

VU Research Portal

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

Büyükcan Tetik, A.

2015

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Büyükcan Tetik, A. (2015). *Multiple Levels of Influence on Wellbeing: Individual Factors, Relationships, and Life Events*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Chapter 3:

Self-Control and Relationship Wellbeing: Balancing Self- and Partner-Interests

This chapter is based on Buyukcan-Tetik, A., Finkenauer, C., Kuppens, S., & Vohs, K. D. (2013). Both trust and self-control are necessary to prevent intrusive behaviors: Evidence from a longitudinal study of married couples.

Journal of Family Psychology, 27, 671-676.

Abstract

Many people engage in intrusive behaviors in close relationships. Existing research links intrusive behaviors to a lack of trust and an imbalance between self- and partner-interest. We tested the novel hypothesis that people need self-control in order to regulate intrusive behaviors. Self-control enables people to forgo their self-interests (reassurance or closeness) for the sake of their partner or the relationship. Specifically, we predicted that people need both trust and self-control to refrain from intrusive behavior. One-hundred-eighty-nine couples participated in a prospective longitudinal study with three waves. Consistent with predictions, multilevel analyses revealed an interaction between trust and self-control on intrusive behaviors cross-sectionally as well as longitudinally (albeit marginally). These results provide support for our hypothesis that neither trust in the partner nor self-control is sufficient to forestall intrusive behaviors, but rather both are necessary to refrain from intruding into one's partner's privacy.

Many people engage in intrusive behaviors toward their close relationship partners. People might read their partners' text messages without consent, check their pockets, or enter their room without knocking (Petronio, 1994; Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011). Intrusive behaviors are defined as behaviors that invade the partner's privacy (Petronio, 1994). As one might expect, intrusive behaviors exact serious costs on close relationships, such as triggering conflict between partners (Hawk, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009) and eroding relationship quality (Saffrey, Bartholomew, Scharfe, Henderson, & Koopman, 2003). What is more, intrusive behaviors are common — according to a recent survey, two-thirds (66%) of young adults reported invading their partner's privacy in some aspect, and 81% of them reported knowing someone else who behaved likewise (Derby, Knox, & Easterling, 2012). Given that intrusive behaviors are exceedingly common and have detrimental outcomes for relationship success, it is perhaps surprising how little scholars know about the risk factors that contribute to intrusiveness.

Why Do Some People Snoop into Their Partner's Affairs?

Multiple motives might underlie why some people intrude on their partner's privacy. Previous analyses point to the importance of trust: distrusting partners ascribe harmful motives to their partner and may engage in intrusive behavior to feel reassured (Vinkers et al., 2011). Trust alone, however, does not entirely account for why people engage in intrusive behaviors. Intrusive behaviors may also indicate a need for relatedness with the partner (Lavy, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2009). Yet to maintain harmonious relationships, people need to balance needs for reassurance or closeness with their partner's need for privacy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

We propose that people not only need to trust their partner in order to refrain from engaging in intrusive behavior, they also need good self-control to balance their own and their partner's needs. Self-control is the capacity to foresee the negative consequences of one's actions beyond short-term rewards, inhibit impulses, and exert influence over behaviors (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). In doing so, self-control enables people to forgo their self-interests for the sake of their partner or the relationship (e.g., DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Therefore, we hypothesized that the combination of trust and self-control prevents people from enacting intrusive behaviors toward their partner, such that the lowest levels of intrusiveness would be seen in partners who are very trusting of their partner and who possess good self-control. We tested this hypothesis in a prospective longitudinal study among married couples.

Trust

Trust in one's partner is essential for well-functioning relationships (Simpson, 2007). Larzelere and Huston (1980) defined trust "as a belief by a person in the integrity of another individual" (p. 595). Trust also motivates people to behave positively toward their partner (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). To illustrate, Campbell and his colleagues (2010) found that during conflicts with their partner, trusting people engaged in constructive behaviors (e.g., listening to the partner's ideas), rather than destructive behaviors (e.g., blaming the partner). More recently, Shallcross and Simpson (2012) showed that, as compared to distrusting people, trusting people are more likely to accommodate their partner's request for a sacrifice. These findings suggest that trusting people engage in constructive relationship behaviors even when these behaviors come at a price.

How is trust related to the privacy management and intrusive behaviors in close relationships? Low trusting people view their partner's future behaviors as unpredictable, and are likely to seek information about their partner to reduce this unpredictability (Afifi et al., 2004; Rempel et al., 1985). Indeed, Ickes and his colleagues (2003) showed that people who report low levels of trust in their partner were more motivated to acquire information from their partner — even when it could potentially threaten the relationship. In line with these suggestions, Vinkers et al. (2011) found that trust in the partner buffered the negative effect of lack of partner disclosure on intrusive behaviors. That is, lack of partner disclosure was associated with intrusive behaviors only among people who did not trust their partner. The authors argued that low trusting people used intrusive behavior as a means to reduce uncertainty and gain reassurance elicited by the partner's lack of disclosure.

Balancing Partners' Needs Requires Self-Control

Problems develop when people pursue their own goals at the expense of their partner's (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). These situations present a dilemma: On the one hand, people believe that they have reasons to pursue their self-interest (knowledge about the partner or increase closeness to partner). On the other hand, they have reasons to support their partner's interest (maintain the relationship, adhere to social norms). For example, an interpersonal dilemma may occur when distrusting people seek reassurance (Vinkers et al., 2011) or closeness (Lavy et al., 2009), but have to invade their partner's privacy to do so. In both the cases, not engaging in intrusive behaviors allows people to solve this dilemma by forgoing their self-interest for the good of the relationship (Wieselquist, Rusbult,

Forster, & Agnew, 1999). Given that they are departures from self-interest, not engaging in intrusive behaviors is costly and effortful and requires the exertion of self-control (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010). Therefore, we propose that people need self-control - in addition to trust - to prevent them from intruding into their partner's privacy.

Ample studies confirm the beneficial effects of self-control on behaviors in interpersonal relationships (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). For example, couples with high self-control are more forgiving, have fewer conflicts, and report easier coordination of efforts than couples with low self-control (Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). Finkel and Campbell (2001) found that individuals high in self-control accommodate rather than retaliate when their partner behaves poorly. The wealth of evidence on self-control indicates that it enables relationship partners to enact pro-relationship behaviors by controlling selfish impulses and self-interested behavior.

Overview of the Study

Across three waves of a prospective longitudinal study, we investigated the interaction effect between trust and self-control on intrusive behaviors. We hypothesized that self-control moderates the relation between trust and intrusive behaviors, and expected the lowest level of intrusiveness among people who are high in both trust and self-control.

We also attempted to rule out alternative explanations. Studies showed that people who are highly committed to their partner and satisfied in their relationships are more likely to engage in pro-relationship behaviors than uncommitted and dissatisfied people (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Furthermore, compared to people in shorter relationship, people in longer relationship might have more opportunities to invade their partner's privacy. Vinkers and her colleagues (2011) found that women engage in intrusive behaviors more frequently than men do. Hence, we controlled for the effects of commitment level, satisfaction level, relationship duration, and gender on intrusive behaviors.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Heterosexual married couples participated in a five-wave study on well-being and marriage. The data relevant to the current analyses were collected in the final three waves, each with a one-year interval. There were 189 couples in the third wave. Data from the third wave on trust and intrusive behaviors were reported in Vinkers et al. (2011). In the fourth and fifth waves, due to the attrition,

155 and 139 couples of the 189 couples participated in the study, respectively. Almost all participants were Dutch (98.90% of husbands and 96.80% of wives). During the third wave, husbands' and wives' average ages were 33.89 ($SD = 4.91$) and 30.93 ($SD = 4.26$), respectively. They had been romantic partners for 7.61 ($SD = 2.99$) years on average.

Dutch municipalities provided contact information of the newlyweds for a study on well-being and marriage (for details, see Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, & Branje, 2009). At each wave, partners who accepted to be involved in the study completed questionnaires at home in the presence of a trained interviewer in order to ensure that they completed the questionnaires independently.

Measures

All measures were administered in Dutch. Previous studies established good psychometric properties of all scales used in the present study. Scores were computed by averaging responses across items. Higher scores indicated higher levels.

Trust in the partner. We assessed trust with 12 items of the Trust Scale (Rempel et al., 1985). Sample items were “I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me” and “My partner behaves in a very consistent manner”. We administered items on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*). Cronbach's alphas ranged between .88 and .89 across the three waves of this study.

Self-control. We measured trait self-control with the 11-item version of the Trait Self-control Scale (Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005; Tangney et al., 2004; $\alpha = .72-.78$). Example items were “I am good at resisting temptation” and “I am able to work effectively toward long-term goals” (1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*).

Intrusive behaviors. We used the intrusive behaviors scale by Vinkers et al. (2011; $\alpha = .59-.77$). Participants rated how often they engaged in behaviors, such as reading the partner's emails without permission and trying to find out Internet websites the partner has visited on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*).

Alternative explanations. To assess commitment and satisfaction levels of the participants, we used the 8-item version of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; $\alpha = .93-.94$) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976; $\alpha = .82-.87$), respectively.

Results

Strategy of Analysis

The data were analyzed with the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM deals with the interdependence between the partner variables and the nesting of the consecutive waves of our data within individuals.

We verified the need to use the APIM by checking for significant interdependence across waves and between partners by testing an intercept-only model (i.e., null model) without predictors. We conducted a three-level regression analysis with time (i.e., waves of data collection), individual, and couple levels representing the first, second, and third levels of the multilevel model, respectively. The percentages of the variance at the first, second and third levels were 38%, 49%, and 13% respectively. As such, the largest amount of the variance of intrusive behaviors was situated at the individual level. We also calculated the intraclass correlations (ICC) using variance components (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2010). In terms of intrusive behaviors, there were significant similarities between waves within the same individual and between individuals within the same couple, $ICC_1 = .62, p < .001$ and $ICC_2 = .21, p = .002$, respectively. These significant intraclass correlations confirmed the need to use the APIM, which we did using the SPSS Mixed procedure and standardized variables (Kenny et al., 2006; Peugh & Enders, 2005).

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

As an initial test of our hypotheses, we assessed the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables (Table 3.1). Consistent with predictions, at the individual level, participants' self-control levels and trust in their partners were negatively associated with behaving intrusively.

Table 3.1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trust in the partner	4.19	.49	.34 **	.09 *	.00	.28 **	.30 **
2. Self-control	3.27	.46	.34 **	-.03	.04	.10 *	.09 *
3. Intrusive behaviors	1.87	.35	-.12 **	-.16 **	.14 **	.02	.01
4. Commitment	4.56	.47	.62 **	.14 **	-.02	.27 **	.28 **
5. Satisfaction	110.15	10.99	.67 **	.33 **	-.12 **	.58 **	.38 **

Note. Descriptive statistics show the statistics across three waves of data. Correlations under the diagonal are correlations within individuals, correlations on and above the diagonal are correlations across partners. * $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Because the scores of the partners were correlated, we conducted separate APIM analyses for each variable to test whether average scores of variables varied across gender and waves of data collection. We only observed three significant main effects of gender. Compared to husbands, wives had lower self-control, $b = -.15$, $t(487.70) = -2.24$, $p = .026$, engaged in intrusive behaviors more frequently, $b = .44$, $t(316.25) = 6.72$, $p < .001$, and reported higher levels of commitment, $b = .20$, $t(314.88) = 3.19$, $p = .002$. There was neither main effect of waves nor the interaction effect between waves and gender on the study variables.

Repeated Cross-sectional Associations

For our repeated cross-sectional association analyses, we fitted two models that allowed the intercept to vary across individuals and couples, and the time to have a random slope (Singer, 1998). First, we tested the association between the independent variables and intrusive behaviors. The results revealed main fixed effects of trust in the partner and self-control on intrusive behaviors, $b = -.11$, $t(893.71) = -2.91$, $p = .004$ and $b = -.09$, $t(868.20) = -2.47$, $p = .014$, respectively. Additionally, the model revealed the hypothesized significant interaction between trust and self-control, $b = -.07$, $t(924.52) = -2.52$, $p = .012$.

Then, we checked whether the effects remained after controlling for several alternative explanations and confound variables (Table 3.2). Consistent with hypotheses, this model also showed a significant main effect of trust in the partner, $b = -.10$, $t(930.13) = -2.29$, $p = .023$ and a marginal main effect of self-control, $b = -.07$, $t(827.90) = -1.94$, $p = .053$. What is more, the predicted interactive effect of trust and self-control on intrusive behaviors remained significant (Figure 3.1). We conducted four simple slope analyses to decompose the interaction. The results revealed that self-control scores did not predict intrusive behaviors among people who had low trust in their partner, $b = .00$, $t(828.83) = .01$. As hypothesized, there was a significant negative effect of self-control on intrusive behaviors among people who had high trust in their partner, $b = -.14$, $t(866.88) = -3.10$, $p = .002$. Also as hypothesized, trust scores had a significant effect on intrusive behaviors among people with high self-control, $b = -.17$, $t(926.31) = -3.18$, $p = .002$, but not among people with low self-control, $b = -.04$, $t(918.16) = -.69$, $p = .490$. These results showed that self-control is effective among high trust people and trust is effective among high self-control people, and are consistent with our suggestion that intrusive behaviors are lowest among people who are high in both trust and self-control. Hence, people who both trust their partner and have more self-control are less likely to engage in intrusive behaviors.

Table 3.2
Fixed Effect Estimates for the Study Variables on Intrusive Behaviors

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i>
Intercept	.03	.60 (332.95)	.546
Time	-.03	-.57 (381.45)	.573
Gender	.42	6.37 (304.32)	<.001
Relationship duration	.02	.36 (340.62)	.723
Commitment	.05	1.19 (871.55)	.236
Satisfaction	-.05	-1.29 (874.52)	.199
Trust in the partner	-.10	-2.29 (930.13)	.023
Self-control	-.07	-1.94 (827.90)	.053
Trust in the partner x Self-control	-.07	-2.56 (879.12)	.011

Note. Subsequent analyses showed that the interaction did not differ across gender or waves of the data.

Longitudinal Associations

To examine whether the interaction between trust in the partner and self-control predicted change in intrusive behaviors over the course of a year, we conducted residualized lagged analysis (Kenny et al., 2006). We tested the same three-level models as above, but now used the previous year's trust and self-control to predict following year's intrusive behaviors (e.g., Wave-1's variables to predict Wave-2's intrusive behaviors, Wave-2's variables to predict Wave-3's intrusive behaviors), and statistically controlled for the previous year's intrusive behaviors. Again, we controlled for the effects of commitment, satisfaction, relationship duration, and gender in our models. We conducted APIM for repeated measures data.

Our results in longitudinal analysis indicated that neither trust nor self-control had a main effect, $b = .02$, $t(554) = 0.41$, $p = .684$ and $b = -.05$, $t(554) = -1.31$, $p = .190$, respectively. Yet, their interaction was marginally significant, $b = -.05$, $t(554) = -1.80$, $p = .072$. Note that this marginal interaction did not differ across gender or waves of the data. Simple slope analyses revealed that the only significant relation was the negative association between self-control and the change in intrusive behaviors among people who had high trust in their partner, $b = -.10$, $t(554) = -2.14$, $p = .032$. Put plainly, people who had both high trust and high self-control tended to engage in fewer intrusive behaviors over time than people who had trust but not self-control.

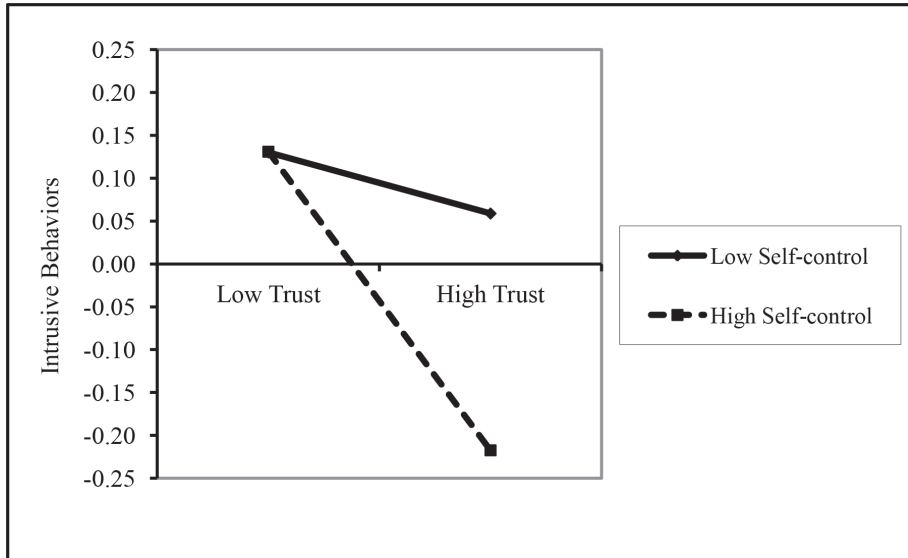


Figure 3.1. The interaction effect between trust in the partner and self-control on intrusive behaviors in the repeated cross-sectional models. High and low levels are represented using the scores, which were one *SD* above and below the mean of the respective scale. The slope of high self-control line was significant. Also, difference between low and high self-control points at the high trust level was significant.

Discussion

We hypothesized that the known beneficial effect of high trust in one's partner was not sufficient for the prevention of intrusive behaviors, but rather that it is the specific combination of high trust and high self-control. Findings from a longitudinal, multi-wave study of married couples supported this hypothesis. We replicated the negative association between trust in the partner and intrusive behaviors (Vinkers et al., 2011) controlling for possible alternative explanations. Our novel contribution was in the demonstration that self-control had a preventive effect on intrusive behaviors, but only among high trusting partners.

We conceptualized intrusive behavior as resulting from, at a distal level, an imbalance where people's self-interest and needs for reassurance or closeness outweigh their partner's need for autonomy and privacy. We therefore proposed that self-control may be key in that it enables people to forgo their self-interests for the sake of their partner or the relationship (e.g., Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Thus, people not only need to trust their partner in order to refrain from engaging in intrusive behavior, they also need high self-control to balance their own and their partner's needs.

Repeated cross-sectional association analyses revealed that the negative association between trust in the partner and intrusive behaviors emerged especially when self-control was high. In parallel, self-control was negatively related to intrusive behaviors but only when trust was high. Although the interaction effect between trust and self-control on intrusive behaviors was marginally significant in our longitudinal analysis, simple slope analyses revealed that high self-control was related to fewer intrusive behaviors over time — but again only among people who had high trust in their partner.

There are of course limitations of the present research. First, given the correlational design of our research, the causal direction of the proposed effects remains to be tested. Although we showed the predicted (albeit marginal) effect of the hypothesized interaction over time, experimental research would complement that finding. Second, although relationship duration varied considerably in our sample, future studies testing the effects of trust and self-control on intrusive behaviors among people with longer durations of marriage would be welcome (cf., Iafraite, Bertoni, Donato, & Finkenauer, 2012).

Based on the literature documenting the detrimental consequences of intrusive behaviors in relationships (Hawk et al., 2009; Saffrey et al., 2003), we considered intrusive behaviors as negative behaviors, which are undesirable in close relationships. Nevertheless, some studies have found that not all people perceive these behaviors negatively (e.g., Sinclair & Frieze, 2005). Some people may perceive intrusive behaviors even as an expression of love and interest. A fascinating area of study would include conditions under which intrusive behaviors are perceived as negative or positive.

Several strengths of this work should also be acknowledged. First, we confirmed our hypothesis that one needs self-control and trust to ward off the temptation of intrusive behaviors, using a prospective three-wave longitudinal design among couples. We showed that the interaction between trust in the partner and self-control held across waves of data collection. Second, we controlled for several confound variables, and showed that the interactive effect of trust and self-control was significant above and beyond the effects of these alternative explanations.

From an applied perspective, our findings suggest that to solve privacy management problems in relationships, couples therapists should consider both interpersonal and personal factors. If professional treatment is indicated, our findings point to the important role that self-control may have for relationships.

In addition to building and repairing trust, strengthening self-control may be critical to not only prevent intrusive behaviors but also increase pro-relationship behavior (Vohs et al., 2011).

As noted in the Introduction, intrusive behaviors have the potential to cause relationship harm and even destruction. What is more, they are depressingly common. The current work suggests that people, who both refrain from acting in a self-interested manner via the judicious use of self-control, and who are highly trusting of their partners, can preclude invading their partners' privacy.