



Background and Aims

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 what we know of close others' life stories and how that knowledge may be related to our own life story². Although there is broad agreement across psychological disciplines that "knowing" another person is not neutral but intertwined with and influenced by one's own personality^{3,4,5}, the question of whether this influence extends to *life story* knowledge of others remains largely unanswered.

Based on research and theory contending that agency and communion function as superordinate themes in life stories⁶ and that redemption and contamination sequences play particularly meaningful roles in life stories⁷ we might expect to find correlations between these themes and sequences in one's own life story and in that of a close other, if our knowledge of ourselves and of close others is indeed related. Based on self-enhancement bias⁸, we might also expect to find a higher degree of positivity, via redemption sequences, in one's own life story than in life story accounts of a close other.

Method

Participants: 51 romantic couples/102 participants (age M=25.3, SD=4.47),

- recruited from local universities, professional and art schools in Aarhus, Denmark,
- cohabitated ≥ 11 months
- native Danish speakers

Procedures: Participants give computer written responses in separate rooms, but simultaneously.

- Part 1*:** "The Life Story Interview"⁹ (abbreviated) about self
- Part 2*:** "The Life Story Interview" about partner
* Counterbalanced and blinded to Part 2 task
- Part 3:** Dyadic Adjustment Scale¹⁰ questionnaire

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

- Chapters: Briefly describe main chapters
- Episodes: 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

Case example: Low point episodes for Niels, 25, and Lise, 23

Niels' describes his own "low point"

"... 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. I was often affected by these quarrels. 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 - it is not always good, but I'm sure it comes from my childhood when I listened to the quarreling." ♦

Niels describes Lise's "low point"

"Lise's mom moved out of their home when Lise was 18. Her dad was totally upset and Lise felt a huge responsibility and did not do too well during this period. One evening the mom was visiting a neighbor for dinner...Lise said to her father that he should not go down to the neighbor's, but when he still did it, she became angry and shouted 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." ♦

Lise describes her own "low point"

"One evening, after (my father) and my mother were divorced, we were supposed to eat with him ... 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 but has also been a challenge I have had to work on."

Lise describes Niels' "low point"

"He is told one day in the 1st or 2nd grade by his mother and father, that his father has been unfaithful to his mother for a very long time, which results in the father moving away from them in a while, so they can think things over. He is very sad and very disappointed by his father, who he has always looked up to ... It says about him that he's a sensitive guy who sees loyalty and family ties as a very important thing. He can easily get angry, disappointed and upset if he is personally impacted on his emotions and important values."

Coding

Interviews coded by 2-3 raters for presence of theme or sequence.

- Agency Themes:** Self-Mastery, Status/Victory, Achievement/Responsibility, Empowerment
- Communion Themes:** Love/friendship, Dialogue, Caring/Helping, Unity/Togetherness¹¹
- Redemption Sequence (♦):** Significant bad event/state redeemed by causing or being chronologically followed by positive state or event¹²
- Contamination (●):** Initially positive or tolerable event/state spoiled or contaminated by causing or being followed by a negative state/event¹³

Expected Results

- Participants' own life stories will be significantly positively correlated to the life stories they tell of their partners on agency and communion themes and redemption and contamination sequences
- Participants' own life stories will express a higher degree of positivity than the life stories they tell of their partners.

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