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Generalized Anxiety and Relational Uncertainty as Predictors of Topic Avoidance During Reintegration Following Military Deployment

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For military couples reunited following deployment, discussing or avoiding topics is a central dimension of communication. This paper theorizes about two predictors of topic avoidance that arise from a lack of confidence in social situations: generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty. In Study 1, 220 returning service members described issues they avoid discussing upon reunion. Content analytic findings indicated eight avoided topics. In Study 2, 118 military couples reported on topic avoidance for the first 3 months after homecoming. Multilevel modeling results revealed that the generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty of actors, but not partners, were consistent predictors of topic avoidance. The findings illuminate the complexities of communicating following a tour of duty.

Keywords: Generalized Anxiety; Military Couples; Relational Uncertainty; Topic Avoidance

After being reunited following a tour of duty, military personnel and their romantic partners face the task of negotiating how much information to share about their experiences (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). Military couples may have much to catch up on because channel issues can hamper communication during deployment (e.g., expense, intermittent access, unreliable technology, confidentiality regulations; Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010). Motivational issues

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also can constrain people's willingness to exchange information during deployment (e.g., reluctance to worry the at-home partner, to distract the service member from warzone duties, and to mar the exchange with conflict in case tragedy strikes; Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012; McNulty, 2005). Although restricted communication during deployment ensures that service members and at-home partners have plenty to talk about upon homecoming (e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009), military couples may avoid discussing sensitive topics due to fear of vulnerability (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008).

Understanding the parameters that predict the reluctance of military couples to communicate upon reunion is vital for advancing both theory and practice. Our project builds theory by conceptualizing topic avoidance as rooted in people's lack of confidence about social situations. We theorize about two potential predictors of topic avoidance: *generalized anxiety*, which indexes chronic worry about future events (Newman & Erickson, 2010), and *relational uncertainty*, which reflects people's questions about the status of a relationship (Knobloch, 2010). With respect to practice, evidence demonstrates that topic avoidance corresponds with both stress (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson, Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011) and relationship dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). Documenting the foundations of topic avoidance during the post-deployment transition, by extension, would be useful for helping military couples to reduce stress and preserve dyadic well-being upon reunion.

Our project is innovative both conceptually and methodologically. Conceptually, our work takes an interdisciplinary perspective by considering both psychological and communicative processes during reintegration following deployment. Methodologically, our project combines qualitative insight into the themes of topic avoidance (Study 1) with quantitative insight into the predictors of topic avoidance (Study 2). Moreover, Study 2 adheres to recommendations within the military family literature (Merolla, 2010) and the topic avoidance literature (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004) to collect couple-level data to evaluate the interplay within dyads. Finally, Study 2 responds to calls for longitudinal research on reunion following deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a) and topic avoidance (Caughlin & Golish, 2002) by tracking the first three months of reintegration.

Topic Avoidance upon Reunion Following Deployment

Topic avoidance entails strategically evading communication with a partner about an issue (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Dailey & Palomares, 2004). People engage in topic avoidance for a variety of reasons. Those motivations include protecting themselves from embarrassment, safeguarding their relationship from harm, preventing conflict, desiring privacy, seeing communication as futile, and/or feeling constrained by social norms (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004).

Scholars have not yet catalogued the issues that are challenging for military couples to talk about upon reunion (e.g., Frisby et al., 2011), but speculation exists that military couples are reluctant to discuss what happened at home and overseas, commitment levels, extra-dyadic experiences, and household roles (Faber et al., 2008; Frisby et al., 2011; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Identifying issues avoided during reintegration would be valuable for educating military couples about the communication challenges that may arise upon homecoming. It also would allow a comparison with the topics avoided by civilian couples to determine whether communication skills training programs designed for civilian audiences are suitable for (or require adaption to) military couples navigating reunion. Hence, we pose *RQ1*:

> *RQ1*: What topics, if any, do individuals avoid talking about during reintegration following deployment?

Our theorizing about the predictors of topic avoidance begins with the premise that individuals are motivated to avoid sensitive topics when they are not confident in interpersonal circumstances (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). Accordingly, we examine generalized anxiety (Newman & Erickson, 2010) and relational uncertainty (Knobloch, 2010) as constructs that embody a lack of confidence about social situations. Although generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty are not the only constructs that exemplify the propensity to be unsure about interpersonal interaction, they form an advantageous pairing when considered together because they index both psychological and communicative processes, both intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics, and both socially diffuse and relationship-specific concerns. Thus, we consider generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty as a starting point for theorizing about how people's lack of confidence may correspond with their reluctance to communicate.

We also address calls for dyadic conceptualizations of topic avoidance (Dailey & Palomares, 2004), particularly among military couples (Frisby et al., 2011), by theorizing about actor and partner effects (e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). In the vernacular of this study, *actor effects* refer to an individual's own generalized anxiety or relational uncertainty predicting his or her topic avoidance, and *partner effects* refer to a partner's generalized anxiety or relational uncertainty predicting an individual's topic avoidance.

Generalized Anxiety and Topic Avoidance

Generalized anxiety is characterized by chronic worry, nervousness, and apprehension about the future (Behar, DiMarco, Hekler, Mohlan, & Staples, 2009). Its extreme form, generalized anxiety disorder, is marked by symptoms such as uncontrollable worry about everyday situations, restlessness, fatigue, difficulty relaxing, trouble concentrating, and irritability (Newman & Erickson, 2010). People high in generalized anxiety can be overly pessimistic, distracted by potential hazards, hesitant to make decisions, and needy for reassurance (Newman & Erickson, 2010).

Generalized anxiety may motivate returning service members and at-home partners to engage in topic avoidance upon reunion following deployment. For example, people high in generalized anxiety may doubt their ability to solve problems, and, as a result, behave submissively (Newman & Erickson, 2010). They report being overly accommodating, nonassertive, and socially inhibited in their relationships (Eng & Heimberg, 2006); all of these characteristics may make military personnel and their romantic partners reluctant to discuss face-threatening issues. Second, individuals high in generalized anxiety may be uncomfortable experiencing strong emotion, and, as a result, prefer to avoid witnessing and expressing intense affect (Behar et al., 2009; Borkovec, Alcaine, & Behar, 2004). In fact, people high in generalized anxiety experience notable discomfort when feeling strong emotion (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2005; Mennin, Holaway, Fresco, Moore, & Heimberg, 2007). These lines of logic, taken together, suggest that returning service members and at-home partners high in generalized anxiety may avoid discussing face-threatening topics.

Partner effects also may exist. Perhaps partners enact *protective buffering* by concealing problems or minimizing concerns to safeguard individuals high in generalized anxiety from further worry. Notably, military wives engage in protective buffering during deployment to avoid upsetting their husbands in the warzone (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). If this general pattern holds true during reintegration, then returning service members and at-home partners may engage in topic avoidance to shield a partner high in generalized anxiety from more worry. Alternatively, partner effects may stem from a desire to avoid provoking emotional outbursts from a mate. Some evidence suggests that people high in generalized anxiety are prone to intermittent bouts of anger (Newman & Erickson, 2010). If so, then individuals may learn to avoid talking about sensitive issues with a partner high in generalized anxiety to circumvent hostility (e.g., Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000). *H1* and *RQ2* examine our reasoning:

> *H1*: An actor's generalized anxiety is positively associated with his or her topic avoidance during reintegration following deployment.
> *RQ2*: Is a partner's generalized anxiety positively associated with an actor's topic avoidance during reintegration following deployment?

Relational Uncertainty and Topic Avoidance

Whereas generalized anxiety involves worry about future problems, relational uncertainty entails a lack of confidence in the definition of a relationship. *Relational uncertainty* is the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement within a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Three sources of relational uncertainty form the overarching construct: *self uncertainty* (e.g., "How certain am I about my view of this relationship?"), *partner uncertainty* (e.g., "How certain am I about my partner's view of this relationship?"), and *relationship uncertainty* (e.g., "How certain am I about the definition of this relationship?").

Whereas the sources of relational uncertainty are applicable across relationship types, the content of what people are unsure about varies by dyadic context (Knobloch, 2008; Knobloch & Delaney, 2012). To identify the themes of relational uncertainty relevant to reunion following deployment, Knobloch and Theiss (2012) surveyed 259 recently reunited individuals (137 service members, 122 at-home partners). Open-ended data revealed questions about how to (a) preserve commitment, (b) assimilate everyday routines, (c) negotiate household tasks, (d) adjust to personality changes, (e) navigate sexual closeness and resolve concerns about infidelity, (f) safeguard the returning service member's physical and emotional well-being, and (g) communicate effectively. Our study capitalizes on these findings by constructing a new measure of *relational uncertainty about reunion*. It also attends to the self, partner, and relationship sources of relational uncertainty to afford a comprehensive view.

Military couples experiencing relational uncertainty during reintegration may engage in topic avoidance because they are unwilling to risk the costs embedded in open communication (e.g., Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). Communicating openly under conditions of relational uncertainty is quite hazardous: People risk embarrassing themselves, feeling vulnerable, detecting a discrepancy in commitment, unearthing issues of discord, pressuring their partner, and accentuating divisiveness (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Recently reunited military couples, in particular, face a host of communicative perils when they are unsure: Open communication may reveal that infidelity occurred, or that individuals grew apart, or that resentment is brewing over sacrifices made during deployment, or that commitment between partners has waned (e.g., Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Accordingly, relational uncertainty may motivate topic avoidance because people are intimidated by communicating openly.

Research has documented relational uncertainty as a predictor of topic avoidance in civilian contexts. For example, relational uncertainty is positively associated with topic avoidance within sibling relationships (Bevan, Stetzenbach, Batson, & Bullo, 2006), in-law relationships (Mikucki-Enyart, 2011), stepfamilies (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), cross-sex friendships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Malachowski & Dillow, 2011), and dating relationships (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). Hence, our reasoning about the connection between relational uncertainty and topic avoidance among military couples has parallels in other domains.

The possibility of partner effects is less straightforward. Do partners grappling with relational uncertainty behave in ways that discourage individuals from communicating openly during reunion following deployment? When people are unsure about their relationship, they view their partnership more negatively (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011), feel more negative emotion (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007), and do less to maintain their relationship (Malachowski & Dillow, 2011; Theiss & Knobloch, in press). These results hint that partners experiencing relational uncertainty may act in ways that spark topic avoidance by actors during the post-deployment transition. A recent study supports this logic: Knobloch and Theiss

(2011b) found that individuals were less willing to talk about their relationship when their dating partner was experiencing more partner uncertainty. *H2* and *RQ3* consider these issues:

> *H2*: An actor's relational uncertainty is positively associated with his or her topic avoidance during reintegration following deployment.
> *RQ3*: Is a partner's relational uncertainty positively associated with an actor's topic avoidance during reintegration following deployment?

Study 1

Method

Study 1 evaluated *RQ1* via a cross-sectional, online survey of military personnel recently home from deployment. We recruited returning service members by (a) circulating announcements to military family practitioners, (b) distributing flyers at reintegration workshops, and (c) posting to online forums for military families. Military personnel were eligible to participate if they (a) were currently involved in a romantic relationship, and (b) had returned home from deployment during the past six months (following the timeframe for reintegration posed by Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001). Individuals received a $15 gift card for participating.

Advertisements invited military personnel to visit a secure website that hosted an online questionnaire. Participants provided demographic information and responded to an open-ended item that read "Now that you are reunited, what topics, if any, do you avoid talking about with your partner?"

Participants. The sample contained 220 military personnel (185 males, 35 females) living in 27 states who ranged from 18 to 57 years old ($M = 32.69$ years, $SD = 8.45$ years).[1] Participants were Caucasian (80%), African American (6%), Hispanic (5%), Asian (3%), Native American (3%), and other (3%). Most participants were married (83%), lived with their romantic partner (89%), and had children (59%). The length of their romantic relationship averaged 8.06 years ($SD = 6.38$ years).

Participants were members of the U.S. National Guard (64%), the Army (28%), the Navy (3%), the Air Force (3%), and the Marines (2%). They had been deployed, on average, for 11.08 months (*range* = 1–24 months, $SD = 2.88$ months) and home for 3.04 months (*range* = less than 1 week to 6 months, $SD = 1.83$ months). Approximately 57% had completed more than one deployment, and 7% were members of a dual-deployed couple.

Data analysis. We conducted a content analysis of the open-ended responses in several phases (following Neuendorf, 2002). First, the lead author and an outside observer inductively derived themes from the data. Then, we divided responses that referenced multiple ideas into thematic units. A *thematic unit* conveys a single idea, ranges in length from one clause to several sentences, and constitutes a unit of analysis appropriate for open-ended text (Krippendorff, 2004). Next, we trained three

independent judges to code each thematic unit into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. We calculated Krippendorff's (2004) α to evaluate reliability, and we resolved disagreements among judges by majority rule. Finally, we grouped the themes into higher-order categories focused on *deployment issues* versus *reintegration issues*.

Results

Only slightly more than half of returning service members reported issues they are reluctant to discuss. Of the 220 participants, 9 participants (4.1%) did not answer the question, 98 participants (44.5%) commented that they do not avoid any topics, and 113 participants (51.4%) listed a total of 151 substantive thematic units.[2] Judges achieved an acceptable level of reliability (overall α = .86).

Deployment issues. Three themes pertained to deployment. *Dangers and experiences during deployment* included threats to safety, warzone experiences, and events that occurred during the separation ($n = 56$ thematic units, 37.09% of the substantive thematic units, α = .85). Examples included (a) "bombs exploding in the area," (b) "what happened while I was overseas, such as any dangers I faced," (c) "what I have seen over there," (d) "I still haven't gone in any details about what I went through or happenings overseas," (e) "I don't talk about deployment with him," (f) "combat-related deaths and injuries of those around me," (g) "I try to stay away from things that happened negatively over there due to the fact that if I get deployed again, she can stay in the dark and have a positive attitude about it," (h) "just how dangerous everything really was over there," and (i) "fun [family] things that happened while I was gone."

Confidential military information involved mission intelligence not to be shared with civilians ($n = 24$ thematic units, 15.89%, α = .76). Examples included (a) "complete details of the type and nature of work I did while [deployed]," (b) "information that may harm the replacement unit in theatre," (c) "details of missions," (d) "what I did for my job while I was deployed – I am still not allowed to talk about it," and (e) "in theatre operations."

Faithfulness and fidelity during deployment focused on the possibility of extra-dyadic affairs ($n = 12$ thematic units, 7.95%, α = .97). Sample comments were (a) "men and women that would 'hit' on us," (b) "I had gotten close to another woman and she found out," and (c) "sex while deployed ... temptations around different genders."

Reintegration issues. Five themes emphasized reunion following deployment. *Household stressors* indexed an assortment of challenges of running a household while readjusting ($n = 15$ thematic units, 9.93%, α = .83). These included parenting problems, division of labor, and conflict-inducing topics. Examples were (a) "we don't talk about things that cause arguments – kids, family, etc.," (b) "children," (c)

"some kid topics – we have [adult children] trying to get out on their own," and (d) "whenever she starts saying that I don't do things fast enough for her or that I don't do things how she would, I just ignore her."

Topic avoidance about *the returning service member's feelings and emotions* referenced anxiety, sadness, fear, and distress ($n = 15$ thematic units, 9.93%, $\alpha = .86$). Examples included (a) "my inner feelings," (b) "stress," and (c) "PTSD."

The possibility of a future deployment surfaced as a third theme ($n = 15$ thematic units, 9.93%, $\alpha = .95$). Sample comments were (a) "we avoid talking about possible future deployments," (b) "the Army, it's a sore subject because she has been with me through two deployments and fears another deployment," (c) "about future deployments and the possibility of them," and (d) "the possibility to go back over."

Financial troubles involved adhering to a budget and making ends meet while shifting from a deployment income to a domestic income ($n = 10$ thematic units, 6.63%, $\alpha = .96$). Examples included (a) "financial, medical, and dental," (b) "money matters; I feel we're spending too much day to day," (c) "money is always sensitive," and (d) "money and bills."

Comments referencing *politics, world events, and news coverage* related to the military comprised a final theme ($n = 4$ thematic units, 2.65%, $\alpha = 1.00$). Examples included (a) "politics," and (b) "I stopped watching the news altogether, and we don't talk about world topics like we did before I left."

Discussion

The goal of Study 1 was to identify topics difficult to discuss when service members return home from a tour of duty (*RQ1*). Although the sample contained only military personnel and many participants did not report any avoided topics, the findings provide an initial glimpse of communication challenges upon reunion. The avoided topics pertained to both anchors of the transition from deployment life to civilian life. Deployment-focused topics included (a) dangers and experiences in theatre, (b) confidential military information, and (c) fidelity. Reintegration-focused topics involved (a) household stressors, (b) the returning service member's feelings and emotions, (c) the possibility of a future deployment, (d) financial troubles, and (e) politics, world events, and news coverage.

These findings are important for theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic reasons. With respect to theory, they triangulate Sahlstein et al.'s (2009) conclusion that some military couples may handle communicative dilemmas during reunion by privileging full openness and others may disclose selectively. Methodologically, they provide a basis for crafting closed-ended measures of topic avoidance customized to reintegration. Pragmatically, they offer practitioners a starting point to prepare military couples for the issues that may be face-threatening to talk about during reintegration.

Whereas some issues that emerged in Study 1 are avoided in romantic relationships generally (e.g., sex, money; Caughlin & Golish, 2002), other topics are unique to the cycle of military deployment and reunion (e.g., life-threatening incidents, privileged

details about the mission, the potential for a subsequent tour of duty). These latter findings promote a context-specific view of topic avoidance tailored to the dyadic domain under investigation. Consequently, Study 2 will focus on three overarching categories of topic avoidance: deployment issues, reintegration issues, and relationship issues. We include the final category because it is salient to romantic partners in general (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004) and military couples in particular (Frisby et al., 2011).

When we couple these categories of topic avoidance with our theorizing about generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty, our hypotheses and research questions expand accordingly. Hence, Study 2 will evaluate actor effects of generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty on topic avoidance about deployment (*H1a*, *H2a*), reintegration (*H1b*, *H2b*), and the relationship (*H1c*, *H2c*). It also will examine partner effects of generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty on topic avoidance about deployment (*RQ2a*, *RQ3a*), reintegration (*RQ2b*, *RQ3b*), and the relationship (*RQ2c*, *RQ3c*).

Study 2

Method

Study 2 was a longitudinal online survey of U.S. service members and their romantic partners. We advertised the study using similar procedures as Study 1, but to gain a relatively proximal view of homecoming, we recruited military couples in which (a) one or both partners had returned from deployment within the past 30 days, and (b) couples were custodial parents of one or more children (this second criterion was relevant to the larger study).

Procedures. After individuals provided their consent, we emailed them a web address for the Wave 1 questionnaire along with a unique login and a unique password. People who failed to complete the Wave 1 questionnaire within seven days were eliminated from the study along with their romantic partner ($n = 24$ couples). We repeated the data-collection procedures for the continuing couples on the 31st day after their enrollment for Wave 2 and the 61st day after their enrollment for Wave 3. Participants received a $15 gift card for each wave they completed plus a bonus $15 gift card for completing all three waves.

Participants. The sample included 118 heterosexual romantic couples ($N = 236$ individuals; $n = 118$ men, 118 women) residing in 20 states.[3] Individuals ranged in age from 21 to 63 years ($M = 33.03$ years, $SD = 6.84$ years). Most participants were Caucasian (84%); others were Hispanic (6%), African American (4%), Native American (3%), Asian (2%), and other (1%). Most couples were married (98%). Their romantic relationships averaged 9.61 years in length ($SD = 5.67$ years). The

sample comprised 86% single-career military couples and 14% dual-career military couples. One dyad was a dual-deployed couple.

Branches of service included the U.S. Army (57%), Army National Guard (21%), Air National Guard (13%), Air Force (6%), and Marines (3%). Of the deployed service members ($n = 119$), 97% were men ($n = 115$) and 3% were women ($n = 4$). They were stationed in Afghanistan (66%), Iraq (15%), United Arab Emirates (7%), Egypt (3%), Qatar (3%), and other locations (6%). Their primary mission was combat (81%), peacekeeping (9%), training (4%), or other (6%). They were deployed an average of 9.67 months ($SD = 3.86$ months). Approximately 68% had completed multiple deployments.

On average, couples had been reunited 16.78 days ($SD = 8.74$ days) upon enrolling in the study. Only 14% of couples at Wave 1 reported having participated in a program to help military couples after deployment.

Measures. The demographic variables were measured only in Wave 1; the independent and dependent variables were measured in all three waves. We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) on the Wave 1 data to verify the unidimensional structure of the multi-item indices (Brown, 2006), and we calculated the scales as the average of responses to the unidimensional items.[4] Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for each wave.

Generalized anxiety. Two brief scales were combined to operationalize generalized anxiety. The first was the generalized anxiety measure from the short form of the Mental Health Inventory (Berwick et al., 1991; Yamazaki, Fukuhara, & Green, 2005). Participants responded to two items beginning with the stem "How often in the past 30 days have you...?" (1 = *none of the time*, 6 = *all of the time*): (a) been a very nervous person (wave $Ms = 1.93$–2.23, $SDs = 1.09$–1.23), and (b) felt calm and peaceful (reverse-scored; wave $Ms = 2.80$–3.04, $SDs = 1.12$–1.27). To supplement the two-item scale, participants also completed the generalized anxiety item from the Healthy Days Symptoms Module of the Health-Related Quality of Life measure

Table 1 Descriptive statistics by wave.

	Wave 1			Wave 2			Wave 3		
	M	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α
Generalized anxiety	0.10	0.87	0.78	−0.07	0.80	0.79	−0.04	0.82	0.78
Self uncertainty	1.49	0.84	0.92	1.65	0.88	0.91	1.69	1.04	0.95
Partner uncertainty	1.73	1.02	0.93	1.94	1.22	0.97	1.97	1.32	0.98
Relationship uncertainty	1.61	0.97	0.94	1.83	1.08	0.93	1.82	1.15	0.94
Reunion uncertainty	2.18	1.06	0.93	2.32	1.11	0.92	2.15	1.09	0.94
Deployment topic avoidance	2.88	1.40	0.84	3.05	1.44	0.84	2.93	1.53	0.86
Reintegration topic avoidance	2.09	0.94	0.75	2.14	0.93	0.73	2.06	0.95	0.77
Relationship topic avoidance	1.88	1.29	0.92	2.12	1.40	0.91	1.90	1.29	0.89

Notes: $N = 236$ individuals for Wave 1, $n = 225$ individuals for Wave 2, and $n = 223$ individuals for Wave 3. Generalized anxiety is reported on a standardized scale.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000). Participants selected a number between 0 and 30 in response to the item "During the past 30 days, for how many days have you felt worried, tense, or anxious?" (wave $Ms = 5.62–6.73$ days, $SDs = 6.67–8.03$ days). The three items formed a unidimensional scale when standardized into a common metric.

Relational uncertainty. Existing scales measured self, partner, and relationship uncertainty, and new items gauging reunion-focused issues of uncertainty were created for this study. Individuals responded to items introduced by the stem "How certain are you about…?" (1 = *completely or almost completely uncertain*, 6 = *completely or almost completely certain*). The items were reverse-scored so that higher scores denoted more relational uncertainty.

Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty were operationalized using the short form of Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) scales (abridged by Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010). Four items indexed *self uncertainty*: (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. Parallel items assessed *partner uncertainty*: (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. Four items considered *relationship uncertainty*: (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.

The items for *reunion uncertainty* reflected the themes of relational uncertainty that emerged from the open-ended responses Knobloch and Theiss (2012) solicited from recently reunited service members and at-home partners. Seven items formed a unidimensional scale: (a) how to readjust to being together, (b) how to redistribute household chores, (c) how to get to know each other again, (d) how to renegotiate parenting roles, (e) how to be sexually intimate with each other after the time apart, (f) how to assess your partner's health and well-being, and (g) how to communicate with your partner.[5]

Topic avoidance. We wrote new items to operationalize topic avoidance about deployment and reintegration based on the findings of Study 1, and we adapted Guerrero and Afifi's (1995) measure to assess topic avoidance about the relationship. Participants indicated how much they avoided talking with their romantic partner about a series of topics during the past week (1 = *never avoided*, 7 = *always avoided*).

Study 1 revealed three themes of *topic avoidance about deployment*: (a) dangers and experiences during deployment, (b) confidential military information, and (c) faithfulness and fidelity during deployment. Because the first theme encompassed multiple issues, we wrote five items to index the breadth of that category. Seven items constituted a unidimensional measure: (a) danger that the deployed person faced during deployment, (b) what happened during deployment, (c) experiences during deployment, (d) difficulties encountered by the family at home during deployment,

(e) injuries and deaths in the unit during deployment, (f) confidential military information, and (g) faithfulness to your relationship during deployment.

Study 1 also indicated five themes of *topic avoidance about reintegration*: (a) household stressors, (b) the returning service member's feelings and emotions, (c) the possibility of a future deployment, (d) financial troubles, and (e) politics, world events, and news coverage. Again, the first theme contained several related ideas, so we crafted three items to represent its content. Seven items comprised a unidimensional scale: (a) children, (b) household tasks, (c) topics that would cause arguments, (d) the deployed person's feelings and emotions, (e) the possibility of a future deployment, (f) money, and (g) politics, world events, and news coverage.

A three-item scale adapted from Guerrero and Afifi (1995) comprised a measure of *topic avoidance about the relationship*. The items were (a) the state of your relationship, (b) how your relationship is going, and (c) expectations for your relationship.

Results

Preliminary analyses. We conducted preliminary analyses using the Wave 1 data to circumvent the statistical dependence across waves. Paired-samples *t*-tests comparing men ($n = 118$) versus women ($n = 118$) revealed only one difference: Women ($M = 0.34$, $SD = 0.96$) reported more generalized anxiety than men ($M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.70$), $t(117) = 4.48$, $p < .001$. Similarly, paired-samples *t*-tests comparing returning service members ($n = 117$) versus at-home partners ($n = 117$; the dual-deployed couple was excluded) indicated that at-home partners ($M = 0.36$, $SD = 0.97$) reported more generalized anxiety than returning service members ($M = -0.14$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(116) = 4.81$, $p < .001$. Independent-samples *t*-tests comparing individuals experiencing their first deployment (32%) versus multiple deployments (68%; the dual-deployed couple was excluded) revealed no differences.

We also computed bivariate correlations for the Wave 1 data. Positive associations among the substantive variables were apparent among men, among women, and within couples (see Table 2). Next, we calculated zero-order correlations between the substantive variables and the time-based variables of relationship length and the number of days since reunion. Relationship length was not correlated with any of the substantive variables. Similarly, the number of days since reunion was not correlated with any of the substantive variables for returning service members, but for at-home partners, it was positively associated with partner uncertainty ($r = .22$, $p = .019$) and topic avoidance about reintegration ($r = .32$, $p < .001$).

Substantive analyses. Multilevel models estimated how the generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty of actors and partners predict topic avoidance while addressing the statistical dependence within couples and across time (following Kenny et al., 2006). The dependent variables were an actor's reports of topic avoidance about deployment, reintegration, and the relationship.

Table 2 Wave 1 correlations.

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8
V1: Generalized anxiety	0.11	0.22*	0.15	0.26**	0.42***	0.36***	0.36***	0.42***
V2: Self uncertainty	0.19*	0.40***	0.52***	0.83***	0.62***	0.23*	0.43***	0.53***
V3: Partner uncertainty	0.07	0.67***	0.32**	0.71***	0.56***	0.26**	0.40***	0.49***
V4: Relationship uncertainty	0.21*	0.92***	0.68***	0.54***	0.72***	0.27**	0.46***	0.60***
V5: Reunion uncertainty	0.30**	0.70***	0.60***	0.75***	0.44***	0.33***	0.54***	0.65***
V6: Deployment topic avoidance	0.20*	0.32***	0.50***	0.34***	0.50***	0.26**	0.59***	0.42***
V7: Reintegration topic avoidance	0.29**	0.37***	0.49***	0.43***	0.55***	0.77***	0.24**	0.75***
V8: Relationship topic avoidance	0.19*	0.46***	0.53***	0.53***	0.54***	0.56***	0.72***	0.34***

Notes: $N = 118$ men, women, or dyads. Wave 1 bivariate correlations for men appear above the diagonal, Wave 1 bivariate correlations for women appear below the diagonal, and Wave 1 within-couple correlations appear on the diagonal and are underlined.

A first step involved evaluating unconditional models with restricted maximum likelihood as the estimation method and heterogeneous compound symmetry as the residual structure. Findings demonstrated substantial between-person variance for the models predicting an actor's reports of topic avoidance about deployment (87%), reintegration (95%), and the relationship (88%) compared to within-person variance. In other words, people's reports of topic avoidance were largely, but not exclusively, stable from month to month.

A second step entailed constructing models to evaluate the hypotheses and research questions. The models distinguished couples by sex (men $= -1$, women $= 1$), and sex was examined as a potential moderator. Each model also included two time-based Level 1 covariates: (a) a lagged variable denoting the topic avoidance actors reported in the previous wave ($t - 1$) to account for the autocorrelation of the residuals, and (b) the number of days since reunion. Finally, the models contained three sets of independent variables at Level 1: (a) the generalized anxiety of actors and partners, (b) one measure of the relational uncertainty of actors and partners, and (c) six interaction terms computed as sex multiplied by the time-based covariates and the independent variables.

The continuous predictors were grand-mean centered. No random slopes or intercepts were able to be estimated because actors' scores for topic avoidance were so highly correlated with their lagged scores in the previous wave ($t - 1$). The models utilized restricted maximum likelihood estimation and employed heterogeneous compound symmetry for the residual structure. The raw slopes for the independent variables document whether the predictors explain variance in the actor's topic avoidance after controlling for the actor's topic avoidance in the previous wave.

When the main effects were moderated by sex, the interactions were probed using a two-intercept approach to calculate the intercepts and slopes separately for men and women. For these analyses, each time-based covariate and independent variable was multiplied by two dummy-coded terms representing men and women. The Level 1 error variance was set to zero, and random effects were estimated for each person's intercept at Level 2 (as per Kenny et al., 2006). The continuous predictors were grand-mean centered, restricted maximum likelihood was the estimation strategy, and heterogeneous compound symmetry was the residual structure.

Topic avoidance about deployment. Table 3 depicts the main effects for the four analyses predicting topic avoidance about deployment. Generalized anxiety did not correspond with actor effects (*H1a*) or partner effects (*RQ2a*), but sex interacted with a partner's generalized anxiety in all four models. Probing the interaction revealed a trend toward a disordinal interaction. Whereas men's generalized anxiety was positively associated with women's topic avoidance about deployment at a level that approached statistical significance ($b = .21$–.22, $p = .053$–.072), women's generalized anxiety was negatively associated with men's topic avoidance about deployment ($b = -.21$ to $-.24$, $p = .020$–.008). With respect to relational uncertainty, actor effects were apparent for the models containing self uncertainty and reunion uncertainty (*H2a*). Relational uncertainty did not coincide with any partner effects (*RQ3a*).

Topic avoidance about reintegration. Table 4 reports the main effects predicting topic avoidance about reintegration. Across all models, the generalized anxiety of actors (*H1b*) and the relational uncertainty of actors (*H2b*) were positively associated with their topic avoidance about reintegration. Partner effects for generalized anxiety did not emerge (*RQ2b*), but when partners reported more partner uncertainty, actors reported more topic avoidance about reintegration (*RQ3b*). In addition to the main effects, an ordinal interaction involving sex surfaced for the $t-1$ lagged covariate across all models. Women's scores for topic avoidance about reintegration were more positively correlated from wave to wave ($b = .52$–.56, all $p < .001$) than men's scores ($b = .30$–.33, all $p < .001$).

Topic avoidance about the relationship. See Table 5 for the main effects predicting topic avoidance about the relationship. As hypothesized, the generalized anxiety (*H1c*) and relational uncertainty (*H2c*) of actors were positively associated with their topic avoidance about the relationship. Whereas no partner effects for generalized anxiety occurred (*RQ2c*), partner effects for relational uncertainty were apparent for all of the analyses except the model containing self uncertainty (*RQ3c*). Finally, an ordinal interaction for sex by the $t-1$ lagged covariate was evident for the model including reunion uncertainty. Women's scores for topic avoidance about the relationship were more positively correlated from wave to wave ($b = .41$, $p < .001$) than men's scores for topic avoidance about the relationship ($b = .25$, $p < .001$).[6]

Table 3 Main effects for the multilevel models predicting topic avoidance about deployment.

	Self uncertainty			Partner uncertainty			Relationship uncertainty			Reunion uncertainty		
	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t
Intercept	3.09	(0.07)	41.23***	3.09	(0.08)	41.10***	3.09	(0.08)	41.19***	3.08	(0.07)	41.29***
Slopes for covariates												
Sex	−0.07	(0.07)	−1.06	−0.07	(0.07)	−1.09	−0.07	(0.07)	−1.05	−0.09	(0.07)	−1.22
$t-1$ Topic avoidance	0.65	(0.04)	16.07***	0.64	(0.04)	15.83***	0.64	(0.04)	15.98***	0.64	(0.04)	15.81***
Days since reunion	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.44	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.35	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.40	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.20
Slopes for actor effects												
Generalized anxiety	0.09	(0.07)	1.29	0.12	(0.07)	1.62	0.10	(0.07)	1.35	0.07	(0.07)	0.97
Relational uncertainty	0.13	(0.07)	2.03*	0.07	(0.05)	1.51	0.10	(0.06)	1.74	0.18	(0.05)	3.28**
Slopes for partner effects												
Generalized anxiety	−0.01	(0.07)	−0.10	0.00	(0.07)	0.04	−0.01	(0.07)	−0.20	−0.01	(0.07)	−0.15
Relational uncertainty	0.04	(0.07)	0.63	0.05	(0.05)	1.13	0.07	(0.06)	1.25	0.04	(0.05)	0.68

Notes: Each analysis included one measure of relational uncertainty.
*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.

Table 4 Main effects for the multilevel models predicting topic avoidance about reintegration.

	Self uncertainty			Partner uncertainty			Relationship uncertainty			Reunion uncertainty		
	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t
Intercept	2.13	(0.05)	46.41***	2.13	(0.05)	47.05***	2.13	(0.05)	46.74***	2.13	(0.04)	49.42***
Slopes for covariates												
Sex	0.00	(0.05)	0.09	0.00	(0.05)	0.02	0.01	(0.05)	0.17	−0.01	(0.05)	−0.26
t−1 Topic avoidance	0.44	(0.04)	10.36***	0.43	(0.04)	10.13***	0.43	(0.04)	10.16***	0.38	(0.04)	9.24***
Days since reunion	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.15	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.07	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.10	−0.00	(0.00)	−0.71
Slopes for actor effects												
Generalized anxiety	0.16	(0.05)	3.23**	0.18	(0.05)	3.65***	0.16	(0.05)	3.20**	0.13	(0.05)	2.77**
Relational uncertainty	0.21	(0.04)	4.67***	0.14	(0.03)	4.28***	0.16	(0.04)	4.27***	0.27	(0.04)	7.31***
Slopes for partner effects												
Generalized anxiety	0.01	(0.05)	0.21	0.01	(0.05)	0.26	−0.00	(0.05)	−0.06	−0.01	(0.05)	−0.13
Relational uncertainty	0.04	(0.04)	0.81	0.07	(0.03)	2.14*	0.07	(0.04)	1.88	0.06	(0.04)	1.62

Notes: Each analysis included one measure of relational uncertainty.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 5 Main effects for the multilevel models predicting topic avoidance about the relationship.

	Self uncertainty			Partner uncertainty			Relationship uncertainty			Reunion uncertainty		
	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t	b	(SE)	t
Intercept	2.07	(0.07)	30.84***	2.07	(0.06)	33.02***	2.05	(0.06)	33.10***	2.07	(0.06)	32.23***
Slopes for covariates												
Sex	0.01	(0.06)	0.16	0.01	(0.06)	0.16	0.02	(0.06)	0.34	−0.01	(0.06)	−0.13
$t - 1$ Topic avoidance	0.35	(0.04)	8.36***	0.34	(0.04)	8.34***	0.32	(0.04)	7.97***	0.33	(0.04)	7.99***
Days since reunion	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.55	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.65	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.50	−0.00	(0.00)	−1.05
Slopes for actor effects												
Generalized anxiety	0.18	(0.06)	2.83**	0.21	(0.06)	3.40***	0.17	(0.06)	2.66**	0.16	(0.06)	2.52*
Relational uncertainty	0.50	(0.06)	8.25***	0.34	(0.04)	7.71***	0.45	(0.05)	8.64***	0.46	(0.05)	9.09***
Slopes for partner effects												
Generalized anxiety	0.04	(0.07)	0.64	0.03	(0.06)	0.50	0.01	(0.06)	0.19	0.03	(0.07)	0.48
Relational uncertainty	0.04	(0.06)	0.66	0.15	(0.04)	3.43**	0.12	(0.05)	2.38*	0.11	(0.05)	2.15*

Notes: Each analysis included one measure of relational uncertainty.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The results of Study 2, although complex, can be encapsulated in two ways. One approach is by comparing actor versus partner effects. People's topic avoidance was more consistently associated with their own generalized anxiety (*H1*) and relational uncertainty (*H2*) than their partner's generalized anxiety (*RQ2*) and relational uncertainty (*RQ3*). In other words, people's own lack of confidence in social situations (rather than their partner's lack of confidence) is a more proximal predictor of their reticence to talk about sensitive issues during reintegration. This finding could be an artifact of measurement such that actor effects reflect shared method variance within informants relative to partner effects across informants. Conversely, individuals may have difficulty discerning a partner's generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty. This latter account accentuates the importance of examining a partner's communication behaviors as a pathway through which individuals detect (or fail to detect) their partner's lack of confidence.

Another approach to making sense of the results is by comparing the topics. People's reluctance to discuss deployment was positively associated with an actor's self uncertainty and reunion uncertainty (*H2a*), and men's topic avoidance about deployment was negatively associated with women's generalized anxiety (*RQ2a*). People's reluctance to discuss reintegration and their relationship was predicted by an actor's generalized anxiety (*H1b*, *H1c*), an actor's relational uncertainty (*H2b*, *H2c*), and, in some models, a partner's relational uncertainty (*RQ3b*, *RQ3c*). Slicing the results by topic demonstrates that people's behavior is not uniform across issues. Whereas studies of topic avoidance often aggregate across subject areas for parsimony (e.g., Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Malachowski & Dillow, 2011; but see Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010; Frisby et al., 2011), the findings of Study 2 underscore the importance of attending to nuances in the content individuals are unwilling to discuss.

General Discussion

Sharing and withholding information is a basic communication process within relationships (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 2000) and especially among military couples reunited following deployment (e.g., Sahlstein et al., 2009). Study 1 addressed the need for an inclusive inventory of the topics military couples have difficulty discussing upon homecoming (Frisby et al., 2011). Study 2 combined theorizing about generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty, two constructs that epitomize people's lack of confidence in social situations, to examine why military couples may refrain from discussing sensitive topics during reintegration.

The Nature of Topic Avoidance among Recently Reunited Military Couples

A prerequisite for understanding topic avoidance in this context was identifying commonly avoided issues (*RQ1*). Study 1 revealed three topics stemming from being separated during the tour of duty: (a) dangers and experiences during deployment,

(b) confidential military information, and (c) faithfulness. Five topics pertained to reintegration: (a) household stressors, (b) the returning service member's feelings and emotions, (c) the possibility of a future deployment, (d) financial troubles, and (e) politics, world events, and news coverage. A remarkable feature of this list is the breadth and depth of issues that are challenging to discuss upon homecoming. The topics span pragmatic hassles and emotional difficulties; past, present, and future experiences; issues internal and external to the dyad; and concerns related to military and civilian life.

On the other hand, topic avoidance may be neither particularly dynamic nor universally pervasive among military couples during reintegration (e.g., Frisby et al., 2011; Sahlstein et al., 2009). One conspicuous aspect of Study 2 was that topic avoidance was relatively stable. Hence, our substantive analyses were stringent because we controlled for people's reports of topic avoidance in the previous month, but generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty still emerged as predictors despite the consistency of topic avoidance from wave to wave. An implication is that people's inclination to guard against face-threatening conversations may remain fairly steady across the first three months of reintegration following deployment.

An even more striking attribute of our data was the subdued prevalence of topic avoidance. Slightly less than half of participants in Study 1 reported that they did not avoid any topics in response to an open-ended item, and participants in Study 2 reported relatively low levels of topic avoidance via rating scales. Although the findings are not directly comparable given the different strategies for measuring topic avoidance in Study 1 versus Study 2, the two measurement techniques coalesced in suggesting that topic avoidance was not widespread. One explanation is that the modest salience of topic avoidance reflects reality. Perhaps advances in communication technologies linking military personnel with at-home partners during deployment translate into less topic avoidance upon reunion (e.g., Greene et al., 2010). An alternative account is the endorsement of an openness ideal that is not congruent with actual behavior. For example, Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, Middleton, Stone, and Brown (2011) found that families of lung cancer patients were able to function effectively by espousing openness while strategically avoiding sensitive topics. Perhaps military couples, too, reconcile the apparent contradiction of valuing pure openness while communicating selectively. No matter what the origins of the findings, however, the broader point is that any conclusions from our research must be contextualized by the relative stability and modest magnitude of topic avoidance in our data.

Generalized Anxiety as a Predictor of Topic Avoidance

Mixed support was apparent for our logic connecting generalized anxiety with topic avoidance. Although the generalized anxiety of actors did not predict people's reluctance to talk about deployment (*H1a*), it was positively associated with their avoidance of reintegration (*H1b*) and their relationship (*H1c*). Whereas scholars have hinted that individuals with chronic worry may find it difficult to communicate about sensitive issues (Eng & Heimberg, 2006; Newman & Erickson, 2010), our

findings provide initial evidence of an association between people's generalized anxiety and their topic avoidance. Perhaps more importantly, our results showcase the ties between people's mental health and their communication. Typically the study of mental health is left to the purview of psychologists, but communication scholars are well equipped to make important contributions to understanding how people's mental health intersects with interpersonal interaction (e.g., Segrin, 2013). Communication scholars have generated key insights about depression in recent years (e.g., Duggan & Le Poire, 2006; Knobloch, Knobloch-Fedders, & Durbin, 2011; Segrin & Rynes, 2009), and generalized anxiety is another component of people's mental health that deserves attention within the discipline (e.g., Segrin, Badger, Dorros, Meek, & Lopez, 2007).

Partner effects of generalized anxiety, rather than actor effects, were apparent for people's topic avoidance about deployment (*RQ2a*). The nature of the association varied for men (most of whom were returning service members) versus women (most of whom were at-home partners). When men experienced more generalized anxiety, women engaged in more topic avoidance about deployment at a level that approached statistical significance. The direction of this correlation is compatible with our logic about benevolent and/or self-protective motives: Women may be trying to shield their partner from stressful memories of deployment (e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009) or trying to guard against hostile outbursts by their partner (e.g., Newman & Erickson, 2010). On the other hand, when women experienced more generalized anxiety, men engaged in less topic avoidance about deployment. A very speculative explanation is that men may be trying to mollify their partner's anxiety by sharing benign details about deployment, a strategy that may parallel the *reassuring safety* behavior Merolla (2010) identified in the communication of military couples during deployment. The motivations underlying the partner effects of generalized anxiety on people's topic avoidance about deployment, as well as the reasons for the divergence between men and women, represent important directions for future research.

Relational Uncertainty as a Predictor of Topic Avoidance

With respect to relational uncertainty, we theorized that military couples who are unsure about the dynamics of their partnership may prefer to avoid communicating about sensitive issues rather than risk potential costs (e.g., Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). The results were largely consistent with our reasoning: When individuals experienced more relational uncertainty, they reported more topic avoidance in 10 of 12 tests (*H2*). Two actor effects, corresponding with the self source of relational uncertainty and the reunion theme of relational uncertainty, were apparent for all three topics. Not only do these findings complement work linking relational uncertainty with topic avoidance across a variety of dyadic domains (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Bevan et al., 2006), but they also cohere with evidence of nuances in both the sources (Priem & Solomon, 2011) and the themes (Knobloch, 2008) of relational uncertainty. In the context of a service member's reentry into domestic life, ambiguity about people's own view of their relationship and ambiguity about

reintegration appear to be particularly potent predictors of their willingness to communicate openly about sensitive issues.

RQ3 inquired about whether the relational uncertainty of partners corresponds with the topic avoidance of actors. Partner effects surfaced beyond the variance explained by actor effects in 33% of the models, most notably for people's topic avoidance about the relationship. These findings suggest that a partner's relational uncertainty plays a role in how willing individuals are to discuss the status of their relationship (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). When people sense that their partner is unsure about his or her level of involvement, they may be more reluctant to communicate about the nature of the relationship because of the potential for awkwardness or tension (e.g., Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). More generally, the partner effects signify reciprocal influence between individuals such that one person's ambiguity is manifest in the other person's behavior. Our findings, paired with evidence of partner effects of relational uncertainty on other communication processes (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009), imply that a next generation of theorizing about the link between relational uncertainty and communication should account for the interplay within dyads.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Our project contains several strengths. Whereas communication scholars have examined the behavior of military couples using qualitative methods (Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009) or quantitative methods (Frisby et al., 2011; Joseph & Afifi, 2010), our project capitalized on both open-ended and closed-ended data to illuminate topic avoidance. Moreover, Study 2 answered calls for new measures of topic avoidance (Frisby et al., 2011) and relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012) tailored to the issues facing military couples upon reunion. Study 2 also followed advice in the literature on military couples (Merolla, 2010) and the literature on topic avoidance (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004) to solicit responses from both partners to gain insight into mutual influence within dyads. Finally, Study 2 heeded recommendations in work on military couples (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a) and work on topic avoidance (Caughlin & Golish, 2002) to collect data over time.

The successes of our project, however, are tempered by limitations. For example, the majority of participants were affiliated with the U.S. Army and the National Guard. More heterogeneous samples are needed to determine how well our findings apply to military couples affiliated with the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marines (e.g., Greene et al., 2010). Another limitation is that direct comparisons between topic avoidance in the two datasets are obscured by the divergence between the open-ended measure used in Study 1 and the closed-ended measure employed in Study 2. In addition, our funds for Study 2 were limited to only three waves of data collection, which prevented us from modeling growth curves and taking full advantage of our longitudinal design.

Issues of temporality and causality are important to tackle as well. Our logic cast generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty as predictors of topic avoidance, but it is equally plausible that people's decisions to discuss or evade sensitive issues contribute to their subsequent generalized anxiety (e.g., Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2011) and

relational uncertainty (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). Limited evidence speaks to reciprocal linkages among the constructs, but Knobloch and Theiss (2011b) found that romantic partners experienced more relational uncertainty when they avoided talking about their relationship during the previous week. An added benefit of collecting more than three waves of data would be the ability to conduct sequential analyses to disentangle time order in the associations among generalized anxiety, relational uncertainty, and topic avoidance.

A final task involves scrutinizing people's motivations. Our project provides an incomplete picture of topic avoidance upon reunion due to a lack of data on *why* military couples avoid discussing sensitive issues. Although topic avoidance, in general, tends to be dissatisfying (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010), restricting openness is less debilitating when individuals seek to safeguard their partner or their relationship from harm compared to when they hope to protect themselves from embarrassment or disapproval (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). Accordingly, we encourage scholars to examine the motives underlying people's decisions to eschew communication about sensitive topics during the post-deployment transition.

Conclusion

Our project conceptualized people's lack of confidence about social situations as a foundation of topic avoidance among military couples recently reunited following deployment. On a practical note, the data may help military couples negotiate the cycle of deployment and reintegration. For example, Study 1 identified eight avoided topics during reintegration, which could be incorporated into pre-deployment and post-deployment programming to teach military couples about the sensitive issues that may arise. Returning service members and at-home partners may be better equipped to handle face-threatening topics if they are knowledgeable about the content in advance. Study 2 documented generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty as predictors of topic avoidance. These findings suggest that delineating ways to bolster the confidence military couples have in social situations may help alleviate their difficulty talking about sensitive topics. We hope that both sets of results will be useful for educating returning service members and at-home partners about how to communicate effectively upon reunion following deployment.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1]   Knobloch and Theiss (2011a) reported closed-ended data from this sample.
[2]   We conducted subsidiary analyses on the demographic variables to compare participants who reported at least one avoided topic ($n = 113$) to participants who reported that they do not avoid any topics with their romantic partner ($n = 98$). Age was the only variable that distinguished the two groups. Participants who reported at least one avoided topic ($M = 34.59$ years, $SD = 8.12$ years) were older than participants who did not ($M = 30.71$ years, $SD = 8.16$ years), $t(209) = 3.37$, $p < .001$.
[3]   A second study drawn from the sample is described by Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, and Ogolsky (in press). Generalized anxiety and all of the dependent variables are unique to this paper.
[4]   The fit statistics for the CFA models are available from the first author.
[5]   Subsidiary CFA findings demonstrated that (a) self, partner, and relationship uncertainty were not unidimensional with the 12 items loaded onto 1 factor, and (b) self, partner, relationship, and reunion uncertainty were not unidimensional with the 19 items loaded onto 1 factor. Thus, we evaluated the measures in separate models (following Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a).
[6]   Findings were similar for the subsample of couples in which the man was deployed and the woman was the at-home partner ($n = 114$ couples).

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