Why do close partners snoop? Predictors of intrusive behavior in newlywed couples

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Abstract

Existing research shows that intrusive behavior has detrimental consequences for relationships. Surprisingly, little is known about why close relationship partners snoop. This study examined why romantic partners engage in intrusive behavior among newlywed couples in the Netherlands. As predicted, the results showed that perceiving a lack of partner disclosure is linked to intrusive behavior, and importantly, that trust moderates this link. Only when people did not trust their partner were their perceptions of partners’ low disclosure associated with intrusive behavior. When people trusted their partner, perceived partner disclosure was not associated with intrusive behavior. These results help to explain why people snoop and highlight the importance of trust as a powerful protective buffer against intrusive behavior in close relationships.

People can be intrusive when it comes to their partners’ private matters. They ask about their partners’ whereabouts, give unsolicited advice, and may even read partners’ text messages without consent, to name just a few examples. Research on intrusive behavior has focused mostly on its consequences, such as increased conflict (Hawk, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009), and the tactics that people use to restore their privacy after it has been violated (Petronio, 1994). These studies suggest that people regard intrusive behavior in close relationships as undesirable and that intrusive behavior may have potentially detrimental effects on the quality of the relationship. Why, then, would people act intrusively toward their partners? Surprisingly, little is known about the circumstances that give rise to intrusive behavior in close relationships. Furthermore, while prior studies have examined intrusive behavior in parent–adolescent relationships (e.g., Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2008; Hawk et al., 2009; Petronio, 1994), little research has investigated intrusive behavior in equal relationships between adults. In this study, we sought to fill these gaps in knowledge by investigating whether married couples exhibit intrusive behavior and delineating possible circumstances in which married partners engage in this behavior.

Defining intrusive behavior

The literature has described different types of intrusive behavior. Covert intrusive behavior occurs without a partner’s permission or knowledge, such as reading a partner’s e-mail in his or her absence (Petronio, 1994). Overt intrusive behavior occurs when people...
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excessively intervene into others’ private matters, such as by meddling with the other’s affairs. In contrast to covert intrusive behavior, the other is aware of this type of intrusive behavior and is typically present when it occurs. Intrusive behavior can also be categorized in terms of intrusive acts and intrusive attitudes, a distinction that we will use throughout this article. Intrusive acts refer to concrete and specific activities, such as checking a partner’s text messages without his or her permission. Intrusive attitudes refer to people’s more abstract judgments about certain behaviors as being intrusive, which reflects that they regard their own or others’ behaviors as intrusive. To illustrate, people may acknowledge that they snoop into their partner’s private affairs.

The literature considers intrusive behavior as a means by which partners can regulate their privacy within the relationship (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Petronio & Durham, 2008). According to communication privacy management theory, people regulate the amount and kind of personal information they reveal to others by creating metaphorical privacy boundaries (Petronio & Durham, 2008), which represent their desired level of control over others’ access to their private information (e.g., internal states or possessions; Petronio, 2002). By acting intrusively, people disregard their partner’s need for personal space, psychological distance, autonomy (Vaughn & Leff, 1981), and privacy (Bok, 1982). Intrusive behavior does not only violate the other’s privacy, however; it also allows people to access and control a partner’s private matters when these matters are otherwise inaccessible (Margulis, 2003). In this sense, intrusive behavior is likely to be functional for the person engaging in it. In line with this functional approach, the clinical literature identifies intrusive behavior as a means to gain psychological control over another’s behavior (Leff & Vaughan, 1985; cf. Fredman, Chambless, & Steketee, 2004).

Intrusive behavior in close relationships

Prior research on intrusive behavior has primarily focused on unequal relationships, in which one relationship partner has more power or status than the other. For instance, studies show that parents exhibit intrusive behavior toward their children (e.g., Hawk et al., 2008; Van Ingen, Moore, & Fuemmeler, 2008), and close relatives of adult psychiatric patients often engage in intrusive attempts to control patients’ actions and choices (Fredman et al., 2004). In these unequal relationships, intrusive behavior negatively affects the relationship quality between relationship partners, as evidenced by increased conflict (Hawk et al., 2009), decreased mutual trust (Petronio, 1994), and high levels of experienced stress and tension during interaction (Cutting, Aakre, & Docherty, 2006). To our knowledge, no research has examined whether partners with equal status or power also engage in intrusive behavior. Furthermore, previous studies have focused on possible consequences of intrusive behavior. Little is known, however, about the circumstances that give rise to intrusive behavior in relationships. Assuming that intrusive behavior has detrimental consequences for the relationship—regardless of the (in)equality between relationship partners—it is important to not only examine whether close partners snoop but also why they do so. The present research begins to answer these questions. Specifically, we propose that intrusive behavior may be the result of two relational processes—disclosure and trust—that are not only at the heart of most relationships (Rubin, 1973; Simpson, 2007) but have also been shown to be closely related to privacy in relationships.

Partner disclosure and intrusive behavior

Disclosure, or the process of revealing personally relevant information, thoughts, and feelings to others (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006), is an important means by which relationship partners regulate their privacy (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Petronio, 2002). Intrusive behavior defies the privacy boundaries established by partner disclosure. Specifically, we propose that when partners engage in high levels of disclosure, people perceive them to have permeable boundaries and do not need to be intrusive. In contrast, when
partners engage in low levels of disclosure, people perceive them to have rigid boundaries and may be more likely to be intrusive to increase their control over, and access to, their partner’s private information.

The literature provides indirect support for this suggestion. Baxter (1979) argued that another’s disclosure serves as the primary relational cue for the extent to which people feel that they are able to access the other’s private information. Indeed, openness about private matters between close partners is indispensable for relationship quality and satisfaction (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). A partner’s disclosure fosters people’s feelings of connectedness (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Waring, Tillman, Frelick, Russell, & Weisz, 1980) and strengthens beliefs that the partner is truthful (Greene et al., 2006). Conversely, when a partner is perceived to withhold private information, people feel hurt, devalued (Feeney, 2004), and excluded by their partner (Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Branje, & Righetti, 2009). Low levels of partner disclosure violate people’s expectations regarding intimate relationships (Baxter, 1986; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001). Thus, a partner’s lack of disclosure is incompatible with people’s desires and expectations toward close relationships, including a permeable privacy boundary (Metts & Cupach, 1990).

Limited access to a partner’s innermost thoughts and feelings undermines people’s confidence that their partner is sincere, emotionally involved, and accessible (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). When a partner violates people’s relational expectations for openness, people experience uncertainty about their relationship (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Knobloch, 2008; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988; Turner, 1990). Conversely, the more people in romantic relationships communicate with each other, the less uncertainty they experience (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Thus, perceiving a lack of disclosure from one’s partner evokes uncertainty and doubts because it deprives people of valuable knowledge about one’s partner and the future of one’s relationship, and contradicts people’s expectations for intimacy and closeness. To cope with these feelings of uncertainty, people may be motivated to increase their access to, and control over, their partner’s private information by engaging in intrusive behavior. Bell and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1990) provide support for this suggestion. They examined the information-seeking strategies that people employ to gain information about their partner’s relational intentions. They found that people engage in intrusive behavior, such as questioning a partner’s friends or listening in on the other’s phone conversations, and that these behaviors yielded information that allowed people to predict the future course of their relationship. Thus, we propose that people engage in intrusive behavior when they perceive low disclosure from their partner (Hypothesis 1).

The protective power of trust

Certain relationship features may attenuate the proposed link between a perceived lack of partner disclosure and intrusive behavior. Trust represents people’s level of confidence that a partner will respond to their needs, can be relied upon, and is concerned with their well-being (Larzele & Huston, 1980; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). When people trust their partner, they perceive their partner as predictable, dependable, and motivated to remain caring and responsive, regardless of what the future may hold. Not surprisingly, trust is argued to be the “antithesis of doubt” (Sorrentino, Holmes, Hanna, & Sharp, 1995, p. 314). Trust dispels doubts and uncertainties about a partner, partly because of its powerful effects on the manner in which people evaluate their partner’s ambiguous behavior (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001). People with high levels of trust in their partner attribute their partner’s behavior to benign intentions, even when they feel that their partner behaved in an unresponsive or inconsiderate manner (Miller & Rempel, 2004). They even transform the meaning of potentially negative information about their partner in ways that confirm their positive expectations (Murray & Holmes, 1993). Conversely, people who do
not trust their partner amplify the implications of a partner’s negative behavior, thereby reinforcing existing beliefs that their partner is not trustworthy (Camper, Jacobson, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Schmaling, 1988).

These findings suggest that trust may serve as a protective mechanism that helps to buffer against the uncertainty people experience when they perceive their partner’s lack of disclosure. Therefore, we propose that trust acts as a moderator on the link between people’s perceptions of a partner’s low disclosure and their intrusive behavior (Hypothesis 2). At low levels of trust, a perceived lack of partner disclosure should be associated with more intrusive behavior. Conversely, at high levels of trust, a perceived lack of partner disclosure should not be associated with intrusive behavior.

Overview of this study

This study examined why romantic partners engage in intrusive behavior. On the basis of the existing literature on relational processes that characterize close relationships and that have been linked to privacy regulation (Petronio, 1994, 2002), we advanced two hypotheses about why romantic partners engage in intrusive behavior. First, we predicted that perceiving low disclosure from one’s partner is associated with intrusive behavior. Because we obtained data from both partners within each couple, we were able to examine our predictions while controlling for confounding factors, such as the dependence of partner’s scores within couples (Cook & Kenny, 2005), and biased perceptions of partners due to projection effects (Kenny & Aticelli, 2001). Specifically, we controlled for (a) respondents’ own disclosure, (b) partners’ own disclosure, and (c) partners’ perceptions of respondents’ disclosure. Second, we predicted that the level of trust in one’s partner moderates the link between perceived partner disclosure and intrusive behavior, in that perceived partner disclosure and intrusive behavior should be negatively associated when people have low trust in their partner, but should not be associated when people have high trust in their partner.

We tested these predictions in a sample of newlywed couples. We included two indices of intrusive behavior, intrusive attitudes (reflecting people’s judgment of their behavior as being intrusive) and intrusive acts (concrete intrusive activities that people engage in). We did not expect different effects for the two indices of intrusive behavior.

We extend current conceptual and empirical work on intrusive behavior in close relationships in three unique ways. First, in contrast to previous work, our study examined intrusive behavior in close relationships that are characterized by equal status and interdependence. Second, although the literature emphasizes that effective privacy management in relationships depends on both relationship partners (Petronio & Durham, 2008), most research has focused on the people whose privacy is at stake (e.g., Burgoon et al., 1989; Hawk et al., 2009; Petronio, 1994). Our study, in contrast, focuses on the people who engage in intrusive behavior in order to illuminate why they snoop. Third, emerging evidence suggests that intrusive behavior may have harmful consequences for relationships, which makes studies on the conditions that may give rise to intrusive behavior all the more important. By investigating two possible predictors of intrusive behavior, perceived partner disclosure and trust, we provide new insights as to when and why people exhibit such behavior.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 188 married couples, drawn from an ongoing longitudinal investigation of newlywed couples in the Netherlands. The mean age of the husbands was 33.74 years ($SD = 4.89$) and the mean age of wives was 30.84 years ($SD = 4.35$). The couples had been married on average for 2.07 years ($SD = 0.09$). At the time of the study, 2% of the wives and 6.5% of the husbands were not doing paid work. The majority of the husbands worked 33–40 hr a week (64%). Wives’ working hours were more variable: 17–24 hr (28%), 25–32 hr
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(29%), and 33–40 hr (29%). Couples were primarily Dutch (98.5% of the husbands and 96.4% of the wives).

Procedure

The sample consisted of newlywed couples who participated for the third time in a longitudinal investigation of well-being and marriage, which started in 2006 (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Of the original 199 couples, 188 couples (94%) participated in the third data collection, during which all data relevant to this article were collected. The present data were collected from April 2008 until June 2008.

At the beginning of the study in 2006, participants were recruited via the municipalities in which they got married. The municipalities provided names and addresses of couples who married in the previous month. Each couple was sent a letter inviting them to participate in a study concerning the factors that contribute to marital and individual well-being. Of all couples, 19% agreed to participate. At that time, we verified that couples were married for the first time, had no children, and were between 25 and 40 years old. During the third data collection in 2008, 124 couples (66%) had one or more children or were expecting a child.

Both members of each couple separately filled out an extensive questionnaire at home, which took about 90 min to complete. During each data collection, a trained interviewer was present to ensure that partners did not discuss questions or answers with each other. After the partners completed the questionnaire, they received 15 euros and a pen set. Furthermore, we increased couples’ commitment to the study by sending them birthday cards, as well as regular updates on the progress of the study via e-mail and the Web site that was created for the longitudinal project.

Measures

Disclosure

We used the Partner-Specific Disclosure Scale (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004) to measure partners’ own and perceived disclosure. Spouses reported the extent to which they disclosed their intimate thoughts and feelings to their partner, as well as the extent to which they perceived this behavior from their partner. The seven items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Example items are “I talk to my partner about my biggest fears,” “I tell my partner what moves me,” and “I share my most intimate thoughts and feelings with my partner.” We calculated the average score for own and perceived (α = .92) disclosure for each partner, separately.

Intrusive attitudes

We measured intrusive attitudes with a Dutch translation of the Intrusiveness subscale of the Level of Expressed Emotion questionnaire (Hale, Raaijmakers, Gerlsma, & Meeus, 2007). The questionnaire has been used previously to examine parent–adolescent relationships, so we modified it for use with married couples. It consists of seven items, which partners rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Example items are “I have to know everything about my partner,” “I am always nosing into my partner’s business,” and “I butt into my partner’s private matters.” Respondents rated their own intrusive attitudes toward their partner (α = .82) and their perceptions of their partner’s intrusive attitudes toward themselves (α = .84).

Intrusive acts

We measured intrusive acts by an adapted version of Petronio’s (1994) questionnaire on privacy invasion in parent–child relationships. The questionnaire includes concrete intrusive activities that pertain to gaining access to matters that people typically consider private. These include internal states, such as feelings and opinions, which may be expressed through verbal or written communications (e.g., e-mail, diary, letters), as well as personal space and possessions (e.g., the content of pockets or drawers). The items for the Intrusive Acts Scale were derived from previous studies on privacy invasion in
Intrusive behavior in marital relationships (Hawk & Keijsers, 2010; Petronio, 1994), further refined and adjusted for use with romantic partners. Couples reported the frequency with which they exhibited intrusive acts. The 11 items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Example items are “... reading my partner’s e-mail without permission,” “... rummaging through my partner’s personal belongings, for example, pockets,” and “... trying to find out which Internet sites my partner has visited.” Again, we measured and averaged spouses’ own ($\alpha = .71$) as well as their perceptions of their partner’s ($\alpha = .76$) intrusive acts.

**Trust**

To assess interpersonal trust, we used the 12-item measure developed by Rempel and colleagues (1985). This scale is one of the most widely used scales to assess trust in close relationships. It includes three components of trust: predictability (e.g., “My partner behaves in a very consistent manner”), dependability (e.g., “I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she made to me”), and faith (e.g., “Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support”). The scale is generally examined as a single average score that emphasizes a people’s expectations that their partner will be caring and act in ways that are responsive to people’s needs (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Partners rated items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). We averaged the scores for each partner ($\alpha = .89$).

**Results**

**Strategy of analysis**

To deal with the nonindependent nature of dyadic data, we used hierarchical linear modeling, a multilevel regression method in which the scores of the two partners are treated as nested within the same dyad (Hox, 2002). Specifically, we adopted an analytical approach that is based on the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny, 1996). The APIM assumes that each dyad member’s score on the outcome variable is not only affected by his or her own score on the predictor variable (i.e., an actor effect) but also by his or her partner’s score on that predictor variable (i.e., a partner effect). Therefore, actor effects are estimated while controlling for partner effects (Cook & Kenny, 2005). For the APIM analysis, we used the SPSS MIXED procedure, which is comparable to the SAS PROC MIXED procedure (see Campbell & Kashy, 2002). All variables were centered prior to analyses.

We present our results in three sections. In the first part, we present basic analyses and correlations for all measured variables. In the second part, we consider the hypothesized link between perceived disclosure and both indices of intrusive behavior. In the final part, we report our findings with regard to the moderating role of trust in this link.

**Descriptive analyses and correlations**

To our knowledge, there is no research investigating whether partners in close, equal relationships engage in intrusive behaviors. To examine this question and explore sex differences and target effects, we conducted 2 (sex: husbands vs. wives) × 2 (target: self vs. partner) repeated measures analyses of variance, with both variables treated as within-couple factors (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). For disclosure, the analysis revealed a significant main effect for target, $F(1,184) = 25.75, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .123$, indicating that partners reported more own than perceived disclosure. There was no difference between husbands and wives, $F(1,184) = .48, p > .05$. The interaction effect was significant, $F(1,184) = 47.40, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .205$, with wives reporting more own than perceived disclosure. There was no difference between husbands and wives, $F(1,184) = .48, p > .05$. The interaction effect was significant, $F(1,184) = 47.40, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .205$, with wives reporting more own than perceived disclosure. There was no difference between husbands and wives, $F(1,184) = .48, p > .05$. The interaction effect was significant, $F(1,184) = 47.40, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .205$, with wives reporting more own than perceived disclosure.
wives, compared to husbands, reported more own and perceived intrusive behavior. For intrusive attitudes, the analysis yielded no main effect for target, $F(1, 186) = 1.80, p > .05$. For intrusive acts, a main effect for target emerged, $F(1, 176) = 9.87, p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .053$. This indicates that partners reported similar levels of own and perceived intrusive attitudes, whereas they reported more own than perceived intrusive acts. Finally, a significant interaction effects emerged for both intrusive attitudes, $F(1, 186) = 31.82, p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .146$, and intrusive acts, $F(1, 176) = 25.04, p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .125$. For both indices of intrusive behavior, wives reported more own than perceived and husbands reported more perceived than own intrusive behavior. Thus, both partners agreed that wives engaged in more intrusive behavior than husbands.

Table 2 summarizes the correlations between all measured variables within each partner and between partners within each couple.¹

### Table 1. Means and standard deviations of self-reported own (o) and perceived (p) variables by sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Husbands</th>
<th>Wives</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclosure (o)</td>
<td>4.12**</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure (p)</td>
<td>4.19**</td>
<td>.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrusive attitudes (o)</td>
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<td>.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrusive attitudes (p)</td>
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<td>Intrusive acts (o)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrusive acts (p)</td>
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<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.48</td>
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</table>

** $p < .01$.

### Table 2. Correlations between variables within and between partners

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<th>4</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Disclosure (o)</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.20**</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Disclosure (p)</td>
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<td>.23**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.26**</td>
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<td>3. Intrusive attitudes (o)</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
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<td>4. Intrusive attitudes (p)</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Intrusive acts (o)</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>6. Intrusive acts (p)</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
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<td>7. Trust</td>
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<td>.54**</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Values on and above the diagonal represent correlations across partners (between-partner correlations) and values under the diagonal represent correlations within individual partners (within-partner correlations). o = own behavior; p = perceived behavior.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Perceived partner disclosure and intrusive behavior

To examine whether perceived partner disclosure is negatively associated with intrusive behavior (Hypothesis 1), we used the APIM. In addition to perceived partner disclosure, we conducted a principal component analysis, which revealed that the items from the two scales loaded on two components, confirming that these scales measure two related but separate dimensions of intrusive behavior. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

¹ As can be seen in Table 2, the two indices of intrusive behavior were highly correlated ($r = .59$). Therefore, we conducted a principal component analysis, which revealed that the items from the two scales loaded on two components, confirming that these scales measure two related but separate dimensions of intrusive behavior. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
Table 3. Testing the moderating role of trust on the link between perceived partner disclosure and intrusive behavior (N = 188 dyads)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intrusive attitudes</th>
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<th>Intrusive acts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>62.95</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1.88</td>
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<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor effects</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclosure (o)</td>
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<td>0.57</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure (p)</td>
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<td>-2.95</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>-3.17</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner effects</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure (o)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure (p)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction effects</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclosure (p) × Trust</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. b-values are unstandardized regression coefficients. o = own behavior; p = perceived behavior.

we included several other predictors in the model to control for the effects of confounds, namely (a) sex, (b) partner-reported perceived disclosure, (c) self-reported own disclosure, and (d) partner-reported own disclosure. All predictor variables were centered around their sample mean prior to analysis. Table 3 summarizes the results of this analysis. Although the effects were small (Cohen, 1992), consistent with our predictions, the analyses yielded significant actor effects of perceived partner disclosure on both intrusive attitudes, \( b = -0.18, p < .01 \), and intrusive acts, \( b = -0.07, p < .05 \). Despite the fact that respondents’ own disclosure predicted their perceptions of their partner’s disclosure, respondents’ own disclosure did not predict intrusive attitudes, \( b = 0.04, p > .05 \) or intrusive acts, \( b = 0.02, p > .05 \).

No significant partner effects emerged for perceived and own disclosure on either indicator of intrusive behavior. Finally, we examined whether the hypothesized link between perceived disclosure and indicators of intrusive behavior was different for husbands and wives. Therefore, we added interaction terms between sex and perceived disclosure in the model, for actor’s and partner’s sex separately. These interaction effects were not significant (all \( ps > .05 \)), indicating that the link between perceived disclosure and intrusive behavior did not vary as a function of sex. In sum, the results indicate that, in support of our prediction, the extent to which spouses perceived disclosure from their partner was negatively associated with their own intrusive attitudes and acts.

The protective power of trust: Does trust act as a moderator?

To analyze the moderating role of trust between perceived disclosure and intrusive behavior (Hypothesis 2), we again used the APIM. To test our hypothesis, we added interaction terms between trust and perceived disclosure to the main effects of perceived disclosure, trust, and sex. This interaction was significant for intrusive attitudes (\( b = 0.37, \))

2. We included these predictors on the basis of preliminary analyses, which revealed that, within couples, perceptions of a partner’s disclosure, intrusive acts, and intrusive attitudes were not only predicted by partners’ reports but also by people’s own reports on these variables. In other words, couples showed so-called projection effects (Kenny & Aticelli, 2001), indicating that people tend to infer their partner’s behavior and feelings by using self-related information. To control for these projection effects, we included these variables in the model (results available upon request).
p < .01), as well as for intrusive acts (b = .27, p < .01). Subsequently, we examined whether the link between perceived disclosure and intrusive behavior was different for people with high levels of trust in comparison with those with low levels of trust. Figures 1 and 2 depict these interaction effects upon intrusive attitudes and acts, respectively.

To test whether the interaction slopes at high (1 SD above the mean) and low (1 SD below the mean) levels of trust were different from zero, we conducted simple slope analyses by regressing both indices of intrusive behavior on perceived disclosure and high and low trust. These analyses revealed that at high levels of trust, the slope did not differ significantly from zero for either intrusive attitudes, $b = .06, t(369) = .66, p > .05$, or intrusive acts, $b = .09, t(369) = 2.02, p > .05$. At low levels of trust, however, the slope differed significantly from zero for both intrusive attitudes, $b = .27, t(364) = -2.65, p < .01$, and intrusive acts, $b = -.17, t(364) = -3.27, p < .01$. This indicates that when spouses trusted their partner, perceptions of their partner’s level of disclosure did not predict their intrusive behavior. Conversely, when spouses did not trust their partner, perceived disclosure from their partner was negatively associated with intrusive behavior. Thus, in support of our prediction, the results show that trust moderates the link between perceived disclosure and both indices of intrusive behavior.

**Discussion**

This study sought to empirically investigate two possible predictors of intrusive behavior in order to explain why married partners snoop into each other’s private affairs. Our findings confirmed both our hypotheses. First, lower levels of perceived partner disclosure were associated with higher levels of intrusive behavior. Second, perceived disclosure was negatively associated with intrusive behavior at lower levels of trust in one’s partner, but not at higher levels of trust.

**Intrusive behavior in close relationships**

Previous research showed that intrusive behavior takes place in relationships that are characterized by inequality in status and dependence, such as parent–adolescent relationships (e.g., Hawk et al., 2008). We expand upon this work by demonstrating that people in equal relationships engage in intrusive behavior, as well. Specifically, marital partners reported enacting intrusive behaviors, as indicated by both the frequency of specific intrusive acts (e.g., reading a partner’s e-mail without his or her knowledge or rummaging through a partner’s belongings) and the strength of intrusive attitudes (e.g., wanting to know everything about one’s partner and one’s awareness of nosing into a partner’s business). Furthermore, couples
agreed that wives engaged more often in intrusive behavior than husbands. This result, although not expected, may be explained by earlier findings suggesting that women are more verbally demanding and seek more emotional involvement than men (Vogel, Murphy, Werner-Wilson, Cutrona, & Seeman, 2007) and that men have a greater need to control their privacy than women (Rosenfeld, 1979).

Our findings did not yield differences between the two indices of intrusive behavior assessed in our study. This lack of differences is not surprising; the high correlation between the two measures suggests that both measures tap the extent to which people defy their partner’s privacy boundaries. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that the two scales assessed related, but different, dimensions of intrusive behavior. More research is needed to pit the two dimensions against each other and examine their similarities and differences.

**Partner disclosure and intrusive behavior**

As hypothesized, perceived disclosure predicted intrusive behavior. People who perceived their partner to display low levels of disclosure intruded on their partner’s privacy. Emphasizing the importance of perceived disclosure, this finding held even when we controlled for gender. This result is striking in the light of findings showing that men and women differ in the value they place on intimate disclosure (Derlega et al., 1993) and in the extent to which they are expected to disclose as a function of their gender role (Dindia & Allen, 1992). The lack of gender differences in our study suggests that people’s relational expectations, including openness (Baxter, 1986) and interpersonal accessibility (Baxter, 1979), are more predictive of their responses to a partner’s lack of disclosure than are more specific, gender-related differences or sex roles.

We can also rule out some alternative explanations for our findings. For example, the negative associations between perceived disclosure and intrusive behavior also held when controlling for people’s own disclosure, indicating that it is no artifact of projection or a “bias of assumed similarity” (Kenny & Aticelli, 2001). We did find evidence for projection, however, in that perceptions of a partner’s disclosure were associated with reports of one’s own disclosure (Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Lemay & Clark, 2008). Nonetheless, our results also show that people detect their partner’s level of disclosure. Importantly, it is the detection of partner disclosure, above and beyond projection effects, that is related to their reports of intrusive behavior. This finding supports our suggestion that when partners are perceived to have permeable boundaries (Petronio, 2002), as reflected by high levels of disclosure, people need not be intrusive. In contrast, when partners are perceived to have rigid boundaries, as reflected by low levels of disclosure, people are more likely to be intrusive in order to increase their access to, and control over, their partner’s private information.

Taken together, these findings are consistent with our suggestion that when people perceive themselves as having limited access to their partner’s private matters—as reflected by a perceived lack of partner disclosure—they become intrusive. We theorized that a lack of disclosure increases uncertainty about a partner and a relationship. Because we did not assess uncertainty, we cannot conclude that intrusive behavior provides a means to reduce uncertainty. However, intrusive acts, such as spying behaviors, have been linked to jealousy, which may represent a specific form of uncertainty about a partner’s commitment (Afifi & Reichert, 1996; Guerrero, 1998). Nonetheless, more research needs to examine the mechanisms underlying the link between perceived partner disclosure and intrusive behavior. Also, future studies should examine whether related communicative behavior, such as perceived concealment (Finkenauer et al., 2009) and topic avoidance (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995), yields similar effects on intrusive behavior.

**The protective power of trust**

As predicted, trust moderated the association between perceived low disclosure from a partner and intrusive behavior. This finding supports our suggestion that trust is an antithesis of doubt (Sorrentino et al., 1995).
Trust may buffer the deleterious effects of a perceived lack of partner disclosure in a variety of ways. First, it may allow people to feel secure in their relationship despite the lack of disclosure from their partner. Indeed, people who feel secure about their partner’s benevolence make optimistic inferences about their partner’s behavior (Murray & Holmes, 1993; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Second, trust may motivate people to use more constructive strategies to deal with their partner’s lack of disclosure. Existing research shows that people who have positive beliefs about the future of their relationship respond constructively to their partner’s unpleasant behavior (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Thus, trust may lead people to explicitly address their dissatisfaction by initiating a discussion rather than responding with intrusive behavior. Finally, trust may deflect any perceived threat to one’s relationship satisfaction and commitment that nondisclosure may elicit (Finkenauer et al., 2009).

These findings further underline trust as a crucial element for relationship satisfaction, maintenance, and survival (Holmes, 2004; Kelley, 1979; Rempel et al., 1985). Given the detrimental consequences that intrusive behavior may have on people’s interpersonal interactions (e.g., Hawk et al., 2009; Petronio, 1994), it is important to shed light on the factors that may prevent people from engaging in this potentially deleterious behavior. Other relational factors may have similar protective effects. For example, commitment may be a key factor as to whether people engage in intrusive behavior (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). People in committed relationships may be able to downregulate the threat posed by perceived lack of partner disclosure, given their long-term orientation, their intent to persist, and their psychological attachment to the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

From a broader perspective, our results raise some interesting questions about the functional value of intrusive behavior in close relationships. We theorized that intrusive behavior may represent a form of information seeking that serves to reduce uncertainty about one’s partner. It may also allow people to prepare for a feared outcome or to prevent it from occurring. The question arises, however, whether intrusive behavior actually helps people to gain reassurance and escape relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, it may only provide a temporary relief of uncertainty. When people find the incriminating evidence that they are looking for, for example, the information may fuel further doubts. The literature suggests that information that is gained through intrusive behavior is often ambiguous and unreliable, which raises doubts rather than firmly confirming or refuting them (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). When people fail to find what they are looking for, intrusive behavior may be negatively reinforced. In line with this suggestion, the existing literature indicates that worried people detect, perceive, and interpret information in such a way that it reinforces and worsens their worries (Craske, 1999; Mathews, 1990). This implies that once people engage in intrusive behavior, they may be drawn into an ongoing downward spiral of uncertainty and intrusiveness, which may have deleterious effects on their relationship. In support of this suggestion, research found that people who frequently grapple with doubts about their partner’s commitment are more likely to break up than those without doubts (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006). Thus, although intrusive behavior may seem an effective coping tool to deal with uncertainty, it may actually perpetuate doubts and reinforce even more intrusive behavior.

**Strengths and limitations**

This study has several important strengths. First, our work is the first to delineate circumstances that may give rise to intrusive behavior in a large sample of newlywed couples. We contribute to the existing literature not only by demonstrating that intrusive behavior occurs in egalitarian relationships, in our study married partners, but also by identifying two possible predictors of intrusive behavior. Second, we obtained data from both partners within each couple, which allowed us
to examine associations within and across couples, as well as to control for confounds caused by the interdependence within couples. Third, our findings extend our current understanding on the tension that exists between disclosure and privacy in close relationships (Petronio, 2002). In contrast to previous work (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004), we highlight the position of the recipient of (non)disclosure to investigate intrusive behavior in close relationships. Our study suggests that the perception of partner disclosure may affect the extent to which people defy their partner’s privacy boundaries. It thereby underscores the notion that successful privacy regulation in close relationships depends on the dynamics of both partners’ behavior, rather than on just one partner’s behavior (Petronio & Durham, 2008).

There are also several limitations to this study. First, because the data are correlational, a note of caution is warranted in the interpretations of our findings. Although our findings may indicate that a perceived lack of partner disclosure among low trusting people may cause these people to engage in intrusive behavior, and our hypotheses reflect such an assumption, it is not possible to rule out alternative interpretations. It is possible that when people do not trust their partner, their intrusive behavior causes them to believe that their partner discloses little private information. This suggests that there may be reciprocal effects between perceived disclosure and intrusive behavior. Second, variables not measured in this study may cause the observed effects of perceived disclosure and trust on intrusive behavior. For example, the literature suggests that people’s self-esteem negatively affects both inferences about a partner’s behavior and the extent to which they feel confident in the strength of their relationship (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, & Rose, 2001). More studies need to examine these suggestions. Third, we examined intrusive behavior in newlywed couples. This prevents generalization of our findings to romantic partners at other stages of their relationship. For example, especially in the beginning of romantic relationships, uncertainty about the future of a relationship is particularly high (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002) and the content and frequency of intimate disclosure are restricted (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). This would imply that the links we found may be especially pronounced in dating couples, in comparison with married couples. Finally, we did not measure whether people who reported relatively low levels of perceived disclosure actually regarded this as a lack of disclosure or as undesirable. It is possible that some people feel that it is perfectly acceptable when their partner does not engage in full disclosure, out of respect for their partner’s privacy and autonomy or because their partner is not a “talker.” Existing research, however, suggests that perceiving a partner as withholding private information is aversive and has detrimental effects on relationships (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Moreover, although this limitation raises additional questions about the underlying mechanism of the link between perceived disclosure and intrusive behavior, it does not contradict our finding that they are indeed negatively associated. Future research that directly assesses the perception of nondisclosure as being undesirable is essential for providing an explanation for its associations with intrusive behavior. Finally, we did not examine the specific issues over which marital partners claim a right to privacy. Married couples share a lot of private information, space, and property, which renders individual privacy an ambiguous concept (Petronio, 2002). Furthermore, even when people are aware that their intrusive behavior violates their partner’s privacy, they may justify it with the rationale that they have the right to access their partner’s private matters (Petronio & Durham, 2008). Future research should illuminate how equal relationship partners view intrusive behavior, privacy, and possible violations thereof. Ideally, these studies should investigate both points of view, namely, the person whose privacy is intruded upon and the person enacting the intrusive behavior.

Conclusion

The overarching goal of this work was to explore the predictors of intrusive behavior in close relationships. We proposed that
perceiving a lack of disclosure from one’s partner may motivate people to engage in intrusive behavior. A perceived lack of partner disclosure, after all, is incompatible with people’s desires and expectations for an open and intimate relationship (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Importantly, we predicted that trust may buffer the link between perceived partner disclosure and intrusive behavior, in that it protects people from doubts and uncertainties about their partner and relationship. A large study among newlywed couples confirmed our predictions, extending our understanding of the potential reasons for snooping into a partner’s private affairs. Underlining the protective power of trust in close relationships, people who trusted their partner did not show a link between perceived lack of partner disclosure and intrusive behavior, but people who did not trust their partner did show this association. Given the detrimental consequences that intrusive behavior may have for relationships, we believe that our study has opened up exciting and important new avenues for future research on intrusive behavior in romantic relationships.

References


