
The Relational Turbulence Model

Communicating During Times of Transition

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Imagine two adventurers canoeing down a river. For much of the trip, the water is calm and smooth, the weather is peaceful, and the canoe glides effortlessly downstream with the current. The passengers are free to enjoy the sights and sounds of the great outdoors. When a rocky stretch of river bed is accompanied by stronger winds, however, the canoers discover that their previously relaxed paddling methods are no longer effective. The canoe bounces around unpredictably from the momentum of the white-capped eddies, which escalates the difficulty of accomplishing even simple tasks, such as reaching for sunglasses or adjusting a hat. The passengers may shake with fear, shout with exuberance, or tip the canoe with an ill-timed move. Their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors amidst the turbulence provide a foundation for what lies ahead: They may reach calm waters exhilarated and unscathed, frightened and apprehensive, or frustrated and soaking wet.

The *relational turbulence model* suggests that the pandemonium the canoers encounter on the rugged patch of water is akin to the upheaval that romantic partners experience during times of transition. According to the model, the progression of a romantic relationship is punctuated by unique periods of intense relating similar to a peaceful stretch of river giving way to suddenly turbulent conditions (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Theiss, 2008; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). Just as the trajectory of the canoe depends on the paddlers' ability to alter their prior techniques for navigating the river, the trajectory of romantic relationships depends on what people say and do during times of transition. Indeed, transitions are decisive moments that can lead to dyadic growth or decline (Solomon & Theiss, 2011).

The twin goals of this chapter are to explicate the relational turbulence model and to synthesize research evaluating the model's claims. I begin by describing the scholarly roots of the model. Then, I explain the model's key objectives, claims, and tenets. After defining how the model portrays communication, I summarize recent studies and practical applications stemming from the model. I conclude by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the model and proposing ideas for future expansion.

Intellectual Tradition of the Relational Turbulence Model

Theories of relationship development traditionally characterize progression in one of two ways (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, pp. 57–58). *Qualitative change perspectives* assume that relationships exist in a relatively static form until they are transformed by a sudden, major change. Accordingly, qualitative change perspectives portray relationship development as a series of demarcated stages containing unique features (e.g., Aldous, 1996; Knapp, 1984; Rodgers & White, 1993). In contrast, *quantitative change perspectives* contend that relationships change in degree, but not in kind, as they progress. Quantitative change perspectives depict relationship development as incremental shifts in key characteristics such as intimacy, self-disclosure, uncertainty, and commitment (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994).

The relational turbulence model integrates these two approaches to conceptualizing relationship development. The model defines a *transition* as a discontinuous phase in the progression of a relationship that corresponds with changes in how partners think, feel, and behave (Knobloch, 2007). Accordingly, the model incorporates qualitative change principles by proposing that transitions transform how individuals define their relationship and behave toward each other (Solomon & Theiss, 2011). The model also argues that transitions are critical junctures during which individuals become vigilant about their partnership and react intensely to even minor occurrences (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon et al., 2010). *Relational turbulence* encompasses the tumult, upheaval, and turmoil that people experience when relationships are in flux (Knobloch, 2007; McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). The model proposes that individuals are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally reactive to dyadic circumstances during times of transition (e.g., happy events are more joyous, unexpected events are more uncertainty-provoking, unpleasant events are more distressing, exciting events are more thrilling). The model embraces quantitative change principles, then, by positing that transitions coincide with escalated volatility.

Although the relational turbulence model draws on interdisciplinary theorizing from both qualitative and quantitative change perspectives, it is situated

squarily in the field of interpersonal communication. It employs a post-positivist theoretical orientation by distinguishing two mechanisms that give rise to relational turbulence during times of transition: relational uncertainty and interference from partners. Whereas the relational uncertainty explanation has its roots in uncertainty reduction theory from the field of interpersonal communication (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975), the interference from partners explanation has its roots in the emotion-in-relationships model from the field of social psychology (Berscheid, 1983, 1991).

Main Goals and Features of the Relational Turbulence Model

The model identifies relational uncertainty as an intrapersonal foundation underlying turmoil when relationships are in flux (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). *Relational uncertainty* refers to the degree of confidence (or lack of confidence) that individuals have in their judgments about the nature of their relationship (Knobloch, 2010; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). It exists in three forms (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). *Self uncertainty* indexes people's questions about their own investment in the relationship ("How certain am I about how important this relationship is to me?"). *Partner uncertainty* denotes how unsure individuals are about their partner's participation in the relationship ("How certain am I about how important this relationship is to my partner?"). Finally, *relationship uncertainty* entails ambiguity about the nature of the relationship itself ("How certain am I about the current status of this relationship?"). All three sources of relational uncertainty contribute to the overarching construct (Knobloch, 2010).

The model argues that relational uncertainty sparks reactivity because people lack information to guide the sense-making process. Indeed, when individuals are confronted with questions about their relationship, they have difficulty both producing and processing messages (e.g., Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007; Priem & Solomon, 2011), which may pave the way for hypervigilance. For example, people experiencing relational uncertainty appraise unexpected events to be more upsetting (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b), irritations to be more severe (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), hurtful episodes to be more distressing (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009), sexual intimacy to be less fulfilling (Theiss & Nagy, 2010), and social network members to be less supportive of their partnership (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). With respect to emotion, individuals grappling with relational uncertainty are more prone to anger, sadness, fear, and jealousy (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). Most

broadly, romantic partners who are unsure about involvement view their relationship as more turbulent (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012). This evidence is consistent with the model's premise that relational uncertainty may underlie tumult during times of transition.

The model designates interference from partners as an interpersonal foundation of upheaval (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). The model's reasoning about interference from partners is grounded in Berscheid's (1983, 1991) theorizing about how dyads establish and re-establish interdependence in relationships over time (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). Berscheid (1983, 1991) argued that relationship development occurs as people intertwine their lives—first during the acquaintance process and again whenever major changes arise. Disturbances inevitably transpire as individuals insert and re-insert themselves into each other's daily routines. *Interference from partners* occurs when a partner's interruption disrupts a person's ability to accomplish a goal ("How am I supposed to lose weight when you keep making cookies?" "You didn't really rent another action movie, did you?"). *Facilitation from partners* arises when a partner's interruption helps a person achieve a goal ("Bike ride—good idea!" "Shrimp stir fry? What an awesome surprise!").

According to the relational turbulence model, people who encounter frequent disruptions from their partner are vulnerable to reactivity. Researchers using the model have linked interference from partners to both cognitive and emotional markers of turmoil. For example, individuals experiencing interference from partners judge irritations to be more threatening to their relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b); they consider hurtful events to be more intentional and more damaging to their relationship as well (Theiss et al., 2009). They perceive sexual activity to be less satisfying (Theiss & Nagy, 2010), and view friends and family members to be less encouraging of their relationship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). They experience more negative emotions, including anger, sadness, fear, and jealousy (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). They also characterize their relationship, in general, as more tumultuous (Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; McLaren et al., 2011). Collectively, this evidence coheres with the model's theorizing that interference from partners may be a basis of volatility during times of transition.

As an illustration of these ideas, consider the upheaval that Enrique and Ella experience when they welcome their first child into their lives. No matter how many books they read or how much advice is heaped on them, nothing can fully prepare them for the transition. Enrique feels left out by Ella's around-the-clock focus on the baby, Ella gets upset when Enrique does not pitch in cheerfully to help with chores, and both partners feel less connected to each other. They experience plenty of questions about their relationship: How committed

is each partner to caring for their family? How will they maintain a romantic bond in the midst of night feedings, mounds of laundry, and streams of well-wishers invading their home? They also disrupt each other's daily routines: Enrique's tendency to get distracted photographing the baby's every smile often results in charred meals, Ella's sunrise gym sessions wake Enrique up early after long nights comforting the baby, and both are guilty of overstuffing the dirty diaper bin so the other person has to empty it. According to the model, the relational uncertainty and interference from partners that Enrique and Ella experience lead them to overreact with anger to thoughtless remarks, on one hand, and with joy to unexpected compliments, on the other. They find themselves jumping to conclusions, experiencing strong emotions, and simultaneously shying away from conflict-inducing topics but getting carried away during the arguments that do arise. Ultimately, the transition furnishes mixed outcomes for their partnership: They spend less quality time together but learn to appreciate each other more.

How Communication Is Conceptualized in the Relational Turbulence Model

Communication has a central place in the relational turbulence model (Solomon et al., 2010; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Of course, people's communication can initiate transitions (e.g., "Will you marry me?"), but to date the model has focused on how the mechanisms of relational turbulence predict communication outcomes via both message production and message processing (Solomon & Theiss, 2011). With respect to message production, the model argues that people's reactivity during times of transition is reflected not only in extreme cognitions and emotions, but also in extreme communication behaviors. More specifically, the model proposes that individuals experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from partners rely on both indirect and assertive messages.

Researchers have documented evidence compatible with the model's claim that relational uncertainty coincides with both avoidant and aggressive messages. On one hand, individuals experiencing relational uncertainty are reluctant to express feelings of jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a), to discuss their partner's irritating behavior (Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b) or hurtful actions (Theiss et al., 2009), to communicate directly about sexual intimacy (Theiss, 2011), and to talk openly about sensitive topics (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013), including the nature of their relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). On the other hand, people grappling with questions about their own involvement in a relationship (i.e., self uncertainty) are more likely to confront

partners about irritations (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b) and less likely to manage conflict constructively (Theiss & Knobloch, in press). In a study examining both halves of the model's logic about polarized communication, Theiss and Knobloch (2013) found that military personnel returning home from deployment report more closed yet more aggressive communication with their romantic partner under conditions of relational uncertainty. This work, viewed as a set, implies that relational uncertainty may be a foundation of reactivity in message production.

Interference from partners, too, may correspond with both passive and assertive messages. With respect to avoidance, military service members experiencing interference from partners are less likely to engage in open communication (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013) and to maintain their relationship through assurances (Theiss & Knobloch, in press) during the post-deployment transition. With respect to aggression, individuals encountering interference from partners display less affiliation in conversation (Knobloch, 2008), behave more argumentatively (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), and employ less constructive conflict management strategies (Theiss & Knobloch, in press). These findings hint that disruptions to everyday routines may be a harbinger of polarized message production.

The model posits that the mechanisms of relational turbulence have implications for message processing as well. On this point, the model imports logic from relational framing theory (Dillard, Solomon, & Samp, 1996; McLaren & Solomon, Chapter 9, this volume) to describe how relational uncertainty and interference from partners may guide the inferences people draw from each other's utterances. Relational framing theory proposes that individuals glean information about the nature of a relationship by interpreting their partner's messages through the frames of dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation. Further, the theory contends that characteristics of relationships (such as relational uncertainty and interference from partners) constitute one set of cues that shape people's judgments of dominance-submissiveness and affiliation-disaffiliation. A combination of the two perspectives implies that individuals experiencing questions and disruptions may view their partner's messages as dominating and disaffiliative. Initial evidence is consistent with this claim. Among husbands and wives in conversation, relational uncertainty corresponds with perceptions that a spouse's messages are more dominating and less affiliative (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007), and interference from partners corresponds with perceptions that a spouse's messages are less affiliative (Knobloch, 2008). In the context of hurtful episodes, women experiencing interference from partners and men experiencing relational turbulence see their partner's messages as more dominating (McLaren et al., 2012). Taken together, these studies indicate that relational uncertainty and interference from partners may play a role in message processing.

Research and Practical Applications of the Relational Turbulence Model

The relational turbulence model originated in the context of dating partners navigating the transition from causal dating to serious involvement (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008), but shortly thereafter, scholars began broadening the model's scope to other transitions. For example, investigators have focused on normative shifts within romantic relationships, such as couples becoming parents (Theiss, Estlein, & Weber, 2013) or launching children from their home (Nagy & Theiss, 2013). Researchers also have considered transitions sparked by health challenges, such as romantic partners battling breast cancer (Weber & Solomon, 2008), grappling with infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008, 2012), or managing depressive symptoms (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012). In addition, scholars have investigated transitions relevant to particular cohorts, such as military couples (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013) and military adolescents (Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, in press) negotiating a service member's return home from deployment. Collectively, this work spotlights the model's versatility.

For a flavor of the model in action, consider a pair of studies on infertility and relational turbulence. In a first investigation, Steuber and Solomon (2008) analyzed online forums, message boards, and blogs containing personal testimony from individuals grappling with infertility. Themes of relational uncertainty included questions about (a) the importance of the romantic relationship relative to achieving pregnancy, and (b) who is to blame for the inability to reproduce. Issues of interference from partners included disruptions tied to (a) privileging fertility above all other commitments, and (b) being overinvolved or underinvolved in treatment procedures. In a second study, Steuber and Solomon (2012) evaluated the mechanisms of relational turbulence as predictors of couples' difficulty managing private information. They collected survey responses from 50 infertile couples who reported on disclosures to a total of 250 social network members. Interference from partners did not predict problems coordinating disclosures, but when husbands reported that they or their wives were experiencing relational uncertainty, husbands viewed their wives as less accepting of their disclosures to social network members. In sum, both studies suggest that the relational turbulence model may have relevance to the context of infertility.

Another example is research on military couples during homecoming following deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2014). As a first step, Knobloch and Theiss (2012) collected open-ended survey responses from 259 recently reunited individuals (137 service members, 122 at-home partners) to identify themes of relational uncertainty and interference from partners salient during

the transition. Issues of relational uncertainty included questions about how to (a) sustain commitment, (b) integrate daily routines, (c) divide household chores, (d) adapt to personality shifts, (e) negotiate sexual intimacy, (f) protect the service member's physical and emotional health, and (g) communicate well. Sources of interference from partners included disruptions related to (a) managing everyday routines, (b) completing domestic tasks, (c) distributing control, (d) feeling smothered, (e) parenting, (f) negotiating differences between partners, (g) coordinating social activities, and (h) prioritizing time together. As a second step, Knobloch and Theiss (2011a) and Theiss and Knobloch (in press) collected closed-ended data from returning service members and at-home partners reunited within the past six months. Their results documented both relational uncertainty and interference from partners as predictors of upheaval. Most recently, Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, and Ogolsky (2013) tracked 118 military couples once per month during the first three months after homecoming. Their findings identified relational uncertainty and interference from partners as predictors of people's reintegration difficulty during the transition. Together, this scholarship showcases the applicability of the relational turbulence model to military couples reunited following deployment.

Evaluation of the Relational Turbulence Model

Just as the best interpersonal relationships blossom when partners build on their strengths and shore up their weaknesses, theories of interpersonal communication improve when scholars hone and refine their ideas. One strength of the relational turbulence model is that it integrates both qualitative and quantitative change perspectives of relationship development. Moreover, by melding theorizing about relational uncertainty and interference from partners, the model assimilates both intrapersonal and interpersonal explanations for upheaval during times of transition. A third strength is that the model lends itself to investigation via diverse research designs (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, content analyses, observational coding) and forms of inquiry (e.g., qualitative and quantitative methods). Perhaps most notably, the model has considerable heuristic value for illuminating a variety of transitions.

Questions yet to be answered by the model represent limitations to address in future research. First, when does a transition begin and end? To date, the model has not explicated the conditions that mark the start and finish of a transition. Scholars have begun testing the model over time (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Solomon & Theiss, 2008; Theiss et al., 2009), but the elusive gold standard is prospective longitudinal data across the full trajectory of a transition (e.g., Theiss et al., 2013). Second, how is relational turbulence manifest in conversation? Much more is known about people's

global communication strategies than micro features of their conversations during times of transition, which is unfortunate because conversations are the building blocks of relationship trajectories (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Finally, scholars have started to examine the interplay within dyads, and this work demonstrates that individuals are responsive to each other's experiences of relational uncertainty and interference from partners (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009). Future research is needed to theorize more explicitly about mutual influence within couples when relationships are in flux (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013).

Continuing the Conversation

The relational turbulence model is maturing to the point that practical applications are plausible. A key question kicks off this conversation: How could the model be used to help people navigate times of transition more constructively? Perhaps infertile couples, for example, could benefit from recognizing the issues of relational uncertainty and interference from partners that are likely to surface during treatment (e.g., Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Perhaps military couples, as another example, could fare better upon reunion following deployment if they learned how to anticipate questions about involvement and troubleshoot routines prone to hindrance (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a, 2012). Perhaps empty-nest couples could navigate the transition more effectively if they were knowledgeable about the changes to their relationship, issues of relational uncertainty, and sources of interference from partners that are likely to transpire (Nagy & Theiss, 2013). As a final example, perhaps individuals grappling with depression could enhance the well-being of their romantic relationship if they understood how to handle dyadic ambiguity and manage disruptions from partners (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012; Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010). Translating the model into evidence-based programming will require researchers to collaborate with clinicians, practitioners, and educators united by the goal of helping individuals communicate effectively in the midst of changing circumstances.

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