



Within-person variations and between-person differences in self-control and wellbeing[☆]



Asuman Buyukcan-Tetik^{a,*}, Catrin Finkenauer^{b,c}, Wiebke Bleidorn^d

^a Sabanci University, Turkey

^b Utrecht University, The Netherlands

^c VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^d University of California, Davis, United States

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the associations between both within-person variations and between-person differences in self-control and wellbeing. We examined these associations across two diverse samples using longitudinal survey data from 69 American undergraduate students who completed biweekly assessments across 39 weeks in Study 1, and 199 Dutch newlywed couples who completed five yearly assessments in Study 2. Our results showed that both between-person differences and within-person variations in self-control were related to wellbeing. Our research also showed that between-person differences have a stronger association than within-person variations with wellbeing.

Self-control helps people to cope with everyday life, work, and relationships. For example, people with high levels of self-control are more likely to exercise regularly, earn success in their professional life, and maintain harmonious relationships (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). Not surprisingly considering these positive outcomes, recent studies demonstrated a positive association between self-control and psychological wellbeing (Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, & De Ridder, 2014; Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2013). People who have high levels of self-control report higher levels in both feelings of happiness and life satisfaction than people low in self-control (Hofmann et al., 2013).

Although people have high/low levels in self-control or wellbeing on average, their self-control and wellbeing levels are not static. Individuals experience fluctuations in their self-control and wellbeing in daily life (Eid & Diener, 2004; Hofmann, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012). For example, on some days, people are better able to regulate their behaviors, thoughts, and emotions than on other days. Conversely, on other days, people may not have the strength to resist temptations or alter their behaviors. Similarly, on some days, people are happier or more depressed than they are in general. How are these within-person fluctuations in self-control and wellbeing linked to each other?

In contrast to the burgeoning literature on individual differences in self-control and wellbeing, relatively little is known about the link between these two constructs at the within-person level. Research,

however, has shown that associations between psychological constructs do not have to be the same at between- and within-levels in terms of direction and size (Curran & Bauer, 2011). A particularly important and hitherto unanswered question is whether people experience a change in their subjective wellbeing when they experience a change in their self-control. Previous studies on the relationship between self-control and wellbeing have exclusively focused on between-person differences in these constructs, and thus, provide only limited insight into within-person processes. A better understanding of these processes would be critically important to develop interventions designed to boost self-control and/or wellbeing (Curran & Bauer, 2011; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). Hence, the current research aims both to replicate the findings on between-person differences in the previous work and to examine the association between within-person variations in self-control and wellbeing.

1. Associations between self-control and wellbeing at the between-person level

In this research, self-control is defined as the ability to inhibit temptations, override unwanted responses, and regulate behaviors so as to bring them into agreement with some internal or external standards (Tangney, Boone, & Baumeister, 2004). Wellbeing is used as an umbrella term, which covers different indicators of subjective wellbeing,

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* Corresponding author at: Sabanci University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Psychology Program, Universite Cad. No: 27 Tuzla, 34956 Istanbul, Turkey.

E-mail address: asumanbt@sabanciuniv.edu (A. Buyukcan-Tetik).

including positive mood, happiness, absence of depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction. These indicators represent different components of wellbeing such that positive mood, happiness, and absence of depressive symptoms assess the affective component, and life satisfaction measures the cognitive component (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Although the affective component captures the felt wellbeing in the short-run, the cognitive component assesses the overall evaluation of life in general. Research has found a substantial phenotypic and genetic overlap between affective and cognitive components, supporting our approach to use wellbeing as an umbrella term (e.g., Bartels & Boomsma, 2009).

Several possible mechanisms may explain the positive link between self-control and wellbeing at the between-person level. First, individuals high in self-control are better in pursuing and reaching their goals. Successful goal pursuit should then lead to higher wellbeing (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Hsee & Abelson, 1991). Second, the relation between self-control and happiness may be mediated by regulatory orientation (promotion vs. prevention focus; Cheung et al., 2014). Specifically, people with high levels of self-control may be more likely to approach and strive for positive outcomes and future goals (e.g., work promotion) and less likely to focus on preventing negative outcomes (e.g., work failures) than people low in self-control. The focus on positive outcomes, in turn, may have a positive impact on wellbeing.

Third, Hofmann et al. (2013) showed that higher levels of self-control were related to fewer conflicts and temptations in people's everyday life. Similarly, recent studies showed that self-control's positive effects on several life domains are related to avoiding temptations and sticking to beneficial habits (De Ridder et al., 2012; Galla & Duckworth, 2015).

Fourth, wellbeing may also contribute to higher levels of self-control. For example, Fredrickson (2004) proposed that, opposite to the effects of negative feelings (e.g., anxiety), which narrow people's perception and attention, positive feelings may broaden people's mindsets and lead to better self-regulation and improved goal pursuit (Aspinwall, 1998; Fredrickson, 2004; Isen & Reeve, 2005; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Taken together, theory and research suggest that higher self-control may be conducive to increased wellbeing, and increased wellbeing may facilitate self-control.

Previous research has found evidence for positive associations between self-control and wellbeing at the between-person level. However, these findings cannot inform the question whether experiencing increased levels of self-control at one particular time precipitates increased levels of wellbeing, and vice versa. A better understanding of the association between self-control and wellbeing at the within-person level is needed to answer this question.

2. Within-person variations in self-control and wellbeing

2.1. Self-control

Stable and variable components of self-control have often been referred to as trait and state self-control, respectively (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Research has shown that factors such as sleep deprivation (Christian & Ellis, 2011) and resisting temptations (e.g., media use or sex) in daily life (Hofmann et al., 2012) predict decreases in state self-control. Conversely, small acts of encouragements (Hamburg & Pronk, 2015) and mindful meditation (Friese, Messner, & Schaffner, 2012) for example have been shown to lead to increases in state self-control.

2.2. Wellbeing

Although some of the wellbeing indicators are highly variable (e.g., mood) and others are relatively stable (e.g., life satisfaction), all wellbeing indicators contain both variable and stable components to some extent. For example, Eid and Diener (2004) investigated state and trait

components of mood and life satisfaction among college students across three measurements in eight weeks. Because relatively variable part (i.e., state variance) was larger for mood than for life satisfaction, their findings suggested that life satisfaction is more stable over time than is mood. Nevertheless, life satisfaction also had a substantial state variance, indicating that life satisfaction too is to some extent variable. Other experience sampling, diary, and longitudinal studies also showed that wellbeing indicators such as negative affect and positive affect fluctuate across hours within a day, across days, and across years (e.g., Bleidorn & Peters, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012).

3. The present research

In this research, we seek to investigate natural, real-life fluctuations in self-control and wellbeing, and their link with each other. Consistent with earlier findings on between-person associations between self-control and wellbeing, we predicted that within-person variations in self-control and wellbeing are also positively interrelated.

To our knowledge, only one previous study has tested the association between self-control and one aspect of wellbeing (i.e., positive affect) at the within-person level. In their study, Wenzel, Kubiak, and Conner (2016) showed that within-person increases in positive affect were related to the successful use of one specific strategy of self-control, namely distraction (i.e., being able to pay attention to something else other than the impulse), in the presence of strong temptations.

In our research, we aim to extend this finding in three respects. First, in contrast to Wenzel et al. (2016) who investigated only within-person variations, we examined within-person fluctuations independent of between-person differences in self-control and wellbeing (Curran & Bauer, 2011; Hoffman & Stawski, 2009). Second, we investigated the associations between self-control and wellbeing using four different indicators of wellbeing: mood, happiness, life satisfaction, and absence of depressive symptoms. These indicators may have different state and trait variances (e.g., life satisfaction has more trait variance than state variance; Eid & Diener, 2004). Also, the associations between the affective and the cognitive component, respectively, and personality characteristics may vary in strength (Schimmack, Schupp, & Wagner, 2008). Therefore, we will assess whether the proposed association between self-control and wellbeing holds for all these indicators. Last, to examine the robustness and generalizability of our findings, we tested our research question across two different time scales (i.e., 39 weeks and 4 years) and across two different samples (i.e., American students and Dutch newlywed couples).

Our research includes two longitudinal studies, which complement each other. Study 1 followed undergraduate students at an American university biweekly for 39 weeks. Study 2 followed newlywed couples in the Netherlands annually for four years. A large number of assessment waves (14–20 assessments in Study 1; 5 assessments in Study 2) is important to estimate reliable associations between the within-person variations in self-control and wellbeing (cf. Whitton, Rhoades, & Whisman, 2014).

4. Study 1

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants and procedure

Data of Study 1 came from 69 American undergraduate students ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.04$, $SD = 0.43$) who filled out biweekly online questionnaires for 39 weeks. Data were almost equally distributed across gender (51% were males). Most participants were European American (76%) and Asian American (11%); the rest included participants from other ethnicities and nationalities.

Participants were invited to take part in a longitudinal study through flyers distributed at the university campus (for details, see

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