

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

## Conclusion

The way one tells the life story of one's romantic partner appears to be influenced both by the way one tells one's personal story and by the way that partner tells her personal story, with regard to agency and communion themes and redemption sequences.

In addition, personal life stories may be constructed more redemptively than partner life stories, revealing a self-enhancement bias.

These relationships do not appear to be due to any similarities between the two personal stories of the partners.

This line of research suggests that the narrative identity level of personality may be involved in our perception of others' histories, and may eventually be useful in the treatment of couples and of individuals struggling with relational problems.

## Background

The construction of a personal life story is widely recognized as crucial for developing an identity<sup>1</sup>. However, very little research has examined how we construct others' life stories, termed *vicarious life stories*<sup>2</sup>, in particular, whether those constructions may reflect our personal life story constructions.

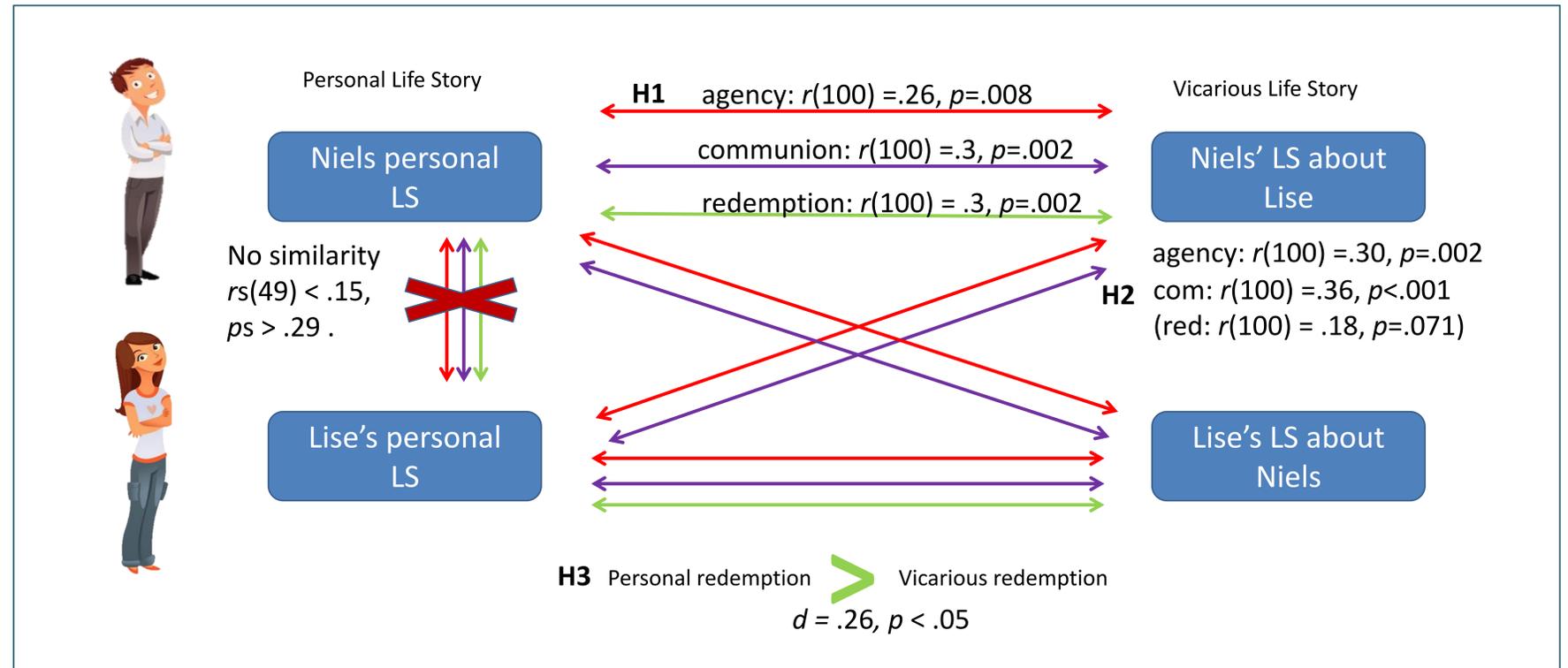
Diverse psychological theories agree that one's perception of another person is not neutral but intertwined with one's own personality<sup>3,4,5</sup>. This may extend to perceptions of the life stories of others.

## Aims

**H1:** Based on literature contending that the prevalence of agency and communion themes in personal life stories represents a person's understanding of what makes life meaningful<sup>6</sup>, we expected to find personal life stories to be related to vicarious life stories on these themes, along with redemption sequences ("perceiver effects").

**H2:** We also expected these vicarious life stories to be related to those partners' personal life stories about themselves ("correspondence effects").

**H3:** Based on previous findings of personal life stories being self-rated more positively than vicarious, we expected more redemption sequences in personal than vicarious life stories.



## Methods

**Participants:** 51 romantic couples/102 participants (age  $M = 25.3$ ,  $SD = 4.47$ ), cohabitating over 10 months.

**Procedures:** Participants individually provided written narratives of personal life story, and subsequently, life story 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 systems for themes of agency and communion and for redemption sequences (modified):**<sup>9</sup>

- summed across episodes for a 0-15 score ranges for total communion and for total agency; 0-5 total redemption sequences score
- Interrater reliability correlation coefficients: agency, communion and redemption
  - personal:  $r_s(100) = .71, .71$  and  $.84$
  - vicarious:  $r_s(100) = .70, .63$  and  $.77$

## Results

**H1: Perceiver effects:** participants' personal life stories were positively related to the vicarious life stories they told about their partners on agency, communion and redemption.

**H2: Correspondence effects:** vicarious life stories about partners were also positively related to those partners' personal life stories on agency and communion, but not redemption.

**H3:** Participants used more redemption sequences in personal than vicarious life stories.

Couples' two personal life stories were not related on any measure.

**Contact: Katherine Panattoni, PhD fellow**  
[kpanattoni@psy.au.dk](mailto:kpanattoni@psy.au.dk)