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Multiple Levels of Influence on Wellbeing: Individual Factors, Relationships, and Life Events

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Chapter 1:

General Introduction

Improving happiness and life satisfaction is one of the main goals of international organizations and governments, because deficits in psychological wellbeing are unfortunately very common. The World Health Organization (2014) reported that 400 million people around the world suffer from depression. Furthermore, most people strive for having and sustaining a high level of psychological wellbeing (Diener, 2000; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). For example, in a study across 42 countries, 69% and 62% of 7,204 participants associated happiness and life satisfaction with the highest level of importance, respectively (Diener, 2000). These numbers indicate that understanding the predictors of psychological wellbeing can not only provide information for prevention and intervention programs, but also contribute to a better quality of life.

Several factors, including, but not limited to, demographics, physical health, individual differences (e.g., personality characteristics), interpersonal relationships, and life events influence wellbeing (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). Nevertheless, demographic factors such as age and gender explain only a small amount of variance of wellbeing (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener et al., 1999, 2003). Thus, the examination of additional factors, particularly psychological processes due to individual differences, interpersonal relationships, and life events can crucially contribute to our scientific knowledge on wellbeing.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the research on psychological wellbeing with a focus on individual differences (e.g., self-control), relationships (e.g., interpersonal and family relationships), and life events (e.g., child loss). For this purpose, I present four empirical chapters. Specifically, I first demonstrate how self-control and individual wellbeing are interrelated (Chapter 2). In two chapters (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), I focus on the role self-control plays in harmonious and trustworthy romantic and family relationships. Finally, Chapter 5 shows how a major life event, namely child loss, influences bereaved parents' relationship wellbeing.

In this introductory chapter, I will set the stage for the empirical chapters. I will first define psychological wellbeing, and present an overview of its link to individual differences, interpersonal relationships, and major life events. I will continue with the definition of self-control, and review the literature on the role of self-control in individual and relationship wellbeing. I will then zoom in on the research examining the effects of major life events, particularly of child loss, on

wellbeing. I will conclude this introductory chapter with a summary of the goals of each empirical chapter in this dissertation.

Wellbeing and Individual Differences, Relationships, and Life Events

In this dissertation, my focus is on subjective psychological wellbeing, which can be defined as people's own perceptions of their psychological wellbeing (Diener & Lucas, 2000). Higher levels on this perception broadly refer to a feeling of happiness and absence of pain (Diener, 2000). Furthermore, subjective psychological wellbeing includes both broad evaluations of wellbeing such as life satisfaction, and satisfaction in a specific domain such as relationship satisfaction (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 2003; Luhmann et al., 2012). Although some studies used objective physical indicators of wellbeing such as cortisol and blood glucose levels (e.g., Bedgood, Boggiano, & Turan, 2014; Stanton, Campbell, & Loving, 2014; Steptoe, Wardle, & Marmot, 2005), this dissertation draws attention to people's own assessments about the quality of their wellbeing. Furthermore, as detailed below, this dissertation focuses on the roles of individual differences, relationships, and life events in wellbeing.

Wellbeing and Individual Differences

Individual differences figure prominently among the factors that affect wellbeing (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 2003). It is well-known that some people report greater wellbeing than others. Previous research on the role of individual differences in wellbeing mostly concentrated on the Big Five personality dimensions (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness) (DeNeve, 1999; Lucas & Fujita, 2000). Nevertheless, in a meta-analysis of 137 personality traits, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) showed that the effects of control-related variables (e.g., perceived control, locus of control, desire for control) on wellbeing were stronger than the effect of neuroticism, which had the strongest association with wellbeing among the Big Five dimensions. Although the relation of wellbeing to neuroticism was $r = -.27$, its links to perceived control, locus of control (vs. chance), and desire for control were $r = .29$, $r = .34$, and $r = .34$, respectively. These results indicate the importance of perceived mastery (i.e., perceived control), belief in capability (i.e., locus of control), and motivation to exert influence on the external events (i.e., desire for control) for subjective wellbeing. Two recent studies add to these findings by showing that the ability to control one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, namely self-control, too is positively related to happiness and life satisfaction (Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese,

& De Ridder, 2014; Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2013; see below for more information). Extending these recent findings, this dissertation (Chapter 2) focuses on self-control as an individual predictor of wellbeing. Specifically, in Chapter 2, I examined how between-person and within-person processes in self-control and wellbeing are interrelated.

Wellbeing and Relationships

Interpersonal relationships have a major influence on wellbeing too. Having intimate and trustworthy relationships with significant others (e.g., romantic partners, family members, friends) boosts our psychological and physical wellbeing (Frost & Forrester, 2013; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Stack & Eshleman, 1998). Human beings have a need to belong to other people, and want to satisfy this need by developing and maintaining reliable and harmonious relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This belongingness need is so substantial that when it is thwarted, people may engage in hostile and aggressive behaviors toward their partner and other people (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Furthermore, people look for stability in their relationship wellbeing. People, whose relationship satisfaction with the partner fluctuates over time, report higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower levels of life satisfaction compared to people, whose relationship satisfaction is stable and balanced (Whitton, Rhoades, & Whisman, 2014; Whitton & Whisman, 2010). Considering the importance of relationships for wellbeing, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 in this dissertation focus on romantic (i.e., marriage) and family relationships, respectively. Specifically, Chapter 3 examined how self-control can contribute to the maintenance of harmonious relationships by forestalling behavior that may undermine relationships in the long-run, namely privacy intrusion (Petronio, 1994). Chapter 4 investigated whether family members detect each other's self-control levels as a gauge for their trustworthiness, one of the main sources of wellbeing in families (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004).

Wellbeing and Life Events

The last influence on wellbeing I cover in this dissertation is the influence of major life events. A recent meta-analysis, which included 188 papers focusing on eight life events (e.g., bereavement, divorce, unemployment), different cultures, and varying time periods, showed that although the strength of people's first reaction and the adaptation process depend on the type of life event, all eight life events considerably affected people's subjective wellbeing (Luhmann et al., 2012).

For example, people were faster in adapting (i.e., returning back to the initial wellbeing level) to unemployment than they were in adapting to divorce. Most relevant for this dissertation is the finding that bereavement was one of the life events that had the strongest initial negative effect on subjective wellbeing of all life events that were investigated.

Life events affect not only individual wellbeing of the people concerned, but also their relationship wellbeing (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Neff & Karney, 2004; Story & Bradbury, 2004). For example, bereaved parents are likely to experience a decrease in their relationship satisfaction over time, and are more likely to get divorced than non-bereaved parents (Gottlieb, Lang, & Amsel, 1996; Lyngstad, 2013). Chapter 5 of this dissertation therefore, aims to contribute to the research on the influence of life events on wellbeing by zooming in bereaved parents' relationship wellbeing. Specifically, I examine the effect of parents' perception of each other's grief level on their relationship wellbeing over time.

Self-Control and Individual and Relationship Wellbeing

Self-control is defined as the ability to inhibit temptations, alter or override unwanted responses, resist short-term rewards for long-term goals, and regulate behaviors so as to bring them into agreement with some internal or external standards (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Tangney, Boone, & Baumeister, 2004). In this dissertation, my approach is to consider self-control as an umbrella term, which links psychological concepts (e.g., self-regulation, impulsivity, executive functioning, willpower) from different disciplines (e.g., Bridgett, Burt, Edwards, & Deater-Deckard, 2015; Finkenauer et al., 2015).

Although many papers on self-control have been published, especially in the past few decades, research on the definition and functions of self-control is still evolving and developing (e.g., Ent, Baumeister, & Tice, 2015; Fujita, 2011; Galla & Duckworth, in press; Inzlicht, Legault, & Teper, 2014). For example, even though previous studies mostly focused on self-control's role in resisting impulses, recent studies revealed that people with higher levels of self-control are also better able to avoid, not only resist, conflicts and temptations (Ent et al., 2015; Hofmann et al., 2013; Hofmann, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012). That is, people with high self-control seem to organize and manage their lives in order not to experience dilemmas and conflicts, and stick to their beneficial habits; and they do so better and more effectively than people low in self-control (Galla & Duckworth, in press; Hofmann et al., 2013). Another function of self-control is that it enables people to devalue

short-term distractions and temptations so as to reach long-term goals (Myrseth, Fishbach, & Trope, 2009; Pronk, Karremans, & Wigboldus, 2011). Thus, self-control serves beneficial outcomes through different means and processes (Fujita, 2011), and across the life-span (Moffitt et al., 2011). Research reveals different mechanisms on how self-control promotes wellbeing and positive outcomes; despite these differences in how self-control affects wellbeing, as detailed below, there is a general consensus that self-control has beneficial effects across several life domains (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Fujita, 2011).

Self-Control and Individual Wellbeing

Self-control is linked to various positive outcomes in life. For example, self-control is positively related to academic and vocational success, eating healthy, and exercising (Daly, Delaney, Egan, & Baumeister, 2015; De Ridder et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004). Childhood self-control predicts success and health during the adulthood (Daly et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2011). Recent studies also revealed the beneficial effects of self-control on happiness and life satisfaction through its role in avoiding conflicts and engaging in goal-oriented and habitual behaviors (Cheung et al., 2014; Galla & Duckworth, in press; Hofmann et al., 2013).

Despite the evidence showing that people with higher levels of self-control are happier (Cheung et al., 2014; Hofmann et al., 2013), this finding is limited to between-person differences in self-control. Nevertheless, self-control level also fluctuates across time and situations within the same person. To illustrate, people feel depleted after they engage in a socially demanding and challenging task (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005), or when they were not able to sleep well the day before (Christian, & Ellis, 2011). No research however, examined the association between fluctuations in self-control and wellbeing. In order to fill this gap in the literature, this dissertation (Chapter 2) investigates whether within-person fluctuations in self-control over time are related to wellbeing.

Research on the link of self-control to wellbeing also fails to consider the possible bidirectional association between self-control and wellbeing. Regarding the correlation between personality factors and subjective wellbeing, for example, Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003) noted that (p. 407) “Whether researchers focus on traits or on other nontrait personality factors, they must be careful not to make inferences about causal priority from correlational data.” Indeed, in addition to the studies mentioned above, which demonstrated a positive effect of self-control on wellbeing, research also indicated a positive effect of wellbeing on self-control

(Isen & Reeve, 2005; Labroo & Patrick, 2009; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). Nevertheless, all of these studies focused on only one side of the story, and no study has examined the reciprocal association between self-control and wellbeing. This dissertation (Chapter 2) therefore seeks to contribute to the literature by examining the reciprocal association between self-control and wellbeing.

Self-Control and Relationship Wellbeing

Self-control is influential not only on individual wellbeing, but also on relationship wellbeing. For example, people with higher levels of self-control are more likely to show accommodating behaviors toward their partner (Finkel & Campbell, 2001), forgive others (Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010), and keep their promises (Peetz & Kammrath, 2011). Furthermore, compared to people with low levels of self-control, people with high levels of self-control are less likely to engage in aggressive and violent behaviors in interpersonal relationships even when they are provoked by their partner and tempted to behave aggressively in return (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Finkenauer et al., 2015). Thus, self-control enables people to override impulses and regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors for the sake of their relationships with significant others.

Research also indicated that one of the functions of self-control in interpersonal relationships is providing the ability to balance self-interests and partner-interests (Pronk & Righetti, 2015; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Sheldon & Fishbach, 2015). Maintaining a balance between these interests is one of the main challenges in relationships, and the lack of this balance has destructive effects on relationship wellbeing (Baxter, 1990; Rankin-Esquer, Burnett, Baucom, & Epstein, 1997; Saffrey, Bartholomew, Scharfe, Henderson, & Koopman, 2003). In the case of imbalance between self-interests and partner-interests, people sometimes engage in intrusive behaviors toward their partner to pursue the goal of having a closer relationship, or to feel reassured about their partner's commitment (Lavy, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2009; Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011). This dissertation (Chapter 3) seeks to investigate whether, and under which circumstances, self-control contributes to well-balanced relationships by providing people the capacity to refrain themselves from intruding into their partner's privacy.

Because interpersonal and family relationships are affected by the characteristics and behaviors of all partners; not only people's own level of

self-control, but also their significant others' levels of self-control influence relationships. For example, Righetti and Finkenauer (2011) demonstrated that people are more likely to trust strangers and their partner if they perceive them to have higher levels of self-control. People detect other people's self-control levels by observing their behaviors. Past behaviors such as forgiveness, or behaviors conducive to goal-achievement indicate the level of a person's self-control, which, in turn, positively relates to the trust in that person. Even thinking of a high self-control person has some benefits. For example, thinking of a friend who has high self-control activates thoughts about self-control, which, in turn, results in better performance on tasks requiring self-control resources (VanDellen & Hoyle, 2010). Hence, not only our own self-control level but also significant others' self-control levels influence our behaviors and outcomes (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2015; Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). This dissertation (Chapter 4) considers these findings and examines the role family members' self-control level plays in other family members' trust in them.

Overall, abundant research has shown that self-control contributes to both individual and relationship wellbeing. Three chapters of this dissertation therefore focus on the role of self-control in wellbeing. Nevertheless, as detailed below, uncontrollable life events affect our wellbeing too (Luhmann et al., 2012). The last empirical chapter in this dissertation, therefore, focuses on one of the most important, devastating, and uncontrollable life-events that people can be confronted with, namely the loss of a child (Paykel, Prusoff, & Uhlenhuth, 1971).

Loss of a Child and Individual and Relationship Wellbeing

Major life events such as severe illness or unemployment are traumatic and devastating (Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2003; Turner & Lloyd, 1995). In this dissertation, I focus on one specific life event, namely child loss. Many studies have demonstrated the considerable effects of child loss on individual wellbeing. For example, bereaved parents suffer from high levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and negative emotions (e.g., Rogers, Floyd, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Hong, 2008; Wing, Clance, Burge-Callaway, & Armistead, 2001). Nevertheless, until recently, the interpersonal context of child loss has received only little attention in research (Stroebe, Schut, & Finkenauer, 2013a). This is surprising, because interpersonal relationships and the family context affect and are affected by bereaved parents' reactions to loss (Albuquerque, Pereira, & Narciso, in press; Gilbert, 1996).

Some studies demonstrated that relationship satisfaction levels of bereaved parents decrease over time (Gottlieb et al., 1996; Lyngstad, 2013). A recent study

revealed that holding back grief reactions (e.g., hiding emotions, trying to stay strong) for the sake of the partner increases not only the holder's but also the partner's grief level (Stroebe et al., 2013b). These findings suggest that grief after losing a child is an interpersonal process between bereaved parents, and their reactions to loss affect not only themselves, but also their partner. This dissertation (Chapter 5) considers the interparental (i.e., relational) consequences of child loss, and investigates how bereaved parents' perceptions of their partner's grief level compared to theirs' influence their relationship satisfaction.

Overview of the Present Dissertation

Together the chapters in this dissertation investigate how individual factors (e.g., self-control), relationships (e.g., interpersonal and family relationships), and life events (e.g., child loss) shape our wellbeing. In three chapters, my focus is on the contribution of self-control to individual (Chapter 2) and relationship wellbeing (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4). One chapter (Chapter 5) examines how an uncontrollable major life event relates to relationship wellbeing.

Summary of Goals in Empirical Chapters

In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I have two aims. First, I seek to examine the relations of between-person differences and within-person deviations in self-control to individual wellbeing. The literature examined how between-person differences in self-control relate to happiness and life satisfaction (Cheung et al., 2014; Hofmann et al., 2013). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, no study has examined the influence of within-person deviations in self-control, which can be defined as the intrapersonal fluctuations in self-control over time, on wellbeing. Second, I aim to investigate the direction of the association between self-control and wellbeing, and hypothesize that they mutually reinforce each other. I test the expectations across two longitudinal data sets (27 weeks and 5 years), which are different from each other in terms of participants' age range, nationalities, and relationship status.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the imbalance between self-interests and partner-interests in marriages, which has destructive effects on relationship wellbeing (Baxter, 1990; Rankin-Esquer et al., 1997; Saffrey et al., 2003). Drawing attention to intrusive behaviors toward the partner and extending previous research which demonstrated the preventive effect of trust in the partner on intrusive behaviors (Vinkers et al., 2011), I propose that people also need self-control to refrain themselves from intruding into their partner's privacy. I test this hypothesis using a three-wave longitudinal data collected from newlywed couples.

Following Chapter 3's focus on the protective function of self-control for relationship wellbeing, Chapter 4 seeks to examine the role of self-control in family wellbeing. For this purpose, Chapter 4 examines trust, which is one of the main sources of wellbeing in family relationships (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Building upon previous findings showing that people use strangers' and their partner's self-control levels as an indicator of their trustworthiness (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011), I seek to examine the same question in families. I investigate whether family members detect each other's self-control levels to trust them both in horizontal (i.e., parent–parent and sibling–sibling) and vertical (i.e., parent–child and child–parent) relationships. I test this research question using a full-family design (2 parents and 2 children in each family).

Different from the previous empirical chapters, which investigate the role of individual differences in wellbeing, Chapter 5 examines the effect of a life event on relationship wellbeing. Specifically, in Chapter 5, I investigate whether bereaved parents' perceptions of each other's grief process affect their relationship satisfaction. I propose that bereaved parents, who perceive that they and their partner have similar levels of grief, have the highest level of relationship satisfaction. I also propose that parents, who perceive dissimilar levels of grief with their partner (i.e., experiencing either more or less grief than they experience themselves), have lower levels of relationship satisfaction. I test this hypothesis using a three-wave longitudinal dataset collected from couples who have lost a child.

Thus, following this introductory chapter, this dissertation consists of four empirical chapters on individual and relationship wellbeing. The concluding chapter not only summarizes the key findings of empirical chapters, but also discusses limitations, strengths, and future directions of my research. Chapters in this dissertation were written independently, and empirical chapters have been submitted to scientific journals. Hence, I encourage readers to read each chapter separately despite the similarities across them.

