

Spinning your story like my own: personal and vicarious life stories related within couples

Conclusions

Our results suggest that one sees a romantic partner's life story through a similar lens to one's personal life story, at least with regards to the existential themes of agency and communion.

The vicarious life story of the partner appears to be influenced both by one's personal story and the partner's own telling of her personal life story.

This line of research may eventually be useful to for treating couples in couples therapy and, possibly, with diagnosis and treatment of individuals with personality disorders characterized by interpersonal challenges.

Background

Despite the proliferation of life story research in recent years and widespread recognition of its vital role in one's identity and personality¹, very little research has examined how we tell others' life stories, deemed *vicarious life stories*, and how those stories may be related to our personal life stories².

Diverse psychological theories agree that one's perception of another person is not neutral but intertwined with one's own personality^{3,4,5}. This may extend to perceptions of vicarious life stories.

As a type of social cognition, we were also interested in the extent to which vicarious life stories of others correspond to those others' personal life stories.

Aims

Based on literature contending that agency and communion function as superordinate existential themes in personal life stories and that their prevalence varies across individuals to shape personal identity⁶, we expected to find the following with regards to these themes:

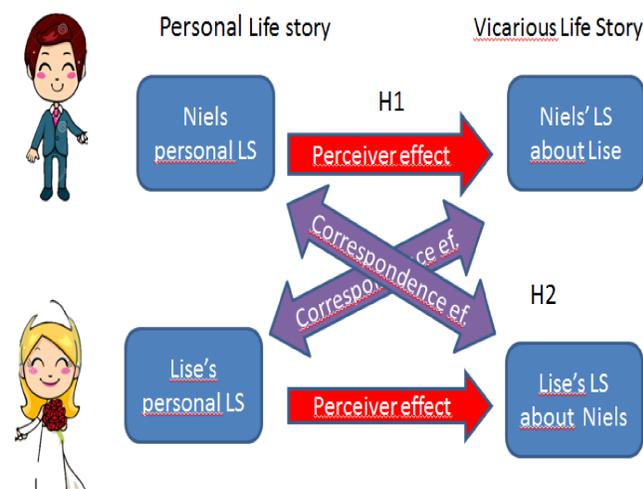
- relationships between participants' personal life stories and the vicarious life stories they tell about their romantic partners ("perceiver effects"),
- relationships between the vicarious life stories of the romantic partners and those partners' personal life stories about themselves ("correspondence effects").

Methods

Participants: 51 romantic couples/102 participants (age M=25.3, SD=4.47), cohabitating at least 11 months.

Procedures: Participants complete interviews on computers in separate rooms, but simultaneously.

- Part 1:** "The Life Story Interview"⁸ about self
- Part 2:** "The Life Story Interview" about partner



Materials

Life story interview (abbreviated): Imagine your/your partner's life as a novel.

- Describe important childhood and teenage episodes, and high, low and turning point episodes (5 total)
- what happened, where, when, who was involved, thoughts/feelings at the time, what episode says about you/partner

Coding system for themes of agency and communion (modified)

interviews coded by 2 raters for presence of agency subthemes (Self-Mastery, Status/Victory, Achievement/Responsibility) and communion subthemes (Love/friendship, Caring/Helping, Unity/Togetherness)⁹

- summed across episodes for a 0-20 total communion and total agency scores
- Interrater reliability correlation coefficients: agency personal, $r(102) = .71$, and partner, $r(102) = .70$; and total communion personal, $r(102) = .71$, and partner $r(102) = .63$.

Results

- Perceiver effects: participants' personal life stories were positively related to the vicarious life stories they told about their partners on...
 - agency ($r(102) = .26, p = .008$)
 - communion ($r(102) = .30, p = .002$).
- Correspondence effects: vicarious life stories about partners were also positively related to those partners' personal life stories on...
 - agency ($r(102) = .297, p = .002$)
 - communion ($r(102) = .356, p < .001$)
- Multiple linear regressions (forced entry) showed that participants' personal life stories and participants' partners personal life stories were each independent significant predictors of participants' vicarious life stories.

Regression model with participant's personal life story (LS) agency and participant's partner's personal LS agency as predictors of agency in participant's vicarious LS about partner.

variable	Agency in vicarious life story		
	β	t	p
constant		2.41	.018
Participant's personal LS agency	.244	2.52	.010
Partner's personal LS agency	.282	3.04	.003

Note. Regression model $F(99, 2) = 8.54, R^2 = .147, p < .001$

Regression model with participant's personal life story (LS) communion and participant's partner's personal LS communion as predictors of communion in participant's vicarious LS about partner.

variable	Communion in vicarious life story		
	β	t	p
constant		.37	.714
Participant's personal LS commun.	.365	4.17	< .001
Partner's personal LS communion	.412	4.70	< .001

Note. Regression model $F(99, 2) = 17.09, R^2 = .257, p < .001$

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