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Relational Turbulence Theory Applied to the Transition from Deployment to Reintegration

The transition from deployment to reintegration can be unexpectedly demanding for military couples as they cope with the changes that arose during separation and identify new patterns of relating. Although the postdeployment transition has important ramifications for the well-being of military couples, the homecoming process is relatively undertheorized and underresearched within the deployment cycle. We identify relational turbulence theory, and its predecessor, the relational turbulence model, as a conceptual approach that may account for the upheaval that returning service members and at-home partners encounter during the transition from deployment to reintegration. We delineate relational turbulence principles and research with the goal of evaluating their promise for understanding the postdeployment transition. We also describe implications for research and practice.

> After a year of her being in charge of essentially everything, I came back and took some of those responsibilities. Her view at first was that I was taking over because I felt she couldn't handle things or that I didn't trust her. (Deployed Army husband, 29 years old)

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Media portrayals of the return home of a service member after deployment convey a blissfully happy reunion between military personnel and at-home family members. As Howard and Prividera (2015) described the narrative: "The soldiers and crowd run toward one another colliding with loving embraces and an outpouring of emotion as they are welcomed home from service to their country . . . . It is a time of celebration, closure, national pride, personal fulfillment, and relief" (p. 217). The coming-home narrative emphasizes a happily-ever-after story line after months of anticipation, but in reality, the transition from deployment to reunion can be surprisingly taxing for military families. Returning service members, at-home partners, and their children describe a host of challenges, including difficulties rebuilding social ties, acclimating to personality changes, and developing new routines and communication patterns (Karakurt, Christiansen, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Weiss, 2013; Knobloch, Basinger, Wehrman, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016; Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2014).

Although the postdeployment transition is a decisive period for returning service members and their families (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001), scholarship on how military families negotiate homecoming after deployment is relatively sparse in terms of both theory and research. Fortunately, an emerging interdisciplinary literature has begun to examine the interpersonal dynamics of military families upon reunion. This work has roots in the scholarly disciplines

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of health sciences (e.g., Chandra et al., 2010; Nichols, Martindale-Adams, Graney, Zuber, & Burns, 2013), nursing (e.g., Gambardella, 2008; Lapp et al., 2010), communication (e.g., Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009; Wilson, Gettings, Dorrance Hall, & Pastor, 2015), family studies (e.g., Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Karakurt et al., 2013; Marini, MacDermid Wadsworth, Christ, & Franks, 2017), and psychology (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Brenner et al., 2015). Our own contribution comes from the field of communication and stems from our application of the relational turbulence model (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), and more recently, relational turbulence theory (Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016), to the study of how military couples navigate the transition from deployment to reintegration.

With the recent creation of relational turbulence theory, we believe that the time is right for a comprehensive synthesis of the literature to take stock of where scholarship has been and where it needs to go. Our goal is to organize work on relational turbulence among romantic couples during the transition from deployment to reintegration with an eye toward setting an agenda for research and practice. We begin by describing people's experience of the postdeployment transition to lay a foundation for theorizing about the romantic relationship dynamics at play upon homecoming. We then explicate the evolution of the relational turbulence model into relational turbulence theory. Next, we summarize research evaluating relational turbulence principles during the transition from deployment to reunion. We conclude by considering the ramifications of the theory for both research and practice.

Reintegration After Deployment

> I am used to being in charge and when I want to do something, I do it. I did not have to wait for someone or something, I just did it overseas. Back home I find myself waiting for someone to get ready, or not wanting to go, or just holding me up, and it really gets under my skin. (Deployed Army National Guard husband, 31 years old)

The cycle of deployment and reunion can be divided into five stages, with signature tasks to accomplish during each stage (Pincus et al., 2001). The process begins with the predeployment stage when service members receive orders to deploy. Military families may experience a combination of grief, excitement, and uncertainty over the upcoming departure, struggle to complete the preparatory tasks while carving out quality time to spend together, and alternate between striving for closeness versus seeking distance in their relationship (Pincus et al., 2001; Sahlstein et al., 2009). The second stage, deployment, denotes the month after the service member departs. Deployed personnel and at-home family members may feel disoriented over the change and/or relieved to move on with their lives (Pincus et al., 2001). The sustainment stage encompasses most of the separation. Service members and at-home family members may settle into new routines, find new outlets of support, and grow in confidence (Pincus et al., 2001). Children may have difficulty adjusting to the altered family dynamics but also may embrace opportunities for independence (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2015; Pincus et al., 2001). Key tasks for all family members include identifying ways to stay in touch with loved ones across the miles (Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, & Sahlstein, 2013; Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009) and coping with the inevitable ups and downs of life events (Lapp et al., 2010; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012; Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014).

Two stages encompass the homecoming process (Pincus et al., 2001). Redeployment occurs during the month before the service member's return home. Family members may cycle between excitement over reunion and worry over how to rebuild connections (Faber et al., 2008; Pincus et al., 2001). Postdeployment begins upon the service member's arrival and lasts for approximately 6 months after homecoming. Military families may be ecstatic during the early portion of this stage but encounter a delayed onset of stress as they strive to reestablish their communication patterns and everyday routines (Knobloch, McAninch, Abendschein, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016; Pincus et al., 2001; Sahlstein et al., 2009).

Military families experience numerous changes across the deployment cycle. With respect to constructive changes, some military couples report that their relationship grew stronger or they valued their relationship more

than before deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Other benefits of deployment include contributing to a greater good, being thankful for life's blessings, developing strong connections with family, cultivating friendships with battle buddies and supportive social network members, becoming independent, developing effective communication patterns, and getting ahead financially (Baptist et al., 2011; Knobloch, Basinger, et al., 2016; Newby et al., 2005). With respect to destructive changes, some military couples describe difficulty reconnecting, problems communicating, challenges navigating autonomy, trouble managing finances and employment, difficulty negotiating sexual intimacy, hassles incorporating the service member back into everyday routines, escalated conflict, and entertaining the possibility of separation or divorce (Baptist et al., 2011; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Newby et al., 2005). Children in military families report shouldering extra responsibilities, coping with shifts to everyday routines, and feeling intense emotions across the deployment cycle (Huebner et al., 2007; Knobloch, Pusateri, et al., 2015). The experience of deployment changes family life in ways that are broad and deep.

The homecoming of a service member is a time when many of the changes wrought by deployment come to light. For example, military couples need to establish new routines, negotiate new roles and responsibilities, and adapt to new aspects of each other's personality (Karakurt et al., 2013; Knobloch, Basinger, et al., 2016). They also have to decide how much information to disclose versus withhold about their experiences while apart (e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Rossetto, 2013; Sahlstein et al., 2009). And because military couples inevitably become more autonomous during deployment, they face the task of reconstructing their interdependence upon reunion (Karakurt et al., 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Similarly, because military couples tend to identify new sources of support during deployment, they have to reintegrate their partner back into their social support network upon homecoming (Karakurt et al., 2013). The transition from deployment to reunion is a pivotal juncture for military couples as they seek to establish a new normal in their relationship.

A striking feature of the literature is the claim that many of the strategies that are advantageous for military couples during deployment may be detrimental during reunion (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Gambardella, 2008; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Whereas emotional numbness can be useful in a combat mission overseas or in coping with loneliness at home, returning service members and at-home partners who are emotionally unavailable during the transition from deployment to reunion can have trouble renewing their bond (Bowling & Sherman, 2008). Whereas concealing information about stressors can be valuable during deployment for protecting loved ones from worry, failing to share information about sensitive topics upon reunion can create distance between partners (e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Whereas developing self-reliance can be beneficial during deployment for moving forward independently, reluctance to yield decision-making power during the postdeployment transition can inhibit interdependence (e.g., Gambardella, 2008; Karakurt et al., 2013).

The paradox of strategies being functional during deployment but dysfunctional upon homecoming underscores the importance of developing theory with strong explanatory mechanisms to guide research and practice. Theories capable of identifying the mechanisms that underlie the shifting landscape of relationships in transition are particularly important for informing interventions to help military couples navigate changing circumstances. To that end, we turn our attention to explicating relational turbulence theory.

Relational Turbulence Theory

> I expected more excitement, more love, more emotion, more understanding, "distance makes the heart grow fonder" stuff, like he wrote in the wonderful emails to me in Afghanistan, but nothing like this occurred. (At-home Army wife, 31 years old)

Relational turbulence theory is uniquely positioned to theorize about the experiences of military couples during the transition from deployment to reunion (Solomon et al., 2016). The theory originated as the relational turbulence model, which was designed to account for turmoil during the transition from casual involvement to serious commitment in dating relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). The model asserted that individuals

experience relational uncertainty and interference from a partner at moderate levels of intimacy, which in turn, correspond with polarized cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactions to interpersonal events (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Early tests generally supported the model's logic (e.g., Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008), but as the model evolved, scholars moved away from considering fluctuations in intimacy as the driving force for turmoil and focused instead on the potential for upheaval during a variety of transitions in romantic relationships (e.g., Solomon & Theiss, 2011; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). The homecoming of a service member after deployment was one transition to which scholars applied the model (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014); others included the transition to parenthood, the acclimation to an illness diagnosis, and the shift to an empty nest (e.g., Solomon et al., 2010).

The relational turbulence model was fruitful for documenting military couples' cognitive, emotional, and communicative turmoil during the transition from deployment to reunion, but it stopped short of explaining the causal mechanisms responsible for reactivity. Relational turbulence theory addresses this gap by (a) articulating the processes through which relational uncertainty and interference from a partner give rise to reactivity during times of transition; (b) describing the ways cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactivity are related; and (c) clarifying how repeated tumultuous episodes coalesce into broader perceptions of the relationship as turbulent. The logic of the theory is depicted in Figure 1.

Transitions

Relational turbulence theory broadens the scope of the model to consider how transitions at any point in the life cycle of a relationship may spark turmoil. Transitions are times of discontinuity that disrupt otherwise stable patterns of relating and require individuals to adopt new roles, embrace new identities, and/or devise new routines (Solomon et al., 2016). In general, transitions arise when previously established patterns in a relationship are insufficient for navigating new circumstances. Transitions can be initiated by positive and/or negative developments in a relationship; they subside when partners successfully adapt their roles and routines to accommodate the changes.

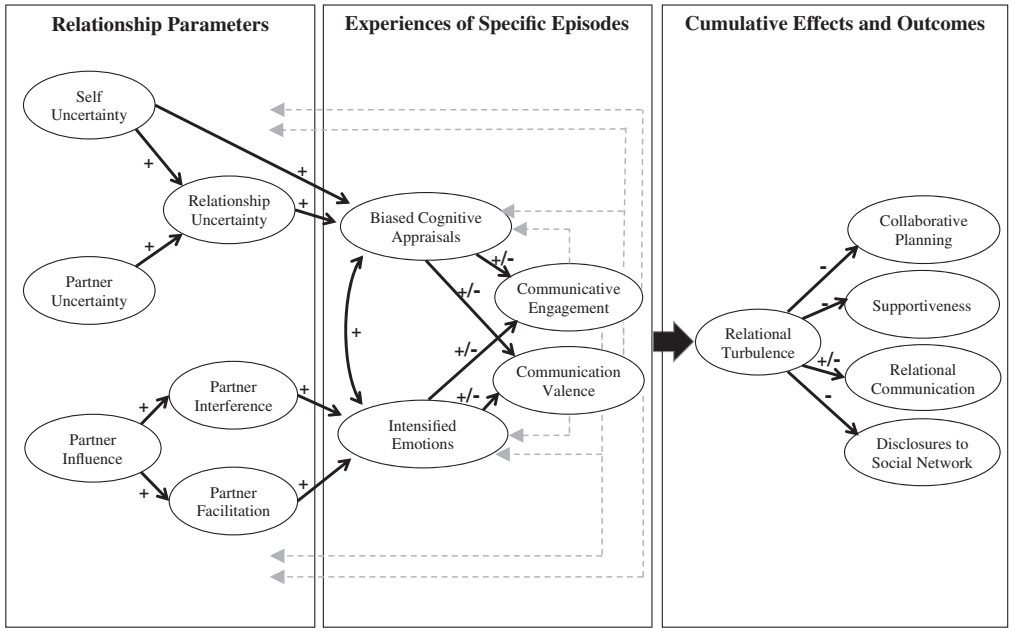
Relationship Parameters

The first panel in Figure 1 shows the relationship parameters central to the theory. Following the logic of the relational turbulence model, the theory asserts that transitions are characterized by questions about the relationship and disrupted patterns of interdependence, which make people reactive to otherwise mundane circumstances (Solomon et al., 2016). In short, the theory identifies relational uncertainty and disrupted interdependence as relationship parameters that may foster reactivity.

Relational uncertainty. Relational uncertainty refers to the degree of confidence individuals have in their perceptions of involvement in a relationship (Knobloch, 2010; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Relational uncertainty contains three interrelated sources of questions. Self uncertainty reflects questions about one's own involvement in a relationship, partner uncertainty reflects questions about a partner's involvement, and relationship uncertainty reflects questions about the relationship as a whole. Consistent with these conceptual definitions, a widely used measure of relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) contains items assessing self uncertainty (e.g., "How certain are you about how you feel about your relationship?"), partner uncertainty (e.g., "How certain are you about how important your relationship is to your partner?"), and relationship uncertainty (e.g., "How certain are you about the current status of your relationship?").

The theory's logic about relational uncertainty begins with the premise that individuals experiencing questions about involvement have difficulty comprehending incoming information (Solomon et al., 2016). The theory argues that when relational uncertainty obscures people's ability to derive meaning from their social environment, they tend to draw biased cognitive appraisals of relationship events (e.g., Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). Consider an example involving suspicions of infidelity during the postdeployment transition. According to the theory, a returning service member who is grappling with relational uncertainty is more likely to jump to negative conclusions when a partner receives text messages from an unknown source than a

FIGURE 1. RELATIONAL TURBULENCE THEORY.



Note. Reciprocal effects are depicted in dashed gray lines. From "Relational turbulence theory: Explaining variation in subjective experiences and communication within romantic relationships," by D. H. Solomon, L. K. Knobloch, J. A. Theiss, and R. M. McLaren, 2016, *Human Communication Research*, p. 509. Reprinted with permission.

returning service member who is not experiencing questions about involvement. In sum, individuals are prone to cognitive reactivity under conditions of relational uncertainty because they lack sufficient information to make sense of a partner's behavior and to accurately interpret the meaning of specific episodes.

Interdependence. Interdependence is the degree to which people's outcomes are intertwined in a relationship. As relationships progress, individuals allow each other to influence their goals, routines, and actions (Berscheid, 1983), and times of transition can spark changes in how much influence from a partner people allocate to each other (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). This reshuffling of influence provides opportunities for partners to facilitate and/or disrupt each other's everyday goals. Facilitation from a partner is the extent to which a partner makes it easier for an individual to perform everyday routines (e.g., "The kids have been so clingy since I've been back—thanks for giving me a break so I could exercise"). Interference from a partner is the extent to which a partner makes it more difficult for an individual to complete daily activities (e.g., "I can't keep the house clean anymore with your battle gear everywhere!"). Commonly used measures of these constructs ask people to indicate their agreement with sets of items gauging influence ("my partner influences the plans I make"), facilitation ("my partner helps me to do the things I need to do each day"), and interference ("my partner disrupts my daily routine") from a partner (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004).

The theory contends that facilitation and interference from a partner escalate people's emotional reactivity to subsequent events (e.g., Berscheid, 1983; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon et al., 2016). More specifically, the theory proposes that facilitation and interference from a partner generate a climate of reactivity that leads individuals to feel more intense emotion in response to later episodes. Disruptions to everyday goals are especially likely to provoke volatile reactions (Berscheid, 1983), so relational turbulence theory accentuates interference from a partner in particular as a relationship parameter that intensifies people's emotional reactivity to subsequent events. An example

involves the markedly different sleep schedules that military couples can experience during the postdeployment transition as the returning service member acclimates to a domestic schedule in the local time zone. If a night owl and an early bird are continually disrupting each other's sleep patterns, for example, then they are more likely to emotionally overreact to an argument about child discipline than is a military couple who is not interfering with each other's sleep patterns.

Experiences of Specific Episodes

The second panel in Figure 1 documents the theory's logic about how people's biased cognition and intense emotion contribute to polarized communication in response to specific episodes (Solomon et al., 2016). The theory posits that people's cognitive and emotional reactivity shape two features of their communication behavior: the degree to which they engage their partner in communication about the event and the valence of their communication about the event. The theory recognizes that biased cognitive appraisals and intense emotional reactions can lead to more or less communicative engagement and positively or negatively valenced communication, depending on the circumstances. For example, with regard to cognitive appraisals, individuals tend to confront conflicts they perceive as severe (e.g., Samp & Solomon, 1998; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), but they tend to avoid conversations about topics they perceive as threatening (e.g., Theiss & Estlein, 2014). With regard to emotional reactions, hurt can prompt both active distancing from a partner (e.g., McLaren & Steuber, 2013) and direct confrontation of partner (e.g., Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009). Similarly, cognitive and emotional reactivity to specific episodes can influence the tenor of communication. For instance, people who make negative attributions for a partner's behavior (e.g., Miller & Bradbury, 1995) and feel more hurt by a partner's behavior (e.g., McLaren & Steuber, 2013) tend to communicate less constructively. Relational turbulence theory draws on this logic to claim that people's cognitive appraisals and emotional reactions to specific events shape the engagement and valence of their communication in response.

Although the theory positions communication as an outcome of biased cognitions and intensified emotions, it also recognizes the reciprocal effects of communication. In particular, the theory highlights the ways communication can shape cognitive and emotional reactivity to the immediate circumstances, as well as affect the broader relationship parameters that make individuals susceptible to reactivity (Solomon et al., 2016). For example, in terms of the proximal reciprocal effects of communication on cognition and emotion, avoiding communication about relationship problems coincides with rumination and attributions of blame (Cloven & Roloff, 1991). In addition, aggressive communication in conflict corresponds with subsequent self-interested cognitions (Keck & Samp, 2007). At a more macro level, communication can have reciprocal effects on the relationship parameters of relational uncertainty and interdependence. For example, open communication coincides with subsequent declines in relational uncertainty, whereas avoidant communication corresponds with increases in relational uncertainty over time (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). Relational turbulence theory spotlights how communication shares bidirectional associations with cognitive and emotional reactions to relationship events as well as the relationship parameters of relational uncertainty and interdependence.

Relational Turbulence and Its Outcomes

As represented by the arrow connecting the second and third panels of Figure 1, relational turbulence theory argues that the accumulation of interpersonal episodes marked by polarized cognitions, emotions, and communication behaviors coalesce into appraisals of the relationship as turbulent (Solomon et al., 2016). Relational turbulence is a global, diffuse, and persistent assessment of a relationship as tumultuous. It reflects people's sense of chaos stemming from their repeated encounters characterized by cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactivity. The theory defines relational turbulence as a global attribute of relationships, on par with other constructs such as intimacy, satisfaction, and commitment. Items measuring relational turbulence ask people to rate their relationship via adjectives such as chaotic, tumultuous, and stressful (e.g., Knobloch, 2007; McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011).

Relational turbulence plays a key role in how partners relate to each other and engage with

their social environment. As depicted in the third panel of Figure 1, the theory proposes that a variety of cumulative outcomes are compromised under conditions of relational turbulence via the pathways of construals and dyadic synchrony (Solomon et al., 2016). Construals are conceptual cognitive units that organize people's perceptions in ways that are either more myopic and instrumental, on the one hand, or more abstract and idealistic, on the other hand (Trope & Liberman, 2003). According to the theory's logic about construals, relational turbulence tends to narrow people's construals such that they fixate on the specific details of their chaotic relationship and have difficulty construing their circumstances in nuanced, open, and thoughtful ways. Dyadic synchrony is the extent to which people's interactions are coordinated, fluid, and coherent (Harrist & Waugh, 2002). According to the theory's logic about dyadic synchrony, relational turbulence tends to undermine coordination and misalign action between partners. The theory contends that relational turbulence, through its effects on construals and dyadic synchrony, undercuts people's ability to engage in a variety of fundamental processes. Examples of those cumulative outcomes include people's capacity to plan collaboratively for the future, support each other effectively, draw accurate inferences about the relational implications of messages, and coordinate the sharing of information with social network members.

Relational Turbulence During Reintegration

> Skype helped during the deployment, but since being back my partner is a little sensitive and easily irritated. For the most part things seem fine, but her ability to communicate other than angry outbursts when frustrated about something is limited. (Deployed Army husband, 31 years old)

A rapidly growing body of research has examined relational turbulence principles among military families during the transition from deployment to reintegration. All the studies have been conducted under the rubric of the relational turbulence model rather than the newer relational turbulence theory, but the findings suggest that the theory has substantial promise for illuminating the interpersonal dynamics of military families during the postdeployment transition. A notable attribute of the work is its methodological diversity: It features both cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs, both self-report and unobtrusive data collection methods, and both qualitative and quantitative data. In the paragraphs that follow, we review the literature with an eye toward highlighting the variety of approaches to empirical research.

Substance of Relational Uncertainty and Interference From a Partner

One strand of the literature has sought to delineate the content of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner during the transition from deployment to reunion. To that end, Knobloch and Theiss (2012, 2014) collected open-ended responses from 259 individuals (137 service members, 122 at-home partners) who had been reunited with their romantic partner during the previous 6 months. Participants reported several issues of relational uncertainty during the postdeployment transition. Returning service members and at-home partners described grappling with questions about whether each person was still committed to the relationship, how to approach reintegration, ways to handle household stressors, whether personalities had changed during the time apart, how to navigate sexual behavior and the possibility of infidelity, whether the service member was having problems with his or her physical and/or mental health, and ways to communicate effectively. At-home partners, compared to military personnel, were more likely to report questions about the returning service member's health. Taken together, these findings showcase the diversity of questions that military couples may encounter as they acclimate to life together after deployment.

Individuals also described a variety of ways their partner interfered with their ability to accomplish their everyday goals upon reunion. More specifically, they reported hindrance in executing daily routines, completing domestic tasks, distributing decision-making power, having privacy, making parenting decisions, adjusting to differences in each other's personalities, coordinating social networks and social activities, and identifying time to spend together. At-home partners were more likely than returning service members to reference goal blockages regarding everyday routines and not enough quality time together. More broadly, the results illustrate the many ways that at-home

partners and returning service members may disrupt each other's daily activities during the transition from deployment to reintegration.

Although relational turbulence theory focuses on romantic couples, a complementary line of work has considered how children in military families experience the postdeployment transition. Knobloch et al. (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with 31 military adolescents (age range = 10 to 13 years old) who reported on their experiences of being reunited with a parent returning from deployment. Military youth described changes such as spending quality time together as a family, feeling more calm and more secure, resuming routines and traditions that were interrupted by deployment, and having problems adjusting to the service member's arrival back into daily life. They also reported many questions about family functioning during the transition, including uncertainty about their parent's experiences during deployment, their parent's reasons for entering the military and for receiving orders to deploy, the strength of the bonds among family members, and the likelihood that their parent would deploy again in the future. A key contribution of this adolescent interview data is illuminating military children's experiences of reunion in their own words.

Outcomes of Relational Uncertainty and Interference From a Partner

Other work has considered the outcomes of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner by employing increasingly more complex research designs. One early data collection effort utilized a cross-sectional approach in which 220 service members who had returned home from deployment within the previous 6 months completed an online questionnaire about aspects of their romantic relationship. Findings revealed that returning service members who were experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from a partner reported more depressive symptoms and less relationship satisfaction (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a). Other results focused on the communication patterns of military personnel upon homecoming. Returning service members appraised both their own communication behavior and their partner's communication behavior as less open and more aggressive under conditions of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). As a whole, these data suggest initial evidence in favor of the theory's claims about relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as precursors of reactivity during the postdeployment transition.

A second project solicited observations from at-home partners in addition to returning service members. More specifically, 235 individuals (118 returning service members, 117 at-home partners) who were recently reunited after deployment reported on a variety of markers of upheaval. The data showed that when people were grappling with questions about their relationship and disruptions to their everyday routines during the postdeployment transition, they judged their partner as less responsive to their needs and perceived their relationship as more tumultuous (Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). They also were more reluctant to talk about their experiences of deployment upon reunion (Knobloch & Theiss, 2017). Both sets of results are compatible with the theory's premise that individuals who encounter relational uncertainty and interference from a partner are susceptible to reactivity during homecoming.

A third investigation moved beyond cross-sectional data to collect people's perceptions of interpersonal dynamics across time. The research design involved three waves of observations in which 118 military couples completed an online questionnaire once per month for 3 consecutive months upon reunion after deployment. Returning service members and at-home partners reported an initial upturn in relational uncertainty and interference from a partner at Wave 1, followed by a plateau or downturn in relational uncertainty across Waves 2 and 3 (Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016). Individuals who were unsure about the nature of their relationship were less willing to discuss sensitive topics during the postdeployment transition (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013). Moreover, returning service members and at-home partners experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from a partner reported greater difficulty adjusting to the transition (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013), as well as more relational turbulence (Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016). These longitudinal findings, like those of the cross-sectional investigations, imply that military couples recently reunited after deployment are reactive under conditions of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner.

A final strand of research extended beyond the claims of relational turbulence theory to examine whether parental dynamics of relational turbulence spill over to the well-being of children in military families. Using data from the three-wave longitudinal study of 118 military couples, Knobloch, Knobloch-Fedders, Yorgason, Ebata, and McGlaughlin (2017) found that parents who were experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from a partner reported that their oldest child had more difficulty dealing with the challenges of reintegration. An important implication of these parental reports is that upheaval among military couples may spill over to the functioning of military children during the postdeployment transition.

In total, the literature examining relational turbulence principles among military families has expanded rapidly since the first empirical investigation was published in 2011. The findings are largely compatible with the theorizing of the model, and by extension, the theory. Qualitative data have shed light on the content of people's experiences of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner during the transition from deployment to reunion (Knobloch et al., 2014; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012, 2014). Quantitative data have documented relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as predictors of people's appraisals of relational turbulence (Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), their relationship satisfaction (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a), and their communication behavior (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2017; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013) during the postdeployment transition. With respect to outcomes specific to the transition itself, work has revealed relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as predictors of military couples' own difficulty with reintegration (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013) and their children's difficulty with reintegration (Knobloch et al., 2017). These findings, viewed as a set, imply that relational turbulence theory has promise for illuminating the experiences of military couples and families upon reunion following deployment.

Suggestions for Research

> There has been a huge decline in communication since the deployment. Prior to, we discussed everything, and often were so in sync with each other that we knew before words were spoken what each other was thinking. Now words are few and far between, and the communication isn't there. There seems to be a wedge between us. (At-home Air Force wife, 30 years old)

Our summary and synthesis of relational turbulence theory, viewed alongside our review of the literature, point to several avenues for future expansion. One route involves collecting longitudinal data to clarify the trajectory of the postdeployment transition. Observations gathered over time are critical for evaluating the dynamic processes articulated by relational turbulence theory in a trio of ways. First, the only longitudinal project published to date contained only three waves of data (see Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Knobloch et al., 2017; Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016), so a lingering task is to track the postdeployment transition across the 6 months typically ascribed to reintegration (Pincus et al., 2001). A second benefit of collecting more waves of data over a longer period of time is the capacity to disentangle reciprocal effects in the pathways posed by the theory (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Third, longitudinal observations are essential for illuminating how communication between military couples can break the cycle of reactivity and relational turbulence to generate constructive outcomes during times of transition. This latter benefit would not only enhance the conceptual sophistication of relational turbulence theory but also enrich its utility for practice.

Additional inroads rest on the ability to recruit and retain diverse samples. For example, investigations that solicit data from all members of military families are vital for examining the similarities, differences, and intersections among people's experiences. Recent investigations of romantic dyads documenting both actor effects and partner effects in relational turbulence processes (e.g., Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010) underscore the importance of examining how individuals within military families affect each other's outcomes. Second, larger and more heterogeneous samples of military families are essential for examining the possibility of group differences in people's experience of relational turbulence. Key groups neglected thus far include female returning service members (e.g., Southwell & MacDermid

Wadsworth, 2016), homosexual and bisexual military personnel (e.g., Lehavot & Simpson, 2014), racial minority military members (e.g., Mustillo & Kysar-Moon, 2016), and very young children within military families (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013).

Other directions for future research stem from the recent evolution of the model into a theory. To date, work has examined the principles of the relational turbulence model (the first two panels of Figure 1) but has not paid systematic attention to how relational uncertainty and interference from a partner may intersect, combine, and intermingle as individuals navigate times of transition (see Knobloch & Delaney, 2012). Moreover, research has not evaluated the process of how people's day-to-day experiences coalesce into a sense of relational turbulence and trigger cumulative outcomes (the third panel of Figure 1). An expansive horizon offers countless possibilities for scholars to consider how daily episodes shape military couples' perceptions of relational turbulence over time, and in turn, how their perceptions of relational turbulence contribute to overarching outcomes. Also yet to be evaluated are the mechanisms of construals and dyadic synchrony that the theory employs to account for the link between relational turbulence and enduring outcomes. Another issue awaiting investigation is the extent to which communication between returning service members and at-home partners has reciprocal effects promoting or demoting relational uncertainty and interdependence processes. Clearly, ample opportunities exist for research evaluating the entirety of the theory.

Given the early success of relational turbulence principles for illuminating the dynamics of military couples during the postdeployment transition, a logical move is to apply the theory to other transitions military couples experience both inside and outside the deployment cycle. For instance, military families are likely to experience upheaval during the predeployment phase as they adjust to news of the departure, get their affairs in order, and plan for the separation (e.g., Pincus et al., 2001; Sahlstein et al., 2009). During deployment, military families are apt to encounter turmoil as they negotiate the distance, stress, uncertainty, and risk posed by a tour of duty (e.g., Faber et al., 2008; Knobloch, Theiss, & Wehrman, 2015; Maguire et al., 2013). Military life also involves transitions beyond deployment that carry the potential for instability, including frequent geographic moves (e.g., Finkel, Kelley, & Ashby, 2003) and the eventual transition to veteran status (e.g., Koenig, Maguen, Monroy, Mayott, & Seal, 2014; Villagran, Ledford, & Canzona, 2013), in addition to the normative transitions that all families face (e.g., Wiens & Boss, 2006). A daunting yet important direction for future research is to evaluate whether relational turbulence theory has utility for understanding the myriad of transitions that military families undergo across the family life cycle.

Suggestions for Practice

> I'm trying to convey to my family what is really important in life. When you see things and see how people live over there, we don't need to worry or argue about stuff that's really not that crucial. (Deployed Army husband, 45 years old)

Implications for practice are apparent as well. First, scholarship on relational turbulence theory implies that family life education efforts should strive to counteract the idyllic coming home narrative popular in the media (e.g., Howard & Prividera, 2015) by preparing military families for challenges during the transition from deployment to reunion. Military families who expect to encounter relational uncertainty and disrupted interdependence upon homecoming may be able to soften their tendency toward relational turbulence. Moreover, military families who are trained to handle ambiguity, troubleshoot disruptions to their daily routines, and reframe their perceptions of relational turbulence via the cognitive, emotional, and communicative pathways posed by the theory may be able to mitigate the negative effects of upheaval during the postdeployment transition (e.g., Solomon et al., 2016). This training may involve helping military families break habits formed during deployment that are less suitable for reintegration, such as maintaining emotional distance, avoiding threatening disclosures, and seeking support outside the family (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Karakurt et al., 2013). We eagerly await the development of clinical interventions and family life education materials based on relational turbulence principles that normalize the experience of turmoil and convey strategies

for managing relational uncertainty, disrupted interdependence, and relational turbulence.

We also see opportunities located in the latter portion of the theory. Can individuals be taught to focus their construals on the long term instead of narrowing to the immediate circumstances when facing relational turbulence? Can people be trained to interact in ways that are coordinated, fluid, and synchronous under conditions of relational turbulence? Affirmative answers to these questions would be encouraging for the utility of relational turbulence theory to assist military couples during the postdeployment transition. A related question involves the most effective method of supplying family life education based on the theory. Telephone support groups may be a viable route for delivery given recent data showing their efficacy for assisting at-home partners upon reintegration (Nichols et al., 2013). Alternatively, online platforms may be helpful for providing support to military families during the postdeployment transition (e.g., High, Jennings-Kelsall, Solomon, & Marshall, 2015; Jennings-Kelsall, Aloia, Solomon, Marshall, & Leifker, 2012). Regardless of the mode of distribution, we are enthusiastic about the possibility of teaching military families about construals and dyadic synchrony to facilitate the well-being of their relationship upon homecoming.

A third recommendation for practice involves paying particular attention to subgroups of military couples and families who are most vulnerable to experiencing relational turbulence. Investigations of the relational turbulence model suggest that at-home partners (e.g., Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012), military couples in which both partners deployed (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), reserve component military couples (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012), and military couples reunited for a longer period of time (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a) may be particularly likely to encounter upheaval during the transition from deployment to reunion. Military families dealing with the aftermath of a returning service member's injury or illness sustained during deployment may be prone to dyadic upheaval as well (e.g., Badr, Barker, & Milbury, 2011). We look forward to family life education efforts designed to reach military families who are especially susceptible to difficulty upon homecoming.

Conclusion

Our objective was to describe scholarship on relational turbulence theory, evaluate the usefulness of the theory for elucidating the postdeployment transition, and identify next steps for future work. Although the theory is still in its infancy, research conducted under the rubric of the relational turbulence model suggests that the theory has the potential to generate evidence-based guidelines to support military families upon reunion. We invite scholars to join us in applying relational turbulence principles to help returning service members, at-home partners, and children rejuvenate their communication, rekindle their intimacy, and renew their connection during the transition from deployment to reintegration.

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