approaches commonly used in entrepreneurship research. I argue that this compatibility makes drawing insights from more realist theoretical identity perspectives to explore agentic identity changes both within and between spouses a practical option.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the literature relating to how we-ness has been conceptualised in order to clarify how this shared identity perspective can be accessed through my narrative identity study. I also outline the potential implications of entrepreneurial failure on we-ness for copreneurial couples coping with the stress of entrepreneurial failure.

3 ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND WE-NESS

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of narrative identity perspectives on a socio-cultural continuum and showed how an intersubjective narrative identity is suited exploring identity at the level of a copreneurial couple.

In this chapter, I will extend the notion of exploring identity at a dyadic level by providing a conceptual overview of how copreneurs experience shared identity through their sense of we-ness. This overview offers a foundation for considering how the entrepreneurship literature could benefit from using a we-ness lens to study identity interactions and change at the level of copreneurial couples.

Identity research has received increasing attention from entrepreneurship scholars (Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Wagenschwanz, 2021). This interest relates to the connection between identity and meaning, which is a primary motivator of entrepreneurial behaviour (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). Therefore, identity research provides opportunities for theoretical insights into how entrepreneurs shape “who they are and what they do” (Mmbaga et al., 2020, p.11).

Most extant identity research in entrepreneurship is at the level of the firm or the individual (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). At the firm or organisation level, identity research can show what is enduring and distinctive about that entity and informs identity. This understanding provides a framework for making sense of shared assumptions and claims about the nature of a firm and its culture that relate to identity (Leitch & Harrison, 2016). Conversely, at the individual level, identity can help explain aspects of entrepreneurship such as entrepreneurial intention, passion, and opportunity recognition (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

However, there is a lack of research aimed at understanding identity at a dyadic level, such as between copreneurial couples (Caza et al., 2018; El Shoubaki et al., 2022;

Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). This gap is surprising since a substantial proportion of entrepreneurial activity involves committed couples (Bird & Zellweger, 2018; Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010).

The concept of we-ness has relevance to copreneurial couples since their ability to achieve a balance between the needs of the self, their relationship, and their business are often critical to the success or failure of that business (Kadis & McClendon, 1991).

Moreover, how spouses interact and share a commitment to the business has also been shown to influence their ability to deal with business stressors (Danes & Jang, 2013; Yang & Danes, 2015). These considerations lead to the first research sub-question:

“How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples’ sense of we-ness?”

The organisation of this chapter is as follows: First, I provide an overview showing how several scholars have conceptualised we-ness, including from a narrative identity perspective. Next, I focus on how we-ness relates to couples coping with significant life challenges, including dyadic coping and the identity dynamics involved in we-ness.

Following this, I move to the literature on copreneurial couples and show how this can be broadly understood to include a spouse who might not appear to be visibly involved in the venture. This understanding provides a foundation to review the extent to which the entrepreneurship literature has considered copreneurial relationships. In this last section, I pay particular attention to how identity dynamics and we-ness influence emerging internal and external threats to a copreneurial couple’s relationship. Further, I discuss gender identity and the relative importance of individual identities and interactions.

3.1 Conceptualising We-ness

Committed couples are interdependent, which indicates that they possess a “we” or “us” orientation whereby a person understands themselves in relation to others in close relationships (Acitelli et al., 1999; Topcu-Uzer, 2020). For this thesis, couple we-ness is conceptualised as a person’s sense of interdependent unity with their spouse (Ahmad et al., 2017; Badr et al., 2007, Fergus, 2011, 2014; Reid et al., 2006). The concept of we-ness is not intended to suggest a complete integration of two spousal selves: instead,

It is a sense of self that not only connotes an internalized interdependence and mutuality with the partner but also involves a feeling of a coexisting separateness and autonomy so as to allow partners to form a sense of unity or fundamental partnership and friendship. (Reid et al., 2006, p. 255)

As such, we-ness involves the dynamic interplay of individual and shared identities in their relationship (Ahmad et al., 2017, Reid et al., 2006; Reid & Ahmad, 2015; Topcu-Uzer et al., 2020).

The we-ness literature is complicated by the tendency for researchers to use different terminology (Cruwys et al., 2022). For example, the terms *couple identity* and *mutuality* are often used interchangeably with *we-ness* (e.g., Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Reid & Ahmad, 2015; Singer et al., 2015). For this thesis, we-ness is my preferred term for two reasons. Firstly, it closely reflects how couples naturally describe their experience of shared identity—e.g., “we are a team”. Secondly, the term also provides a link for this study to the discursive aspect of narrative identity research when exploring “we-talk” and “we-stories” (Fergus, 2015; Gildersleeve et al., 2017; McAdams, 1997b; Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

Progress towards the notion of we-ness can be traced back to the late 1970s when relationship scholars began transitioning away from the standard view that married couples could be understood by studying individual spouses. Over subsequent decades, models viewing couples as an interacting system became increasingly popular

(Bradbury, 1998). Initially, emphasis was placed on observable interpersonal behaviour. However, during the 1980s, it was recognised that an adequate understanding of spousal behaviours could not be achieved without paying more attention to aspects such as feelings and thoughts. This change led to a growth in therapeutic approaches for couples, such as cognitive-behavioural, emotionally focused, and integrative approaches. During the late 1990s, relationship psychologists began paying closer attention to the importance of identity in a couple's interdependent relationship (Garrido & Acitelli, 1999; Topcu-Uzer, 2020).

Concurrently, there was also work on self-concept based on the premise that it consists of a tripartite system of the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Thus, the idea of a relational self shared in dyadic bonds—such as in committed couple relationships—was receiving increasing attention, and various theoretical conceptualisations of we-ness developed. Topcu-Uzer et al. (2020) provide a useful overview of several we-ness theories and frameworks proposed since the early 1990s. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. *Conceptualising We-ness*

Key Author(s)	Theoretical conceptualisation	Definition
Buehlman et al. (1992); Carrère et al. (2000);	We-ness	“How much a spouse identifies his or herself as part of a couple versus emphasizing his or her individuality or independence” (Buehlman et al., 1992, p. 298).
Agnew et al. (1998)	Cognitive interdependence	“A mental state characterized by a pluralistic, collective representation of the self-in-representation” (Agnew et al., 1998, p. 939).
Acitelli et al. (1999); Badr et al., (2007)	Couple identity	“The extent to which a person views oneself as part of a couple and to which it is considered an important part of the self” (Acitelli et al., 1999, p. 587).
Singer et al. (2015)	Mutuality	“An understanding within the partners that they exist within a larger entity that transcends either of their individual selves, and entails feelings, cognitions, and

		behaviors that seek to promote the welfare and best interests of the relationship while maintaining a simultaneous awareness of each partner's individual concerns" (Singer et al., 2015, p. 124).
Bodenmann (2005)	We-ness in the systemic transaction model (STM)	The STM model considers that committed couples can have an interdependent experience of stress. Couples viewing stress as <i>we-stress</i> report lowered stress and greater relationship satisfaction and quality. (Topcu-Uzer et al., 2020).
Reid & Ahmad (2015); Reid et al. (2006)	We-ness as an emergent process	"A sense of self that not only connotes an internalized interdependence and mutuality with the partner but also involves a feeling of a coexisting separateness and autonomy" (Reid et al., 2006, p. 255).

Note. Adapted from Topcu-Uzer et al. (2020, pp. 3-7)

Buehlman and his colleagues were the first to use the term we-ness (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000). Initially, we-ness work consisted of coding on a dimension representing the extent to which a spouse viewed themselves as part of a couple versus seeing themselves individually. Subsequent work has focused more on the strength of we-ness, which reflects a "sense of unity and identity as a couple" and predicted stability in the marital bond (Carrère et al., 2000, p. 44).

The Acitelli et al. (1999) conceptualisation of shared identity in couple relationships also focuses on the strength of this form of identity as a predictor of relational stability (Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Badr et al., 2007). They propose a broad single relational identity dimension to indicate the degree to which a person considers themselves connected with others. Acitelli et al. (1999) argue that couples can possess either a general relational identity or a stronger interdependent version which they termed *couple identity*.

In this approach, couple identity is defined as "seeing the relationship itself as an entity (rather than seeing only two individuals) and the extent to which that entity is seen as

part of the self” (Badr et al., 2007, p. 213). Badr et al. (2007) also use the term we-ness to indicate the degree of union a spouse experiences with their partner. However, they speculate that excessive we-ness could lead to psychosocial problems. Finding a balance between separateness and connectedness may lead to better outcomes when couples cope with significant life stressors.

Acitelli et al. (1999) indicate that their conceptualisation of couple identity is similar to work by Agnew et al. (1998). Agnew et al. argued that when spouses regard themselves as part of a unit, they are in a state of cognitive interdependence. They contend that this state is an essential expression of relationship awareness and represents the “self-in-relationship” (p. 942).

How couples cope with stress in life also relates to we-ness. In his work on dyadic coping theory, Bodenmann (2005) claims that when couples positively deal with stress together, it enhances their sense of we-ness. Thus, in addition to reducing stress through positive dyadic coping efforts, couples can simultaneously improve the quality and stability of their relationship.

Bodenmann (2005) argues that some challenging life events, such as coping with serious illness, may create opportunities for couples to become closer and increase we-ness. This phenomenon occurs through spouses conceptualising their stress as “we-stress” and adopting a shared approach to coping (Bodenmann et al., 2016). However, Bodenmann (2005) also contends that some forms of chronic stress may have the reverse effect and erode we-ness due to reduced or negative dyadic communication or having less opportunity to spend positive time together.

Singer et al. (2015) focus on the concept of mutuality to develop earlier work by scholars exploring couple interdependence. In this approach, mutuality is intended to emphasise each spouse’s contribution to the relationship and mutual commitment. This

concept also connects with the notions of respecting and validating each other's sense of self, achieving common goals, and recognising their merged relationship.

Singer et al. (2015) refer to the work of scholars such as Skerrett (2003), who argues that we-ness encourages each partner's individual growth and provides a protective resource in the form of "relational resilience" (p. 70). Skerrett's (2003) work involved the facilitation of shared storytelling to provide coherence, meaning, and direction to joint coping with one spouse's serious illness, thereby enhancing we-ness. This work was further developed by Singer and Skerrett (2014) as a proposal for a narrative therapeutic framework based on the facilitation of co-constructed "we-stories" (p. 36) that draw from favoured "relationship-defining memories" (Alea et al., 2015, p. 164). Singer and Skerrett argue that we-stories help shift a couple's relationship from a more individual orientation to one of greater interdependent connection.

The final theoretical approach in Table 2 conceptualises we-ness as an emergent process (Reid et al., 2006). Reid and his colleagues consider that when a sense of we-ness and couple identity develops, it resides within an interpersonal system unique to that spousal relationship (Fergus & Reid, 2001; Reid et al., 2006). Their systemic constructivist therapeutic model regards each spouse in the relationship as a separate "self-system" interacting with the other in complex and subtle ways to reflect both personalities (Fergus & Reid, 2001, p. 387). Therefore, Fergus and Reid (2001) argue that "each individual is a necessary ingredient in the dialectical interplay responsible for the existence of 'we-ness', and in turn, the experience of 'we-ness' enhances the individual self" (pp. 387-388). An important implication of this model is that each spouse is regarded as critical for helping to maintain their partner's sense of identity and the essence of their relationship (Reid & Ahmad, 2015).

A useful way to depict the overlapping and complementary nature of we-ness is in the form of overlapping circles, or a Venn diagram, whereby the shared identity emerges in

the intersection between individual self-identities (Agnew et al., 1998; Reid et al., 2006). A critical aspect of this understanding is that this conceptualisation is not intended to imply integration with one's partner; instead, it is a sense of self in relationship so that a partner experiences the world as if they are, to some extent, merged with their spouse (Fergus & Reid, 2001). Therefore, Reid and Ahmad (2015) argue that couples in a state of we-ness may appear as different individuals, but their closeness is symbiotic or mutually beneficial to each other.

While a constructivist perspective of we-ness suggests an ongoing emergent aspect, this concept has also been connected to the notion of relatively stable relationships anchored by positive relationship-defining memories within a couple's shared life story (Gildersleeve et al., 2017). Indeed, it has been argued that there is a strong pull toward homeostasis within a couple identity system (Fergus & Reid, 2001). Over time, this need for homeostasis leads couples to negotiate ways to accommodate their individual identities within a shared subjective reality consisting of many layers of meaning. Effectively, couples can grow together (Ahmad et al., 2017).

3.2 A Narrative Identity Perspective

Fergus and Reid (2001) indicate that we-ness is highly experiential and relies on a couple's shared history to form their unique perception of unity (Topcu-Uzer et al., 2020). This history means that much of a couple's experience of we-ness is implicit, often non-verbal, and not easily observed (Fergus, 2015).

The implicit nature of we-ness presents a problem for a researcher endeavouring to access this aspect of couple relationships. The notion of we-ness has been intrinsically associated with language. The term we-ness itself highlights couples' use of plural personal pronouns. Indeed, the intensive coding of plural pronouns to operationalise we-ness for analysis is a common research approach (Ahmad et al., 2017; Cruwys, 2022).

However, while we-oriented pronouns are relevant to show a couple's sense of we-ness, this approach alone is insufficient (Reid & Ahmad, 2015). One obvious complication with this approach is that pronoun constructions in English are not always straightforward (Alea et al., 2015). For example, the statement, "My husband and I were adapting to life after the business failed", could easily have been, "We were adapting to life after our business failed".

The challenge for a researcher is how to access the thinking that reflects each spouse's sense of interdependence and awareness of themselves as a couple (Fergus, 2011; Fergus & Reid, 2001). It has been argued that co-constructed stories are how couples comprehend their world together and locate themselves in their past, present, and future. This understanding conceptualises a couple's lived experience of a relationship as a collaborative and reflexively constructed life story.

A couple's co-constructed stories are like pebbles cast upon the beach of a relationship, weathered and worked with the changing tides, taking shape, and shaping the relationship as it unfolds and moves through time. The narrative situates the couple in space and time linking together past, present, and future. Through narrative, the couple can reflect back upon their history, make meaning of their present, and plan the course of their future. (Fergus and Reid, 2001, p. 395)

This passage reveals a narrative identity perspective showing how couples narratively build meaning and coherence in their relationship (Fergus, 2015; McAdams, 1997b). Moreover, some scholars argue that just as self-defining memories are integrated into narratives of selfhood, relationship-defining memories are woven into couple stories and are essential for constructing we-ness (Alea et al., 2015; Gildersleeve et al., 2017). Singer and Skerrett (2014) argue that "couples' stories function as the emotional handles that couples grab on to in order to express to each other and to others outside their relationship fundamental themes and defining elements of who they are together" (p. 46). For example, the redemptive themes in stories couples tell about their

experiences of difficult times have been associated with coping, fostering a sense of we-ness, and marital satisfaction (Fergus, 2011; Skerrett, 2003).

The importance of stories of shared memories and stories for couples to construct and maintain their sense of we-ness underscores the value of a narrative identity perspective for a researcher to comprehend this inner core of their relationship. These views are consistent with the intersubjective narrative identity perspective outlined in Chapter 2 and the approach I have adopted for this research.

However, as with individual identities, a sense of we-ness is not static and may develop and change over time due to a couple's lived experience together—especially when dealing with challenging events (Ahmad et al., 2017; Fergus, 2015; Fergus & Skerrett, 2015; Reid & Ahmad, 2015).

3.3 We-ness and coping with Life Challenges

Much of the we-ness literature highlights the benefits of we-ness for couples dealing with adversity. A stronger sense of we-ness has been associated with a capacity for couples to cope with challenges together (e.g., Badr et al., 2007; Fergus, 2015; Bodenmann, 2005). Moreover, scholars refer to coping with life challenges as an emergent phenomenon in which the shared experience can also strengthen a couple's sense of we-ness (Bodenmann, 2005; Reid & Ahmad, 2015). This capacity has led to we-ness being described as a form of *relational resilience*—a protective coping resource unique to the couple's relationship (Bodenmann, 2005; Skerrett, 2015). This view has led some scholars to liken we-ness to a “muscle” that can be strengthened with exercise (Fergus & Skerrett, 2015). This analogy is helpful for therapeutic purposes where the focus is on how to tap into or enhance a couple's sense of we-ness for the mutual benefit of both partners (e.g., Rohrbaugh, 2021).

A substantial body of literature on we-ness sits within the health field. The health literature often explores the value of we-ness for its capacity to alleviate the negative impacts of one spouse being seriously ill. A strong sense of we-ness is generally assumed to improve both a spousal caregiver's state of mind and improve the quality of life of their sick partner (Ahmad et al., 2017; Badr et al., 2007).

Examples of such health studies include how spouses cope with situations where one partner has cancer (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2017; Miller & Caughlin, 2013), is HIV-positive (Huang et al., 2018), has memory loss (Hernandez et al., 2019), has suffered a stroke (van Nes et al., 2009), or has drug addiction (Crowley & Miller, 2020).

The interdependence of couples and their coping efforts have led to the development of dyadic coping models. This form of coping as a dyad is regarded as a manifestation of we-ness since it involves couples taking each other's perspectives to see a problem as shared. Dyadic coping⁶ is a large field, but its close involvement with we-ness means that it is important to consider as an aspect of this thesis. Therefore, a short consideration of dyadic coping follows before moving on to consider how identity change is involved with adjusting to life challenges.

3.3.1 Dyadic Coping

Dyadic coping differs from individual models of coping by viewing it as an interpersonal concept. Several different models of dyadic coping have been formulated since the 1990s with different theoretical orientations (e.g., Berg & Upchurch, 2007; Bodenmann, 1995; Coyne & Smith, 1991). Like the we-ness literature in general, many of these dyadic coping models and studies focus on chronic health issues in

⁶ The dyadic coping literature is extensive, and a detailed review is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, there are several systematic reviews and meta-analyses of different dyadic models (Lee & Roberts, 2019; Falconier et al., 2015; Staff et al., 2017; Traa et al., 2015; Weitkamp & Bodenmann, 2022).

relationships; however, it has been argued that they can be applied to other stressful events (Berg & Upchurch, 2007). Essentially, these models refer to how couples deal with stressors in their life by appraising them as “ours” instead of just “mine”. For comparison, I will briefly describe models based on two broad theoretical types: a transactional perspective and a socio-cultural perspective.

Firstly, the Systematic Transaction Model (STM) (Bodenmann, 1995) was derived from the individual transactional coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The individual transactional approach defines coping as the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). STM extends this theory to emphasise the interdependent nature of coping in close relationships as a dyadic issue.

Therefore, this model incorporates individual and couple-related goals and can lead to individual and couple-related coping. There are also different modes of dyadic coping included in STM. As with individual coping, dyadic coping can be both positive and negative. Negative dyadic coping can arise when a partner perceives that they are being coerced or compelled to provide support or because of exhaustion (Bodenmann, 2016). The positive modes include problem-focused, such as looking for solutions, or emotion-focused, such as offering empathic understanding. Each mode can involve several different forms, but *common dyadic coping* is of particular interest to this thesis since it is characteristically a shared involvement in the coping process. Often it will involve the couple talking with each other about the stress and sense-making (e.g., looking for information or reframing). Other joint efforts to reduce stress in the common approach could include spiritual activities (such as praying) or emotional and physical intimacy. One criticism of STM is that it still retains an individual emphasis to the extent that it posits dyadic coping only takes place after individual efforts have been exhausted.

Further, STM does little to locate the stress within a contextual framework (Berg & Upchurch, 2007; Staff et al., 2017).

Berg and Upchurch (2007) formulated a developmental-contextual model (DCM) for dyadic coping. Their model is an example of a socio-cultural perspective where dyadic appraisal and coping are influenced by aspects such as culture and gender. These scholars highlight that cultural context can influence the interdependence between spouses. Moreover, they point out that women are more attuned to the emotions of their spouses and more frequently think about the relationship.

DCM assumes that dyadic coping is the primary approach for couples regardless of how effective individual efforts might be. Berg and Upchurch (2007) contend that other contextual factors are also important, such as the quality of the relationship and the demands imposed by the stressor. DCM views dyadic coping as occurring on a continuum of involvement, from uninvolved to collaborative. This approach also conceives the situation where a partner becomes overinvolved and is regarded by their partner as controlling.

Scholars have commented that the field of dyadic coping is still immature since there are numerous models, and a more integrated approach is needed (Lee & Roberts, 2018; Staff et al., 2017). Recently there has been evidence of more interest in integrated approaches, such as a proposal to synthesise STM and DCM (Badr & Acitelli, 2017). It has also been argued that coping studies would benefit from a more relational lens to highlight intraindividual and interpersonal aspects and the context in which these dynamic changes are embedded (Lee & Roberts, 2018).

However, while dyadic coping models involve we-ness (Weitkamp & Bodenmann, 2022), they do not examine we-ness directly or how it changes in response to identity-relevant life challenges.

3.3.2 We-ness as a dynamic system

Scholars indicate that we-ness is not static: We-ness and personal identities operate as a dynamic system in couple relationships, and changes occur (Fergus & Reid, 2001).

Some studies have shown how we-ness changes in response to life challenges (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2016; Miller & Caughlin, 2013; Skerrett, 1998). These studies have led to an interest in how couples adjusting to adversity might affect how spouses shift between having a sense of being together or more separate in their relationship.

3.3.2.1 Shifts and Balance

McCarthy et al. (2016) considered the fluctuations between I-ness and we-ness during a couple's adjustment to serious illness in one spouse. They identified we-ness-affirming, eroding, and differentiating processes taking place over time when dealing with the illness. Their findings suggest that a need for personal boundaries, or periods of separateness, in the context of serious illness may be natural and do not necessarily undermine we-ness. Indeed, McCarthy et al. comment that it can serve "to honour both 'I's and enhance their individual as well as collective functioning" (p. 11). They argue that we-ness may be better conceptualised as a dynamic, fluid process where couples naturally shift between a sense of "I" and "we" as they adapt to challenging life events. This understanding expands on the notion that life challenges can strengthen a sense of we-ness through dyadic or communal coping processes, making it more resilient to future threats (Bodenmann, 2005; Lyons et al., 1998; Reid & Ahmad, 2015; Skerrett, 2015).

The McCarthy et al. (2016) findings could also reflect the understanding of we-ness as a self-system in which each spouse is critical for maintaining their partner's sense of identity (Reid & Ahmad, 2015). Therefore, in addition to spouses needing to feel connected, they also need to respect their partner's need sometimes to be separate. As Badr et al. (2007) suggest, "too much 'we-ness' may be associated with greater

enmeshment, and ultimately, more psychosocial problems” (p. 226). Based on the notion of degree or strength of we-ness, the optimal amount for relationships remains unclear (Alea et al., 2015).

However, a study by Walsh and Neff (2018) refines the notion of what might be an optimal level of we-ness by introducing the notion of balance. These researchers found that couples with a greater sense of well-being in their relationship also perceive more equality of contribution from their respective personal identities. Walsh and Neff argue that this perceived balance leads to feelings of greater security and the ability to deal with threats that may challenge their relationship. Conversely, imbalanced relationships are where one spouse’s self is dominant in the relationship. This situation may lead to issues such as one partner feeling eclipsed by the other. A lack of balance between identities diminishes a couple’s sense of shared identity and we-ness. They are less likely to engage in pro-relational behaviour in response to life challenges. Although Walsh and Neff (2018) indicate that a couple’s perceived balance of identities can affect relationship outcomes, their study does not offer insights into how or why dynamic changes may occur over time.

3.3.2.2 Gender

Another key aspect noted for its tendency to influence we-ness is gender. It has been found that socio-cultural factors relating to gender are involved with we-ness (Acitelli et al., 1999). In Western European and North American countries, women naturally develop an interdependent self-construal, while men tend to be more independent (Cross & Madison, 1997). Therefore, gender may be an important aspect involved with we-ness and how it can change when couples are confronted with a challenging life event.

Research shows that husbands and wives can think and feel differently about their relationship (Acitelli, 2001; Acitelli & Badr, 2005). For example, women tend to be the

nurturers or caregivers in relationships and respond differently to life challenges. When couples are having trouble with their marriage, women tend to undertake the task of emotional repair, while men are more likely to withdraw. Such gendered differences can lead to difficulty adjusting their relationship to challenges. Acitelli and Badr (2005) reported that, in circumstances where their spouse is seriously ill, women are more likely than men to use talking to provide emotional support. This difference suggests that when spouses adopt gender-traditional roles, an unwell woman is likely to suffer more than her male partner (p. 133).

However, a subsequent study (Badr et al., 2008) found that relationship talk in the context of coping with serious illness showed no significant gender differences in terms of marital adjustment or stress. The authors speculated that traditional gendered propensities concerning relationship talk might be less salient when confronted by a major life stressor, such as cancer. It is also possible that many health studies involving we-ness and coping with serious illnesses concern single-sex cancers, such as breast or prostate cancer, so it is difficult to disentangle gender differences (Badr et al., 2010).

While the effects of gendered differences in relationship talk on we-ness when coping with a serious life event remain unclear, there may be other important gendered differences influencing we-ness, such as relationship memories. For example, it has been shown that women are more adept than men at using autobiographical memories to construct a sense of we-ness that predicts marital satisfaction (Alea et al., 2015). This propensity may create greater marital resilience when women perceive themselves as being in close unity with their partner during difficult times and form relationship-defining memories about the event.

Therefore, the nature of we-ness in a couple's relationship is dynamic. The type of life challenges, how couples cope and adapt, and their gendered differences, are involved with changes in we-ness. This understanding leads to the next section about

copreneurial couples as a precursor to discussing how identity and we-ness research is relevant to copreneurs.

3.4 Copreneurial Couples

The literature on copreneurs shows that they stand out in business for various reasons. A copreneurial couple's business is distinct from other types of family businesses because copreneurs share life goals specific to their relationship—such as having children and buying a home together. As a business team, they have the potential to perform household and business duties flexibly but may also transfer tensions between the home and workplace (El Shoubaki et al., 2022). Despite these distinctive features and the high incidence of copreneurs in business together, this type of business team is rarely studied (Bird & Zellweger, 2018; El Shoubaki et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurship research only began to pay closer attention to business-owning spouses in the late 1980s when Barnett and Barnett (1988) coined the term *copreneurs*. Scholars initially applied this designation to married couples, or those in a defacto marriage relationship, who jointly own and manage a business. Various similar definitions followed, mainly emphasising the formal involvement of both spouses in the business operation.

Scholars soon began to consider the personal aspects of copreneurial relationships and what implications these may have for business survival (Kadis & McClendon, 1991). As the exploration of the personal dynamics of business-owning couples proceeded, the criteria for a copreneurial business became more focused on the idea of shared responsibility for the venture. Studies began to emphasise the significance of shared decision-making as a criterion for copreneurship rather than the minimum time each spouse spends in the business (Fitzgerald & Muske, 2002).

More nuanced models of copreneurship began to appear. De Bruin (2006) contends that there are several ways in which spouses may be involved in entrepreneurial ventures: solo entrepreneurs with a supportive spouse, spouses independently operating different ventures, or those exclusively operating a business together. In De Bruin's framework, only the last category are couples viewed as copreneurs.

Leveraging previous research, Fletcher (2010) provides a typology of copreneurship based on the dimensions of management and ownership. According to this typology, three patterns of couples in business emerge: "classic" copreneurship, where both spouses are involved in managing and owning the business; "informal" copreneurship, where one spouse owns and manages the business, and the other informally helps such as with knowledge and emotional support; and "inter-generational" copreneurship, where a family business passes from parents to a couple through purchase or inheritance.

Based on her analysis, Fletcher (2010) constructed a view of copreneurs embedded in the household as the location for market work, creativity, knowledge, and skills relating to a venture. Moreover, the couple share "commitment to and responsibility for the business venture in terms of risk, ownership and management and enact this in their life together" (p. 466). This formulation implies that formal legal ownership by both spouses is unnecessary for a business-owning couple to be considered copreneurs.⁷ Indeed, Kirkwood (2009) argues that co-ownership of a business is not necessary for a couple to be considered copreneurs. In her view, copreneurs are any couple who share a personal and work relationship.

⁷ This view of business ownership aligns with the situation in many legal jurisdictions, including New Zealand, whereby a business owned by one spouse is generally regarded as joint relationship property (Björnberg & Coyle-Shapiro, 2009).

Others, such as Blenkinsopp and Owens (2010), provide a different analysis but reach a similarly broad conceptual understanding of copreneurship by viewing entrepreneurial activity as embedded in the family. Their approach indicates that even where one spouse has little direct involvement in the operation of a business, they are still considered to have a meaningful influence on entrepreneurial activity. Different forms of practical, psychological, and emotional support offered by a less visible spouse are essential for the entrepreneur's well-being and business outcomes (Danes, 2013; El Shoubaki & Stephan, 2018; Hedberg & Danes, 2012; Lewis et al., 2016; Lewis & Massey, 2011).

However, it is also important to note that although spouses are considered central to the business context, they may not necessarily be supportive. For example, spouses may be ambivalent or even actively unsupportive toward their partner starting and operating a new business venture (Kirkwood, 2009).⁸

These extended views of copreneurship rely on concepts of social embeddedness. Some scholars consider the family as a common context for copreneurial activity (e.g., Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010), while others believe this activity to be embedded in the household (e.g., Fletcher, 2010). However, I argue that a different view is appropriate when using a we-ness perspective in entrepreneurship research—couple embeddedness.

It has been accepted that viewing entrepreneurs from their embedded social context is essential; hence there has been growing interest in viewing this activity from the context

⁸ The possibility of an unsupportive spouse in relation to entrepreneurial activity raises an interesting question about whether such a couple could still be considered as copreneurs. Based on the broad understanding of copreneurship (Fletcher, 2010), the existence of an unsupportive spouse suggests that a couple are unlikely to share responsibility and commitment to the business, so would not be considered as copreneurs. However, a spouse's perception of what constitutes being supportive or unsupportive is entirely a matter for them. Moreover, perceived support between spouses may change (increase or decrease) over time. Blenkinsopp and Owens (2010) argue that where spouses locate themselves on a continuum of copreneurial involvement in a business is not easily knowable for an external observer. Therefore, while it remains a possibility that the copreneurial nature of a relationship may cease, the challenge of defining what constitutes support in the context of relationship and identity dynamics is not straightforward.

of families or households (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson, 2007; McAdam & Marlow, 2013). More recently, however, it has been argued that couples involved in business are unique and should be studied separately from other family members (El Shoubaki et al., 2021).

Bird and Zellweger (2018) highlight the distinctiveness of committed couples compared to other family or household members, such as siblings. They build on the concept of relational embeddedness (Blatt, 2009), which indicates the importance of the three elements of trust, identification, and obligations to entrepreneurial ventures. Bird and Zellweger (2018) found that these key features of relational embeddedness are powerful in spousal entrepreneurial relationships. The nature of spouses' financial ties, goals, and shared life results in typically high levels of trust and obligation between couples. Similarly, the element of identification is substantial; indeed, Bird and Zellweger suggest that this bond may be because "spouses fulfil many requisites of shared identity" (p. 267).

As an operational definition of copreneurship for this thesis, I adopt the view stated by Fletcher (2010) that, regardless of direct involvement in the business, spouses can be copreneurs if they share "commitment to and responsibility for the business venture in terms of risk, ownership and management and enact this in their life together" (p. 466). In addition, because of the usually high levels of trust, identification, and obligation between spouses, I include Bird and Zellweger's (2018) argument that the nature identity and dynamics within such relationships are distinct from other relationships at the family or household level. This approach embeds copreneurship at the relational level of the couple.

Acknowledging that even a non-entrepreneurial spouse is vital for the overall copreneurial endeavour refocuses attention on the importance of copreneur relationships in terms of business outcomes (Yang & Danes, 2015). For instance, it has been

recognised that copreneurs encounter tensions in the boundary between the systems of work and personal life that must be managed, or this could jeopardise both the business and their personal relationship (Danes, 2006; Fitzgerald & Muske, 2002). For copreneurs, such tensions between work and personal life raise questions about the involvement of identities, such as gender (McAdam & Marlowe, 2013).

3.5 Copreneurs and Identity in Entrepreneurship

Much of the work on identity in entrepreneurship has focused on the individual (Mmbaga et al., 2020). However, identities are not constructed in isolation. Indeed, some argue that “identities are always an expression of relationship” (Fletcher & Watson, 2007, p. 13). Thus, there have been calls for more study of identity in entrepreneurship in new contexts emphasising situational factors and social interaction, such as between spouses (Caza et al., 2018; Harrison & Leitch, 2016; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017).

3.5.1 The Case for Copreneurial Identity Research

With a few notable exceptions, the entrepreneurship literature contains little reference to identities shared by copreneurs or the concept of *we-ness* (e.g., Björnberg & Coyle-Shapiro, 2009; Danes & Jang, 2013; Jang & Danes, 2013). This dearth of identity research in copreneurship is surprising since the small amount of prior research has indicated that shared identity involves aspects associated with business sustainability, such as good communication quality, mutual support, commitment to business goals, and resilience (Danes & Jang, 2013; Jang & Danes, 2013). While there is little consideration of couple-level identities or *we-ness* in the entrepreneurship literature, interpersonal *spousal social capital* is considered essential for copreneurs starting a new venture (Danes, 2013; Matzek et al., 2010; Yang & Danes, 2015).

Björnberg and Coyle-Shapiro (2009) also lament the lack of knowledge about copreneurs from a relational perspective. These scholars propose a model to explain copreneurial work and relationship outcomes. A key aspect of their model posits that a strong “concern for the other” between spouses benefits copreneurial relationships due to the copreneurial couple’s enhanced communality—meaning that they will offer help to each other without the expectation of reward (“Exchange and communal relationships” para. 1). In addition, Björnberg and Coyle-Shapiro argue that these copreneurs may also possess a level of emotional cohesion, helping maintain marital satisfaction despite disagreements on business processes or tasks.

In a broad sense, Björnberg and Coyle-Shapiro’s (2009) conceptual model also illustrates that copreneurs provide an opportunity to investigate how a committed relationship impacts both business and personal outcomes. Danes and Jang (2013) authored a rare study in the entrepreneurship literature focusing on the idea that entrepreneurial identity can be more than an individual construct. They argue that copreneurial spouses are more than the sum of two individuals in business. Such spouses should instead be seen as having a different interaction pattern due to their shared relationship and unity of life goals, purpose, and commitment.

These scholars demonstrate how a role-based copreneurial identity can be constructed between spouses. Moreover, they suggest that forming a copreneurial identity provides copreneurs with resources to deal with the challenges of entrepreneurship. However, Danes and Jang (2013) acknowledge that copreneurial relationships and commitment are not static concepts, so further research is necessary to understand how such a shared identity can change.

While Danes and Jang (2013) argue that a copreneurial identity may underpin collaboration and create resilience to external challenges, threats may also arise within a relationship. Poor quality spousal relationships can also adversely impact a business

(Kadis & McClendon, 1991). Even the good intention of offering support can be construed negatively. For example, if business problems persist for too long, positive spousal support may negatively affect an entrepreneur (Danes, 2013).

Research on entrepreneurial failure has seen an upsurge in the past decade. These studies show that failure's financial, emotional, psychological, and social costs can be significant for individuals, unfolding in complex ways over time (Singh et al., 2007, 2015; Cope, 2011; Fang He et al., 2017; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). However, the consequences of failure are not just at the level of the entrepreneur since “the relational ripples of failure extend in many directions” (Cope, 2011, p. 613).

Significant others, including spouses, can be deeply affected by entrepreneurial failure⁹—sometimes leading to a breakdown of marital relationships (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007). Yet, we know little about how identity is involved in entrepreneurial failure (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). An entrepreneur's spouse may be their “last bastion of support” if the business fails—yet this critical support person may also suffer the debilitating consequences of failure (Cope, 2011, p. 612). This last observation highlights the significance of interdependent support between copreneurial couples in the event of entrepreneurial failure. Still, we know little about the implications of entrepreneurial failure for a critical shared coping resource—their sense of we-ness.

Therefore, while it has been established that entrepreneurs do not operate in isolation and identity is critical to how copreneurs think, feel, behave, plan their future, and provide mutual support, little is known about how identities are involved in copreneurial relationships. I argue that this analysis provides a strong case for identity perspectives in copreneur research.

⁹ The literature on entrepreneurial failure is considered more fully in Chapter 4.

3.5.2 Gender Identities in Copreneurship

Gender is an essential aspect of identity in entrepreneurship literature (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Wagenschwanz, 2021). Remarkably, although a significant proportion of the extant literature on copreneurial couples focuses on gender, few of these studies focus on identity (El Shoubaki et al., 2022). The lack of studies using an identity perspective in copreneurial business research is surprising since spouses are often deeply immersed in socially gendered roles foundational to identities and potential tensions (Danes & Lee, 2004; Danes, 2006; Bird & Zellweger, 2018).

Some studies of gender identity in entrepreneurship indicate that spousal tensions can arise between copreneurs (Danes, 2006; McAdam & Marlow, 2013; Marshack, 1994). For example, a husband might feel undervalued by his wife due to a perception of not meeting his responsibility as the primary family provider. Alternatively, a wife might think that her financial compensation from the business indicates that her contribution is less valued by her husband (Danes, 2006). Conversely, other studies suggest that copreneurial couples can adopt a less gendered, egalitarian approach to their relationships to balance business and domestic needs (Bruni & Perrotta, 2014; Deacon et al., 2014; Gather et al., 2016).

Deacon et al. (2014) found that couples adopt an egalitarian approach to distributing roles and leadership. While their participants generally followed traditionally gendered norms, they valued each other's contributions equally and showed no resentment or tension. Deacon et al. describe their results as tentative, encouraging further research.

Bruni and Perrotta (2014) undertook joint interviews with couples to explore how they accomplished the process of entrepreneuring together. This research yielded narratives showing the positioning of gendered identities within each couple's business. These researchers found that couple stories could be placed on a continuum. At one end were stories indicating that one spouse was subsidiary to the other. These couples used

language that was more individually oriented and traditionally gendered. The other end of the continuum consisted of stories that showed couples with a highly collaborative, egalitarian approach.

From a slightly different perspective but still relevant to gender, Hedberg and Danes (2012) explored the power dynamics of married copreneurial couples. Their study indicates that copreneurs create equitable, inclusive power structures, respectfully share ideas and opinions, and operate more collaboratively to benefit their business. Moreover, an inclusive power structure sustains an emotional interdependence between spouses reducing interpersonal tension in their relationship, “resulting in psychological safety” (p. 237).

Context also appears to be an important aspect influencing how gendered identity affects copreneurial relationships, such as socio-cultural norms and discourses (Jurik et al., 2019). Other contextual factors may also cause changes in the emphasis on gendered positionings, such as life-stage (e.g., parenting or career-stage) and challenging life events (Baù et al., 2016; Skerrett, 2010).

Therefore, evidence from studies in the copreneurship literature exploring how copreneurs undertake entrepreneurship suggests that the extent to which they view themselves as operating together involves managing gender identities. This understanding indicates further that copreneurial research using a we-ness perspective could provide valuable insights into how failure triggers interpersonal identity tensions—particularly those associated with gender.

3.5.3 Identity Importance and Interactions

Scholars contend that an entrepreneurial identity can also consist of numerous micro-identities, which may also interact with other relational identities (Murnieks et al., 2020; Ramarajan, 2014; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009b). This understanding indicates that an

individual spouse can link gendered identities with other individual identities—such as a work or entrepreneurial identity (Gather et al., 2016; Ladge, 2019).

Additionally, some identities may be more central and valued by an individual than others (Murnieks et al., 2020, Nielsen et al., 2018). This difference raises questions about how gender and other personal identities might interact over time with an entrepreneurial identity (Lewis et al., 2016; Ladge et al., 2019). For example, individual spouses may value their role in a shared parental identity—such as being a caregiver—more highly than an entrepreneurial identity, so they feel more distressed if this gendered element is threatened (Bird & Schnurman-Crook, 2005; Murnieks et al., 2014). Alternatively, a person might value their gendered identity less than a threatened entrepreneurial identity. A further complication is that identity salience can change over time (Lewis et al., 2016). For example, a parenting identity may become less salient as children leave home. Therefore, relative differences in the value spouses each place on an entrepreneurial or gendered identity can drive complex interdependent dynamics in their relationship following entrepreneurial failure (Fergus & Reid, 2001).

3.6 Chapter conclusion

The entrepreneurship literature rarely refers to the concepts of we-ness or shared identity. However, there is support for the notion that copreneurs possess more significant resources than individual entrepreneurs when dealing with failure. This suggestion is consistent with the broader literature on we-ness, indicating that this construct is associated with pro-relational behaviours and relational resources to cope with life challenges such as serious illness.

There is also evidence that gender identities are closely involved with copreneurs prioritising relational needs. Additionally, there are indications that a complex dynamic can exist between gender and other valued identities in their relationship.

The broader we-ness literature indicates that life challenges, such as serious illness, will sometimes erode a couple's sense of we-ness and the stability of their relationship. This past research raises questions about how a copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness is involved when encountering entrepreneurial failure.

Chapter 4 will next consider we-ness in the context of entrepreneurial failure. It sets the scene for a further research sub-question: "How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?"

4 WE-NESS IN THE CONTEXT OF ENTREPRENEURIAL FAILURE

In Chapter 3, I explained that we-ness is conceptualised in this thesis as a person's sense of interdependent unity with their spouse and is closely associated with how couples cope with life challenges. I also highlighted that copreneurial couples are a distinctive form of entrepreneurial team. Despite the importance of identity-relevant interactions between copreneurial spouses in terms of business outcomes and coping with life challenges, they have rarely been studied from an identity perspective.

In this chapter, I will begin by providing a definition of entrepreneurial failure at the level of copreneurial couples that is consistent with the purpose of this thesis. This definition sets the scene for a discussion about how copreneurs manage failure.

While entrepreneurial failure is still a relatively new topic, interest has been growing in the academic literature (Czakoń et al., 2022). Many negative implications for well-being following failure were established more than a decade ago and have fuelled interest in entrepreneurial failure and its consequences (Cope, 2011; Shepherd, 2003; Singh et al., 2007). Scholars have been asking questions such as how this critical experience impacts entrepreneurs personally and socially and how they re-emerge from it (Cardon et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2021, 2022; Jenkins & Byrne, 2020; Ucbasaran et al., 2013).

During the last decade, studies have revealed more about the nature of the personal impacts of failure on entrepreneurs (e.g., Corner et al., 2017; Mantere et al., 2013; Shepherd et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2015). It is noteworthy that these studies primarily concentrate on the focal entrepreneur, omitting the views of and interactions with significant others who share in the failure experience. Entrepreneurial failure has been identified as a complex multilevel phenomenon with financial, emotional, psychological, and social impacts and outcomes extending into the long-term (Corner et

al., 2017; Klimas et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2015; Ucbasaran et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2020). This understanding suggests that analysis at levels beyond the individual entrepreneur could yield important insights (Caza et al., 2018; Klimas et al., 2021; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

As a complex and challenging life event, entrepreneurial failure can trigger identity changes (Maitlis, 2009, 2012; Saylor et al., 2021). However, identity change in entrepreneurship is under-researched (Jenkins, 2022; Mmbaga et al., 2020). In the small amount of entrepreneurial failure research investigating identity, interesting results have been found, such as debilitating identity threats and even the loss of their entrepreneurial identity (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Moreover, it is unclear how the identities involved in close relationships are affected when a failure occurs (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). The importance of this thesis research is further underscored by the evidence showing that entrepreneurial failure can have severe effects on the well-being of couples, sometimes leading to outcomes such as separation and divorce (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007, 2015). These considerations lead to the second subquestion for this study: “How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?”

This chapter begins by identifying an appropriate definition of entrepreneurial failure¹⁰ to guide this thesis. Next, there is a review of the literature relating to how entrepreneurs manage the experience of failure. The discussion then moves to consider the relevance of identity in entrepreneurial failure research. Particular attention is given to narrative identity. After this, identity work in couple relationships is considered for its potential role in maintaining we-ness when copreneurs experience entrepreneurial failure.

¹⁰ As a reminder to the reader, Footnote 5 in Chapter 1 explained why the term entrepreneurial failure is used in this thesis instead of copreneurial failure.

4.1 Definitions of Entrepreneurial Failure

There is no single definition of entrepreneurial failure (Corner et al., 2017; Czakon, 2022; Klimas et al., 2021; Walsh & Cunningham, 2016). While each conceptualisation of entrepreneurial failure has merits, it is generally accepted that the variety in the literature can make it difficult to understand and compare empirical failure research. (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016; Walsh & Cunningham, 2016; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Some scholars argue that the issue is not about the disparity of definitions; instead, it is a question of selecting a definition that best suits the research questions (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016).

Consequently, this chapter begins by considering what definition of entrepreneurial failure is most appropriate to the research questions in this thesis. As a reminder, the overarching research question for this thesis is, “How do copreneurial couples experience entrepreneurial failure from their we-ness perspective?” Two subquestions follow this principal question. Firstly, “How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples’ sense of we-ness?” Secondly, “How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?” These questions direct attention to the personal consequences of failure for copreneurial couples.

The word “failure” clearly implies an unwanted or negative outcome. Therefore, entrepreneurial failure scholars emphasise that it is essential not to conflate failure with business exit since this may not always be for negative reasons (Jenkins, 2022). Indeed, some departures may be voluntary and regarded as a successful outcome (Fang He et al., 2017; Jenkins & Byrne, 2020; Ucbasaran, 2013). Thus, a starting point for this research is that the departure from the business must have been an unwanted outcome. A complete conception of failure suitable for this thesis research requires more detail.

An organising framework to classify different types of failure research helps develop an appropriate definition.

Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) recognise the many facets of entrepreneurial failure and propose a framework to categorise failure criteria relevant to a definition. The first two categories relate to the business or individual level of analysis. The second two categories concern whether criteria are subjective or objective. This approach produces a 2x2 classification framework for conceptualising entrepreneurial failure (Figure 2).

		Objective	Subjective
Level of Analysis	Business	Bankruptcy/Insolvency Focus on variable response to business failure	Poor Firm Performance Focus on exit planning
	Individual	Returns to Human Capital Focus on unmet personal goals	Personal Failure Focus on negative personal impacts

Figure 2. Classification Framework. Adapted from Jenkins and McKelvie (2016, p. 181).

Therefore, two types of failure classifications are shown at the business level. Firstly, objective business-level failure focuses on insolvency or bankruptcy criteria (e.g., Shepherd, 2003; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) indicate that such objective business-level criteria are helpful when theorising about the implications of business failure for entrepreneurs, such as the variety of ways in which they respond to the consequences.

Secondly, subjective business-level criteria also focuses on the firm's viability but relies on the entrepreneur's evaluation at the time of departure. Since this approach relies on the entrepreneur's assessment of business failure, qualitative interpretivist research that seeks subjective views may be valuable. Such exits from underperforming businesses are unforced, so there is potential to explore how such entrepreneurs plan for this situation, how they respond, and what they do next.

At the level of the entrepreneur, two further classifications are shown. Firstly, the objective individual-level failure conceptualisations include those situations where the entrepreneur fails to meet personal goals set when they established their venture. Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) cite Gimeno et al.'s (1997) threshold performance theory as their inspiration for this type of failure. This theory holds that an entrepreneur determines their acceptable minimum threshold of economic performance compared to what they could achieve by using their abilities in another way (*returns to human capital*). For example, Ucbasaran et al. (2013) specify that failure means "the cessation of involvement in a venture because it has not met a minimum threshold for economic viability as stipulated by the entrepreneur" (p. 175). It is also worth noting that these situations may include ventures that are still financially viable but have failed to achieve the goals set by the entrepreneur. This category may also include entrepreneurs following the "affordable loss principle", whereby they select a threshold for the risks they are willing to take before exiting a venture (Ucbasaran et al., 2013, p. 176). Therefore, this category of failure criteria is helpful for research focusing on unmet personal goals.

The second classification at the entrepreneur level in the Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) framework is the subjective individual-level. This classification is helpful for research focusing on the emotional impacts of failure (e.g., Singh, 2007; Cope, 2011). Such failure definitions include criteria relating to negative personal impacts. This subjective-

individual classification is relevant to this thesis since the psychological and emotional aspects of failure involved in exiting a business are closely tied to personal well-being and identity change (Jenkins & Byrne, 2020).

The subjective-individual category in Jenkins and McKelvie's (2016) framework may overlap with the *emotive approach* in Khelil's (2016) failure typology, which also emphasises an entrepreneur's state of mind and feelings of disappointment resulting from failure. Emphasising negative emotions can provide a useful distinction from failure definitions aimed at the level of business or voluntary individual exit by an entrepreneur (Klimas et al., 2021). However, the Jenkins and McKelvie framework provides the additional benefit of being extendable to other levels of analysis—such as copreneurs. Therefore, I next consider how this framework can be extended.

4.1.1 A Copreneurial Conceptualisation of Entrepreneurial Failure

While there has been some consideration of how entrepreneurial failure involves significant others, this consists of relatively limited glimpses from the perspective of the focal entrepreneur (e.g., Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007; Wiklund et al., 2019). As argued in Chapter 3, copreneurial couples are a distinctive dyadic team requiring separate investigation rather than at the family or household level (Bird & Zellweger, 2018; El Shoubaki et al., 2022).

Researching the experience of failure in copreneurial couples provides insights into the mutual psychological and emotional effects on copreneurs, including the impact on the well-being of individual spouses and their relationship (El Shoubaki & Stephan, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2019; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017; Wiklund et al., 2019). A dyadic level of analysis enables researchers to investigate how spousal identities are co-constructed and changed (Caza et al., 2018). This approach allows the exploration of copreneurial

couples within their distinctive relationship and the resources or constraints this relationship creates (Bird and Zellweger, 2018).

Figure 3 extends Jenkins and McKelvie's (2016) framework to include a dyadic (committed couple) level.

		Objective	Subjective
Level of Analysis	Business	Bankruptcy/Insolvency Focus on variable response to business failure	Poor Firm Performance Focus on exit planning
	Individual	Returns to Human Capital Focus on unmet personal goals	Personal Failure Focus on negative personal impacts
	Dyadic (committed couple)	Returns to Human Capital Focus on unmet copreneurial goals	Personal Failure - Copreneurs Focus on negative impacts for copreneurial relationship

Figure 3. Extended Classification Framework. Adapted from Jenkins and McKelvie (2016, p. 181).

By extending the framework to include a dyadic level for committed couples, two further failure conceptualisations emerge. The objective-dyadic level encompasses those situations where copreneurs start a business with a joint expectation that it must meet a minimum threshold of economic performance. This threshold is based on business performance in contrast to copreneurs using their shared relational abilities differently (i.e., returns to human capital). This judgement is more complex than the objective individual level since it involves two spouses. For example, they might have agreed on a scenario where lowered business performance triggers one spouse to find alternative employment. At the same time, the other spouse continues to run the business unless it

fails to meet an even lower threshold. Despite more complexity, a copreneurial couple may still have agreed on what they consider to be an acceptable level of economic performance in the context of their relationship.

The subjective-dyadic level (highlighted yellow in Figure 3) denotes situations where the focus is on entrepreneurial failure's emotional and psychological impacts on the copreneurial couple's relationship. For spouses, this approach could extend to situations where the failure leads to relationship separation or divorce (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016; Singh et al., 2007). It may also involve situations where spouses are impacted differently emotionally and psychologically, leading to questions about consequences for self-identities, we-ness, and how copreneurial couples manage identity-related changes within their relationship (Maitlis, 2012; Reid et al., 2006). These identity-related impacts and their effect on we-ness are the focus of this thesis research.

The overarching research question revolves around the psychological and emotional impacts of entrepreneurial failure on a copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness. This focus points to an entrepreneurial failure conception encompassing intersubjective meanings relating to emotional and psychological consequences. At an individual level, Singh et al.'s. (2007) entrepreneurial failure definition aims to maintain a broad, holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The Singh et al. definition includes not only financial issues but also:

[O]ther factors such as intractable disputes and legal problems and personal issues of the entrepreneur. Importantly, this study's definition of business discontinuance does not include less serious reasons for business discontinuance such as shift in personal interests of the entrepreneur. (Singh et al., 2007, p. 332)

The emphasis on negative personal impacts means that this definition is located within the subjective-individual criteria of the Jenkins and McKelvie (2016) classification framework.

For this thesis study, I adopted a similar approach to the Singh et al. (2007) definition of entrepreneurial failure but extended it to the dyadic level of copreneurs (Figure 3). To ensure a focus on the subjective emotional and psychological effects, I placed additional emphasis on the copreneurial couple's experience of negative impacts. Therefore, my definition of entrepreneurial failure for copreneurs is as follows:

Discontinuance for reasons that have a significant negative impact on the personal lives of copreneurial couples. Such reasons may include: 1) serious financial reasons, such as insolvency of the business, 2) being unable to continue in the business for reasons such as disputes with partners or legal problems, or 3) other significant personal reasons.

4.2 Managing the Experience of Entrepreneurial Failure

Much of the entrepreneurial failure literature has focused on intertwined processes involved in how entrepreneurs cope with the experience, make sense of it, and learn from it (Jenkins & Byrne, 2020; Omorede, 2020). Omorede (2020) conducted a literature review and synthesis of qualitative studies investigating how entrepreneurs manage their failure experiences. This study yielded three overall categories relating to failure management: the experience and costs, the impacts, and the outcomes.

In terms of experience and costs, entrepreneurial failure is a challenging life experience with well-being implications for many business founders (Jenkins, 2022; Jenkins & Byrne, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2014). Aside from the financial consequences, which may be years of debt, the experience is often highly stressful and potentially traumatic (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007). Indeed, the experience of entrepreneurial failure has been argued to be like the grief process taking place following the death of a loved one (Shepherd, 2003; Singh et al., 2007). Using the language of grief to describe the effect of venture failure on entrepreneurs is more than hyperbole since some entrepreneurs can suffer from symptoms suggesting trauma and psychological illness (Ucbasaran et al., 2013).

Entrepreneurial failure studies have identified complex emotional responses to failure, including anger, guilt, fear, blame, disappointment, sorrow, and grief. (Singh et al., 2007; Cope, 2011; Fang He et al., 2017; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Studies have also shown that important social aspects are involved with the individual's experience of failure. For example, how the entrepreneur perceives the impact of their failure on significant others can influence the strength of their emotions and sense-making (Heinze, 2013). The social consequences of failure can also include stigma and loss of personal networks, including close friends and family (Singh et al., 2015).

The stigma of entrepreneurial failure can have debilitating effects on individuals, including a loss of self-esteem and relationships (Cope, 2011; Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Singh et al., 2015; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011; Simmons et al., 2014; Walsh, 2017). Stigma can be social or self-stigma (Singh et al., 2015; Walsh, 2017). Social stigma derives from the experience of discrimination from others and their endorsement of social stereotypes. Self-stigma involves a person discrediting or blaming him or herself by internalising those negative social beliefs.

Omoredede's (2020) second category of studies explore how entrepreneurs manage the impact in the aftermath of failure. These studies mainly involve emotions and strategies used by entrepreneurs to cope and make sense of their experience.

Some entrepreneurial failure studies have drawn from the transactional model of coping that has been widely applied in social sciences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model has been used in several entrepreneurial failure studies to consider how entrepreneurs react to stress, negative emotions, and reduced well-being (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017; Jenkins, et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2007).

The transactional model contains several critical elements—the individual, their environment, and the appraisal process. These elements are incorporated into a model involving emotion- and problem-focused coping dimensions. Emotion-focused coping

refers to efforts to regulate emotional reactions, such as reframing how the individual sees the event. Problem-focused coping attempts to deal with the stressor through practical diversionary strategies, such as acquiring new skills. Individuals employ these coping strategies in their efforts to reduce negative emotions.

Scholars had previously assumed that entrepreneurs needed to recover after failure. However, Corner et al.'s (2017) emergent findings suggest that most entrepreneurs cope well and follow a resilient trajectory to normal functioning within a few months. Another study of entrepreneurial failure drawing from the transactional coping model also unexpectedly found that, for some entrepreneurs, negative emotions motivate, instead of hinder, efforts to build positive meaning following failure (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015).

These unexpected findings raise questions about what other factors might be involved when entrepreneurs are coping with failure. While it is certainly possible that there are yet unexplored aspects of individual entrepreneurs in the context of failure that might account for these findings, it is also possible that relational factors might be involved. This thesis aims to explore the latter possibility by studying the lived experience of copreneurial couples following failure.

Other studies using different theoretical perspectives have also shown the potential for the experience of failure to produce personal transformation and growth (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Cope (2011) argues that a deliberative process of critical reflection and sense-making involves entrepreneurs challenging past assumptions and moving forward positively from their experience. Cope contends that this process takes time.

However, other researchers have shown that the experience of failure can trigger positive transformations in surprising ways. For example, Singh et al. (2015) found that entrepreneurs can experience sudden deep personal insights (*epiphanies*) following entrepreneurial failure, transforming negativity about the event into a valuable life

experience. One illustration from the Singh et al. study was an entrepreneur's realisation about his negative ego-protecting behaviours that had led to his bankruptcy. His insight was sudden, and the authors suggested that this example and others in their study may point to a different transformative mechanism from the more deliberative process described by Cope (2011).

Mantere et al. (2013) also described a somewhat different transformative mechanism when studying narrative attributions following entrepreneurial failure. Their study shows that some entrepreneurs who take personal responsibility for the failure experience provide *catharsis* and *hubris* narratives which appear to involve identity change— “abandoning the ‘old me’ in favor of a ‘new me’” (p. 470). These personal changes following entrepreneurial failure are not well understood. Mantere et al. suggested that studying identity changes across and within narratives might provide further insights.

The third group of qualitative entrepreneurial failure studies identified by Omorede (2020) relates to outcomes. Omorede highlights research that shows that entrepreneurs' ability to move forward with their careers involves acknowledging what happened and detaching themselves from the experience of negativity and stigma surrounding their failure experience (e.g., Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018; Walsh, 2017). Several of these outcome studies explicitly or implicitly indicate that identity may be involved in this change but do not explore this directly. For example, Walsh (2017) highlights the identity-damaging aspect of stigma (Goffman, 1963). She argues that entrepreneurs can create psychological distance by separating their identity from their failed firm.

Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2018) found that the impact on family members compounds the entrepreneur's initial grief. This finding resembles the family-related shame and self-stigma some entrepreneurs experience following failure described by other studies (e.g., Heinze, 2013; Singh et al., 2015). Following this stage, Amankwah-Amoah et al.

(2018) indicate that close family members play a vital role in the entrepreneur's ability to "bounce back" (p. 644), but it is unclear how they are involved.

Baù et al. (2016) considered how life-career stages influence decisions to start another venture. Interestingly, this study found a decreased propensity to start another venture during the mid-career stage, which, as the researchers point out, is associated with higher levels of family responsibility. This finding has relevance for identity since the challenges of this life stage are consistent with Skerrett's (2010) observation that "midlife years are frequently conceptualised as a time of considerable identity work" (p. 506).

Thus, several studies in the entrepreneurial failure literature appear to explicitly or implicitly suggest that research exploring identity and the involvement of significant others, such as spouses, could yield further insights.

4.3 The Identity Impacts of Entrepreneurial Failure

An identity perspective is gaining popularity in entrepreneurship research (Byrne & Shepherd, 2020). However, this trend is not yet evident in entrepreneurial failure studies (Jenkins, 2022). Research exploring failure at the individual level often uses theoretical perspectives that focus on how meaning and emotions are involved in an entrepreneur's experience of failure and their return to their usual level of functioning (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2014). Although identity has seldom been used as a theoretical lens to explore entrepreneurial failure, there is a close relationship between an entrepreneur's experience of failure and identity. For example, how an entrepreneur attributes meaning to failure influences the extent to which they experience identity-relevant consequences, such as the loss of self-esteem and social identity (Jenkins et al., 2014). In essence, efforts to find meaning are tethered to perceptions based on one's identity (Jenkins & Byrne, 2020; Ucbasaran et al., 2013).

Identity-relevant language is sometimes used to help describe the emotions involved in the experience of failure. For example, scholars have noticed entrepreneurs often liken their business to a family member or a baby (Cardon et al., 2005; Omorede, 2020).

Cardon et al. (2005) extend this metaphor to an entrepreneur's experience of venture failure by pointing out that it can be compared to a parent's identity. In this way, the authors draw attention to the complexity and depth of emotions an entrepreneur experiences from the founding ("birth") of a venture to its failure ("death"). This metaphor highlights that, for an entrepreneur, losing their business can be like losing a part of themselves (Cardon, 2009; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011; Singh et al., 2015).

The significance of identity threats due to failure has also been recognised by considering strategies entrepreneurs might use to mitigate such consequences. For instance, it has been suggested that some entrepreneurs reduce the emotional severity of an impending failure by beginning to separate their identity from the failing business (Shepherd et al., 2009). This anticipation of the grief of failure to reduce negative identity implications has also been compared to the experience of divorce (Jenkins & Byrne, 2020). A spouse initiating a divorce has already had time to mourn the loss of a marriage, while a spouse who would like to continue the marriage is likely to mourn its loss after its end.

The stigma of failure and social distancing are also involved with identity (Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). These negative impacts can also be experienced before the failure (Singh et al., 2015). So, although the negative identity impacts of failure surround the event, it is unclear how entrepreneurs mitigate these effects.

4.3.1 Narratives of Identity in Entrepreneurial Failure

Narratives have been used to understand how entrepreneurs find meaning following failure (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017; Mantere et al., 2013; Singh

et al., 2015). However, narratives are also a critical means by which people “construct, describe and understand their experiences, and, through this, their identities” (Maitlis, 2009, p. 50). Scholars argue that identity work through narratives involves circumstances where significant change or transition causes a disjuncture in a narrative identity—such as a career change or transitioning into an unfamiliar new work role (Caza et al., 2018; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Shepherd & Williams, 2018). Therefore, as posited in Chapter 2, narrative identity is a useful lens through which to explore entrepreneurial failure. Indeed, Mantere et al. (2013) suggest that future researchers could use narratives to “help theorize identity-building processes” involved in failure (p. 471).

This understanding brings attention to narrative identities and their role in how people can construct, or co-construct, threatened, damaged or lost identities over time following a challenging life event, such as entrepreneurial failure (Maitlis, 2009, 2012; Pals & McAdams, 2004; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). Meaning is critical in constructing a narrative identity since it allows new events to be introduced in an understandable way (Singer, 2004; Hytti, 2005).

In more usual circumstances, identity may serve as a useful anchor for building meaning. Still, if an identity is no longer appropriate to the situation, it may inhibit finding meaning (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Petriglieri, 2011). An example might be an experienced builder who associates their work identity with being a professional craftsperson. A downturn in the industry leads to less demand for bespoke architectural projects requiring advanced building skills and experience. As a consequence, this person accepts work constructing prefabricated housing. While this individual continues to be a builder, the change from the craftsperson element may threaten their preferred work identity and its meaning. As a consequence, such an individual is likely to feel that their career is not moving forward.

In extreme cases, identities may be disrupted entirely and need to be transformed or replaced (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The emotions involved with trauma expressed through narratives may indicate damage or disruption to identity and an effort to make sense of the impact on the self (Pals & McAdams, 2004; Maitlis, 2009). It has been argued that, following a trauma-creating identity disruption, narrative identity construction processes are involved in returning to a positive sense of self (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Pal & McAdams, 2004).

While the focus of identity research in entrepreneurship is typically on how identity is involved in existing ventures, Jenkins and Byrne (2020) argue that “it is also likely to play a central role in the exit process” (p. 247). Moreover, it has been contended that narrative identity processes are involved in identity transitions following significant life events, such as entrepreneurial failure.

When major life events, like divorce, retirement, or business failure undermine an existing narrative emplotment of beliefs and understandings, individuals feel angst, despair, and a loss of identity. [...] Life stories are not limited to self-centered accounts of “Who I am”; they will often expand to include loved ones, partners and communities, and this is attractive because it extends an individual’s identity beyond the constraints of their own birth and death. (Downing, 2005, p. 192)

Downing’s (2005) reference to relational aspects in the above passage also draws attention to the capacity of identity narratives to include others, such as a spouse. This notion connects with the approach of this thesis which uses an intersubjective narrative perspective to explore the impacts and transformation in we-ness experienced by copreneurs following failure.

Entrepreneurship scholars have confirmed that business failure can threaten or cause the loss of an entrepreneurial identity, but the mechanisms and consequences remain unclear (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). A recent study considered the effect of failure on digital, online identities (Fisch & Block, 2021). The authors show that identity-shaping changes take place in entrepreneurs’ digital identities following failure suggesting

positive learning and growth; however, they also acknowledge that a digital identity may not be the same as “actual (offline) identities” (p. 16).

Saylors et al. (2021) undertook a rare study in the entrepreneurial failure literature using a narrative identity work perspective. The authors used publicly available failure narratives from technology sector entrepreneurs. They demonstrated that identity work is necessary before an individual can successfully reaffirm their identity as an entrepreneur or transition to a new work identity. However, while Saylors et al.’s study adopts a social relational approach to narrative identity work in public failure narratives, there is little mention of family or spouses aside from acknowledging their importance as trusted and encouraging supporters. The oblique references to how family and spouses are involved in exploring career choices after entrepreneurial failure highlights a gap in this literature. Other studies mention the critical influence of spouses and family participants in the career choice process following entrepreneurial failure but provide little detail (e.g. Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018; Nielsen & Sarasvathy, 2011). Therefore, including the voices of spouses in a dyadic-level study is essential to better understand their involvement (Heinze, 2013).

Others have considered how identity work processes could be involved in the relationship between the entrepreneur and others. Shepherd and Williams (2018) speculate that entrepreneurs may create a positive work identity following entrepreneurial failure through *identity play*—a form of identity work. Moreover, these authors suggest that families may be involved in the process of helping to refine and validate a new identity. Thus, it seems reasonable to explore the notion of identity disruption and identity work following entrepreneurial failure at the level of copreneurial couples. Each spouse may be impacted at the level of individual identities and intersubjectively through their sense of we-ness (Fergus, 2015; Fergus & Reid, 2001; Reid et al., 2006).

4.4 Identity Work in Couple Relationships

Identity becomes important when couples attempt to evaluate what a confronting life event means for their relationship (Fergus, 2015; Olekalns et al., 2020; Skerrett, 1998, 2010). In her therapeutic work, Skerrett (2003) explains to couples the challenge ahead of them in dealing with significant health issues for one partner in the relationship: “I tell couples that the illness experience they are facing is one that presents a real challenge to their capacity to maintain connection” (p. 74). Skerrett’s comment conveys her therapeutic approach of encouraging a sense of we-ness through facilitating couple dialogue. Similarly, Fergus (2015) points to how each spouse is responsible for identity maintenance:

An intimate partner therefore provides a highly customized form of support, one that is deeply rooted in the pair’s intersubjectivity and has a critical role to play in couple resilience by virtue of the identity maintenance function he or she enacts. (p. 29)

This quote suggests that spouses trying to adjust to the experience of entrepreneurial failure individually and as a couple are likely to involve their sense of we-ness.

However, this underlying identity construction and the change dynamics are not well understood.

When couples maintain we-ness, it helps to protect them from stressors and enhances their ability to sustain their relationship (Reid et al., 2006). However, ongoing exposure to stress can also erode this protective effect unless couples proactively use relationship maintenance behaviours and actions to facilitate a sense of we-ness (Afifi et al., 2016, 2020). Thus, strategies to maintain a sense of being connected as a couple during stressful times are deemed important (Badr et al., 2008; Afifi et al., 2020).

A study by Miller and Caughlin (2013) shows that couple identity is complex and multifaceted. The authors found that, following a challenging life experience, couples negotiate to help adjust impacted identities to maintain and strengthen their relationship.

Moreover, negotiating new shared identities is essential to a couple's ability to adapt following this challenge. However, while Miller and Caughlin's study closely examines interactions between spouses, it does not provide detail about strategies underpinning these dynamics.

The theoretical and emerging evidence of the protective aspects of we-ness for couple relationships has led to the development of therapeutic methods to maintain and enhance this identity construction (e.g., Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Jong & Strong, 2014; Reid et al., 2006; Rohrbaugh, 2021; Skerrett, 2003).

Stories containing relationship-defining memories have been used to assist couples in reconnecting and strengthening their relationship (Alea et al., 2015; Singer & Skerrett, 2014; Skerrett, 2010). These approaches rely on the narrative identity assumptions that stories provide a sense of coherence, purpose and meaning across the life of individuals and couples (Carrère et al., 2000; Singer, 2004; Singer & Skerrett, 2014; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Veroff et al., 1993).

While numerous studies have been conducted in the health field, evidence suggests that their findings are highly contextual. For example, while studies exploring memory loss patients and their caregivers have provided an understanding of we-ness maintenance strategies (e.g., Hellström et al., 2007; Hernandez et al., 2019; McGovern, 2011), the nature of this illness over time involves the patient losing memories. Hernandez et al. (2019 p. 1176) found that this leads to caregivers progressively shifting towards a sense of "I". This shift highlights the specific nature of some health contexts affecting how couples interact and adjust their relationship over time.

Other studies in the health literature also highlight that outcomes for we-ness may change due to socio-cultural responses to the nature of the illness (Huang et al., 2018). For example, the we-ness literature shows how stigma can be involved in how couples cope and shape their identities in their relationships (Crowley & Miller, 2020; Huang et

al., 2018; Milbury et al., 2012). These studies relate to serious health issues and report mixed results where the couple's relationship can sometimes buffer the effects of stigma yet also reinforce negative implications. Crowley and Miller's (2020) study involved couples coping with opioid addiction. One spouse offered her view that, while people might perceive her as an "unlovable 'junkie'" (p. 1646), the existence of her relationship countered this stigma. Yet, while the relationship provided a buffer against stigma, it also reduced their chance of getting well. Thus, social and self-stigma involving different health issues can sometimes hamper a couple's ability to negotiate identities and adapt their sense of we-ness to health challenges.

To avoid homogeneity in the examination of we-ness, Skerrett (2015) advocates its exploration in different complex contexts and populations with multiple stressors, economic diversity, and possible gendered differences:

We-ness should also be examined within various complex contexts involving multiple stressors. [...] It would also be important to look at partner ability to cultivate and sustain we-ness under a variety of circumstances, for example the sudden vs. gradual onset of challenges or challenges that were solicited vs. those that were uninvited. (p. 16)

Skerrett's call provides further justification for examining how we-ness is affected and can be maintained in the context of entrepreneurial failure. Unlike many we-ness studies involving couples dealing with long-term chronic health issues, emerging evidence suggests that entrepreneurial failure is a comparatively acute crisis (Corner et al., 2017). Further, it has been argued that we-oriented coping with health stressors is context-dependent and may vary by aspects such as type and stage of illness, a couple's life stage, and the socio-cultural context (Berg & Upchurch, 2007). Thus, context is likely important when theorising how we-ness is involved in entrepreneurship and failure (Suddaby et al., 2015).

Another aspect likely involved in we-ness dynamics following entrepreneurial failure is the importance each spouse assigns to an entrepreneurial identity (Shepherd & Haynie,

2009b; Nielsen et al., 2018). If one spouse considers being entrepreneurial more critical to their personal view of self, they may be deeply threatened at an identity level by a business failure (Ladge et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2011; Shepherd & Cardon, 2009). Murnieks et al. (2020) suggest that an entrepreneur may associate their entrepreneurial identity with feelings of importance due to aspects such as enabling support for their family. Damage or the loss of this identity may, therefore, magnify personal and relationship impacts. Their suggestion is consistent with other scholars' argument that perceptions of inequality of contribution by individual identities in the relationship can also destabilise couple identity (Walsh & Neff, 2018).

This dynamic between one spouse, whose sense of self is more deeply affected by failure than the other, might resemble we-ness studies exploring the dynamic between a seriously ill person and their caregiving spouse (Ahmad et al., 2017; Badr & Acitelli, 2005). In those situations, the less affected spouse is usually motivated by their sense of we-ness to look for ways to support their ill partner. This support is not just behavioural: it is tied to the couple's sense of we-ness, affecting psychosocial adjustment and overall patient well-being (Ahmad et al., 2017). In effect, life challenges suffered by one spouse—such as chronic illness—are viewed as a problem for the couple's relationship that should be coped with together (Acitelli & Badr, 2007; Bodenmann, 2005).

Spousal emotional support could be significant during this challenging life experience, such as when one spouse languishes or obsessively ruminates about failure. If a person becomes stuck in this negative emotional state, they might fail to take constructive actions and become depressed (Ucbasaran, 2013). Becoming stuck in this negative state could also hinder progress towards a positive new identity (Maitlis, 2009; Shepherd & Williams, 2018; Ucbasaran, 2013). A less affected spouse may be able to offer emotional support to help at such a time (Acitelli & Badr, 2005).

A strong sense of we-ness increases the likelihood that a spouse less affected by a life challenge will make self-sacrifices for the more vulnerable spouse in times of crisis (Fergus, 2015). Changes affecting one spousal identity may lead to a need for their partner to make accommodations in their own self-identity. Those with a strong sense of we-ness are likely to make these adaptations more easily (Fergus, 2015; Reid et al., 2006, p. 244). Where a confronting event provokes a fundamental threat to an important individual identity, changes to adapt their identity system may also follow (Miller & Caughlin, 2013). However, an adaptive response is not necessarily assured. For example, if a failure experience disrupts the couple's we-ness, creating a sense of imbalance, spousal sacrifice or support may be less likely (Olekals et al., 2020; Walsh & Neff, 2018).

We-ness and relationship scholars have pointed to the importance of positive emotions in relationships for reducing conflict and sustaining commitment (Singer & Skerrett, 2014; Gottman & Gottman, 2015). Indeed, Skerrett and Fergus (2015) comment that "if the relationship itself can be seen as a source of positive emotion, couples are more likely to view the relationship as an entity that nourishes, sustains, and is worthy of time and attention" (p. 14).

Moreover, Alea et al. (2015) found that couples demonstrating a strong level of we-ness also had fewer negative relationship-defining memories than they did positive ones. Therefore, these researchers indicate that couples can become more resilient to relationship threats by "fostering a sense of 'we' even during, or especially during, the difficult times" (p. 173). However, this statement opens the question of how couples can foster we-ness during difficult times.

Acitelli and Badr (2005) argue that maintaining a couple orientation involves keeping their relationship in awareness. They distinguish between explicit awareness, where the relationship is the object of thought or discussion, and implicit awareness where the

relationship is the lens used for thought or discussion. Implicit awareness is a we-ness orientation that can be manifested and maintained through both thought and speech. Thus, couples keeping their relationship in awareness through talking is important for maintaining we-ness and viewing a life challenge as shared.

However, Acitelli and Badr (2005) point out that gendered differences are also involved with relational awareness and communication strategies between spouses. They highlight the tendency for women to regard talking as an everyday part of relationship maintenance, while men tend to value it to solve relationship problems strategically. Despite these gendered differences, Acitelli and her colleagues argue that if both partners see a life challenge as a shared rather than an individual problem, they are “more likely to realize the need to engage in relationship talk as a form of strategic relationship maintenance” (Acitelli & Badr, 2005, p. 128; Badr & Taylor., 2008).

Moreover, when the disruption of failure creates identity threats and intersubjective tension, communication between spouses in narrative practices may help provide a sense of coherence (Jorgenson, 2016). The motivation to persevere and undertake such practices requires a relational commitment to an ongoing future together (Olekalns et al., 2020). Such identity work through narratives may help stabilise and reconcile identity tensions between spouses in the context of their relationship (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Olekalns et al. (2020) call for an examination of how this process operates.

Specifically, we need to better understand the process by which dyads are able to make salient the positive aspects in their shared history and to downplay the negative aspects of their shared history. (p. 17)

The discursive aspects of we-ness are also important for maintenance. Narrative identity scholars contend that narrating life stories about ourselves to others is important to establish and maintain a sense of who we are (Ramarajan, 2014). In the same way, talking openly about a failure and its emotional impacts is an implicit requirement for

successfully establishing critical relationship defining memories in narratives (Allea et al., 2015; Fergus, 2015; Gildersleeve et al., 2017). We-ness maintaining strategies are created in co-constructed discourse between spouses and identity-defining episodes communicated to audiences, so talk between spouses about a failure is crucial. Without effective communication between spouses, identity tensions may remain unresolved and negatively affect their relationship (Crawford et al., 2019; Danes, 2006).

4.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter reviewed relevant entrepreneurial failure literature and considered how a copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness may be involved in this life challenge. This chapter discussed and extended an existing conceptual framework to help determine a failure definition to guide this thesis research. Many studies of entrepreneurial failure have employed an individual approach based on the experience of the focal entrepreneur and their efforts to construct meaning. This chapter argued that while such individual approaches have proven useful, a narrative identity approach at the level of copreneurial couple dyads may provide further insights. Close copreneurial relationships include a sense of we-ness. Intersubjective identity dynamics may play an essential role in shaping and maintaining we-ness following entrepreneurial failure.

5 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This chapter will clarify the philosophical position of this study before describing the design and process guiding data collection and analysis. There are four main sections in this chapter. First, the philosophical position guiding this study is described, along with comments about how the theoretical perspective of intersubjective narrative identity shapes research assumptions. The second section situates this research in the broad domain of qualitative research and considers how this placement shapes the overall design of this study. This section also considers how the theoretical perspective informs the selection of an appropriate research methodology. The third section discusses the choice of data collection methods. The final section discusses the choice of data analysis method and how this is applied in this research.

5.1 Philosophical Position

A basic requirement for all researchers is to ensure that “the purpose, questions, and methods of research are all interconnected and interrelated so that the study appears as a cohesive whole” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 90). The justification for these choices must be consistent with the researcher’s philosophical assumptions (Crotty, 1998). Moreover, it is essential to be transparent about these assumptions to help a reader evaluate the trustworthiness of a project and its findings (Levitt et al., 2018). In this section, I aim to sketch the philosophical assumptions underpinning my research.

How a researcher identifies and seeks to address a research problem is related to fundamental philosophical beliefs and assumptions about the nature of the world. These assumptions inform and shape the methodological approach (Crotty, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018). At a high level, two philosophical concepts are vital to identifying these assumptions: ontology, which questions the nature of reality, and epistemology, which

aims to understand how we can know about the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Lincoln et al., 2011).

Crotty (1998) provides a framework of four interrelated elements to help plan and justify a research proposal: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Crotty omits the explicit inclusion of ontology from this framework since he argues that issues of epistemology and ontology tend to arise together. However, for this thesis, some initial discussion of ontology is relevant to understanding how epistemology is positioned in this research.

A realist ontology assumes a singular reality and that the social world exists independently of social actors. Research in this tradition emphasises the importance of detachment and likens the researcher to someone standing behind a “one-way mirror, viewing natural phenomena as they happen and recording them objectively” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). On the other hand, a relativist ontology assumes that multiple realities can exist (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Lincoln et al., 2011). This understanding of the world means that language and narrative description do not provide a straight-forward reflection of what is out there; instead, it is constructed from many voices in one’s society and culture (Crotty, 1998).

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, narrative identity theorists do not always maintain distinct and consistent ontological positions (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). For example, some theorists and researchers have been described as adopting a view of identity as “(tacitly) entangled in a sense of (neo)realism” (Smith & Sparkes, 178). Such theorists (e.g. McAdams, 1997b; Crossley, 2000) assume that a relatively stable self-identity exists that can be discovered. At the same time, these theorists maintain a generally

qualitative constructivist¹¹ epistemology associated with a relativist view that multiple worlds exist and are socially constructed (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Indeed, the broad field of social constructionism includes many nuanced debates concerning reality and truth, so the distinction between realism and relativism sometimes becomes blurred in this epistemology (Burr, 2003, Crotty, 1998). For example, Crossley (2003b) argues that there is a need to appreciate how self and experience can be structured in language and social discourse. Yet, there is also a need to maintain “a sense of the essentially personal, coherent and ‘real’ nature of individual subjectivity” (p. 289).

This philosophical position has been labelled *critical constructivism* and is the stance I adopt for this thesis (Ronkainen, 2016b). This philosophical position means that, aside from highly disruptive life events, I assume that a relatively stable sense of self exists that enables continuity and agency in life narratives. In this stance, I also consider that the construction of meaning is derived from individual lived experiences and interactions with others.

As will be discussed next, the theoretical perspective selected for this thesis contains assumptions regarding identity stability and the construction of meaning that, aside from significant disruptions, underpin ongoing agency and continuity in life narratives.

¹¹ It is important that *constructivism* is distinguished from the similar looking term, *constructionism*. Many scholars use the philosophical terms constructivism and constructionism interchangeably (Crotty, 1998; Fletcher, 2006). However, for the purpose of this thesis the distinction between terms is important. Constructivism has a key interest in how individuals cognitively construct their worlds while also attending to socio-cultural aspects involved with this (Fletcher, 2006; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Constructionism privileges narratives as relational social action instead of an interior cognitive phenomenon (Esin, 2011; Smith & Monforte, 2020), and is more appropriate to research undertaking a strong relational perspective on identity as outlined in Chapter 2.

5.1.1 An Intersubjective Narrative Identity Theoretical Perspective

The next element in Crotty's (1998) framework concerns the selection of a theoretical perspective for the study. As explained in Chapter 2, an intersubjective narrative identity perspective is the primary commitment in this thesis for understanding and exploring a couple's sense of we-ness. This theoretical commitment is somewhat more accommodating of socio-cultural aspects of narrative identities than some psychosocial formulations (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). While an intersubjective narrative identity theoretical perspective insists that individuals retain a sense of self, selves can also overlap and combine to create a sense of interdependence (Fergus & Reid, 2001). This awareness of self as part of a couple's relationship leads to the notion that individual life stories can overlap and combine to form shared meaning and an intersubjective sense of we-ness (Fergus, 2015).

For two reasons, I argue that an intersubjective narrative identity theoretical perspective is relevant to this research. As highlighted in Chapter 3, researching we-ness by only considering collective pronouns provides an impoverished view of a spouse's subjective experience of their relationship (Fergus, 2015). Therefore, a qualitative narrative approach considering co-constructed copreneur stories is likely to enable access to a much richer view of their inner life (Fergus & Reid, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). Second, an intersubjective theoretical perspective provides a view of spouses as individuals and together, allowing an interior view of dynamic identity-relevant changes between spouses impacting their sense of we-ness.

The following section will show how this research sits within the broad tradition of qualitative research and its implications before identifying specific methodological design choices.

5.2 Qualitative Research Design

Research design is the general plan for a study and provides the direction for research procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). This research falls within the qualitative research tradition in terms of the broad type of inquiry. Some scholars might argue that the earlier identification of theoretical perspective necessarily situates this inquiry within the qualitative research domain (e.g., Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). However, others, such as Crotty (1998), contend that the classification of a study as qualitative is determined at the level of methods. This debate has little practical significance for this thesis since the narrative methods outlined later in this chapter place this research within the qualitative tradition (Riessman, 2008). There are characteristics of a qualitative study that affect its design. These characteristics are outlined next before describing the methodology selected.

Creswell and Creswell (2018 pp. 257-258) provide an expanded list of characteristics relevant to selecting a methodology and methods. These attributes are considered in the present study.

First, qualitative researchers typically collect their data in a natural setting, such as the participants' environment. Interaction is usually face-to-face between the researcher and participants, often for an extended time. Second, the researcher usually collects data by examining documents, observing, or conducting interviews. They do not typically use questionnaires or other instruments provided by other researchers. Third, they tend to use multiple data sources, such as observations, interviews, documents, and other open-ended data shared by participants, without predetermined instruments or scales.

Researchers then review the data to make sense of it and organise it into themes across the collected data. Fourth, qualitative researchers use inductive approaches to analyse data by building from the bottom up. They iteratively and progressively organise the data into greater levels of abstraction to achieve a comprehensive set of themes. There is

also a deductive stage where the researcher looks back at their data to decide if more information is necessary to support each theme. Fifth, the focus is on the meaning of the research problem or issue from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's view or the relevant literature. Sixth, research designs are emergent, meaning the process is flexible and may change after the researcher begins collecting data. Research questions, how the data are collected, individuals studied, and the locations visited may be revised during an investigation. These changes indicate that the researcher is digging more deeply into the phenomenon and learning from participants about the issue. Seventh, qualitative researchers are reflexive; they reflect on how their background, experiences, and culture potentially shape the interpretations they apply to the research data. Eighth, qualitative researchers aim to develop a holistic view of the issue under investigation. Reporting from different perspectives and identifying many factors help to create a larger picture that may not be a linear model but could show multiple elements in complex interactions. Qualitative researchers would argue that the resulting view represents how events operate in the world.

As noted in the above characteristics, the nature of a qualitative study is interpretive. This approach involves the researcher with aspects such as ethical issues that must be considered part of a qualitative design. A qualitative researcher must comment reflexively on their role in the research and consider ethical protocols (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These aspects are considered next.

5.2.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity denotes the qualitative researcher's understanding of the values, biases, and experiences they bring to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In recent years, researcher positioning, and self-disclosure have become critical in qualitative research writing (Berger, 2015, Creswell & Poth, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018). A qualitative researcher's prior experiences can impact every stage of the process, from designing research

questions, selecting participants, gathering data, analysis, and interpretation. Therefore, many consider reflexivity a necessary form of quality control to enhance the trustworthiness of empirical qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Levitt et al., 2018).

Reflexivity is not an attempt to remove the effects of the researcher; instead, it is a researcher's effort to position themselves in their research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Moreover, there are arguments that reflexivity is essential when researching sensitive research topics (Band-Winterstein et al., 2014). This last point regarding sensitive research will be discussed later in the data collection methods section.

Therefore, an important aspect of this qualitative study is to present my experience concerning the phenomena I am exploring. In addition, I need to reflect and discuss how my past experiences may have shaped my interpretive work in this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Appendix F contains an account of my relevant personal experiences and reflexive comments to highlight how these may shape my research and interpretive efforts.

5.2.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles must underpin all research activities (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Moreover, Clandinin (2013) argues that the nature of narrative research requires particularly close ethical attention. The relational ethics involved with narrative inquiry calls attention to social responsibilities. They touch on every aspect of the project, including recruiting participants, collecting their data, analysing their stories, and presenting the findings.

The formal ethical standards I applied to this research were contained in an application to the university ethics committee (AUTEC) for my research which received approval on 5 March 2018 (Appendix A). In addition, this research is socially sensitive, requiring additional care. Sieber and Stanley (1988) indicate that “socially sensitive research

refers to studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research” (p.49).

Many consider entrepreneurs to be particularly hardy and capable members of our society. The widespread notion of entrepreneurs as heroic individualists exemplifies this assumption (Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson, 2007). However, depression, stigma and relationship breakdown are all potential outcomes reported in empirical studies of entrepreneurial failure (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2015; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Thus, copreneurs recalling the challenges of entrepreneurial failure must be treated with care and sensitivity by a researcher, bringing attention to ethical responsibilities in the research design (Lee & Renzetti, 1993).

Details concerning ethical conduct in this investigation were included in the application to AUTECH. Additionally, the detailed methods sections below include ethical considerations such as the approach to interviewing, transcribing, confidentiality, and other matters.

5.3 Narrative Inquiry Methodology

An intersubjective narrative identity perspective’s philosophical and theoretical assumptions inform the research methodology, or strategy, guiding this investigation. The research methodology addresses the question, “[h]ow can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108). The methodological choice must also consider the research purpose and questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This thesis research aims to understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure from the shared perspective of copreneurial couples who have experienced it. Therefore, the overarching research question is, *“How do copreneurial couples experience*

entrepreneurial failure from their we-ness perspective?” This primary question is elaborated by two subquestions which ask:

- *How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples’ sense of we-ness?*
- *How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?*

Based on the theoretical perspective of intersubjective narrative identity, the focus on a copreneurial couple’s sense of we-ness, and the research purpose and questions, the methodology selected for this research is narrative inquiry. This methodology connects the three research aspects of entrepreneurial failure: the lived experience, couple we-ness, and identity change. Narrative inquiry can be used to bring research focus to the relationship between experience, life stories, and identity (Chase, 2011). Recalled memories of life events are included in narratives to represent an ongoing sense of self in the relationship (Alea et al., 2015; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). It has also been argued that biographical narratives can capture and illustrate the personal and contextual nature of close relationships (Dunlop et al., 2020).

A narrative methodology emphasises imagination and human agency and is suited to studies focused on aspects such as identity (Chase, 2011; Crossley, 2003b; Maitlis, 2012; Riessman, 1993). Moreover, narratives constructed after a life challenge show identity changes and meaning integrated into an ongoing sense of self and we-ness (Crossley, 2000; Maitlis, 2009, 2012; Miller & Caughlin, 2013; Pals & McAdams, 2004; Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

Although narrative inquirers are interested in using stories¹² to access knowledge and meaning about phenomena, the field is awash with disparities, connections, and tensions arising from different scholarly perspectives (Chase, 2018; Smith, 2007). Some argue that stories are not merely chronicling events; they are more about meaning and coherence than facts (McAdams, 1997b; Sarbin, 1986).

Narrative approaches help gain insights into how identity evolves over a lifetime, and they can also show how multiple identities emerge and interact. As Ramarajan (2014) comments:

These life stories evolve and grow over peoples' lifetimes. As stories contain many different characters, sub-themes, and scripts, narrative identity approaches are quite relevant to multiple identities. To the extent that narrative identity approaches surface conflict, differentiation, and integration of different voices or parts in the stories, the connection to multiple identities becomes more explicit. (p. 607)

The value of narrative inquiry as a strategy for exploring multiple identities also touches on another important aspect of this research—how to bring the investigation to focus on a copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness in the relationship. Fergus (2015) contends that we-ness is an elusive entity to study because it primarily exists between two selves, making it difficult for a person outside their relationship to access. However, joint storytelling by couples can provide access to shared meaning. In a couple's overlapping

¹² Since the terms *narrative* and *story* frequently appear in this discussion of methodology it is important to comment on how they are used in this thesis. Some scholars distinguish these terms by arguing that a narrative describes part of a lived experience, whereas a story is a more complete account incorporating narratives, while other scholars use these terms as synonyms (Kim, 2016). Crossley (2003) points out that Sarbin (1986) uses the terms narrative and story conterminously as would an ordinary English speaker. Riessman (2008) generally prefers to diminish the distinction between narrative and story in her writing and research. Similarly, Sparkes and Smith (2008) comment that “because narratives exist only in particular stories and all stories are narratives, the distinction is hard to sustain” (p. 311). Since the distinction between narratives and stories is not central to this thesis, I adopt the approach of using these terms interchangeably.

story, it becomes possible to identify the intersubjective “we” in their relationship¹³ (Holmberg et al., 2003; Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

In addition to identity, a narrative inquiry can strengthen investigations of challenging and complex life events. Narrative inquiry has proven particularly useful for researchers investigating tensions or turning points (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maitlis, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Studies have highlighted how narrative inquiry can show how people make sense of disruptive life events, including divorce, chronic illness, and entrepreneurial failure (e.g., Riessman, 1990; Sakellariou et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2015). As Riessman (2008, p. 10) comments, “telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning, and enabling connection with others”. This passage indicates that a narrative methodology offers access to connections, meanings, and identity transitions between copreneurs during a challenging life experience, such as entrepreneurial failure.

There is an increasing interest in using narrative inquiry in entrepreneurship research to recognise a more holistic, higher order meaning of experiences for those engaged in this activity (Gartner, 2007, 2010). Narratives have been identified as a fertile basis for building theory in entrepreneurship—particularly in contexts where narrative conflict can be identified (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017). Such conflict can be seen in the struggles of entrepreneurs experiencing the life challenge of entrepreneurial failure. Over the last decade, several entrepreneurial failure studies have used narrative approaches to explore and build theory (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017; Mantere et al., 2013; Saylor et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2015).

¹³ The practical matter of the value of joint interviews and how to locate the couple identity, or we-ness voice in joint (narrative) interview transcripts is discussed later under data collection and analysis methods.

Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes two modes of narrative inquiry, which many narrative researchers have found helpful: *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis* (Kim, 2016). Analysis of narrative is the most common approach and refers to how researchers collect and analyse stories as data. This approach seeks to identify common themes or salient constructs in the narrative data. On the other hand, Polkinghorne restricts the term narrative analysis to situations where researchers use a narrative mode of thinking about stories to organise experiences so that a story is the outcome of the analysis.

Distinguishing these two modes of narrative inquiry is valuable. However, Polkinghorne's terminology still leaves the potential for confusion since the phrase narrative analysis is widely used as an umbrella term when referring to the act of analysing narrative data. (Kim, 2016, p. 224). Smith and Sparkes (2006) support Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between modes of narrative inquiry but avoid the potential confusion with the umbrella term of narrative analysis. They clarify that the standpoints are first, where a researcher acts as a *story analyst* who "thinks *about* stories", and secondly, where they act as a *storyteller* who "thinks *with* stories" (Smith & Sparkes p.185, italics in original). Put differently; a story analyst produces abstractions while the storyteller produces a story. In the present research, I adopted the story analyst approach, which I discuss in more detail later in the data analysis section. Next, I discuss the data collection methods.

5.4 Data Collection

The preliminary steps for data collection are considered first in this section. These aspects include participant selection, sample size, selection criteria, and participant profiles, followed by a detailed consideration of the data collection methods: individual narrative and joint interview.

5.4.1 Participant Selection

Participant selection for qualitative research differs from quantitative investigations that require random sampling to achieve statistical generalisation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Instead, qualitative techniques include non-random, purposive approaches to locate appropriate research participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Patton, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2005). Consequently, the qualitative researcher should consider which participants are more likely to provide rich, insightful, comprehensive stories about their lived experiences concerning the phenomena under investigation (Cope, 2011; Corner et al., 2017; Patton, 1990). These techniques reflect the qualitative researcher's intention to collect rich data to address the research questions rather than representativeness in a population (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

The nature of narrative inquiry research has important implications for how data is to be collected. As in the present study, the sensitivity of the phenomena under investigation can make finding suitable participants difficult. In this situation, *snowball sampling* was used to help locate participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2015). This technique involves enlisting the support of others by making enquiries with people who know people, thus extending my network to find relevant participants who may provide information-rich cases. Networks, including my family, friends, business contacts and existing participants, were all used to help find participants for this study.

5.4.2 Sample Size

Although the terms “sample” and “sample size” appear in this chapter, they are not used in the way a quantitative researcher might intend. Quantitative research usually requires prior definitions and predetermined data pools. On the other hand, qualitative researchers primarily want to elucidate the particular rather than the general (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This thesis research's emergent, exploratory nature means that these

terms are used indicatively without necessarily limiting the potential number of participants or where they might be found (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

Thus, rules about sample size in advance of data collection are debated in qualitative research, and there is little guidance (Guest et al., 2006; Guetterman, 2015). Guest et al. (2006) suggest that for a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews within a purposively selected, relatively homogenous sample, around 12 cases are likely sufficient for theoretical insights about common experiences and perceptions.

When setting a target, the likely data richness is essential to consider. The present research design utilises individual and joint narrative data for each copreneurial couple. Acquiring thick narrative data from not just one but several sources in each copreneur dyad adds detail relevant to determining the adequacy of the sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Another aspect to consider is the potential constraints this project may encounter (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Past studies have indicated that researchers are likely to experience difficulty locating participants for entrepreneurial failure research (Cope, 2011; Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016; Khelil, 2020; Singh et al., 2015). This constraint suggests a relatively conservative sample size estimate is more practical given the likely difficulty of recruiting participants within a reasonable timeframe.

Ultimately, a decision about the adequacy of a sample size depends on the principle of theoretical data saturation. Guetterman (2015) recommends that the researcher provide a clear rationale and sample plan and that “the researcher should remain reflexive throughout the research process, continually assessing and exploring sampling issues including theoretical saturation” (Guetterman, 2015, “Recommendations”). A common understanding of saturation is when additional participants confirm aspects seen in prior participant narratives rather than adding significant new insights, themes, or issues for conceptual categories (Bowen, 2008).

After I had established the likely richness of the data and the available general guidance for narrative inquiry sampling, a provisional sample target of 12-14 copreneurial couples was set for this study. The recruiting and data collection process took approximately one year. After interviewing 12 copreneurial couples and collecting 22 individual copreneur narratives, I decided that the data were sufficiently rich and complex, and no significant new information was being added.

Next, the selection criteria and process for recruiting participants are discussed.

5.4.3 Selection Criteria and Participant Profile

I developed a one-page advertising flyer to inform and recruit suitable participants (Appendix B). These criteria were:

- *The participant must be the business owner, or that person's spouse, of a New Zealand or Australian business that failed.*
- *The business must have employed fewer than 20 employees¹⁴.*
- *The business must have been, or intended to become, the participants' main source of income.*
- *Participants must have been in a committed relationship when the business was closed and still in that relationship.*
- *The business must have been closed for reasons that may include any of the following: financial, disputes/legal problems, significant personal issues.*
- *The closure must have been more than six months ago*

¹⁴ The threshold of fewer than 20 employees was chosen because this is the number generally used to help define a small business in New Zealand (Small Business Council, NZ, 2019). One aspect of a multi-dimensional definition of entrepreneurship is ownership of a small business (Gedeon, 2010). However, I acknowledge that internationally, fewer than 50 employees is often regarded as the size of a small business.

Researchers exploring entrepreneurial failure have indicated that recruiting participants for their studies is difficult (e.g., Cope, 2011; Khelil, 2020; Singh et al., 2015).

Therefore, it was no surprise that recruiting participants for this research was difficult and slow. A further challenge was the requirement for copreneurs willing to participate in this study to do so together. Although 28 spouses (14 copreneurial couples) signed individual informed consents as the university ethics committee required, two copreneurial couples withdrew from the study. In the case of one copreneurial couple, one spouse was reluctant to continue, necessitating that both withdraw from the study.

Two recruitment criteria were essential to minimise potential negative impacts on participants. These were included in this study's university ethics approval conditions (Appendix A). First, the failure must have been at least six months before the interview so that participants had some distance from the emotional turmoil of the event. The second requirement was that copreneurs must still be together. These conditions were intended to avoid involving any copreneurial couple whose relationship may have broken down due to trauma associated with entrepreneurial failure. If potential participants met these criteria, I arranged an initial meeting with the copreneurial couple to answer any questions about the research.

I provided each person with an information sheet (Appendix C) and an informed consent form (Appendix D). Individual informed consent was necessary to ensure voluntary participation and minimise the possibility of feeling coerced by their spouse (Mellor et al., 2013). Each spouse was required to consent before participating in this study as a copreneurial couple.

A further consideration for narrative researchers is the suitability of the participants for inclusion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This aspect touches on several critical definitional issues for this research relevant to selecting copreneurial couples. First is the definition of copreneurship. The conception of copreneurship for this thesis was detailed in

Chapter 3. Regardless of how directly spouses are involved in a business, they are considered to be copreneurs if there is shared responsibility and commitment for the ownership, risk, and business management enacted in their lives together (Fletcher, 2010).

Next, there is the need for an operational definition of entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship does not have a singular definition; instead, it has been described as a multidimensional concept encompassing a range of theoretical foundations (Gedeon, 2010). These foundational concepts can include founding a business, small business ownership, leadership, and identifying market opportunities to create market equilibrium or disequilibrium. These concepts can also involve different levels, such as acting alone, in a team, or inside a company.

Politis and Gabrielsson (2009) did not enter into the complexities of defining entrepreneurship. Instead, their entrepreneurial failure study adopted a pragmatic approach of defining an entrepreneur as “an individual who establishes and manages a business, which is consistent with past entrepreneurship research” (p. 370). Since past research establishes that entrepreneurship can apply to multiple levels beyond individuals (Gedeon, 2010), I have adjusted Politis and Gabrielson’s definition to extend it to the level of copreneurial couples. Thus, the definition of entrepreneurship for this study includes copreneurs who establish and manage a business, “which is consistent with past entrepreneurship research” (Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009, p. 370).

The third issue is the definition of entrepreneurial failure. As explained in Chapter 4, this thesis follows Jenkins and McKelvie’s (2016) subjective-individual criteria and extends it to a dyadic level for copreneurs. These criteria focus on the subjective impacts experienced by copreneurs who felt compelled to exit the business. The key to this approach is that a copreneurial couple felt forced to exit the business and consequently did not experience this positively. In some cases, this conceptual view of

failure means the copreneurs cease to be owners, while the business may continue without them. With these definitional aspects and the recruitment criteria, the salient features of the 24 copreneurial participants in the study are as follows:

Most participants possessed tertiary-level qualifications. There was a small amount of ethnic diversity. Most participants self-identified as New Zealand European; one person identified as of New Zealand European and Maori descent. Other participants variously indicated that they were: Australian (two), British (one), and from a Middle Eastern background (three). The ages of participants ranged between 35 to 79 years, with a median age of 49. All 12 copreneurial couples were in ongoing committed long-term relationships that ranged from 14 to 56 years, with a median duration of 24.5 years.

Most interviews took place in Auckland, New Zealand. All copreneurial couples were living in New Zealand during their business failure experience. Except for one Australia-based business, failure experiences related to New Zealand businesses. The cities copreneurs were living in at the time of the failures were not identified to preserve confidentiality.

All participant copreneurial couples had experienced an entrepreneurial failure during their relationship that caused significant disruption in their lives. Several copreneurial couples had experienced more than one failure. Except for one copreneurial couple, all other copreneurs were parents with dependents during their business failure experiences. Most had significant debt in the form of personal or external investment in their failed businesses, but the majority had since cleared these debts by the time I interviewed them. Regardless of indebtedness due to failure, all participants indicated significant wealth reduction and lost income opportunities.

The preference was for participants to be first-time entrepreneurs since empirical evidence shows that experiential learning from previous entrepreneurial experiences may alter skills, confidence, and persistence (Sarasvathy et al., 2013). However, first-

time entrepreneurship was not part of the selection criteria due to the anticipated difficulty of recruiting participants for this sensitive investigation (Khelil, 2020). Nevertheless, over half of the copreneurial couples (eight) had not previously owned businesses, either individually or together, before their first entrepreneurial failure. Four copreneurial couples had experienced other entrepreneurial failures in the years following their first business failure. These copreneurs were encouraged to talk about these events during their joint interview. Multiple failure experiences appear for the relevant copreneurial couples on the participant profile, as well as the date of failure and the type of business. Table 3 shows participant profile information of the copreneurial couples participating in this research:

Table 3. *Participant Profiles*

Couple pseudonym	Relationship duration	Sex	Age group	Dependents during failure(s)	Ethnicity	Business sector(s) (approximate failure date)
Sarah & Kallum (S&K)	15 years	Female	30-39 years	Yes	Mid-Eastern	Marketing technology (2017)
		Male	30-39 years		Mid-Eastern	
Terry & Alice (T&A)	17 years	Male	50-59 years	Yes	NZ-European	Media analytics (2017)
		Female	50-59 years		NZ-European	
Niki & Tom (N&T)	14 years	Female	30-39 years	No	Mid-Eastern	Retail fashion (2013)
		Male	30-39 years		NZ-European	
Harry & Amy (H&A)	33 years	Male	40-49 years	Yes	NZ-European	Telecommunications services (2013)
		Female	50-59 years		NZ-European	
Adam & Kate (A&K) ^a	37 years	Male	50-59 years	Yes	NZ-European	Property development (1997)
		Female	50-59 years		NZ-European	Building construction services (2010)

Couple pseudonym	Relationship duration	Sex	Age group	Dependents during failure(s)	Ethnicity	Business sector(s) (approximate failure date)
Bill & Catherine (B&C)	56 years	Male	70-79 years	Yes	NZ-European	Property development (1989)
		Female	70-79 years		NZ-European	
Nick & Christine (N&C)	27 years	Male	50-59 years	Yes	NZ-European	Property sales (2008)
		Female	50-59 years		NZ-European	
Molly & Harry (M&H)	20 years	Female	40-49 years	Yes	Australian	Building construction services (2006)
		Male	40-49 years		NZ-European	
Tony & Claire (T&C) ^a	15 years	Male	40-49 years	Yes	Australian	Food importing/distribution (2011)
		Female	30-39 years		British	Health food manufacture (2014)
Oliver & Tara (O&T) ^a	34 years	Male	50-59 years	Yes	NZ-European	Infant retail products (2000)
		Female	50-59 years		NZ-European	Telemarketing (2003) Online marketing (2005)
Emma & Ethan (E&E)	22 years	Female	40-49 years	Yes	NZ-European/ Maori	Graphics/gaming technology (2014)
		Male	40-49 years		NZ-European	
Jack & Olivia (J&O) ^a	34 years	Male	60-69 years	Yes	NZ-European	Manufacturing raw materials importer (1998)
		Female	60-69 years		NZ-European	Furniture manufacturer and retailing (2004)

^a Several copreneurial couples indicated multiple entrepreneurial failure experiences.

Table 4 on the following pages provides additional information to assist with understanding how copreneurial couples were involved in the business and how failure affected them. This table provides an indication of business size through full-time equivalent employees; the extent of each spouse's direct involvement with the business (role in business, and time working in the business); whether spouses had outside

employment; approximately how long couples owned the business, the failure type, and an indication of the financial loss or impact, and each spouse's employment status within three months after the failure.

Table 4. *Aspects relevant to business involvement and failure impacts*

Couple pseudonym	Business sector(s) (approximate failure date)	Full time equivalent employees	Spouse	Role in business	Time working in business	Employed outside before failure	Failure type	Business ownership (approximate)	Financial loss or impact ^a	Employment status within 3 months after failure
Sarah & Kallum (S&K)	Marketing technology (2017)	< 5	Sarah	Founder, joint CEO	100%	No	Closed due to losses	1 year	Lost savings from prior redundancy payment	Full-time student
			Kallum	Founder, joint CEO	100%	No				Full-time Employee
Terry & Alice (T&A)	Media analytics (2017)	< 10	Terry	Founder, business development/ operations	100%	No	Closed due to losses	4 years	Lost savings. Investors (including family members) lost a total of over \$2,000,000	Temporary contractor
			Alice	Supportive spouse	-	Full-time				Part-time employee
Niki & Tom (N&T)	Retail fashion (2013)	< 5	Niki	Founder, business development	100%	Full-time in year 2	Closed due to losses	2 years	Lost savings	Full-time Employee
			Tom	Supportive spouse and accounting services	10%	Full-time				Full-time Employee
Harry & Amy (H&A)	Telecommunications services (2013)	< 20	Harry	Founder CEO	100%	No	Liquidation	17 years	Lost house, \$700,000 debts, forced to re-home their loved pet dogs	Not in paid employment
			Amy	Office administrator	50%	No				Not in paid employment

Couple pseudonym	Business sector(s) (approximate failure date)	Full time equivalent employees	Spouse	Role in business	Time working in business	Employed outside before failure	Failure type	Business ownership (approximate)	Financial loss or impact ^a	Employment status within 3 months after failure
Adam & Kate (A&K)	Property development (1987)	< 5	Adam	Founder, CEO	100%	No	Closed due to dispute with business partners and losses.	7 years	Lost house and savings	Not in paid employment
			Kate	Supportive spouse	-	Part-time				Full-time Employee
	Building construction services (2010)	< 5	Adam	Founder, CEO	100%	No	Closed due to losses	10 years	Lost savings, debts (e.g. \$30,000 rent) and ongoing cost of legal disputes.	Full-time independent contractor
			Kate	Office administrator	100%	No				Full-time Employee
Bill & Catherine (B&C)	Property development (1989)	< 10	Bill	Founder, MD	100%	No	Liquidation	6 years	Lost, house, \$1,000,000 debts	Full-time founder in new business
			Catherine	Supportive spouse	-	No				Not in paid employment
Nick & Christine (N&C)	Property sales	< 10	Nick	Founder, joint CEO	100%	No	Closed due to losses	8 years	Lost savings	Not in paid employment
			Christine	Founder, joint CEO	100%	No				Full-time independent contractor
Molly & Harry (M&H)	Building construction services (2006)	< 5	Molly	Supportive spouse	-	Full-time	Closed due to losses and dispute with business partner	1 year	Lost savings. Struggling to service a very large house mortgage.	Not in paid employment
			Harry	Founder, business development	100%	No				Full-time Employee

Couple pseudonym	Business sector(s) (approximate failure date)	Full time equivalent employees	Spouse	Role in business	Time working in business	Employed outside before failure	Failure type	Business ownership (approximate)	Financial loss or impact ^a	Employment status within 3 months after failure
Tony & Claire (T&C)	Food importing/distribution (2011)	< 10	Tony	Founder, Director	100%	No	Dispute and removal by co-founders	7 years	Bought out for a low price, unable to pay rent forcing a move to cheaper accommodation	Full-time founder in a new business
			Claire	Supportive spouse	-	Part-time				Not in paid employment
	Health food manufacture (2014)	< 5	Tony	Founder, MD	100%	No	Closed due to losses changing and market	6 years	Lost up to \$200,000 (shared between several business partners)	Full-time founder in new business
			Claire	Supportive spouse	10%	No				Not in paid employment
Oliver & Tara (O&T)	Infant retail products (2000)	< 5	Oliver	Founder, joint CEO	100%	No	Liquidation	3 years	Lost savings, downsized house to help repay debts.	Full-time solo contractor
			Tara	Founder, joint CEO	80%	No				Not in paid employment
	Telemarketing (2003)	< 20	Oliver	Founder, business development	100%	No	Closed due to dispute with business partner and losses	2 years	Lost technology investment, staff release costs, and lease obligations.	Full-time independent contractor
			Tara	supportive spouse	-	Part-time				Full-time founder in new business
	Online marketing (2005)	< 5	Tara	Founder, CEO	100%	No	Closed due to losses	2 years	Lost \$200,000.	Not in paid employment
			Oliver	Business development	80%	Part-time				Full time independent contractor

Couple pseudonym	Business sector(s) (approximate failure date)	Full time equivalent employees	Spouse	Role in business	Time working in business	Employed outside before failure	Failure type	Business ownership (approximate)	Financial loss or impact ^a	Employment status within 3 months after failure
Emma & Ethan (E&E)	Graphics/ gaming technology (2014)	< 20	Emma	Founder, CEO	100%	No	Liquidation	4 years	Investors (including close friends) lost money. Lost a share buyout offer of \$1,000,000	Not in paid employment
			Ethan	Supportive spouse	-	Part-time				Part-time independent contractor
Jack & Olivia (J&O)	Manufacturing raw materials importer (1998)	< 5	Jack	Founder, MD	100%	No	Closed due to losses and changing market	7 years	Still had some savings	Not in paid employment
			Olivia	Supportive spouse	-	Full-time				Full-time employee
	Furniture manufacture and retailing (2004)	< 10	Jack	Founder MD	100%	No	Liquidation	6 years	Lost \$1,000,000	Full-time employee
			Olivia	Supportive spouse	-	Full-time				Full-time employee

^a Since this research was a qualitative design with minimal intervention from the interviewer, precise measurements of financial losses were not always available in transcribed data (Corner et al., 2017). Alternatively, or in addition to providing a precise measurement of loss, an indication of the financial impact is provided.

5.4.4 Narrative Data Collection Methods

A narrative inquiry methodology requires data in the form of narratives elicited from participants. Identity stories are often collected in the form of life stories—particularly in psychology research (Maitlis, 2012). However, it has also been argued that stories from biographical memories are similarly useful for narrative identity research where the focus is on a particular bounded event in people’s lives (Bühler & Dunlop, 2019; McAdams, 2018; Riessman, 2008; Singer, 2004). This approach has also been used for collecting co-constructed biographical narratives from in-depth joint interviews with couples showing identity change (Radcliffe et al., 2013).

This thesis research explores the experience and aftermath of entrepreneurial failure from a copreneurial couple we-ness perspective, so data collection centred on biographical narratives and the couple dyad. The focus on dyads raises the question of what method (or methods) is best used to collect data from each dyad. Competing views exist regarding data collection from couples.

Some scholars argue that a dyadic approach does not necessarily require that copreneurs attend interviews together. Indeed, some researchers have undertaken dyadic research using only individual interviews to create a dyadic view (e.g., Freeman et al., 2017; Jurik et al., 2019; Mellor et al., 2013; Miller & Caughlin, 2013). The individual interview approach is often due to ethical concerns, such as couples dealing with highly sensitive issues such as a chronic or terminal illness. However, shared stories are critical for shaping a couple’s sense of we-ness (Fergus, 2015). Moreover, interviewing couples together enables researchers to examine the “co-constructed nature of meaning and identity” in their relationship (Jong & Strong, 2014, p. 382).

Eisikovits and Koren (2010) point out that advantages and disadvantages are inherent with either individual or joint interviewing to form the dyadic perspective. They observe that while individual interviews benefit from revealing each partner's different perspectives, dyadic information gathered about the other partner is primarily interpretive and distant from the descriptive view. Conversely, joint interviewing can provide a shared narrative; however, this approach can obscure the individual perspectives within the relationship (McCarthy et al., 2016; Jurik et al., 2019). So, there can be disadvantages to using individual or joint interviews to form the dyadic perspective. Therefore, to mitigate the weaknesses of either approach, this thesis research collected narrative data from individual spouses and jointly from couples (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

Data collection proceeded in two stages to cover the individual and joint perspectives involved in the copreneurial couple dyad. This approach allows me to compare individual and joint accounts. Comparing accounts in this way can be considered a form of triangulation—a concept more often associated with positivist research.

However, triangulation is applied from a constructivist perspective in this thesis study. Therefore, the purpose is not to check factual accuracy; instead, I intend to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences through similarities, contrasts, and overlaps in their narratives (Polkinghorne, 2005). In qualitative research, the value of triangulation comes from the idea that greater accuracy is possible by obtaining more than one view of a subject (Gibbs, 2007).

As noted earlier, couple identity is an elusive entity to research because it primarily exists between two selves (Fergus, 2015; Fergus & Reid, 2001). While the primary focus is on joint interview data and the access it provides to each copreneurial couple's interactive, co-constructed narrative, it is also valuable to understand what is said and sometimes not said in the joint interview (Jurik, 2019). For example, there may be times

when relevant content is omitted or receives a different emphasis in either joint interviews or individual narratives. These differences may enhance my interpretation of how a sense of we-ness is transformed and maintained.

Although interviews are a common approach to gathering data in narrative research (Flick, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008), other methods are available. For example, stories may be collected in journals or diaries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This solo approach to narrative construction was used for individual narratives in stage one of the data collection. Requesting individual participants to either write or create a solo voice recording was intended to reduce external influences from their spouse and the physical presence of an interviewer. Despite this enhanced individual focus, an imagined audience may still have been in the individual's mind when creating their narrative (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

By selecting a narrative inquiry methodology and methods, I also shifted my representation of participants in the research process. Because stories form the empirical data for this research, it was important not to regard copreneurs as interviewees; instead, I conceptualised them as storytellers (Smith & Monforte, 2020). This approach is a significant shift away from the notion of a researcher gathering answers to prepared questions put to participants during an interview. Instead, the process becomes one of the storytellers actively telling stories based on their life experiences, voices, and what they think is contextually appropriate. Indeed, these stories may contain answers to questions that a researcher would not necessarily know to ask. Moreover, this approach places the onus on the researcher to “not only attend to the stories that people happen to tell during interviews but also work at inviting stories” (Chase, 2005, p. 661).

5.4.4.1 Individual Narrative

I asked each storyteller participant to provide their story about entrepreneurial failure in stage one of this research. It was made clear that this was to be a solitary exercise.

Storytellers were given a choice to provide their experience by voice recording or writing. Allowing storytellers to select their preferred means of storytelling was intended to help them feel more comfortable with the process. If they chose voice recording, they could use a small (provided) digital voice recorder, personal smartphone, or computer. A written story could either be typed or handwritten.

Storytellers were given guidance notes on a single side of an A4 page (Appendix E). These notes consisted of an initial generative question (Flick, 2014) to provide focus and a starting point (see Table 5), followed by prompts. The prompts aimed to encourage a richer story about the storyteller's entrepreneurial failure experience. These notes emphasised that prompts were intended as guidance only, and storytellers should feel free to tell the story in their way. I did not explicitly limit how long their story should be since I wanted to allow each storyteller to decide what would be sufficient.

Table 5. *The Generative Question used for Individual Narratives*

To start you off, please tell me the story of the business that was closed. The best way to do this would be for you to start from how the business got started and then tell me all the things that happened one after the other up until the present. You can take your time in doing this, and also give details, because for me everything is of interest that is important to you.

Note. Adapted from Flick (2014, p. 266).

Although it was possible to collect data by interviewing individual participants, I considered that allowing them to create this story in their own time (a minimum of two weeks) without having me present might lead them to focus more on their story. The solitary nature of this process may also have reduced their reluctance to share deeply personal information if an interviewer was physically present. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the storyteller could still consider me their imagined audience. Stories are constructed with an audience in mind, even if they are not physically present (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

A potential disadvantage of this approach is that some storytellers might not be experienced or comfortable with telling stories. Their contribution may be less fulsome than with an interviewer present. Despite this possibility, this was considered a risk worth taking since I intended these data as secondary to the joint interview data.

For primarily ethical considerations, I assured storytellers that I would do my best to maintain individual confidentiality, even from their spouses (Zarhin, 2018). This assurance may also help gain better access to individual storyteller perspectives; that is, it may reduce the possibility that storytellers will censor or change aspects of their story to avoid disclosing information or views they want to withhold from their spouse.

Fifteen individual storytellers opted to do a voice recording. One copreneurial couple (N&T) declined to participate in stage one and contributed a joint narrative interview.

Stage two of data collection was a joint interview. Since this is co-constructed storytelling, it provides the primary data source for analysis from a we-ness perspective (Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

5.4.4.2 Joint Interview

Narrative interviews are usually biographical (Flick, 2014) and encompass the following basic principles:

In the narrative interview, the informant is asked to present the history of an area of interest, in which the interviewee participated, in an extempore narrative. The interviewer's task is to make the informant tell the story of the area of interest in question as a consistent story of all relevant events from beginning to its end. (Hermanns 1995, p. 183, as cited by Flick, 2014, p. 265)

Although this guidance only mentions a single storyteller (“interviewee”), narrative interviews can also occur when an interview is with more than one person simultaneously. Scholars have applied different terminology to this interview method.

A more specific term for capturing the interactive, co-constructive nature of storytelling by copreneurial couples is *dyadic interviewing* (Morgan et al., 2013). However, this

term could cause confusion in my study since I collected both individual and joint data from the dyad. The term dyadic interviewing has been used to broadly indicate data collected from either separate interviews with each spouse analysed as a unit or when data are collected by interviewing both spouses together (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). Polak and Green (2016) resolve this issue by using the term *joint interviews* to denote “interviewing people with a prior relationship at the same time” (p. 1639). Therefore, I chose Polak and Green’s *joint interview* terminology to indicate this aspect of dyadic data collection.

The joint interview has advantages and disadvantages compared with the more common approach of individual interviews. One advantage is the *cueing phenomenon* that can arise from the interactive nature of joint interviews (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). Cueing is where spouses might prompt or question each other to provide more detail to the developing story. With the opportunity for joint reflection, this phenomenon can enhance the nuance and richness of the resulting narrative data.

Disadvantages of joint interviewing include the possibility that one spouse might dominate, or their presence may suppress their partner’s views (Jurik, 2019). It is also possible that spouses might disagree during the interview, so the interviewer must be aware of the potential for rising tensions and take steps to de-escalate or terminate the interview if necessary (Bjørnholt and Farstad, 2014; Valentine, 1999).

The joint interview was positioned as the second stage of the data collection, following storytellers’ completion of their respective individual narratives. This order was due to the interactive nature of the joint interview, which allows the generation of new interpretations and meanings of particular experiences (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; van Nes et al., 2009). Retaining this order of data collection avoided the possibility that spouses preparing individual narratives would update their stories with this new knowledge.

Another precautionary step was to inform participants that the researcher would not read or listen to their individual narratives until after their joint interview. This strategy prevented storytellers from assuming that their interviewer knew parts of their story that might have caused them to skip or gloss over these aspects during the joint interview. This approach also helped ensure that spouses heard more fulsome versions of each other's contributions. Moreover, there may have been aspects of individual experiences storytellers shared during the joint interview not previously shared in the same way with their spouse.

When arranging joint interviews, I asked each copreneurial couple when and where they would feel most comfortable for the interview. Most preferred to have the interview during the evening in their own home. I recorded interviews using a digital voice recorder.

Overall, an *active listener* approach was taken, focusing on eliciting the telling of rich stories and only using occasional questions to encourage the copreneurs (Kim, 2016; Flick, 2014). Storytellers were seldom interrupted, and body language conveyed my interest through expression and non-verbal signals (such as reinforcing "hm's"). I avoided evaluative comments and directive statements. Questions were generally only asked to clarify aspects of stories or encourage a quieter spouse to contribute their part in the story.

The joint interview began with the same generative question used for stage one, with slightly adapted wording to suit the joint participation of spouses. This question followed a similar structure to the example provided by Flick (2014). It was anchored to the significant life event of the first entrepreneurial failure, followed by storytelling about what happened from then until the present (see Table 6).

Table 6. *The Generative Question used for Joint Interviews*

I want to ask you both to tell me the story of the business that was closed. I'm particularly interested to hear about this from your shared perspective as a couple. But if there are important things you want to mention that only relate to you as individuals, please talk about these too. The best way to do this would be for you to tell me about how the business got started and then tell me all the things that happened one after the other up until the present. You can take your time in doing this, and also give details, because for me everything is of interest that is important to you. I may have to ask a few questions to get more clarity while listening to your story.

Note. Adapted from Flick (2014, p. 266).

A data summary table indicating the length of each individual narrative and joint interview is shown on the following page as Table 7.

Table 7. *Data Summary*

Couple Pseudonym	Individual Spouse	Stage 1: Individual Narratives		Stage 2: Joint Interviews	
		Recording time (minutes) or self written ^a	Transcript length (single spaced typed pages)	Recording time (minutes)	Transcript length (single spaced typed pages)
Sarah & Kallum (S&K)	Sarah	28	6	59	14
	Kallum	12	2		
Terry & Alice (T&A)	Terry	Self-written	5	96	18
	Alice	22	4		
Niki & Tom (N&T)	Niki	-	-	69	15
	Tom	-	-		
Harry & Amy (H&A)	Harry	Self-written	3	95	23
	Amy	Self-written	2		
Adam & Kate (A&K)	Adam	8	2	119	35
	Kate	17	3		
Bill & Catherine (B&C)	Bill	17	4	73	16
	Catherine	8	2		
Nick & Christine (N&C)	Nick	17	4	66	26
	Christine	16	4		
Molly & Harry (M&H)	Molly	Self-written	4	66	20
	Harry	44	9		
Tony & Claire (T&C)	Tony	35	7	93	26
	Claire	Self-written	3		
Oliver & Tara (O&T)	Oliver	35	7	72	25
	Tara	22	5		
Emma & Ethan (E&E)	Emma	107	24	110	39
	Ethan	14	3		
Jack & Olivia (J&O)	Jack	Self-written	4	102	37
	Olivia	Self-written	3		

Note. One couple (N&T) chose not to complete individual narratives

^a Self-written means that the storyteller either typed or handwrote their story instead of creating a voice recording

The choice of analysis method and the justification for its selection is discussed next.

5.5 Data Analysis

The stories people tell a researcher are mimetic—that is, the investigator only has access to the narrator’s imitation of what occurred (Riessman, 2008). As such, stories centre on experience and depictions of human actions. Since the researcher is at least one step removed, a conscious and critical approach to analysis and interpretation is necessary. A narrative analysis covers a variety of interpretive methods for texts in storied form (Riessman, 2008).

As noted earlier (Section 5.3), the term narrative analysis is used in this thesis as an umbrella term indicating a collection of methods that focus on stories (Smith & Monforte, 2020). Moreover, in this thesis, I adopted the stance of a story analyst and viewed data as “narratives-under-analysis” (Sparkes & Monforte, 2020, p. 2). This orientation opened a range of narrative analysis methods, including thematic, structural, dialogical, and performative (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Riessman, 2008). Combinations of these methods are also possible (Riessman, 2008).

Unlike many other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological analysis, one of the challenges for research using these narrative methods is a lack of detailed guidance available for its implementation (Esin, 2011; Riessman, 2008). However, several scholars have recently offered general strategies and examples (e.g., Maitlis, 2012; Smith, 2016). A fundamental principle insisted upon by narrative analysis scholars is that fragmenting stories into small categories must be avoided (Chase, 2018; Riessman, 2008).

When selecting a particular narrative analysis method, it was essential again to consider the purpose of this research and the questions. These considerations were detailed earlier in this chapter; however, as a reminder, this thesis research aims to study the experience of entrepreneurial failure from a copreneurial couple’s we-ness perspective.

The focus on experience brings attention to the content of what is being told. This thesis research does not seek to explore the structural aspects of storytelling or performative interactions between copreneurs, such as non-verbal information. Therefore, the primary concern is understanding the content of copreneurial couple stories— “what is said rather than the way it is said” (Maitlis, 2012, p. 494).

These considerations led me to select thematic narrative analysis. In contrast to other methods, a thematic approach views language as a resource instead of a topic of inquiry, and the primary focus is on the story’s content (Riessman, 2008). This approach is likely the most common variety of narrative analysis (Maitlis, 2012, Smith, 2016). An advantage of this approach is that it also allows the consideration of larger samples and patterns within and across data sets. Hence, it helps develop theory for many cases (Bryda, 2020). This method has also been successfully used in entrepreneurship research (e.g., Jurik et al., 2019).

5.5.1 Thematic Narrative Analysis

Although there is no step-by-step guide to using a thematic narrative approach, Smith and his colleague Monforte (Smith, 2016; Smith & Monforte, 2020) provide general strategic guidance by drawing from several scholars. This guidance is summarised in Table 8.

Smith (2016) indicates that his guidelines are cyclic and iterative, and a researcher may move back and forth between the different strategies or research phases. Smith also emphasises the flexibility a researcher must exercise when applying these guidelines. The importance of writing throughout the research process is underscored and considered part of the analysis process. Writing includes notes, memos, drafting and editing the report—these activities are essential to idea discovery and keeping the

analysis moving (Smith & Monforte, 2021). Similarly, the transcription process is viewed as a distinct analytical strategy.

A critical distinguishing feature of this method from others—such as Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis—is that the story, instead of the theme, is the unit of analysis (Riessman, 2008). Scholars caution that losing sight of this aspect may risk fragmenting narratives and losing context and flow (Riessman, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2007). The practical implications of these differences are incorporated into the following discussion about the analysis process.

Table 8. *Thematic Narrative Analysis Strategies*

Narrative Thematic Analysis
1. <i>Writing</i>. Start writing early and continuously (notes, memos, drafting report)—view writing as part of the analysis process. 2. <i>Transcribing data</i>. Create verbatim transcription as soon as possible after it has been collected—view transcription as part of the analytical process. Capture relevant thoughts while transcribing. 3. <i>Organising data</i>. Create a structured approach to organising data files. 4. <i>Narrative indwelling</i>. This concept is similar to familiarisation in thematic analysis and involves repeated reading of data and writing impressions—the researcher orients to participants as storytellers. Identification of stories is incorporated into this process by looking for new shifts in content or episodes. 5. <i>Identifying narrative themes and thematic relationships</i>. Find patterns running through story/stories. What themes are common to each story, and what repeatedly occurs? Aim to keep the stories intact. Use extended phrases to summarise potential latent and manifest meanings in the data. Avoid over-coding since this can fragment stories. “Think of the process as ‘theme-ing’ the data” (Smith & Monforte, 2020, p. 4). 6. <i>Describing and interpreting</i>. Name themes, then work iteratively with notes and data to describe the themes. To be a narrative analysis, ensure that the themes are related to what the story is about. This stage can include identifying relationships between themes. Engage critically with data. Offer interpretations and insights drawing from other research and theory. 7. <i>Representing results</i>. Create a realist tale (King, 2015). This process may require multiple iterations to reach a version representing people’s stories. Assume that any representation produced is provisional rather than final.

Note. Adapted from Smith (2016, pp. 263-264) and informed by Smith and Monforte (2020).

5.5.1.1 Writing

The process of writing is part of the analysis process (Smith & Monforte, 2020). Thus, writing should start early and occur continuously throughout the research. This process includes writing notes and memos throughout the process. As it evolves, there may be many iterations and revisions of the research report. I followed this guidance by writing throughout my research to record my observations and capture my reflexive thoughts and evolving understanding. Each of the following steps relies on continuous writing as part of an inductive analysis process.

5.5.1.2 Transcribing Data

This method does not regard transcription as peripheral to analysis; instead, it forms part of the analytical process. Transcriptions are themselves interpretive and only partial representations of what transpired. How transcripts are created may support different interpretations and theoretical positions (Riessman, 2008, p.50). Decisions about what to include in transcripts and how they are structured and represented are critical to the information available for interpretation and a reader's understanding (Riessman, 1993; Eisen et al., 2014).

Because thematic narrative analysis mainly focuses on the content of narratives, detailed performative representation of non-verbal information was not necessary for this research. However, I retained some observations to let readers orient themselves to multiple speakers during the joint interview. Parentheses, or round brackets “()” are used to signal researcher observations. Text is shown between square brackets “[]” to indicate occasions where another person comments while the current main speaker is talking.

I used quotation marks within the transcribed text to indicate when storytellers were using reported direct speech, such as when they reported their own or someone else's past comments. While this might be regarded as a performative feature (Riessman, 2012), I determined that it could confuse readers if reported direct speech is not marked (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

As noted earlier, this research, which focuses on copreneurial couples during a difficult period in their lives, is sensitive. Therefore, confidentiality measures were necessary. Transcripts were first anonymised to protect copreneurs' confidentiality (such as changing people and place names). A further layer of confidentiality was also applied between spouses. If one spouse mentioned their partner's name during their individual narrative, this was changed to "X". The consequence of this precaution is that it is impossible for readers to directly link passages from individual narratives to a particular copreneurial couple's dyad. Despite this downside, ethical considerations are paramount.

Another aspect of preserving confidentiality is that, on rare occasions, a copreneur requested me to remove some transcribed text. The removal of text from a transcript is signalled by using square brackets and three ellipsis points "[...]".

Finally, I sent participants their respective anonymised transcripts to make changes they regarded as necessary to protect their confidentiality. Once participants approved these, the transcripts were final and ready for analysis.

5.5.1.3 Organising Data

I transcribed joint interviews using Microsoft Word. Joint interviewing generated 12 rich interactive stories lasting for a median of one and a half hours each. The transcription process resulted in almost 300 A4 pages. Individual narratives were shorter and totalled approximately 100 single-spaced typed pages. Both electronic and

hard-copy transcripts were sorted and filed into copreneurial couple dyads for subsequent reading and analysis.

Because of the anticipated complexities of this analysis, such as having a dyadic approach and over 400 transcribed pages, a software tool was used to help organise the data and analysis processes. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that computers provide the most value when working with larger data sets. I selected NVivo (release 12) from QDAS International. As with several similar computer-based tools for qualitative research, functionality includes the ability to file, edit and code large volumes of data.

However, other qualitative researchers have found that the software does not provide a complete “scaffold” for the analysis process (Maher et al., 2018, p. 12). Therefore, I used paper-based processes such as post-it notes, memos, and coloured pens to help organise data.

A potential issue with using NVivo was the software’s focus on breaking text into small codes and losing sight of the storied nature of the material. Therefore, the software was treated as a convenient repository for indexing and searching material more than for its coding functionality.

5.5.1.4 Narrative Indwelling

Smith (2016) indicates that indwelling is very similar to the process used by other methods, such as the thematic analysis process of familiarising oneself with data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step requires immersion in the data by repeated reading of transcripts and actively listening to recordings to search for patterns and meaning. A researcher must understand their participants’ perspectives regarding them as storytellers sharing a story (Smith & Monforte, 2020). Making notes and marking text is critical for beginning to discern meaning and patterns in the data.

By personally transcribing interviews, I became more aware of nuances in the data. If something came to my attention during this process, I placed a short memo beside the relevant passage to think about later. After typing each transcript, I produced a hard copy and read it several times, making further notes in margins and post-it notes. Part of this process was to identify where there were significant shifts in storied content indicating a new episode, complication, or resolution in an unfolding storyline (Smith & Monforte, 2020, p. 4).

Another indwelling aspect of this research relates to the dyadic nature of the narrative data. This research aims to view the experience of entrepreneurial failure from a copreneurial couple's we-ness perspective. It was important for me to notice the use of singular and plural personal pronouns (e.g., "I/me", "we/us") to help distinguish between occasions where participants narratively presented themselves as individuals or as a copreneurial couple in different circumstances (Gildersleeve et al., 2017). These shifts in pronoun use occurred throughout both joint interviews and individual narratives.

However, while pronoun use was an obvious indicator of we-ness, there was a deeper narrative aspect to indwelling where I needed to reflect on aspects of storytelling such as pro-relational behaviour, reciprocity, and perspective-taking between spouses (Reid & Ahmad, 2015).

5.5.1.5 Identifying Narrative Themes and Relationships

This step focuses on the storied content or what is said. As noted earlier, the story is the unit of analysis in thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). A thematic narrative analysis approach requires first identifying the subtext relevant to the research questions (Esin, 2011; Lieblich et al., 1998). Therefore, an entrepreneurial failure subtext was identified within each transcript for content relevant to the research question. However, it is essential to note that narrative interpretation can also be facilitated by material

outside the selected subtext (Lieblich et al., 1998). For example, some spouses, such as Sarah (S&K) and Christine (N&C) indicated they were initially less enthusiastic or willing to start the new business than their life partner. Introducing this knowledge from the broader narrative context contributes to understanding how failure affected copreneurial relationships.

Finding narrative themes involves finding a pattern running through a story or group of stories. To help with this process, Smith and Monforte (2020) provide the following advice: “[T]he researcher can ask, ‘What is the common theme(s) or thread(s) in each story?’, ‘What occurs repeatedly within the whole story?’” (p. 4). Finding narrative themes involves highlighting meaningful sentences and circling keywords or phrases along with margin notes, but this is done in a way that does not break down text too much. Nevertheless, some reduction of text must take place. Esin et al. (2014) call these smaller segments of text “micro units of analysis” (p. 207). This process has been called “‘theme-ing’ the data” (Smith & Monforte, 2020, p. 4).

The indwelling and margin notes I made during transcription were collated to help me identify patterns and relationships for each dyad. This process began with the joint interview, regarded as the primary data, before considering individual narratives in the dyad. This process continued during, and beyond, the 12 months it took to complete my data collection.

Since data were collected one dyad at a time, the analysis began as a within-dyad analysis before later moving to an across-dyad analysis. This within-dyad analysis often showed idiosyncratic nuances within copreneurial relationships. For example, one spouse (Terry, T&A) indicated that he felt guilty about losing his parents in-laws’ investment. In the wider context of this copreneurial story it was apparent that Terry’s spouse (Alice) was raised in a very successful entrepreneurial family. Therefore, Terry’s business failure and losing the in-law’s investment took on greater significance in his

feelings of guilt, entrepreneurial competence, and undermining of we-ness in his relationship.

Within-dyad analysis also provided an opportunity to use qualitative triangulation (Gibbs, 2007) to explore what was said and unsaid in the individual narratives compared with joint interviews. This comparison further highlighted within-dyad nuances. An example is where, during her individual narrative, one person highlighted her concern about her spouse's excessive drinking after his business failure and how this impacted their relationship, yet this was not mentioned during their joint interview.

As I collected more dyadic data, the process extended to looking across dyads for broader repeating patterns. Candidate themes were developed through this cyclical and iterative process. Narrative scholars offer little specific guidance on this part of the process (Esin, 2011; Riessman, 2008). However, Smith (2016) indicates that thematic narrative analysis can also be considered a form of *categorical-content analysis* described by Lieblich et al. (1998). Eisen (2011) also references Lieblich et al. (1998) as helpful in illustrating the steps of thematic narrative analysis. While this approach focuses on categorising the content of stories and therefore overlaps with standard non-narrative thematic approaches (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006), Lieblich et al. (1998) consider that narrative analysis approaches fundamentally exist along two dimensions—from categorical to holistic and from content to form. Moreover, they contend that “many possibilities for reading a text represent the middle points along these dimensions” (p. 12).

Thus, while the primary location of a thematic narrative approach is in categorical content, it also leans towards a more holistic approach. Accordingly, some content can be interpreted by other parts of the narrative to retain the whole storied context. This approach also accepts that, while overall content categories can be established, some nuances and variations may also be reflected in the narrative texts when comparing

groups (or dyads, as in this research). These features are markers of a narrative analysis approach to respecting the integrity of the overall story instead of just the component categories or themes that arise from a text (Riessman, 2008).

Table 9 illustrates the narrative theme-ing process. This table shows how a data extract links to an extended phrase, indicating a repeating pattern, and then helps to support a narrative theme.

Table 9. *Narrative Theme-ing Process*

Data Extract	Extended Phrase Signifying a Repeating Pattern	Narrative Theme
Tara: And then they had this meeting and said, “We can’t put the money in.” Oliver: And one of the directors was overseas—which was all convenient. So, he said, “well, we already made the decision”. And we said, “what? You’re directors like we’re directors. You’ve made that decision without us. And you’re saying, there’s no choice? [...] And we said, “Well, we’re insolvent. We can’t trade the business while we’re insolvent.” He said, “Sorry, I’m off next week.” Tara: Yeah. And they basically both left—went to America on holiday. Oliver: [...] And then he buggered off and said, “Well, you guys need to clean it up”. Tara: (looking to the interviewer) Close the company.	People we trusted were unethical and betrayed us	
Adam: Well, I went back and said to them, “Look, we’ve got to sort this out, or we’re all going to have nothing. You’ve got a month to come and sort it out.” And by this time, they’d got into sort of a weird state (looks to Kate)—hadn’t they? She’d started blaming us and making us the enemy and not Allen (her husband). Kate: Well, I think it was because she wanted to keep it between the two of them. Adam: [...] I was really just trying to get them to come to an agreement as a way of perhaps sorting it out. And in truth, they couldn’t [Kate: They didn’t.] So, we just sold everything, really. And by then, the banks were crawling all over us.		We have social integrity
Amy: We talked about that a lot (bankruptcy)— we didn’t want to go down that road. Although, it would have been easier (looking at Harry) because you wouldn’t have had to pay all that money back. But it wasn’t the honourable thing to do. You’ve got to do the right thing. Harry: It was not an easy road. So across four years, we’ve paid 700 thousand dollars back		
Oliver: With this one (their current business), we started with the principle of, “Why can’t we make good money and have a successful business, but actually do some good shit?” Tara: And have fun along the way. Oliver: And really enjoy it, and there’s the thing about giving back. Why can’t that all be rolled into something that’s commercially successful? Why would that not be the case? So that was our area of inquiry.	We do the right thing	

However, in practice, the process of narrative theme-ing is more complex than the example in Table 9 can show. As noted earlier, material outside the identified failure subtext was sometimes relevant to the wider narrative arc and aided my interpretation (Eisen, 2011; Lieblich, 1998, Maitlis, 2012). Thus, an analytical tension exists between retaining the distinctive narrative context of each copreneurial dyad while also working across dyads to identify broad themes (Maitlis, 2012). Therefore, while a thematic narrative analysis can offer valuable insights into larger groups of copreneurs, there is also the risk of obscuring or losing idiosyncratic meanings within copreneurial dyads. The discussion of findings in Chapters 6 and 7 enables me to introduce and explain contextual details and nuances underlying narrative interpretation and forming the basis for aggregating themes (Esin, 2011).

5.5.1.6 Describing and Interpreting

At this stage, I named themes and described them. The extended phrases from the preceding stage provided valuable guidance for this process. Smith (2016) notes that to ensure that the analysis is narrative rather than just thematic, it is essential that themes capture “what the story is about” (p. 264). Describing the relationships between themes is also helpful, but the emphasis must be on interpretation. This interpretive emphasis is similar to thematic analysis (Ronkainen et al., 2016b). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest thinking about themes in terms of questions such as, “ ‘What are the assumptions underpinning it?’, ‘What conditions are likely to have given rise to it’, ‘Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way?’ ” (p. 94).

5.5.1.7 Representing the Results

As indicated earlier, although representing the results might appear as the final stage, a researcher may have been working on developing this reporting early in the process. The report may require many iterations to produce what has been called a *realist tale*

(Gibbs, 2007; King, 2016; Smith & Monforte, 2020). This approach is characterised by the researcher's absence from the text, often using edited and carefully selected quotes from storytellers (King, 2016). This approach is the most common way to communicate qualitative research (Riessman, 2012; Smith & Monforte, 2020). Reported findings include nuanced extracts from transcripts that provide sufficient evidence for the analytic themes and arguments relating to the research questions.

5.6 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter set out the philosophical principles and assumptions underpinning this research. The theoretical framework was determined to be narrative constructivism. In combination with considering the research purpose and questions, this framework led to the selection of narrative inquiry as the overarching methodology. Data were collected from copreneurial couples both individually and jointly. The selected analysis method was thematic narrative analysis. General guidance from scholars was used to conduct this analytical process culminating in the production of realist tales of findings presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

6 FINDINGS: WHEN WE-NESS SUBSIDES

In Chapter 6, I answer the first subquestion: “How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples’ sense of we-ness?” In doing so, I bring together the findings using the methodology outlined in Chapter 5, and also draw on the conceptualisation of we-ness from Chapter 3, and the definition of a copreneurial couple’s experience of entrepreneurial failure from Chapter 4.

All copreneurs in this study provided examples showing how many consequences of entrepreneurial failure were shared. However, most copreneurs also reported that some identity-relevant challenges were not shared, often leading to relationship tensions and subsidence in their sense of we-ness. The themes of *feeling burdened*, *breaching our arrangement* and *how others see us* illustrate findings in this chapter.

6.1 Feeling Burdened

This theme involves copreneurial couples feeling burdened by the consequences soon after entrepreneurial failure. Copreneurs perceived that some burdens were shared and met together. Extended phrases relevant to the shared aspect of this theme are: *This is hard, but we’ll get through it together*, and *we face these challenges by making joint decisions*. On the other hand, some burdens were unequal in their impact. Where their burdens fell unequally, exploring the intersubjective dynamics was important. Extended phrases showing this unequal aspect of this theme are: *I feel alone and depressed; I’m uncertain about what to do next*, and *it’s difficult to share feelings about the failure with my spouse*.

All copreneurial couples provided evidence that they jointly shared many burdens brought about by entrepreneurial failure. Descriptions of burdens perceived as being equally shared involved frequent use of plural pronouns such as “we” and “us”,

indicating that they perceived these as “our burden”. Several examples of shared burdens follow.

The financial and emotional consequences of failure brought significant changes to the lives of all copreneurs, leading to talk of how these affected them jointly and how they needed to make decisions together. For example, Oliver and Tara (O&T) spoke about how they jointly confronted the burdens and decisions as a copreneurial couple in the aftermath of their failure:

Tara: It was just survival mode for about three months. We were just on a mission to get it done. Fast as possible. And just move on. It was kind of a blur. And stressful with a child and lumpy income. So, we were struggling to survive in that house. That's when we decided to put it on the market.

Shared burdens were also evident for copreneurs when they spoke of betrayal or incompetence by others leading to entrepreneurial failures. Such stories were reasonably common in this study and were told by about one-third of the copreneurial couples. Those affected in this way would talk about how these experiences impacted them both after the failure (A&K, H&A, M&H, O&T). Harry and Amy (H&A) provided an example showing how they saw their betrayal in business as a shared emotional burden they carried after the failure:

Amy: We felt really deflated and let down. (Looks to Harry) Gutted, really, eh? All that hard work and trust you put into people as well.

Harry: We were gutted, more from the fact—not of the failure of the business—but that we'd put our trust in individuals. We paid them handsomely, looked after them, and then when we needed them most, they threw us under the bus.

Amy: Yeah, it was pretty hard.

Some copreneurial couples spoke about the burden of shared shame and guilt arising from their business failure's effect on others. One copreneur provided the following comment in her individual narrative showing how she and her husband both shared a sense of guilt about letting others down.

It was just such an awful thing to do because we'd made so many friends through this business. It was incredibly stressful and just awful. We felt terrible that we'd let them down—that we couldn't help them.

Copreneurial couples often mentioned feelings of shared stress and anxiety due to business failure. For example, Kate (A&K) described receiving a large bill from their lawyer. They could not see how to afford this bill and felt overwhelmed. Kate spoke of their shared reaction: “we ended up just throwing food at the wall; we were so distressed”.

However, in several cases where strong negative emotions or depression persisted for a long time after the failure—sometimes many months—one spouse was usually more deeply impacted than the other. Some copreneurial couples would gloss over or omit this individual suffering in their joint interview. For instance, in two copreneurial couple dyads, one spouse's suffering was not mentioned in the joint interview but was raised as a critical concern in individual narratives. One copreneur commented, “I was worried that he could be depressed”, and another was concerned about “the depression and loss that X experienced afterwards”. Such feelings of dismay and concern for a partner's well-being, combined with the reluctance to discuss these feelings in their joint interview, suggest that the copreneurial couple saw this as personal to one spouse rather than a shared burden. Therefore, despite a less affected spouse's concern for their life partner's suffering, these examples show how copreneurs were sometimes unable to deal with these emotional and psychological burdens together.

Some copreneurial couples were less reticent about discussing circumstances where one spouse was more deeply emotionally burdened by the failure. This unequal burden often related to entrepreneurship. It was common to find that one spouse in each copreneur dyad felt that being entrepreneurial was very important for their sense of self, while this was less important for the other person. Despite entrepreneurship having been a shared aspect of their lives together before the failure, feelings of separation developed after

the failure. It became apparent that some of the entrepreneurial spouses had experienced a deep sense of loss of self and career confusion. Yet, instead of sharing these problems with their spouse, they withdrew from attending to their relationship to focus on themselves. The depth of this emotional reaction could take the copreneurial couple by surprise. For example, one copreneur spoke about her husband's concern for her well-being after the business closure. A friend had told her husband that entrepreneurs could become depressed after business failure, so he asked how she felt. She described her reaction as follows:

And I was like, "Yeah, I'm not going to be that bad. But oh yeah, I know it's going to be pretty sad. But jeez you know, I can't imagine that happening to me." But it was really sweet that he was being really caring, and he was quite worried about my mental well-being.

Next, this participant explained how she began to experience a deep sense that she had lost a vital part of herself just a few days later.

All of a sudden, I seemed to have just disappeared. And people didn't even notice I was gone. You know, a lot of people didn't even know my business had closed down. Even though they hadn't heard from me in two years, they were like, "Oh really? It closed down?" It was not talked about—it just became invisible. And I became invisible. And, and all these things that I thought that I was I realised were just hype.

Even though her husband was warned that she might become depressed, they were both unprepared for the sudden onset and intensity of her emotions: "every day for two weeks I cried—I was in mourning". She even considered the idea that she might not ever work again. This participant then described how she spent a couple of months working through her feelings associated with losing her business and sense of self. Meanwhile, her spouse felt deeply concerned but separate from his partner's struggle. This extract illustrates how an entrepreneurial spouse suffering from a profound loss of self after business failure can shock and additionally burden the copreneurial couple with feelings of separateness.

Similarly, when Harry's (M&H) business failed, he felt "really lost" and "didn't know what to do next". Despite Harry's struggle with feelings of loss relating to entrepreneurship, there was an apparent disconnection at the level of their relationship. Molly indicated that she was worried about Harry, but she thought the best thing for him was to find a job. At this point, Harry's former employer invited him to return to corporate banking. The offer lifted Harry's bruised self-esteem and solved the issue of restoring his financial contribution to their relationship. However, he soon realised that he missed the autonomy of having his own business. Even worse, because of his failure, Harry had become "ashamed" of his role as a business advisor.

Harry: I had this failure—a business failure. I was responsible for one and a half billion dollars of business clients. And they would look to me for advice. These multimillion-dollar businesses. And I had this failure. I felt hypocritical—or you couldn't trust my judgement.

Not only was Harry feeling disconnected from his view of himself as an entrepreneur, but he also felt like an imposter in his banking role. He became overworked and depressed.

Harry: I ended up pushing myself far too hard. I went through two major bouts of depression.

Molly: Yeah, but I was looking back at the timeline, and I reckon that your depression relates back to the business failing. When you look at the timeline, it's not that far.

Harry referred to this period as his "massive struggle". He also mentioned media reports of another entrepreneur who "almost killed herself". Still, in their joint interview, Harry and Molly chose not to provide details about how his massive struggle impacted their relationship. Instead, Harry spoke about how the burden of their relationship difficulties after business failure was valuable for understanding similar challenges confronting other copreneurial couples.¹⁵ He commented, "we've got husband and wives sitting

¹⁵ This copreneurial couple currently have a business advising other small business owners.

across the table, and the wife says, ‘If you don’t fix him, I’m leaving him.’” Harry and Molly were each more candid about their relationship challenges in their individual narratives, but these cannot be reported here.¹⁶

Nick and Christine (N&C) were more explicit in their joint interview about how Nick’s loss of self impacted their relationship. Similarly to Harry in the previous example, a corporate approached Nick with a job offer. Two years had passed since their business failure. Nick was still unemployed and confused about his career. He felt unmotivated and recognised that this was not good for their relationship; in Nick’s words, “we were just doing”. Christine focused on success in her real estate career, while Nick wanted nothing to do with the industry. He even refused to talk with Christine about her work, which increased their feelings of separateness. The following interaction illustrates this:

Christine: And you were so disinterested in real estate as well.

Nick: I just was over real estate.

Christine: I couldn’t talk about a listing or—nothing.

Nick: Zero interest.

Nick then described being approached to work in a corporate. His initial reaction was that the job would not fit his personality: “I’m not corporate [...] I’m just not that person”. However, he decided to give it a go due to his frustration and career confusion. He soon realised that he hated the job. He did not feel like himself—he felt like an imposter. Moreover, Nick found that the job demands meant he had even less time for his relationship.

*Nick: And I basically became a grey man working a hundred hours,
[Christine: Pulling your hair out.] a hundred hours a day. And I was
thinking, “why?”*

¹⁶As discussed in Chapter 5, Methodology and Methods, inter-spousal confidentiality is important in this study. This means that individual narrative data cannot be directly linked to joint narratives.

Nick: (looks to Christine) And you never saw me for that whole time that I was working for them.

These passages illustrate how Nick's loss of self and career confusion arising from their business failure created emotional and psychological burdens for himself, and they also created burdens at the level of their relationship. Nick actively avoided connecting with his partner about an essential part of her life—her work. Furthermore, his ill-considered job decision also kept him away from spending time with his family.

Difficulty communicating with each other about their sense of burden during this time was evident in the case of several copreneurial couples and added to their feelings of separateness. One copreneur even commented in her individual narrative that difficulty talking with her spouse about their business failure created a distance that felt like a “divorce”. Another acknowledged that discussing the emotional burden of failure with their spouse was difficult and was, therefore, avoided. A third person remarked, “talking was hard—talking honestly with X was quite hard”.

While it was less common for copreneurs to mention communication difficulties in their joint interviews, two copreneurial couples did raise this as an issue. During their interview, Sarah (S&K) commented to Kallum that she did not think they had “ever really talked about it”. Kallum expressed surprise at this remark, but Sarah clarified that she thought they never really “reflected” on the failure. Her clarification indicated her view that they had avoided talking about the deeper emotional aspects and how this affected them. Similarly, Ethan (E&E) commented, “there are probably still things we don't like to talk about”.

These comments about communication difficulties representing four different copreneur dyads showed that some copreneurial couples had difficulty discussing their feelings and emotions about entrepreneurial failure. Moreover, the comments suggest that

omitting to reflect and communicate about their business failure significantly reduced their sense of we-ness during that period.

In summary, copreneurial couples saw many burdens following entrepreneurial failure as shared, so it did not negatively impact their sense of we-ness. However, a move away from we-ness was particularly evident when a more entrepreneurial spouse struggled with a feeling that they had lost part of themselves. Although the less affected spouse always expressed concern about their partner in this situation, the affected partner somewhat withdrew him or herself emotionally, so their relationship became less we-oriented.

Individual copreneurs indicating a loss of self after their failure also wrestled with career confusion. As a result, two individuals in different dyads admitted to making poor job choices causing them to feel like an imposter. These situations led to further depression and paying less attention to the relationship, thus reducing their sense of we-ness. Several copreneurial couples also found it difficult to reflect and talk together about the effect of failure on their relationship. Reduced meaningful communication about the emotional impacts of failure also negatively impacted their sense of we-ness.

6.2 Breaching Our Arrangement

This theme involves a feeling of breaching an implicit understanding of responsibilities in their relationship. Such a breach involves roles or responsibilities underpinning the relationship expected to be performed mainly by one spouse. This feeling of a breach, which either or both spouses may acknowledge, can lead to a perceived imbalance in contribution to their relationship, reducing their sense of we-ness. In most copreneurial couple dyads, it was noticeable that one spouse more than the other tended to emphasise that they felt insecure and unsupported during this time. Extended phrases relevant to

this theme are: *My spouse isn't pulling their weight; I feel unsafe and let down by my spouse; and I feel bad that I've let my spouse down.*

Most copreneurial couples in this study had dependents (11 of the 12 copreneurial couples) at the time of failure. Parental responsibilities and associated expectations often became the focus of tension between spouses after the failure and featured strongly in their narratives. There were many instances where the copreneurial couple saw one spouse—generally, but not always, the mother—as having primary responsibility for caregiving in their family unit. Similarly, one spouse—often the father—was identified as the primary breadwinner.

The usual breadwinner and caregiver roles could sometimes be challenged by the new financial circumstances requiring income restoration. Some caregiver spouses felt their partner did not offer sufficient support following the failure. For example, Molly (M&H) felt that her husband did not do a good job of sharing the load while she needed to work full-time after the failure.

Molly: I went from two days a week to five days a week. Juggling the twins. I mean, even though Harry was home. [Harry: I was daddy day-care for a couple of months.] Yeah, he was daddy day-care for a couple of months. But he didn't excel at that. He didn't enjoy that. So, I was coming home, and the travel and all the rest of it, and still having to bath twins, dinner, and put them to bed. So, I wasn't there during the day—but I was still the primary caregiver. Yeah, so to me, it was just hard slog.

Harry used a seemingly pejorative expression, “daddy day-care” to describe taking over responsibility for caring for their children. Molly resented that Harry was not good at this crucial task and still needed to do most of this work when she came home at the end of the day. They use singular pronouns throughout this passage, underscoring how they did not see themselves operating as a unit during that period. They had tried to reverse their usual caregiver-breadwinner roles for practical reasons, but this had not worked out. Molly signalled in their joint interview that the balance of contribution to the

relationship had become unequal after their business failure, leading to tensions between them.

In each copreneurial couple dyad with dependent children, the caregiver tended to emphasise a more conservative, risk-averse view about family finances and security than their partner. It was common for the caregiver to show their discomfort about how reduced financial security might threaten their family unit. Alice (T&A) provided a good illustration of this in their joint interview:

Alice: We just couldn't take this financially, and as a family, it was just too much pressure. Luckily, I had some work. So, we had an amount of money that we knew was coming into the family. But just having no stability was just too much for me.

Alice wanted Terry to take some action, and she recalled telling him to “just go and get a bloody salaried role working somewhere.” But at the same time, she recognised that he was conflicted, so she commented that their situation “became very tense and stressful”.

Terry responded by trying to find a job through recruiters but setting a high standard for what he deemed an acceptable role. He described the typical response he received when he went to recruiters:

Terry: They would say, “Well, the role that you're looking for only comes across our desk once every eight or nine months.” So that was pretty depressing. I knew that Alice was really keen on me just going out and grabbing anything. Basically, getting employed. I probably could have gone and changed my CV and just gone for something less ambitious. And I just didn't do that. I don't know why I didn't sit down and do that really.

Therefore, Terry's reluctance to lower his criteria for a non-entrepreneurial job so that he was more likely to get an offer created further tension in their relationship.

Olivia (J&O) provided a further example of the risk aversion shown by most of the caregiver spouses. She saw her role as the one who kept “the home fires burning”. She had chosen not to work in the business alongside her husband, explaining that she

reduced their exposure to financial risk by working in a different job, particularly while they had a young son at home.

While most caregivers expressed some reservations in their joint narratives about the risks of starting a business, they were careful not to appear too critical of their partner when discussing the failure. This reticence became more apparent when comparing joint narratives with individual narratives. Several copreneurs provided a much more robust view in their individual narratives. The following provides an example of a sincere and powerfully emotional passage from an individual narrative.¹⁷

It's not his fault, but I couldn't forgive the situation. You know, you marry someone, and you think for a second—of course, I would never admit that—but you think they're going to take care of you, and they're going to keep you safe, and I'm sure he thinks that too. And he's told me several times about how disappointed he is in himself for letting me down. And I would obviously return and say, "No, no, you're fine." But I couldn't resist but think about it as well. So yeah, I was disappointed. I was disappointed in the bad timing in all these things. Safety is what I always need.

This passage shows how the need to feel safe and secure can differ for each person in the relationship. In this instance, a caregiver spouse believed that her husband should have been keeping her safe and that he was breaching this obligation. This view resulted in negative emotions such as disappointment and resentment that reduced the copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness.

In this copreneur's joint interview with her husband, there were still hints of her disappointment, but she was careful to moderate her emotional intensity. As she stated in the passage above, she knew her husband was "disappointed in himself", so she was careful not to make him feel worse. While she acknowledged that she could not blame

¹⁷ As noted in the previous Footnote 16, confidentiality applies between spouses where they provide an individual narrative. Hence, where excerpts are used from individual narratives, the dyad the individual belongs to is not disclosed to safeguard their confidentiality. Where an individual narrative excerpt includes the name of their spouse, this is changed to "X".

her husband for their business failure, she still felt that he put her into an unsafe situation, creating instability in their relationship and reducing we-ness.

Caregivers often expressed insecurity about losing their family home—either the possibility or the actuality. In the following passage, Olivia (J&O) describes her relief that the creditors could not take their house:

Olivia: Yeah, I mean, I was a director. So basically, I had responsibility. The big thing was that I'd said to our accountant, "I don't want the risks, the risks associated with me or the house."

Jack: She's pretty much risk averse.

Olivia: No, no, no. But I said, "I don't want them coming after the house." And that was the big thing. We didn't have the house—the bank did—but not the business. So, the landlord couldn't come after us—couldn't come after the house.

This passage highlights how Olivia saw the potential loss of security represented by losing the family home as something for which she needed to fight. She saw this as being more her problem than one she shared with her partner. Jack positioned himself as being less threatened, commenting about her risk aversion. This situation undermined their we-ness.

In several instances, caregivers were more candid about the depth of this fear of losing their family home in their individual narratives.

I still remember X telling me that we were going to have to sell our house. We were walking down Fenton Street, and I said to him, "We're going to have to sell the house, aren't we?" And he said, "Yep, we are." And that realisation was not a good one. We'd put things into our joint accounts, into our joint names. I should have listened to a lawyer who suggested that I should own some assets and X own some others.

Another participant similarly expressed the depth of her concern about becoming "homeless":

And many times, I felt in my head, I imagined, "Oh my God we're going to lose all our savings, and we're going to live on the streets, we're going to be homeless." I really had these thoughts.

Individual narratives would sometimes reveal the omission of important information from joint interviews about behaviour that breached the need to trust and feel secure in the relationship. In one case, an individual spoke about how their spouse became depressed after the failure and drank too much. This behaviour seriously undermined the relationship to the point where they considered separating. This copreneurial couple cannot be identified for reasons of confidentiality (see Footnote 17).

Sometimes one spouse expressed dismay about their partner's decisions, creating a sense of separateness and resentment. In one case, Christine (N&C), a caregiver spouse, left the business before her partner. Their business had been struggling, but this action effectively sealed its fate. Christine's departure created tension in their relationship, even though it had seemed a financially prudent decision in the circumstances.

Nick: Well, you jumped first.

Christine: I know. I always feel bad about that.

Interviewer: What happened there?

Christine: I was just over it. I was just miserable. Absolutely miserable.

Nick: You know, times have been tough ahead of the whole business thing. We've been through hoops before.

Christine: We've been through some big stuff.

Interviewer: So, this wasn't new to you?

Nick: No. Shit no. No, no. But we normally hunker down and do what we're both individually good at and just shut up and get on with it.

In this interaction, Nick highlighted that although they usually dealt with challenges together, it was different this time. Her decision to "jump first", leaving him to wind up the business, felt like abandonment, causing him to see the situation as no longer one they were meeting together. Christine tried to justify leaving the business by saying she was miserable and agreed they usually worked as a team, which only increased Nick's apparent resentment. During their discussion, both spouses agreed that Christine's

decision was logical at that time; however, they also highlighted that this action created an emotional rift, reducing their sense of we-ness.

Another seemingly logical decision that created a sense of separation and resentment came up in Bill and Catherine's (B&C) joint interview. Following their business failure, this copreneurial couple had substantial debts. The New Zealand economy was not in strong shape at that time, so Bill decided to start a new business in another country for financially prudent reasons. This decision meant that Bill left home for extended periods while Catherine cared for their family back in New Zealand. Although they agreed that the decision had been mutual, Catherine found this situation extremely difficult. Aside from feeling alone, Bill's extended absences required her to take on financial tasks that she saw as his usual responsibility. She emphasised how unhappy she felt and her difficulty in coming to terms with the consequences of this decision for their relationship.

Catherine: Well, it was terrible. I just found it terrible. [Bill: Yeah.] I cried almost every night when he was in Argentina. I was not good company for my younger boys who were living at home. And I went through photos and all that sort of stuff, and thought, "This is awful." And I couldn't understand. I kept feeling that he should be in New Zealand. I really felt that he should not be setting up this business in Argentina.

Thus, while their agreement for Bill to start a new business overseas to recover from the previous failure seemed logical, Catherine still felt that he had let her down. This disappointment and sense of abandonment had the effect of reducing we-ness at that time in their relationship.

The pressures on parental roles and responsibilities were not always on the caregiving spouse. For copreneurs with children, parental roles also highlighted tensions around the spouse responsible for being the relationship's breadwinner. Entrepreneurial failure often meant the spouse seen as the breadwinner might not (at least temporarily) fulfil

this role in the relationship. For example, in her individual narrative, one copreneur commented:

X was angry about the situation and how it played out. The failure wasn't only a business failure but a failure of being able to provide for his family. While I never said anything, I was angry at X for not listening to me about finding another job first. This put a lot of pressure on us financially and stress on our relationship.

When highlighting parental roles in narratives, spouses typically indicated who held the caregiver or breadwinner responsibility. In several joint interviews, the tension would increase when the caregiver spouse pointed out that their breadwinner partner was reluctant to find paid employment following their business failure.

Interviewer: So, did you have a view about what Harry should be doing?

Molly: Getting a bloody job. My thing was, "I don't care what it is; you just need to find something." I probably didn't say it that bluntly at the time.

There were also instances when several male spouses felt self-critical about failing to meet what they saw as their obligation to be the family breadwinner. These self-criticisms were more apparent in their individual narratives, such as in the following example: "I was deeply worried about money and my employment prospects. I wanted to be bringing money into the family but failed, so I felt a massive sense of failure in the eyes of my wife and kids."

Similarly, another participant commented, "I felt like I was meant to be the primary income earner or that the responsibility was mine." In these cases, the participants felt ashamed that they had failed to provide what they saw as their responsibility, creating a sense of inequality of contribution in their relationship.

In summary, the theme "breaching our arrangement" illustrates that for copreneurial couples with dependent children (most copreneurial couples in this study), tensions in their relationship were often related to the parental roles of caregiver and breadwinner. Many copreneurial couples perceived that these implicit relationship responsibilities had

been breached. This perception led to feelings of being let down, resentment, abandonment, and guilt. Consequently, we-ness subsided for these copreneurial couples.

6.3 How Others See Us

This theme concerns the situation where copreneurs perceived that others viewed them or their relationship negatively following entrepreneurial failure. Extended phrases relevant to this theme are: *I worry about how others see our failure*; and *others judge us but we don't care*. Half of the copreneurial couples provided evidence for this theme.

Extended family and their expectations were a powerful presence in some accounts. For example, there were several points in Terry and Alice's (T&A) joint interview showing concern about how Alice's family might view Terry's performance in business. Early in the interview, Terry mentioned that Alice's father had been a successful entrepreneur:

Terry: It wasn't a terrible outcome. But it wasn't a glowing sort of "Hey, let's retire now" sort of outcome. Alice's dad had the glowing, "I will retire at the age of 40" outcome. And so, I had a very hard, high bar.

Interviewer: So, did he retire young?

Terry: Yeah. He was involved with a successful business.

Terry's remark that he "had a very hard, high bar" shows that he did feel some performance pressure and judgement. Later in their narrative, Alice also mentioned several times that she came from a successful entrepreneurial family. In this context of perceived external evaluation of his performance, Terry's subsequent admission of feeling guilty about losing investment money from her family assumes a greater significance.

Terry: The overarching thing is that I definitely felt guilt about Alice's family missing out—that we lost their money. It would have carried some impact, but it's not going to force them to sell their house or anything. [Alice: No.] But I still felt a lot of guilt about losing their money.

Terry and Alice also alluded to her parents as being parenting role models. At various points during their interview, it became clear that Terry had not met this high standard of parenting and had to learn. The following is an example of this:

Terry: Alice has come from a very supportive family environment where the kids are really looked after and put first. [Alice: And not in a spoiling way, but in a loving way.] In a loving parenting way. Whereas, I come from the exact opposite. The complete exact opposite.

These passages suggest that business failure can become intertwined with social perceptions of spousal performance in a copreneurial couple's relationship. For Terry and Alice, the failure was not just about Terry's business but also about how his contribution might not have measured up to Alice's family's standards. Not only had Alice's parents been successful in business, but they were still able to be emotionally involved and supportive of their children. Their interview revealed a shared view that Terry had not been particularly engaged as a father before the failure. Therefore, Terry and Alice's interview presents a more complex picture of social evaluations intertwined with business failure negatively impacting their sense of we-ness.

Individual copreneurs sometimes expressed concerns about perceived social evaluations in their individual narratives that were not raised in their joint interview. For example, one individual commented that she felt unhappy about her husband's decision to start the business. Her dissatisfaction was compounded by her belief that their families would not understand what they were doing. She described "this whole journey" as one ending with failure and then made the following remarks:

I come from a family of teachers, and so does he. And teachers don't normally start businesses—they're not entrepreneurial—so they couldn't understand what the hell we were doing. And they would help us with money and stuff like that. I really didn't like that either.

Although she had felt it necessary to support her husband with starting a business, the failure caused her to resent him because she believed their families would probably not understand.

Olivia (J&O) provided another instance of a perceived negative social evaluation. In her joint interview, she described how she avoided telling others at her workplace about their business failure.

Olivia: And I haven't told anyone at work that this is going on. No one really knew. They knew that we—that I had a business. I had an EA subsequently who knew. But no, I didn't tell my boss. I didn't particularly like my boss that much. But I didn't tell anyone.

Interviewer: You were a shareholder in the business, right?

Olivia: Yeah, but only nominal, nominal.

Olivia had little direct involvement in running the failed business, yet it is clear that she also felt the embarrassment associated with the failure. One interpretation of her reluctance to tell others might be that she was trying to protect her partner from criticism. However, the assertion at the end of this passage that her shareholder responsibility was “only nominal” suggests that she was trying to distance herself from how others might judge her and their relationship.

In another example, Catherine (B&C) commented that she needed to “pretend” to others that things were fine while her husband, Bill, was overseas trying to pay off their substantial debts, and she was alone and depressed:

Interviewer: So, there were very few people that you could talk to?

Catherine: Well, that I could be honest with. Because I had to just pretend that it was alright.

Interviewer: Why did you feel that you needed to pretend?

Catherine: Well, yes, that's interesting, isn't it, because that's not normally what I would do. I, well, I kept believing Bill, that it would all come right. It wouldn't be that long, and it would all come right.

Interviewer: And yet it stretched on for longer.

Catherine: Oh, yes, obviously, yes, it did.

Catherine admitted that she even surprised herself that she felt this need to pretend to others. It may be that her initial motivation was to protect her husband from criticism

about business failure. However, her comments at the end of the passage that Bill could not quickly make things right show how she began to feel let down. Therefore, it seems more likely that Catherine pretending to others that “it was alright” was to hide her disappointment and loss of belief that her husband could make it “all come right”.

There was also evidence that negative evaluations by others did not always impair a copreneurial couple’s sense of we-ness. There were several instances where copreneurial couples highlighted negative social evaluations, yet they viewed these as jointly shared problems.

Jack and Olivia’s (J&O) interview provides an example of sharing the challenge of negative evaluations. They briefly spoke about historical tensions with Jack’s wider family and described them as “very stressful”. Olivia then described an episode in which Jack’s family found out about their business failure:

Olivia: I said to Jack, “It’s up to you when you tell people and how you tell people. But remember, it’s published in the paper that you’ve got a liquidation.” And his bloody Uncle worked in accounts in his travel business stuff, rang us up, going, “I see Jack’s in liquidation.” And I went—and of course, I burst into tears— “How the hell do you know?” And I said, “did Jack ring you?” And he said, “No, I read it in the paper.” And that’s when I went, “Oh, shit.” You know how some people read the death notices?

Olivia did not see this incident as a compassionate call. In the passage above, Olivia conveyed that they, as a copreneurial couple, were negatively judged by Jack’s family. Her embarrassment was compounded by discovering that this family member had not received this news confidentially but had discovered it in a public newspaper. Because Olivia and Jack viewed this as an example of ongoing animosity with the broader family, they perceived it as a shared problem that did not impact their sense of we-ness. Nick and Christine (N&C) provided another example of social judgements as problems that applied to them jointly. The business they were running together was struggling, so Christine decided it was in their best interests if she left to work for a competitor. They

subsequently became aware that others interpreted this to indicate that their relationship had also failed.

Christine: I mean after the initial pain of closing it down. (Looking at Nick) And you were out of it. Everybody thought we'd split up.

Interviewer: Did people ask you that?

Christine: Yeah. So many people thought we'd split up. You know, because we'd been Ace Realty, Nick and Christine working together. And then suddenly, just Christine. And it's like, "Oh, where's Nick gone?"

Interviewer: Was it hard on you both to hear people saying that?

Nick: (Looking at Christine) It was quite funny.

This passage shows that Nick and Christine perceived those others saw their relationship as intertwined with their business. When Christine separated from the venture, others assumed their marriage was also in trouble. Instead of causing their relationship harm, this appears to have been more like an inconvenience for this copreneurial couple. As Nick commented, they saw the situation as "quite funny".

As a final example of social judgements perceived as shared, Adam and Kate (A&K) described how their local community reacted after their business had failed.

Kate: It was like tall poppy syndrome [Adam: We were tall poppies]. Yeah, we got a lot of flak.

Adam: We had the big flash house on the hill.

Kate: But we did get a lot of flak from people.

This passage shows how Adam and Kate felt severely judged by others in their community, yet they still felt united as a copreneurial couple. They jointly agreed that

this situation was a case of “tall poppy syndrome”¹⁸. Because they saw this as a social criticism of them together, it did not negatively impact their sense of we-ness.

In summary, this theme of “how others see us” shows how perceived social evaluations of a copreneurial couple following entrepreneurial failure may have complex effects on their sense of we-ness. A perception that one spouse may have failed to meet relational responsibilities, or a social standard about their relationship, could lead to tensions such as blame and resentment, reducing their sense of we-ness. In contrast, when participants perceived negative social evaluations applied to them as a copreneurial couple, their sense of we-ness was not impaired.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

The purpose of Chapter 6 was to answer the question: “How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples’ sense of we-ness?” Three themes were described and illustrated: “feeling burdened”, “breaching our arrangement” and “how others see us”. Overall, these findings demonstrate how interdependent identities in copreneurial couple relationships can be destabilised by failure, causing we-ness to subside. All copreneurial couples showed that they could view entrepreneurial failure’s emotional, psychological, and social consequences as a shared challenge. However, when entrepreneurial failure threatened a valued aspect of an individual’s sense of self or safety, these findings show that participants shifted away from we-ness and instead focused on needs relating to their own threatened identity. These shifts could lead to tensions between spouses, such as a caregiver spouse feeling insecure and

¹⁸ *Tall poppy syndrome* is a relatively common term in New Zealand and Australia where egalitarianism is widely regarded as an important element of culture. It has been defined as someone “who is conspicuously successful and whose distinctions frequently attract envious notice or hostility” (Kirkwood & Warren, 2019, p. 1). Entrepreneurs viewed by their community as tall poppies can be judged harshly when they fail—such as where the entrepreneur is seen as failing for personal reasons (Kirkwood, 2007).

blaming their partner. Some shifts from we-ness involved an entrepreneurial spouse feeling a loss of self, leading to poor mental health, poor communication, and withdrawal from the relationship. These individual threats or losses caused their sense of we-ness to subside.

7 FINDINGS: MAINTAINING WE-NESS

In Chapter 6, I showed how the experience of entrepreneurial failure often involved dynamic changes and tensions in a copreneurial couple's relationship that caused their sense of we-ness to subside.

In Chapter 7, I explore how copreneurial couples respond and adapt to changes and tensions in their relationship by answering the second subquestion: "How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?"

As with the previous chapter, I bring together findings using the methodology outlined in Chapter 5 while also drawing on the conceptualisation of we-ness from Chapter 3 and the definition of copreneurs' experience of entrepreneurial failure from Chapter 4. Four themes were constructed from narrative data and illustrate the findings: *We won't let failure define us, we have social integrity, finding our middle ground, and entrepreneurship is part of us.*

7.1 We Won't Let Failure Define Us

This theme captures the feeling expressed by copreneurial couples that entrepreneurial failure was unpleasant, but they would not allow this negative experience to be a defining aspect of their ongoing relationship. Copreneurial couples described how they disconnected from the negative aspects of failure in their relationship and then commented on how they experienced increased closeness and growth in their relationship. At this stage, they would typically talk about how they began to see that failure could benefit their relationship. Extended phrases relevant to the pattern showing this theme are: *Failure is an event separate from our relationship; we can find benefits from failure; and we focus on building our relationship.* About half of the copreneurial couples provided evidence for this theme.

When asked to talk about what their business failure meant for them, Harry and Amy (H&A) described it as “an event”—something that happened to them. They did not focus on personalising the failure or blaming each other. Instead, they emphasised their choice to separate themselves from the negativity and “move forward”.

Harry: It made us resolve that it was not a final situation. It was an event; it wasn't a person. It's easy to give up but look who's watching you. My children are looking at me and going, "Am I going to be resilient to the end, or am I going to quit?" It's okay for failure to happen. It's an event. What you need to do is move forward from the failure.

Amy: And not let it put you off.

In time, they could see it as an opportunity to show their children a life lesson about being resilient. Harry and Amy then focused on how the failure could be viewed as an event that made them stronger together and as a family.

One couple indicated that they managed the impact of entrepreneurial failure on their lives by placing it into a broader context of other past family tragedies they had dealt with together. During their joint interview, Bill (B&C) turned to his wife Catherine to ask her if she wanted to add to his comments about the effect of entrepreneurial failure on their relationship. She began by agreeing with her husband's comment that family needs to be their priority and then elaborated on what this meant for them.

Catherine: That's true. Yeah, I would think that the fact that we've been able to laugh at some things is quite good. And even in the days when our daughter was diagnosed with cancer, and the baby died. We'd still have some jokes together. You know, within the family.

At first sight, Catherine's response seems to have veered off on a tangent by highlighting other family tragedies rather than their business failure. However, by juxtaposing their business failure and these other shared family traumas, Catherine showed how they had managed all types of adversity together. In this way, Catherine showed how she and Bill did not allow the negativity of these tragedies to define their relationship—instead, the shared challenge brought them closer together. They shared

the grief but did not let the negativity of these events become how they viewed themselves together.

Some copreneurial couples spoke about how the failure had triggered discussions about safeguarding their relationship from negativity. Tara and Oliver (T&O) spoke about how the experience of failure had made them realise they needed to make changes in their lives so that the negativity of failure and other business stressors did not spill over into the intimacy of their relationship:

Oliver: Like any couple that's been 'round for thirty odd years, if you have strong intuition, then you're very in-tune with the other person. I think the thing that's taxed us though, is that the challenging times are very stressful on the intimacy and that sort of connection—because you're just tired. [Tara: And it's about work.] And you're a bit beaten up. We've had to wake ourselves up a few times and say, "Hey, can we just not talk about this today?"

Tara: Yeah, because if it becomes a business relationship as opposed to being husband and wife and in a relationship together.

Oliver: So, we've got an immense, true, love and respect for each other. So that's the closeness.

This passage shows how Tara and Oliver recognised the need to resist the negativity of business failure and ongoing work stress by making changes to keep these aspects separate from the intimacy of their relationship. This strategy enabled them to feel closer together.

As noted in Chapter 6, some copreneurial couples in this study indicated difficulty discussing some emotional aspects of the failure. However, other copreneurs showed how talking with each other following their failure was critical to maintaining a sense of being closely connected in their relationship. This open communication was also critical for copreneurs to begin detaching the negative emotions associated with failure from their relationship. Adam and Kate (A&K) spoke about how talking was vital when dealing with the negativity of failure. They emphasised that they “talked a lot” when

experiencing hardship. This communication allowed them to detach the negativity of failure from their relationship and feel closer.

Kate: The harder times have definitely brought us closer.

Adam: But as I say, I think we were pretty close in the first place.

Interviewer: And when you have those hard times, do you have a way that you deal with it together?

Adam: We talk. We talked a lot.

Copreneurial couples indicated that openly expressing feelings and listening to each other was critical to detaching their relationship from the stress and negativity of failure. The significance of intimate communication was also raised by some copreneurs in their individual narratives, such as the following example:

I think for X and me it would have been very easy to let the stress destroy our relationship. You need to have a strong commitment to each other—a strong love. And communication is the key in terms of just let the other person vent if they need to. We spent hours just talking stuff through. And I think that's a big part of actually dealing with it, healing from it, and not letting it be a ticking time bomb for destruction.

This individual compared the stress of failure to a “ticking time bomb”—unless they could defuse the tension associated with failure by talking about it, there was a risk that it would destroy their relationship.

Some copreneurs experienced negative judgements from others about them after their business failure. Talking together about this allowed them to disconnect from these negative feelings. Adam and Kate (A&K) spoke of the animosity towards them from their small local community after their business failure.

Kate: Yeah. And you know Napier is such a small place. We were big in Napier. [Adam: We were quite big, yeah.] So, the gossip mongers were out in force, weren't they?

Adam: So, they were all thrilled to bits, you know.

It became abundantly obvious to us that we couldn't function there. So we may as well get out.

Kate: Start afresh.

Interviewer: Was this sudden or something you discussed over a period of time?

Adam: Oh, we discussed it over a period.

Kate: It was probably about six months, wasn't it? (Looks to Adam)

Adam: Yeah.

This passage shows how Adam and Kate protected themselves from negative judgements through talk in the months following their failure. Their use of pejorative language to describe the perpetrators as “gossip mongers” and “thrilled to bits” indicates their shared disdain and rejection of the negative judgements about them. In this way, Adam and Kate resisted such judgements by others from becoming part of how they saw themselves as a copreneurial couple.

For some copreneurs, the negativity associated with their business failure was carried by one spouse more than the other, creating a barrier to maintaining their sense of we-ness. For example, Terry (T&A) spoke about how the business and its failure had caused him to neglect his relationship. He found it difficult to detach from the negativity of his experience, which damaged his relationship, so he sought help from an external men's support group. The insights this support group provided Terry were critical to helping him reconnect with Alice. During their joint interview, Alice made the following comment:

Alice: It's still been a work in progress since the company shut down. But it has made a significant difference and I think, as Terry said, I don't think we would still be together if he hadn't been doing that work.

Terry's personal work provided the foundation to reconnect with his relationship without the negativity associated with the previous business and its failure. He and Alice could begin working on their relationship priorities, particularly parenting.

Alice: So that's been our re-education, the reframing of what family means.

Terry: It has, yeah. Learning how to sit with my kids and to show love to my kids. To give them time.

Alice: [...] That was hard for me to do, and it was hard for you (looking at Terry) in the first couple of months. But where we are now—even though it's been hell—we feel more like a family than we've ever felt.

Using pronouns such as “our” and “we” is noteworthy in this passage. Alice signals that she does not view this as a one-sided change made by Terry alone; instead, it has been a change for them both—“our re-education”. This shared approach and relationship growth could only commence following Terry’s efforts to disconnect from the negativity of failure.

Emma (E&E) provided a different example of one spouse needing to move past the negativity of failure before being able to reconnect to the relationship. After the failure, Emma was depressed and self-focused, so it took time to reconnect with her husband. Several months after closing the business, Emma could finally put some negativity behind her and begin focusing on her relationship. She described an incident involving their young children and some merchandising toys that were symbolic of the failed business for her.

Emma: I had these toys, and I gave them to the girls. And they ran off all happy. And I burst into tears. [Ethan: Mmm.] (Looks to Ethan) And he gave me a hug. I think that was about the only thing I remember.

This incident was an emotionally charged episode in Emma’s account. For her, this event signalled a turning point where she was able to let go of the negativity associated with her failed business and begin focusing on her relationship. Emma and Ethan then began to describe how they jointly began planning and thinking positively about their future together. Their planning included a critical decision about parenting roles and who was best to be the primary breadwinner. Ethan commented that although “everybody looks at the husband to be the provider”, he could see Emma still had the best career and income potential. He remarked, “she will be far greater, succeed faster and earn far more than I ever will”.

Despite their awareness that others might be critical of their socially unconventional choice for Ethan to be a “stay-at-home dad”, this arrangement worked well for them. They were proud of this choice and saw it as a distinctive way to operate collaboratively in their relationship. However, before they could make positive decisions about their relationship, Emma needed time to separate from the negativity of business failure. The previous two examples show that detaching from the negativity of failure in relationships takes time, as indicated by most copreneurial couples. During her confidential individual narrative, one copreneur described this as a “process” she and her husband needed to go through together before they could start to see how the experience had benefitted them.

The negatives have been the company folding and the subsequent depression and loss that X experienced afterwards. But then the positives are our life-changing, our attitudes changing. Overall, we are financially and mentally better off—far better off now. But we had to go through that process to get where we are today.

Similarly, Claire (T&C) spoke about how it took time after their entrepreneurial failure for them to feel better about life and their future together. She spoke of how they had learned the importance of not becoming focused on disappointment and negativity:

Claire: We’ve been through this long journey where it’s been a struggle and hasn’t been as easy as I’d have thought. So, for a while, we both got a bit jaded—we were sort of in the grind of life. And recently, we’ve started to come back out. I feel that I’ve started to come back out of that and again feel like, “Let’s just focus on what we really want and our dreams.” And if it happens—great. And if it doesn’t, well, that’s okay as well.

This passage shows that Claire and Tony realised that failure had made them negative—“a bit jaded”—and they needed to begin looking at their relationship and future more positively. They each summarised their understanding of the importance of resisting negativity. Claire remarked that “life is going to go on, and we’ll just deal with it as we go”, and Tony commented, “we don’t think, ‘It’s got to be this way, or we’re not happy.’”

In most cases, the emotional and psychological impacts of failure meant that it took time—sometimes many months—for copreneurial couples to resist the negativity of failure becoming part of how they saw their relationship. Two copreneurial couples (A&K and T&C) expressed their difficulty with moving forward positively together while they were still immersed in their everyday lives after failure. The daily routines in a familiar setting made it hard for them to disconnect from the negativity of failure. Each copreneurial couple described how they purposely removed themselves from their usual life to create a separation from past negative experiences and refocus on their relationship.

Adam and Kate spoke about what they called their “tent experience”.

Kate: So, we lived in a tent. And we stayed there for six months. It was the first time in a very long time that we'd been alone. We'd always had people around, you know.

Interviewer: So, you were enjoying this time, were you?

Adam: Oh, hell yeah. We were having a ball. [Kate: Yeah.] It was a bit damp in the middle of winter. Cold wasn't a problem. [Kate: No, it was the damp.] But we had it all set up. I'd built a shed and insulated it that we'd use for a kitchen. I built a shower block.

Adam and Kate's time-out from their everyday life lasted six months. During this period, they could focus on themselves as a unit, rejuvenating and maintaining their feeling of togetherness after their stressful challenges. They both saw this as a revitalising time. As Kate remarked, “we're each other's best friends, and we've had a lot (looks to Adam) to contend with, haven't we?” While they still saw challenges in their future, they were able to find the strength to cope through their ongoing sense of being united.

Tony and Claire also discussed the decision to take two months away from their usual environment after their negative experiences.

Claire: We went to stay in Australia for a couple of months. We were managing Tony's dad's petrol station. So, it wasn't paying us (looks to Tony

to help remember), but they basically paid for the flight? [Tony: Yeah, they paid us a bit, yeah]. We wanted to get out for winter [Tony: That's right]. We'd hit one of those points where we thought, "oh man, we just need a change".

This change in everyday routine meant that Tony and Claire could spend the time focusing on each other and enjoying their relationship.

These illustrations show how, after the stresses of entrepreneurial failure, some copreneurial couples needed to take time out from their everyday lives. This time enabled them to separate their relationship from the negative aspects of failure and reconnect positively with their relationship.

In summary, this theme shows how copreneurial couples need to separate the negativity of entrepreneurial failure from the intimacy of their relationship. This distancing did not mean denying that events happened and were stressful—but it was essential to consider those consequences as “something that happened to us, instead of being part of us”. By ensuring that the negativity of failure was not a defining aspect of their relationship, many copreneurial couples began to find benefits for their relationship and started working more positively on their future together.

7.2 We Have Social Integrity

This shows how copreneurial couples were motivated to ensure that their sense of social integrity was shared and closely aligned. About one-third of copreneurs demonstrated this theme, with most examples involving copreneurs that had been the victims of unethical behaviour by others. Extended phrases relevant to repeating patterns constituting this theme are: *People we trusted were unethical and betrayed us; and we do the right thing.*

In their interview, Harry and Amy (H&A) provided several examples to show how others had behaved unethically, while they, in contrast, ascribed to high social values as

a copreneurial couple. The first example was a discovery they made during a crucial period as they attempted to trade out of receivership.

An employee of theirs had forgotten to insure some costly equipment damaged in transit to their client. They had been loyal to this corporate client over the years. For example, when the 2010 New Zealand Christchurch earthquake severely damaged the client's building, Harry and Amy chose to gift them a \$100,000 temporary fit-out. They did not ask for payment since, as Harry commented, "we believed we were developing a relationship". However, much later, when Harry and Amy's business was in receivership, they were shocked to find that their loyalty was not reciprocated when the long-term client refused to claim for the damaged equipment on their own corporate insurance.

Harry: If we stuff up, we step up, and we take accountability for it. [Amy: Yeah]. We take responsibility for our actions, and that's it—right? They hid behind their moral bankruptcy, and their policies, and their global bullshit.

After this, Harry and Amy provided several more examples related to their business failure to show how they had held to higher ethical standards while others had let them down. These episodes prompted the interviewer to ask whether these experiences had changed their approach to people and business.

Amy: We're probably a bit more careful than we were. (Looks to Harry) What do you think?

Harry: Well yeah, we are.

Amy: Still caring. We're still caring about people.

Despite being so severely let down, Harry and Amy both wanted to emphasise that they still had not lost their core shared belief in caring about people. This value of compassion also aligned with their firmly held and shared Christian faith. When discussing the importance of religion in their lives they commented:

Harry: Yeah, absolutely, that was our cornerstone. [Amy: Absolutely, it was, yeah.] And that's what kept us anchored as a couple.

Amy: Yes, church was very good.

Harry: They walked the journey with us. I found out a lot about who were my “cheque book friends”.

Amy: We had lots of friends, didn’t we? But all of a sudden, we only had about five or six that were any good.

This copreneurial couple also created a “vision board” after their failure, highlighting their shared core values. Their vision board showed how they had set future goals that would align with their social values—such as the goal of starting a business that would benefit the disabled community. Despite their negative experiences with others contributing to their business failure, this copreneurial couple made a considerable effort to ensure that they held similar core values that kept them “anchored as a couple”.

Adam and Kate (A&K) provided another example that emphasised their shared values. Before their failure, they had invited their accountant to be a business partner and company director. After their failure, they discovered that this trusted individual had siphoned money from their business to prop up a fraudulent scheme he was operating. He was subsequently convicted and imprisoned for fraud, but Adam and Kate’s business had failed by this time.

Despite this significant betrayal involving financial and emotional costs, Adam and Kate wanted to show concern for other victims harmed by this person’s actions.

Adam: This lady didn’t know that this money wasn’t there. She didn’t even know he’d done this.

Kate: She was a widow.

Adam: She was a widow, and it was her husband’s pay-out from his death insurance payment. It would make your hair curl, you know. [Kate: A terrible mess.] And we were just pulling our hair out at that stage, weren’t we? (Looks to Kate.)

Towards the end of their interview, they again showed how they shared social values and beliefs.

Kate: I’ve always looked out for people.

Adam: Well, I do too, really.

Kate: Yes, I know. I know you do. (Looks to the interviewer) We've had all sorts of strays at home that he likes to drag in.

Oliver and Tara (O&T) were serial entrepreneurs. They described how they had consecutively lost two businesses due to betrayals by others. In one example, they described how, months after their business had failed, a friend had overheard a conversation from two of Oliver and Tara's former business partners. This reported conversation showed them that these two trusted individuals had deliberately sabotaged their business despite outward appearances of integrity:

Tara: These guys were laughing about it and saying that "It was a bit sneaky, but it was cheaper." [Oliver: Cheaper than buying us out] And it only cost them like seventy grand rather than trying to buy the whole business out, which they had done to a couple of other small startup businesses.

Oliver: And these people that lied through their teeth were supposedly religious. (Looks to Tara) Remember, they were quite churchy people? [Tara: Yeah.]. It was quite revolting.

Towards the end of their interview, Oliver and Tara highlighted that although their experience of business sabotage had made them more cautious in subsequent years, it had not shaken their fundamental belief in people. They spoke about how their failure experiences reinforced their shared determination to hold high standards of integrity and social values. They wanted to underscore how these beliefs underpinned their new values-based business aiming to help people:

Tara: So, we were more in love with, "how can we make an impact on other people, and help other people? And maybe make some money along the way".

Oliver: Well, we definitely want to make some money along the way.

Tara: Yeah. But we're not fixated on— you know— fifty million. It's just like, "if it can provide us with a good income going forward, then that would be great". And we're doing something for the good.

Interviewer: So, you want to have a business that's consistent with your values?

Oliver: Yes, yeah, yeah.

Tara: Yeah.

Jack and Olivia (J&O) provided another example of shared social values. In their case, business failure did not involve betrayal by others. Instead, they attributed their business failure to market conditions. However, they wanted to show how they did not want others to suffer due to their business failure. They illustrated this by describing how several employees in their small manufacturing business were on work visas and would have struggled to find jobs after the closure. They both emphasised that they did not want to abandon these employees to their fate.

Olivia: He would let the guys in the factory make up as many storage systems as they could, so they could sell them. And Fred was allowed to keep working. And the woman who was running the retail outlet—we helped with her CV. Like she got a job at an engineering firm. She was a really good administrator. [Jack: That's right.] So, we helped.

This passage illustrates how it was important for Jack and Olivia to demonstrate their shared compassion for others despite their own financial and emotional hardship following the failure.

In another example, Emma and Ethan (E&E) spoke of how some of the intellectual property belonging to the failed business still had value and could be sold to help pay down debts. An advisor had told them to promote a story that the business was not really closing to improve their chances of selling the intellectual property for a reasonable price.

Emma: I was told to put some sort of release around. They wanted it to be a good news story about the license going to this other company. So, I think we said something about that. But not many people read it. But the company who was licensing the property said, "No. It can't be that you're closing the business down." [Interviewer: Because that sounds bad?] Yeah, it just sounds like maybe the product's wrong.

Ethan: Yeah, and that's why I was telling people, "Oh we just licensed it out to somebody else."

Emma: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, you sorted out something to say to people.

Ethan: Yes. Legally and emotionally, yeah.

While this cover story also helped protect Emma from being negatively judged by others, they both admitted to feeling bad about letting people think that the business had been sold instead of failing. As Emma commented, it was like “lying”:

Emma: Some people saying things to us that I didn't like. They were saying things like, “Oh, so I've heard you've sold the business!” Like I got an exit. I hated that. I was very quick to go, “Oh, it's been licensed out.” But no, the business got shut down. I don't like the lying.

Therefore, while Emma and Ethan felt compelled to maintain this lie, they privately shared their feelings at the time that they thought this was wrong and it offended their sense of integrity.

In summary, this theme shows the vital aspect of values in relationships following entrepreneurial failure—particularly where copreneurial couples perceived that they had been the victims of unethical behaviour or felt their failure might harm others.

Copreneurial couples that felt these core values were challenged during entrepreneurial failure worked together to align and anchor them.

7.3 Finding Our Middle Ground

This theme shows how copreneurial couples dealt with the circumstances outlined in Chapter 6, where one spouse wanted to continue being entrepreneurial following the failure. At the same time, their partner was resistant and highlighted their need for financial security. Copreneurs described how they could negotiate a balance between these needs to achieve an acceptable outcome for both. Extended phrases relevant to this theme are: *We can reduce risks and still have entrepreneurial elements*; and *we can find ways to work together in business*. Half of the copreneurial couples were coded to this theme.

One way some copreneurial couples could achieve these seemingly incompatible needs was for the more entrepreneurial spouse to move into salaried permanent employment with a business that still offered some elements of being entrepreneurial. Sarah and Kallum (S&K) provided the following interaction illustrating how they found their solution:

Sarah: This current company—it's a startup, it's a company that's been around for 20 years, but this new development, it's a startup. So, he is (Kallum interrupts)

Kallum: So that's why we're going to venture capitalists; we're getting money from them. That's why [Sarah: And it's technology. You like that.] Its technology. It's global. It incorporates a little bit of my background from my previous company.

They both pointed out aspects that appealed to their individual needs. Sarah highlighted that the company had “been around for 20 years”, which satisfied her wish for Kallum to have job security. But the company was also like “a startup”, so it offered elements that met Kallum’s need to feel entrepreneurial. They both highlighted aspects of the job that were particularly important to Kallum and how he had even turned down a more highly paid role because it did not meet these minimum criteria.

Kallum: Yeah. Because, in the end, I didn't just want to be another employee.

Sarah: There was a job that he refused actually. It was working with (looks to Kallum) what's it called—the other corporate? Kingston Ltd. [Kallum: Kingston Ltd., yeah.] And he got the job. [Kallum: I got the job.] And then he said, “Nope.”

Kallum: And it was really good money. It was far more money than even when I left my other company. And I just felt I'm going to be [Sarah: You're going to be bored.] I'm going to be bored. I'm going to be a cog in the wheel. It was a big role too, but it was a slow company.

In this way, Sarah and Kallum resolved this critical tension between them. Sarah could have the security of Kallum being in a job with a stable income, while Kallum still felt he was working for a company that was like “a startup”. This outcome represented a compromise on both sides. Sarah accepted that Kallum would have been “bored” by the

“big role” in a corporate even though the salary would have been substantially more than his new position:

Jack and Olivia (J&O) provided a further example for this theme, but in this case, the solution was less optimal than Sarah and Kallum’s. Jack and Olivia agreed that she was the primary caregiver and the most risk-averse person in their relationship, especially regarding the security of having their own home. Olivia had clarified earlier in their joint interview that she would not tolerate losing their home for a business venture.

The following passage contains Jack and Olivia’s interaction about Jack’s next career move after his failed business. Jack explained that he and Olivia knew someone who owned a construction business and was looking for a salesperson:

Jack: So, I went and talked to them. I ended up working for them for the next four years. [Olivia: As a sales guy.] As a sales guy, just a sales guy. And I did okay. It was somewhere to go in the morning. It gave me a salary. Gave me a car.

Jack was not excited by the sales job, describing himself as “just a sales guy”. However, he emphasised that he still felt proud of his entrepreneurial achievements in this role:

Jack: Well, they had an agency from an Italian company that made specialised aluminium processing equipment. All of the aluminium window manufacturers used this kind of gear. So, I took that in three years from nought to a half-a-million dollars turnover.

Even though Jack felt disappointed with aspects of his new job, it was clear that he felt a sense of pride that he could use his entrepreneurial business development experience. While this outcome was not as mutually satisfying as Sarah and Kallum’s previous example, Jack showed that he could still find aspects in this secure job that met some elements of his need to be entrepreneurial.

Terry and Alice (T&A) also reached a compromise, but it was not through the security of permanent employment in their case. Following his business failure, Terry had been helping another startup in a temporary paid consulting role. After this contract ended,

Alice became anxious. Feeling frustrated, and in need of income security, she told Terry to “just go and get a bloody salaried role working somewhere”. However, Alice realised that Terry still felt drawn towards entrepreneurship and commented to him during their interview that “you have that entrepreneurial spirit and desire to be your own boss”. Despite understanding Terry’s needs, she was unhappy with the uncertainties and risks of entrepreneurship after their business failure.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Terry started searching for jobs through recruitment agencies but appeared to self-sabotage his efforts by setting his expectations so high that he could not find anything he deemed suitable. This self-defeating behaviour forced Terry to find a compromise, not by starting a new venture with staff but by proving to Alice that he could provide a reliable income as a sole contractor.

Terry: I chose to just double down on trying to boost my contracting revenue. And so, I really just pushed that. And really focused on that. And it just started growing.

Terry saw this as his compromise, but Alice indicated it was not her ideal solution.

Alice: And the problem with contracting is that nothing’s ever guaranteed. And it didn’t feel secure. Or like you could relax, or kind of go, “oh well this is sorted now”.

Alice was not entirely comfortable with Terry’s compromise. However, his extra efforts to ensure a reliable contracting income and her understanding that he needed to retain some entrepreneurial elements led her to accept this outcome.

Some copreneurial couples found a way to compromise by agreeing to work together again despite some disadvantages. Nick and Christine (N&C) had jointly founded and operated their own real estate business until it failed due to market conditions. Just before their business failure, Christine started working for a competitor and became quite successful. As explained in Chapter 6, Nick struggled emotionally for a couple of years, rejecting the idea of having anything more to do with real estate. He briefly tried

working for a corporate, but this was unsuccessful and created more tension in their relationship.

Nick and Christine then explained how top salespeople could operate with a relatively high degree of autonomy within a larger corporate organisation. This business model had the potential to offer Nick many aspects of having a business that he enjoyed without “all that sort of clunky administration stuff”. So, Nick asked Christine if she would include him as a business partner. His proposal initially surprised Christine, but she soon saw the mutual benefits and agreed.

Christine: Well, I don't know that I was looking for a partner that I wanted to work with, but it just seemed just, "Why?" I always say to people, "I learned from the best." (Indicating Nick) I learned from him. And yeah. It was like, "Why wouldn't we just work together?" It still has its challenges.

This outcome allowed Nick to return to the elements of being entrepreneurial that were important to him. Christine admitted that working together in business was not always easy and “it still has its challenges”. However, she recognised that this outcome was necessary for Nick to regain a sense of self that he had struggled to find. Christine acknowledged that Nick was not always easy to work with, but she was motivated to make room for him. She later commented that their failure experience had probably taught them “how to manage each other a little bit better”.

Similarly to the previous example, Molly and Harry (M&H) experienced contrasting identity impacts in the aftermath of business failure. With Molly's encouragement, Harry returned to working as a senior banking executive for his previous employer. They were once again financially secure. Molly had been working part-time for a government department but found the environment “toxic”, so she decided to leave. Since Harry was in a highly paid job, it was not critical for her to find employment again. Molly then decided to try working for herself.

Molly: All of my jobs have been in logistics in various forms. So, I started a logistics consultancy. With the view—to be completely honest—that I didn't

need to worry about earning an income because he (looks at Harry) was earning squillions. And I was just going to become a lady of leisure and have the token business card—"I have a business". But I very quickly won some contracts and was doing crazy hours.

Harry: She was working even longer than five days a week.

While Molly had not intended that self-employment would become a key focus in her life, she found herself in a situation where she had more work than she could reasonably handle. She was very busy with consulting and was still the primary caregiver for their two children.

Meanwhile, as explained in Chapter 6, Harry had become depressed in his job at the bank. Business failure still haunted him and caused him to feel like an imposter in his banking advisory work. He felt ashamed. Eventually, Harry came up with an idea about how he could return to being the person he wanted to be and asked Molly if he could become her business partner.

Molly: So, then it was the decision of, what do we do? Either stay at the LB, or he could look for another job. And then he put on the table, "well, how about I join your business and do business consulting?"

So, despite relinquishing the financial security Harry's executive position had brought, Molly agreed, and they modified her existing business to combine their skills and experience.

In summary, this theme demonstrates how copreneurial couples were able to negotiate a compromise that still delivered the more entrepreneurial spouse sufficient elements to satisfy their sense of self. Sometimes the agreed outcome met the needs of one spouse somewhat more than the other. However, both spouses reached what they regarded as a satisfactory outcome that sufficiently met individual needs and supported their ongoing sense of connection with their relationship.

7.4 Entrepreneurship is Part of Us

This theme conveys the deep understanding between spouses of how entrepreneurship fits into their relationship. While all copreneurs in this theme reported experiencing adversity due to past entrepreneurial failure, they showed little hesitation about continuing with entrepreneurship. These copreneurial couples did not view this outcome as a negotiated compromise; instead, they saw entrepreneurship as a core part of their sense of we-ness. Extended phrases relevant to this theme are: *We complement each other in entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship is core to who I am/you are, and it's hard to see our future together without entrepreneurship*. One-third of copreneurs were coded to this theme.

These copreneurial couples clearly understood how continuing to be entrepreneurial worked within their relationship. As in the case of most copreneurial couples in this research, one spouse in each dyad providing data for this theme attached greater importance to being entrepreneurial than their partner.

Tony and Claire (T&C) provide an example of a shared understanding of how entrepreneurship fits into their relationship despite challenges and even failure.

Claire: I've just learned that the experience of living with an entrepreneur is that there are these experiences of ups and downs, and these successes and failures. And if I was to go up and down on that ride it would just be exhausting. So, it's almost like I'm a bit more objective, I think. I know this is Tony's journey, and whilst I'm there with him and supporting him, it's ultimately his journey.

Claire shows in this passage that she saw her spouse as “an entrepreneur” and that this was important for him as it was “his journey”, and she is determined to support him through her “objective” approach. Moreover, Claire’s objectivity and calm approach seemed to have benefited Tony. In the following passage, Tony acknowledges that he used to be far more emotionally impacted by his sense of deep connection with his business:

Tony: Whereas before, I think my venture was me. It was an extension of me. So, I felt deeply, deeply connected with it. If it died, I effectively died. You know that kind of feeling. Whereas now I feel that I'm much more like, "Okay, there's the idea, there's the venture—and just like it's my child—I will work to look after it and make it survive and so forth. But if it dies, it doesn't kill me".

Therefore, Tony and Claire were explicit that they had learned to deal with entrepreneurship in their relationship. The value of Claire's "objectivity" helped to counter Tony's feeling that "venture was me" and the potential negative consequences of this level of emotional attachment. Claire enabled Tony to gain some emotional distance from the venture.

Despite the disappointment of failure, this copreneurial couple's transition into a new startup was relatively smooth. Tony had realised that the old business was effectively ending and had "stopped trading". During this time, he began working on establishing a new venture, "Better Produce".

As the earlier passages show, Claire and Tony understood how business ownership's ups and downs worked in their relationship. Being entrepreneurial had become integrated with their sense of who they were as a copreneurial couple. Tony and Claire were in no doubt that he should continue to be entrepreneurial, so Tony began focusing his efforts on establishing his new venture as the old one failed.

Harry and Amy (H&A) also provided an example of a copreneurial couple with a deep understanding of how ongoing entrepreneurship was integral to their relationship. Harry began as an engineering contractor in the early 2000s. His work quality won awards, and he began employing staff, growing his business into a sizable venture with a multi-million-dollar turnover. Even before the venture failed in 2013, Harry and Amy had envisioned starting a new technology business. Harry retained his commitment to being entrepreneurial and kept to his plan for this new startup, but first needed to clear their large debts from his business failure. He returned to working as a sole contractor to

repay their debts before finally starting his new business several years later. During their interview, Harry brought out the “vision board” he and Amy had jointly created. This vision board included their plans for a new venture.

Harry: Yeah, so by this stage, we were looking at TechCo Ltd and going, “What does it represent? What does it look like?” So, we were about, “Switched on peace of mind”. And then we went through a branding exercise and came up with the name NewCo Ltd. So, we formulated NewCo Ltd. as a company. [Amy: This is going back to about 2011.] About 2011. So, this is a pictorial road map.

By consciously working on a shared vision for how entrepreneurship connected with their relationship and future, Harry and Amy kept their plans for the new venture alive.

Having a prior explicit understanding or plan for how entrepreneurship works in a relationship was not evident for every copreneurial couple in this theme. Sometimes this understanding was more implicit, only surfacing when spouses reflected on their relationship during their interview. In the case of Bill and Catherine (B&C), several factors combined to ensure that starting a new venture was the only option for them. Although Bill was a qualified accountant, property development was his business expertise. He believed that starting a new business in Argentina was the only way he could earn the sort of money required to repay substantial debts and avoid bankruptcy. He knew this would be hard on his relationship.

Bill: And I realised that Catherine wasn’t happy, but I really couldn’t see that I could do anything else. I was quite conscious of the fact that we had to start off with a clean slate, and I didn’t want to go bankrupt.

Bill indicated that this was important to him because professional pride was involved, and he had become used to being “my own boss”. Catherine added that he enjoyed the risk-taking elements of business ownership:

Catherine: (looks at Bill) But that’s not in your makeup, I don’t think— to take a safer way of doing things. It’s like being married to a gambler, really—Bill’s a gambler.

While they both saw the risks in entrepreneurship and the potential costs to their relationship and family, they accepted this. Catherine saw that Bill being entrepreneurial was something that she could not change and was an aspect of their relationship—“it’s like being married to a gambler”. By comparing the risk aspects of entrepreneurship with being a gambler, Catherine underscored the potential individual and relational well-being costs she associated with entrepreneurship. However, she knew this was an essential aspect of Bill’s sense of self, so she accepted this as an integral aspect of their relationship.

This part of their discussion turned to another aspect—avoiding bankruptcy—which Bill and Catherine both saw as related to continuing with entrepreneurship. Bill had made it clear that he saw starting a new business as the only way to earn the income to live and deal with their substantial debts. However, it became clear that the issue was more than just the income level a new business could create. For Bill, risking his professional standing and pride by being declared bankrupt was something he could not tolerate. Catherine knew this, and she insightfully drew Bill out on this point during their interview:

Catherine: (looking at Bill.) But I think your point too about not wanting to go bankrupt—you would see that as something terrible. [Bill: Oh, yes.] Because then you’d have your passport proscribed wouldn’t you. You couldn’t run a business. [Bill: Get thrown out of the accountants’ society.] Out of the accountants’ society. So, you wouldn’t feel that that was something you would tolerate at all.

Bill: I wouldn’t, no. Well, that’s pride more than anything.

Avoiding bankruptcy was raised again a short while later. It became evident that Bill had more than pride at stake; this was also about being seen as professionally competent—such as by continuing as a member of the accountants society.

Bill: I’d set myself up as an upright person, and I didn’t want to show that I wasn’t upright, and I wasn’t capable. So that’s about it really. We had to make sure that that didn’t happen.

Catherine: Some of our very good friends were other accountants, and I think that would have been a factor in it too.

Bill: Oh, yeah. Well five years ago I got my long service certificate from the accountants' society. I was very proud of that because I worked hard to get it and keep it.

Thus, retaining his professional pride and competence was also part of Bill's sense of self. His use of singular personal pronouns signals the deeply personal nature of Bill's professional pride. However, it also became clear in this passage that Bill's professional pride was also important to their relationship when Bill and Catherine switched to using plural personal pronouns—"we had to make sure that didn't happen", and "some of *our* very good friends were other accountants".

Catherine's deep awareness that continuing in entrepreneurship, maintaining professional pride, and avoiding bankruptcy were all essential to her husband, so supporting this decision became vital to their sense of connection as a copreneurial couple. For his part, Bill tried to reduce the burden on Catherine, who needed to stay behind to look after the family, by organising regular trips between countries.

Adam and Kate (A&K) were unusual in this research since they were still dealing with legal issues arising from their failure several years earlier. For reasons of confidentiality, these issues are not detailed here. These ongoing challenges associated with their business failure created feelings of disappointment in life which they spoke about in the latter stages of their interview. However, Adam started another small manufacturing business soon after their failure.

When describing their ongoing legal problems, Adam and Kate became subdued and pessimistic about their future. Kate was no longer directly involved in the new business but was still supportive. Adam still saw himself as entrepreneurial but felt frustrated by their circumstances.

Adam: You know, don't get me wrong, if I see a sniff of something I'll go after it like a hound-dog. But I tend to agree with Kate, that's probably more wishful thinking than reality.

Interviewer: So, do you still look for those opportunities?

Adam: Oh, relentlessly, relentlessly. But it's getting increasingly difficult to make them fly. [...] Then I'm not sure how I'd make anything fly. I'm not unrealistic. You know I can make it fly if it can be flown. [Kate: Yeah, yeah.] I think it's getting increasingly difficult for ordinary people.

So, while Adam and Kate saw that entrepreneurship was still an essential part of their relationship, they felt constrained by their current circumstances. They relied on a strong sense of connection in their relationship, which they conveyed through many shared experiences in their interview—“we're each other's best friends”. They indicated mutual support and drew strength from each other despite feeling constrained and disappointed about their future.

Finally, Emma and Ethan (E&E) showed how restoring entrepreneurship to their relationship did not necessarily mean starting or owning a new business. For Emma, company leadership was the crucial element of entrepreneurship she missed. As described in Chapter 6, Emma had been very depressed following the failure of her business and uncertain about what she could do next. Ethan had come across an opportunity through his consulting work, which he mentioned to Emma. The passage below provides Ethan and Emma's recollection of how this key event unfolded:

Ethan: I found out that there was a CEO who had to resign because of health conditions.

Emma: And he's the chairman of that board.

Ethan: I came home and said to Emma, I said, “oh, I said it's terrible. You know this client of mine; she's leaving almost immediately [Emma: (turns to the interviewer) As the CEO.] for health reasons. And she goes, “Oh my God they're going to need a new CEO.” And I said, “Yeah, well yeah. They're asking me who I could put forward.”

She turns around and says, “Well I could do that.” And I foolishly said, “Oh, well you know who the chairman of the board is, don't you? Ryan, your old chairman.” [Emma: Yeah.] And in front of me, she picks up her

phone and calls Ryan. And goes, “I hear you’re looking for an acting CEO.” And he goes, “Oh my God—perfect!”

This interaction shows how they arrived at the shared realisation of how Emma could restore the critical element of being entrepreneurial that she had been missing—business leadership. Ethan then described how this was a positive turning point for Emma.

Ethan: And it was about November. So that started in August. And it was about October/November. I could tell, one night she came home, and she just had this look. And she was back. It was like, she was the CEO.

And I looked at her and just went, I just looked inwardly, and went, “oh God, she wants to do this again”. And just went, “do you want to do this?” And she goes, “Yep”. So, then we went on another part of our journey of our lives that we concentrated on Emma becoming the person that she should always—the boss again because she was very good at it. She was very good at it.

For Emma, this decision to be “the boss again” was not a compromise; instead, it represented a return to a leadership role similar to the position she held before her company failed. This role represented her return to being entrepreneurial in a corporate setting. In their interview, Ethan and Emma made it clear that this outcome was a joint decision. Ethan talked about Emma’s restoration to being “the boss” as “another part of our journey”. These remarks showed Ethan’s understanding that this decision was crucial for restoring Emma’s sense of self and an essential aspect of their connectedness. They explained how they were still working on Emma’s career plan for the years ahead.

Ethan: We’re sitting here now strategising on the seven-year plan for Emma. (Looks to Emma.) You know we were only talking about this last week.

Emma: Yeah.

In summary, the copreneurial couples in this theme did not significantly question their motivations about continuing to be entrepreneurial following failure—indeed, they saw continuing with new business ventures as inevitable in their relationships. Central to

each of these cases is a deep understanding of how entrepreneurship continued to be important in their relationship.

7.5 Chapter Conclusion

The purpose of Chapter 7 was to answer the question: “How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?” Four themes were described and illustrated: We won’t let failure define us, we have social integrity, finding our middle ground, and entrepreneurship is part of us. These findings demonstrate how copreneurial couples were motivated to maintain their relationship despite the negative emotional, psychological, and social consequences that failure brought into their lives. An important step for many copreneurial couples was to disconnect the negative aspects of failure from their sense of who they were as a copreneurial couple. This change took time and required good communication and reflexivity. Some needed time away from their usual lives to focus on being together. Aligning core social values and beliefs was important for some copreneurial couples—particularly if they had been betrayed by others they had trusted. Many copreneurs showed how they worked to defuse tensions in their relationship triggered by failure, especially those relating to the gendered aspects of parenthood. Finally, one-third of the copreneurial couples considered that entrepreneurship was deeply intertwined with their sense of being connected as a unit. These participants all went on to continue with entrepreneurship in their lives.

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure has attracted increasing attention in recent decades since it has implications for the well-being of individuals and their relationships (Cope, 2011; Jenkins & Byrne, 2020; Singh et al., 2007; Shepherd et al., 2019; Wiklund et al., 2019). However, despite acknowledging that entrepreneurial failure can be challenging for close relationships, there has been little research on how this experience affects copreneurial couples.

The primary aim of this thesis was to study the experience of entrepreneurial failure from the perspective of couple we-ness, conceptualised as a person's sense of interdependent unity with their spouse. This aim was achieved using the guidance of an overarching research question for this study: *“How do copreneurial couples experience entrepreneurial failure from their we-ness perspective?”* This principal question was elaborated by two subquestions which asked:

- *How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness?*
- *How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following entrepreneurial failure?*

This thesis adopted a broad definition of copreneurial couples accepting that even spouses not directly involved in the day-to-day business are closely involved with entrepreneurial outcomes and well-being (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010; Fletcher, 2010). Moreover, since the interest in this thesis relates to identity change, the identity lens of we-ness was used to explore how entrepreneurial failure impacts and affects copreneurial couples' experience of shared identity (Ahmad et al., 2017; Topcu-Uzer et al., 2020).

We-ness has primarily been explored in the fields of health and relationship therapy. This thesis research provides fresh insights by exploring we-ness in the context of entrepreneurial failure, which is a significant life challenge for copreneurial couples involved in the experience (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007, 2015).

To address the research questions, I collected storied data from copreneurial couples who had experienced entrepreneurial failure during their relationship and applied a narrative analysis method to develop themes based on content.

The purpose of this chapter is first to summarise the findings that answer the research questions. This summary is followed by a discussion of three main theoretical implications that flow from these findings: the first relates to theory on entrepreneurial failure, the second to identity in entrepreneurship, and the third to theory on we-ness. Following this, I consider how these theoretical insights can offer practical contributions. Finally, I comment on this study's limitations and opportunities for future research.

8.1 Summary of Findings

While we-ness can be a source of mutual strength in dealing with adversity, it is itself paradoxically vulnerable to adverse impacts. Without a strong sense of we-ness, copreneurial couples are less able to cope together with entrepreneurial failure. The findings offer insights about how we-ness can become destabilised and subside in the aftermath of entrepreneurial failure yet also be maintained by copreneurial couples using several strategies.

First, the findings in Chapter 6 answer the following research question developed in Chapter 3: "How does the experience of entrepreneurial failure transform copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness?" Copreneurs provided examples showing that they shared many of the financial, emotional, psychological, and social consequences of

entrepreneurial failure. However, there were also impacts at the level of individual identities held by each spouse. These impacts led to identity-related interactions within and between spouses that destabilised we-ness, creating tensions in their relationships. These tensions were described in the themes *feeling burdened*, *breaching our arrangement*, and *how others see us*.

In the theme *feeling burdened*, most copreneurial couples provided evidence of burdens arising from failure that they saw as affecting them jointly, and they dealt with these together. However, there were also many examples of burdens that they felt more individually.

One spouse in each copreneurial couple dyad was found to value entrepreneurship more than their partner. These spouses often felt that the failure threatened this vital element of their sense of self. In several cases, a more entrepreneurial spouse experienced a debilitating loss of self due to the failure causing them to emotionally withdraw from their spouse, despite their life partner's concern. This emotional withdrawal represented subsidence in we-ness and, for those individuals, was accompanied by negative consequences such as long-term depression and career confusion. Some behaviours that were detrimental to relationships also occurred. Failing to communicate at an emotional level with their spouse was common. Other negative behaviours included spending less time with the family and excessive drinking.

The theme of *breaching our arrangement* showed that failure could destabilise the gendered aspects of parental identities. Most copreneurs in this study were parents of dependent children. These copreneurial couples discussed their arrangements concerning who was primarily responsible for being the caregiver or breadwinner in their relationship (Gather et al., 2016; Smith, 2000).

A caregiving spouse typically described their concerns about increased financial insecurity after the failure and feelings of blame or resentment towards their partner. In

contrast, breadwinner spouses sometimes indicated guilt at failing to fulfil their financial responsibilities due to the failure. Most breadwinner participants also valued entrepreneurship as an aspect of self (Ladge et al., 2019). This identity pairing created an internal conflict for these individuals: entrepreneurial failure threatened their role as breadwinners, yet being entrepreneurial was still important to them.

Some copreneurial couples pragmatically attempted to reverse gender-traditional roles after the failure so that the caregiver worked while the breadwinner stayed home to look after the children. For some of these copreneurs, this arrangement escalated tensions in their relationship.

In the theme of *how others see us*, some copreneurial couples perceived the negative judgements from others about the failure as applicable to them jointly. However, on a few occasions, participants perceived negative judgements as applying to them individually instead of as a copreneurial couple. This led to behaviours that protected the individual but were not positive for their sense of we-ness. For example, one of the less entrepreneurial spouses attempted to deflect the stigma of failure from themselves, and another pretended to others that nothing was wrong. These spouses experienced feelings of blame or being let down by their life partner. In contrast, when the more entrepreneurial spouses perceived that others were judging them individually, they experienced negative emotions such as shame and guilt.

The themes in Chapter 6 demonstrated that when impacts were perceived as individual instead of jointly shared, it destabilised personal identities in the relationship and led to subsidence in we-ness. This instability reduced a copreneurial couple's relationship quality and hindered their ability to utilise we-ness as a shared coping resource during this critical period (Bodenmann, 2005).

This leads to the second subquestion developed in Chapter 4 to guide the findings in Chapter 7: "*How do copreneurial couples maintain their sense of we-ness following*

entrepreneurial failure?” It was found that copreneurs used identity work to drive one or more of four we-ness maintenance strategies described by the themes: *we won’t let failure define us*, *we have social integrity*, *finding our middle ground*, and *entrepreneurship is part of us* (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Many copreneurial couples indicated how they could downplay the negative aspects of failure and its effect on their experience of we-ness. *We won’t let failure define us* was a key strategy within which copreneurs worked to detach their sense of we-ness from the negativity of failure. They used various tactics, such as language that depersonalised the failure (“it was an event”), or they created everyday verbal cues to ensure that discussion about the negativity of failure and business did not intrude on the intimacy of their relationship.

By downplaying the negative aspects of failure, copreneurial couples could focus on more redemptive talk in their storytelling, such as how they found benefits for their relationship from the failure experience. However, overcoming these negative aspects required careful attention to their relationship and open communication. Some copreneurial couples described how they removed themselves from their everyday lives for several months to help focus on their relationship.

Another strategy involved copreneurs showing that *we have social integrity*. Several copreneurial couples experienced betrayal by trusted people during their failure experience, and their stories emphasised efforts to align social values and beliefs (Reid et al., 2006). These copreneurial couples often contrasted the unethical behaviour of others with their positive social values. In addition, copreneurial couples would often describe how they intended to, or had, integrated these values into new ventures. This commitment to demonstrate and implement these values illustrates the constrained social nature of these stories—they are not just any preferred reality; instead, they draw

from a repertoire of social and cultural narrative resources (Maitlis, 2012; McAdams, 1997b; Phillips et al., 2013).

A further strategy used by copreneurial couples was *finding our middle ground* to reconcile conflicting individual identity needs. Since a source of relationship tension was often between gendered parental and entrepreneurial identities, the primary focus of this strategy was to negotiate a career compromise for the more entrepreneurial spouse. Copreneurs using this maintenance strategy agreed on a balance between a job that included aspects of entrepreneurship and a reasonable level of income stability.

In the fourth strategy, some copreneurial couples showed that *entrepreneurship is part of us*. These copreneurial couples understood that entrepreneurship was a valued aspect of how they viewed themselves as a unit. Despite the difficulties of entrepreneurship, they were still determined to continue this career path. These copreneurial couples showed profound insights about each other such as how entrepreneurship connected with other critical individual identities (e.g., a professional identity as an accountant) or how their respective personal attributes were complementary and helped deal with the “ups and downs” of entrepreneurship. These copreneurs established and reinforced that continuing with entrepreneurship was vital to their ongoing sense of we-ness.

Finally, as an overall observation, copreneurial couples in this research seldom mentioned receiving emotional or practical support from others outside their relationship, including extended family. A few did talk about the importance of others, such as their church community or a men’s support group. This minimal mention of others suggests that, following failure, most copreneurial couples rely on each other as their primary source of support.

8.2 Implications for Theory on Entrepreneurial Failure

The first significant implication of this thesis is that it presents a new lens drawn from the health and psychology literature—the concept of *we-ness*—to explore the phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure. Doing so affords us an understanding of failure at the level of copreneurial relationships.

Previous entrepreneurial failure research has mainly examined this phenomenon at the level of individual entrepreneurs (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2007, 2015). While this level of analysis has been helpful in understanding entrepreneurs' lived experiences of failure, it also implicitly—and perhaps inadvertently—creates an impression that entrepreneurs deal with failure mainly based on their personal feelings, beliefs, and expectations. Yet, past studies have shown that entrepreneurial failure can place significant stress on relationships to the point where some end in divorce (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007).

A significant contribution of this thesis is showing how the impact of entrepreneurial failure destabilises a copreneurial couple's sense of *we-ness*. How copreneurs then adapt to restore identity balance is critical to how successfully they can cope with the experience and remain satisfied with their relationship. This level of analysis shows that, while entrepreneurial failure has many impacts on their lives, a chief priority while juggling these challenges is keeping their relationship intact. This priority also plays a significant role in their thinking about entrepreneurship and what effective coping means for them in the aftermath of failure.

This thesis adopted the view that couples owning a business together can be conceptualised as copreneurs (Fletcher, 2010). This view accepts that even where one spouse is unseen in the venture, interactions within their relationship are critical to business decisions and outcomes (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010; Lewis & Massey, 2011). Moreover, this study focused on the copreneurial couple as a distinct

interdependent dyadic pair, different from the family or household (Bird & Zellweger, 2018). This approach provided a more nuanced view of their experience and the impacts of failure on their relationship.

Chapter 4 indicated that entrepreneurial failure scholars are interested in the impacts of failure and how entrepreneurs return to their usual level of psychological and emotional functioning. Chapter 2 showed that an intersubjective narrative identity perspective is appropriate to study we-ness since it accommodates the understanding of a relatively stable sense of self that may include an awareness of self in relationship. A strong sense of we-ness has been shown to be involved with the likelihood that couples will engage in collaborative coping and adapt to adversity more easily. We-ness is also connected to individual and relationship well-being (Fergus, 2015).

This thesis found that entrepreneurial failure can trigger individual identity threats and create points of tension in copreneurial couples' relationships, leading to instability and a subsiding in their sense of we-ness. A subsidence in we-ness reduces a copreneurial couple's ability to cope effectively together and feel satisfied with their relationship. For copreneurial couples remaining committed to a future together, these tensions and decreased satisfaction with their relationship can create a problem that needs to be addressed (Olekalns et al., 2020).

Previous entrepreneurial failure research indicates that most individual entrepreneurs can cope and return to their usual emotional and psychological functioning after failure (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2014). These studies have mainly drawn from the transactional model of individual coping used widely in social sciences (Biggs et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, it has been unclear why some entrepreneurs cope more effectively and quickly return to normal functioning while others take longer.

At the level of couples, individual coping theories have been extended to couples coping dyadically with stress impacting their relationships (Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Bodenmann, 2005). Various dyadic coping models exist in the literature (Staff et al., 2017). Positive dyadic coping indicates that couples facing a stressor can view it as a shared problem. Dyadic coping is an expression of we-ness, and couples can reinforce their sense of we-ness by coping collaboratively with a stressor they perceive as “our problem”. However, these theories of dyadic coping do not explore identity-related impacts and changes in the relationship.

Although copreneurial couples in this research provided evidence of positive dyadic coping with the immediate consequences of failure, most also encountered identity-related tensions in their relationships. Several past health-related studies have shown that a major illness in one spouse can create different identity challenges that hamper a couple’s efforts to maintain a strong sense of we-ness and cope together (e.g., Miller & Caughlin, 2013; Crowley & Miller, 2020).

This thesis provides the insight that, for copreneurs, coping models do not give a complete answer for how they deal with the consequences of entrepreneurial failure and the implications for we-ness. While a strong sense of we-ness can provide access to dyadic coping resources, identity threats or loss in the relationship causes imbalance and subsidence in their sense of we-ness, limiting their ability to cope effectively.

This thesis contributes to the literature by theorising that entrepreneurial failure can destabilise a copreneurial couple’s identity system and reduce their sense of we-ness. However, a significant contribution is demonstrated by showing that restoring we-ness to a copreneurial couple’s usual sense of balance involves the we-ness maintaining strategies described in subsection 8.1 of this chapter. Most copreneurial couples involved in this study were able to return to their usual relational functioning relatively quickly using one or more of these strategies. Some copreneurial couples could not

access these strategies for a considerable time due to issues such as the emotional withdrawal of a spouse. These copreneurs took much longer to restore their sense of we-ness and faced more significant risks of relationship breakdown.

Previous entrepreneurial failure research shows that some entrepreneurs can make sense of failure and transform the experience into something positive, while others do not (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Singh et al., 2015). However, it has remained unclear how entrepreneurs transform negative emotions into positive emotions and meaning.

This thesis also contributes to understanding how copreneurs can change from experiencing negative emotions to constructing shared positive meanings about their failure experience. Many copreneurial couples in this study provided evidence of their efforts to disconnect the negative aspects of failure from their sense of we-ness. By preserving their sense of we-ness as a safe location in their relationship, combined with open communication, copreneurial couples were able to construct shared positive meanings from their experiences.

These findings also contribute to the literature on well-being in entrepreneurship (Shepherd et al., 2019; Wiklund et al., 2019). Well-being is still a nascent topic in the entrepreneurship literature, but scholars have become increasingly interested in its application to research (Wiklund et al., 2019). It has also been contended that aspects of well-being impacted by entrepreneurial failure, such as meaning and purpose in life, should be integral to failure research (Ryff, 2019).

There are overlaps and connections between well-being and the literature on coping since well-being researchers in entrepreneurship tend to focus on aspects such as the level of life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect (El Shoubaki et al., 2018; Ryff, 2019). There is also a close connection to maintaining we-ness since well-being is “an integral part of living a fulfilling and flourishing life and is intimately related to people’s ability to work, maintain positive relationships, and experience positive

emotions” (Wiklund et al., 2019, p. 580). It has also been emphasised that this concept is highly relevant to copreneurs and the well-being of their personal and business lives since the success or failure of one affects the other (Jang & Danes, 2013).

Well-being is conceptually complex; however, the entrepreneurial failure literature has tended to assume that negative emotions indicate diminished well-being, while positive affect and life satisfaction indicate its presence (Shepherd et al., 2019; Wiklund et al., 2019). The failure literature considering the impact on well-being has mainly focused on the psychological and emotional effects on the entrepreneur (Jenkins & Byrne, 2020). Although past failure research has acknowledged that failure’s financial, emotional, and psychological consequences also negatively impact an entrepreneur’s relationships, the relational aspect of well-being has largely been overlooked.

As previously noted, this thesis found that entrepreneurial failure generally triggered identity-related tensions in copreneurial relationships. The associated negative emotional and psychological consequences, individually and at the level of a copreneurial couple’s relationship, represent a reduction in affective and relational well-being. However, failure’s relational costs and downside do not tell the whole story; there are also benefits for copreneurial couples. This research found that most copreneurial couples eventually experienced an uplift in well-being through more positive emotions and relationship satisfaction. This change in well-being depended on copreneurial couples successfully using we-ness-maintaining strategies.

A further contribution of this study relates to re-entry to entrepreneurship. Research in this area is limited, so it remains unclear what drives decisions to re-enter an entrepreneurial career following failure (Nielsen & Sarasvathy, 2016; Simmons et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). Explanations for serial entrepreneurship following failure have primarily focused on how individuals deal with the experience. These explanations include theoretical perspectives such as attributions (Yamakawa et al., 2015), life stage

(Baù et al., 2016), prior failure experiences (Dias & Teixeira, 2017), and stigma (Singh et al., 2015). Some studies have indicated that family members are important in their support of these career decisions following failure, but they have not explored their involvement in detail (e.g., Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018; Baù et al.; Shepherd & Williams, 2018).

This thesis found that, after failure, both spouses were deeply involved in negotiations regarding re-entry to entrepreneurship and other career choices. By locating the activity of negotiating career decisions at the level of we-ness and its maintenance, this study offers fresh insights into understanding post-failure career decisions. In particular, evidence showed that serial entrepreneurship understood as business founding (Cardon et al., 2009) or entrepreneurial leadership (Leitch & Volery, 2017), is more likely when copreneurial couples view this identity as crucial for one spouse in the relationship. This finding suggests that an entrepreneurial identity intertwines with the copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness. The identity implications of this finding are explained in the following section.

8.3 Implications for Theories of Identity in Entrepreneurship

The second significant implication of this thesis relates to identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, we know little about how the phenomenon of entrepreneurial failure affects identity (Mmbaga et al., 2020). Moreover, few entrepreneurship studies have explored dynamic identity change and interaction with others (Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Wagenschwanz, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 3, copreneurial couples are a common relational team, yet they have rarely been studied from an identity perspective. This thesis research responds by examining the experience of entrepreneurial failure from the fresh perspective of copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness.

Couple we-ness denotes a person's sense of interdependent unity with their spouse (Gildersleeve et al. 2017). This conceptualisation highlights the important notion that although spouses each perceive shared identity as an aspect of self, personal identity changes may require ongoing adaptation to maintain we-ness. Relationship-defining memories serve an essential function by stabilising and reflecting we-ness in stories about challenging times created and told by couples (Alea et al., 2015).

Entrepreneurial failure can be highly stressful and damaging for copreneurial couple relationships (Cope, 2011; Singh et al., 2007). However, the copreneurial experience of failure is poorly understood. Scholars indicate that a strong sense of we-ness is linked to the quality and stability of a marital relationship (Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Topcu-Uzer et al., 2020). Therefore, we-ness is likely to be integral to understanding how the experience of failure affects copreneurial couples.

This thesis makes a significant contribution by highlighting and illustrating how entrepreneurial failure has the potential to threaten and destabilise multiple valued identities in copreneurial relationships. It also showed that copreneurial spouses in this study attempted to safeguard important personal identities that they often valued equally, if not more than entrepreneurial identity. The findings support the notion that multiple identities exist within and between spouses (Ramarajan, 2014). Also, a relative difference in the importance of individual identities is essential to understanding the tension points and strategies copreneurial couples use to maintain we-ness (Murnieks et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2018).

Spouses in this study differed in the relative importance assigned to particular individual identities impacted by the failure. For copreneurs with dependent children (most copreneurial couples in this study), the gender-traditional parenting roles of caregiver and breadwinner were distinct (Jurik et al., 2019). Copreneurial couples also indicated how important entrepreneurship was for each person's sense of self (Murnieks

et al., 2014). Where entrepreneurial failure posed a threat to an identity viewed by an individual as necessary to their sense of self, that person could become distressed (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Individuals can also experience internal identity conflicts (Ramarajan, 2014).

Participating spouses who viewed entrepreneurship as an essential identity usually paired this with the traditionally male breadwinning role (Gather et al., 2016; Ladge et al., 2019). This pairing of identities often created a sense of failure and guilt by not meeting their responsibility as the breadwinner. Yet, the individual still yearned to be entrepreneurial or mourned the loss of that identity. The interdependent nature of their relationship meant that threatened and conflicting personal identities interacted with those of their spouse (Fergus, 2015). Therefore, personal identity threats and loss caused by the failure led to complex interactions and tensions in copreneurial relationships leading to imbalance and subsidence in their sense of we-ness.

However, it was found that through identity work to re-balance or affirm identities, copreneurial couples can replenish and sustain we-ness, which functions as a reservoir of support for them to deal with the consequences of failure.

These findings also respond to calls for clarification of the gender-identity implications of failure (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Walsh & Cunningham, 2016). Past research in the health and psychology literature indicates there can be gendered differences in emotional response and communication between spouses (Acitelli & Badr, 2005). These differences can impede relationship awareness and coping together when a life challenge confronts couples. Some prior studies have suggested that if both spouses can engage in positive relationship talk, it is likely to strengthen we-ness and improve relationship outcomes. This thesis research also supports the notion that relationship talk between spouses about the emotional impacts of failure was critical to maintaining we-ness.

This understanding of gender identity dynamics may also cast light on previous studies showing that gendered positioning and tensions feature in some copreneurial relationships but not others (Deacon et al., 2014; McAdam & Marlow, 2013). This study indicates that while a committed copreneurial couple in more usual circumstances might experience few or no gendered tensions, this can change due to how each copreneurial couple's sense of we-ness is impacted in the context of stressors. This thesis shows that the context of failure can threaten and create instability between gender identities.

This thesis also shows that whether identity-related tensions continue to feature in a relationship after failure depends on copreneurial couples' utilisation of we-ness maintaining strategies. Since the copreneurs in this study remained committed to the future of their relationship (Olekalns et al., 2020), they were motivated to use identity work guided by we-ness maintaining strategies (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Open and honest communication between spouses was critical at this time; copreneurial couples took longer to restore their sense of we-ness if they had difficulty with this aspect (Jorgenson, 2016).

The first of these strategies, "we won't let failure define us", represents efforts by copreneurial couples to detach the negativity of failure from their sense of we-ness. This strategy provides insights into how copreneurs can "downplay the negative aspects of their shared history" (Alea et al., 2015; Olekalns et al., 2020, p. 17). By downplaying the negativity, copreneurial couples in this study viewed their sense of we-ness as a safe shared location from which it became possible to build positive meaning and "grow together" (Fergus & Reid, 2001, p. 393).

Indeed, after using this strategy, copreneurial couples typically introduced redemptive elements into their shared stories (McAdams & Jones, 2017). This analysis provides

insight into how copreneurs can move from negative to positive emotions when dealing with the consequences of failure (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Corner et al., 2017).

The strategy “we have social integrity” was essential for copreneurial couples who had their core social values challenged by others involved in their failure. These core values are critical to meaning systems involved with personal and shared identities (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Skerrett & Fergus, 2015). Therefore, these copreneurial couples developed shared stories that aligned and reinforced their shared values.

In the third strategy, “finding our middle ground”, copreneurs negotiated a compromise that allowed each spouse to minimise the threats to their individual identities while taking into account the perspective and needs of the other. Identity work between spouses minimised tension between gender identities while retaining elements of an entrepreneurial identity for a new work role (Cardon, 2009; Murnieks et al., 2020).

The final strategy, “entrepreneurship is part of us”, was used by copreneurial couples who understood that entrepreneurship was an established and valued core aspect of their sense of we-ness. While they acknowledged the risks and downsides of entrepreneurship, they established that it was so integral to their lives that it had become intertwined with how they viewed themselves as a unit. This understanding did not require that both spouses regarded entrepreneurship as essential to maintain their sense of self; instead, it represented mutual affirmation that entrepreneurship was so important to one spouse that the well-being of their relationship depended on it.

This finding extends past arguments that an individual’s sense of self can become intertwined with a business and its fate (Cardon et al., 2005; Shepherd et al., 2009; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). Because the failed business was no longer part of their lives, copreneurial couples using this strategy demonstrated that the identity domain of entrepreneurship had become intertwined with their ongoing sense of we-ness.

For most copreneurial couples using this fourth strategy, the key identity element following failure was the founder role, and they proceeded to start a new business venture relatively quickly (Cardon et al., 2009). In the case of one copreneurial couple, an entrepreneurial leadership identity was critical (Leitch & Volery, 2017). In this case, although one spouse continued her career in entrepreneurial leadership, her career plan was negotiated and managed as a copreneurial couple. Thus, copreneurs using this final identified strategy were the most likely to be, or become, serial entrepreneurs.

8.4 Implications for Theory on We-ness

The third implication is for research on we-ness. Chapter 3 highlighted that much of the extant literature on we-ness sits within the health and relationship therapy fields. The clinical rehabilitation interest in these disciplines has generally focused on studying the beneficial capacities of we-ness. Therapeutic models have been developed to help couples deal with the subsidence of we-ness in their relationship (e.g., Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Reid et al., 2006; Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). Few studies show the impact of stressors on we-ness itself.

This research responds to a call for examining we-ness in various complex contexts showing different stressors, including efforts to cope and maintain we-ness (Berg & Upchurch, 2007; Skerrett, 2015). It contributes to the we-ness literature by exploring the construct in the new context of entrepreneurial failure, focusing on how we-ness is affected.

The findings in this thesis underscore the need for fresh contexts to study we-ness. Past evidence from the health literature relating to cancer patients and their spouses suggests that shifts away from we-ness are relatively temporary and may even be beneficial for the relationship (McCarthy et al., 2016). In contrast, most copreneurial couples in this study showed evidence of adverse identity impacts on their relationship following

entrepreneurial failure. For a few copreneurial couples, these negative impacts lasted between several months and two years. These different findings underline that the view of we-ness in this thesis study is indigenous to entrepreneurship and is shaped by socio-cultural and other contextual aspects involved in copreneurs' experience of failure (Suddaby et al., 2015).

A further contribution of this thesis relates to the role of dyadic coping. As noted in subsection 8.3 of this chapter, theories of dyadic coping are commonly associated with we-ness research—particularly for health studies (Bodenmann et al., 2016). However, several past studies show that although dyadic coping is associated with maintaining and improving we-ness, identity challenges between spouses are also involved in how well they maintain we-ness (Miller & Caughlin, 2013; Crowley & Miller, 2020). This thesis research broadly concurs with those studies by showing that, when faced with a significant life stressor, both dyadic coping and identity challenges are involved with we-ness; however, this finding appears in the fresh context of entrepreneurial failure. This means that copreneurs experiencing failure may generate different approaches to maintaining we-ness: different from health research but appropriate to their sociocultural and entrepreneurial context.

This thesis also extends knowledge of how and why identity balance in we-ness can change in a copreneurial couple relationship. The we-ness literature generally conceptualises we-ness as varying in level or degree (Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Topcu-Uzer et al., 2020); however, it has also been shown that couples can perceive it as balanced or imbalanced (Walsh & Neff, 2018). This latter concept relates to spouses' perception of equality of personal identities in the relationship. A perceived imbalance leads to a lower likelihood of couples engaging in pro-relationship behaviours when faced with challenges. Conversely, the perception of balance promotes relationship

well-being and collaboration. As explained in Chapter 4, it remains unclear how this perception of identity balance in we-ness changes over time.

This research found that identity threats and loss created a perceived imbalance between spousal identities, leading to relationship tensions negatively impacting copreneurial couples' sense of we-ness. We-ness maintaining strategies facilitated the adaption of these imbalanced personal identities to a more stable equilibrium, improving relationship quality.

While studies have highlighted the importance of “fostering” we-ness to navigate difficult times, it is unclear what strategies copreneurial couples use to do this naturally (Alea et al., 2015; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Singer & Skerrett, 2015). This current research also provides empirical evidence of strategies underlying how we-ness can be fostered—in particular, by separating it from the negativity of failure (“We won’t let failure define us”). By using this strategy, copreneurial couples could view we-ness as a safe location to deal with identity threats and tensions associated with failure. After working to separate the negativity of failure from we-ness and restore the balance between personal identities, copreneurial couples can potentially begin to find positive meaning in entrepreneurial failure to benefit their relationship.

8.5 Implications for Practice

Findings in this study show that copreneurial couples endeavouring to maintain their sense of we-ness after entrepreneurial failure naturally adopt one or more of several strategies depending on how they have been impacted. These findings may help prompt copreneurs to consider the importance of communicating with each other about their emotional experience using the identified strategies as a guide.

However, for some copreneurial couples, subsidence in their sense of we-ness is severe and may lead to long-term difficulty with communication and behavioural issues, such

as alcohol abuse, that may threaten the well-being and viability of their relationship.

Business mentors should be alert to indications that a copreneurial couple may struggle with their relationship following an entrepreneurial failure. Mentors should advise copreneurial couples to seek specialised relationship therapy in more severe cases.

Specific clinical assistance may be required when one spouse has suffered a loss of identity and could still be struggling with the psychological consequences. This assistance should recognise that involving the spouse in this process is critical in helping them view the issue as a shared problem. This approach supports the maintenance of a mutual sense of we-ness and access to powerful resources for helping to restore well-being (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Models of narrative couple therapy exist to help couples focus on co-constructing we-ness through stories (Gildersleeve et al., 2017; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). However, these approaches are more general in helping copreneurial couples recover and reinforce past positive relationship-defining memories to restore feelings of mutuality and we-ness.

This thesis research emphasises the importance of the contextual aspect of entrepreneurial failure. The importance of context means that if general therapeutic models are used, therapists should be aware of the unique challenges of entrepreneurship that can bring copreneurial couples closer or threaten their relationship. For copreneurs struggling to maintain their relationship after failure, it would be ideal to enlist the support of another copreneurial couple with past failure experience who have successfully navigated back to a stable and happy relationship.

For copreneurs struggling to keep their relationship healthy and intact after failure, a primary focus for those helping them would be to help them separate the negativity of failure from how they see themselves together (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Olekalns et al., 2020). This approach does not deny the need to work on negative consequences such as financial burdens. However, it preserves a copreneurial couple's sense of we-

ness as a place of safety. Using this foundation, they can regain a perception of balance in their relationship. Copreneurial couples will strengthen their shared coping resources by working on maintaining we-ness as a priority.

Depending on identity-relevant impacts arising from failure, other key aspects to explore in therapy include ensuring the alignment of shared values (Gottman & Gottman, 2015) and finding ways to negotiate career choices that preserve individual identity needs. Some copreneurial couples may already understand that their sense of we-ness includes a commitment to serial entrepreneurship, despite their failure experience. Such copreneurial couples may still need advice about safeguarding their relationship from risks due to future entrepreneurial challenges.

Policymakers and funded support groups, such as *startup incubators*, should consider offering support to copreneurs experiencing entrepreneurial failure. By implication, copreneurs experiencing failure may not be in a financial position to pay for counselling support or mentoring; yet failure is also widely considered to be a valuable learning experience improving the chance of success in a new venture (Cardon & McGrath, 1999; Klimas et al., 2021; Politis & Gabrielsson, 2009). However, the psychological and emotional costs suffered by entrepreneurs and those close to them also represent a social and well-being cost that should be mitigated (Eklund et al., 2018; Wiklund et al., 2019).

Financial institutions should also consider how failure has affected entrepreneurs in their committed relationships. Many entrepreneurs are motivated to meet their financial obligations, but they and their families will undergo significant stress to achieve this. Working with copreneurs to help them manage debts is a critical way to support their ability to sustain their well-being and relationship during this difficult time. These institutions should consider how serial entrepreneurship can be accomplished and supported within a copreneurial couple's relationship. This thesis research shows that

copreneurs maturely understand how entrepreneurship works in their relationship, so starting a successful new venture becomes possible with proper financial support.

8.6 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis research has some limitations that also raise opportunities for further research.

This thesis investigated the aftermath of failure experienced by copreneurs and shows that most copreneurial couples could return to their usual level of relationship functioning. However, an untested supposition follows that those choosing to establish a new venture subsequently will have developed a more resilient sense of we-ness (Bodenmann, 2005; Corner et al., 2017; Skerrett, 2015). It would be useful to conduct longitudinal research following copreneurs from failure to new venture startups until a mature business is established. Such an investigation could show whether their we-ness remains strong and balanced over time and contributes to business sustainability.

A noteworthy aspect of this study was that most copreneurial couples were parents of dependent children. While this was not part of the criteria when purposively recruiting copreneurs, it proved valuable for observing gendered dynamics in these relationships. However, the predominance of parents in this research raises questions about how copreneurs without children might experience failure. For instance, are copreneurial couples with dependent children likely to develop a stronger sense of we-ness because of this shared responsibility? Alternatively, are they more likely to experience gender identity or other identity tensions causing we-ness to subside? A future study could, therefore, purposively select copreneurial couples without children to investigate their experience of failure.

Previous research indicates that the stigma of entrepreneurial failure and the subsequent gendered tensions between spouses may be influenced by socio-cultural contexts

(Huang et al., 2018; Jurik et al., 2019). This thesis research took place mainly in the socio-cultural context of New Zealand, which is known to have high rates of entrepreneurial activity, but also a high incidence of venture failure (Singh et al., 2015). New Zealand has also been described as a culture in which successful entrepreneurs are more likely to be discredited. This social tendency, referred to as “tall poppy syndrome”, is also linked to failure and may discourage some failed entrepreneurs from starting a new business (Kirkwood, 2007). Future research could use a we-ness perspective to explore entrepreneurial failure in other countries and cultures.

There is also growing interest in how entrepreneurs make career choices, including re-entering entrepreneurship following failure (e.g., Amankwah Amoah et al., 2018; Saylor et al., 2021; Shepherd & Williams, 2018; Tipu, 2020). There are questions about how entrepreneurs evaluate the risk of starting a new venture and deal with the ongoing consequences of failure (Nielsen & Sarasvathy, 2011; Singh et al., 2015; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). This thesis study found that copreneurial couples jointly make decisions about future careers and founding new ventures following failure. Future research could examine how copreneurs that have experienced failure undertake the process of establishing a new venture.

Previous studies investigating individual entrepreneurs found that they sometimes experienced sudden insights leading them to see benefits and grow from their failure experience (Mantere et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2015). This thesis study did not find sudden insights amongst copreneurial couples—instead, most copreneurs indicated that finding benefits from their experience required open communication and time. If relational sense-making had been taking place in the lives of participants in previous studies, others involved are likely to be “unseen” in an individual-level research design. An entrepreneurial failure study at the level of copreneurial couple dyads but focusing

on separate instead of joint interviews might help determine if the appearance of sudden insights is connected to relational dynamics.

Lastly, future we-ness researchers may also wish to consider using the data collection and analysis methods set out in Chapter 5. I argue that these methods make a modest methodological contribution (Bergh et al., 2022). Copreneurial couple we-ness is challenging to research because it exists between two selves in an intimate relationship (Fergus, 2015). Attending to plural pronouns is a common approach to identifying we-ness (Cruwys, 2022). However, a narrative identity perspective combined with thematic narrative analysis provides scope for greater interpretive insights than only pronoun use. The thematic narrative analysis allows meaning to be revealed that might otherwise be missed using non-narrative approaches that fragment the text (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Monforte, 2020). Although rarely used in entrepreneurship research, the thematic narrative approach used in this research proved sensitive in showing the dynamic nature of identity-related tensions between copreneurs following failure (Jurik et al., 2019). This form of narrative analysis can also accommodate a larger sample size than other approaches (Riessman, 2008).

Another uncommon aspect of this present research is that storied data were collected from individual participants and copreneurial couples as co-constructed stories. As explained in Chapter 5, each approach to narrative data collection has inherent advantages and disadvantages, but the combining approaches, as was performed in this research, provide “the best of both worlds” (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010, p. 1643). Individual and joint dyadic data collection enabled a form of qualitative triangulation (Gibbs, 2007), providing insights into what was said and what was “unsaid” in their joint account that would have otherwise remained hidden (Fergus, 2015; Jurik et al., 2019; Polkinghorne, 2005; Riessman, 2012). Additional ethical precautions are

necessary to ensure confidentiality between spouses (Zarhin, 2018), but these can be navigated, and the effort proved worthwhile for this research.

However, there is also the possibility of a *boundary condition* for this method using we-oriented talk (Bergh et al., 2022; Cruwys et al., 2022). This thesis research required participants to recall a stressful time in their life. One past study found that using this method to investigate copreneurs was unsuccessful (Owens et al. 2013). However, that research explored the everyday aspects of copreneur relationships' impact on the success of a venture—not its failure. Therefore, a boundary condition might exist for this data collection method, restricting its use to researching stressful life events experienced by copreneurs.

8.7 Concluding Reflections

During a lifetime, most committed couples will confront many challenges together.

While entrepreneurial endeavours can be highly fulfilling, failure is always a possibility.

Couples that share a copreneurial bond through business ownership are likely to experience significant adversity due to entrepreneurship's risky and uncertain nature.

This thesis found that copreneurs encountering failure usually only have each other to rely on during that stressful and challenging period. Research indicates that many relationships will not survive the stress this brings into their lives.

This study shows that, while many copreneurial couples experience tensions and instability in their relationship, causing them to feel more separate, they also have unique resources to help maintain and restore their sense of we-ness. Some may even emerge from the experience feeling that they have grown stronger individually and as a copreneurial couple. In other words, these copreneurs experience an overall improvement in relational well-being.

Every couple's relationship consists of two selves, each with their own needs and aspirations, who jointly create a coherent, overlapping story of their lives to form a shared sense of who "we are". Entrepreneurial failure presents a life challenge rupturing part of their old story, requiring copreneurial couples to incorporate new memories and experiences to maintain the meaning and coherence in the story of their relationship. This research explores these stories to understand the interdependent identity dynamics in copreneurial relationships after failure and how copreneurs maintain their sense of we-ness. If entrepreneurship remains part of their lives together, copreneurs may need to CONTINUALLY find new ways to maintain balance and manage the stress it brings to their relationship.

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10 APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL



AUTEC Secretariat

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D-88, WU406 Level 4 WU Building City Campus
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

AUT

8 March 2018

Smita Singh
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Smita

Ethics Application: 18/57 **Couples coping with business failure**

I wish to advise you that the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTC) has **approved** your ethics application at its meeting of 5 March 2018.

The committee wishes to commend you and the researcher on the thoroughness of the application.

This approval is for three years, expiring 5 March 2021.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Make it clearer in the advert that you are recruiting a couple.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTC before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,

Kate O'Connor
Executive Manager
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: steven.corrick@aut.ac.nz; Marcus Ho; Helena Cooper-Thomas

APPENDIX B: ADVERTISING FLYER



Would you and your life partner like to be part of some important research about business failure?

The purpose is to understand how individuals and couples deal with a business failure.

Are you the founder of a small New Zealand business (entrepreneur), or are you that person's life partner, **and** has that business failed?

If you answered YES, please read on...

To take part in this research

- The business must have employed fewer than 20 employees.
- The business must have been, or intended to become, your main source of income.
- You must have been in a committed relationship when the business was closed, and still in that relationship.
- The business must have been closed by you for reasons that may include any of the following: financial, disputes/legal problems, significant personal issues.
- The closure must have been more than six months ago.

Participation is voluntary. If you contact me and then decide it's not for you – that's fine.

The first part of the research will be either a written or spoken (recorded) individual story about the business failure. This story will be made by you and your partner separately. The next stage will be an interview that I will conduct with you and your partner together.

For more information please contact:

Steven Corrick
Phone 022 625 8053
Email: steven.corrick@aut.ac.nz

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

9 February 2018

Project Title

Couples dealing with business failure

An Invitation

Hello, my name is Steven Corrick. After a long and varied career, I'm returning to university as a mature student at AUT to begin my doctoral research.

I'm hoping to talk with you as a person who has experienced the failure of a small business, either as a founder (entrepreneur) or as the business founder's life partner. Because my research is focused on how couples cope with this difficult event, it's important that both the founder and the founder's life partner are willing to participate in this research.

I would be pleased if you would like to help me in this research, but I want to make sure that you and your partner only take part if you are each completely happy to do so. I don't want either person to feel obliged just because their partner wants to take part, so I'm making this request to each of you individually.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to understand how couples cope with a business failure - both individually, and together.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You would have either seen or were given a copy of my advertisement and decided to make contact with me.

There are a few other important factors that help me confirm if you, and your life partner have had the type of experience I'd like to find out about for my research. Firstly, the business must have been small – fewer than 20 employees. The business must have been, or was intended to become, your main source of income. You must have been in a committed relationship when the business was closed, and still in that relationship. The decision to close the business must have been for important reasons, including: financial, disputes/legal problems, significant personal issues.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

I have a consent form for you to read and sign when you are happy to take part.

Participation in this research is totally voluntary and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. If you withdraw from the study then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

The research will involve two stages. In the first stage I'll ask you each to tell me your individual story about the business failure. You can choose to either write your story, or record it using a digital recorder.

For the second stage, I would like to interview you and your partner together about the business failure. I expect that the joint interview will take at least 90 minutes. I'll do my best to arrange for a time and place that suits you both.

What are the discomforts and risks?

This research concerns a time that was, and might still be, difficult for you and your partner. If there is any point that you do not feel like sharing certain information then you can remain silent for that question or discussion. You can refuse to participate at any time and you will not be asked to give any reasons. I will also collect some personal information such as your work experience, age and family circumstances.

There is some risk of identification through the responses that I may quote in the research but I will take steps to minimize these risks as far as possible. Please read below for more detail.

If anything about this concerns you, please feel free to ask me any questions and I will do my best to answer or accommodate your concerns.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Under no circumstances will you be pressured to give any information.

I will try to maintain confidentiality as far as possible. For example, your name, names of any organisations, places or people will be replaced with false names (pseudonyms) in any transcripts. Any descriptions that might lead to identification of a person or organisation will be changed or deleted during transcribing.

I will send interview transcripts for you to check before they are used for analysis. Despite precautions it is not possible to completely eliminate the possibility of being identified through your participation and responses given. For example, if you have shared your experiences through public speeches, websites or media interviews.

When sharing your individual experiences in stage one, please safeguard your writing or the digital recorder. If you feel uncomfortable you should stop. If this happens, give yourself some time and you can think about whether you want to continue participating. Please also see the information about counselling support below.

Stage two will only proceed if both participants are happy. If you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable during the joint interview in stage two, please let me know. If my questions are causing you concern I will stop. If the questions or comments concerning you are from your partner, I will politely ask them to stop. The interview will only continue after you indicate that you are happy to do so.

If emotional issues come up that you find difficult, AUT Health Counselling and Wellbeing is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research, and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- Drop into our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone 921 9992 City Campus or 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment. Appointments for South Campus can be made by calling 921 9992
- Let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling <http://www.aut.ac.nz/being-a-student/current-postgraduates/your-health-and-wellbeing/our-counselling-and-mental-health-services/profiles-of-our-counsellors>.

In addition, there are a range of helplines and community services that you might like to consider. The Mental Health Foundation provides a very good summary of these on their website <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/helplines/>

What are the benefits?

This research will help me to complete the requirements of my doctoral degree. Having the opportunity to tell the story of a difficult time in your life can often help you to make better sense of it. I'm also hoping that this research will contribute to a better understanding of how couples cope with business failure. Understanding how people work through this type of event could help improve the support offered to couples in the future. Others in the community will get an opportunity to learn from your shared experiences in this study and may inspire others coping with the failure of their business.

How will my privacy be protected?

The interview data collected will be used for the purposes of my doctoral research, thesis, and possibly for other academic publications such as journal articles, research conferences and media interviews. To protect your privacy and confidentiality, I will not use your real name, or business name, in any published information. The consent form I will ask you to sign will have your name on it, but it will be kept by one of my supervisors in a locked cabinet separately from any other material I collect from you.

I will ensure that any information you provide is kept safe. Digital information I collect from you will be kept on my password protected computer. I will personally transcribe all digital recordings. Any physical material, such as notes from interviews, will be kept securely in a locked cabinet. Any data collected is kept securely for six years and then destroyed.

Unless you specifically request, I will not directly share the story you provide in stage one with your partner. When I send transcripts for review you can ask me to remove anything you feel uncomfortable about being included. Sometimes stories and contexts may need to be changed to protect confidentiality.

Despite taking these steps, it is important that I point out that I can only minimise the risk of possible identification, but not eliminate this risk altogether.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There is no cost to you apart from your time. For stage one, the time taken to either write or narrate your story and provide it to me is entirely up to you. For stage two when I interview you both as a couple, I expect it will take at least 90 minutes. It is possible that I might need to re-contact you later if I need to clarify some aspects of the information you have provided for my analysis.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

If you would like more time to think about whether you would like to participate, you can get back to me in within one month. Feel free to call or email me during this time if any other questions or concerns occur to you. My contact details are listed below.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes. After research completion, I will be able to provide you with a summary of my overall findings. You can indicate on the Consent Form whether or not you will like to receive a copy of the summarized research findings. If you wish to receive the summary, you will need to provide your email or postal address details on the Consent Form.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Smita Singh, Senior Lecturer, International Business, Strategy and Entrepreneurship, Auckland University of Technology, smita.singh@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 7932

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Steven Corrick, steven.corrick@aut.ac.nz , 022 625 8053

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Smita Singh, Senior Lecturer, International Business, Strategy and Entrepreneurship, Auckland University of Technology, smita.singh@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 7932

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 5 March 2018, AUTEK Reference number 18/57.

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Project title: ***Couples coping with business failure***

Project Supervisor: ***Dr. Smita Singh***

Researcher: ***Steven Corrick***

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 9 February 2018.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed, and that notes will also be taken during the interview.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
 - ☐ In stage one, I understand that I can provide either a written or oral recording of my story.
 - ☐ In stage two, I understand that I will be interviewed together with my life partner.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (please provide either an email or postal address if you wish to receive a summary of the findings at the end of the project):

Email:

Postal:

.....

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 5 March 2018 AUTEC Reference number 18/57 Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

APPENDIX E: STAGE ONE PARTICIPANT GUIDANCE NOTES



Auckland University of Technology
Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999
www.aut.ac.nz

Stage One – individual story told either orally or in writing Participant guidance

You may choose to either write your story (either handwritten or typed on a computer), or use a provided voice recorder to tell it orally. Please take as much time, or write as much as you want, to tell your story. It is important to read the following notes before you begin.

Your story

To start you off, please tell me the story of the business that was closed. The best way to do this would be for you to ***start from how the business got started and then tell me all the things that happened one after the other up until the present. You can take your time in doing this, and also give details, because for me everything is of interest that is important to you.***

As further guidance, I'm particularly interested in your thoughts, feelings and any actions you took concerning the following:

- What factors led to the decision to close the business?
- A business closing is a difficult time for many. Can you tell me about what you were thinking/feeling and doing during the following periods:
 1. Leading up to the time of business closure?
 2. Immediately after the business closed? (up to the first three months)
 3. The medium to long term? (from about three months onwards)
- If the business closure involved hardships or disappointments for you, what would you say were the key things you did to deal with these challenges? How successful would you say you were with these efforts?
- Do you think that the business failure changed the way you understand your life and see the world? If so, please explain in what ways and, if possible, provide some examples.
- How would you sum up what you learnt about
 - Yourself?
 - Your relationship with your life partner?
- Has this event affected your career, or business plans, subsequently and for the future? If so, how?

APPENDIX F: REFLEXIVE ACCOUNT

I started writing this short reflexive account at the beginning of my research, occasionally referring to it and re-writing and updating portions as my study progressed. In addition, I wrote brief personal reflections after each joint interview and made occasional memo notes about personal observations as I transcribed my data.

There were periods of my life directly relevant to forming my interest and views regarding entrepreneurial failure and copreneurship. Two experiences stand out for me as being particularly relevant to the research topic of copreneurs experiencing entrepreneurial failure.

In the mid-2000s, I made a critical career change to work in a small technology business founded by my father. My parents had divorced many years earlier, and my father had re-married. Over the years, I had found my relationship with my father somewhat strained and distant, and I was keen to bridge this divide somehow. I had become dissatisfied with a career in human resources management, so I accepted his offer to work in his business.

His second wife was closely involved with the daily business operation and management—their business was a copreneurial venture. During this period, I could see the significant impacts on their relationship caused by overlapping personal and work lives. Unfortunately, this was a difficult time in their marriage, and their emotional tensions would often spill into the work environment. Several years later, they divorced.

The challenge of working closely with two unhappy copreneurs, and my close family connection with them, meant that I left the business after only two years. However, my interest in the implications of copreneurial couples began with this experience.

My second relevant experience occurred between 2007-10 when I was part of a small team managing a merger between two companies listing on the New Zealand share market. Unfortunately, factors relating to global economic conditions in 2009 led to the failure of this newly merged business. This business failure brought significant personal and financial challenges for my family and me.

I then established a solo consulting business. However, during the two years following their business failure, I spent a substantial amount of personal time organising a group legal action for many ex-employees disputing redundancy entitlements from the previously failed business.

My experience of working in my father's small business, combined with a personal encounter with business failure, led to my interest in the topic of this thesis. These experiences made me aware of how challenging business ownership can be for close relationships. Even viable businesses can be demanding on relationships, so I wondered how couples would deal with the failure of a venture.

My wife and I have been together for over thirty years and we have two (now adult) children. Our experiences together included significant life challenges, such as coping with serious illnesses and the death of close family members. Like us, other couples in long-term relationships will endure both hardship and good times, contributing to the unique patina of their we-ness. So, I needed to consider how my unique experiences have shaped my perspective on relationships and copreneurship.

About halfway through my data collection, I had an opportunity to meet with an entrepreneur whose business had failed and thought he might like to be involved in my research. Unfortunately, he and his wife had earlier separated due to the challenge of entrepreneurial failure. Their relationship breakdown meant that he and his wife could not participate due to university ethics (AUTEC) restrictions for my research. However, he was still happy to talk with me about how the business failure affected his relationship. No details about that discussion were included in my research.

As I thought about that person's marital breakup, I wondered how his relationship and circumstances differed from the copreneurs in my research who had stayed together after their failures. Naturally, I also reflected on my relationship with my wife and how things were between us during our stressful times. I reminded myself that my earlier experiences, such as seeing how my father and his wife were unable to reconcile their business and personal life, were circumstances unique to them. These reflections reminded me that, while my life experiences help form my view of the world, I needed to be open to how others' see theirs. While the challenges of copreneurship and failure can drive a permanent wedge into a relationship, others can get through it—my research would help me understand how.