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My partner's stories: Relationships between personal and vicarious life stories within romantic couples

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Abstract

In this paper, we examined relationships and differences between personal and *vicarious life stories*, i.e., the life stories one knows of others. Personal and vicarious life stories of both members of 51 young couples (102 participants), based on McAdams' Life Story Interview (2008), were collected. We found significant positive relationships between participants' personal and vicarious life stories on agency and communion themes and redemption sequences. We also found significant positive relationships between participants' vicarious life stories about their partners and those partners' personal life stories on agency and communion, but not redemption. Furthermore, these relationships were not explained by similarity between couples' two personal life stories, as no associations were found between couples' personal stories on agency, communion and redemption. These results suggest that the way we construct the vicarious life stories of close others may reflect how we construct our personal life stories.

Key words: *Life stories, close others, agency, redemption sequences, APIM*

My partner's stories: relationships between personal and vicarious life stories within romantic couples

Introduction

The feeling of intimacy that grows out of knowing others closely does not consist solely of being able to chronicle their traits and goals. We also need to know their personal past - how they came to be who they are and why that matters (McAdams, 1995). These representations of others' lives have been coined *vicarious life stories* (Pillemer, Steiner, Kuwabara, Thomsen, & Svob, 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). The study of vicarious life stories and vicarious memories have highlighted that current understandings of memory may need to be expanded to account for how individuals remember events from other individuals' lives (Pillemer et al., 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017) and researching relations between personal and vicarious life stories, as in the present study, will assist efforts in developing such broader theories.

Despite the flourishing of research into the impact of personal life stories on the self and identity over the last three decades, research into vicarious memories and stories is in its infancy (Fivush & Merrill, 2016; McLean, 2016; Pillemer et al., 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017; Zaman & Fivush, 2013). One important question still unanswered is whether the way we remember and describe close others' personal past is connected to how we remember our own lives.

To begin to answer this question, we examine whether individuals in romantic couples recall their own life stories and the vicarious life stories of their partners with similar motivational and affective themes. Specifically, we investigate relationships and differences in the prevalence of agency and communion themes and redemption sequences. Romantic couples would seem to be a promising dyad for investigating relationships between personal and

vicarious life stories because individuals have likely heard the personal stories of their partners and recalled and re-shared these with the partners as well as close friends and family to create intimacy (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; McLean, 2016).

We first review literature on personal and vicarious life stories. Then we review support for the idea that vicarious life stories of romantic partners should be related to narrators' personal life stories on motivational themes and redemption sequences. We also outline support for the common sense view that vicarious life stories of romantic partners will correspond to how those partners narrate their personal life stories.

Personal and Vicarious Life Stories

According to Dan McAdams (2013), personality and the self consist of different layers, including personality traits, goals, and life stories – i.e., the narrative representation of select memories that creates a coherent identity integrating one's past, present, and future (Adler, Chin, Kolisetty, & Oltmanns, 2012; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1996; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Just as we construct mental models of ourselves as possessing traits, goals, and stories, so might we construct mental models of specific other individuals as having traits, goals, and stories (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). Research into how the trait level of our mental models of ourselves shapes the way we perceive other people's traits is well-established (Furnham & Henderson, 1983; Wood, Harms, & Vazire, 2010) and a recent study has shown that this is also the case for goals (Dunlop, McCoy, Harake, & Gray, 2017). However, research on how personal life stories may shape the way we recall the life stories of others, *vicarious life stories*, is generally lacking.

Personal life stories are constructed by selecting and interpreting material from autobiographical memory (McAdams, 1996). One primary function of this selection and

interpretation process is to give unity and purpose to one's life and self-understanding. Motivational themes of agency and communion and redemption sequences are among the most studied constructs that are thought to support those functions (see Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016, for a review). Agency themes (i.e., power, autonomy, achievement), and communion themes (i.e., deepening connection with others) reveal a narrator's motivations and interpretations of what makes a meaningful life (Adler et al., 2012; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). A redemption sequence refers to a story during which a negative event is chronologically followed by a silver lining, "redeeming" the negative event (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). As with agency and communion themes, redemption sequences are constructed through interpretation and selection of one's personal memories. Such interpretation and selection processes may extend to how individuals construct life stories for close others based on vicarious memories and result in positive relationships between themes and redemption in personal and vicarious life stories.

Previous research on vicarious life stories

Vicarious life stories is a new direction in narrative research, and to our knowledge, no studies have been conducted on vicarious life stories of romantic couples, nor on motivational themes and redemption sequences in vicarious life stories. However, there is limited, but growing, research on vicarious life stories of friends and family members. This research provides evidence that individuals know important stories of close others (Habermas, Negele, & Mayer, 2010; Pillemer et al., 2015; Svob & Brown, 2012), and that recalling these vicarious memories may be significant for the self. Indeed, the directive, social, and self functions traditionally attributed to autobiographical memories (Bluck et al., 2005) may also extend to vicarious memories, in that vicarious memories of friends and parents are used to guide personal life

decisions and problem solving (Pillemer et al., 2015), make meaning from personal memories, and bond with others through sharing (McLean, 2016), as well as to support identity development and well-being (Duke, Lazarus, & Fivush, 2008; Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, 2011; Merrill, Srinivas, & Fivush, 2017; Lind & Thomsen, 2018).

The foregoing studies attest to the influence of vicarious stories, at least of close others, on the individual. Considerably less attention has been paid to the opposite direction – the influence the individual exerts on the how vicarious stories are recalled and interpreted (cf. Budziszewska & Dryll, 2013; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017; Zaman & Fivush, 2013). Literature on how individuals recall and interpret vicarious life stories, particularly in relation to their personal life stories is slim, but there are a few informative studies. Middle aged and older adults' narratives of their parents' lives have been found to reflect themes related to the developmental stage of the narrators, not the parents (Budziszewska & Dryll, 2013). More securely attached adolescents have been found to tell more coherent and emotionally expressive stories about their mothers' childhood (Zaman & Fivush, 2013). Most relevant to the present study, Thomsen and Pillemer (2016) directly compared personal and vicarious life stories using self-ratings. They found that participants who rated their personal life stories as more positive tended to rate their close friends' life stories as more positive (see Lind & Thomsen, 2018 for similar results), and participants who were high on neuroticism rated both personal and vicarious life stories for close friends as more negative.

These previous two studies, however, suffer from the design limitation that they lack access to the personal accounts of the other member of the dyad. We do not know, therefore, the extent to which vicarious life stories are faithful reconstructions of the stories as originally recounted. This also means that we cannot rule out the possibility that their findings of

relationships between personal and vicarious life stories were due to actual similarities between the personal life stories of the participant and the friend. Thus, in order to study whether personal life stories shape the construction of vicarious life stories for close others we examine relationships between personal and vicarious life stories, while at the same time examining relationships between the two personal life stories.

Vicarious life stories: perceiver effects

Despite limited literature on whether personal life stories shape the construction of vicarious life stories, it is broadly accepted across many areas of psychology that perceptions of close others are not objective but coloured by one's own personality. For example, in personality psychology, perceiver effects, i.e., tendency to view others in a particular way, have long been observed in the way individuals assess others' traits (Furnham & Henderson, 1983; Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010; Wood et al., 2010). It was recently found, that individuals' perception of others' goals mirrored their personal goals (Dunlop et al., 2017). Freud's concept of transference, where a patient tends to perceive a new person, such as a therapist, as a parent, also expresses the idea that personality affects the perception of other people (Freud & Strachey, 1989; McWilliams, 1994). Similarly, according to attachment theory, early caregiver relationships form the basis of internal working models that set perceptions of new "others" (Bowlby, 1975; Fivush, 2006), while cognitive psychology posits that our perception of another person is molded by our personal schemata (Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985). In addition, according to self-expansion theory, close others are integrated into the self leading to overlapping representations of self and close others (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Even if these diverse approaches disagree on the mechanisms underlying our perceptions of others, there is consensus that those perceptions are influenced by other aspects of the self and

personality, whether those be traits, goals, schemata, internal working models, or other. If this effect extends to life stories, we should expect that how personal life stories are remembered would resemble how vicarious life stories are remembered, at least of close others, and that this would be apparent in positive relations between motivational themes of agency and communion as well as redemption in personal and vicarious life stories. We call this a *perceiver effect*, borrowing the term from the trait literature (Wood et al., 2010).

Romantic couples may be an especially ripe dyad for finding relationships between vicarious life stories and personal life stories on motivational themes and redemption. Perceiver effects may occur in romantic couples' life stories because individuals may be motivated to selectively interpret their partners' life stories to justify investment in the relationship and confirm their personal agentic and communal meaning making. They may use life stories as a vehicle for idealizing partners, possibly by constructing the vicarious stories to express their personal motives (see Weidmann, Ledermann, & Grob, 2016, for a review of positive illusions in couples). Recalling and interpreting personal life stories and vicarious life stories of partners with the same motivational themes and redemptive structure may strengthen feelings of closeness, justify investment in the partner, and confirm one's own meaning-making.

Vicarious life stories of romantic partners: correspondence effects

That vicarious life stories of romantic partners might reflect the narrators' personal life stories does not mean that vicarious life stories can be constructed untethered to the reality of how those partners' tell their personal stories. There are common sense grounds to assume that vicarious life stories should correspond to the personal life stories on which they are likely to be based (i.e., show *correspondence effects*). Simply put, we depend on vicarious stories to guide our interpersonal interactions, i.e., to generate closeness (McLean 2016) and build trust needed to

make interpersonal commitments like marriage or buying a home. To be successful in these

interpersonal navigations, we need to know what the other person is remembering and how they

interpret their past experiences (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). If I, for example, do not recall my

boyfriend's heartfelt story about overcoming his adolescent weight problems, I am less likely to

predict accurately that he will feel misunderstood by an off-the-cuff joke about having a second

piece of birthday cake. The closeness of our relationship also will likely suffer, as personal

stories are shared to bond (Bluck et al., 2005), and my failure to recall his story of overcoming

this past challenge might leave the impression that I do not really understand him, and thus break

that bond. One could argue, therefore, that although we may be motivated to project onto a

romantic partner's life resulting in perceiver effects, we are also highly motivated to recall the

partner's stories in the forms they were recounted for us in order to accurately predict close

other's behaviours and maintain the closeness of the relationship.

Previous studies on vicarious stories are limited in their designs in that they could say

nothing about how well vicarious life stories correspond to the personal life stories on which

they are likely to be based, since the other dyad member's stories were not included (e.g., Lind &

Thomsen, 2018; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). Although the life story literature has generally

focused less on "accuracy", having a sense of this correspondence (or lack of) could provide

valuable information about the constructive memory processes for vicarious life stories and

vicarious memory more generally. Our study aimed to address this weakness by including the

personal and vicarious life stories of both members of the dyads.

Hypotheses

This study aims to investigate the extent to which the life stories we tell about romantic partners

- vicarious life stories - are related to our personal life stories (i.e., perceiver effects), as well as

the extent to which these vicarious life stories correspond to the way those partners' tell their own personal life stories (i.e., correspondence effects). We decided to focus on agency and communion themes and redemption sequences rather than examining whether the same events would be included (e.g., would both partners include the same specific childhood event in the personal and vicarious life story for the woman part of the couple). This focus was because we were interested in the *interpretation* of a romantic partner's life story and not in the *identification* of events; that is, the meaning of events, not which events they choose. Moreover, the likelihood of finding significant relationships, particularly of correspondence effects, should be greater with motivational themes and redemption than with identification of events, because overarching characteristics, like motivational themes, have shown more longitudinal stability than identification of events in life stories (McAdams et al., 2006). In other words, since particular events included in life stories may change, it would be very difficult for participants to identify the "right" events, but somewhat easier to emphasize the "right" themes.

We expect participants' personal and vicarious life stories to be positively related on agency and communion themes as well as redemption, because interpretations involved in constructing personal life stories would also be applied when constructing vicarious life stories for close others (perceiver effects). Because close others may be integrated into the self (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003), perceiver effects may be moderated by relationship adjustment, such that higher participant scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) will predict stronger relationships.

In addition to perceiver effects, we expect partners in serious relationships to have been good listeners to each other, and, therefore, to find positive relationships between participants' vicarious life stories about their partners and those partners' personal life stories about

themselves on agency, communion, and redemption (correspondence effects). We will also explore whether relationship adjustment, as measured by DAS score, moderates these relationships.

We also explored whether the two personal life stories in each couple are related, i.e., "similarity effects," in the hope of understanding whether any "perceiver effect" findings are due to actual life story similarity between the romantic partners and, therefore, not to a perceiver effect.

Finally, we examined differences between personal and vicarious life stories. Thomsen and Pillemer (2016) found that personal life stories were self-rated more positively than the vicarious life stories of friends, perhaps indicating self-enhancement biases (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Hence, we expected personal life stories to exhibit significantly more redemption sequences than vicarious life stories, because redemption captures a positive view of the self. Differences between personal and vicarious life stories on agency and communion were also explored.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 51 heterosexual, romantic couples, i.e., 102 individuals (50% male, age $M = 25.30$ years, $SD = 4.47$), who had cohabitated at least 9 months ($M = 3.52$ years, $SD = 3.04$ years). They were recruited from post-secondary student populations from academic, technical, and arts schools in Aarhus, Denmark. Each spoke Danish as a mother tongue and received a movie ticket for their participation. Specific ethnic and racial demographics are not typically collected in Danish psychological research, due to the population's homogeneity, and were not collected in this study. Participants were blind to the study's purpose and tasks, apart from that

they should attend together and be prepared to write about themselves for approximately two hours. Students represented 84.8% of the sample, while full-time and part-time workers represented 12.1% and 3.0%, respectively. The sample was largely unmarried (80.4%) and without children (93.0%). The project followed the APA Ethical Principles for Psychologists and Code of Conduct and was reviewed by the research center's ethics committee. The committee found that no scientific-ethical considerations spoke against implementation of the project.

Measures

The Life Story Interview

The life stories each participant told about him/herself and his/her partner were elicited using an abbreviated version of The Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008), in which participants were asked first to think of their (or their partner's) life as a book, and then spend up to 15 minutes briefly describing the chapters that would be included in a table of contents. Next, participants were asked to describe an important childhood event, an important teenage event, a life high point, a life low point, and an important life turning point for themselves (or the partners). For each event a variation on the following prompt was given.

> "…What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you (your partner) thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good/negative/important and what the scene may say about who you are (your partner is) as a person."

The Life Story Interview was translated to Danish by the first author, who is fluent in English and proficient in Danish, and subsequently edited by the second author, a native Danish and fluent English speaker.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) has been used in numerous studies, across many languages (Graham, Diebels, & Barnow, 2011), including Danish (Elklit & Jind, 1999). The 32 item scale consists of four subscales: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and affective expression, all measured using 6 point Likert scales where participants indicate their level of agreement ("always disagree" to "always agree") or frequency ("never" to "all the time") and two binary (yes/no) agreement statements. All items are summed with higher scores indicating greater relationship adjustment. Internal reliability was acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha = .87.

Procedure

Each participant produced two Life Story Interviews (McAdams, 2008) in written questionnaire format - one focusing on the participant her/himself, i.e., the "personal" life story, and one focusing on the romantic partner, i.e., the "vicarious" life story. The questionnaires were completed sequentially on computer in a separate room from the participant's partner, after individual, in-person instructions about each questionnaire. Questionnaire order was counterbalanced by couple and participants were blind to the second questionnaire until completing the first. Written consent to participate, to being blinded to the second part of the study, and to having their personal narratives anonymized and included in a paper was personally obtained by the first author at the outset of the study. Participants were informed that their responses would not be shared with their partner.

After finishing both life story questionnaires, each participant completed a pen-and-paper demographics questionnaire and the DAS. Participants were debriefed and asked whether they had guessed correctly some aspect of the study's tasks or hypotheses and whether they had

discussed their life stories with their partners in preparation for study participation. Of the 102

participants, 10 reported that they had guessed correctly about the task or hypotheses, but none

of the participants reported having discussed their life stories with their partners to prepare.

Thematic content coding

Each episode was coded for the presence or absence of four agency and four communion themes,

using the well-established "Coding System for themes of Agency and Communion" (McAdams,

2002), with the purpose of being summed across episodes as subthemes and as total themes, as

per the coding manual (see Appendix A for an example of one couple's low point episodes).

Agency themes included *self-mastery* (i.e., striving to expand or perfect the self through insight,

power or control), *status/victory* (i.e., winning or the attainment of higher status vis a vis others),

achievement/responsibility (i.e., pride in reporting achievement of tasks, jobs, instrumental goals,

or in the assumption of responsibilities over other people), and *empowerment* (i.e., self-

expansion through association with something larger than the self, e.g., authority figure, God, or

nature). Communion themes including *love/friendship* (i.e., the enhancement of erotic love or

friendship particularly among peers), *dialogue* (i.e., reciprocal, non-hostile and non-instrumental

communication), *caring/helping* (i.e., the protagonist is caring, helpful or empathic towards

another), and *unity/togetherness* (i.e., experiencing a sense of solidarity or belongingness).

As per the scoring manual, total agency and total communion scores were calculated

across each life story, resulting in a 0-15 score for both agency and communion. The first author

and a student co-rater coded each life story separately so that a participant's two life stories,

"personal" and "vicarious," could neither be linked to each other, nor to the participant's partner.

Coders initially trained together on five life stories to develop common understandings, before

both continued to code the remainder of the life stories.

The themes of empowerment and dialogue, although with acceptable raw agreements per episode (91% and 88% respectively) reduced intraclass correlations (ICCs) of total agency and total communion that were already in the low end (see below). Hence, we decided to calculate total agency and communion excluding empowerment and dialogue as this would provide us with the most reliable measures (note however, that the pattern of results for perceiver effects, correspondence effects, similarity effects, and differences between personal and vicarious life stories was similar if totals of agency and communion included these two themes).

Raw agreement per episode was good for each dimension of personal agency (78%, 96%, and 84% for self-mastery, status/victory, and achievement/responsibility) and vicarious agency (83%, 96%, and 80% for self-mastery, status/victory, and achievement/responsibility). Similarly for each dimension of personal communion (89%, 87% and 87% for love/friendship, caring/helping, and unity/togetherness) and vicarious communion (87%, 88% and 87% for love/friendship, caring/helping, and unity/togetherness). ICCs were .70 for total agency and .70 for total communion in personal life stories and .68 for total agency and .63 for total communion in vicarious life stories. Although these agreement coefficients are in the low end, they still show substantial agreement between raters, suggesting that the coding reflects properties of the narratives appropriately. Of note, other studies also report interrater agreement within this range (e.g., Guo, Klevan, & McAdams, 2016; McAdams & Guo, 2015). The first author's scores were used for all analyses, since she was considered the expert coder.

Each life story was also initially coded for redemption and contamination sequences, using the Coding System for Redemption Sequences (McAdams, 1999) and the Coding System for Contamination Sequences (McAdams, 1998). However, due to very low base rates and insufficient variance for total number of contamination sequences in life stories (i.e., *Ms < .80,*

range 0-3, over 43% of life stories containing no contamination sequences) coupled with low interrater reliability, no further tests were conducted on contamination sequences. Interrater reliability on redemption sequence coding was also initially insufficient, so we recoded all of the life stories for redemption sequences using a simplified version of McAdams' coding system; i.e., each episode was coded only for the presence of a redemption sequence, and redemption scores for each episode were then summed across each life story. A redemption sequence was present where an initial negative event was described and chronologically followed by a positive event, state, or interpretation. Events qualified as "negative" if they expressed an emotionally or physically negative feeling or if they could be characterized as objectively negative, e.g., parents' divorce or a bad breakup. In our modified system, milder negative emotions than seem to have been included in the McAdams' original coding system, such as disappointment about not getting into the first choice university, were enough to qualify as a negative antecedent. To qualify as a subsequent positive event, the event need only be a silver lining; it need not transform the initial "badness" into a positive event. After training with the co-rater on 20% of the life stories, each rater independently coded all the remaining questionnaires, ultimately obtaining good reliability for personal life stories and vicarious life stories (88% and 86% raw agreement per episode and ICCs = .84 and .77 on summed scores). Again, the first author's coding was used in all subsequent analyses.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Power

Power analyses

Power analyses using G*power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) indicated that we had an adequate sample size to detect medium and some smaller effect sizes, given an alpha of 0.05 and desired power of 0.80.

Order of life stories

To assess whether the order of the life story questionnaires (i.e., whether personal or vicarious was written first) affected the results, we conducted independent t-tests with life story order as the grouping variable and word count (i.e., the total number of words across each life story's five episodes), agency, communion, and redemption for personal and vicarious life stories as dependent variables. No significant differences were found on any of the hypothesized outcome variables, i.e., themes and redemption sequences, so the groups were collapsed for remaining analysis. Word counts were higher in both personal and vicarious life stories when they were described first (personal: $M = 906.54$, $SD = 312.55$; vicarious: $M = 666.44$, $SD = 242.39$) rather than second (personal: $M = 706.08$, $SD = 227.58$, $t(100) = 3.69$, $p < .001$, $d = .73$; vicarious: $M = 573.88$, $SD = 225.67$, $t(100) = -2.00$, $p = .05$, $d = .40$); however, regardless of the order, participants' personal life stories were longer than their vicarious life stories. [Table 1 near here]

Assumption of independence

Since participants were nested within couple dyads, we conducted Pearson's correlations between each couple's two personal life stories on agency, communion and redemption to assess non-independence (Kenny, 2015; Alferes and Kenny, 2009). As noted in the main results section below, no significant relationships were found (no "similarity effects"). To test non-independence in the vicarious life stories, we conducted partial correlations controlling for the predictor variables, i.e., the personal and the partner's personal life stories on the relevant measure (e.g., agency, communion or redemption), in accordance with Kenny (2015). No

significant relationships were found between the dyad's vicarious life stories on agency (r(47) = -.03, p = .82), communion (r(47) = .07, p = .62), nor on redemption sequences (r(47) = .02, p = .88). Assumptions of independence therefore had been met, permitting the person to be used as the unit of analysis.

Main Analysis

Differences between personal and vicarious life stories

We first investigated differences between participants' personal and vicarious life stories on agency, communion, and redemption (see Table 1). Within-subject t-tests revealed higher agency and higher redemption in participants' personal life stories than in their vicarious life stories, but no difference on communion themes. Thus, participants imbued their personal life stories with more redemption sequences, as expected and agentic themes than they did their partners' stories.

Results for perceiver effects

To test our hypotheses regarding perceiver effects, we conducted Pearson's correlations that indicated positive correlations on agency, r(100) = .26 [.05, .44], p = .01, communion, r(100) = .30 [.11, .49], p < .01, and redemption sequences, r(100) = .45 [.27, .60], p < .001 (note that bias corrected and accelerated bootstrap 95% CIs are reported in square brackets throughout the results section). That is, the more participants highlighted agentic, communion, and redemption in their personal stories, the more they did the same in their romantic partners' life stories.

To uncover any effect of relationship adjustment on these correlations, we conducted a moderated multiple regression analysis using Hayes' PROCESS in SPSS with agency in the personal life story as the predictor variable, DAS score as the moderator variable, and agency in the vicarious life story as the outcome variable, R^2 = .11, F(3, 94) = 4.39, p < .01. The analysis

revealed moderation as there was a significant interaction of personal agency and DAS score on

vicarious agency, as shown in Table 2. Specifically, there were non-significant relationships

between agency in personal and vicarious life stories, when DAS scores were low, i.e., one

standard deviation below the mean, and at the mean; whereas, when DAS scores were high, i.e.,

one standard deviation above the mean, there was a significant positive relationship. In other

words, only for participants who report the highest levels of relationship adjustment did agency

in one's personal life story predict agency in vicarious life stories for partners (see Table 3).

[Tables 2 and 3 near here]

In contrast to agency, there were no interaction effects between DAS score (as

moderator) and communion in personal life stories on the dependent variable of communion in

vicarious life stories ($b < .01[-0.02, 0.02]$, $p = .93$), nor between DAS and redemption in personal

life stories on redemption in vicarious life stories ($b < .01[-0.01, 0.02]$, $p = .77$). This indicates

that one's level of dyadic relationship adjustment did not affect the correlations between one's

personal and vicarious life stories on communion and redemption sequences.

Results for correspondence effects

We next investigated *correspondence effects* on agency, communion, and redemption; i.e.,

whether participants' vicarious life stories about their partners corresponded to the partners'

personal life stories. Pearson's correlations revealed significant correspondence effects for both

agency, $r(100) = .30$ [.10, .48], $p = .002$, and communion, $r(100) = .36$ [.17, .53], $p < .001$, with

no moderation by DAS score. There was no correspondence effect for redemption, $r(100) = .18$

[-.01, .38], $p = .07$. Thus, in contrast to redemption sequences, the more that participants'

partners narrated agency and communion themes in their personal life stories, the more

participants included those themes in their vicarious life stories about those partners, and this was unaffected by participants' level of relationship adjustment.

Results for similarity effects

Next, we tested for "similarity effects", i.e., relationships between the two personal life stories within each of the 51 couples. While each participant individually contributed with both a perceiver effect and a correspondence effect, the similarity effect was the same for both persons in the same dyad. Hence, we only had 51 cases in these analyses. Pearson's correlations revealed no significant relationships; that is, on neither agency, nor communion, nor redemption were the personal life stories of the two members of the couple similar from a statistical standpoint, $rs(49) = .08$ [-.16, .26], -.15 [-.33, .03], .06 [-.16, .28], $ps = .55, .29, .66$, respectively.

Hierarchical regression models of perceiver and correspondence effects

As both perceiver effects and correspondence effects were significant with regards to agency and communion, our next step was to conduct hierarchical multiple linear regressions to assess the relative explanatory strength of these two effects, and the extent of overlap in their variance. In model 1, we entered participant's personal life story agency as the predictor for vicarious life story agency. In model 2, *partner's* personal life story agency was added. Personal life story agency was included first because we were interested in how much of its variance would be subsumed by the variance of partner's personal life story agency; that is, how much would its beta coefficient drop in the second model. The same analysis was conducted for communion variables, but not redemption as no correspondence effect had been found. Both agency regression models were significant (Model 1: $F(1, 100) = 7.25$, $p = .01$, *adj.* $R^2 = .06$; Model 2: $F(2, 99) = 8.54$, $p < .001$, *adj.* $R^2 = .13$). Tables 4 and 5 show the results for agency and

communion, respectively. Agency in personal life stories and agency in partner's personal life stories independently predicted agency in vicarious life stories. The beta coefficient for personal life story agency lowered only minimally ($\Delta = -.02$), indicating that very little variance was shared between the two predictors. The communion regression equation was also significant (Model 1: $F(1, 100) = 9.98$, $p = .002$, *adj. R^2* $= .08$; Model 2: $F(2, 99) = 17.09$, $p < .001$, *adj. R^2* $= .24$). The same pattern of results was found for the communion variables as had been found for agency. Both communion predictors were significant, and there was only minimal change in the beta coefficient for personal life story communion in Model 2 ($\Delta = .05$). In summary, participants' vicarious stories about their partners resembled both participants' personal life stories as well the partners' personal life stories with regards to agency and communion themes, but the personal and partner variables accounted for different portions of variance. [Tables 4 and 5 near here]

Actor Partner Interdependence Model using Multilevel Modelling

Although statistical assumptions of independence of data had been met, we decided to test the robustness of the results modelling the romantic partners as nested in dyads. We therefore used multilevel modelling with REML in SPSS to test for perceiver and correspondence effects under the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), designed for research on couples to test reciprocal effects of each partner's predictor variable on their own and their partner's outcome variable, while accounting for variation between dyads (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). When possible, this reciprocity is analysed by systematically distinguishing between the two dyad members, e.g., by gender in heterosexual couples. As per APIM, we first tested for an interaction of gender on perceiver and correspondence effects (termed *actor* and *partner effects* in APIM) in agency, communion and redemption. Table 6 shows all perceiver and

correspondence effects as represented by *Personal* and *Partner.personal*, respectively. All

perceiver and correspondence effects averaged across men and women were significant except

for the correspondence effect for redemption, demonstrating the same pattern of results as the

bivariate correlations and regressions reported earlier. We then tested for the main effects of

perceiver and correspondence effects, distinguished by gender, using a two-intercept approach

(Kenny, et al. 2006). For women, there were significant perceiver effects on agency,

communion, and redemption, and correspondence effects for communion and redemption.

Further, there was a trend toward significance for correspondence effects on agency. For men,

only the perceiver effect for redemption and correspondence effects for agency and communion

were significant. However, none of the foregoing differences between men and women on

perceiver and correspondence effects were significant and are hence not further discussed. [Table

6 near here]

Discussion

The results suggest that when individuals recall vicarious stories of their romantic partners, they

do so in ways that exhibit the patterns of agency, communion, and redemption of their personal

life stories, i.e., perceiver effects. These vicarious life stories for romantic partners also exhibit

the patterns of agency and communion of those partners' personal life stories, i.e.,

correspondence effects. It seems that the stories one remembers about one's intimate romantic

partner's life may reveal much about oneself as well as one's partner. Moreover, perceiver and

correspondence effects on agency, communion and redemption in this study did not seem to be

due to similarities in the personal life stories, as there were no relations between the couple's two

personal life stories.

Despite the perceiver effects, participants still narrated more redemption and agency in their personal life stories than in vicarious stories. This is in agreement with and extends the previous study on vicarious life stories and may suggest that vicarious life stories are used to self-enhance (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). In the remaining parts, we discuss perceiver effects and correspondence effects as well as implications for understandings of memory more broadly.

Perceiver Effects in Vicarious Life Stories

As expected, our results indicated that the agentic, communion, and redemptive spins individuals attribute to personal life stories are mirrored in the vicarious life stories they recall of their partners. We deemed these relationships "perceiver effects," as the relationships did not appear to be due to influence from the partners' personal life stories. Perceiver effects have been found in the evaluation of others' traits (Srivastava et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2010) and goals and motivations (Dunlop et al., in press), and the present findings suggest a similar phenomenon with life stories– that is, individuals' personalities may affect their perceptions of other people also at the narrative identity level.

Why might life story perceiver effects occur? First, it could simply be a heuristic; i.e., in the absence of having heard detailed information about their partners' stories, participants filled in the mnemonic holes with their personal experiences and details salient to their agentic and communion concerns and redemptive outlook in order to see their partner's life in a coherent and purposeful way. This may be especially true within the context of a research study explicitly on couples where the life story prompt assumes partners can remember the life stories of their partners. Participants may have felt greater social demands in this elicitation context to demonstrate how well they know their partner's stories, leading them to fill in more mnemonic

holes than they might in other storytelling contexts. Theory of mind and mentalization theories both suggest that individuals model their understanding of others' minds off their understanding of their own mind (Dimaggio, Lysaker, Carcione, Nicolò, & Semerari, 2008). Possibly, hearing another's story may cue recall of related personal experiences, causing one to interweave details from one's own personal memories into the construction of vicarious memories (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017).

Second, within couples, perceiver effects on agency and communion themes may be a projection resulting from a desire to see one's partner's life story as similar to one's own. Constructing oneself and one's partner as like-minded regarding what makes life meaningful may enhance feelings of closeness and trust in a partner and may justify one's investment in the relationship (Gildersleeve, Singer, Skerrett, & Wein, 2017; McLean, 2016; Weidmann et al., 2016). It also may shore up the self by confirming one's personal motives. Furthermore, drawing on one's personal life story for one's partner's story may occur automatically in particularly close relationships, if closeness means to integrate the other into the self (Aron et al., 1991). However, we found only weak support for this interpretation, as relationship adjustment (DAS score) was found to moderate only the perceiver effect for agency, not for communion or redemption. One explanation for these mixed results may be that the DAS, as an explicit measure of dyadic satisfaction is not a good estimate for subjective closeness. Another might be that couples who volunteer to spend two hours writing about themselves and their partners are likely to be fairly satisfied with their relationships, as evidenced by our high DAS mean. Thus, there may have been insufficient variance to capture other moderation effects.

These were correlational analyses and therefore causation cannot be concluded, but the hierarchical regression results combined with the null "similarity effect" support an

interpretation that the perceiver effects for agency, communion and redemption are unlikely to be due to partners' personal stories influencing participants' personal life stories (via vicarious stories). For agency and communion themes, the variance in vicarious life stories explained by the *partner's* personal life stories was different from the variance explained by the narrator's personal life stories. For redemption sequences, partner's personal life story was not correlated with participants' vicarious life stories at all; there was no correspondence effect.

Correspondence Effects in Vicarious Life Stories

Our results also support the common sense notion that the stories we recall about our partners correspond to the way the partners remember their own stories. This likely occurs because retrieving how partners tell their stories would serve important social functions, such as bonding, navigating painful subjects, and cueing positive recollections (Bluck et al., 2005). Moreover, these correspondence effects on agency and communion were not explained by similarity between the partners' personal life stories, since no relationships were found. Thus, our results generally support the idea that vicarious life stories may help in understanding another person and maintaining the mutual closeness of the relationship.

Interestingly, as noted, a correspondence effect was not found for redemption. The absence of a correspondence effect coupled with a particularly strong perceiver effect for redemption may suggest that a tendency to end a negative story on a positive note functions more like a narrative style that persists even when recounting someone else's life experiences. The null finding may also be due to insufficient power to detect small effects or insufficient variance in redemption, where the range was more restricted than for agency and communion. Still, it is important to note that participants were not instructed to step into their partners' shoes and tell their life stories as they would tell them, but rather, how they personally remembered their

partner's story. Had participants been instructed differently, possibly significant correspondence effects for redemption sequences would have been found.

Implications for Understandings of Autobiographical Memory

Studies of vicarious memories and life stories show that individuals not only remember events from their own lives that they experienced directly. They also remember events experienced by other people. Vicarious memories and life stories seem to serve functions similar to personal memories and life stories (e.g., Pillemer et al., 2015) as well as showing similar temporal distributions (Svob & Brown, 2012; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017) and similar relations between memory characteristics (Pillemer et al., 2015). This raises the issue of whether current understandings of autobiographical memory should be expanded to account for vicarious memories and life stories.

The self-memory-system theory of autobiographical memory focuses on explaining the organization, encoding, and retrieval of personal memories (e.g., Conway, 2005) and despite weaknesses (e.g., Thomsen et al., 2015; Uzer, Lee, & Brown, 2012), it is the most commonly used framework in autobiographical memory research. The theory posits that the retrieval of personal memories is constrained by two principles: Coherence and correspondence. The coherence principle governs memory processes to ensure that memories are consistent with the current self, which provides the system with stability. The self thus continually influences memory construction to support current self-understanding. The correspondence principle constrains memory processes to support relatively accurate representations of events in order to guide behaviour in adaptive ways (Conway, 2005). The present study suggests that vicarious life stories are governed by the same principles: Individuals remember vicarious life stories of a close other using the personal life stories as a filter, thereby presumably bolstering their current

self. At the same time, we found that individuals recalled vicarious life stories in ways that partly reflected the life stories of their partner, thereby ensuring correspondence needed to assist interpersonal understanding. Future studies should examine whether other processes involved in encoding, organization, and retrieval of vicarious memories and life stories are similar to processes governing personal memories and life stories. If this is the case, the self-memory-system (Conway, 2005) could be extended to account for vicarious memories and life stories (see Rubin & Umanath, 2015).

Implications for Couples Research

Understanding how people perceive their partners over time in well-adjusted intimate relationships is vital for understanding what has gone wrong when unhappy couples arrive at psychotherapy. As narrative is the principle vehicle for psychotherapy diagnosis and treatment, using the combined picture of one's personal and vicarious life story accounts to help unravel problematic interpersonal misconceptions may prove valuable. Vicarious life stories may also complement the field of couples research, which already elicits narratives about the relationship using, e.g., the Marital Attachment Interview (Dickstein, 2004) and the Oral History Interview (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992) for the purpose of predicting marital satisfaction (Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993).

Future studies should track changes in personal and vicarious life stories along with couple closeness and satisfaction longitudinally, study perceiver and correspondence effects in other couple populations such as long term and older couples, couples transitioning into parenthood, couples in therapy, as well as with individuals suffering from personality disorders characterized by distortions in interpersonal perceptions. Investigating the presence of perceiver and correspondence effects on event identification and other well-established narrative measures,

such as coherence, meaning making, and emotional elaboration, would also be informative. In addition, future studies should investigate whether the effects we found are part of a general tendency to judge all others similarly to oneself on agency, communion, and redemption, or only one's romantic partners or close others. Finally, eliciting personal and vicarious stories within social contexts (rather than individually on computer) may also shed light on what conversational and memory processes underlie the creation of vicarious memories and life stories and the functions they serve in everyday life (Harris, Barnier, Sutton, & Keil, 2014; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Thus, methods and insights from the transactional and collaborative memory literature may be used to design studies examining how vicarious memories are encoded, organized, and retrieved in conversations (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012).

Limitations

First, the interrater reliability coefficients for agency and communion were lower than expected, and, therefore, the study's subsequent results should be treated cautiously, and replications are needed. Second, we could not analyse single episodes, because the coding system we used requires summing scores across episodes to gain sufficient variance for statistical analyses, leaving unanswered questions about whether the relationships found in the study hold across episodes or whether they are specific to some episodes (e.g., episodes from adulthood versus episodes from childhood). Relatedly, we did not systematically collect data on whether episodes had been shared by both partners or occurred prior to the relationship and hence we could not examine how shared versus non-shared events affected results. Third, because the sample consisted entirely of Danish, heterosexual, relationally satisfied couples mostly in their 20's within their first few years of coupledom, these results should be treated with caution when generalizing to other couple populations. Finally, as one of the first studies in this area, many

other features of the narratives were not examined, e.g., whether partners remembered the same events and narrative coherence.

Conclusion

In this study, we collected personal and vicarious life stories from each member of 51 couples and found evidence of perceiver and correspondence effects on agency and communion themes and of perceiver effects on redemption sequences that could not be explained by the similarity of the partners' personal life stories. We also found higher redemption and agency in personal life stories, suggesting that people remember and construct vicarious life stories in a manner that comparatively enhances themselves. The study is thus an important step in showing that the life story level of personality is involved in the way we perceive other individuals' personalities. Together with other studies on vicarious memories and life stories, it indicates that understandings of autobiographical memory may need to be expanded to account for memory of events from other individuals' lives. Although it is seductive to believe that one knows a romantic partner and his or her life in an unbiased way, this study suggests that while our vicarious life stories of romantic partners do correspond to those partners' personal life stories, we also remember their stories in ways that shed light on who we are.

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Appendix A.

Example of one couples' ("Niels" and "Lise") personal and vicarious "low point" episodes with coding for agency and communion themes and redemption sequences.

Personal (about self)	Vicarious (about partner)
Niels' low point stories	
"... one particular time the (arguments between sister and mother) became so intense that my sister took off. ... I was afraid of what would happen. ... **I felt responsible for my twin sister ... and comforted her.**[c] I was often affected by these fights. Not because I cried or got upset, but because I thought that it could easily have been avoided. **Today I have gotten good at managing conflicts**[a,r] - it is not always good, but I'm sure it comes from my childhood when I listened to their arguments."	"Lise's mom moved out of their home when Lise was 18. Her dad was totally out of it and could not relax. He thought about her mother all the time and could not be alone. **Lise felt a huge responsibility and didn't do too well during this period. She couldn't relax and was always on watch.**[c] One evening the mom was visiting a neighbor for dinner. ... Lise told her father that he should not go down to the neighbor's, but when he still did it, she got angry and yelled at him. Lise was incredibly sad and it has taken time to move on after this period and accept her father's actions. **She has however come out stronger on the other side.**[a,r]"
Lise's low point stories	
"One evening, after (my father) and my mother were divorced, we were supposed to eat with him to have some quality time .... My mother was eating at the neighbors, which meant that my father, who was really a mess about the divorce, could not concentrate on the evening with me and my little brother... . I felt frustrated, betrayed and **afraid for his state of mind.** ... **About me, the episode says that I have always taken on others worries ... It makes me empathetic**[c] but has also been a challenge I have had to work on."	"(Niels) is told ... that his father has been unfaithful to his mother for a very long time. ... He is very sad and very disappointed by his father, who he has always looked up to. ... For that reason, it is a difficult episode for him - because his father didn't live up to the ideal and **had made his mother so sad, and because it had an impact on the whole family, which was at risk of splitting up. It says about him that he's a sensitive guy who sees loyalty and family ties as very important.**[c]"

ote. Superscripts indicate bolded text coded for the following: [a] agency theme, [c] communion theme, and [r] redemption sequence.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, Mean difference, Confidence Intervals, T-statistic, Significance and Effect Sizes for Episodes Word Count, Agency, Communion, Redemption, and DAS score.

| | *M (SD)* | Personal versus vicarious | | | | |
		Mean diff.	CI of Mean diff.	*t*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Episodes word count.personal	808.27 (290.85)	189.02	[134.64, 236.43]	7.42	.000	.71
Episodes word count.vicarious.	619.25 (237.45)					
Agency.personal	4.18 (1.70)	0.52	[0.16, 0.89]	2.50	.01	.30
Agency.vicarious	3.66 (1.75)					
Communion.personal	3.51 (1.65)	0.37	[-0.02, 0.77]	1.86	.07	.22
Communion.vicarious	3.14 (1.77)					
Redemption.personal	2.50 (1.31)	0.35	[0.09, 0.62]	2.54	.01	.26
Redemption.vicarious	2.15 (1.37)					
DAS score	118.43 (10.51)					

Note. Bias corrected and accelerated bootstrap 95% CIs reported

Table 2.

Moderated Regression Model with Agency in Personal Life Story Predicting Agency in Vicarious Life Story, Moderated by Relationship Adjustment

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*p*
Constant	3.73	.17	< .001
	[3.39, 4.07]		
Relationship adjustment	0.01	.01	.54
	[-0.02, 0.04]		
Personal	0.17	.11	.12
	[-0.04, 0.39]		
Rel. adjust. x Personal	0.03	.01	.002
	[0.01, 0.05]		

Note. 95% CI reported in parentheses

Table 3.

Conditional Effect of Personal Agency on Vicarious Agency at Low, Medium and High Values of Relationship Adjustment

DAS Value	*B*	*SE*	*p*
1 SD below mean	-0.13	.14	.36
	[- 0.42, 0.15]		
Mean	0.17	.11	.12
	[- 0.05, 0.39]		
1 SD above mean	0.47	.14	.001
	[0.19, 0.76]		

Note. 95% CI reported in parentheses

Table 4.

Hierarchical Linear Regression Model of Personal Life Story Agency and Partner's Personal Life Story Agency as Predictors of Vicarious Life Story Agency

Predictor	B	SE B	β	p	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1					.07	
Constant	2.53	.45		< .001		
	[1.64, 3.43]					
Personal	.27	.10	.26	.01		
	[0.07, 0.47]					
Step 2					.15	.08
Constant	1.39	.58		.02		
	[0.25, 2.53]					
Personal	.25	.10	.24	.01		
	[0.06, 0.44]					
Partner.personal	.29	.10	.28	.003		
	[0.10, 0.48]					

Note. Bias corrected and accelerated bootstrap 95% CI reported in parentheses.

Table 5.

Hierarchical Linear Regression Model of Personal Life Story Communion and Partner's Personal Life Story Communion as Predictors of Vicarious Life Story Communion

Predictor	B	SE B	β	p	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1					.09	
Constant	2.00	.40		< .001		
	[1.21, 2.79]					
Personal	.33	.10	.30	.002		
	[0.12, 0.53]					
Step 2					.26	.17
Constant	.20	.53		.71		
	[-0.85, 1.24]					
Personal	.39	.10	.37	< .001		
	[0.21, 0.58]					
Partner.personal	.45	.10	.41	< .001		
	[0.26, 0.63]					

Note. Bias corrected and accelerated bootstrap 95% CI reported in parentheses.

Table 6.

Actor Partner Interdependence Models of effect estimates of Personal Life Story and

Partner's Personal Life Story on Vicarious Life Story within couples distinguishable

by gender on Agency, Communion, and Redemption.

	Parameter	B	SE	95%CI	p
Agency	Interaction				
	Intercept	0.05	.16	[-0.27, 0.37]	.76
	Gender	0.25	.17	[-0.08, 0.59]	.13
	Personal women.men	0.31	.10	[0.11, 0.51]	.002
	Partner.personal women.men	0.28	.10	[0.08, 0.47]	.01
	Personal x gender	0.17	.10	[-0.03, 0.37]	.09
	Partner.personal x gender	-0.04	.10	[-0.24, 0.15]	.67
	Main Effects				
	Intercept.women	0.30	.24	[-0.18, 0.79]	.23
	Intercept.men	-0.20	.22	[-0.64, 0.24]	.36
	Personal x Women	0.49	.16	[0.16, 0.82]	.004
	Personal x Men	0.14	.12	[-0.09, 0.37]	.23
	Partner.personal x Women	0.24	.13	[-0.02, 0.49]	.07
	Partner.personal x Men	0.32	.15	[0.02, 0.61]	.04
Communion	Interaction				
	Intercept	-0.02	.16	[-0.34, 0.29]	.88
	Gender	0.29	.15	[-0.001, 0.59]	.05
	Personal women.men	0.34	.09	[0.15, 0.53]	.001
	Partner.personal women.men	0.46	.10	[0.26, 0.65]	<.001

	Personal x gender	0.17	.09	[-0.02, 0.35]	.08
	Partner.personal x gender	.01	.10	[-0.18, 0.21]	.90
	Main Effects				
	Intercept.women	0.27	.24	[-0.20, 0.74]	.26
	Intercept.men	-0.32	.19	[-0.70, 0.07]	.12
	Personal x Women	0.50	.13	[0.24, 0.76]	<.001
	Personal x Men	0.17	.14	[-0.10, 0.45]	.22
	Partner.personal x Women	0.47	.17	[0.13, 0.80]	.01
	Partner.personal x Men	0.44	.12	[0.23, 0.66]	<.001
Redemption	**Interaction**				
	Intercept	0.01	.12	[-0.24, 0.25]	.96
	Gender	0.11	.12	[-0.13, 0.35]	.35
	Personal women.men	0.46	.09	[0.27, 0.64]	<.001
	Partner.personal women.men	0.14	.09	[-0.04, 0.32]	.12
	Personal x gender	-0.003	.09	[-0.19, 0.18]	.97
	Partner.personal x gender	.13	.09	[-0.05, 0.32]	.16
	Main Effects				
	Women	0.12	.17	[-0.23, 0.46]	.49
	Men	-0.11	.17	[-0.45, 0.23]	.54
	Personal x Women	0.45	.14	[0.17, 0.74]	.002
	Personal x Men	0.46	.12	[0.22, 0.71]	<.001
	Partner.personal x Women	0.27	.12	[0.03, 0.52]	.03
	Partner.personal x Men	0.01	.14	[-0.27, 0.29]	.93

Note. Continuous variables are grand mean centered. CI denotes confidence intervals.