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Relational turbulence and perceptions of partner support during reintegration after military deployment

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ABSTRACT

The transition from deployment to reintegration can be stressful for returning military personnel and at-home partners, and support plays a key role in their ability to transition effectively. We draw on relational turbulence theory to advance predictions about how parameters of the relationship between returning service members and at-home partners predict their perceptions of their partner's support during the post-deployment transition. We surveyed 235 individuals (117 returning service members, 118 athome partners) who had experienced the transition within the past 6 months. Findings consistent with the theory indicated that relational turbulence partially mediated the negative associations that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner shared with partner support. Partner uncertainty was a direct negative predictor of partner support as well. We consider how these results extend theory, research, and practice.

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KEYWORDS

Interference from a partner; military deployment; relational turbulence; relational uncertainty; social support

More than 2.2 million U.S. service members have deployed to warzones around the world during the past two decades (Institute of Medicine, 2013). These deployments require military couples to interrupt their lives, tackle their military mission or their domestic mission independently, and then adjust to new routines when reunited (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). Homecoming after deployment often is met with substantial anticipation and considerable fanfare, but the transition from deployment to reintegration can be surprisingly difficult (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Military couples can struggle to rebuild their bond, restore their compatibility, recalibrate their priorities, and reshape their roles (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Knobloch, Basinger, Wehrman, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016). The accumulation of stressors before, during, and after deployment can take a heavy toll upon reunion: Both returning service members and at-home partners are vulnerable to mental health problems, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress, during the six months after being reunited (McNulty, 2005; Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbig, & Hamilton, 2007; Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008).

The support military couples provide to each other upon homecoming can enhance their ability to navigate the transition (Karakurt, Christiansen, MacDermid Wadsworth,

& Weiss, 2013). For example, at-home partners can help returning service members seek mental health care if needed (e.g. Meis, Barry, Kehle, Erbes, & Polusny, 2010). Returning service members, for their part, can help alleviate household burdens and parenting stress for at-home partners (e.g. Karakurt et al., 2013; Lester et al., 2010). For these reasons, identifying the relationship parameters that promote or hinder support is essential for assisting military couples during the post-deployment transition.

Relational turbulence theory (Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016), a recent update and extension of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2011), offers logic about the interpersonal dynamics that may enrich or impede partner support upon reunion. We seek to test a core premise of the theory that positions relational turbulence as a pathway through which relationship parameters predict perceptions of a partner's support. To that end, we rely on a dataset collected shortly before the theory's launch to examine partner support during the key juncture of the post-deployment transition. Our efforts advance the literature by testing a central tenet of relational turbulence theory, by documenting the connection between relationship dynamics and partner support, by illuminating the transition from deployment to reintegration, and by suggesting evidence-based guidelines to help military couples upon homecoming.

Partner support during the post-deployment transition

Substantial work establishes the utility of social support for coping with stress. For example, social support can lessen hurt, reduce stress, diminish anxiety, assuage fear, and improve people's quality of life (Lakey, 2013; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011). Unsupportive responses, on the other hand, correspond with depressive symptoms, psychological distress, and physical ailments (Ingram, Betz, Mindes, Schmitt, & Smith, 2001). In sum, individuals reap a variety of physiological and psychological benefits from social support.

Typologies of social support typically categorize behaviors based on the content of the help people offer (e.g. Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Informational support involves providing facts and advice about a situation. An example would be researching treatment options for a returning service member struggling with mental health symptoms (e.g. Wilson, Gettings, Dorrance Hall, & Pastor, 2015). Emotional support involves expressing verbal and nonverbal concern. An example would be conveying sincere appreciation for sacrifices made during deployment (e.g. Rossetto, 2015). Esteem support involves bolstering a person's self-concept by voicing respect for an aspect of his or her identity. An example would be reassuring a returning service member that he or she is a good parent even if children are slow to warm up upon reunion (e.g. Davis, Hanson, Zamir, Gewirtz, & DeGarmo, 2015). Network support involves connecting a person with others to facilitate feelings of belonging. An example would be encouraging a partner to spend time with the people who were loyal confidants during deployment (e.g. Wiens & Boss, 2006). Finally, tangible support (or instrumental support) involves supplying material goods and resources. An example would be completing household chores to help a partner overwhelmed by the demands of reunion (e.g. Karakurt et al., 2013).

Although social support is advantageous for individuals under stress, in general, and military couples dealing with the challenges of reintegration, in particular, not everyone receives the type or amount of support they desire (High, Jennings-Kelsall, Solomon, & Marshall, 2015; Joseph, Afifi, & Denes, 2016; Rossetto, 2015). Scholars have articulated a handful of relationship dynamics that predict perceptions of a partner's supportive behavior. People's attachment style, for example, corresponds with their appraisals of the helpfulness of a partner's support messages (e.g. Collins & Feeney, 2004; Holmstrom, 2015). Similarly, people's history with their partner shapes the meanings they ascribe to support messages (e.g. Carlson, 2014; Goldsmith, Bute, & Lindholm, 2012; Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006). People's satisfaction with their relationship also coincides with their interpretations of a partner's support messages (e.g. Guntzviller, Ratcliff, Dorsch, & Osai, 2017; Verhofstadt, Lemmens, & Buysse, 2013). We build on these lines of research by considering how the characteristics of romantic relationships nominated by relational turbulence theory predict perceptions of partner support.

Relational turbulence theory

Relational turbulence is people's general and enduring perception of their relationship as tumultuous, chaotic, and fragile (Solomon et al., 2016). Relational turbulence theory begins with the premise that changes in people's relational environment bring the potential for upheaval. *Transitions* are discrete junctures between periods of relative continuity that require individuals to establish new patterns of relating (Knobloch, 2007; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). Transitions, by their very nature, spark questions about the status of the relationship and compel partners to restructure interdependence. The theory proposes that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner polarize people's subjective experiences of day-to-day episodes, which accumulate into a climate of relational turbulence that governs outcomes such as supportiveness. Next, we unpack the theory's reasoning to deduce hypotheses about partner support.

Relational uncertainty

The theory identifies relational uncertainty as a cognitive construct that prompts reactivity during times of transition (Solomon et al., 2016), and the transition from deployment to reintegration is filled with questions for returning service members and at-home partners (Faber et al., 2008; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013). *Relational uncer-tainty*, formally defined as how sure or unsure people are about involvement in a relation-ship, includes questions about the self, the partner, and the relationship (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). People experience *self uncertainty* when they are unsure about their own participation in a relationship, *partner uncertainty* when they are unsure about their partner's participation in the relationship, and *relationship uncertainty* when they are unsure about the nature of the relationship itself. The three sources of relational uncertainty are distinct despite their strong covariation (Knobloch, 2010).

The theory argues that individuals experiencing relational uncertainty are prone to cognitive biases and communication difficulties, which coalesce into overarching perceptions that the relationship is turbulent, and in turn shape outcomes such as partner support (Solomon et al., 2016). By definition, relational uncertainty interferes with people's ability to produce and process messages because they lack a definitive conceptual framework for making meaning (Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). Individuals operating under a

knowledge deficit are susceptible to relying on heuristic cues that promote information processing biases and communication problems (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007). Because relational uncertainty undermines people's ability to form unbiased perceptions of their relationship and to communicate competently about their day-to-day experiences, individuals come to view their relationship as turbulent. The theory goes on to propose that relational turbulence makes it difficult for partners to support each other (Solomon et al., 2016).

Interference from a partner

Relational turbulence theory also identifies interference from a partner as polarizing people's subjective experiences during times of transition, and the transition from deployment to reintegration provides abundant opportunities for military couples to interfere with each other's day-to-day routines (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Karakurt et al., 2013; Knobloch, Basinger, et al., 2016). The theory draws on Berscheid's (1983) logic about interdependence to depict transitions as periods when partners renegotiate their influence over each other's everyday activities. As they alter their patterns of influence, they become vulnerable to interrupting each other's daily routines in ways that hamper or bolster their ability to accomplish objectives. *Interference from a partner* occurs when people impede each other's goals, and *facilitation from a partner* occurs when they help each other achieve their goals.

The theory reasons that hindrance from a partner, in particular, gives rise to volatile emotions and communication problems, which lead to a sense of relational turbulence that is the proximal predictor of outcomes such as partner support (Solomon et al., 2016). According to Berscheid (1983), interference from a partner generates immediate emotion commensurate with the value of the blocked goal. The theory broadens Berscheid's (1983) claim to contend that periods of heightened interference create an atmosphere of emotional volatility and communication difficulties that coalesce into perceptions of the relationship as turbulent. The theory further predicts that relational turbulence diminishes people's ability to provide and receive support.

In sum, relational turbulence theory contends that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner give rise to relational turbulence, which in turn, results in less supportiveness. A prerequisite step in evaluating the theory's logic involves examining whether individuals experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from a partner perceive less support in their relationship. Empirical evidence on this point is mixed. The only prior study on the topic found that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner were not correlated with people's appraisals of their dating partner's supportive communication in a conversation episode (Solomon & Priem, 2016), but recent research with military couples suggests that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner are plausible predictors of people's global assessments of a partner's support. Reuniting service members and at-home partners experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from a partner report more difficulty with reintegration (Knobloch et al., 2013), less satisfaction with their relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), and less open and more aggressive communication from their partner (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). In light of work implying a connection between relationship qualities and partner support among military couples, we propose two hypotheses:

H1: Relational uncertainty is negatively associated with people's perceptions of their partner's support.

H2: Interference from a partner is negatively associated with people's perceptions of their partner's support.

Relational turbulence

Relational turbulence theory proposes that people come to view their relationship as turbulent after repeated exposure to episodes in which relational uncertainty and interference from a partner trigger polarized cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. In turn, the theory argues that relational turbulence undermines relationship functioning by reducing people's capacity to think beyond their immediate circumstances and to coordinate their behavior. The theory casts relational turbulence, then, as a proximal predictor of a variety of outcomes, including partner support. By extension, the theory implies that returning service members and at-home partners who perceive their relationship as turbulent during the post-deployment transition will view their partner's behavior as less supportive.

Prior investigations involving other outcomes are only partially consistent with the theory's view of relational turbulence as a mediator. For example, studies of civilian courtships show that relational turbulence corresponds with more negative emotion in response to hypothetical scenarios about a partner's hurtful behavior (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011) and more perceived dominance in a partner's hurtful messages within conversation (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012), but relational turbulence was only a partial mediator of outcomes in both studies. A recent investigation of military couples documented relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as predictors of their appraisals of relational turbulence (Knobloch, McAninch, Abendschein, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016), but that study did not examine relational turbulence as a mediator of any outcomes. We advance a pair of hypotheses to test relational turbulence as a mediator of partner support during the post-deployment transition:

H3: Relational turbulence is negatively associated with people's perceptions of their partner's support.

H4: Relational turbulence mediates the negative associations that relational uncertainty (H1) and interference from a partner (H2) share with people's perceptions of their partner's support.

Method

A project conducted just prior to the formulation of relational turbulence theory afforded an opportunity to evaluate our hypotheses. Individuals were eligible for the study if they and/or their romantic partner had returned home from deployment during the past six months. Participation was limited to one person per couple. Individuals completed an online questionnaire containing measures both for this study and for a larger project (data from the same sample are reported by Knobloch & Theiss, 2012, 2017; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). People received a \$15 gift card from a national retailer for participating.

Participants

Of the 235 individuals who completed the study, 100 were men (43%) and 135 were women (57%). They ranged from 19 to 55 years of age (M = 32.95 years, SD = 8.53 years) and resided in 30 U.S. states. Most individuals were White/Caucasian (85%); others were African American (6%), Hispanic/Latino (6%), Asian (1%), Native American (1%), and other (1%). Their relationship status was married (82%), engaged (6%), seriously dating (9%), or casually dating (3%). Their romantic relationships averaged 9.59 years in length (SD = 7.25 years). Most participants lived with their romantic partner (89%) and had children (59%).

Slightly more than half of the 235 participants were service members (n = 128, 54%); the rest were civilians (n = 107). Of the 128 service members, 103 service members were part of a military-civilian couple (80%) and 25 service members were part of a dual-career military couple (20%). Service members were affiliated with the U.S. National Guard (59%), Army (32%), Marines (4%), Air Force (3%), and Navy (2%). Their military status was active duty (51%), reserves (38%), inactive ready reserves (4%), discharged (1%), retired (1%), or other (5%).

The sample of 128 service members contained 117 service members who had returned home from deployment during the prior 6 months (n = 98 men, n = 19 women). Seven of the returning service members were part of a dual-deployed couple in which both people had returned home during the previous 6 months. Among the 118 participants who were at-home partners (n = 2 men, n = 116 women), 11 were service members themselves, and 107 were civilians. On average, individuals reported on a deployment that lasted 11.40 months (SD = 2.57 months), and they participated in the study 3.16 months after reunion (SD = 2.12 months).

Measures

Relational uncertainty

Participants responded to a 12-item version of Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) relational uncertainty scale (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010). Four items prefaced by the stem 'How certain are you about ...?' (1 = *completely uncertain*, 6 = *completely certain*) assessed each of the three sources of relational uncertainty. All items were reverse scored.

The items for *self uncertainty* were (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, $\alpha = .93$). The items for *partner uncertainty* included (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, $\alpha = .96$). The items for *relationship uncertainty* were (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, $\alpha = .94$).

Results of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA; Kline, 2011) verified the unidimensionality of the items measuring the three sources of relational uncertainty individually, but not together, despite the strong positive correlations among them (see Table 1). These results echo theoretical arguments (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999)

Tal	ble	1.	Bivariate	corre	lations.
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	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
V1: Self uncertainty	-									
V2: Partner uncertainty	.73***	_								
V3: Relationship uncertainty .93***		.79***	-							
V4: Interference from a partner	.59***	.51***	.59***	-						
V5: Relational turbulence	.66***	.58***	.68***	.58***	-					
V6: Informational support	42***	40***	42***	40***	33***	-				
V7: Emotional support	55***	67***	61***	56***	48***	.65***	-			
V8: Esteem support	57***	65***	62***	52***	51***	.60***	.86***	-		
V9: Network support	47***	47***	50***	41***	43***	.53***	.58***	.62***	-	
V10: Tangible support	53***	57***	57***	53***	43***	.53***	.70***	.66***	.61***	-
Note: N = 235. *p < .05. **p < .01.										

and prior findings (Knobloch, 2010) that self, partner, and relationship uncertainty are unique constructs. Hence, we treated them as separate variables per the precedent in the literature (e.g. Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Theiss & Nagy, 2012).

Interference from a partner

Individuals completed Knobloch and Solomon's (2004) measure of interference from a partner. Participants indicated their agreement ($1 = strongly \ disagree$, $6 = strongly \ agree$) with six statements: (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, $\alpha = .90$). CFA findings documented the unidimensionality of the measure.

Relational turbulence

Knobloch's (2007) scale assessing people's appraisals of turmoil operationalized relational turbulence. Individuals rated their relationship via adjectives preceded by the stem 'At the present time, this relationship is ... ' (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Seven of the eight items were unidimensional according to CFA results: (a) chaotic, (b) turbulent, (c) in turmoil, (d) tumultuous, (e) frenzied, (f) overwhelming, and (g) stressful (M = 2.72, SD = 1.31, $\alpha = .91$).

Partner support

Items adapted from Xu and Burleson's (2001) experienced support scale gauged people's perceptions of their partner's support. Participants indicated how frequently their partner performed a variety of behaviors during the past month (1 = not at all, 5 = all of the time).

Informational support contained the items (a) my partner gave me advice about what to do, (b) my partner analyzed the situation with me and told me about available choices and options, (c) my partner gave me reasons why I should or should not do something, and (d) my partner provided detailed information about the situation or about skills needed to deal with the situation (M = 3.29, SD = 1.16, $\alpha = .93$). Emotional support included the items (a) my partner expressed understanding of the situation that was bothering me, (b) my partner comforted me when I was upset by showing some physical affection (including hugs, hand-holding, shoulder patting, etc.), (c) my partner expressed sorrow or regret for my situation or distress, and (d) my partner offered attentive comments when we spoke (M = 3.53, SD = 1.15, $\alpha = .91$). Items measuring *esteem support* were (a) my partner expressed respect for a personal quality of mine, (b) my partner told me that I was still a good person even though I had a problem, (c) my partner tried to reduce my feelings of guilt about the problematic situation, and (d) my partner assured me that I am a worthwhile person (M = 3.53, SD = 1.25, $\alpha = .93$). Network support involved the items (a) my partner connected me with people whom I could turn to for help, (b) my partner connected me with people whom I could confide in, (c) my partner reminded me of the availability of companions who share similar interests or experiences with me, and (d) my partner helped me find the people who could assist me with things (M = 2.80,SD = 1.33, α = .95). The *tangible support* items included (a) my partner took me to see a doctor when I didn't feel well, (b) my partner took care of my domestic chores when I

was stressed, (c) my partner did laundry or cooked for me when I was stressed, and (d) my partner offered to help me when something needed to be done (M = 3.42, SD = 1.17, $\alpha = .87$). All five scales were unidimensional based on CFA findings.

Results

Bivariate analyses

A first step in data analysis was to examine the zero-order correlations (see Table 1). Consistent with previous work (Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016), the measures of relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relational turbulence were positively correlated with each other (see also Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). Also compatible with extant findings (Xu & Burleson, 2004), the five types of partner support shared positive associations. Results supporting our hypotheses revealed that relational uncertainty (H1), interference from a partner (H2), and relational turbulence (H3) were negatively correlated with partner support in all tests.

Second, we computed bivariate correlations with deployment length and the number of months since reunion. Deployment length shared a positive association with relational turbulence (r = .16, p = .014). The number of months the service member had been home was positively associated with self uncertainty (r = .19, p = .003), relationship uncertainty (r = .18, p = .007), interference from a partner (r = .21, p = .002), and relational turbulence (r = .26, p < .001); it was negatively correlated with emotional support (r = -.18, p = .005), esteem support (r = -.18, p = .005), and network support (r = -.17, p = .013). Hence, we included both variables as controls in our multivariate analyses.

We also evaluated differences based on biological sex (n = 100 men, n = 135 women) and deployment status (n = 117 returning service members, n = 118 at-home partners). No differences were apparent for the independent variables. With respect to the dependent variables, men reported receiving more informational support (men M = 3.49, SD = 1.07; women M = 3.15, SD = 1.20), t (233) = 2.24, p = .026, d = 0.30, esteem support (men M = 3.74, SD = 1.06; women M = 3.38, SD = 1.35), t (233) = 2.25, p = .025, d = 0.30, and network support (men M = 3.06, SD = 1.25; women M = 2.60, SD = 1.36), t (233) = 2.69, p = .008, d = 0.35, than women. In addition, service members (M = 2.97, SD = 1.27) reported receiving more network support than at-home partners (M = 2.62, SD = 1.37), t (233) = 2.02, p = .044, d = 0.26. Accordingly, we covaried biological sex and deployment status in our multivariate analyses.

Multivariate analyses

We chose structural equation modeling for the multivariate analyses because of its suitability for evaluating mediation (Kline, 2011). We built the models using parcels to index the latent variables, set the error variance of the parcels to $(1-\alpha)(\sigma)$ to address measurement error, and evaluated the five types of partner support in separate analyses to avoid multicollinearity. We controlled for deployment length, the number of months the service member had been home, biological sex, and deployment status by constructing the models using residuals from regression analyses that partialled the covariates from the

independent and dependent variables. We set the criteria for model fit at $\chi^2/df < 2.00$, CFI > .95, and RMSEA < .06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

We ordered the independent variables by constructing paths from self uncertainty and partner uncertainty to relationship uncertainty (per Solomon et al., 2016) and from relationship uncertainty and interference from a partner to relational turbulence (per prior findings from this sample reported by Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). We also included a path from relational turbulence to partner support as per H3. To test the mediation proposed by H4, we omitted direct paths from relationship uncertainty and interference from a partner to partner support, and we used bootstrapping procedures to examine indirect effects.

Results indicated that additional paths were necessary to achieve model fit. For all five types of support, we inserted a path from relationship uncertainty to interference from a partner. The same path surfaced in a previous study of returning service members (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). With the addition, the hypothesized model fit the data for information support, $\chi^2/df = 1.40$, CFI > .99, RMSEA = .04. For the other types of support, we included a path from partner uncertainty to the dependent variable. The resulting models fit the data for emotional support ($\chi^2/df = 0.60$, CFI > .99, RMSEA < .01), esteem support ($\chi^2/df = 1.33$, CFI > .99, RMSEA = .04), network support ($\chi^2/df = 1.61$, CFI > .99, RMSEA = .05), and tangible support ($\chi^2/df = 0.47$, CFI > .99, RMSEA < .01). Table 2 reports the standardized path coefficients, and Figure 1 shows the final models. Across all five models, relational turbulence was a negative predictor of partner support (H3).

We employed bootstrapping procedures to evaluate relational turbulence as a mediator (H4). The analyses involved 5,000 bootstrap samples with 95% bias corrected percentile method confidence intervals. Findings indicated that both relationship uncertainty and interference from a partner had indirect effects on partner support that were mediated by relational turbulence (see Table 2). These results support H4.



Figure 1. Final structural equation model predicting partner support.

Table 2. Standardized path coefficients.

	Path a	Path b	Path c	Path d	Path e	Path f	Path g	Path h	Indirect path e to g	Indirect path f to g
Informational support	.77***	.86***	.18***	.63***	.54***	.28***	46***	_	33*** [42,24]	13** [21,06]
Emotional support	.77***	.85***	.18***	.63***	.53***	.29***	26***	55***	19*** [28,09]	07*** [14,03]
Esteem support	.77***	.85***	.18***	.63***	.53***	.29***	24***	54***	17** [27,07]	07** [14,02]
Network support	.77***	.85***	.18***	.63***	.53***	.29***	24**	35***	17* [29,06]	07** [14,02]
Tangible support	.77***	.85***	.18***	.63***	.53***	.28***	36***	40***	25*** [36,15]	10**** [17,05]

Notes: *N* = 235. Paths correspond with the letters depicted in Figure 1. Cell entries are standardized path coefficients. Confidence intervals are in brackets. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

****p* < .001.

Discussion

Returning service members and at-home partners face many challenges upon reunion following deployment (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Knobloch, Basinger, et al., 2016), and their ability to support each other during the transition is important for their well-being (e.g. Karakurt et al., 2013). We turned to relational turbulence theory to examine how the relationship dynamics of returning service members and at-home partners correspond with their perceptions of their partner's support. After considering how our findings illuminate relational turbulence and social support, we spotlight the implications for helping military couples navigate the post-deployment transition.

Understanding relational turbulence

Whereas the relational turbulence model identified relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as predictors of upheaval during times of transition, it did not formally articulate mechanisms to explain their effects (e.g. Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Relational turbulence theory broadens the model's conceptual infrastructure by proposing that relational uncertainty and interference from a partner polarize people's subjective experiences and accrue into an atmosphere of relational turbulence, which shapes diverse outcomes (Solomon et al., 2016). Accordingly, the model was best equipped for application, but the theory is designed to support deductive tests of its logic. We revisited an existing dataset to test core claims of the theory. Our findings were compatible with hypotheses linking relational uncertainty (H1), interference from a partner (H2), and relational turbulence (H3) to perceptions of partner support. Moreover, our data were consistent with the theory's depiction of relational turbulence as a conduit through which relational uncertainty and interference from a partner predict outcomes (H4).

Our results move relational turbulence theory forward in two ways. First, they represent the first test of the theory's logic about perceptions of partner support among individuals navigating a transitional period. Whereas a prior study of dating couples did not uncover evidence of relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, or relational turbulence as predictors of people's perceptions of partner support in conversation (Solomon & Priem, 2016), our findings linking those constructs (H1, H2, and H3) are consistent with the theory's reasoning about turmoil during times of transition. Second, our data constitute the first test of relational turbulence as a predictor of outcomes among military personnel and their partners (H4). Extant work conducted during the post-deployment transition had stopped short of evaluating relational turbulence in a mediating capacity (Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Thus, our data highlight the interpersonal dynamics that accompany a climate of relational turbulence.

Our findings for mediation are especially noteworthy (H4). The theory positions relational turbulence as the pathway through which relational uncertainty and interference from a partner transcend everyday episodes and predict more enduring outcomes (Solomon et al., 2016), but relational turbulence was only a partial mediator in our data because partner uncertainty had a direct effect on four of the five types of partner support. Previous tests have confirmed direct effects of relational uncertainty and/or interference from a partner controlling for relational turbulence in investigations of hurtful partner behavior (McLaren et al., 2011, 2012), topic avoidance (Theiss & Nagy, 2012), and emotional improvement from stress (Solomon & Priem, 2016). Thus, our data coalesce with extant research characterizing relational turbulence as a mediator, while also documenting a lingering role for the predictors originally emphasized by the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

Although relational turbulence as a partial mediator was not unexpected based on previous work (McLaren et al., 2011, 2012), partner uncertainty as the source of the direct effect was somewhat of a surprise. The theory orders self and partner uncertainty as correlated antecedents of relationship uncertainty under the assumption that questions about individuals contribute to questions about the relationship as a whole (Berger & Bradac, 1982). In our data, the three sources of relational uncertainty shared their trademark strong positive bivariate correlations, and they were related to partner support in similar ways. The departure emerged in the multivariate findings: Partner uncertainty had a direct effect on four of the five types of partner support, rather than an indirect effect conveyed through relationship uncertainty. The theory emphasizes that self uncertainty may diverge when partner and relationship uncertainty are covaried (cf. Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Priem & Solomon, 2011; Theiss & Solomon, 2006), but only rarely has research documented an unmediated effect of partner uncertainty on outcomes in the presence of self and relationship uncertainty (cf. Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). An obvious explanation involves the nature of the outcome under investigation: Both partner uncertainty and partner support involve an individual's perceptions of his or her partner's investment in the relationship. We are intrigued by the prospect that partner uncertainty may share a specialized association with outcomes that explicitly reflect a partner's involvement, but the possibility remains conjecture until evaluated by additional research.

A key caveat is that the theory is more expansive than our investigation was able to test. For example, we considered only interference from a partner (as per most tests of the relational turbulence model), but the theory identifies influence, interference, and facilitation from a partner as comprising interdependence processes (Solomon et al., 2016). We also conceptualized partner support as an outcome, but the theory contends that relational uncertainty and interdependence processes coalesce into relational turbulence via people's cognitions, emotions, and communication in response to everyday episodes, so daily deficits in partner support also could be a precursor of relational turbulence. Third, the theory proposes that relational turbulence shapes outcomes by affecting how people construe their relationship and synchronize their behavior, but we did not evaluate those pathways. Although our investigation did not assess the totality of the theory, it does offer preliminary evidence that the theory may be viable for understanding the post-deployment transition.

A lingering question for relational turbulence theory involves how people's questions about involvement correspond with their disruptions of each other's routines. Although qualitative data show rich connections between relational uncertainty and interference from a partner (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012; Steuber & Solomon, 2008), quantitative data depict an inconsistent pattern of bivariate association (cf. McLaren et al., 2011; Solomon & Priem, 2016; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Our results revealed a path from relationship uncertainty to interference from a partner identical to one documented in a prior investigation of returning service members (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013), but any directional claims are limited by the cross-sectional nature of both investigations.

Indeed, we think it plausible that questions about involvement give rise to disruptions, and in turn, disruptions spark questions about involvement. Further theorizing and research on this issue are warranted.

Understanding social support

Our study contributes to theories of social support by identifying features of romantic relationships that correspond with people's perceptions of their partner's support. Consider three examples. The theory of communicating social support argues that people make sense of supportive behavior vis-à-vis their goals, their valued identities, and their relational context (Goldsmith et al., 2012). The dual process theory of support proposes that individuals use features of their relationship as a heuristic for interpreting a support message if they are unwilling or unable to scrutinize the message content (Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012; Holmstrom et al., 2015). Advice response theory contends that people take their relationship with the advice-giver into account when evaluating advice (Guntzviller et al., 2017; MacGeorge, Guntzviller, Hanasono, & Feng, 2016). Notably, all three theories reserve a role for characteristics of the relationship, but all three leave space for scholars to identify what those relationship parameters might be. Our findings hint that relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relational turbulence are three features of relationships that predict people's evaluations of partner support. More generally, we see value in conceptual synthesis since scholars of social support are working to consider relationship characteristics (e.g. Goldsmith et al., 2012; Guntzviller et al., 2017; Holmstrom et al., 2015) and relational turbulence theorists are working to consider social support (e.g. Solomon et al., 2016). An added bonus of integration along these lines is that all three theories of social support have much to say about people's perceptions of support quality in addition to the support quantity we examined (e.g. Goldsmith et al., 2012; Holmstrom et al., 2015; MacGeorge et al., 2016).

An unresolved issue is whether returning service members and at-home partners offer less support to each other upon reunion or if individuals fail to notice the support their partner provides. In the absence of dyadic data, we are left to speculate on the possibilities. Perhaps the most straightforward possibility is that individuals are disinclined to offer support when romantic relationships are turbulent. Evidence compatible with this explanation has shown spillover between partners such that when individuals are experiencing questions and hindrance, their partner is more likely to report negative outcomes (Knobloch et al., 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Another possibility is that partners provide support, but individuals are biased in their appraisals of their partner's behavior. Findings consistent with this account have revealed that spouses judge their partner's actions pessimistically under conditions of relational uncertainty and interference from a partner (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). A third possibility is that partners provide support in such subtle ways that individuals do not perceive it. Invisible support is support that individuals do not notice or do not interpret as support (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). Results congruous with this possibility have demonstrated that invisible support offered skillfully can reduce a recipient's negative emotion outside his or her conscious awareness (Howland & Simpson, 2010). We await future research that collects observations from both partners to disentangle these possibilities.

Our data also intersect in intriguing ways with a recent qualitative study about perceived partner support among military reservist couples. Karakurt et al. (2013) conducted 101 interviews with 19 returning service members and at-home partners during the year following homecoming. Their findings revealed that people's support systems evolved twice across the deployment cycle. During deployment, military couples shifted away from relying on each other as a primary source of support to relying on unit colleagues, family members, and friends. After reunion, it took time for military couples to feel comfortable turning to each other for support, but individuals gradually came to depend on each other again as the transition progressed. Perhaps interpersonal dynamics such as relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relational turbulence complicate the shift from social network support back to partner support during the post-deployment transition.

Implications for practice

Our study suggests five recommendations for assisting returning service members and athome partners during the transition from deployment to reunion. These guidelines center around who, when, and how to offer assistance upon homecoming. With respect to who, individuals in our sample who had experienced a longer deployment reported more relational turbulence. Not only do these results complement work suggesting that deployment length is a risk factor for reintegration difficulty (Adler, Huffman, Bliese, & Castro, 2005; Mansfield et al., 2010), but they also imply that outreach efforts to enhance relationship functioning may be particularly helpful to military couples who have been apart for an extended period of time. Second, men and returning service members reported receiving more partner support than women and at-home partners (84% of returning military personnel in our sample were men, 98% of at-home partners in our sample were women). Returning service members are the obvious target of support during the transition from deployment to reintegration, but at-home partners face considerable stress as well (Renshaw et al., 2008; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Our data offer quantitative evidence to bolster Bommarito, Sherman, Rudi, Mikal, and Borden's (2017) point that the support needs of at-home partners should not be overlooked during the post-deployment transition.

With respect to *when* to offer services, our findings imply that the difficulties of the reintegration period may surface somewhat later than the service member's arrival date. Individuals in our sample who had been reunited for a longer time reported more relational turbulence and less support from their partner. Prior work suggests that the post-deployment transition starts with a harmonious honeymoon window, but as people's excitement inevitably wanes over time, the transition may become more challenging due to the pressures of returning to daily responsibilities (Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Pincus et al., 2001). Perhaps reintegration programming should be timed for after the honeymoon period is over (so that military couples do not dismiss the information as irrelevant), but before upheaval comes to the fore (so that military couples do not get locked into a cycle of escalating turbulence and diminishing support). Sequenced outreach such as the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program for National Guard and reserve service members, which typically offers sessions 30 days, 60 days, and 90 days post-

deployment (e.g. Scherrer et al., 2014), would appear to be a natural fit for evaluating the best timing of intervention efforts.

Our results also illuminate *how* to help military couples during the post-deployment transition. One suggestion flows from the possibility that returning service members and at-home partners may not recognize the support they receive. If so, then we see utility in educating individuals both to appreciate their partner's support and to draw prosocial attributions for their partner's behavior. We suspect that helping military couples to recognize and value each other's support may be useful on two fronts. First, offering invisible support in romantic relationships can be emotionally costly for support providers over time (König et al., 2016), so returning service members and at-home partners who appreciate each other's support may be able to circumvent those inequities. Second, the attributions people make about their partner's behavior, and the behaviors that result from those attributions, play a key role in marital quality over time (Durtschi, Fincham, Cui, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011). Military couples who learn (or re-learn) how to make constructive attributions for their partner's support in the midst of the potentially volatile shift from deployment to reunion may see gains in their relationship as the transition unfolds.

Another recommendation for *how* to help involves providing communication skills training on social support to military couples navigating the post-deployment transition. Although our data are silent on the content of such training, interpersonal communication theorizing provides substantial insight into the features of successful support behavior. In particular, support behavior is most effective when it validates the distressed person's emotions (e.g. MacGeorge et al., 2011), attends to the face threats that permeate upsetting situations (e.g. Goldsmith, 2004), and confirms valued identities (e.g. Rossetto, 2015). We suspect that educational efforts geared toward helping military couples employ these communication practices when supporting each other would be exceedingly valuable for preserving their resilience during the transition from deployment to reunion.

A final insight about *how* to help comes from our data documenting people's experiences of relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relational turbulence as predictors of partner support (H1, H2, and H3). As noted by relational turbulence theory (Solomon et al., 2016), all three constructs are locations of intervention. Educational curricula designed to help military couples clarify their questions about the relationship, minimize their hindrance in each other's daily routines, and address the climate of upheaval in their relationship could enrich support between partners and ultimately bolster their dyadic well-being. Although several established programs have impressive track records of helping military families cope with the cycle of deployment (e.g. Gewirtz, DeGarmo, & Zamir, 2016; Lester et al., 2011; Nichols, Martindale-Adams, Graney, Zuber, & Burns, 2013), a need remains for support services for military couples upon reintegration (e.g. Sherman, Larsen, & Borden, 2015), particularly those that drill down into the specific relationship dynamics at work during times of transition. Accordingly, we nominate relational uncertainty, interference from a partner, and relational turbulence for inclusion in intervention efforts.

Strengths, limitations, and directions for future research

One strength of our study is that we sought to test theoretical claims rather than report descriptive data. Despite a growing body of research on military couples and families across the deployment cycle, the literature is not yet theoretically robust (Knobloch & Wehrman, 2014; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). A second strength is that we recruited groups of returning service members as well as at-home partners. Our ability to compare the two groups revealed that returning service members reported receiving more network support from at-home partners than vice versa. These results may allude to the balancing act that returning military personnel face in seeking to rekindle their connection with their domestic family while also preserving their connection with their deployment family (e.g. Karakurt et al., 2013; Wiens & Boss, 2006). A third strength is that we collected data from individuals living in 30 states. Accordingly, our results are not constrained to a particular unit or region of the country.

The strengths of our study are offset by several limitations. First and foremost, our cross-sectional data do not shed light on the trajectory of partner support across the transition. Longitudinal research is required to document how the experiences of returning service members and at-home partners change in the days, weeks, and months after homecoming (e.g. Karakurt et al., 2013; Knobloch et al., 2013), to evaluate the causal ordering proposed by relational turbulence theory (Solomon et al., 2016), and to investigate potential reciprocal effects between relational turbulence and partner support (e.g. Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Second, although our sample was dispersed geographically, it was relatively homogeneous in terms of race, military branch, and gender composition. More heterogeneous samples are necessary to shed light on demographic diversity during the post-deployment transition (e.g. Sherman et al., 2015; Willerton, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Riggs, 2011). A third limitation is that our sample contained individuals rather than couples. Dyadic data are important for unraveling how returning service members and at-home partners contribute to each other's outcomes as they navigate the reunion period (e.g. Knobloch, McAninch, et al., 2016).

Looking to the future, scholars could mesh relational turbulence theory with other frameworks to add theoretical depth to the literature on homecoming after deployment. Attachment theory and family stress theory are two examples of how this synergy could occur. Attachment style plays a role in how returning service members and at-home partners respond to the post-deployment transition (Riggs & Riggs, 2011), so we see value in work that considers how people's experience of relational turbulence upon reunion may hinge on their attachment style. Applications of family stress theory to the deployment cycle underscore the resources military families have at their disposal and the appraisals they make of their situation (Maguire, 2012; Wiens & Boss, 2006), so we envision inroads from research that investigates how people's experience of relational turbulence upon reunion intersects with their internal and external circumstances. More generally, we encourage scholars to integrate relational turbulence theory with other conceptual frameworks for continued innovation in understanding how military couples navigate the post-deployment transition.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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