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Jennifer A. Theiss^a & Mary E. Nagy^b

^a Department of Communication, Rutgers University

^b Department of Communication Studies, Bloomsburg University

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A Relational Turbulence Model of Partner Responsiveness and Relationship Talk Across Cultures

Jennifer A. Theiss & Mary E. Nagy

This study applies the relational turbulence model to identify characteristics of romantic relationships that predict perceptions of relationship talk across cultures. Relational uncertainty and interference from partners were examined as predictors of perceived partner responsiveness and relationship talk in South Korean and American romantic relationships. We surveyed 294 individuals from South Korea (N = 138) and the United States (N = 156) about their romantic relationship. The results of a structural equation model (SEM) indicated that (a) relational uncertainty was negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness and enacted relationship talk, and positively associated with the threat of relationship talk; (b) interference from partners was positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk and enacted relationship talk; and (c) perceived partner responsiveness was negatively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk and positively associated with the enactment of relationship talk. Cultural differences emerged in paths linking relational uncertainty with the perceived threat of relationship talk and partner interference with enacted relationship talk. The results are discussed in terms of implications for extending the relational turbulence model and for understanding the dynamics of romantic relationships across cultures.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural; Interference; Relational Turbulence Model; Relational Uncertainty; Relationship Talk; Responsiveness

The relational turbulence model identifies characteristics of romantic relationships that generate upheaval during times of transition, especially the transition from

Jennifer A. Theiss (PhD, University of Wisconsin–Madison) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Rutgers University. Mary E. Nagy (PhD, Rutgers University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University. The authors wish to thank Scott Choi for his assistance on this project. Correspondence to: Jennifer A. Theiss, Department of Communication, Rutgers University, 4 Huntington St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA. E-mail: jtheiss@rutgers.edu

casual to serious involvement during courtship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Although recent studies have moved the model forward by applying it to new outcomes and contexts (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a; Steuber & Solomon, 2008; Theiss, 2011; Theiss & Nagy, 2010; Weber & Solomon, 2008), at least two issues remain unexplored. First, research has tended to focus on the emotional and cognitive markers of relational turbulence, yet the communicative manifestations of turbulence have received relatively less focus (but see Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b; Theiss, 2011). Second, the model has only been examined in romantic relationships in the United States; thus, the tenets of the model have not been tested across cultures. This study aims to address these shortcomings. The first goal of this study is to examine markers of relational turbulence that are specifically related to communication processes between partners. We nominate partner responsiveness, the threat of relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk as markers of turbulence. The second goal of this study is to examine potential cross-cultural differences in the model in the United States and South Korea.

Markers of Relational Turbulence

The relational turbulence model identifies relationship characteristics that correspond with intensified reactions to interpersonal events. In the model, *relational turbulence* is defined as heightened emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactivity to relationship circumstances. In this study, we focus on cognitive and behavioral markers of turbulence that are implicated in the interpersonal communication behaviors of relationship partners: perceived partner responsiveness, perceived threat of relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk.

Perceived partner responsiveness refers to the appraisals people make about whether or not a relationship partner recognizes and supports their core identity and personal goals (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis, 2007; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Individuals who demonstrate a willingness and ability to respond to a mate's communication, needs, wishes, or actions receive appraisals of high partner responsiveness (Miller & Berg, 1984). Partner responsiveness is often reflected in conversational behaviors, such as listening, empathizing, and providing social support (Reis, 2007; Reis et al., 2004). Moreover, demonstrations of understanding, validation and caring for a relationship partner's core values and desires is associated with increased intimacy and closeness (Reis & Shaver, 1988). As an appraisal of a partner's attentiveness, perceived partner responsiveness is likely sensitive to various factors affecting relational quality.

Another variable that may reflect relational turbulence is the *perceived threat of relationship talk*, which refers to appraisals of how risky it would be to engage in explicit talk about the nature or status of a relationship (e.g., Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Relationship talk can be threatening when people believe it has the potential to damage their self-image or hurt the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). The extent to which people feel comfortable or vulnerable discussing the state of their relationship is influenced by various qualities and characteristics

of the relationship itself, such as intimacy and uncertainty (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). Thus, we nominate the perceived threat of relationship talk as another marker of relational turbulence.

We also consider enacted relationship talk as an indicator of tumult. *Relationship talk* consists of messages that explicitly reference the nature, state, or future of a relationship (Acitelli, 1988, 2008; Knobloch, Solomon, & Theiss, 2006). Relationship talk demonstrates an awareness of the relationship, a willingness to discuss dyadic issues, and a desire to maintain an acceptable level of relational functioning (Acitelli, 2001). Partners who engage in relationship talk are better equipped to define their relationship status (Baxter, 1987), more capable of overcoming times of trouble (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and they report more positive emotions (Acitelli, 1988). Many studies have documented a positive association between relationship talk and relational satisfaction (e.g., Acitelli, 1988, 1992; Acitelli & Badr, 2005; Badr & Acitelli, 2005), but research also suggests that the nature and quality of a romantic relationship may influence whether people approach or avoid explicit conversations with a partner about their relationship (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). Accordingly, we highlight enacted relationship talk as a variable that may reflect underlying turbulence.

Although these outcomes have been predominantly tested in relationships within the United States, a few studies of cross-cultural communication imply that Americans and Koreans may differ on these constructs. With regard to partner responsiveness, studies show differences between Americans and Asians in terms of what messages are perceived as supportive and comforting (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003). With regard to relationship talk, the culture-based conversational constraints theory suggests that cultures differ in terms of what constitutes appropriate and effective communication (M. Kim, 2005). Conversations are constrained by desires for clarity, minimizing imposition, not hurting the other's feelings, avoiding negative evaluations from others, and effectiveness. Each of these constraints has implications for people's ability and desire to carry out relationship talk. Moreover, studies have shown that Americans are more motivated by the desire for clarity and Koreans are more motivated by desires to avoid hurt feelings and negative evaluations from others (M. Kim, 1994). The fact that Koreans have more prosocial goals in their communication is likely related to the collectivist nature of their cultural ideology and may point to differences in the way they handle the potential face threats inherent in relational communication.

Mechanisms that Predict Relational Turbulence

The relational turbulence model argues that people are more reactive to relationship circumstances when relational uncertainty and interference from partners are heightened. Most tests of the relational turbulence model have focused on the transition from casual dating to serious involvement as a time in romantic relationships that gives rise to increased relational uncertainty and interference from partners. Accordingly, we focused on dating relationships in the United States and South Korea to test the model's assertions in similar types of relationships across cultures. To date, the

relational turbulence model has only been tested in romantic relationships within the United States, but researchers have documented associations between the mechanisms in the model and a variety of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral markers of turbulence in romantic relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2010, 2011b; Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsaman-Conrad, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b). In this study, we examine relational uncertainty and interference from partners as predictors of partner responsiveness, the perceived threat of relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk.

Relational Uncertainty as a Predictor of Turbulence

The relational turbulence model identifies relational uncertainty as one mechanism in romantic relationships that contributes to more polarized reactions to interpersonal events. *Relational uncertainty* refers to the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of their involvement within interpersonal relationships and it stems from three interrelated 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 the relationship. *Partner uncertainty* refers to the doubts people experience about a partner's commitment to the relationship. *Relationship uncertainty* is the uncertainty an individual experiences as he or she evaluates the status of the relationship more generally. Relationship uncertainty exists at a broader level of abstraction and encompasses elements of both self and partner uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Relational uncertainty is particularly salient in dating relationships as partners grapple with their expectations for involvement and their desire for a more committed relationship.

Tests of the relational turbulence model in American dating relationships reveal that relational uncertainty is associated with an array of cognitive and communicative markers of turbulence. In terms of cognitive reactivity, relational uncertainty is associated with perceptions of irritations as severe and relationally threatening (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). In addition, people who are experiencing increased relational uncertainty report greater suspicion of third party rivals (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a) and they perceive hurtful messages as more severe, intentional, and relationally threatening (Theiss et al., 2009). Moreover, relational uncertainty is positively associated with the perceived risk of relational communication (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). Taken together, this evidence suggests that individuals struggling with relational uncertainty are likely to have more extreme appraisals of their partner's behavior and to dread the prospect of intimate communication. Given that relational uncertainty promotes doubts about a partner's relational involvement and appropriate behaviors for the relationship, individuals should perceive their partner as unresponsive and appraise relationship talk as threatening when relational uncertainty is heightened. Thus, we advance the following hypotheses:

- H1a: Relational uncertainty is negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness in romantic relationships.

H1b: Relational uncertainty is positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk.

Relational uncertainty is also associated with various forms of behavioral reactivity, which is often reflected in extreme communication behaviors. Studies of dating relationships in the U.S. show that people who are relationally uncertain tend to engage in more indirect communication about a variety of relationship events, like irritations (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), hurt (Theiss et al., 2009), and jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). In addition, research suggests that date requests are less explicit under conditions of relational uncertainty (Knobloch, 2006). Particularly germane to the current investigation, relational uncertainty has also been linked with decreased relationship talk (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b). Because heightened relational uncertainty makes it difficult for people to develop an appropriate plan for interaction and to anticipate the outcomes of conversation (Berger, 1997; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991; Sunnafrank, 1990), romantic partners are unlikely to participate in relationship talk under these conditions. Accordingly, we advance the following hypothesis:

H2: Relational uncertainty is negatively associated with enacted relationship talk.

Partner Interference as a Predictor of Turbulence

The relational turbulence model also highlights interference from partners as a second mechanism in close relationships that may contribute to heightened reactivity to interpersonal events (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). *Interference from partners* refers to the degree to which an individual perceives a partner as undermining personal actions. In developing relationships, partner interference manifests in situations when one person's routine is interrupted by efforts to coordinate actions with a relational partner (Berscheid, 1983). As relationship partners begin to establish interdependence, opportunities emerge for individuals to have increased influence on the goals and routines of their partner. A partner's influence can be beneficial to the extent that it *facilitates* personal goals (e.g., "Thank you for doing the laundry, I was completely out of clean socks."). In contrast, a partner's influence can be detrimental to the extent that it *interferes* with personal goals (e.g., "You shrunk my favorite sweater! Now I'll have nothing to wear to the party this weekend."). In dating relationships, interference from partners is heightened because partners are starting to have more influence in each other's lives, but they have yet to work out how to coordinate their actions in a way that facilitates, rather than hinders, one another's goals.

Previous tests of the relational turbulence model in American dating relationships have shown that interference from partners predicts cognitive and behavioral reactivity to relationship circumstances. With regard to cognitive reactivity, individuals experiencing partner interference view irritations as more severe (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), report more hindrance from social network members (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006), and appraise their partner's behavior as more hurtful (Theiss et al., 2009). Evidence also suggests partner

interference corresponds with increased suspicion and jealousy over third party rivals (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b) and heightened appraisals of turmoil (Knobloch, 2007). Interference from partners inherently reflects a lack of awareness or consideration of a partner's goals, so we expect that it is negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness. In addition, partner interference implies that relationship partners are incapable of coordinating their ideas, goals, and actions, which should undermine people's confidence in their ability to enact effective relationship talk. Consistent with this logic, we advance the following hypotheses:

- H3a: Interference from partners is negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness.
- H3b: Interference from partners is positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk.

In general, less is known about the associations between partner interference and behavioral reactivity, but existing research points to polarized communication behaviors under these conditions. On one hand, interference from partners is associated with more direct communication about irritations (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b) and jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a) among dating partners in the U.S. On the other hand, one study of American military couples revealed that people who are frustrated by partner interference enact fewer assurances and conflict management behaviors (Theiss & Knobloch, in press). Although the evidence is conflicting, we expect that interference from a partner may be a catalyst to discuss relational problems. In other words, partner interference may provide an opportunity for individuals to confirm their goals with a relationship partner as they work to establish more coordinated patterns of action. Thus, relationship talk may be increasingly threatening under conditions of partner interference, but also increasingly necessary for improving relational quality. The following hypothesis summarizes this logic:

- H4: Interference from partners is positively associated with enacted relationship talk.

Interrelated Markers of Turbulence

A second set of hypotheses in this study examines the associations between cognitive and communicative markers of turbulence. First, we consider the association between perceived partner responsiveness and the perceived threat of relationship talk. Partner responsiveness is demonstrated through attentive communicative behaviors, such as listening, empathy, and support (e.g., Reis, 2007), and responsive partners tend to cultivate feelings of intimacy and closeness in the relationship (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 1998). Feeling intimately connected, supported, understood, and cared for by a relationship partner creates a communication environment where partners should feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings. Thus, perceived partner responsiveness should predict a decreased threat of relationship talk. Formally stated:

- H5: Perceived partner responsiveness is negatively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk.

People's appraisals of the perceived threat of relationship talk should also predict whether or not they engage in relationship talk. Communicating directly with a romantic partner about the state of the relationship can be risky because it may reveal incompatibility, generate conflict, lead to embarrassment, or damage the partnership (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Studies also suggest that people have more negative perceptions of their relationship talk when the relationship is in flux (Knobloch et al., 2006). When people fear the potential outcomes of relationship talk and perceive that they are unskilled at relational communication, they are less likely to approach a relationship partner to discuss the nature or status of their partnership. Thus, we expect a negative association between the perceived threat of relationship talk and enacted relationship talk. Formally stated:

H6: The perceived threat of relationship talk is negatively associated with enacted relationship talk.

The predicted associations are summarized in Figure 1. Recall that relational uncertainty is predicted to be negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness (H1a), positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H1b), and negatively associated with enacted relationship talk (H2). The model also includes paths linking the three sources of relational uncertainty, because they are known to be highly correlated (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). We also predicted that interference from partners is negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness (H3a), and positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H3b) and enacted relationship talk (H4). Finally, we predicted that perceived partner responsiveness is negatively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H5), which, in turn, is negatively associated with enacted relationship talk (H6).

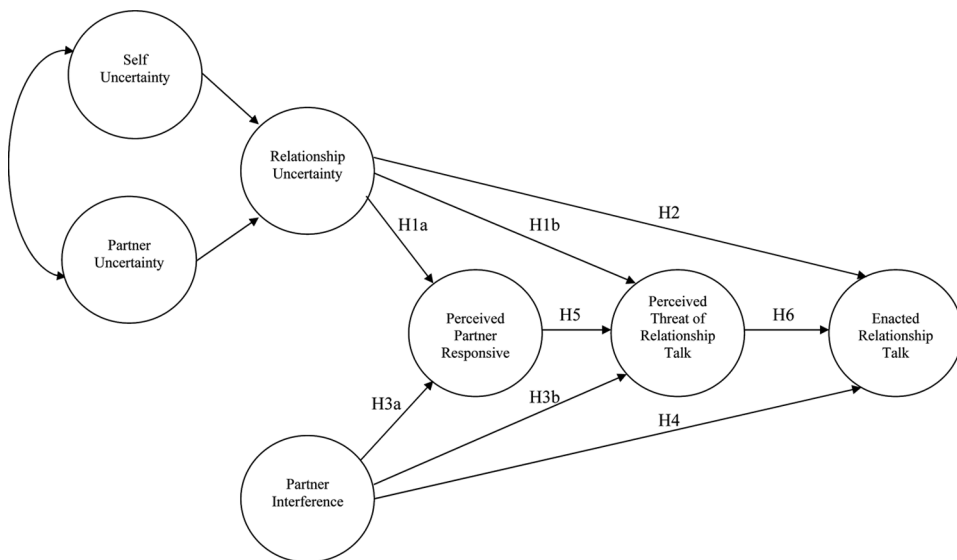


Figure 1 Predicted Model Including All Hypothesized Associations.

Examining Similarities and Differences Across Cultures

The final goal of this study is to search for cultural differences in the relational turbulence model. Hofstede identified five dimensions on which cultures vary (see Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & McCrae, 2004): (a) *power distance* refers to the extent to which less powerful individuals accept and expect power-based inequality; (b) *uncertainty avoidance* refers to a culture's tolerance for ambiguity; (c) *individualism/collectivism* refers to the extent to which individuals are integrated into social groups; (d) *masculinity/femininity* refers to the distribution of emotional roles between the sexes, varying from assertive competition on one end to caring modesty on the other; and (e) *long-term/short-term orientation* reflects thrift and perseverance for the long-term orientation and respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's face for the short-term orientation. Cultural comparisons suggest that South Korea tends to be high in power distance, long-term orientation, and uncertainty avoidance, and low in individualism and masculinity; on the other hand, the United States tends to be relatively low in power distance, long-term orientation, and uncertainty avoidance, and high in masculinity and individualism (Hofstede, 2001).

The values underlying these cultural dimensions are implicated in the relationship characteristics and communication behaviors examined in this study. One consideration is whether the predictors in the relational turbulence model (i.e., relational uncertainty and interference from partners) are shaped by the underlying dimensions of culture. The uncertainty avoidance dimension of culture suggests that cultures may vary with regard to their tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, such that Koreans are significantly less tolerant of ambiguity than Americans (e.g., Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Hofstede, 2001). A study of the predictors of marital satisfaction among remarried Korean couples indicated ambiguity about their role in the relationship and ambiguity about family boundaries were associated with less satisfaction with their relationship (H. Kim, 2010). In addition, the individualist versus collectivist nature of these societies has implications for the ways individuals perceive interference from partners. Whereas collectivist cultures value the achievement of group goals and the maintenance of group harmony, individualist cultures value the achievement of personal goals and the assertion of a differentiated sense of self (Triandis, 1994). Studies suggest that individualists are more distressed than collectivists by events that impede individual goals, needs, desires, or abilities (Mesquita, 2001); thus, partner interference may be more frustrating for Americans than it is for Koreans.

Evidence also suggests that the outcomes in this study may be vulnerable to cultural differences. With regard to responsiveness, studies suggest that Americans perceive messages high in person-centeredness and solace as significantly more comforting and messages low in person-centeredness and solace as significantly less comforting than Chinese individuals do (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003). These findings suggest that Americans may be more attuned to a partner's responsiveness than South Koreans. On the other hand, whereas collectivist cultures tend to have an

“other-face” orientation toward conflict that promotes responsive behaviors such as calmness, apology, private discussion, and giving in, individualist cultures tend to have a “self-face” or “mutual-face” orientation toward conflict that promotes defensiveness and aggression (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008); thus, Koreans may perceive their partners as more responsive than do Americans.

Cultural differences are also expected for perceived and enacted relationship talk. Holtgraves and Yang (1992) found that Koreans tend to view power and relational distance as more influential to their communication than Americans, which suggests that Koreans may find relationship talk more threatening than Americans. On the other hand, Americans are more likely to use aggression and antisocial face maintenance strategies to deal with discomfort or embarrassment than other Asian cultures (Cocroft & Ting-Toomey, 1994; Cupach & Imahori, 1993), which may contribute to perceptions that relationship talk is risky or threatening. In addition, the self-focus of individualist cultures promotes more dominating conflict styles, whereas the other-focus of collectivist cultures promotes more integrating and avoiding conflict styles (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003); thus, relationship talk might be threatening for Americans who might expect more dominating communication behaviors from a romantic partner. With regard to enacted relationship talk, Koreans are less likely than Americans to view communication as an integral part of relational maintenance and are unlikely to engage in relational maintenance strategies that involve communication with a partner (Yum & Canary, 2003). Collectivist cultures are more likely than individualist cultures to respond to relational dilemmas with accommodating communication behaviors (Yum, 2004) or silence (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Thus, relationship talk may be enacted differently in Korean and American cultures.

These studies suggest that relationship characteristics and communication behaviors may differ across cultures; however, studies that investigate cross-cultural differences in romantic relationships are few in number. The relational turbulence model has only been tested in American samples; thus, one goal of this study is to investigate whether or not the predictions in the model would be confirmed in a cross-cultural study. A second goal of this study is to probe potential differences in the ways Americans and South Koreans talk about their relationships. Thus, we advance the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent is the predicted model similar or different across cultures?

Method

College students from the United States and South Korea completed questionnaires about their romantic relationship. The United States sample was gathered by recruiting individuals from communication classes at a large, northeastern university and the South Korean sample was gathered by approaching individuals at the student center at a large, private university in Seoul, South Korea. We recruited a college-aged sample because these individuals are likely to be in the stage of relationship development that is frequently marked by relational turbulence (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004;

Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Individuals in both cultures were eligible to participate if they had a romantic interest in another person with whom they had frequent interaction. American students received a small amount of extra credit and Korean students were compensated with free lunch in exchange for their participation. The questionnaire assessed demographic characteristics as well as the individual's perceptions of his or her romantic relationship.

Sample

The sample consisted of 156 Americans (52 male, 104 female) and 138 South Koreans (59 male, 78 female, one missing). The mean age of the US sample was 20 (range 18–30) and the mean age of the Korean sample was 22 (range 18–29). The ethnicities represented in the United States sample were Caucasian (60.9%), Asian (16%), African American (12.8%), and Hispanic (9%). The South Korean sample was predominantly Asian (98.6%; the remaining 1.4% self-reported other). Respondents were also asked about their relationship status. In the United States sample, 4.5% reported that they were friends with a romantic interest, 34% reported that they were casually dating, 58.3% described their relationship as serious dating partners, 2.6% were engaged to be married, and 0.6% were married. The South Korean sample reported 31.4% friends with romantic interest, 17.5% casual dating, 50.4% serious dating partners, and 0.7% engaged to be married.¹

Procedures

United States sample

Students who were interested in participating were instructed to come to the Communication Interaction Lab at a designated time to complete the questionnaire. After obtaining informed consent, students were asked to complete a questionnaire about their relationship with a romantic partner. The questionnaire gathered demographic data and data on relational uncertainty, partner interference, perceived partner responsiveness, perceived threat of relationship talk, and amount of relationship talk.

South Korean sample

The researcher obtained informed consent and asked the participant to complete the same questionnaire that was used in the United States. All study elements, including the consent form and the questionnaire, were translated into Korean by a graduate research assistant of South Korean descent. The Korean versions of the study materials were then translated back into English by a different graduate research assistant of South Korean descent. The researchers then compared the original English version of the survey to the back-translated version to check for accuracy.

Measures

Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted on all multi-item scales to ensure that they were unidimensional and externally valid (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982). The CFAs

were conducted on the combined sample of Americans and South Koreans so that the resulting variables would have the same factor structure for both groups.² The criteria for a good fitting model were $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, CFI $> .90$, and RMSEA $< .10$ (Kline, 1998). After confirming the unidimensionality of the scales, composite scores were constructed by averaging the responses to the individual items.

Relational uncertainty

We operationalized relational uncertainty using a brief version of Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) measure of self, partner, and relationship uncertainty. Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements that followed the stem, "How certain are you about . . . ?" Responses were recorded on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *completely or almost completely uncertain*, 6 = *almost or completely certain*), and we recoded all items so that higher values reflected greater uncertainty. Five items were averaged to form a reliable measure of *self uncertainty* ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.94$, American $\alpha = .86$, Korean $\alpha = .88$): (a) whether or not you want the relationship to last, (b) how much you like your partner, (c) how important the relationship is to you, (d) how much you are romantically interested in your partner, and (e) whether or not you are ready to commit to your partner. Four items formed the *partner uncertainty* scale ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.36$, American $\alpha = .94$, Korean $\alpha = .94$): (a) whether or not your partner is ready to commit to you, (b) whether or not your partner wants to be with you in the long run, (c) how important the relationship is to your partner, and (d) whether or not your partner wants the relationship to work out in the long run. Finally, four items comprised the *relationship uncertainty* measure ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.08$, American $\alpha = .75$, Korean $\alpha = .84$): (a) whether or not the relationship will work out in the long run, (b) whether or not the relationship is a romantic one, (c) whether or not your partner likes you as much as you like him/her, and (d) how you can or cannot behave around your partner.

Partner interference

To assess respondents' perceptions of partner interference, we used scales employed in previous tests of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Respondents reported their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) with a series of statements regarding their partner's interference in everyday activities. Four items comprised this scale ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.06$, American $\alpha = .84$, Korean $\alpha = .77$): (a) this person interferes with the achievement of everyday goals I set for myself, (b) this person interferes with my ability to use my time well, (c) this person interferes with how much time I devote to school work, and (d) this person interferes with the things I need to do each day.

Perceived partner responsiveness

We used Reis and Shaver's (1988) scale to measure perceived partner responsiveness. Each item was preceded by the stem, "My partner usually . . .", and respondents

reported the extent to which each statement was a true characterization of their partner's behavior on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true*, 9 = *completely true*). Four items comprised this scale ($M=6.85$, $SD=1.74$, American $\alpha=.88$, Korean $\alpha=.93$): (a) really listens to me, (b) values my abilities and opinions, (c) respects me, and (d) is responsive to my needs.

Perceived threat of relationship talk

We used Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune's (2004) scale to measure the perceived threat of relationship talk, which contained items reflecting threat to the self and to the relationship. Respondents reported their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) with a series of statements regarding the perceived outcomes of relationship talk for the self or the relationship. The scale began with the stem, "Having a conversation about the nature of this relationship would . . .". Five items comprised this scale ($M=2.64$, $SD=1.31$, American $\alpha=.89$, Korean $\alpha=.92$): (a) threaten the relationship, (b) be embarrassing for me, (c) have a negative effect on the relationship, (d) make me feel vulnerable, and (e) damage the relationship.

Enacted relationship talk

We used items developed by Knobloch and Theiss (2011b) to measure enacted relationship talk. Three unidimensional items completed the stem, "During the past week, we have actively avoided or actively discussed . . ." (1 = *actively avoided*, 6 = *actively discussed*): (a) our view of this relationship, (b) our feelings for each other, and (c) the future of the relationship ($M=2.64$, $SD=1.31$, American $\alpha=.85$, Korean $\alpha=.89$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

As a starting point, we conducted independent sample t-tests to compare means on all of our variables for Americans and South Koreans (see Table 1). The results indicated that Americans reported more self uncertainty (American $M=2.55$; Korean $M=2.19$), partner uncertainty (American $M=2.90$; Korean $M=2.45$), relationship uncertainty (American $M=2.89$; Korean $M=2.31$), and partner interference (American $M=3.19$; Korean $M=2.73$) than Koreans, and Koreans reported more perceived partner responsiveness (American $M=6.51$; Korean $M=7.15$) than Americans. We also conducted individual sample t-tests to compare means on all variables for males and females. Results indicated no sex differences.

Next, we assessed the bivariate correlations among all of the variables separately for Americans and South Koreans (see Table 1). The results of the American bivariate correlations (above the diagonal) revealed that the three sources of relational uncertainty were positively correlated and self uncertainty was positively associated with partner interference. The three sources of relational uncertainty were all negatively

Table 1 Bivariate Correlations and T-Tests for Americans and South Koreans

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	t-test
V1: Self Uncertainty		.41***	.59***	.21**	-.47***	.40***	-.41***	3.45***
V2: Partner Uncertainty	.55***		.72***	.04	-.39***	.50***	-.58***	2.86**
V3: Relationship Uncertainty	.62***	.83***		.14	-.50***	.61***	-.57***	4.79***
V4: Interference	-.19*	-.23**	-.20*		-.18*	.23**	.11	3.74***
V5: Partner Responsiveness	-.48***	-.60***	-.64***	.15		-.54***	.34***	-3.20**
V6: Perceived Threat	.11	.30***	.36***	.13	-.34***		-.44***	.40
V7: Relationship Talk	-.43***	-.53***	-.53***	.10	.55**	-.31***		-.05

Note. Correlations above the diagonal are for the American sample and correlations below the diagonal are for the South Korean sample. The final column of the table reports the independent sample t-tests for each variable with 295 degrees of freedom.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

associated with perceived partner responsiveness, positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk, and negatively associated with the amount of relationship talk. Interference from partners was negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness and positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk. Finally, perceived partner responsiveness and amount of relationship talk were positively correlated with each other and were both negatively correlated with the perceived threat of relationship talk. Results for the South Korean sample (below the diagonal) showed a similar pattern of associations among the mechanisms in the relational turbulence model. All three relational uncertainty variables were negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness and relationship talk, and partner uncertainty and relationship uncertainty were positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk. Finally, all of the outcome variables shared correlations that were similar to the American sample.

Tests of Hypotheses

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the effectiveness of our predicted model. Structural equation modeling allowed us to control for measurement error in the data, which was calculated as $(1-\alpha)(\sigma)$ (Bollen, 1989). We set the threshold for a good fitting model at $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, CFI $> .90$, RMSEA $< .10$ (Kline, 1998).

To test our hypotheses, we began by running the predicted model in the combined sample of Americans and South Koreans (see Figure 2). The results indicated that the predicted model fit the data ($\chi^2_{(10)} = 17.61$, $p = .06$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .05). Consistent with hypotheses, relational uncertainty was negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness (H1a), positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H1b), and negatively associated with enacted relationship talk

(H2). Interference from partners was positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H3b) and positively associated with enacted relationship talk (H4). Contrary to expectations, the association between partner interference and perceived partner responsiveness was nonsignificant (H3a). As expected, perceived partner responsiveness was negatively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H5), which in turn was negatively associated with relationship talk (H6).

Tests for Cultural Differences in the Model

To address our research question regarding cultural differences in the predicted model, we conducted a multiple groups analysis in SEM. The multiple groups analysis constrains the structural paths for the Korean and American models to be equal and compares the fit of the constrained model to the fit of a model in which all of the structural paths are freely estimated. If the constrained and unconstrained models are significantly different, individual paths in the model are unconstrained until the two models fit the data equally. We began by running separate structural equation models for Americans and South Koreans; then, we conducted the multiple groups analysis to compare the models for the two groups.

In the American sample, the predicted model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2_{(10)} = 18.22, p = .05; \chi^2/df = 1.82; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .07$), but some of the predicted paths were nonsignificant (see Figure 3). As predicted, relational uncertainty was negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness (H1a), positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H1b), and negatively associated with enacted relationship talk (H2). Interference from partners was positively

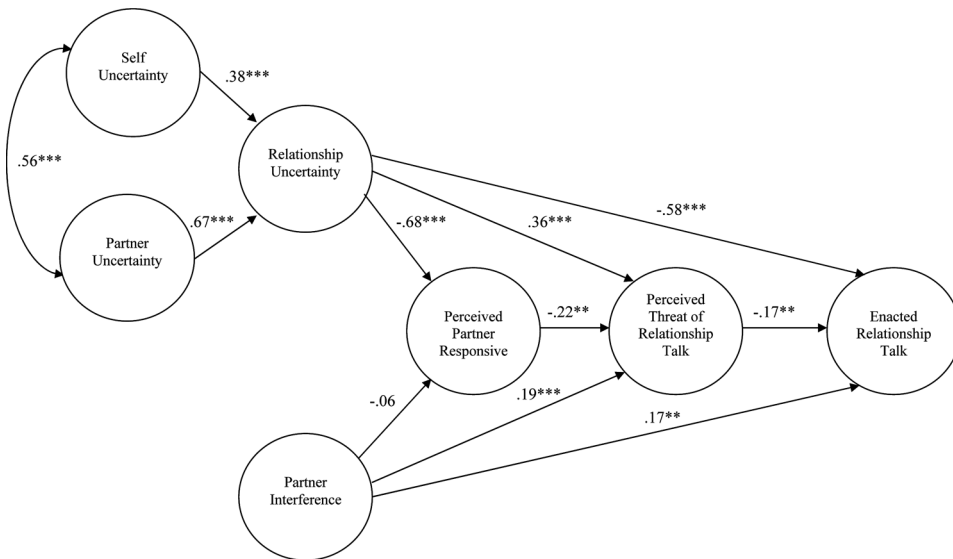


Figure 2 Fitted Model in the Combined Sample of Americans and Koreans. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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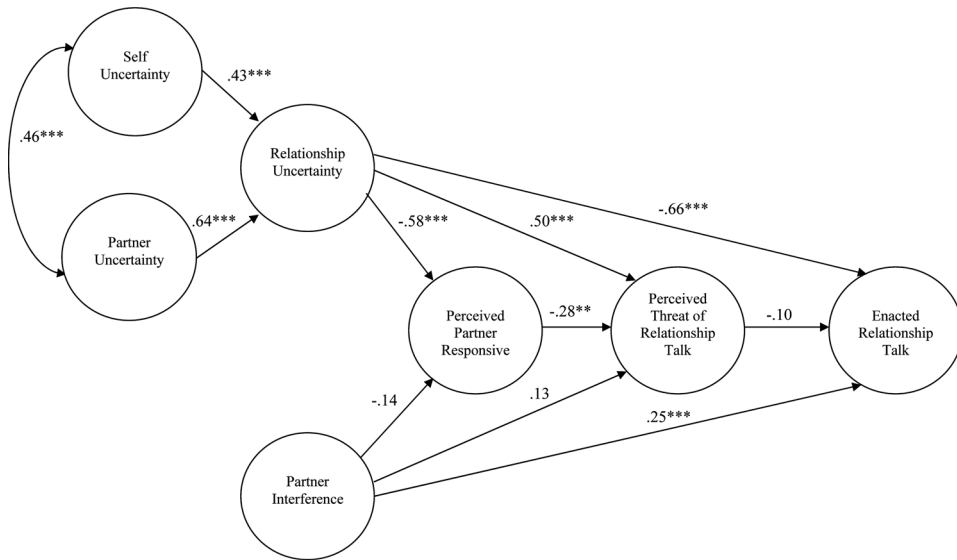


Figure 3 Fitted Model for American Sample. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

associated with enacted relationship talk (H4), but the associations with the cognitive markers of turbulence were nonsignificant; thus, H3 was unsupported for Americans. Finally, perceived partner responsiveness was negatively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H5), but the threat of relationship talk did not significantly predict enacted relationship talk (H6).

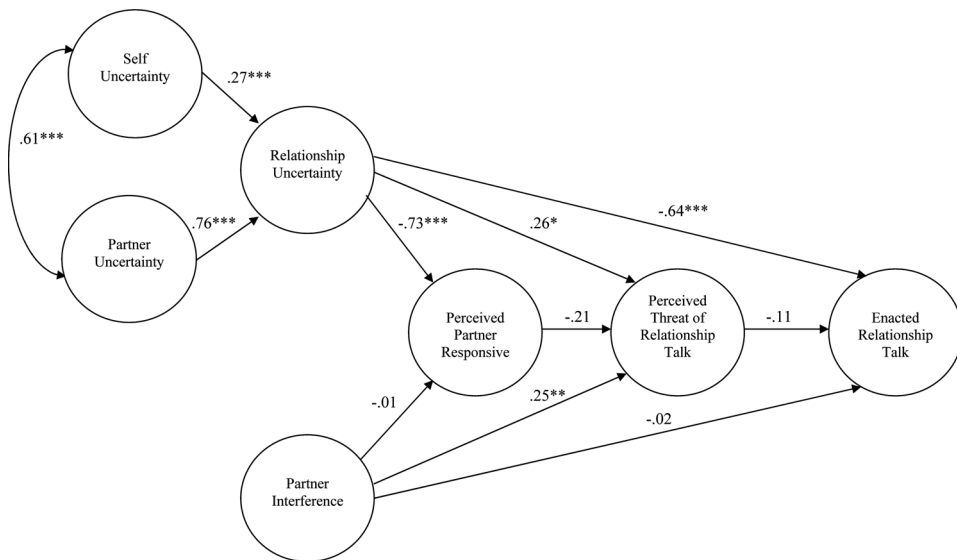


Figure 4 Fitted Model for South Korean Sample. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The model for the South Korean sample also fit the data ($\chi^2_{(10)} = 21.29$, $p = .02$; $\chi^2/df = 2.13$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .09), but several of the predicted paths were non-significant (see Figure 4). As predicted, results indicated that relational uncertainty was negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness (H1a), positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H1b), and negatively associated with enacted relationship talk (H2). Interference from partners was positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk (H3b), but associations with perceived partner responsiveness (H3b) and enacted relationship talk (H4) were non-significant. In addition, H5 and H6 were not supported in the Korean sample.

Next, we conducted a multiple groups analysis to compare the fit of the models for Americans and Koreans. We constrained the structural weights to be equal across the two models. Results indicated that the constrained model ($\chi^2_{(10)} = 37.97$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.80$) did not fit the data as well as the unconstrained model ($\chi^2_{(20)} = 39.52$, $p = .006$; $\chi^2/df = 1.98$). Thus, we unconstrained one structural weights path at a time until the constrained model fit the data as well as the unconstrained model. Decisions about which paths to unconstrain were reached by calculating the difference between the structural path coefficients in the American and Korean models and ordering them from the largest difference to the smallest. We unconstrained structural paths one at a time, starting with the largest difference between coefficients. After unconstraining two paths, we achieved a model that fit the data ($\chi^2_{(8)} = 19.64$, $p = .01$; $\chi^2/df = 2.46$). To obtain a good-fitting model we had to unconstrain the path from partner interference to enacted relationship talk and from relational uncertainty to the perceived threat of relationship talk. These results suggest that Americans and Koreans differ on some aspects of the model with regard to relationship talk.

Discussion

This study applied the theoretical underpinnings of the relational turbulence model to examine cognitive and communicative manifestations of turbulence across cultures. Our findings highlight some consistencies between American and South Korean romantic relationships, but also point to several ways in which individuals from each culture experience relational turbulence differently. The results of this study have implications for understanding how people perceive relationship talk differently based on characteristics of their relationship and their cultural background. In this section, we discuss the implications of our findings for extending the relational turbulence model to new outcomes and across cultures.

Applying the Relational Turbulence Model to Cognitive and Communicative Outcomes

This study highlighted relational uncertainty and interference from partners as two features of romantic relationships that predict perceived partner responsiveness, the perceived threat of relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk. With regard

to perceived partner responsiveness, relational uncertainty was negatively associated with this outcome, but the association with partner interference was nonsignificant. The fact that partner interference did not share a significant association with perceived partner responsiveness was especially surprising given that partner interference seems to inherently reflect a lack of understanding of the personal goals and routines that are important to the other partner. The path was in the predicted direction in the American sample, but failed to reach significance. In the Korean sample the coefficient was near zero. We speculate that the lack of association in the Korean sample may be due to the fact that they reported on less established relationships than their American counterparts; thus, they may not have reached a point in their relationship where they exert influence on one another's goals, thereby limiting opportunities for interference to occur.

The mechanisms of the relational turbulence model performed similarly with regard to the perceived threat of relationship talk. Consistent with previous research (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011b), relational uncertainty was positively associated with the perceived threat of relationship talk. Furthermore, this study adds interference from partners to the list of relationship variables that may compromise people's confidence in the outcomes of relationship talk, particularly for South Koreans. Taken together, these findings suggest that the mechanisms in the relational turbulence model create an environment in which people fear the repercussions of open communication about the relationship. In other words, when the relationship is in a state of flux and turmoil, conversations about the nature or status of the relationship are particularly daunting.

When it comes to enacted relationship talk, however, the mechanisms of the relational turbulence model diverge. Relational uncertainty was negatively associated with enacted relationship talk, but partner interference was positively associated with enacted relationship talk. These results are consistent with previous tests of the relational turbulence model that have documented indirect communication under conditions of relational uncertainty and direct communication under conditions of partner interference (e.g., Theiss & Solomon, 2006a, 2006b). This divergence is explained by differences in the source of relational turbulence. When people experience relational uncertainty they cannot accurately predict the outcomes that their communication will have (e.g., Berger, 1997), so they are likely to avoid interaction. In contrast, when people experience interference from partners they become highly motivated to resolve the interference and develop more coordinated patterns of action (e.g., Theiss & Solomon, 2006b); thus, relationship talk becomes necessary in this context, even if it is uncomfortable.

Examining the Relational Turbulence Model Across Cultures

One goal of this study was to examine similarities and differences in the relational turbulence model across cultures. We collected data from individuals in the United States and South Korea to contrast the model in these two diverse cultures. The results were similar across cultures for the effects of relational uncertainty, but the

effects for interference from partners diverged between the two cultures in many respects. For the Americans, interference from partners only predicted enacted relationship talk, but for the Koreans, interference from partners only predicted the perceived threat of relationship talk. Specifically, two paths in the model needed to be unconstrained to obtain a good-fitting model.

The first significant difference in the model was in the association between partner interference and enacted relationship talk. In the American sample, this association was positive and significant, but in the Korean sample it was negative and near zero. Recall that the two cultural groups did not report significantly different levels of relationship talk, but t-tests did reveal significant differences between the groups in partner interference. Thus, we expect that the difference documented in the structural model is attributable to cultural differences in the experience of partner interference. As we reasoned earlier, the collectivist nature of South Korean culture should correspond with greater tolerance for partner interference in relationships (cf. Hofstede, 2001). If partner interference is not a very salient issue in Korean relationships, then there would be less demand for relationship talk to resolve conflicts and issues arising from goal interference. The individualist nature of American culture, on the other hand, puts people in a position to be highly motivated to resolve issues stemming from interference in their personal goals and routines. Of course, we did not measure the extent to which our participants identified with collectivist or individualist cultural orientations, so our data cannot speak to the influence of these ideologies on partner interference or relationship talk. Future research should probe these associations more directly. An alternative explanation for this effect may be due to the differences in relationship status between the two samples. The Korean sample had significantly less established relationships than the American sample, so one possible explanation for the lack of association is that the Koreans in this study had not reached a point in their relationship where interference was likely to occur or where relationship talk would be appropriate. Future studies should attempt to recruit samples with similar relationship statuses across cultures.

The second difference in the cross-cultural model was in the association between relational uncertainty and the perceived threat of relationship talk. This association was positive and significant in both the American and the South Korean models, but the path coefficient was twice as large in the American sample. Again, the t-tests revealed no significant difference between Americans and Koreans on the perceived threat of relationship talk; therefore, we suspect that the difference in effect size is attributable to increased relational uncertainty for Americans. Not surprisingly, the threat of relationship talk is amplified in American relationships where relational uncertainty is particularly salient. Thus, there is something about relationship talk in American relationships that is particularly daunting when relational uncertainty is heightened. Given that Americans seem to question their associations more strongly than Koreans, perhaps relationship talk is more threatening because the outcome is more uncertain. Perhaps Americans perceive a greater potential for rejection or embarrassment when broaching the topic of their relationship, whereas the collectivist nature of Korean relationships would prevent these sorts of

face threats from occurring. Future research should probe the reasons for this unique association.

Although these two effects were the only paths that needed to be unconstrained to achieve a good-fitting model, several other paths bear mention that became nonsignificant when testing the American model and the South Korean model separately. Specifically, the combined analysis showed a negative association between perceived partner responsiveness and the perceived threat of relationship talk, which in turn was negatively associated with enacted relationship talk. In the multiple groups analysis, however, the association between perceived threat of relationship talk and enacted relationship talk was not significant in either group, and the association between perceived partner responsiveness and perceived threat was only significant for Americans. For Koreans, the only variable that appears to be a significant predictor of enacted relationship talk is relational uncertainty; thus, we wonder if there are cultural differences in people's perceptions of and enactment of relationship talk that are not reflected in these analyses. Perhaps intimacy, commitment, or relationship satisfaction are more strongly implicated in Koreans' relationship talk than the variables in the relational turbulence model. Another possibility may be that relationship talk is unlikely to take the same form in Korean relationships as it does in American relationships. Studies indicate the Koreans find explicitness less effective than Americans (M. Kim, 2005) and are prone to using silence to communicate negative or discomforting information (Gudykunst et al. 1996). Thus, explicit relationship talk, as was measured in this study, might be more of a U.S.-centric phenomenon that is less likely to occur in relationships in other cultures. Perhaps other cultures employ more nonverbal strategies for managing their relationships. Future studies should consider additional relationship characteristics and cultural norms that may influence relationship talk for Koreans.

The findings of this study have implications for extending the relational turbulence model. Conceptually, our results document the need to fine-tune the model's logic regarding partner interference as a mechanism of relational turbulence. This is not the first study in which relational uncertainty is a more consistent predictor of relational outcomes than interference from partners (see Theiss et al., 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). The inconsistencies in associations between partner interference and other variables in the model suggest flaws in the model's logic with regard to this mechanism. Given that partner interference is closely tied to emotional reactivity (Berscheid, 1983; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), perhaps its applicability is limited as a predictor of cognitive or communicative outcomes. Future studies should work to clarify the impact of partner interference in relationships. Pragmatically, our results suggest that the relational turbulence model may not translate perfectly to other cultures. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed significant mean differences between Americans and Koreans on the primary mechanisms in the model. Moreover, given cultural variation on the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), Koreans and Americans may view the mechanisms of relational uncertainty and partner interference as very different forces in their close relationships. Further research is needed to determine the utility of the

relational turbulence across cultures, which should give more explicit consideration to cultural ideologies.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

One strength of this study is that it extends the relational turbulence model by considering new cognitive and communicative markers of turbulence. This study adds perceived partner responsiveness, the perceived threat of relationship talk, and enacted relationship talk to the long list of relational outcomes that are sensitive to relational turbulence. Furthermore, the relational turbulence model has never been tested outside of the United States. Thus, one additional strength of the current investigation is that it extends the generalizability of the model to other cultures. The samples from the United States and South Korea were similar in age and number, so we feel this test is an accurate representation of cultural similarities and differences. Another strength of this study is that we gathered data from native South Koreans who were living in their home country. Many cross-cultural studies obtain cross-cultural samples by surveying international students who are studying at universities in the U.S. By obtaining a native South Korean sample we were able to reduce the possibility that their relational beliefs or behaviors had been colored by living in United States culture.

This study also had several limitations. One limitation of this research is that it uses a convenience sample of college-aged individuals to test the model. We focused on this population because they are likely to be in the kinds of developing relationships privileged by the relational turbulence model. Although the findings add to a growing body of literature on the romantic relationships of young adults, we acknowledge that this focus limits the generalizability of our findings. Although the sample size in this study was sufficient for the combined analysis, another limitation of the study was that the sample sizes for each group were smaller than the ideal for a mixed model SEM. A final weakness of the study is that due to limited time and resources, we were unable to pretest the questionnaire items in a South Korean sample to determine if the measures were valid and reliable in a non-U.S. sample. Although the items were translated into the native language of South Korean participants and the measurement models were invariant across cultures, subtle differences in meaning may have affected the results. Future cross-cultural studies should attempt to pretest the items in the native language of the non-U.S. sample, or confirm that the measurement models are invariant as we have in this study.

We are encouraged by our findings and the applicability of the relational turbulence model beyond the United States. Future research that assesses cultural variability in the relational turbulence should consider the dimensions of culture more explicitly in its logic. Given that we did not measure cultural values of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, or long-term orientation, we are unable to identify the mechanisms that may have contributed to cultural differences in our model. Future studies should assess these cultural values to more clearly identify the ways in which they are correlated with the mechanisms in the

relational turbulence model. This study provided initial evidence that the constructs in the model may vary, but additional research is necessary to understand the sources of divergence across cultures.

Notes

- [1] Independent samples *t*-tests indicated significant differences across the two samples in terms of respondent age ($t_{(291)} = 12.32, p < .001$) and relationship status ($t_{(291)} = 5.15, p < .001$). In terms of age, Americans ($M = 20.18$) were significantly younger than Koreans ($M = 22.93$). In terms of relationship status, Koreans ($M = 3.04$) had less established relationships than Americans ($M = 3.60$).
- [2] We conducted a multiple groups analysis on the measurement model to ensure that the resulting factor structure fit both samples appropriately. We constrained the measurement weights to be equal across the two models. Results indicated that the constrained model ($\chi^2_{(734)} = 1261.64, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 1.72; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .05$) and the unconstrained model ($\chi^2_{(712)} = 1207.01, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 1.70; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .05$) were statistically invariant.

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