



Intrusiveness from an attachment theory perspective: A dyadic diary study

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ABSTRACT

This 14-day dyadic diary study of 60 heterosexual couples examines links between attachment insecurities, intrusiveness, and relationship dissatisfaction by exploring the effects of attachment insecurities on intrusiveness and examining the daily interplay between intrusiveness and relationship dissatisfaction. We assessed attachment orientations, daily self-reported intrusive behavior, and daily relationship satisfaction of members of each couple. Results indicated that self-reported intrusiveness was associated with actor's attachment anxiety and with their partner's attachment avoidance. Unexpectedly, partner's previous-day intrusiveness was *positively* associated with actor's next-day relationship satisfaction. This association was driven mainly by women scoring high on avoidance. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The high divorce rates in many developed countries suggest a need for better understanding of the causes of relationship break-ups. In the present study we focus on a potentially destructive, understudied relationship phenomenon: intrusiveness (e.g., Betchen, 2005; Hawk, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009). Despite its potential relevance to romantic relationships (e.g., Lavy, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011), only a few studies have examined intrusiveness in such relationships, typically using one-time data collection (e.g., Lavy et al., 2010). Here we report a first attempt to study daily intrusiveness using a diary methodology (across 14 days), and examine its antecedents and consequences in couple relationships.

1.1. Intrusiveness in romantic relationships

Reaching a balance between autonomy and relatedness is a prerequisite for maintaining a satisfying relationship (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Prager & Roberts, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrusiveness implies an imbalance between autonomy and relatedness, with one partner compulsively seeking relatedness while disregarding

the other person's need for autonomy (Lavy et al., 2010). Intrusiveness includes behaviors such as monitoring and influencing a partner's attitudes and actions, invading a partner's self-boundaries, seeking proximity while lacking sensitivity to a partner's needs (Lavy, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2009), violating a partner's privacy (e.g., Vinkers et al., 2011), and generally being overly dependent and controlling (e.g., Savage, 2000).

Intrusiveness in romantic contexts has typically been studied within the context of obsessive love (e.g., Sinclair, Ladny, & Lyndon, 2011), pathological jealousy (e.g., Elphinstone & Noller, 2011), and domestic violence (e.g., Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Intrusiveness has also been explored in studies of surveillance or stalking (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003), and is frequently reported by couples seeking counseling (Betchen, 2005). However, recent studies have shown that intrusiveness is also relevant to couples in non-pathological relationships (e.g., Lavy et al., 2009), and may affect their relationship dynamics and satisfaction (e.g., Fanjoux-Cohen, Mouly-Bandini, Werner, & Green, 1998; Hawk et al., 2009).

1.2. Intrusiveness effects on daily relationship satisfaction

The few studies of intrusiveness in romantic relationships, including clinical case studies (e.g., Betchen, 2005), have yielded mixed claims regarding the relational effects of intrusiveness. Although a study of women subjected to domestic violence indicated a positive association between husbands' intrusive behavior

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(as reported by their wives) and husbands' jealousy and assaultive behavior (reported by their wives; Dutton, van-Ginkel, & Landolt, 1996), studies of couples from non-clinical samples have yielded different results. A study of married couples in France revealed a curvilinear association between women's intrusive behavior and marital satisfaction (Fanjoux-Cohen et al., 1998), and a study of lesbian couples indicated no association between intrusiveness and relationship satisfaction (O'Brien, 2003).

These findings suggest that the relational effects of intrusiveness within pathological relationships (where intrusiveness may take extreme forms) may differ substantially from the effects of intrusiveness in non-pathological relationships (where the proximity-seeking goal of intrusive behaviors may be more salient). In addition, there are possible methodological limitations of the cross-sectional design of the reviewed studies, which were based on the assumption that intrusiveness is a stable trait that can be assessed at a single time point. This assumption overlooks the dynamic nature of romantic relationships and within-person fluctuations in both intrusiveness and relationship satisfaction.

The present study was designed to examine these within-person fluctuations in intrusiveness and relationship satisfaction, using a diary methodology in a sample of non-distressed heterosexual couples. We examined the extent to which intrusive behavior on one day affects partner's relationship satisfaction on the subsequent day. Based on previous studies' findings, we hypothesized daily effects of intrusiveness on relationship satisfaction.

H1. Daily fluctuations in partner's (self-reported) intrusiveness will affect relationship satisfaction on the following day.

1.3. Attachment insecurities and intrusiveness

Understanding personality-related antecedents of intrusiveness is also important. Here we focus on attachment insecurities as potential antecedents of intrusiveness. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), which deals with the maintenance of a healthy balance between autonomy and relatedness, is a useful framework for examining intrusiveness. According to Bowlby (1969/1982), the attachment behavioral system evolved to provide protection and support to members of a highly social species. The system causes a person to seek protection and comfort from supportive relationship partners. If proximity seeking reduces the person's distress, he or she can turn to activities governed by other behavioral systems such as exploration. Engaging in what Bowlby called exploration engenders increased cognitive, behavioral, and social skills, which contribute over time to the development of secure autonomy. Consistent effective reliance on security-providing "attachment figures" (relationship partners who provide what Bowlby called a safe haven and secure base) to reduce their distress typically promotes the ability to alternate efficiently between closeness and self-confident autonomy.

However, when a child's primary caregiver is not an effective security-provider, he or she is prone to develop attachment insecurities that can be characterized in terms of two orthogonal dimensions: attachment anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety is characterized by vigilance regarding the relationship, 'clinginess', and overdependence. Attachment-related avoidance is characterized by reluctance to become emotionally close and with compulsive self-reliance (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for review).

Many studies have shown that attachment insecurities are associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Researchers have suggested that this dissatisfaction results from insecure individuals' difficulties in maintaining a balance be-

tween closeness and autonomy, due to the anxious ones' obsessive desire for extreme closeness (potentially leading to intrusiveness) or to the avoidant ones' extreme self-reliance and emotional distance (e.g., Pistole, 1994). Thus, more anxious people are more likely to experience fear of abandonment (Pistole, 1994) and to stress the importance of closeness when talking about their relationship (Feeney, 1999; Feeney & Noller, 1991); these tendencies can fuel intrusive behavior that threatens a partner's need for autonomy. More avoidant people, especially, are likely to reduce their responsiveness to a partner's need for closeness and to experience such needs as intrusive (e.g., Pistole, 1994).

There is initial evidence linking attachment anxiety with intrusive behavior, and avoidant attachment with a partner's intrusive behavior. Parental intrusiveness is more characteristic of mothers who score higher on attachment anxiety (e.g., Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004), and low partner disclosure (characteristic of more avoidant people; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) predicts intrusiveness (Vinkers et al., 2011) – perhaps to compensate for the partner's distancing behavior. Similarly, in one of our recent studies (Lavy et al., 2010), attachment anxiety was associated with self-reported intrusiveness, and avoidance was associated with perceiving a partner as intrusive. However, that study also yielded unexpected findings, including a positive association between attachment anxiety and perceiving one's partner as intrusive. We decided, therefore, to study the relations between attachment insecurities, intrusiveness, and satisfaction in a more detailed way, using a short-term longitudinal, daily diary methodology. This methodology considers effects of couple dynamics on the above-mentioned associations, and examines them above and beyond daily fluctuations in intrusiveness and satisfaction, while taking into account both partners' attachment insecurities. Based on previous studies, we hypothesized that:

H2. Attachment insecurities will be associated with intrusiveness: Both a person's attachment anxiety and partner's avoidance will be positively associated with self-reported intrusiveness.

We were also interested in the possible moderating effects of partners' attachment insecurities. We hypothesized that a person's attachment-related avoidance, reflecting a high need for autonomy and hyper-sensitivity concerning independence and self-boundaries, would amplify any negative effect of a partner's daily intrusiveness on relationship satisfaction. We also hypothesized that attachment anxiety, reflecting an elevated need for closeness and a high degree of self-reported intrusiveness (Lavy et al., 2010), would reduce any negative effect of a partner's daily intrusiveness on relationship satisfaction. That is, we hypothesized that:

H3. Attachment insecurities will qualify the effects of partner intrusiveness on individuals' relationship satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Both members of 60 Israeli heterosexual couples without children, who had been living together for 1–5 years (*Mdn* = 2 years), participated in the study. Men's ages were 20–37 (*Mdn* = 27); women's ages were 19–31 (*Mdn* = 25). Participants were recruited by flyers posted in universities and other public places, and were paid 400 New Israeli Shekels (equivalent to \$100 US) per couple.

2.2. Measures

Attachment insecurities were assessed using the Hebrew version (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000) of the Experiences in Close Rela-

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