Journal of Family Communication, 13: 280–300, 2013

ISSN: 1526-7431 print / 1532-7698 online
DOI: 10.1080/15267431.2013.823430

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Applying the Relational Turbulence Model to the Empty-Nest Transition: Sources of Relationship Change, Relational Uncertainty, and Interference from Partners

Mary E. Nagy
Department of Communication Studies, Bloomsburg University

Jennifer A. Theiss
Department of Communication, Rutgers University

This study employs the relational turbulence model to identify common issues facing married couples during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage. We surveyed 100 individuals who were part of 50 couples who had recently entered the empty-nest phase of their relationship to identify themes of relationship change (*RQ1*), relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and interference from partners (*RQ3*) during the empty-nest transition. Results revealed five themes of relationship change: (a) increased couple time, (b) reduced structure provides increased freedom, (c) increased communication, (d) increased privacy, and (e) new beginnings. Four themes of relational uncertainty were identified: (a) new roles and identities, (b) dependency anxiety, (c) love and intimacy, and (d) growing older. Four themes of partner interference were also found: (a) relationship facilitation, (b) guilt, (c) forced activity, and (d) household chores. Our findings suggest that the relational turbulence model may be a useful tool for understanding the relationship challenges faced by couples during late-life transitions.

The empty-nest transition can be a time of positive relationship growth, but also a time of relational hardship. On one hand, the empty-nest transition can be a time of renewal for married couples as they gain more time to devote to their relationship (Umberson et al., 2005; White & Edwards, 1990). In many cases, couples report greater marital satisfaction, more spontaneity and intimacy, increased alone-time, greater happiness, more freedom, and improved financial condition after launching children from the home (Harkins, 1978). On the other hand, couples are often surprised to find that after spending so many years focused on their children they have forgotten how to be intimate as a married couple (Crowley, Hayslip, & Hobdy, 2003). Some studies show that the empty-nest phase of marriage is characterized by the lowest levels of marital satisfaction compared to other life stages (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983), as well as increased conflict and high rates of separation and divorce (Brubaker, 1985; Kreider, 2005; Radina, Hennon, & Gibbons, 2008). Whether the launching of children is experienced as a positive or a negative

Correspondence should be addressed to Mary E. Nagy, 1102 McCormick Center, Department of Communication Studies, Bloomsburg University, 400 E. Second Street, Bloomsburg, PA 17815. E-mail: mnagy@bloomu.edu

relationship event, it is a transition that contributes to upheaval in spouses' traditional roles and responsibilities (Anderson et al., 1983).

The relational turbulence model is a theoretical framework that may explain why couples are reactive to their relationship circumstances during the empty-nest transition. The model suggests that transitional periods in romantic relationships give rise to conditions in which people are more reactive to their interpersonal circumstances (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). The relational turbulence model has previously been used to identify the issues couples face when managing infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008), when faced with spousal illness (Weber & Solomon, 2008), and during the reintegration of military couples following deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). In this study, we apply the relational turbulence model to identify and explain the relational issues faced by married couples as they navigate the empty-nest phase of their relationship.

The goals of this study are twofold. On a pragmatic level, we seek to illuminate the relationship experiences that characterize the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage and that contribute to both positive and negative relational outcomes. On a theoretical level, we aim to extend the relational turbulence model to a previously unexamined relationship context. Moreover, drawing on the relational turbulence model provides a theoretical framework for organizing the largely empirical literature on the empty-nest transition. In the sections that follow, we articulate the assumptions of the relational turbulence model as they relate to the empty-nest transition and we report the findings of a cross-sectional study in which 50 empty-nest couples responded to open-ended questions about the nature of their relationship following the launching of their children from the home.

RELATIONAL TURBULENCE AND THE EMPTY-NEST PHASE OF MARRIAGE

The relational turbulence model suggests that transitional periods in romantic relationships create conditions ripe for upheaval, turmoil, and tumult (Solomon & Theiss, 2008; Solomon et al., 2010). The first articulation of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) focused on courtship and claimed that the transition from casual to serious involvement in romantic relationships corresponds with increased relational uncertainty and interference from partners. Although early research focused on developing romantic relationships, more recent research has demonstrated that committed relationships may also experience times of transition that contribute to upheaval (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Steuber & Solomon, 2008; Theiss, Estlein, & Weber, 2013; Theiss & Nagy, 2010; Weber & Solomon, 2008).

Relationship transitions disrupt the normative behaviors and routines that partners are accustomed to and give rise to heightened relational uncertainty and interference from partners. *Relational turbulence* arises in response to changing relational norms and is manifest in intensified reactions to relationship circumstances. Relational turbulence is visible in both positively and negatively valenced relationship events (Solomon et al., 2010). For example, the disruption to relational norms and routines during the empty-nest transition can help spouses feel more intensely in love, or it can bring to light underlying contempt. In either case, the transition to the empty-nest stage of marriage is characterized by conditions that are likely to induce relational turbulence. Thus, we apply the relational turbulence model to examine the potential for turbulence during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage.

Relationship Change during the Empty-Nest Transition

The empty-nest transition can produce both positive and negative reactions for spouses. When experienced as a positive stage in the family life cycle, this transition is given the name *empty nest experience* (Raup & Myers, 1982). In the empty nest experience, feelings of a newfound freedom and even relief emerge as the prominent feelings for spouses (Umberson et al., 2005; White & Edwards, 1990). White and Edwards (1990) noted positive relationship effects were greatly increased for those couples who recently launched their children but kept in frequent contact after the launch. Couples who thrive during the empty-nest transition report changes to their marriage in the form of more spontaneity and intimacy with their spouse, more freedom from the demands of children, increased financial stability, and the ability to spend more quality time together (Harkins, 1978). Thus, when couples experience the empty-nest transition positively they may rekindle their relationship (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Guthrie, 2002) and experience more satisfaction (Schmidt, Murphy, Haq, Rubinow, & Danaceau, 2004).

When negative feelings are more prominent after launching children, individuals or couples may experience the *empty nest syndrome*. The empty nest syndrome is characterized as a reaction to loss, similar to that experienced in postpartum depression. Individuals experiencing the empty nest syndrome may experience grief, sadness, or depression (Kahana & Kahana, 1982), most significantly as a result of the absence of children and the loss of parental roles (Borland, 1982; Raup & Myers, 1989). Individuals who had overgiven of themselves and consistently replaced their own needs with their children's needs are most susceptible to empty nest syndrome when the children leave the home (Black & Hill, 1984; Borland, 1982).

Individuals enduring the empty nest syndrome report a higher prevalence of chronic disease (Liu, Sun, Zhang, & Guo, 2007), poor mental health, including increased stress and depression (Long & Martin, 2000; Pillay, 1988), and have a more difficult time managing other life stressors, such as losing a job (Crowley, Hayslip, & Hobdy, 2003).

The empty nest experience and the empty nest syndrome emerge in response to a variety of changes that couples may undergo after launching children from the home. As a starting point, spouses experience a shifting of roles from mother and father to a primary focus on their roles as husband and wife (Borland, 1982). Women are especially vulnerable to the challenges of changing relationship roles when they have invested most of their time, energy, and emotion into raising their children and have not developed an identity outside of the home (Black & Hill, 1984). Couples may also notice a change to their daily routines during the empty-nest transition because they have more time to focus on themselves and their own activities (Harkins, 1978). Finally, spouses may notice a change in their level of relational satisfaction or the frequency and intensity with which they interact with their partner (e.g., Anderson et al., 1983). Accordingly, our first research question investigates the sources of relationship change during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage.

RQ1: What changes to their relationship, if any, do couples report experiencing during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage?

Relational Uncertainty during the Empty-Nest Transition

The first mechanism in the relational turbulence model that heightens reactivity is *relational uncertainty,* which refers to the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of relationship involvement and encompasses three sources of ambiguity (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). *Self-uncertainty* refers to the doubts an individual has about his or her own involvement in a relationship. *Partner uncertainty* refers to the doubts people experience about a partner's involvement in the relationship. *Relationship uncertainty* is the uncertainty an individual experiences as he or she evaluates the status of the relationship more generally. Although some scholars have argued that relational uncertainty is resolved at high levels of intimacy (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), studies suggest that it persists even in highly committed relationships (Knobloch, 2008a).

Research has revealed various sources of relational uncertainty that partners grapple with in diverse relational contexts. For instance, married partners report uncertainty over their children, communication, career issues, finances, health, commitment, extended family, sexual intimacy, retirement, religious beliefs, leisure time, and household chores (Knobloch, 2008a).

Research has also uncovered unique sources of relational uncertainty that characterize specific transitions or experiences in relationships. Military couples navigating reintegration report uncertainty about commitment, their ability to reintegrate the service member into daily life, household stressors, changes in personality, the service member's health, communication, and sexual intimacy (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). In addition, individuals who are diagnosed with breast cancer report myriad sources of relational uncertainty, such as shifting identities, information management, the provision of social support, feeling understood, and navigating sexual intimacy (Weber & Solomon, 2008). Finally, couples coping with infertility experience uncertainty about their degree of involvement in reproductive treatments, the provision of social support, and attributions for conception problems (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Thus, relationships that are in flux are ripe for relational uncertainty.

The empty-nest transition is one stage in a relationship that may be marked by increased relational uncertainty. Although we know of no research that examines relational uncertainty during the empty-nest transition, the events that characterize this transition are likely to give rise to uncertainty. One source of relational uncertainty may stem from the costs and rewards associated with staying in a marriage, particularly as that relationship evolves (Downs, 2003). For example, individuals who are driven by structural commitment when the children reside in the home (Johnson, 1991) may find themselves questioning the viability of their marriage when the children are no longer the driving force for staying in the relationship. Second, the adoption of new roles and routines during the empty-nest transition (Anderson et al., 1983) may raise doubts about the desirability of the new role and one's ability to perform the role appropriately. For example, a woman who has spent many years of her life as a mother might have uncertainty over how to be a good wife and whether or not she desires that role at this stage of her life. Thus, we query the various sources of relational uncertainty for couples who are negotiating the empty-nest stage of marriage.

RQ2: What sources of relational uncertainty, if any, do couples report during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage?

Interference from Partners during the Empty-Nest Transition

The second mechanism that contributes to relational turbulence is interference from partners (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). *Interference from partners* refers to the degree to which an individual perceives a partner is undermining personal goals, actions, and routines. In developing relationships, partner interference manifests when couples attempt to establish interdependence and one person's routine is interrupted by efforts to coordinate actions with a relational partner (Berscheid, 1983). Although the relational turbulence model originally argued that interference from partners should subside at high levels of intimacy (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), empirical evidence suggests that partner interference does not decline, but plateaus, in highly intimate relationships (Solomon & Theiss, 2008). In established relationships, interference from partners may emerge during circumstances that require a change to well-established routines. Thus, the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage may be ripe for partner interference.

Interference from partners manifests in a variety of ways for relationship partners who are navigating unique relational circumstances. In general, dating and married partners report interference from partners in the form of disruptions to daily routines, leisure time, everyday schedules, and goals for diet, exercise, and entertainment (Knobloch, 2008b; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009). More specific relationship transitions are associated with unique sources of partner interference. Military couples experience interference in daily routines, household chores, decision making, privacy, parenting, social life, and together time (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Within the context of infertility, interference from partners can occur when selecting and acquiring medical care, scheduling intercourse around ovulation cycles, and defining each person's role in pursuing pregnancy (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Within the domain of breast cancer, individuals can encounter interference from partners in scheduling and receiving treatments, coping with side effects, securing support, and managing finances (Weber & Solomon, 2008). Thus, unique relational circumstances provide opportunities for interference from partners.

Couples navigating the empty-nest stage of marriage are likely to encounter a variety of changes in their relationship that may disrupt their routines and personal goals (Sakraida, 2005; Unger, McAvay, Berman, & Seeman, 1999). Whereas children may have helped with household chores when living at home, spouses must renegotiate those responsibilities when the children are gone. Although spouses may have enjoyed independent careers and activities when the children resided at home, they may feel obligated to spend more time engaged in collective activities in the absence of their children (George & Gold, 1989; Unger et al., 1999). Moreover, individual goals to retire or travel once the children are launched from the home may be thwarted by the financial responsibilities of paying college tuition (Sakraida, 2005). We know of no research that has explored the impact of partner interference on the empty-nest relationship; thus, our final research question investigates the sources of partner interference during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage.

RQ3: What sources of partner interference, if any, do couples experience during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage?

METHOD

Participants in this study were married couples who launched their last child from the home within the past 18 months. We selected 18 months as our time frame for the empty-nest transition for conceptual and pragmatic reasons. Conceptually, 18 months represented a time frame that was long enough that couples may have started to notice changes in their relationship, but close enough after the departure of children that they would be able to reflect accurately on their experiences during that transition. Pragmatically, in order to recruit enough couples to participate in the study, it was necessary to identify a time frame that would allow us to be more inclusive in identifying eligible participants.

Recruitment

Undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large northeastern university received extra course credit for identifying an eligible empty-nest couple to participate in the study. We defined an empty-nest couple as one in which their last (or only) child had moved out of the home to attend college, join the military, get married, etc., thereby leaving the couple as the sole residents of their home for the majority of the year. Couples were still eligible to participate if their child(ren) returned home for brief periods during the year (such as breaks from school). Couples were eligible to participate in the study if (a) they had never been previously married (i.e., this was their first and only marriage), (b) they had no other children outside their marriage, and (c) the couple had entered the empty-nest phase of marriage within the past 18 months. To gain insight into the experiences of empty-nest couples during this life transition, participants responded to open-ended survey questions about changes to their relationship, the degree of relational uncertainty in their relationship, and the extent to which their partner interfered in daily activities. Upon completion of the study each individual was compensated $25 for their participation.

Sample

The sample consisted of husbands and wives from 50 couples who had recently entered the empty-nest phase of marriage. Participants ranged in age from 39 to 78 years old ($M = 54.83$, $SD = 6.61$). Couples were married for an average of 27.45 years (range 12–56 years) and had on average 2 children. On average, the last child had left the home 9 months prior to participating in the study (range = 1 month to18 months). The majority of participants ($n = 74\%$) were Caucasian, 9% were African American, 7% were Indian, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% was Hispanic, and 3% reported Other.

Procedures

Participants were screened for eligibility by the primary researcher. After ensuring the participants met the eligibility criteria for the study, a date and time were identified for couples to participate. Participants were asked to come to a research facility located at the university. As part of a larger study on relational turbulence during the empty-nest transition, participants individually completed a questionnaire about changes to their marriage since entering the empty-nest

phase of their relationship. The spouses were separated to ensure that they could complete the questionnaire privately and without influence from their partner.

The participants responded to three open-ended questions designed to assess relationship change, relational uncertainty, and partner interference during the empty-nest stage of marriage. To evaluate general changes to the relationship (*RQ1*), participants were asked to "Please describe any ways in which your marital relationship has changed now that all of your children have left the home." To evaluate sources of relational uncertainty during the empty-nest transition (*RQ2*), participants were given the following instructions: "It's normal for people to have questions about their romantic relationships. People may experience uncertainty about their own thoughts, feelings, or behaviors; uncertainty about their partner's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors; or uncertainty about the nature of the relationship itself. Please describe any questions or uncertainties you have experienced about yourself, your partner, or your relationship now that all of your children have left the home." Finally, to identify sources of interference from partners during this transition (*RQ3*), participants were given the following instructions: "Sometimes relationship partners get in each other's way and make it harder for one another to accomplish goals. Please describe ways that your partner has made it harder to complete your personal goals, activities, and routines now that all of your children have left the home."

RESULTS

We conducted a content analysis to inductively identify themes that were present in the data (Neuendorf, 2002). Two outside observers reviewed the open-ended responses several times to become familiar with the data; then, they conducted open and axial coding to identify dominant themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding is an interpretive process designed to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize data; axial coding involves searching for overarching topics or concepts that help to organize subordinate categories into broader themes. Concepts and topics were identified by the research team during the open coding phase and then combined to create overarching categories or themes that were reflected in the axial coding phase. As a first step, the research team read through the responses to become familiar with the material and the conversations. The second time the research team read through the responses they identified topics that either occurred frequently or were described with intensity. On the final read-through, the research team searched for additional topics that may have been missed on the second pass through the data. On the fourth review, the research team was instructed to review the topics and concepts that emerged to determine if they could be combined into more inclusive categories. This process revealed five categories of relationship change (*RQ1*), four categories of relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and four categories of interference from partners (*RQ3*).

Next, we unitized each participant's response to each question into thematic units that conveyed a single idea (Krippendorff, 2004). Participants wrote an average of 1.12 thematic units per question (*range* = 1 to 3 thematic units, *Mdn* = 1 thematic unit). We then trained three independent judges who were blind to the research questions to code the data into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. Krippendorff's α was calculated to evaluate reliability with $\alpha > .67$ denoting marginal reliability and $\alpha > .80$ representing satisfactory reliability (Krippendorff, 2004).

The average intercoder reliability across the three questions was $\alpha = .80$ (range $\alpha = .74$ to $\alpha = .84$). Disagreements were resolved by selecting the category endorsed by the majority of judges.

Changes in the Marital Relationship

The first open-ended question asked participants to reflect on the ways in which their relationship had changed since all of their children had left the home (*RQ1*). Five themes were pertinent to the relationship changes empty-nest couples experienced (Krippendorf's $\alpha = .84$): (a) increased couple time, (b) reduced structure provides increased freedom, (c) increased communication, (d) increased privacy, and (e) new beginnings (see Table 1).

Increased couple time

The first theme referenced the increased amount of time spouses spent together after the children had left the home (46.6% of thematic units). Of those individuals who reported increased couple time, 55.2% were wives and 44.8% were husbands. Individuals often mentioned the pleasure received from engaging in joint activities with their spouse, especially in comparison to when the children were living at home. Couples frequently mentioned the time together was spent participating in 'routine' activities, most notably shopping and errands. For example, one husband (age 58, married 24 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) stated, "We are doing more things together on weekends and during the week at nights – I actually feel we enjoy the things we do more than before."

Similarly, another husband (age 53, married 28 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) stated, "Sometimes I feel like the house is kind of empty. But I also feel like we have more time to be alone and enjoy each other. We get along better." His wife (age 57, married 28 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) said, "We cook less but then we go out more often. We feel lonely but in the same time we look for things to do together," and another wife (age 59, married 38 years, 3 children, empty-nester for 18 months) added, "We have more time to do things as a couple, without all the schedules of the children to work around." Thus, the empty-nest couples in this study found that the absence of children provided opportunities for them to spend more time engaged in activities together.

Reduced structure provides increased freedom

A second theme to emerge from the data described how the lack of structure in couples' day-to-day routines provided increased freedom to pursue their individual goals and desires (26.7% of thematic units). Of those who reported that reduced structure provides increased freedom, 44.7% were wives and 55.3% were husbands. Whereas children's schedules may have dictated daily routines prior to emptying the nest, now that the children have left the home, spouses were pleased to be able to structure their time around their own personal goals. One notable routine that couples frequently mentioned was the new lack of structure around orchestrating dinners.

For example, "We have more time to do things that we enjoy. Dinner is easier/easier to make plans," (wife, age 45, married 25 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 12 months). A husband

TABLE 1
Changes to the Relationship

1. *Increased Couple Time*
"We are doing more things together on weekends and during the week at nights – I actually feel we enjoy the things we do more than before."
"Sometimes I feel like the house is kind of empty. But I also feel like we have more time to be alone and enjoy each other. We get along better."
"We cook less but then we go out more often. We feel lonely but in the same time we look for things to do together."
"We have more time to do things as a couple, without all the schedules of the children to work around."

2. *Reduced Structure Provides Increased Freedom*
"We have more time to do things that we enjoy. Dinner is easier/easier to make plans."
"Seems easier as far as the normal routines goes. No need to take the kids needs into consideration for things such as meal planning, going to their sporting events, etc.."
"We do what we want, when we want- eat, sleep, sex, go out, etc.."
"More time one on one with spouse. Also more alone time. Scheduling is easier with only two schedules; less juggling."

3. *Increased Communication*
"We are able to talk about family matters (Money, work, sex, and activities) more frequently without considering being overheard."
"We speak more to each other and there are no distractions."
"We have to entertain ourselves and talk to each other about us. There is no dinner hour, no sport events to go to after work or on weekends."
"We have to talk to each other. We need each other more."

4. *Increased Privacy*
"We are able to talk about family matters (money, work, sex, activities) more freely without considering being overheard."
"We have more privacy and leave the BR [bedroom] door open . . ."
"More sex, more nudity, smoke pot openly, less stress."
"It's much calmer, less stressful. More time for ourselves."

5. *New Beginnings*
"It is good and enjoyable. It is like dating."
". . . We are *now* building our life together. [emphasis added]."
". . . I actually feel we enjoy the things we do more than before."
"We have made some important commitments regarding how we will fill our 'empty nest' – things we are working on together."

similarly reported, "Seems easier as far as the normal routines goes. No need to take the kids needs into consideration for things such as meal planning, going to their sporting events, etc." (husband, age 50, married 23 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months). As a corollary to the reduced structure in activities and meals, couples also identified the freedom they now experience as a unit. For example, one wife said, "We do what we want, when we want—eat, sleep, sex, go out, etc." (age 54, married 36 years, 3 children, empty-nester for 12 months), and, "More time one on one with spouse. Also, more alone time. Scheduling is easier with only two schedules; less juggling" (husband, age 54, married 30 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 7 months). Generally,

the increased freedom that accompanied the empty-nest relationship was seen as a positive change for the relationship.

Increased communication

The amount of time couples spent talking with one another was also a theme for the empty-nest couples (12.2% of thematic units). Of those who reported increased communication, 45.1% were wives and 54.9% were husbands. Specifically, couples noted the ability to talk with one another regarding "heavy" topics or topics that could not be openly discussed around the children. For example, one wife (age 49, married 26 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 9 months) stated, "We are able to talk about family matters (money, work, sex, and activities) more frequently without considering being overheard." In addition to being able to discuss topics of importance with one another, overall conversations were easier to have simply by having the distraction of children no longer in the home.

One wife (age 49, married 22 years, 1 child, empty-nester for 1 month) addressed this, saying, "We speak more to each other and there are no distractions." Another couple shared this sentiment: "We have to entertain ourselves and talk to each other about us" (wife, age 55, married 26 years, 3 children, empty-nester for 3 months), and "We have to talk to each other. We need each other more" (husband, age 51). By having the distraction of children removed from the home, and the inconvenience of overhearing ears, empty-nest couples enjoyed increased quality and quantity of interpersonal communication.

Increased privacy

Couples highlighted increased privacy as another theme in their relationships since the departure of the children (8.7% of thematic units). Of the empty-nesters that reported increased privacy, 40.7% were wives and 59.3% were husbands. Privacy issues were primarily related to sexual intimacy and peacefulness. For instance, one wife (age 45, married 25 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 12 months) stated, "We have more privacy and leave the BR [bedroom] door open . . . ," and another wife (age 54, married 21 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) adds, "More sex, more nudity, smoke pot openly, less stress." Couples also reported more peacefulness resulting from their newfound privacy, for instance, "It's much calmer, less stressful. More time for ourselves," (husband, age 53, married 28 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months). Thus, empty-nest couples enjoyed more privacy to engage in activities that they would not have done around their children and enjoyed a more peaceful and relaxing home life without their children.

New beginnings

The final theme empty-nesters identified was the realization of a new beginning for the relationship (5.8% of thematic units). Of those who reported new beginnings in their relationships, 42.9% were wives and 57.1% were husbands. For example, "It is good and enjoyable. It is like dating," (wife, age 47, married 24 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 1 month). Couples identified this freedom as giving them more time to begin a new chapter in life with their spouse, ". . . We are *now* building our life together. [emphasis added]," (wife, age 49, married 26 years,

2 children, empty-nester for 9 months), and ". . . I actually feel we enjoy the things we do more than before," (husband, age 58, married 24 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 15 months).

For these couples, the opportunity to reframe the relationship and move forward seemed to be a positive manifestation of the empty-nest period. In fact, at least one couple viewed the rejuvenation of their relationship as a sort of jointly created mission statement, stating, ". . . We have made some important commitments regarding how we will fill our 'empty nest' – things we are working on together," (wife, age 63, married 43 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 5 months). Thus, many couples saw the empty-nest period as a fresh start for their relationship and were committed to making the transition a positive one.

Relational Uncertainty

The second open-ended question invited participants to reflect on sources of relational uncertainty during the empty-nest transition (*RQ2*). For this question coders identified four themes pertinent to the relational uncertainties experienced by empty-nest couples (Krippendorf's $\alpha = .82$): (a) new roles and identities, (b) dependency anxiety, (c) love and intimacy, and (d) growing older (see Table 2).

New roles and identities

Some couples reported concern over shifting roles in their relationships since the children left home (34.5% of thematic units). Of the empty-nesters who reported new roles and identities, 62.2% were wives and 37.8% husbands. Partners experienced concern over being able to reclaim their original roles with their spouse and worried if they would be able to shift from parental caregiver to spouse without incident. For instance, one wife (age 49, married 22 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 13 months) indicated, "After having children live at home for so long, when they leave you really wonder what your role is toward each other. So much time was spent raising them, it feels like you are starting a new relationship all over again." Another wife (age 47, married 21 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) said, "Uncertainty about new role as only partner and no one else to focus my attention as caregiver."

The perceived anxiety over the shifting of roles and role obligations appeared to raise questions for the spouses about how to give up their roles as parents and return to their roles as husband and wife. The loss of the parental identity was particularly salient for some couples. For example, one husband (age 50, married 23 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) stated, "I worried that having no kids at home would leave a very big void in mp's [my partner's] life as if her entire purpose that she devoted so much energy towards is suddenly gone. I worried how she would react to that." This man's wife (age 49) said, "Myself – as the 'mom' my identity has changed as I am no longer a full time mom which is a strange change for me. I have felt better about this. I had lots of anxiety all spring and summer, but that is gone now. But I do find that I don't sleep as well when my children are not home." Spouses also expressed concern over how their spouse would now see them.

One husband (age 54, married 12 years, 6 children, empty-nester for 18 months) said, "[I worry about] being enough for my wife," and another husband (age 51, married 27 years, 4 children, empty-nester for 2 months) shares this feeling saying, "I wonder if my wife looks at me more as

TABLE 2
Relational Uncertainty

1. *New Roles and Identities*
"After having children live at home for so long, when they leave you really wonder what your role is toward each other. So much time was spent raising them, it feels like you are starting a new relationship all over again."
"Uncertainty about new role as only partner and no one else to focus my attention as caregiver."
"I worried that having no kids at home would leave a very big void in mp's [my partner's] life as if her entire purpose that she devoted so much energy towards is suddenly gone. I worried how she would react to that."
"Myself – as the 'mom' my identity has changed as I am no longer a full time mom which is a strange change for me. I have felt better about this. I had lots of anxiety all spring and summer, but that is gone now."
"I wonder if my wife looks at me more as a husband or father now that the kids are gone."

2. *Dependency Anxiety*
"So far it has been okay, later on we may have to figure out more to do independently so that we don't rub off on each other constantly. It is also a little boring and lonely sometimes as there are no kid related chores."
"What do we have in common, what common interests do we still have, how do I relate to him anymore? Do we still have the same goals in life?"
"I don't think my spouse feels the loneliness and emptiness in the house as much as I do – when he gets home from work, usually late, he just wants to go to bed, and usually falls asleep when I'm talking."

3. *Love and Intimacy*
"Being postmenopausal, my sex drive seems to be very little. I never initiate, but I am willing to have sex with [him] and enjoy it."
"What can we do to have more enjoyment together? How can we have a better sexual relationship? How can we grow together and also as individuals?"
"I wondered would we stay together, would the relationship be stronger."
"I wonder if and when we're going to have sex again; we've become more romantic, but less physically involved."

4. *Growing Older*
"With my children leaving home, I feel my own mortality more – getting older time passing quickly."
"Uncertainties are more about job status, changes in financial situation, how can we support each other during changes in family issues."
"What will we do in our retirement years? Where will we live in the next 10 years? Where will we live in the next 5 years?"

a husband or father now that the kids are gone." This negotiation of identity can be a source of concern for the individual's redefining their own roles and for spouses observing their partner's identity shift.

Dependency anxiety

Some couples expressed a concern about feeling bored or lonely and wondered if their relationship was strong enough to survive with the central focus of day-to-day operations not being the children (34.5% of thematic units). Of those who reported dependency anxiety, 61.1% were wives and 38.9% were husbands. For example, one husband (age 49, married 25 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 12 months) stated, "So far it has been okay, later on we may have to figure out more to do independently so that we don't rub off on each other constantly. It is also a little

boring and lonely sometimes as there are no kid related chores." Similarly, one wife (age 55, married 26 years, 3 children, empty-nester for 3 months) asked, "What do we have in common, what common interests do we still have, how do I relate to him anymore? Do we still have the same goals in life?"

Others expressed concern that nerves would rise as a result of increased time spent together. For instance, one wife (age 49, married 27 years, 4 children, empty-nester for 2 months) said, "[I] have been nervous about what we will have in common . . . As it always was the kids." Another wife (age 58, married 24 years, 3 children, empty-nester for 2 months) shared this concern, "I don't think my spouse feels the loneliness and emptiness in the house as much as I do – when he gets home from work, usually late, he just wants to go to bed, and usually falls asleep when I'm talking." Although couples questioned if they would have enough to do as a unit, there was also a concern over having too much of a presence in one another's life.

Love and intimacy

Questions about the nature of the romantic relationship were also a prevalent theme throughout the empty-nester's responses (17.2% of thematic units). Of the empty-nesters who reported love and intimacy, 65.9% were wives and 30.5% were husbands. Now that the children were absent from the home, couples were uncertain about changes to the quantity or quality of their sexual intimacy, whether they would return to their "original" relationship, and whether the relationship would continue in the future. Both spouses in one couple referenced sexual closeness and intimacy concerns: "Being postmenopausal, my sex drive seems to be very little. I never initiate, but I am willing to have sex with [him] and enjoy it," (wife, age 54, married 27 years, 1 child, empty-nesters for 1 month), and, "What can we do to have more enjoyment together? How can we have a better sexual relationship? How can we grow together and also as individuals?" (husband, age 55). Another husband (age 76, married 38 years, 1 child, empty-nester for 3 months) indicated, "I wonder if and when we're going to have sex again; we've become more romantic, but less physically involved." Regarding concerns over the future stability of the marriage, one husband (age 41, married 14 years, 1 child, has been an empty-nester for 1 month) stated, "I wondered would we stay together, would the relationship be stronger." These concerns reflect uncertainty about the degree of intimacy in the relationship and the viability of the relationship moving forward.

Growing older

Empty-nesters also reported concern about getting older during this phase of their marriage (13.8% of thematic units). Of those who reported growing older, 36.4% were wives and 63.6% were husbands. Many recognized the empty-nest transition as a benchmark that indicated they were entering a final stage of life, which spurred reflection on many other later-life issues. For example, one wife (age 53, married 23 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 3 months) stated, "With my children leaving home, I feel my own mortality more – getting older time passing quickly." Retirement and financial concerns were also mentioned as sources of concern in later life. For example, one wife (age 53, married 24 years, 1 child, has been an empty-nester for 18 months) wondered, "What will we do in our retirement years? Where will we live in the next 10 years? Where will we live in the next 5 years?" A husband (age 53, married 26 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months) also shared these concerns: "Uncertainties are more about job status, changes

in financial situation, how can we support each other during changes in family issues." Thus, couples were more aware of their place in life during the empty-nest transition, which contributed to worry about aging, retirement, and finances.

Interference from Partners

The final open-ended question assessed the spouses' perceived interference from partners (*RQ3*). Four themes emerged pertinent to the interference from partners that empty-nest couples experienced (Krippendorf's $\alpha = .74$): (a) relationship facilitation, (b) guilt, (c) forced activity, and (d) household chores (see Table 3).

Relationship facilitation

An overwhelming number of the empty-nesters reported that their partner makes it easier, rather than harder, to accomplish personal goals and routines (70.8% of thematic units). Of those

TABLE 3
Interference from Partners

1. *Relationship Facilitation*
"He has been very supportive is many, if not all ways. One personal goal I have is to learn and read Hebrew fluently so I can lead service . . . He comes with me at times,"
". . . It's just a time when, if you actually have a project or goal you want to attain you really have time to start it and do it. No excuses."
"Most of my goals/activities revolve around work. My wife contributes to this more now that our children are not at home. So I feel it's easier instead of harder."
"She has actually made it easier now that her focus is not on the children,"

2. *Guilt*
"I need to work a lot, so I feel guilty for not spending more time with my spouse."
"I personally look to do more activities on my own . . . feeling sometimes guilty that my partner would feel left out or slighted . . . He asks many times where I'm going . . ."
". . . Sometimes I do not plan activities if he plans on being home."
". . . Sometimes I may want to hang out with friends but don't want to leave him home alone so I won't go out."

3. *Forced Activity*
"[She] wants me to go more places together such as Target, food shopping. Drive her around more."
". . . things such as thinking that I should pass up personal activities (e.g. golf) because she won't be tied up with the kids things."
"Sometimes she makes me feel that she wants me to do what she likes . . ."

4. *Household Chores*
"He is around all the time and by him being there I cannot get as much done around the house."
"My spouse thinks I have more time to do things for him."
". . . more time spent on household chores."
"My partner seems to have gotten more bossy. More often she tells me what to do. Seems to give me more assignments."

empty-nesters who reported relationship facilitation, 50.6% were wives and 49.4% were husbands. Spouses indicated that their routines and goals were often thwarted by the children's needs when they were living at home, but that their partner seemed to have more time to help them accomplish goals now that the children had left the home. One wife mentioned, "He has been very supportive in many, if not all ways. One personal goal I have is to learn and read Hebrew fluently so I can lead service . . . He comes with me at times," (wife, age 63, married 43 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 5 months). Wives felt they had more time to focus on their activities, ". . . It's just a time when, if you actually have a project or goal you want to attain you really have time to start it and do it. No excuses," (wife, age 49, married 22 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 13 months). Husbands felt that wives had more time to focus on them, for example, the previous wife's husband states, "Most of my goals/activities revolve around work. My wife contributes to this more now that our children are not at home. So I feel it's easier instead of harder," (husband, age 49, married 22 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 13 months), and, "She has actually made it easier now that her focus is not on the children," (husband, age 49, married 19 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 1 month). Thus, spouses indicated that that their partner made it easier to accomplish personal goals, rather than interfering in those goals. Husbands in particular appreciated the extra time their wives now had to devote to them and help them in their personal goals.

Guilt

Spouses also reported feelings of guilt as a source of interference from partners (11.2% of thematic units). Of those individuals who reported guilt, 61.1% were wives and 38.9% were husbands. Individuals experienced guilt when work or individual activities precluded "together time." For instance, one husband (age 53, married 27 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 1 month) stated, "I need to work a lot, so I feel guilty for not spending more time with my spouse." Similarly, one wife (age 53, married 24 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 15 months) indicated, "I personally look to do more activities on my own . . . feeling sometimes guilty that my partner would feel left out or slighted . . . He asks many times where I'm going." Guilt also emerged when individuals sacrificed personal activities because they worried their spouse might feel lonely. For example, ". . . Sometimes I do not plan activities if he plans on being home," (wife, age 58, married 28 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months), and, ". . . Sometimes I may want to hang out with friends but don't want to leave him home alone so I won't go out," (wife, age 66, married 38 years, 1 child, empty-nester for 2 months). Thus, now that the children are absent, partners report guilt when they are not present for their spouse.

Forced activity

Husbands, in particular, lamented about having to participate in certain activities that they had no interest in (10.3% of thematic units), and of those who reported forced activity, 41.6% were wives and 58.4% were husbands. For instance, "[she] wants me to go more places together such as Target, food shopping. Drive her around more" (husband, age 50, married 23 years, 1 child, empty-nester for 13 months).

Husbands reported that they felt their wives expected them to sacrifice their own interests in order to engage in more joint activities, ". . . things such as thinking that I should pass up personal

activities (e.g., golf) because she won't be tied up with the kids things," (husband, age 50, married 23 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 2 months), and, "Sometimes she makes me feel that she wants me to do what she likes . . . ," (husband, age 58, married 24 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 15 months). Without children in the home, wives in particular seemed to require their husband's participation in activities that she used to perform independently or with the children. Thus, husbands were often forced to participate in undesirable activities with their spouse.

Household chores

One final theme referenced tasks and obligations around the home (7.7% of thematic units). Of those who reported household chores, 52.0% were wives and 48.0% were husbands. Wives felt they had the same household chore responsibilities as before, but now with the added chore of taking care of their husband. For example, "He is around all the time and by him being there I cannot get as much done around the house" (age 49, married 22 years, 1 child, empty-nester for 1 month), and "My spouse thinks I have more time to do things for him," (wife, age 54, married 27 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 1 month). Husbands reported that they were now expected to participate and help out around the house. For example, ". . . more time spent on household chores," (husband, age 57, married 31 years, 2 children, empty-nester for 18 months), and "My partner seems to have gotten more bossy. More often she tells me what to do. Seems to give me more assignments," (husband, age 62, married 24 years, 1 child, empty-nester for 18 months). Thus, spouses reported increased attention to household activities.

DISCUSSION

This study examined changes to marital relationships during the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage. We asked spouses who had recently entered the empty-nest phase of marriage to describe changes to their relationship (*RQ1*), sources of relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and sources of partner interference (*RQ3*). The responses point to both relational improvements and relational hardships during this transition. Our results suggest important implications for enhancing empty-nest relationships and extending the relational turbulence model.

Implications for Empty-Nest Couples

Many of the responses mirrored traditional expectations that the empty-nest phase of marriage is a time of renewed passion and intimacy in the relationship (Harkins, 1978). When asked to reflect on changes during the empty-nest transition, many individuals highlighted positive experiences, including increased privacy, enhanced intimacy, and excitement over new beginnings. In fact, all of the themes that emerged from this question pointed to primarily positive experiences in the aftermath of launching children. Moreover, in response to the question about partner interference, several couples emphasized that their partner actually helped, rather than hindered, their ability to achieve personal and professional goals. Thus, we were heartened to see that many empty-nest couples experienced this transition as a positive event in their marriage. Notably, couples self-selected to participate in the study, so our research design was unlikely to attract couples who

were experiencing a great deal of relational turmoil. Consequently, the positive aspects of the empty-nest transition might be overstated in our data.

Although we may have been likely to recruit couples who were generally satisfied with their marriage, many respondents still indicated that the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage is ripe for relational turbulence. In particular, the data highlighted four ways in which this transition contributed to relational uncertainty and three ways in which it resulted in partner interference. Participants reported uncertainty over their new relational roles, dependency on their partner, their ability to restore intimacy, and their own mortality. Interference from partners was evident in increased household chores, joint activities, and feelings of guilt. Thus, the new roles and routines that accompany this life transition may contribute to unexpected upheaval in people's relationships. These findings reflect the fact that the empty-nest experience and the empty-nest syndrome may both be present during this transition, contributing to both positive and negative reactions to a child leaving the home.

Our results have implications for couples who are preparing for the empty-nest phase of marriage. Many couples enthusiastically await this life transition because they anticipate increased opportunities for connection and intimacy with their spouse, and they will be satisfied to learn that having an empty-nest does provide for more closeness between spouses, more time for shared activities, more opportunities to communicate, and more collaboration on personal goals. On the other hand, some couples might not anticipate the challenges that will arise during this transition. Research on the empty-nest syndrome highlights experiences of grief, sadness, or depression during the empty-nest phase of marriage (Kahana & Kahana, 1982).

Our study highlights issues of relational uncertainty and partner interference as two relationship experiences that might add to the strife experienced by empty-nesters. Individuals who are approaching the empty-nest transition can look forward to some positive changes in their marriage, but they should be prepared to encounter some hardships. Fortunately, relational uncertainty and interference from partners should subside as couples establish their new roles and learn how to coordinate their new routines.

A particularly salient issue for couples navigating the empty-nest transition is managing feelings of guilt. Whereas prior research has indicated that some empty-nest parents may experience guilt for enjoying the freedom that comes with launching children from the home (Raup & Myers, 1989), our results also point to guilt stemming from the marital relationship. In particular, some spouses reported feeling guilty for pursuing individual goals and interests that excluded their partner, such as working more, spending time with friends, or pursuing a new hobby. In other words, many spouses felt that they *should* be spending more time with their spouse now that the children had departed and felt guilty for not desiring the amount of closeness they perceived as normative during this stage. These results point to two important implications for managing the empty-nest relationship.

First, our findings suggest that interference from a partner may stem from perceptions of one's own behavior rather than actual barriers to personal goals and routines. In others words, an individual's guilt over wanting to pursue individual activities may be perceived as interference even if his or her spouse has done nothing to prevent them from enacting personal routines or achieving individual goals. Second, our results suggest that empty-nesters should be encouraged to view their individual interests and activities as something that enhances their marital relationship rather than detracts from it. From a dialectical perspective, pursuing individual interests can provide

partners with some much needed autonomy that can, in turn, enhance feelings of closeness when partners engage in joint activities that are important to their relationship.

Implications for Extending the Relational Turbulence Model

These findings also have important implications for extending the relational turbulence model. The majority of research using the model has tended to focus on the dark side of relational transitions. For example, studies have examined relational outcomes such as jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a), conflict (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), negative emotion (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010), and hurt (Theiss et al., 2009). In addition, the model has traditionally been applied to relational conditions defined by hardship and strife, such as diagnoses of breast cancer (Weber & Solomon, 2008), infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008), and depression (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010).

Notably, the relational turbulence model does not suggest that relational turbulence is manifest in *negative* relationship experiences; rather, the model defines turbulence as *polarized* reactions to interpersonal events. In other words, partners who are grappling with relational uncertainty and partner interference are just as likely to have extreme positive reactions to constructive relational events as they are to have extreme negative reactions to destructive events. For example, just as a husband may be more hurt by his wife's criticism during a period of turbulence than during more tranquil times in the relationship, he might also be more encouraged by his wife's compliment during this tumultuous transition than during more stable periods of relationship involvement. Thus, the results of this study highlight the importance of considering polarized relationship behaviors in the context of the relational turbulence model, rather than simply focusing on negative relationship events.

This study also adds to the growing body of research that takes an inductive approach to examining sources of relational uncertainty and partner interference during relationship transitions. Scholars have examined messages in online support groups to identify themes of relational uncertainty and partner interference for breast cancer patients (Weber & Solomon, 2008) and couples struggling with infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Another study of military couples' content analyzed individuals' reports of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and partner interference during reintegration (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Our study adds to this literature by asking partners to describe how the empty-nest transition contributes to changes in the relationship, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners. These studies are important for extending the relational turbulence model because they give voice to the individuals who are navigating these relational transitions, rather than deductively imposing the constraints of an existing theoretical model onto these unique life experiences.

Strengths and Limitations

Our study benefits from a number of strengths. As a starting point, our research questions were theoretically driven and guided by the relational turbulence model, which provides a framework for organizing existing research on the empty-nest transition. We also collected data from both husbands and wives, which enabled us to examine the perceptions on both sides of the marital relationship during this transition. Finally, our inductive approach to data analysis enabled us to

identify themes of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and partner interference that were guided by the individuals who were living through this life transition.

Despite these strengths, there were also some weaknesses in this study. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits our ability to speak to the variety of relationship changes that might unfold as spouses navigate this relationship transition. We limited eligibility for this study to couples who had entered the empty-nest phase of marriage within the past 18 months, because we expected that turmoil would peak at the onset of changing relationship conditions and subside as couples acclimated to their new situation, but it may be possible that turmoil does not manifest until the exciting "honeymoon" period of this transition expires. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to explore the trajectory of the empty-nest relationship over time. Second, our recruitment strategy likely attracted couples who were generally satisfied in their relationship; thus, the experiences of partners who are really struggling with this transition are probably not represented in the data.

Future investigations might consider drawing from populations who are receiving counseling or therapy during this transition to highlight some of the more negative experiences of empty-nest couples and counterbalance the largely positive representation that was offered in our data. Finally, although we collected data from both spouses in a relationship about their experienced during the empty-nest phase of marriage, our analyses stop short of documenting the interdependence that exists between partners. Future research should more fully explore the ways in which spouses have interconnected perceptions of their relationship.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study identified sources of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners during the empty-nest transition of marriage. Spouses identified many positive aspects of this transition, which is encouraging for spouses who are approaching this stage of life. On the other hand, couples also referenced a number of challenging experiences that emerge during the empty-nest transition. We interpret these hardships through the lens of the relational turbulence model, which identifies relational uncertainty and interference from partners as two characteristics that are heightened during relationship transitions and make people more reactive to their interpersonal circumstances. We see utility in juxtaposing the theoretical framework offered by the relational turbulence model with the largely empirical representations of empty-nest experiences. Theorizing about the sources of relational turbulence during the empty-nest transition can help couples to anticipate the joys and the hardships that are likely to emerge during this stage of life. Future research should employ the relational turbulence model to investigate how the empty-nest transition unfolds over time and the interdependence that exists between spouses' experiences during this life-altering event.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Mara Agrait, Caitlin Flynn, Kara Jordhoy, Jenna Radigan, Katarzyna Sudol, and Briana Suffy for their assistance with coding.

REFERENCES

Anderson, S. A., Russell, C. S., & Schumm, W. R. (1983). Perceived marital quality and family life-cycle categories: A further analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *45*, 127–139.

Berger, C. R., & Bradac, J. J. (1982). *Language and social knowledge: Uncertainty in interpersonal relationships*. London: Edward Arnold.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, *1*, 99–112.

Berscheid, E. (1983). Emotion. In H. H. Kelley, E. Berscheid, A. Christensen, J. Harvey, T. L. Huston, G. Levinger, et al. (Eds.), *Close relationships* (pp. 110–168). San Francisco, CA: Freeman.

Black, S. M., & Hill, C. E. (1984). The psychological well-being of women in their middle years. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *8*, 282–292.

Borland, D. C. (1982). A cohort analysis approach to the empty-nest syndrome among three ethnic groups of women: A theoretical position. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *44*, 117–129.

Brubaker, T. H. (1985). Later life families. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Crowley, B. J., Hayslip, B. J., & Hobdy, J. (2003). Psychological hardiness and adjustment to life events in adulthood. *Journal of Adult Development*, *10*, 237–248.

Dennerstein, L., Dudley, E., & Guthrie, J. (2002). Empty nest or revolving door: A prospective study of women's quality of life in midlife during the phase of children leaving and re-entering the home. *Psychological Medicine*, *32*, 545–550.

Downs, K. (2003). Family commitment, role perceptions, social support, and mutual children in remarriage: A test of uncertainty reduction theory. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *40*, 35–53.

George, K. L., & Gold, D. T. (1989). Job loss in middle age. In R. A. Kalish (Ed.), *Midlife loss: Coping strategies*. Newburg Park, CA: Sage.

Harkins, E. B. (1978). Effects of empty nest transition on self-report of psychological and physical well-being. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *40*, 549–556.

Johnson, M. P. (1991). Commitment to personal relationships. In W. H. Jones & D. W. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships* (vol. 3, pp. 117–143). London: Jessica Kingsley.

Kahana, B., & Kahana, E. (1982). Clinical issues of middle age and life. In F. M. Berardo (Ed.), *The annals of the American academy of political and social science: Middle and late life transitions* (pp. 140–161). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Knobloch, L. K. (2007). Perceptions of turmoil within courtship: Associations with intimacy, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *24*, 363–384.

Knobloch, L. K. (2008a). The content of relational uncertainty within marriage. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *25*, 467–496.

Knobloch, L. K. (2008b). Extending the Emotions-in-Relationships Model to conversations. *Communication Research*, *35*, 822–848.

Knobloch, L. K., & Knobloch-Fedders, L. M. (2010). The role of relational uncertainty in depressive symptoms and relationship quality: An actor-partner interdependence model. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *27*, 137–159.

Knobloch, L. K., Miller, L. E., & Carpenter, K. E. (2007). Using the relational turbulence model to understand negative emotion within courtship. *Personal Relationships*, *14*, 91–112.

Knobloch, L. K., & Solomon, D. H. (1999). Measuring the sources and content of relational uncertainty. *Communication Studies*, *50*, 261–278.

Knobloch, L. K., & Theiss, J. A. (2010). An actor-partner interdependence model of relational turbulence: Cognitions and emotions. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *27*, 595–619.

Knobloch, L. K., & Theiss, J. A. (2011). Depressive symptoms and mechanisms of relational turbulence as predictors of relationship satisfaction among returning service members. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *25*, 470–478.

Knobloch, L. K., & Theiss, J. A. (2012). Experiences of U.S. military couples during the post-deployment transition: Applying the relational turbulence model. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 29*, 423–450.

Kreider, R. M. (2005). Number, timing, and duration of marriages and divorces: 2001. *Current Population Reports*, 70–97 Washington, DC: US Census Bureau.

Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Liu, L. J., Sun, X., Zhang, C. L., & Guo, Q. (2007). Health-care utilization among empty-nesters in the rural area of mountainous county in China. *Public Health Reports*, 122(3), 407–413.

Long, V. M., & Martin, P. (2000). Personality, relationship closeness, and loneliness of the oldest old adults and their children. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *55*(5), 311–319.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pillay, A. L. (1988). Midlife depression and the "empty-nest" syndrome in Indian women. *Psychological Reports*, 63(2), 591–594.

Radina, M. E., Hennon, C. B., & Gibbons, H. M. (2008). Divorce and mid- and later life families: A phenomenological analysis with implications for family life educators. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *49*, 142–170.

Raup, J. L., & Myers, J. E. (1989). The empty-nest syndrome: Myth or reality? *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *60*, 180–183.

Sakraida, T. J. (2005). Divorce transition differences of midlife women. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, *26*, 225–249.

Schmidt, P. J., Murphy, J. H., Haq, N., Rubinow, D. R., & Danaceau, M. A. (2004). Stressful life events, personal losses, and perimenopause-related depression. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, *7* (1), 19–26.

Solomon, D. H., & Knobloch, L. K. (2001). Relationships uncertainty, partner interference, and intimacy within dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *18*, 804–820.

Solomon, D. H., & Knobloch, L. K. (2004). A model of relational turbulence: The role of intimacy, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners in appraisals of irritations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *21*, 795–816.

Solomon, D. H. & Theiss, J. A. (2008). A longitudinal test of the relational turbulence model of romantic relationship development. *Personal Relationships*, *15*, 339–357.

Solomon, D. H., Weber, K. M., & Steuber, K. R. (2010). Turbulence in relational transitions. In S. W. Smith & S. R. Wilson (Eds.), *New directions in interpersonal communication research* (pp. 115–134). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steuber, K. R., & Solomon, D. H. (2008). Relational uncertainty, partner interference, and infertility: A qualitative study of discourse within online forums. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *25*, 831–855.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Theiss, J. A., Estlein, R., & Weber, K. M. (in press). A longitudinal assessment of relationship characteristics that predict new parents' relationship satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*.

Theiss, J. A., & Knobloch, L. K. (2009). An actor-partner interdependence model of the experience and expression of irritations in romantic relationships. *Communication Research*, *36*, 510–536.

Theiss, J. A., & Nagy, M. E. (2010). Actor-partner effects in the associations of between relationship characteristics and reactions to sexual intimacy in marriage. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *27*, 1089–1109.

Theiss, J. A., & Solomon, D. H. (2006a). Coupling longitudinal data and hierarchical linear modeling to examine the antecedents and consequences of jealousy experiences in romantic relationships: A test of the relational turbulence model. *Human Communication Research*, *32*, 469–503.

Theiss, J. A., & Solomon, D. H. (2006b). A relational turbulence model of communication about irritations in romantic relationships. *Communication Research*, *33*, 391–418.

Umberson, D., Williams, K., Powers, D. A., Chen, M. D., & Campbell, A. M. (2005). As good as it gets? A life course perspective on marital quality. *Social Forces*, *84*, 487–505.

Unger, J. R., McAvay, B. M., Berman, L., & Seeman, T. (1999). Variation in the impact of social network characteristics on physical functioning in elderly persons. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, 54B*, S245–S251.

Weber, K. M., & Solomon, D. H. (2008). Locating relationship and communication issues among stressors associated with breast cancer. *Health Communication*, *23*, 548–559.

White, L., & Edwards, J. N. (1990). Emptying the nest and parental well-being: An analysis of national panel data. *American Sociological Review*, *55*, 235–242.