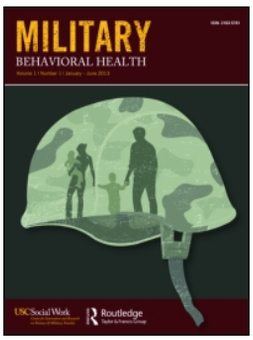

Routledge
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Military Behavioral Health

ISSN: 2163-5781 (Print) 2163-5803 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/umbh20

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To cite this article: Leanne K. Knobloch & Jennifer A. Theiss (2017) Topic Avoidance about Deployment upon Reunion: Applying the Relational Turbulence Model, Military Behavioral Health, 5:2, 117-128, DOI: 10.1080/21635781.2016.1272013

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2016.1272013

Accepted author version posted online: 16 Dec 2016.
Published online: 16 Dec 2016.

MILITARY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
2017, VOL. 5, NO. 2, 117–128
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2016.1272013

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SPECIAL SECTION

Topic Avoidance about Deployment upon Reunion: Applying the Relational Turbulence Model

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ABSTRACT
This study uses the logic of the relational turbulence model to examine the reluctance of military couples to talk about their deployment experiences during reunion. A total of 235 individuals (117 returning service members, 118 at-home partners) completed an online survey within 6 months of homecoming. People experiencing more relational uncertainty and interference from a partner upon reunion reported more topic avoidance about deployment. Relational uncertainty and interference from a partner were especially strong predictors of topic avoidance about deployment for individuals who were highly satisfied with their relationship. The findings have implications for both theory and practice.

KEYWORDS
Communication; deployment; interference from a partner; military couples; postdeployment transition; reintegration; relational uncertainty; relationship satisfaction; reunion; topic avoidance

Staying connected during deployment can be a source of stress for both military personnel and at-home partners (Cigrang et al., 2014; Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, & Sahlstein, 2013; Merolla, 2010). The ability of military couples to keep in touch across the miles can be plagued by logistical difficulties such as technology failures, time zone differences, connectivity outages, operational security regulations, expeditions to remote locations, and mission requirements to go dark (Carter & Renshaw, 2016; Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010). Even when the logistics fall into place, service members and at-home partners may make strategic decisions to withhold information from each other to prevent quarrels, maintain peace, stave off worry, protect the service member from distraction, and preserve privacy (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; McNulty, 2005; Rossetto, 2013). All of these logistic and strategic factors make communication more challenging during deployment, but they also make getting reacquainted more difficult during reunion.

Topic avoidance about deployment occurs when military couples purposefully refrain from talking about their deployment experiences (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Knobloch, Theiss, & Wehrman, 2015). For example, service members report avoiding talking with their romantic partner during deployment about sensitive issues such as restricted military information, mission-related danger, their feelings and mental health, the status of romantic and family relationships, deaths and injuries in theatre, sex and fidelity, money, and reunion concerns (Knobloch et al., 2015). Although disclosing information and expressing emotion can foster closeness, returning service members and at-home partners may decide to conceal information about deployment upon reunion to protect themselves, their partner, and/or their relationship (e.g., Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Rossetto, 2013; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009).

Distinguishing the interpersonal factors that discourage recently reunited military couples from discussing their deployment experiences is imperative for helping them transition smoothly. Indeed, research shows that topic avoidance can be stressful for military couples (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson, Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011) and can correspond with less physical and mental well-being (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Although withholding information can be functional in certain circumstances (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Roloff & Ifert, 2000), topic avoidance tends to be dissatisfying within romantic relationships (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). The correspondence between topic avoidance and people's physical, mental, and relational health highlights the importance of understanding the relationship parameters that predict topic avoidance about deployment upon reunion. Moreover, scholars have called for research to inform evidence-based guidelines for helping military couples communicate effectively during the transition from deployment to reintegration

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(e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Carter & Renshaw, 2016).

The *relational turbulence model* is a theoretical framework that may supply an explanation for why returning service members and at-home partners avoid talking about deployment upon reunion. The model was formulated to account for why romantic partners experience upheaval during times of transition (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010), and it has illuminated people's experiences when relationships are in flux as a result of the arrival of a child (Theiss, Estlein, & Weber, 2013), the shift to an empty nest (Nagy & Theiss, 2013), and the challenges posed by health concerns such as breast cancer (Weber & Solomon, 2008), infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008), and depression (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012). Recently, the model has shed light on how military couples navigate the transition from deployment to reunion (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Our goal is to employ the model's logic to evaluate why returning service members and at-home partners may be unwilling to talk about their deployment experiences after homecoming.

A relational turbulence model of topic avoidance about deployment

The relational turbulence model proposes that times of transition pose unique challenges for sustaining interpersonal ties (Solomon & Theiss, 2011; Solomon et al., 2010). The model defines *transitions* as intervals of discontinuity punctuating otherwise stable periods that provide occasions for people to adjust their roles, recalibrate their feelings, and restructure their interactions (Knobloch, 2007; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). During the postdeployment transition, for example, returning service members and at-home partners need to reestablish their connection, acclimate to communicating in person, decide how to distribute decision-making power, and settle into a routine (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Karakurt, Christiansen, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Weiss, 2013). Returning National Guard and reserve service members face the added tasks of readjusting to their civilian community and civilian employment (Faber et al., 2008). The model identifies two explanations for turmoil during times of transition: relational uncertainty and interference from a partner (Solomon & Theiss, 2011; Solomon et al., 2010). We elaborate on both of these constructs in the subsections that follow.

Relational uncertainty as a predictor of topic avoidance about deployment

The relational turbulence model nominates relational uncertainty as an intrapersonal explanation for upheaval during times of transition (Knobloch, 2015; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). *Relational uncertainty* occurs when people are unsure about the nature of involvement in their relationship (Knobloch, 2010; Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). It is an umbrella construct that emerges from three sources. *Self uncertainty* denotes the questions people have about their own participation in a relationship, *partner uncertainty* indexes the questions they have about their partner's engagement in the relationship, and *relationship uncertainty* references the questions they have about the status of the relationship itself (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Whereas self uncertainty ("How certain am I about how I feel about this relationship?") and partner uncertainty ("How certain am I about how my partner feels about this relationship?") pertain to individuals, relationship uncertainty exists at a higher order of abstraction because it focuses on the dyad as a unit ("How certain am I about the future of this relationship?"). The three sources of relational uncertainty share both conceptual and empirical overlap, but they are distinct rather than redundant constructs (Knobloch, 2010).

According to the relational turbulence model, people grappling with relational uncertainty during times of transition are susceptible to upheaval because they lack information to interpret the changes occurring around them (Knobloch & McAninch, 2014; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). Relational uncertainty, at its core, leaves individuals without adequate knowledge to draw definitive conclusions about their shifting circumstances (Knobloch, 2010) and to communicate effectively (Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). The postdeployment transition is likely to spark relational uncertainty for military couples (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013). Both returning service members and at-home partners may be unsure how to get reacquainted, adjust to personality changes, express their emotions, and renew intimacy (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Consequently, an extension of the relational turbulence model to reintegration following deployment implies that relational uncertainty may emerge during the transition and give rise to turmoil for military couples.

Extensive research documents a link between relational uncertainty and communication difficulties for both civilian couples and military couples. For example, civilian couples experiencing relational uncertainty do less to maintain their relationship (Malachowski &

Dillow 2011), produce less fluent messages (Knobloch, 2006), judge conversations to be more threatening (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007), and are less willing to discuss irritations (Theiss & Solomon, 2006). They also engage in more topic avoidance (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch, Sharabi, Delaney, & Suranne, 2016; Theiss & Nagy, 2012). Similarly, recently reunited military couples grappling with questions about reintegration report more topic avoidance about deployment, reunion, and their relationship (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013). Thus, we propose a first hypothesis that is based on the reasoning of the relational turbulence model and extant empirical evidence:

> Hypothesis 1: Relational uncertainty is positively associated with people's reports of topic avoidance about deployment upon reunion.

Interference from a partner as a predictor of topic avoidance about deployment

The relational turbulence model designates interference from a partner as an interpersonal source of turmoil during transitions (Knobloch, 2015; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). *Interference from a partner* arises when a person's everyday goals are hindered by a partner (Berscheid, 1983; Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). Romantic relationships progress as people give each other influence over their daily lives, but missteps can arise as partners integrate and re-integrate their routines over time (Solomon et al., 2010). Interference from a partner can be intentional ("You got rid of my favorite sweatshirt?") or unintentional ("Your tossing and turning kept me up last night!"), but it blocks an individual from accomplishing personal goals, routines, and objectives (Knobloch, 2008b; Solomon & Theiss, 2011).

The model argues that individuals grow accustomed to habitual sequences of behavior in relationships over time, but an abrupt change in circumstances can unsettle routines that had been straightforward (Berscheid, 1983; Solomon et al., 2010). More simply, times of transition carry substantial opportunities for interference from a partner (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). The shift from deployment to reunion is a prime example. Returning service members have to move from a mission-centric routine to a domestic-centric routine, at-home partners have to adapt their schedule to incorporate the returnee, and all family members have to recalibrate their division of labor, control, information, and responsibility (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Faber et al., 2008; Karakurt et al., 2013). Accordingly, military couples may be susceptible to interfering with each other's everyday goals as they work to intertwine their lives upon reunion following deployment.

A growing body of research suggests that interference from a partner makes communication challenging during times of transition. Within civilian relationships, individuals experiencing interference from a partner communicate less fluently (Knobloch, 2008b), display less affiliation in conversation (Knobloch & Schmelzer, 2008), and perceive less affiliation in their partner's messages (Knobloch, 2008b). Military personnel experiencing interference from a partner during the postdeployment transition report communicating in less open and more aggressive ways (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Notably, the literature has less to say about the link between interference from a partner and topic avoidance. Although one study found that interference from a partner did not predict topic avoidance within courtship (Theiss & Nagy, 2012), another investigation observed that interference from a partner corresponded with topic avoidance about weight loss goals among dating and married civilian couples (Theiss, Carpenter, & Cox, 2015). We are not aware of any work that has examined interference from a partner as a predictor of topic avoidance among military couples, but the logic of the relational turbulence model suggests that interference from a partner can make talking about sensitive topics more threatening (Theiss & Estlein, 2014; Theiss & Nagy, 2013), which can motivate people to avoid potentially uncomfortable conversations (Theiss & Estlein, 2014). A second hypothesis evaluates our reasoning:

> Hypothesis 2: Interference from a partner is positively associated with people's reports of topic avoidance about deployment upon reunion.

Relationship satisfaction as a moderator

To this point, our hypotheses formalize the logic of the relational turbulence model that military couples may be reluctant to talk about their deployment experiences upon reunion because they are experiencing relational uncertainty (Hypothesis 1) and interference from a partner (Hypothesis 2). A remaining question involves the role of people's satisfaction with their relationship. *Relationship satisfaction* refers to how much enjoyment, happiness, and pleasure individuals derive from a relationship (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2006). Not surprisingly, relationship satisfaction corresponds with the three core constructs in this study: individuals tend to be less satisfied with their relationship when they are grappling with relational uncertainty (Dainton, 2003; Knobloch, 2008a), encountering interference from a partner (Theiss et al.,

2013), and engaging in topic avoidance (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). Given these conceptual and empirical ties, a potential critique of the relational turbulence model is that relationship satisfaction could subsume the associations that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner share with topic avoidance about deployment. If so, then practitioners seeking to help military couples could maximize resources by targeting people's satisfaction with their relationship and ignoring relational uncertainty and interference from a partner.

A more plausible possibility is that relationship satisfaction could moderate the associations implied by the relational turbulence model (i.e., the predictive power of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner could vary by people's degree of relationship satisfaction). Stated differently, relational uncertainty and interference from a partner could share stronger associations with topic avoidance about deployment for subgroups of military couples who are highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied. On one hand, relational uncertainty and interference from a partner may prompt more evasiveness among highly satisfied military couples because they are not accustomed to entertaining questions and encountering hindrance (e.g., Faber et al., 2008; Sahlstein et al., 2009). On the other hand, relational uncertainty and interference from a partner may spark more evasiveness among highly dissatisfied couples because they are not willing to risk further tension, conflict, and discord (e.g., Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). Either way, evidence of moderation would mean that practitioners could tailor interventions with the relational turbulence model to people's degree of relationship satisfaction. We submit a research question to examine relationship satisfaction as a moderator:

> Research Question 1: Does relationship satisfaction moderate the associations that relational uncertainty (Research Question 1a) and interference from a partner (Research Question 1b) share with people's reports of topic avoidance about deployment upon reunion?

Method

Our research method was an online survey. U.S. service members and at-home partners were recruited by (a) sending emails to military family life professionals in all 50 states, (b) circulating flyers at reintegration workshops, and (c) posting information on social media and online forums oriented toward military families. To be eligible to participate, individuals had to be involved in an ongoing romantic relationship in which they and/or their romantic partner had returned home from deployment during the past six months. Eligibility was restricted to one person per couple. Upon completion of the online survey, we mailed individuals a US$15 gift card from a national retailer to thank them for their participation.

The recruitment procedures solicited data from 235 people (100 men, 135 women) residing in 30 U.S. states. Of these, 128 individuals (54%) were service members (98 men, 30 women), and 107 individuals (46%) were civilian partners (2 men, 105 women). The group of service members included 25 participants who were part of a dual-career military couple. In terms of deployment, 117 service members had returned home from deployment during the past six months (98 men, 19 women), and 118 participants were at-home partners (2 men, 116 women). The group of service members returning home from deployment included seven people who were part of a dual-deployed couple.

Participants were Caucasian (85%), African American (6%), Hispanic (6%), Asian (1%), Native American (1%), and other (1%). They ranged in age from 19 to 55 years old ($M = 32.95$ years, $SD = 8.53$ years). Their romantic relationship status was married (82%), engaged to be married (6%), seriously dating (9%), or casually dating (3%). The length of their romantic relationship averaged 9.59 years ($SD = 7.25$ years). Most participants lived in the same residence as their romantic partner (89%) and were parents (59%).

The military branch for the service members included the U.S. National Guard (59%), Army (32%), Navy (2%), Air Force (3%), and Marines (4%). Their military status was active duty (51%), reserves (38%), inactive ready reserves (4%), discharged (1%), retired (1%), or other (5%). On average, returning service members had been deployed for 11.40 months ($SD = 2.57$ months) and had been home for 3.16 months ($SD = 2.12$ months).

Data collection procedures

Participants completed an online survey containing measures for this study and for a larger project (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). The online survey contained three modules taking approximately 30 min to complete. The first module provided informed consent text, the second module solicited demographic information, and the third module contained a series of open-ended and closed-ended items.

Measures

All of the multi-item scales were evaluated by confirmatory factor analysis to verify their unidimensional structure (Brown, 2015; Kline, 2011). The criteria for model fit were set at $\chi^2/df < 3.00$, comparative fit index [CFI] $> .95$, and root mean square error of approximation

(RMSEA) <.08 (Brown, 2015; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Kline, 2011). Then, the variables were calculated by averaging the scores for the unidimensional items.

Relationship satisfaction

Individuals reported their relationship satisfaction using a scale by Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas (2000). Participants responded to three items on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*): (a) How satisfied are you with your relationship?, (b) How content are you with your relationship?, and (c) How happy are you with your relationship? ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.52$; $\alpha = .96$; $\chi^2/df = 1.98$, CFI = .99, RMSEA < .07).

Relational uncertainty

Participants completed a brief version of Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) scale with four items measuring each of the three sources of relational uncertainty. Confirmatory factor analytic results indicated that self, partner, and relationship uncertainty did not form a unidimensional 12-item factor ($\chi^2/df = 5.65$, CFI = .88, RMSEA = .14), which is consistent with conceptual explications of the three sources as distinct constructs (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) and findings from previous measurement analyses (Knobloch, 2010). Accordingly, we followed prior work in treating self, partner, and relationship uncertainty as separate variables (Knobloch, 2006; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013; Theiss & Nagy, 2012).

Participants indicated their response to items completing the stem, "How certain are you about …?" The scale anchors ranged from 1 (*completely or almost completely uncertain*) to 6 (*completely or almost completely certain*). The responses were reverse-scored so that larger values denoted more relational uncertainty. *Self uncertainty* included the items (a) how you feel about your relationship, (b) your goals for the future of your relationship, (c) your view of your relationship, and (d) how important your relationship is to you ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = .93$; $\chi^2/df = 1.81$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .06). *Partner uncertainty* contained the items (a) how your partner feels about your relationship, (b) your partner's goals for the future of your relationship, (c) your partner's view of your relationship, and (d) how important your relationship is to your partner ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .96$; $\chi^2/df = 1.66$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05). *Relationship uncertainty* encompassed the items (a) the current status of your relationship, (b) how you can or cannot behave around your partner, (c) the definition of your relationship, and (d) the future of your relationship ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.34$, $\alpha = .94$; $\chi^2/df = 1.98$, CFI = .99, RMSEA < .07).

Interference from a partner

Individuals responded to a brief version of Knobloch and Solomon's (2004) measure to report their perceptions of interference from a partner. Participants indicated their agreement with six items using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*): (a) my partner interferes with the plans I make, (b) my partner causes me to waste time, (c) my partner interferes with my career goals, (d) my partner interferes with the things I need to do each day, (e) my partner interferes with whether I achieve the everyday goals I set for myself (e.g., goals for exercise, diet, entertainment), and (f) my partner makes it harder for me to schedule my activities ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .90$; $\chi^2/df = 2.36$, CFI = .97, RMSEA < .08).

Topic avoidance about deployment

Following the format of the topic avoidance scale by Afifi and Burgoon (1998), we wrote a brief measure of topic avoidance about deployment for this study. Participants completed items asking them to rate "how much you avoided discussing the following topics with your partner during the past week" (1 = *never avoided discussing*, 7 = *always avoided discussing*). Three items formed a unidimensional scale: (a) deployment, (b) what happened while you/your partner were deployed, and (c) your experiences during deployment ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.76$, $\alpha = .86$; $\chi^2/df = 0.94$, CFI > .99, RMSEA < .01).

Results

Preliminary analyses

In a first preliminary analysis, we conducted independent-samples *t* tests to evaluate group differences. Results indicated no differences between men ($n = 100$) versus women ($n = 135$) for any of the covariates, the independent variables, or the dependent variable. Returning service members ($n = 117$, $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.91$) reported more topic avoidance about deployment than at-home partners ($n = 118$, $M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(233) = 2.82$, $p = .005$.

We computed zero-order correlations in a second preliminary analysis. Findings indicated that relationship satisfaction was negatively correlated with relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and topic avoidance about deployment (see Table 1). Relational uncertainty and interference from a partner were positively correlated with each other and with topic avoidance about deployment.

We also examined the bivariate correlations between the substantive variables and the number of months the service member had been home as a potential covariate

Table 1. Bivariate correlations ($N = 235$).

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9
V1: Sex	—								
V2: Deployment status	−.85***	—							
V3: Months home	−.08	.11	—						
V4: Relationship satisfaction	−.09	.03	−.28***	—					
V5: Self uncertainty	−.04	.11	.19**	.80***	—				
V6: Partner uncertainty	.03	−.01	.13	−.69***	.73***	—			
V7: Relationship uncertainty	−.01	.09	.18**	−.81***	.93***	.79***	—		
V8: Interference from a partner	.04	−.01	.21**	−.61***	.59***	.51***	.59***	—	
V9: Topic avoidance about deployment	−.12	.18**	.16*	−.40***	.46***	.38***	.46***	.43***	—

Note. Sex was coded such that women = 0, men = 1. Deployment status was coded such that at-home partners = 0, returning service members = 1.
*$p < .05$. **$< .01$. ***$p < .001$.

(see Table 1). Results revealed that the number of months the service member had been home was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, and it was positively associated with self uncertainty, relationship uncertainty, interference from a partner, and topic avoidance about deployment.

Substantive analyses

We tested our hypotheses and research questions using hierarchical regression procedures. We computed four models to examine self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, relationship uncertainty, and interference from a partner in separate analyses to avoid multicollinearity. Each model included three covariates: (a) respondent's sex given evidence of differences between men and women in patterns of topic avoidance (e.g., Caughlin & Golish, 2002), (b) deployment status as a returning service member versus an at-home partner given the results of the independent-samples *t* tests, and (c) the number of months the service member had been home given the findings from the bivariate correlations. We centered all of the covariates and independent variables around their means (following Aiken & West, 1991).

On the first step of the models, we regressed topic avoidance about deployment onto the covariates of respondent's sex (women = 0, men = 1), deployment status (at-home partners = 0, returning service members = 1), and the number of months the service member had been home. On the second step, we added relationship satisfaction, and on the third step, we included one source of relational uncertainty or interference from a partner. On the fourth step, we entered an interaction term computed as relationship satisfaction multiplied by one source of relational uncertainty or interference from a partner.

Results for the first step were consistent with the preliminary analyses in demonstrating more topic avoidance about deployment reported by returning service members and individuals who had been reunited for more months (see Table 2). Findings for the second step revealed that relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with topic avoidance about deployment. As predicted, results for the third step showed that all three sources of relational uncertainty (Hypothesis 1) and interference from a partner (Hypothesis 2) were positively associated with topic avoidance about deployment. Relationship satisfaction continued to predict topic avoidance about deployment in the models containing partner uncertainty ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .007$) and interference from a partner ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .013$), but not in the models containing self uncertainty ($\beta = -.12$, *ns*) and relationship uncertainty ($\beta = -.09$, *ns*).

On the fourth step, relationship satisfaction interacted with relational uncertainty and interference from a partner in all models (see Table 2). We probed the interactions by (a) calculating the slopes for relational uncertainty and interference from a partner at one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and at one standard deviation above the mean of relationship satisfaction; and (b) reporting the raw coefficients (per Aiken & West, 1991; see Table 3). Findings showed ordinal

Table 2. Four regression models predicting topic avoidance about deployment ($N = 235$).

	R^2 Δ	β
Step 1	.06**	
Sex		−.12
Deployment status		.29*
Months home		.14*
Step 2	.13***	
Relationship satisfaction		−.37***
Step 3		
Self uncertainty	.03**	.31**
Partner uncertainty	.02*	.19*
Relationship uncertainty	.04***	.35***
Interference from a partner	.06***	.32***
Step 4		
Relationship Satisfaction × Self Uncertainty	.02*	.21*
Relationship Satisfaction × Partner Uncertainty	.03**	.22**
Relationship Satisfaction × Relationship Uncertainty	.02**	.21**
Relationship Satisfaction × Interference From a Partner	.02*	.17*

Note. Cell entries are R^2 Δ statistics and standardized coefficients. All of the predictors were centered around their means. Each model contained one source of relational uncertainty or interference from a partner.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Test of moderation at three levels of relationship satisfaction ($N = 235$).

	Level of relationship satisfaction		
	Low	Medium	High
Self uncertainty	.44*	.65**	.87**
Partner uncertainty	.19	.39*	.59**
Relationship uncertainty	.42*	.61**	.80**
Interference from a partner	.38*	.59**	.79**

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

interactions such that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner were more positively correlated with topic avoidance about deployment at high levels of relationship satisfaction (see Table 3 and Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). In other words, relationship satisfaction had a modest moderating effect on the positive associations that relational uncertainty (Research Question 1a) and interference from a partner (Research Question 1b) shared with topic avoidance about deployment. None of the covariates moderated the substantive findings.

Discussion

The postdeployment transition is a critical juncture in the well-being of military couples (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Karakurt et al., 2013; Sayers, 2011). To help returning service members and at-home partners communicate effectively during the postdeployment transition, we sought to understand the relationship dynamics predicting people's reluctance to discuss their deployment experiences upon reunion. We turned to the relational turbulence model to inform hypotheses about relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as predictors of people's topic avoidance about deployment, and we considered relationship satisfaction as a possible moderator. We devote the following subsections to considering the ramifications of our results along with limitations and directions for future research.

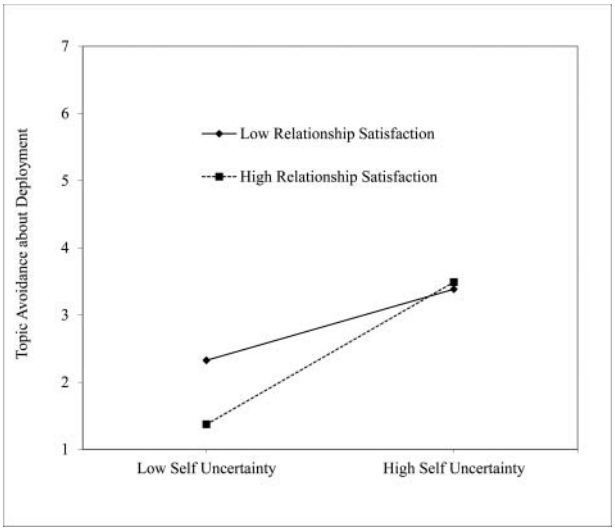

Figure 1. Interaction between relationship satisfaction and self uncertainty predicting topic avoidance about deployment.

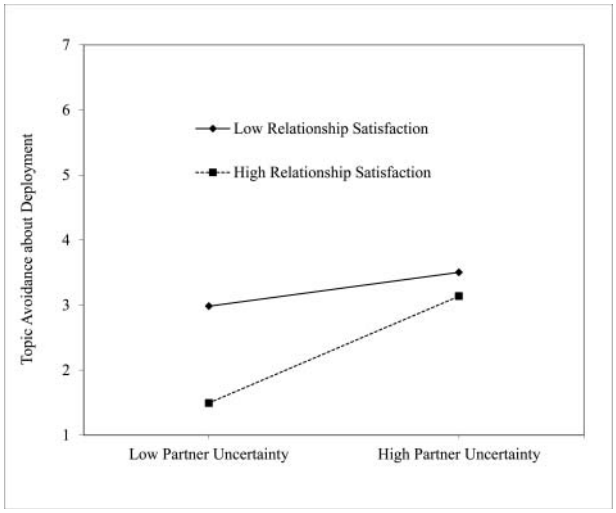

Figure 2. Interaction between relationship satisfaction and partner uncertainty predicting topic avoidance about deployment.

Implications for the relational turbulence model

Our results suggest that the logic of the relational turbulence model is compatible with people's reluctance to talk about deployment issues upon reunion. As expected, both relational uncertainty and interference from a partner predicted topic avoidance about deployment. Returning service members and at-home partners facing

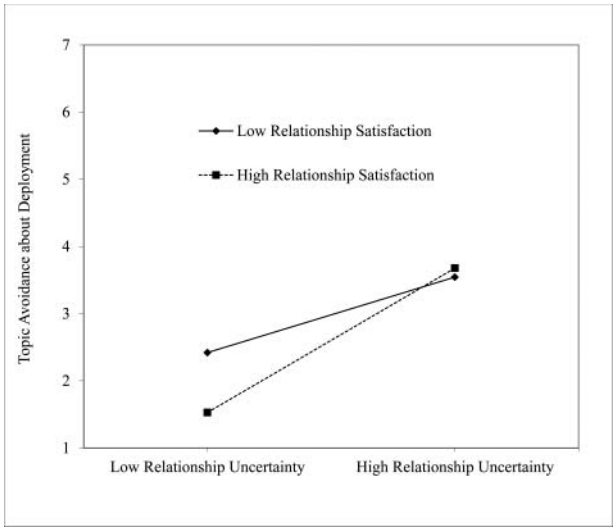

Figure 3. Interaction between relationship satisfaction and relationship uncertainty predicting topic avoidance about deployment.

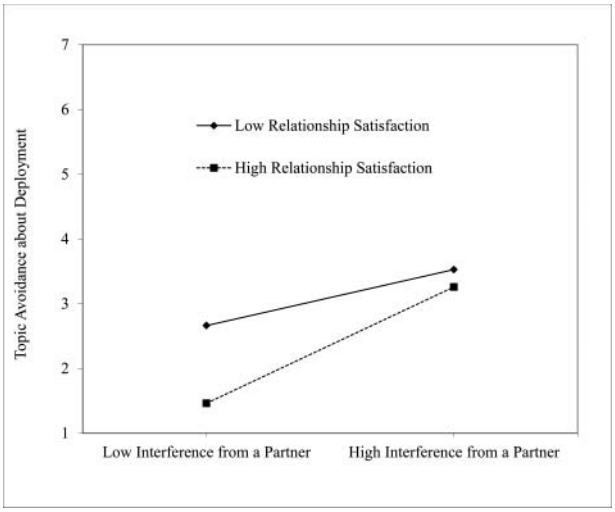

Figure 4. Interaction between relationship satisfaction and interference from a partner predicting topic avoidance about deployment.

questions about involvement and hindrance in their everyday goals reported less willingness to discuss their deployment experiences upon reunion. In addition, relational uncertainty and interference from a partner were stronger predictors of topic avoidance about deployment for individuals who were highly satisfied with their relationship.

These findings contribute to the relational turbulence model in a trio of ways. On a basic level, they add to a program of research suggesting the utility of the model for understanding communication within military couples, particularly how returning service members and at-home partners negotiate the postdeployment transition (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). More broadly, they fill a gap in the model by documenting a connection between interference from a partner and topic avoidance. During the 15 years since the inception of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001), scholars have tended to focus on cognitive and emotional markers of upheaval more than communicative markers of upheaval, and research on communication has privileged relational uncertainty over interference from a partner (for review, see Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016). Stated differently, the link between relational uncertainty and topic avoidance has been documented among civilian couples (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch et al., 2016; Theiss & Nagy, 2012) and military couples (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013), but establishing an association between interference from a partner and topic avoidance among military couples is a novel finding of this investigation. A third contribution lies in evaluating whether the parameters identified by the model are redundant with relationship satisfaction. Our data provide a counterpoint to the potential criticism that the model offers an unnecessarily complex explanation for relational turbulence that could reduce to relationship satisfaction. Rather, our results reveal that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner add explanatory value beyond people's satisfaction with their relationship.

Implications for practice

What do our findings suggest as best practices for clinicians who wish to help returning service members and at-home partners navigate the postdeployment transition? We propose two guidelines implied by our data. A first recommendation echoes the advice of Bowling and Sherman (2008) that practitioners should help military couples manage their expectations about the reintegration process. This recommendation is based on our findings that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner predicted topic avoidance about deployment upon reunion. To the extent that returning service members and at-home partners are prepared to experience questions about involvement and disruptions to their everyday goals during the postdeployment transition (e.g., Faber et al., 2008; Karakurt et al., 2013), they may be better equipped to communicate effectively as they adjust to living in close proximity again. A second recommendation that practitioners should attend to people's satisfaction with their relationship coalesces with Sahlstein Parcell and Maguire's (2014) results that military couples can be distinguished by the trajectory of relationship satisfaction they experience across the deployment cycle. Our findings hint that highly satisfied returning service members and at-home partners may be more perturbed by relational uncertainty and interference from a partner, perhaps because they are unfamiliar with upheaval in their relationship compared to individuals who are less satisfied and better acquainted with turmoil. Consequently, clinicians may have more success intervening with relational turbulence model principles among groups of highly satisfied military couples.

Best practices for helping military couples make decisions about open communication versus topic avoidance during reintegration are more complicated. On the one hand, individuals tend to value open communication (e.g., Caughlin, 2003) and view topic avoidance as dissatisfying. This latter claim is bolstered by previous work (Caughlin & Golish, 2002) and borne out in our data (see Table 2). On the other hand, topic avoidance can have benefits for circumventing tension and preserving harmony (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Roloff & Ifert, 2000). Motivations play an important role here. For example,

topic avoidance can be less dissatisfying when people are motivated to protect their relationship (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004) versus protect themselves (Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). Ironically, military wives who conceal information to protect their spouse from worry during deployment have more problems with both their physical health and their mental health (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Perhaps the complex intersections of opportunities, threats, and motivations explain why individuals endorse open communication but do not always practice it (Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, Middleton, Stone, & Brown, 2011; Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013). Therefore, we encourage practitioners to discard conventional wisdom for military couples to "be open," "talk about it," and "share everything" in favor of more sophisticated advice for military couples to consider their motivations when making choices about revealing versus concealing information (e.g., "safeguarding the relationship is altruistic" versus "protecting personal interests is selfish"). As Donovan-Kicken and Caughlin (2010) noted, "If [individuals] believe that their partners are pursuing the goal of self protection, then they may interpret the avoidance as a sign that their partners do not trust them or do not feel comfortable with them" (p. 251).

Limitations and directions for future research

Key limitations of our study are tied to our sample. First and foremost, we used a convenience sampling strategy that generated volunteers with relatively strong romantic relationship ties (i.e., participants reported low levels of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner and high levels of relationship satisfaction). It is possible that floor effects and ceiling effects attenuated the size of the associations we observed between those predictors and people's topic avoidance about deployment. Moreover, many of the returning service members in our sample were National Guard personnel (59%). Unlike their active duty counterparts, National Guard service members deploy from and return to civilian lifestyles, which can present special challenges upon reintegration (e.g., Kim, Thomas, Wilk, Castro, & Hoge, 2010). Female returning service members and male at-home partners can face unique stressors during the postdeployment transition as well (e.g., Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016), but our study was not able to address that issue because the majority of returning service members in our sample were men (84%) and at-home partners were women (98%). Stratified random sampling procedures are needed to evaluate whether our findings generalize to individuals experiencing substantial distress, active-duty personnel of all service branches, returning service members who are women, and at-home partners who are men.

Another limitation involves our research design. Our cross-sectional data do not speak to processes occurring over time. We endorsed the logic of the relational turbulence model in positioning relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relationship satisfaction as predictors of topic avoidance about deployment (e.g., Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013), but other orderings are conceptually reasonable. For example, people who are reluctant to communicate with their partner about sensitive issues may be more unsure about their relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b) and less satisfied with their partnership (Donovan-Kicken, & Caughlin, 2010). Only longitudinal data can disentangle whether reverse and/or reciprocal pathways are at work (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b).

Other directions for future research stem from variables not considered here. Perhaps most obviously, our findings set the stage for examining the content of topics about deployment that military couples are disinclined to discuss upon reunion. Prior qualitative work has laid a foundation for those efforts by identifying the issues that are challenging for service members to discuss with their romantic partner during deployment and reunion. Avoided topics include confidential operational information, dangers during deployment, emotions and mental health, faithfulness and fidelity, household stressors, financial concerns, and the potential for a future deployment (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Knobloch et al., 2015). Future research that paired our quantitative approach with these qualitative findings would be useful for pinpointing the specific subjects that military couples hesitate to talk about under conditions of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner. Similarly, our study did not attend to the nature of people's experiences during deployment (e.g., the mission of the service member, the stressors faced by the at-home partner). Evidence suggests that at-home partners interpret a service member's behavior differently, for example, based on their perceptions of how dangerous the service member's mission was during deployment (Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008). Accordingly, an important direction for future work is to examine how the daily hassles and major hardships that military couples experience during deployment shape both the dynamics of their relationship and their willingness to talk openly upon reunion.

Conclusion

The goal of our investigation was to shed light on relationship parameters that correspond with people's willingness to discuss their deployment experiences during reintegration. Consistent with the reasoning of the relational turbulence model (Knobloch, 2015; Solomon & Theiss, 2011),

we found that returning service members and at-home partners were more likely to engage in topic avoidance about deployment when they were experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from a partner upon reunion, particularly when their relationship satisfaction was high. Our results fill a gap in the literature on military couples by illuminating how interpersonal dynamics predict the openness of returning service members and at-home partners about deployment when they are reunited. They also provide insight into how clinicians, practitioners, and military family life administrators can assist those who are making the transition from deployment to reintegration.

Acknowledgments

Data collection procedures were approved by the institutional review boards of the University of Illinois and Rutgers University. The authors are grateful to Jennifer Bert, Emmelyn Joy, Amy Lindgren, Kimberly Pusateri, and Larissa Tosi.

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