Introduction

Self-enhancement is one of the most influential self-motives which pushes individuals to increase the positivity of their self-concept and to protect their self-concept from negative information (e.g. Aliche & Sedikides, 2000). Positive illusions and the self-serving bias are two mechanisms associated with the self-enhancement motive. Positive illusions deal with the tendency to perceive the self more favorably than the average other is perceived. Self-serving bias relates to the tendency to make internal responsibility attributions for positive events but to make external responsibility attributions for negative events. In couple relationships the most salient self-representation is not the individual self but the relational self (couple identity). In this context individuals are motivated to enhance and protect their partner and to maintain the relationship. Cognitive biases like positive illusions and the self-serving bias are transformed in order to achieve this goal. Positive illusions are extended to one’s couple relationship so that people tend to perceive their relationship favorably when compared to the relationship of the average other. The self-serving bias displays a reversed pattern: people tend to manifest the other-serving bias, giving credit to the partner for a success and blaming themselves for a failure.

Research overview

Positive illusions about couple relationship and the other-serving bias will be analyzed in premarital and dating couples. The influence of intrusive parenting on these two pro-relationship biases will be also investigated. Intrusive parenting is a particular insidious parental behavior that intrudes upon offspring’s psychological self, hindering the development of an independent sense of self and identity (Barber, 1996, 2002). In particular this work tests the hypothesis that intrusive parenting hinders the process of building a couple identity. Study 1 and 2 are dedicated to the examination of couple positive illusions whereas study 3 investigates the other serving bias.

Study 1

Aim
Identify predictors and outcomes of couple positive illusions. Two main research questions guided the present study:
1. What factors may affect the establishment of couple positive illusions?
2. Is there a linkage between couple positive illusions and well-being?

Method
337 premarital couples (Females: M age = 29.2, Males: M age = 31.5; Mean relationship duration: 6.2 years) filled in a questionnaire assessing the following constructs: couple positive illusions, family positive illusions, centrality of relationship, and family positive illusions. The continuity relation between family positive illusions and couple positive illusions is bidirectional. Intrusive parenting moderates the concurrent and longitudinal relationship between family positive illusions and couple positive illusions only for women.

Results
Couple positive illusions at time 2 are predicted by centrality of relationship and family positive illusions at time 1. For men the relationship between centrality of relationship and couple positive illusions is bidirectional. Intrusive parenting moderates the concurrent and longitudinal relationship between family positive illusions and couple positive illusions.

Study 2

Aim
Analyze the longitudinal relations among couple positive illusions and their predictors. Two main research questions guided this study:
1. Are couple positive illusions, family positive illusions and centrality of relationship related over time? And if so, what is the direction of causal effects?
2. Does intrusive parenting moderate the longitudinal relationship between couple positive illusions and family positive illusions?

Method
A subsample of couples of study 1 (N+125, 250 individuals ) filled in a questionnaire approximately 18 months later the first data completion. Data were analyzed through cross-lagged stability models.

Results
Cross-partner effects like the influence of partners’ family positive illusions on one’s couple positive illusions and the implications of partners’ couple positive illusions for one’s well-being. The assumption of the couple as the unit of analysis allowed to discover interesting cross-partner effects like the influence of partners’ family positive illusions on one’s couple positive illusions and the implications of partners’ couple positive illusions for one’s well-being. Study 2, relying on longitudinal data, clarified the direction of causal effects among couple positive illusions and antecedents identified in study 1, centrality of relationship and family positive illusions. Moreover, it provided evidence of the longitudinal influence of intrusive parenting on the establishment of couple positive illusions for women. Due to the relatively small size of the sample, it was not possible to estimate simultaneously both partners’ paths. Nevertheless, some interesting differences between women and men emerged with respect especially to the influence of intrusive parenting on couple positive illusions. Study 3 tested the influence of intrusive parenting on partners’ responsibility attributions for a dyadic outcome. This study differed from the first two studies as it focused on another form of pro-relationship bias, the other-serving bias, and did not rely on self-report data but employed an experimental procedure.

Conclusions

Study 1, drawing on cross-sectional data, provided a global picture of couple positive illusions, investigating unexplored antecedents and confirming their adaptive function. Moreover, it documented that an intrusive family context has repercussions on the process of establishment of positive illusions by moderating the contingency relation between family positive illusions and couple positive illusions. The assumption of the couple as the unit of analysis allowed to discover interesting cross-partner effects like the influence of partners’ family positive illusions on one’s couple positive illusions and the implications of partners’ couple positive illusions for one’s well-being. Study 2, relying on longitudinal data, clarified the direction of causal effects among couple positive illusions and antecedents identified in study 1, centrality of relationship and family positive illusions. Moreover, it provided evidence of the longitudinal influence of intrusive parenting on the establishment of couple positive illusions for women. Due to the relatively small size of the sample, it was not possible to estimate simultaneously both partners’ paths. Nevertheless, some interesting differences between women and men emerged with respect especially to the influence of intrusive parenting on couple positive illusions. Study 3 tested the influence of intrusive parenting on partners’ responsibility attributions for a dyadic outcome. This study differed from the first two studies as it focused on another form of pro-relationship bias, the other-serving bias, and did not rely on self-report data but employed an experimental procedure.

Findings of these three studies reveal that intrusive parenting has implications for mechanisms involved in the maintenance of couple identity, suggesting that couple processes do not stem exclusively from relationship experiences but may be shaped also by what each partner brings to the union in terms of family experiences (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).