

## ONE



ALMOST EVERYTHING THAT has been published in the social and behavioral sciences and in medicine about adult sleep has looked at adult sleep as an individual phenomenon. Yet millions of adults sleep with another adult. For them, sleep is a complicated, changing, and often challenging social experience. The events of couple bed sharing are quite remarkable once we learn what couples who share a bed have to say. Based on intensive interviews with adults who share a bed, this book explores the challenges, achievements, routines, patterning, and context of couple sleeping. This book is written primarily for researchers and practitioners who focus on couples (for example, family scientists, couple therapists, family sociologists, family psychologists, family social workers, family educators, and others who focus on close relationships). I hope that this book will help readers see how shared sleeping is central to couple relationships and that there is much of great value to learn by looking at how couples experience and deal with the wide range of issues connected to couple sleeping.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING EVERYDAY LIFE

Everyday life should not be taken for granted. It is at the core of what goes on in people's lives. The term *everyday life* can be used in ways that are mystifying and ambiguous (Sandywell, 2004). I do not want to claim more by my usage of the term than that I am studying recurring events that people take as ordinary in their own lives. By everyday life I mean the ordinary things (often treated as unremarkable) that happen day in and day out and are so commonplace that they hardly merit attention (Berger, 1997, pp. 20–27, citing Braudel, 1981, and

Lefebvre, 1971). In studying everyday life, the focus is on what occurs in concrete, natural settings, as opposed to settings created by researchers (Douglas, 1980, p. 1). Everyday life is mundane and routinized in ways that make it taken-for-granted (Weigert, 1981, p. 36) and hence easy for anyone, including scholars, to ignore.

Everyday life can seem to lack drama and importance. But in everyday life people find meaning (Weigert, 1981, p. 36), nourishment, safety, and renewal. Everyday life also has value and meaning because it is linked by many threads to the deepest, most-close-to-ultimate meanings (Berger, 1997, p. 6). For example, the act of sleeping is linked to the value of life itself, to the religious meanings touched by bedtime prayer, to the unconscious that boils up in dreams, to the ways that death is thought of as “going to sleep,” to the power of love, and to the daily choices that keep one healthy and alive. The act of sharing a bed is linked to the discomfort of being alone and the awesome power of being close to another human being, the religious meanings that many people impute to the couple bed, and the many meanings of sexual acts. In sleeping, and for most people sleep occurs at night, there are links to the power of nighttime and darkness, to what is frightening and unknowable, to vulnerabilities, human limitations, and a darkness that can give desired privacy. Perhaps, for most people, the bed evokes some level of awareness of those meanings and is considered a place for dealing with or distancing themselves from those meanings.

The couple bed can be a place to turn away from and ignore dangers, with the banalities of the everyday bed routine used as an aid to avoiding what could be quite threatening (Lefebvre, 1971, p. 24, cited in Berger, 1997, p. 23). Some of the people I interviewed were clear that they used routines centered on the couple bed to distract them from what was upsetting, painful, worrisome, or frightening.

CINDY: There’s nights where I’m really upset about life or whatever, and I tell him, “I am not gonna be able to go to sleep unless you come up there and go to bed with me.” And I tell him, “I want you to read to me. I want you to talk to me. Just do anything to get me to stop thinking about everything’s that got me upset.”

For many people the shared bed is a nest, a place of great safety, comfort, security, and trust (Dunkel, 1977, p. 138) in another human and perhaps in God.

It is easy to take everyday life for granted because it is often automated, obvious, what everybody else seems to be doing, and something of a background for what is unusual or counted as important. But that does not mean that everyday life lacks significance. In fact, many scholars have emphasized how meaning-laden, important, interesting, and revealing the study of everyday

life is (e.g., Berger, 1997; Braudel, 1981; Douglas, 1980; Smith, 1987). There are deeper meanings in everyday life, perhaps deeper than participants and observers may realize. These meanings are revealed when things go wrong, when people are confronted by paradox or change, when people lose some aspect of their everyday life, or when people find themselves in intimate relationship with someone whose view of or action in everyday life differs substantially from their own.

From another angle, some scholars (e.g., Berger, 1997) say that when we look closely at everyday life, we see that it is very much about the human relationship to objects. It is not the life of free-standing humans but of humans using and relating to things. This book is no exception to that perspective. It is not only about the deep meanings and fears that may appear in the couple bed. It is also about the everyday life of couples as they relate to beds, bedding, bed clothes, thermostats, books, television sets, lights, window shades, alarm clocks, medications, electric fans, and bedside tables.

#### COUPLE SLEEPING IS A NEGLECTED TOPIC

Most of the thousands of research reports and clinical articles on sleep are written as though people sleep alone. In *PsycInfo*, the American Psychological Association compendium of abstracts from the psychological literature, there were, on May 19, 2005, 7,334 works listed on human sleep, 9,198 on couples, and 16,022 on marriage and marriage counseling, but only nine abstracts among all those thousands dealt with couple or married couple sleep. In the *Medline* compendium of abstracts in medicine, there were, on May 19, 2005, 40,214 entries dealing with human sleep, 34,295 dealing with couples, and 19,162 dealing with marriage and marriage therapy; but only fifteen abstracts dealt with couple or married couple sleep. On May 19, 2005, the web-based version of *Sociological Abstracts* contained 17,659 abstracts on couples or marriage, 514 on sleep or sleeping, and only one on couple or married couple sleep or sleeping.

Despite the neglect of the topic, it is clear from published writings in the psychological, medical, and sociological literature that the sleep problems of one partner in a couple can create sleep problems for the other (for example, Armstrong, Wallace, & Marais, 1999; Beninati, Harris, Herold, & Shepard, 1999; Mitropoulos et al., 2002; Parish & Lyng, 2003; Shvartzman et al., 2001; Scott, Ah-See, Richardson, & Wilson, 2003; Ulfberg, Carter, Talback, & Edling, 2000). Physicians who treat sleep disorders hear daily from patients and their partners about couple effects. In fact, for certain sleep disorders, it is the partner of a sleeper more than the sleeper herself or himself who can describe the disorder (Aldrich, 1999, pp. 102–103; Bonekat & Krumpke, 1990; Chokroverty, 1994;

Walsh, Harman, & Kowall, 1994). Nonetheless, in the psychological, medical, and sociological literature, sleep has, for the most part, been written about as though it is an individual matter.

Then there is the self-help sleep literature. There are dozens of books in print about how to solve individual sleep problems, but none that I know of that focuses on the couple. The self-help sleep literature seems, like the research and clinical literature dealing with sleep, almost entirely focused on individuals. Self-help sleep books seem to be about how the individual can fall asleep more easily, stay asleep, and have a restful and restorative sleep. The central message of this literature is that sleep problems are individual and are solved by the individual.

Despite the individual focus of psychological, medical, sociological, and self-help sleep writings, for many adults, sleep is a couple experience. The lifetime of most adults will include thousands of nights of shared sleeping with another adult, and often the challenges of sleeping are very much about the couple relationship. To understand sleep we must look at the social aspects of it.

Daly (2003) has written about the “negative spaces” in family theory and research, areas that family scholars ignore but that are central to the lives of couples and families. Couple sleep is one of those “negative space” areas. It is time to look at couple sleep, to begin to fill that negative space with research and theory.

#### PIONEERS IN THE STUDY OF ADULT SLEEP AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

There have been scattered voices in sociology arguing for the importance of studying adult sleep as a social phenomenon. Aubert and White (1959a, 1959b) asserted that sleep is an appropriate sociological concern and an important social event. They pointed out that it is legitimate to analyze preparation for sleep and sleeping itself as role behavior and rule governed. Gleichmann (1980) pointed out that research on sleep has consistently viewed sleep as individual, ignoring social aspects, although from an historical perspective, sleep has been social for many centuries. In Gleichmann’s analysis, sleep is a sociological phenomenon in part because it is regulated by societal rules. For example, there are rules about when to sleep and when to be awake—sleep at night, be awake during the day—and where to sleep—sleep in privacy or semiprivacy in a bed; do not sleep in public places.

One can extend the idea of rules for sleeping to look at relationship rules among people who sleep together (Schwartz, 1970). Perhaps without realizing it, a couple who sleeps together will have worked out hundreds of rules about going to sleep, sleeping, and waking up. Consider, for example, rules concerning waking up (Schwartz, 1970). Those rules will almost certainly deal with

how and when partners might verbally interact during the minutes or perhaps even hours following waking up.

Taylor (1993) argued that sleep research has ignored the social aspects of sleep while sociology has systematically ignored sleep as a topic for study and theorizing, and yet sleep is obviously defined socioculturally and is likely to be patterned according to social class, gender, age, and other sociological categories. Taylor also pointed out that sleep is socially defined and that the way it is socially defined has consequences for how people “do” sleep.

Williams (2001), in advocating that a sociology of the human body should pay more attention to sleep, emphasized that sleep is socially conceptualized and organized. In focusing on the association of health and sleep, Williams (2002) again emphasized the neglect of the social aspects of sleep, and pointed to the social patterning of sleep, the social role of the sleeper, and the “colonization” of sleep by medical experts. Hislop and Arber (2003b), citing Williams, laid out a strong case for the idea that there is much more to sleep than can be framed and analyzed from the perspective of medical knowledge about the functioning of the individual body.

Although none of these pioneers seems to have carried out couple interviews focused on sleep, their writings make clear how valuable it is to look at sleep as a social phenomenon.

#### THE STUDY

I interviewed eighty-eight adults, forty-two couples and four individuals who were in a couple bed sharing relationship. Although with the last of the eighty-eight I was still hearing things I had not heard in earlier interviews, the eighty-eight provided a great deal of commonality about the main themes in this book. I stopped interviewing when I thought I had a book’s worth of material, not when I thought I had learned all there was to learn about couple sleeping. All of the eighty-eight were residents of the thirteen county Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area (including two counties in Wisconsin). Three of the forty-two couples were lesbian and three were heterosexual and not married. Three of the four people who were interviewed as individuals were not married but had current bed sharing relationships; the other person who was interviewed as an individual was married. I did not ask people about race/ethnicity, but I believe one person would self-identify as African American, one as Latina, and one as Afro-Caribbean.

Most interviewees volunteered after learning about the research from television, newspaper, or radio reports. Although some responded to a neutral description of the study as about the experience of sharing a bed with another

adult, others responded to a more sensational description voiced by television anchors who decided to announce the study in that way. The more sensational descriptions called for volunteers for research dealing with “bed hogs” or “snoring.” That might mean that the people who were interviewed had more sleep problems than the normal population. Although there is reason to think that sleep problems occur for most people in the “normal” population (Fietze & Diefenbach, 2003), this is a study of volunteers, not of a representative sample.

Most interviews were carried out in people’s homes; a few were carried out in my university office; and one was carried out at an interviewee’s place of business. All interviews were carried out in complete privacy.

There was an interview schedule covering a wide range of experiences related to sharing a bed, which contained a core set of questions that was asked of everyone. (The interview schedule is in the Appendix of this book, as is some basic information about the people interviewed.) Each interview flowed with the narratives, situations, and enthusiasms of the interviewee(s). As a result, much of what was talked about and the sequence of what was talked about was up to the person or couple being interviewed. In addition, some questions were only asked of some people. Sometimes this was because the questions obviously did not apply—for example, only people who had children were asked about the effects of children. There were some matters not on the interview schedule that had to be asked because of people’s situations (for example, a specific health problem).

The typical interview lasted close to two hours. Interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed word for word. In three cases I botched the audio-taping. When that happened, I wrote extensive notes about the interview as soon as I could after the interview had ended. Interview transcriptions retained most of the linguistic complexity and nuance that could be heard on the tape. So the transcriptions include laughter, pauses (with an estimate of how long the pause lasted), slurs, repetitions, stutters, throat clearings, heavy breathing, sighs, tears, emphases, and records of one partner talking while the other talked. To facilitate reading, most of this complexity has been edited out of the quotes in this book, but I paid attention to it in trying to make sense of what people said.

In the spirit of grounded theory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the data analysis was carried out partly as each interview went on. I thought about what might be implied by what people said and what theoretically might fit what they said, and that often guided my next questions, as I asked for clarification, elaboration, or for a partner’s view on something that I was thinking about analyzing in a certain way. This continuing data analysis also meant that, to some extent, the interview schedule evolved over the course of the study as it became clear that some issues that seemed important before the study began were not so valuable to explore, whereas others deserved more textured,

deeper-digging questions. Also, I was making interview transcriptions constantly after the study began, and that led me to think all along about the data analysis and about how to be a better questioner about certain issues during upcoming interviews.

Data analysis focused on themes. In analyzing the data, I read through several transcriptions to make a preliminary outline of bed sharing/sleeping themes that seemed to be significant in the relationship of at least some couples. Then I used the outline as a basis for analyzing the other transcriptions and the interview notes. The analysis involved frequent outline revision and returning to previously coded transcriptions as each succeeding transcription analysis led to questioning and sharpening previous analyses. The coding process also involved frequent challenges and checks—anything from checking the context of a quote or the next words that somebody said to tabulating something for all cases to be sure that the trends in the interviews were characterized accurately. The frequency checks were facilitated by the transcriptions having been created in WordPerfect 5.1, which has a powerful key word search capability. An important dimension of the coding was the effort to retain interviewees' realities and the sense they gave of what they wanted the interviewer to know and understand. For me, this is a matter of ethics as well as of research validity. I intend to respect interviewees' realities and not privilege my own to the extent of obscuring theirs.

The interviewees ranged in age from twenty-one to seventy-seven. All but one had at least a high school education; fifty-one had a college degree; twenty-five had education beyond the bachelor's degree. The couples had been sleeping together as little as six months and as long as fifty-one years. The homes I saw ranged from a small public housing unit and a one room apartment to several very large homes in wealthy suburbs. Some people not only talked about sleeping with their current partner but also about sleeping with past partners, particularly previous spouses. Nobody talked about having more than one current sleeping partner.

I promised all who were interviewed that I would quote them in a way that masked their identity so that nobody who knew them would know who it was I was quoting. That means that I have changed names and other identifying information. Also, I have simplified the quotes—cutting out repetition, most sounds that aren't words, and most instances of "you know," "I mean," "well," "kind of," and "like." At many places I have quoted words that seem to be at the heart of a point being made but cut out the words that do not seem to me to be central to the point. Wherever I have omitted material from a quote, I indicate the omission with ellipsis dots. The words one person said while another was talking I have put in parentheses.

## STUDYING WHAT IS BACKSTAGE

As Goffman (1959) described social life, we have backstage where we can be out of the character(s) that we present to our publics and can rehearse future performances. We share backstage regions with those with whom we jointly put on performances, and we agree with them to keep confidential whatever goes on backstage. For a couple, the privacy of the couple bed is almost certainly a backstage region. There they can express feelings and ideas they do not dare to express in public. It is there that things can happen in their relationship they would not want others to know.

I tried to respect what I thought might be the deepest secrets by not asking much about sexuality and asking nothing about violence in bed, but some people did talk about those matters. Also, there were many instances in the interviews when people said that they were revealing things to me they had not revealed to anyone else. I am sure secrets were withheld from me, but much was revealed that makes sense, is interesting and important, and is consistent with what others who were interviewed said.

## THE COUPLE SLEEPING SYSTEM

For couples who share a bed, sleep is a relationship system. It is the interplay of the physiology, behavior, psychology, needs, preferences, previous learning, beliefs, fantasy life, and so on of the two people that makes the phenomena of sleep happen for them. As a system (e.g., Minuchin, 1974; Rosenblatt, 1994), whatever emerges comes from the interaction of the individuals involved. The whole is not the sum of what A does plus what B does. It comes from their interaction. This book is an extended development of ideas about how couple sleeping systems come into being, how they operate, what influences them, what maintains them, and what changes them.

The system of sleep is not merely a couple phenomenon. It occurs in a system of larger systems (Maddock, 1993; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). It interacts with these larger systems, although in terms of leverage, power, resources to make things happen, larger systems typically have much more influence on couple sleeping than the reverse. For example, the system of jobs means that often the demands, involvements, insecurities, and harmful effects of the job will come home to the couple bed.

## I SIT THERE AND WATCH YOU SLEEP

Often a person with whom one shares a bed can tell one how one sleeps—for example, the tossing and turning, the snoring, and the sleep talking. In fact, even



actions one might presumably have to be awake to perform during the night, like going to the bathroom or getting up to close a window, one might not have any memory of doing and only know one did because of the report of one's sleeping partner. We could simply take this as an interesting fact, that people learn about their sleeping from the reports of the partner with whom they share a bed.

KRISTEN: Sometimes I sit there and I watch you sleep.

MONICA: There are a lot of mornings when he'll go, "I didn't sleep at all last night," and I was like awake all night with worrying about something or not feeling well or whatever, and he slept the whole night as far as I could see. And snoring on top of it.

JOHN: She's like, it's this little pah. . . . She doesn't really wake up. I've watched her do this. It wakes her up just enough so she's not in really deep sleep (sounding amused). It's very cute. . . . I can watch it for hours. Yeah, I'm always awake in the morning before she is.

An obvious point about one partner observing the other sleeping is that this book is built partly out of partner reports of what the other does while sleeping, just as the couple sleep system is. It arises in part from what a couple does with one partner's observations about the sleep of the other.

#### IT'S MOST OF OUR TIME TOGETHER

For many people in the United States, life has become extraordinarily rushed (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). Most of the couples I interviewed said that most of their time together was the time they were in bed. And for some it was when they were going to bed and in bed that they did most of their talking together.

DAN: The majority of our relationship is spent sleeping together. (KRISTEN: Yeah) 'Cause I come home from work and you'll go to sleep an hour after I get home, so we spend more time together sleeping than we do anything else.

MIKE: She works two jobs, and about the only time that we get alone is that bed time.

LIZ: That's like the only time that we're even by each other.

So bedtime is not just about sleep. It is about renewing and maintaining the couple relationship. It can be the one time when partners learn what has

been going on with one another, plan, make decisions, deal with disagreements, solve problems, provide necessary information, and put words to their realities. Bedtime contact seemed crucial to maintaining the relationship of many couples I interviewed, as a symbol of their being a couple, in their meeting one another's needs, and in the information exchanges that enabled them to coordinate with and know one another.

Sleeping takes up a quarter to a third of most lives. That is far too much of a couple's time together for those of us interested in couple relationships to ignore. Some people who were interviewed had similar notions, that there was so much togetherness time in and around couple sleeping that it was important to pay attention to that time.

JOSH: Sex is ten minutes, and you got eight hours in bed. (MARGARET: Yeah, most of the time it's just sleeping.) It's one third of your life, so what goes on during that time?

With sleep so much of a person's life and with so many couples having little time together except in their bed sharing, understanding couple experiences in bed is central to understanding couples. The content and quality of that time can tell a great deal about a couple's life. Many couples spoke of how important the connection that centers on sleeping together was for them. It was a time for connection, intimacy, pleasure, and feeling comfortable together. For some couples, the time in bed together was not only about their life as a couple. It was their crucial human contact. If it were not for that, they could feel quite alone. Maria and Vic had shared a bed for 14 years.

MARIA: We don't really know a lot of people here, so (laughing) we only have each other, and it just means a lot to . . . go to bed, to end the day close, and then to start out with, I mean, we often talk about it as the best part of our day. (VIC: It is.) Going to bed and waking up together.

For couples who lose their time together, there can be a feeling of threat to the relationship, perhaps particularly for younger couples.

ZACK: My dad was a minister in a small country church, and then he talked to different people at different times, and then sometimes Mom and Dad would be talkin' about it afterwards and us kids, we had elephant ears. And he said, "If a young couple quit sleeping together that's often the end of the marriage." That's what he said. "But," he said, "if

it's an old couple, they sometimes have to sleep in their own beds because they can't stand each other anymore because of the snoring or the getting up at night frequently and disturbing each other. They slept better that way. They had more rest." And so I guess that's sort of, probably it wasn't too far from right. It's not wrong.

Modern life, with its work demands, its commuting, the busy-ness of being a consumer, the fact that the typical adult in the United States reports watching roughly two hours of television each day (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2005), the separation of partners by their personal spheres of work (and perhaps school, organizations, and peer groups), makes it difficult for a couple to have much contact. These days heterosexual couples may have even less opportunity to talk than in the past because increasing numbers of married women are in the work force (MSN.Encarta, 2005). Thus, modern life has made the sleeping situation more important, more imperative. On most days, it is in the sleep situation that the couple connection is symbolized, forged, enacted, and maintained.

Arguably there is some minimum amount of talk necessary to maintain a shared view of key realities (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Rosenblatt & Wright, 1984; Wiley, 1994). Perhaps most couples have learned how to carry out their relationship together so that, on most days, a few minutes of verbal contact suffices. For many of the couples I interviewed, that verbal contact often occurs each night when they are first in bed together.

#### THE PATHS THIS BOOK FOLLOWS

This book takes the reader along two related paths. One path is to develop the notion of the couple system with regard to sharing a bed and sleeping together. It is based on family systems theory and elaborates on that theory by developing, chapter after chapter, details about the systemic context, processes, and challenges of bed sharing and sleeping together.

The other path follows couples through the process of getting to bed and to sleep, sleeping, and awakening. It starts with the bed, then addresses the processes of going to bed, then what goes on as people reach the bed and get into it. It then addresses issues that can be present at bedtime that affect what goes on during particular nights—anger, sexual intercourse, illness and injury, and how work and children may intrude into couple sleeping. Then, assuming at least one of the partners is asleep, it addresses issues related to difficulties falling asleep, including light sleepers (versus heavy sleepers), tossing and

turning, and restless legs. The book then addresses problems that can come up during the night—snoring, sleep apnea, sleep talking, tooth grinding, and nightmares. It then moves to waking up times. Finally, there is an analysis of what happens to sleeping and the couple relationship on the nonstandard nights—weekends and times when the partners sleep apart.