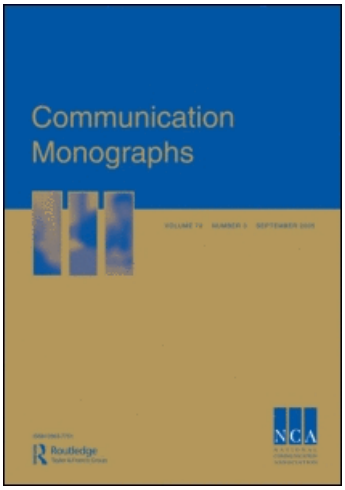

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Relational Uncertainty and Relationship Talk within Courtship: A Longitudinal Actor–Partner Interdependence Model

Leanne K. Knobloch & Jennifer A. Theiss

This study investigated the interplay between relational uncertainty and relationship talk for actors and partners over time. Participants were 135 romantic couples who completed an online survey once per week for six weeks. Between-person and within-person results indicated that people experiencing relational uncertainty appraised relationship talk as more threatening to themselves and to their courtship; they also reported avoiding more and enacting less relationship talk. Lagged analyses demonstrated that individuals who reported avoiding more and enacting less relationship talk in one week experienced more relational uncertainty in the following week. Partner effects, although not as prominent as actor effects, implied mutual influence within couples. The paper concludes by discussing how the findings advance scholarship on relational uncertainty and relationship talk.

Keywords: Relational Uncertainty; Relationship Talk; Courtship

A fundamental question within the field of interpersonal communication is how people negotiate their relationships through talk (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Decades of theorizing have emphasized that individuals make sense of their relationships using two levels of information: A *content message* is the manifest meaning of an utterance, and a *relational message* is the latent information an utterance conveys about the status of a

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relationship (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Although scholars have made substantial progress illuminating relational messages (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Dillard et al., 1999), they have devoted much less attention to understanding content messages about relationships (e.g., Acitelli, 2002, 2008).

The lack of scholarship on content messages about relationships, labeled *relationship talk* (Acitelli, 1988, 1992), is problematic for three reasons. First, relationship talk is an essential part of interpersonal interaction: It helps partners understand the nature of their relationship (Acitelli, 2001; Baxter & Wilmot, 1984, 1985), select behaviors that are appropriate (Baxter, 1987), and navigate turning points that occur over time (Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993). Second, relationship talk coincides with people's personal well-being via more contentment (Acitelli, 1992) and less depressive symptoms (Acitelli & Clair, 1996, as cited in Acitelli, 2002). Third, relationship talk corresponds with people's dyadic well-being via more relationship satisfaction (Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Badr, Acitelli, & Taylor, 2008). Relationship talk warrants investigation, then, as a key communication process that predicts the health of individuals and relationships.

This paper seeks to advance the fledgling literature on relationship talk in two ways. One contribution lies in theorizing about relational uncertainty as a foundation and an outcome of relationship talk over time. *Relational uncertainty* is the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement within interpersonal relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a). Although initial cross-sectional findings suggest a link between relational uncertainty and relationship talk (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005), questions remain about the longitudinal connection between the two constructs. A second contribution involves documenting the interplay within dyads. This study employs an actor–partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) to evaluate how people's reports of relational uncertainty and relationship talk are intertwined within romantic couples. The following sections theorize about the association between relational uncertainty and relationship talk, describe a longitudinal dyadic study, and discuss how the findings illuminate the two constructs.

Relational Uncertainty and Communication

Relational uncertainty indexes three kinds of questions about relationships (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch, 2008). *Self uncertainty* involves the ambiguity people experience about their own participation in a relationship, *partner uncertainty* entails the doubts individuals experience about their partner's participation in a relationship, and *relationship uncertainty* encompasses the questions people have about the relationship itself. Whereas self uncertainty ("How certain am I about how important this relationship is to me?") and partner uncertainty ("How certain am I about how important this relationship is to my partner?") involve questions about individuals, relationship uncertainty ("How certain am I about where this relationship is going?") focuses on the dyad as a unit (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999).

Theories of interpersonal communication imply divergent claims about how people may communicate when they are unsure about their relationship. Uncertainty reduction theory, the seminal theory of uncertainty within the field, argues that individuals strive to predict and explain their social circumstances (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). A core tenet of the theory is that people experiencing uncertainty are motivated to gain information using passive, active, and interactive strategies (Berger, 1979). Hence, uncertainty reduction theory suggests that individuals who lack information about their relationship should work to dispel their uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

More contemporary theories imply a less straightforward association between relational uncertainty and communication. Predicted outcome value theory, for example, posits that individuals experiencing uncertainty should seek information only when they believe the rewards will exceed the costs (Sunnafrank, 1986, 1990). Similarly, uncertainty management theory proposes that people should work to preserve ambiguity when the alternative is certainty about an undesired outcome (Brashers, 2001, 2007). The theory of motivated information management argues that individuals should pursue information only when they believe they can do so effectively (Afifi, 2010; Afifi & Weiner, 2004). Taken together, these theories support the claim that relational uncertainty may not always motivate a quest for knowledge.

Uncertainty reduction theory, predicted outcome value theory, uncertainty management theory, and the theory of motivated information management offer a useful starting point for illuminating people's desire to seek information. Notably, however, relationship talk is not isomorphic with information seeking. Individuals may engage in relationship talk for a variety of reasons, including to enhance solidarity, to seek or give comfort, to resolve conflict, to persuade, and to affirm commitment (Acitelli, 2008; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Knobloch, Solomon, & Theiss, 2006). Accordingly, comprehensive theorizing must consider the unique parameters of relationship talk. The next section turns to that task by explicating relationship talk and proposing hypotheses about its association with relational uncertainty.

Theorizing about Relationship Talk

Relationship talk occurs when individuals use content messages to discuss the nature, status, and/or future of their relationship (Acitelli, 1988, 2008; Knobloch et al., 2006). When people engage in relationship talk, they display an awareness of their relationship, an ability to take a couple-level perspective, and a willingness to discuss dyadic issues (Acitelli, 2001, 2002, 2008; Surra, Curran, & Williams, 2009). Relationship talk messages vary along a number of dimensions, including explicitness/implicitness, depth/superficiality, and positive valence/negative valence (Acitelli, 2008; Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Knobloch et al., 2006). A main function of relationship talk is negotiating and maintaining connections between people (Acitelli, 2001).

An eclectic body of cross-sectional work has examined the outcomes of relationship talk. For example, scholars have documented how people's reports of

the presence of relationship talk coincide with turning points (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis et al., 1993) and secret tests (Bell & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1990). Acitelli's program of research has targeted marital satisfaction, revealing that (1) the presence of relationship talk in hypothetical scenarios is positively associated with people's perceptions of marital satisfaction (Acitelli, 1988), (2) the amount of relationship talk husbands engage in during joint interviews is positively associated with marital satisfaction for wives (Acitelli, 1992), and (3) the amount of relationship talk couples enact when one partner is suffering from chronic illness (Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Badr & Acitelli, 2005) or lung cancer (Badr et al., 2008) is positively associated with their marital satisfaction. Moreover, an observational study found that dating partners perceive conversations containing prominent, in-depth, and negatively valenced relationship talk to be more consequential to their courtship (Knobloch et al., 2006). In sum, cross-sectional findings have identified several outcomes of relationship talk.

This study adopts a longitudinal perspective by examining people's reports of relationship talk over time. It also attends to three components of relationship talk that are implied by theories of how individuals perceive interpersonal interaction more generally (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Petronio, 2002). *Appraisals of threat* are people's perceptions of how risky it would be to engage in relationship talk (e.g., Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). These appraisals include judgments of self threat (i.e., risks to a person's image) and relationship threat (i.e., risks to a relationship). Relationship talk can be threatening because it has the potential to embarrass an individual and/or damage a relationship (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). *Avoidance of relationship talk* involves purposely refraining from talking with a partner about the relationship (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Scholarship suggests that relationship issues are commonly avoided topics within courtship, probably because face threats are salient (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Finally, *enacted relationship talk* entails discussing the relationship with a partner (e.g., Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). Whereas avoided relationship talk can be accomplished by an individual, enacted relationship talk requires the participation of both partners. This study considers appraisals of relationship talk, avoided relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk to gain a more comprehensive view of the construct.

With an explication of relationship talk in place, the following subsections theorize about the associations relationship talk may share with relational uncertainty (see Figure 1). A trio of effects can be distinguished using longitudinal data from actors and partners (Hoffman & Stawski, 2009; Kenny et al., 2006). *Between-person actor effects* document cross-sectional differences among individuals (e.g., people who experience more relational uncertainty may engage in less relationship talk). Between-person actor effects are prominent in the literature on relational uncertainty and topic avoidance (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Bevan, Stetzenbach, Batson, & Bullo, 2006), so these effects are considered for the sake of replication (H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a). *Within-person actor effects* reveal associations between repeated measures

of a predictor and an outcome within an individual (e.g., during a week when a person experiences more than his or her own average degree of relational uncertainty, he or she may engage in less relationship talk). No work has evaluated within-person actor effects of relational uncertainty on relationship talk, so predictions about them are novel (H1b, H2b, H3b, H4b). Finally, *partner effects* specify associations between repeated measures of a partner's predictor and an actor's outcome within a couple (e.g., during a week when a partner experiences more than his or her own average degree of relational uncertainty, an actor may engage in less relationship talk). Theorizing about the interplay within dyads is not well-developed in this literature, so research questions are advanced to consider the possibility of partner effects (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4).

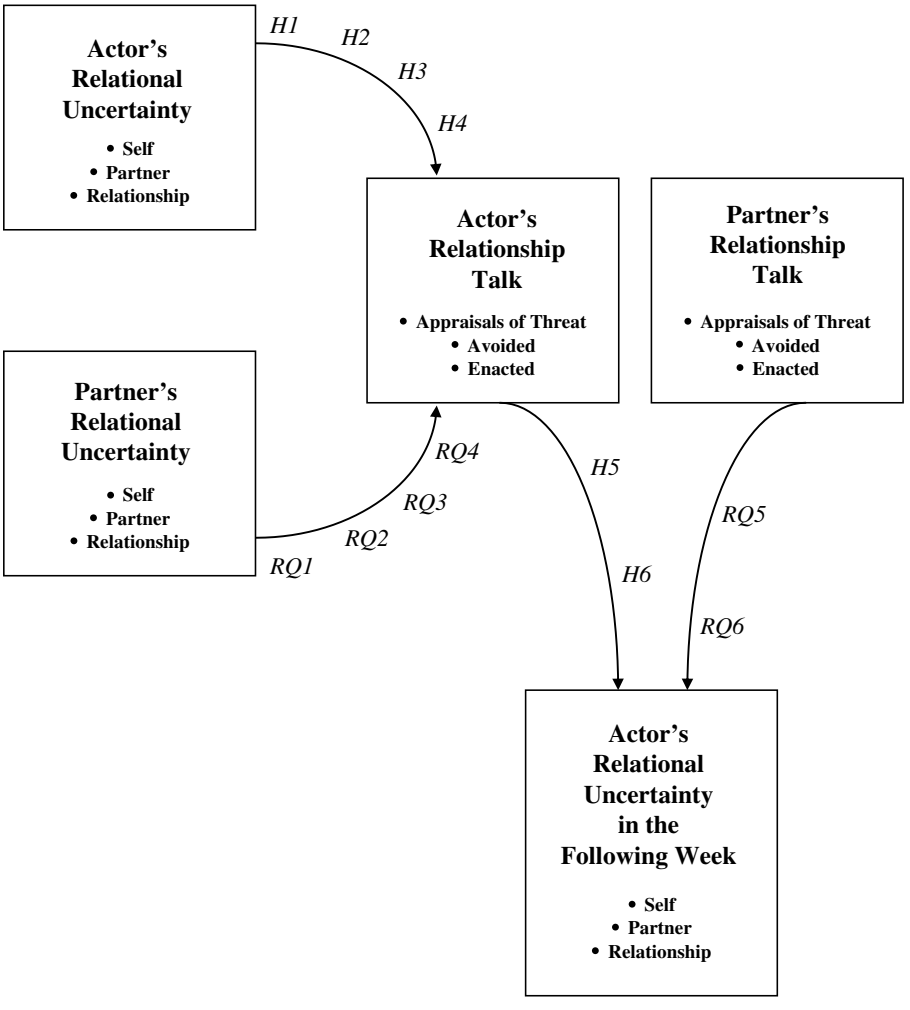

Figure 1 Hypothesized longitudinal actor–partner interdependence model.

Appraisals of Threat

A first proposition is that individuals experiencing relational uncertainty may appraise relationship talk as more threatening to themselves and to their relationship (see Figure 1). Both uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991) and predicted outcome value theory (Sunnafrank, 1990) imply that people who are uncertain have difficulty anticipating the consequences of their actions. If so, then individuals grappling with relational uncertainty may view relationship talk as threatening because they cannot forecast the probable outcomes of a conversation. Relationship talk is inherently risky because people may accidentally embarrass themselves, hurt their partner, generate conflict, discover issues of incompatibility, or harm the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Relational uncertainty may exacerbate these risks because people lack clear guidelines for how to behave.

Empirical findings corroborate the idea that talking about relationships is more threatening under conditions of relational uncertainty. For example, dating partners experiencing relational uncertainty report that discussing sensitive topics would be more threatening to themselves and to their courtship (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Similarly, people who are unsure about their marriage judge conversations with their spouse to be more threatening to themselves and to their marriage (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007). These studies imply that actors may view relationship talk as more threatening when they are experiencing relational uncertainty. Two hypotheses predict between-person and within-person actor effects.

H1: Between (H1a) and within (H1b) individuals, an actor's relational uncertainty is positively associated with his or her appraisals of the self threat of relationship talk.

H2: Between (H2a) and within (H2b) individuals, an actor's relational uncertainty is positively associated with his or her appraisals of the relationship threat of relationship talk.

Investigating partner effects may yield additional insights. Partner effects occur when a partner's cognitions, emotions, or behaviors predict an actor's outcomes (Kenny et al., 2006). Partner effects, in this case, may reveal that individuals perceive relationship talk to be more threatening to themselves and to their relationships when their partner is experiencing relational uncertainty. When people are unsure about their relationship, they behave in ways that may escalate face threats for their partner: They communicate less fluently (Knobloch, 2006), view irritations as more severe (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), and are less satisfied with their relationship (Dainton, 2003; Knobloch, 2008). Thus, even subtle cues that a partner is experiencing relational uncertainty may make the risks of discussing the relationship salient to an individual. Research questions examine this issue.

RQ1: Is a partner's relational uncertainty positively associated with an actor's appraisals of the self threat of relationship talk?

RQ2: Is a partner's relational uncertainty positively associated with an actor's appraisals of the relationship threat of relationship talk?

Avoided and Enacted Relationship Talk

Individuals also may avoid talking about their relationship when experiencing relational uncertainty (see Figure 1). Predicted outcome value theory (Sunnafrank, 1986, 1990), uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001, 2007), and the theory of motivated information management (Afifi, 2010; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) all suggest that people may avoid seeking information rather than risk unfavorable consequences. Individuals may hesitate to discuss their relationship under conditions of relational uncertainty because they cannot predict how their partner will respond (e.g., Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). They may opt for caution to guard against losing face, threatening their partner's image, or injuring the relationship (Knobloch, 2010). Accordingly, individuals experiencing relational uncertainty may forgo relationship talk rather than risk negative outcomes.

Previous work bolsters this proposition by implying that people experiencing relational uncertainty may be reluctant to talk with their partner about sensitive issues. Dating partners (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), cross-sex friends (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998), stepchildren (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), and siblings (Bevan et al., 2006) report engaging in more topic avoidance under conditions of relational uncertainty. Within the context of courtship, individuals who are unsure prefer to avoid direct conversations about unexpected events (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b), feelings of jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a), and irritating partner behavior (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). These studies suggest that people experiencing relational uncertainty may be unwilling to discuss topics of vulnerability.

Three cross-sectional findings support this theorizing more directly. People who are unsure about the possibility of romantic involvement report less relationship talk (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005) and often identify their relationship as a taboo topic (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Moreover, dating partners experiencing relational uncertainty perceive less relationship talk in conversation after controlling for the ratings of observers (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). These studies imply that relational uncertainty corresponds with more avoided and less enacted relationship talk. Hence, H3 and H4 target between-person and within-person actor effects.

H3: Between (H3a) and within (H3b) individuals, an actor's relational uncertainty is positively associated with his or her avoidance of relationship talk.

H4: Between (H4a) and within (H4b) individuals, an actor's relational uncertainty is negatively associated with his or her reports of enacted relationship talk.

Partner effects may exist as well. Here, partner effects may signal that individuals avoid more and enact less relationship talk when their partner is unsure about the relationship. Evidence implies that people may behave in ways that render them less approachable under conditions of relational uncertainty. Individuals see their relationship as more turbulent (Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009), feel more anger, sadness, fear, and jealousy (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Theiss & Solomon,

2006a), and do less to maintain their relationship (Dainton, 2003) when experiencing relational uncertainty. In other words, when partners are grappling with questions about their relationship, they may behave in ways that deter actors from engaging in relationship talk. Two research questions investigate partner effects.

RQ3: Is a partner's relational uncertainty positively associated with an actor's avoidance of relationship talk?

RQ4: Is a partner's relational uncertainty negatively associated with an actor's reports of enacted relationship talk?

Relationship Talk Predicting Subsequent Relational Uncertainty

To this point, we have considered relational uncertainty as a predictor of relationship talk. Cross-sectional logic suggests that people experiencing relational uncertainty may eschew relationship talk (between-person actor effects). Longitudinal logic implies that during weeks when actors and partners experience above average levels of relational uncertainty, actors may evade relationship talk (within-person actor effects and partner effects). A final component of the longitudinal logic is the possibility of lagged reciprocal effects (see Figure 1).

Does avoiding or enacting relationship talk in one week predict people's experience of relational uncertainty in the following week? Relationship talk, when performed effectively, can help individuals obtain knowledge, establish common ground, solve problems, and build solidarity (e.g., Acitelli, 2001; Baxter, 1987). On the other hand, when people are unwilling to discuss dyadic issues, they may limit their vulnerability but also restrict their ability to glean insight (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Surra et al., 2009). Hence, individuals who avoid talking about their relationship in one week may grapple with more relational uncertainty in the subsequent week. Conversely, couples who discuss their relationship in one week may report less relational uncertainty in the following week. Final hypotheses evaluate an actor's avoided and enacted relationship talk; final research questions inquire about partner effects.

H5: Actors report more relational uncertainty when they avoid more relationship talk in the previous week.

H6: Actors report more relational uncertainty when they enact less relationship talk in the previous week.

RQ5: Do actors report more relational uncertainty when partners avoid more relationship talk in the previous week?

RQ6: Do actors report more relational uncertainty when partners enact less relationship talk in the previous week?

Method

To address these hypotheses and research questions, we solicited online survey data from romantic couples once per week for six consecutive weeks. The six-week time frame was selected to be sensitive to people's day-to-day experiences of relationship talk (e.g., Acitelli, 2008) and relational uncertainty (e.g., Theiss & Solomon,

2008) while not demanding an excessive time commitment for participants (e.g., Arriaga, 2001; Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Surra et al., 2009). Students enrolled in communication courses at large universities in the Midwestern and Northeastern United States were invited to participate if (1) they had a romantic interest in a partner, (2) their partner was willing to participate, and (3) both individuals had Internet access.

Students signed up for the study by listing their e-mail address and their partner's e-mail address. Each person received an e-mail with a description of the study and a request to reply if willing to participate. After both partners replied with their consent, individuals received an e-mail containing a web address, a unique username, and a password. Students earned a small amount of extra course credit and partners earned $5 for each wave of the study they completed.

Procedures

On Monday morning, each person received an e-mail with a password to log into the questionnaire for the week. On Thursday afternoon and Saturday morning, reminder e-mails were sent to individuals who had not yet completed the questionnaire. At midnight on Sunday, the password expired and participants could no longer access the questionnaire. The next wave began on Monday morning when participants were e-mailed a new password for the week.

The first questionnaire assessed demographic and relationship characteristics along with people's experiences of relational uncertainty and relationship talk. The questionnaire for the subsequent weeks began with an open-ended item asking participants to report any changes that had occurred in their relationship during the previous week. Then, the questionnaire solicited people's perceptions of relational uncertainty and relationship talk during the previous week.

Sample

Participants were 135 couples (270 individuals; 131 men and 139 women) who provided data for at least the first wave of the study (131 heterosexual couples and four lesbian couples). The age of the sample averaged 20.68 years (range = 18–38 years, $SD = 2.23$ years, $Mdn = 20$ years), and the racial composition of the sample was 65% Caucasian, 13% African American, 11% Hispanic, 9% Asian, and 2% other.

At the start of the study, individuals reported that they had been romantically involved with their partner for an average of 1.75 years (range = less than one month to more than 18 years, $SD = 1.98$ years, $Mdn = 1.18$ years). People characterized the status of their relationship as friendship (4%), casually dating (14%), seriously dating (78%), or engaged to be married (4%).

Three strategies were employed to guard against attrition: (1) offering participants the flexibility to complete the questionnaires at the time and location of their choosing, (2) designing the server to save data so participants could work on their responses during multiple sessions, and (3) sending reminder e-mails to those who

had not participated by the middle of each week. In total, 13 couples (9.6% of the sample) dropped out of the study before completing the final questionnaire (see Table 1 for the sample size for each week). Four couples terminated their courtship during the study, and nine couples were deleted from the sample when one partner did not complete three consecutive questionnaires. Multilevel modeling techniques are able to accommodate missing data, so responses from all of the waves the couples completed were retained in the substantive analyses.

This sample also provided data for studies examining people's perceptions of irritating partner behavior (Theiss & Knobloch, 2009), their experiences of hurt (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009), and their judgments of relational turbulence (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Relational uncertainty is the only variable reported in common among the studies.

Measures

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted on data from the first wave to evaluate the unidimensionality of the closed-ended scales. The variables were calculated as the average of responses to the unidimensional items (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Relational uncertainty. Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty were operationalized using short versions of Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) measures. Participants employed a 6-point response scale (1 = "completely or almost completely uncertain", 6 = "completely or almost completely certain") to complete items introduced by the stem "How certain are you about . . .?" All items were reverse-scored so that larger values indicated greater relational uncertainty.

Self uncertainty included six unidimensional items according to CFA results. Sample items include (1) how much you like your partner, and (2) whether or not you are ready to commit to your partner. *Partner uncertainty* was composed of five parallel items, including (1) whether or not your partner is ready to commit to you, and (2) how important the relationship is to your partner. *Relationship uncertainty* contained six items, including (1) whether or not you and your partner will stay together, and (2) how you can or cannot behave around your partner. Although the three sources of relational uncertainty shared positive bivariate associations (see Table 2), they did not form a undimensional factor at the second-order level, so they were treated as separate variables (following Knobloch, 2006, 2008).

Appraisals of relationship talk. Items crafted by Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) operationalized participants' perceptions of how threatening it would be to talk about their relationship. Individuals responded to items prefaced by the stem

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics by Wave

	Wave 1 ($N = 270$)			Wave 2 ($N = 249$)			Wave 3 ($N = 236$)			Wave 4 ($N = 233$)			Wave 5 ($N = 234$)			Wave 6 ($N = 229$)		
	M	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α
Self uncertainty	1.89	0.84	0.91	1.89	0.97	0.94	1.91	1.05	0.95	2.01	1.15	0.96	1.96	1.13	0.96	1.96	1.15	0.97
Partner uncertainty	1.93	0.93	0.90	2.01	0.99	0.93	2.02	1.13	0.95	2.03	1.17	0.96	1.94	1.17	0.96	1.99	1.19	0.97
Relationship uncertainty	2.03	0.79	0.85	2.03	0.93	0.91	2.06	1.02	0.92	2.09	1.10	0.94	2.02	1.07	0.94	2.00	1.04	0.93
Self threat	1.95	1.02	0.75	1.88	1.07	0.81	1.85	1.04	0.79	1.80	1.06	0.80	1.77	1.05	0.83	1.78	1.15	0.87
Relationship threat	1.89	1.10	0.93	1.92	1.24	0.95	1.89	1.19	0.94	1.91	1.22	0.93	1.97	1.32	0.96	1.94	1.32	0.96
Avoided relationship talk	2.43	1.27	0.79	2.48	1.45	0.87	2.56	1.55	0.86	2.38	1.47	0.88	2.27	1.38	0.86	2.21	1.39	0.89
Enacted relationship talk	4.55	1.23	0.84	4.50	1.29	0.90	4.57	1.33	0.92	4.46	1.39	0.94	4.53	1.37	0.93	4.63	1.31	0.92

Table 2 Intraclass Correlations and Wave 1 Bivariate Correlations

	ρ	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7
V1: Actor's self uncertainty	.55	—						
V2: Actor's partner uncertainty	.57	.50***	—					
V3: Actor's relationship uncertainty	.55	.72***	.67***	—				
V4: Actor's self threat	.46	.29***	.34***	.39***	—			
V5: Actor's relationship threat	.51	.48***	.35***	.47***	.64***	—		
V6: Actor's avoided relationship talk	.45	.42***	.40***	.45***	.47***	.50***	—	
V7: Actor's enacted relationship talk	.62	−.43***	−.41***	−.45***	−.22***	−.32***	−.43***	—
Partner's self uncertainty	—	.33***	.39***	.42***	.13	.18*	.31***	.34***
Partner's partner uncertainty	—	.53***	.37***	.48***	.15	.16	.36***	−.45***
Partner's relationship uncertainty	—	.38***	.42***	.45***	.16	.12	.24**	−.30**
Partner's self threat	—	.05	.19*	.07	.05	−.04	.07	−.22*
Partner's relationship threat	—	.20*	.21*	.18*	.19*	.15	.24**	−.29**
Partner's avoided relationship talk	—	.23**	.40***	.29**	.17	.18*	.35***	−.39***
Partner's enacted relationship talk	—	−.37***	−.31**	−.37***	−.03	−.10	−.19*	.42***

$N = 270$ individuals for intraclass correlations (ρ) and bivariate correlations among actors. $N = 135$ couples for bivariate correlations within couples.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

"Having a conversation about the nature of the relationship would ..." (1 = "strongly disagree", 6 = "strongly agree"). *Self threat* contained three unidimensional items: (1) be embarrassing for me, (2) make me feel vulnerable, and (3) damage my image. *Relationship threat* also included three items: (1) threaten the relationship, (2) have a negative effect on the relationship, and (3) damage the relationship.

Avoided relationship talk. Guerrero and Afifi's (1995) measure assessed avoidance of relationship talk. The instructions asked participants to indicate how much they avoided discussing topics with their partner during the past week (1 = "never avoid discussing", 7 = "always avoid discussing"). Three items comprised the scale: (1) the state of your relationship, (2) norms and expectations for your relationship, and (3) behaviors that put a strain on your relationship.

Enacted relationship talk. Items written specifically for this study measured enacted relationship talk. Three unidimensional items completed the stem "During the past week, we have actively avoided or actively discussed ..." (1 = "actively avoided", 6 = "actively discussed"): (1) our view of this relationship, (2) our feelings for each other, and (3) the future of the relationship.

Results

A preliminary analysis examined the correlations among the variables (see Table 2). First, intraclass correlations (ρ) were calculated to distinguish how much variation in a dependent variable stems from within-person variance versus between-person and between-group variance. Findings indicated a relatively equal distribution between the sources of variance. Next, bivariate correlations were computed between individuals and within couples for the Wave 1 data. Between individuals, the variables of relational uncertainty, self threat, relationship threat, and avoided relationship talk were positively correlated, and they were negatively correlated with enacted relationship talk. Within couples, scores between partners shared positive correlations for all of the variables except self threat and relationship threat.

We chose multilevel modeling for the substantive analyses for three reasons: (1) it accounts for nested data, (2) it parses between-person effects from within-person effects, and (3) it accommodates uneven sample sizes across waves (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Three-level multilevel models were computed using maximum likelihood estimation in which repeated measures were nested within individuals and individuals were nested within couples. The models contained time-varying predictors at Level 1, characteristics of the individual at Level 2, and dyadic variables at Level 3. The three sources of relational uncertainty were evaluated in separate analyses to avoid multicollinearity.

The intercept and slopes are reported for each analysis. The findings for the intercept reveal the between-person actor effects. The results for the slopes document

the within-person actor effects and the partner effects. All of the significance tests were two-tailed.

Relational Uncertainty Predicting Relationship Talk (Model 1)

Model 1 evaluated how relational uncertainty predicts relationship talk. It contained relationship status as an uncentered Level 2 covariate on the intercept. Also at Level 2, the models included the within-person mean for an actor's relational uncertainty, which was uncentered to document between-person effects (H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a). Finally, the relational uncertainty of actors and partners were included as group-mean centered Level 1 predictors. Group-mean centering entailed subtracting an individual's average relational uncertainty score across waves from his or her relational uncertainty score for each wave; it was used to document how fluctuations around an actor's mean relational uncertainty score (H1b, H2b, H3b, H4b) and a partner's mean relational uncertainty score (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4) coincide with an actor's relationship talk. (For a detailed discussion of centering issues, consult Kreft, de Leeuw, & Aiken, 1995; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002.) The intercepts and slopes for the Level 1 predictors were estimated as random effects. Across analyses, results for the residuals indicated that random variability remained to be explained in most of the intercepts and slopes.

Appraisals of relationship talk. H1 and H2 predicted that an actor's relational uncertainty is positively associated with his or her appraisals of self threat and relationship threat; RQ1 and RQ2 inquired about partner effects (see Table 3). With respect to the intercept, between-person effects were apparent such that participants who reported more relational uncertainty also reported more self threat (H1a) and relationship threat (H2a). According to the slopes, during waves when actors and partners experienced greater levels of relational uncertainty than their own averages, actors reported more self threat (H1b, RQ1) and relationship threat (H2b, RQ2).

Avoided relationship talk. H3 proposed that an actor's relational uncertainty is positively associated with his or her avoidance of relationship talk, and RQ3 raised the issue of partner effects (see Table 4). Results for the intercept indicated that individuals who reported more relational uncertainty also avoided more relationship talk (H3a). With respect to the slopes, when actors experienced above average levels of self, partner, and relationship uncertainty, they avoided more relationship talk (H3b). Similarly, a partner's increased experience of partner uncertainty coincided with more avoided relationship talk by actors (RQ3).

Enacted relationship talk. H4 argued that an actor's relational uncertainty is negatively associated with his or her reports of enacted relationship talk; RQ4

Table 3 Relational Uncertainty Predicting an Actor's Appraisals of Relationship Talk

	An actor's self threat			An actor's relationship threat		
	Self uncertainty	Partner uncertainty	Relationship uncertainty	Self uncertainty	Partner uncertainty	Relationship uncertainty
Intercept	1.86***	1.86***	1.86***	1.94***	1.94***	1.94***
Relationship status	−.04	.03	.08	.00	−.15	.06
Actor's relational uncertainty mean	.45***	.45***	.55***	.71***	.42***	.71***
Slopes						
Actor's relational uncertainty	.28***	.23***	.28***	.52***	.40***	.52***
Partner's relational uncertainty	.07**	.12**	.10**	.13**	.19***	.17***

Cell entries in the intercept category are the between-person change in the intercept attributable to Wave 1 relationship status or the within-person mean for an actor's self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, or relationship uncertainty. Cell entries in the slopes category are the within-person slope over the course of the study. Self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty were evaluated in separate models.
$^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 4 Relational Uncertainty Predicting an Actor's Avoided and Enacted Relationship Talk

	An actor's avoided relationship talk			An actor's enacted relationship talk		
	Self uncertainty	Partner uncertainty	Relationship uncertainty	Self uncertainty	Partner uncertainty	Relationship uncertainty
Intercept	2.41***	2.41***	2.40***	4.52***	4.52***	4.52***
Relationship status	−.22	−.24	−.11	.30	.35**	.22
Actor's relational uncertainty mean	.60***	.51***	.70***	−.43***	−.37***	−.52***
Slopes						
Actor's relational uncertainty	.31***	.21***	.28***	−.23***	−.16*	−.15*
Partner's relational uncertainty	.06	.10*	.07	−.05	−.09	−.07

Cell entries in the intercept category are the between-person change in the intercept attributable to Wave 1 relationship status or the within-person mean for an actor's self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, or relationship uncertainty. Cell entries in the slopes category are the within-person slope over the course of the study. Self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty were evaluated in separate models.
$^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

considered partner effects (see Table 4). Relationship status was positively associated with relationship talk on the intercept in the model including partner uncertainty. Also with respect to the intercept, individuals who reported more relational uncertainty enacted less relationship talk (H4a). The slopes indicated within-person actor effects (H4b), such that when actors experienced a level of relational uncertainty above their average, they enacted less relationship talk. Partner effects did not emerge (RQ4).

Relationship Talk Predicting Relational Uncertainty in the Following Week (Model 2)

Model 2 evaluated lagged effects by documenting how an actor's and a partner's relationship talk in one wave predict an actor's relational uncertainty in the following wave. The dependent variables for Model 2 were an actor's self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty in Wave *t*. As in the previous model, Wave 1 relationship status was included as an uncentered Level 2 covariate on the intercept. Actors' reports of self, partner, or relationship uncertainty in the previous wave (i.e., Wave *t*–1) were included as uncentered Level 1 covariates to control for the within-person correlation of relational uncertainty from wave to wave. Finally, to evaluate the hypotheses and research questions, actors' and partners' uncentered avoided or enacted relationship talk in Wave *t*–1 were included at Level 1. The Level 1 covariates and substantive predictors were uncentered to evaluate raw changes in the variables from one wave to the next. The intercepts as well as the Level 1 slopes were estimated as random effects. Findings for the residuals indicated that most of the intercepts and slopes contained random variation left unexplained.

Avoided relationship talk. H5 suggested that an actor's avoided relationship talk is positively associated with his or her relational uncertainty in the following wave, and RQ5 asked about partner effects (see Table 5). Findings indicated a negative association between relationship status and relational uncertainty on the intercept. Not surprisingly, actors' reports of relational uncertainty in one wave were positively associated with their experience of relational uncertainty in the subsequent wave. The slopes also revealed support for H5: An actor's avoided relationship talk in Wave *t*–1 was positively associated with his or her self, partner, and relationship uncertainty in Wave *t*. With respect to RQ5, a partner's avoided relationship talk in one wave was positively associated with an actor's partner uncertainty and relationship uncertainty in the subsequent wave.

Enacted relationship talk. H6 posited that an actor's reports of enacted relationship talk correspond with less relational uncertainty in the following wave. RQ6 speculated about partner effects (see Table 6). Relationship status was negatively associated with relational uncertainty on the intercept. Of course, relational uncertainty was positively correlated from Wave *t*–1 to Wave *t*. Actor effects indicated that enacted relationship talk in one wave was negatively associated with

Table 5 Avoided Relationship Talk Predicting an Actor's Relational Uncertainty in the Following Wave

	Actor's self uncertainty in Wave *t*	Actor's partner uncertainty in Wave *t*	Actor's relationship uncertainty in Wave *t*
Intercept	.75***	.62***	.77***
Relationship status	−.34***	−.31***	−.33***
Slopes			
Actor's relational uncertainty Wave *t*–1	.55***	.56***	.53***
Actor's avoided relationship talk Wave *t*–1	.05*	.04*	.05*
Partner's avoided relationship talk Wave *t*–1	.03	.09**	.05*

Cell entries in the intercept category are the between-person change in the intercept attributable to Wave 1 relationship status. Cell entries in the slopes category are the within-person slope for the lagged predictor. Self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty were evaluated in separate models.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 6 Enacted Relationship Talk Predicting an Actor's Relational Uncertainty in the Following Wave

	Actor's self uncertainty in Wave *t*	Actor's partner uncertainty in Wave *t*	Actor's relationship uncertainty in Wave *t*
Intercept	1.53***	1.38***	1.38***
Relationship status	−.33***	−.35***	−.34***
Slopes			
Actor's relational uncertainty Wave *t*–1	.52***	.57***	.53***
Actor's enacted relationship talk Wave *t*–1	−.08*	−.06†	−.07*
Partner's enacted relationship talk Wave *t*–1	−.02	−.04	−.01

Cell entries in the intercept category are the between-person change in the intercept attributable to Wave 1 relationship status. Cell entries in the slopes category are the within-person slope for the lagged predictor. Self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty were evaluated in separate models.
†$p = .07$, *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$.

self and relationship uncertainty in the following wave; a similar actor effect for partner uncertainty approached statistical significance (H6). Partner effects were not apparent (RQ6).

Discussion

Relationship talk is an important yet understudied topic within the field of interpersonal communication (Acitelli, 1988, 2002). This investigation adds to the literature on relationship talk in three ways: (1) by theorizing about relational

uncertainty as both a predictor and an outcome of relationship talk, (2) by tracking people's reports of relationship talk over time, and (3) by considering the experiences of both actors and partners (see Figure 1). The following subsections interpret the findings in conjunction with each contribution, describe limitations of the study, and propose directions for future research.

Theorizing about Relational Uncertainty and Relationship Talk

Scholarship on relationship talk has been marked by a consistent focus on the outcomes of people's conversations about relationships (Acitelli, 1988, 1992; Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Badr et al., 2008). In contrast, this paper theorized about relational uncertainty as a predictor of relationship talk. Between-person findings indicated that people experiencing more relational uncertainty appraised having a conversation about their courtship to be more threatening to themselves (H1a) and to their relationship (H2a), and they reported more avoidance (H3a) and less enactment (H4a) of relationship talk.

These results lend support for three of the four interpersonal communication theories that consider the link between uncertainty and information seeking. Whereas uncertainty reduction theory proposes that individuals are motivated to acquire knowledge when they are unsure (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991), subsequent theories offer more complex reasoning about people's desire to seek information. Predicted outcome value theory (Sunnafrank, 1986, 1990), uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001, 2007), and the theory of motivated information management (Afifi, 2010; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) coalesce around the idea that individuals will forgo a quest for information if they believe that maintaining uncertainty is more advantageous than obtaining clarity. The findings of this study are compatible with the latter theorizing that people do not always choose to dispel ambiguity.

More broadly, this investigation highlights a gap in theorizing about the link between uncertainty and interpersonal communication. Although all four theories conceptualize uncertainty management in more sophisticated ways than just information seeking (Afifi, 2010; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Brashers, 2001; Sunnafrank, 1990), the bulk of ensuing scholarship has focused on people's decisions to pursue or eschew information (Afifi & Weiner, 2002; Hogan & Brashers, 2009). As a result, the literature is relatively silent about why people experiencing relational uncertainty may choose to engage in relationship talk for reasons other than seeking information (e.g., for developing camaraderie, offering support, solving problems, soliciting compliance, etc.). This theoretical slippage made the task of advancing hypotheses in the current study more challenging because it was necessary to supplement the logic of the four theories with more localized reasoning about the link between relational uncertainty and relationship talk. Clearly, the need exists for a theory that encompasses a wider range of communication behaviors (and the reasons people enact those behaviors) under conditions of relational uncertainty.

Relational Uncertainty and Relationship Talk Over Time

A second contribution lies in theorizing longitudinally about the effects of relational uncertainty on relationship talk. Within-person actor effects document how departures from an individual's typical experiences predict his or her outcomes over time (Hoffman & Stawski, 2009). Findings indicated that, when individuals experienced levels of relational uncertainty above their personal average, they reported more self threat (H1b), more relationship threat (H2b), more avoided relationship talk (H3b), and less enacted relationship talk (H4b). In other words, people may be unwilling to discuss their relationship when they are grappling with more relational uncertainty than they normally do. These findings cohere with the results for H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a by implying that people's desire to protect face may supersede their desire to gain information when they are unsure about the status of their relationship.

Whereas the findings for between-person actor effects add to research suggesting a cross-sectional link between relational uncertainty and relationship talk (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005), the results for within-person actor effects are unique to the literature. The two types of findings are not redundant: Between-person actor effects document how people differ from each other, and within-person actor effects reveal how an individual differs from himself or herself when circumstances change (Hoffman & Stawski, 2009). The move to considering relational uncertainty and relationship talk as time-varying constructs marks a step forward for both literatures. Scholars have long theorized that relational uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1982) and relationship talk (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis et al., 1993) ebb and flow as relationships progress, but researchers have just begun to examine the over-time components of relational uncertainty (Theiss & Solomon, 2008) and relationship talk (Badr et al., 2008; Surra et al., 2009). This study suggests that both constructs should be conceptualized as dynamic rather than static.

Final hypotheses predicted lagged effects of relationship talk on people's subsequent experiences of relational uncertainty. When individuals reported avoiding more relationship talk in one week, they experienced more relational uncertainty in the following week (H5). Similarly, when people reported enacting less relationship talk in one week, they indicated more relational uncertainty in the next week (H6).

Beyond illuminating the dynamic interplay between relational uncertainty and relationship talk, the lagged results supply a concrete illustration of how cognition and communication intersect over time. A fundamental premise of the field of interpersonal communication is that people's thoughts about relationships are intertwined with their talk about relationships (Solomon & Theiss, 2007). An array of scholarship considers people's cognition as a predictor of their communication (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Greene, 1997). Less often does work shed light on the reciprocal association between communication and cognition (but see Burleson, 2010, for one example). The current data suggest that relational uncertainty may inform people's avoidance and enactment of relationship talk (H3, H4), which in turn, may contribute to their relational uncertainty (H5, H6).

Unfortunately, the design of this study does not support conclusions about causality, but the findings do provide a window into the elusive time-ordered connection between cognition and communication.

Interplay between Actors and Partners

A third contribution stems from parsing the experiences of actors versus partners. Notably, partner effects surfaced in approximately half of the analyses. The relational uncertainty of partners was positively associated with actors' appraisals of the self threat (RQ1) and relationship threat (RQ2) of relationship talk, but it did not consistently predict actors' reports of avoided (RQ3) or enacted (RQ4) relationship talk. The avoided relationship talk of partners in one wave was positively associated with actors' reports of partner and relationship uncertainty in the following wave (RQ5), but no lagged partner effects emerged for enacted relationship talk (RQ6).

These findings serve as a reminder that individuals do not negotiate relationships in isolation. Indeed, the presence of actor and partner effects together signals mutual influence within dyads (Kenny et al., 2006). The partner effects hint that people are not adept at concealing either their questions about involvement or their desire to avoid relationship talk. Stated differently, individuals may experience relational uncertainty and avoid relationship talk of their own accord, but people seem to recognize when their partner is entertaining doubts or is reluctant to discuss dyadic issues, and they appear to adjust their cognitions accordingly. Questions remain, however, about why and how the spillover occurs. How do individuals sense their partner's relational uncertainty, and in turn, decide that talking about their relationship carries more self threat and relationship threat? How do people sense their partner's avoidance of relationship talk in one week, and in turn, grapple with more relational uncertainty in the following week? Do individuals intend to be opaque or do they strategically leak clues to their partner? These questions represent promising avenues for future work.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This sample also contributed to a trio of previously published manuscripts. Those papers employed the logic of the relational turbulence model to examine people's perceptions of irritating partner behavior (Theiss & Knobloch, 2009), their appraisals of hurtful episodes (Theiss et al., 2009), and their reports of cognitive and emotional turbulence (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). On one hand, separate papers permitted illumination of the full complexity of people's experiences of irritations, hurt, turbulence, and relationship talk. On the other hand, readers should be mindful of the common origins of the manuscripts so that scholarship on relational uncertainty is not unduly biased by a single sample.

Weaknesses of the research design are notable as well. First, couples were tracked for only a short time. The six-week duration was designed to accommodate rapid oscillations in relational uncertainty and relationship talk (e.g., Acitelli, 2008; Theiss

& Solomon, 2008) without overburdening participants (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2006; Surra et al., 2009). Prior longitudinal studies of courtship have used a six-week time frame successfully (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b), but the short duration may have failed to capture substantial volatility in people's experiences. Second, recruiting couples resulted in lower levels of relational uncertainty compared to studies that have recruited individuals (cf. Knobloch, 2006; Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007). Requiring both partners to participate may have attracted couples experiencing quite modest levels of relational uncertainty. Third, the generalizability of the results is limited to young adult college students and their partners.

A broader limitation is that the study did not address the content of conversations about relationships. A three-pronged measurement strategy assessed people's reports of appraisals of threat, avoided relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk. Although operationalizing multiple components offered more detailed findings than prior investigations that have considered only the presence or amount of relationship talk, the current data cannot shed light on linguistic features of conversations about relationships. Now that a critical mass of findings about relationship talk is beginning to develop, scholars can be more confident that operationalizing relationship talk in complex ways is a sensible investment of research resources.

An even more ambitious avenue for additional inquiry involves assimilating observational methods with self-report methods. Such a study would involve supplementing people's survey responses with periodic conversations recorded in a laboratory or at home. The resulting data would help to circumvent shared method variance as well as document verbal and nonverbal features of relationship talk. The current study paves the way for more intricate research designs by revealing that the link between relational uncertainty and relationship talk is robust, complex, and important to understand.

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