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Testing Relational Turbulence Theory in Friends with Benefits Relationships

James B. Stein
Colter D. Ray
Lisa J. van Raalte
Paul A. Mongeau

This research applied the tenets of relational turbulence theory (RTT) to friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs). The first part of this study explored how RTT's generative mechanisms (relational uncertainty and perceptions of interdependence) differ between FWBRs and exclusive romantic relationships (ERRs). The second portion of this study tested the propositions of RTT in the unique context of FWBRs by using structural equation modeling (SEM). Results showed that FWB participants perceive significantly higher levels of relational uncertainty and significantly lower perceptions of interdependence, than people in ERRs. The SEM model revealed that, in FWBRs, only partner uncertainty significantly and negatively relates to relationship satisfaction. Similarly, perceptions of partner interference positively related to perceptions of turmoil. Both relationship satisfaction and turmoil negatively associated with avoiding relationship discussions. Results are discussed in terms of theoretical development.

Relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) and interdependence (Berscheid, 1983) have long interested communication scholars and represent integral components of relational turbulence theory (RTT: Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016). Researchers have applied the tenets of RTT to numerous relationship types and contexts (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Theiss, 2008; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), but scholarship has yet to explore RTT in friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs), which are noted for their particularly uncertain and transitional nature (Knight, 2014).

At its core, RTT assumes elevated relational uncertainty and perceptions of interdependence heighten the emotional and cognitive responses to otherwise mundane events (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter-Theune, 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). These heightened responses relate to the amount and valence of communication episodes (Solomon et al., 2016). FWBRs operate under highly uncertain conditions (Knight, 2014) in which interdependence is present (Green & Morman, 2011). Although, FWBRs are an increasingly popular relationship type (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bogle, 2008) they have received little theoretical attention. Relational turbulence theory is an appropriate frame to uncover the nuances of turbulence in FWBRs as well as to differentiate turbulence in FWBRs from exclusive romantic relationships (ERRs).

Relational Turbulence Theory

Relational turbulence theory attempts to explain the ways that people think, emote, and communicate during negative relational conditions. Solomon et al. (2016) define turbulence as a "global and persistent evaluation of the relationship as tumultuous, unsteady, fragile, and chaotic that arises from the accumulation of specific episodes" (p. 12). Turbulence often emerges as a couple experiences relational or personal transitions, such as courtship (Knobloch et al., 2007), post-deployment in military couples (Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), or the transition to empty-nest parenthood (Nagy & Theiss, 2013). Two generative mechanisms contribute to couples' negative outcomes in RTT: *relational uncertainty* and *partner interdependence*. These mechanisms act in tandem, both directly and indirectly influencing cognitions and emotions (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009).

James B. Stein received his PhD from the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University.
Colter D. Ray (PhD, Arizona State University, 2018) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication and a Core Researcher in the Center for Communication, Health, and the Public Good at San Diego State University.
Lisa J. van Raalte (PhD, Arizona State University, 2017) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Sam Houston State University.
Paul A. Mongeau (PhD, Michigan State University, 1988) is a Professor and Associate Director of the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Address correspondence to the first author at Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, PO Box 871205, Tempe, AZ 85287-1205. (480) 965-3568. Corresponding e-mail: jbstein1@asu.edu

Relational Uncertainty

Relational uncertainty (i.e., "questions about the nature of involvement within a relationship" Solomon et al., 2016, p. 5) is composed of three elements: s*elf uncertainty* (the degree to which an individual is confident that he/she cares for, and is committed to, his/her partner), *partner uncertainty* (the extent to which someone believes that his/her partner is committed to and loves him/her), and *relationship uncertainty* (the degree to which an individual feels comfortable with and knowledgeable about the nature of his/her relationship; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty are proposed to negatively predict cognitive responses, such as relationship satisfaction (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011) and intimacy between partners (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). These cognitions then predict communication variables such as directness of communication (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a) and negatively related to enacted relational talk (Theiss & Nagy, 2013).

Importantly, turbulence scholars are unclear as to the exact relationships that self, partner, and relationship uncertainty have with cognitive outcomes. Turbulence theory asserts that relational uncertainty "undermines the comprehension of specific episodes" (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 7). However, specific relationships can vary based on culture, relationship type, and circumstance (Solomon et al., 2016). As such, it is important to test the functionality of relational uncertainty across a variety of relationship types, including FWBRs.

Interdependence

Interdependence can be understood as the degree to which two people interrupt each other's causal chain of events (Berscheid, 1983). This classification assumes that *partner interference* and *partner facilitation* are seen as influencing factors that contribute to perceptions of interdependence. Partner interference is the degree to which Partner A hinders Partner B in his/her everyday goals (Berscheid, 1983). Partner interference, according to RTT, positively relates to emotions such as jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b) and perceptions of relational turmoil (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010).

Partner facilitation, on the other hand, is the extent to which Partner A aids partner B in the accomplishment of his/her everyday goals (Berscheid, 1983). Partner facilitation negatively associates with negative emotions (Solomon et al., 2016), such as perceptions of anger, jealousy, and sadness (Knobloch et al., 2007). Thus, partner facilitation predicts emotional responses opposite of partner interference. Like the biased cognitions that arise from relational uncertainty, emotional evaluations are theorized to predict communication episodes as well (Solomon et al., 2016).

Relational turbulence theory argues that relational uncertainty and perceptions of interference are most likely to occur during times of transition or instability (Solomon et al., 2016). Additionally, the theory posits that highly uncertain relationships are the most likely to experience turbulence. One such type of highly uncertain relationship is the FWBR (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, 2014), to be discussed below.

Friends with Benefits Relationships

Friends with benefits relationships involve repeated sexual interaction without the presence or expectation of romantic intentions (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2013). Friends with benefits relationships are common for young adults, as between 49% and 62% of college students have participated in at least one (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Mongeau et al., 2013; Reeder, 2000). Moreover, the number of young adults participating in FWBRs has steadily increased over the last few decades (Perlman & Sprecher, 2012).

The FWBR label covers a wide swath of relational categories ranging from serial hookups, to close friends, and even former romantic partners (Mongeau et al., 2013). Importantly, FWBRs commonly transition across this spectrum, sometimes without the knowledge of either partner (Karlsen & Træen, 2013; Owen & Fincham, 2012). Moreover, FWBRs entail minimal relational talk (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005) and heightened relational uncertainty (Knight, 2014). These relational parameters make FWBRs particularly susceptible to experiences of turbulence, compared to exclusive romantic relationships (ERRs).

FWBRs versus ERRs

The lay assumption is that FWBRs are more casual and less stressful than ERRs. Empirical data has refuted these claims (Hughes et al., 2005). Green and Morman (2011) found that partners in FWBRs desire both romantic and nonsexual interactions just as much as those in ERRs. Additionally, Jonason, Norman, and Richardson (2011) found that FWBRs and ERRs engage in nearly identical frequencies of sexual intercourse; however, ERRs experience more intimate behaviors such as hand holding and cuddling. Thus, FWBRs may desire connection without receiving it. Such an imbalance likely increases relational uncertainty in FWBRs (Knight, 2014) while lowering perceptions of interference facilitation (Hughes et al., 2005).

Although those in FWBRs experience lower levels of communication than those in ERRs (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Bogle, 2008), the mechanisms leading to this conclusion have yet to be uncovered. Relational turbulence theory provides a potential explanation by suggesting that increased levels of relational uncertainty and decreased perceptions of interdependence alter relational cognitions and emotions, ultimately reducing communication. The first two hypotheses of this manuscript test this assertion by comparing levels of relational uncertainty and interdependence between FWBRs and ERRs.

H1: Individuals in FWBRs experience greater levels of relational uncertainty (self, partner, relationship) than individuals in ERRs.

H2: Individuals in FWBRs experience lower levels of partner interference and partner facilitation than individuals in ERRs.

Applying RTT to FWBRs

In addition to testing how the generative mechanisms of RTT fluctuate in FWBRs, we also seek to apply those mechanisms to test the tenets of RTT. If FWBRs are as transitional as previous studies suggest (see Owen & Fincham, 2012), they should fit within the predictions of RTT. Specifically, relational uncertainty and perceptions of interference should relate to cognitions and emotions, respectively, which should then associate with frequency of communication.

Cognitions and Emotions

If the tenets of RTT hold true for FWBRs, levels of relational uncertainty should correlate with perceptions of relational quality, such as satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction has been linked to important individual health outcomes (Cohen et al., 1998; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) and is often used as a perceptional marker of relational quality. Research has suggested that FWBRs experience moderate to low levels of satisfaction (Green & Morman, 2011; Gusarova, Fraser, & Alderson, 2012). One reason for these modest levels may be due to increased relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Thus, we consider relationship satisfaction as an important outcome of relational uncertainty for both conceptual and theoretical reasons.

Relational turbulence theory proposes that relational uncertainty likely influences relationship satisfaction in transitional relationships such as FWBRs. Such a finding would be important for two reasons. First, increased relational uncertainty may help explain why FWBRs are so dissatisfied (Green & Morman, 2011). Second, testing the association between relational uncertainty and relationship satisfaction in FWBRs would increase the scope and sustainability of RTT, a new theory in need of further testing and clarification. The third hypothesis specifies our theoretical proposal.

H3: Relational uncertainty (self, partner, relationship) is negatively related to relationship satisfaction in FWBRs.

Similarly, levels of interference and facilitation in FWBRs should associate with emotional reactions, such as the negative emotions associated with perceptions of turmoil (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Specifically,

interference should increase negative emotions, whereas facilitation should assuage such emotions. Since interdependence is low in FWBRs (Green & Morman, 2011), a significant relationship between interference/facilitation and negative emotion in FWBRs would be very important for the predictive power of RTT. Although the theory predicts that *heightened* levels of interference/facilitation should increase emotional responses (Solomon et al., 2016), finding the same association in relationships with low perceptions of interdependence would illustrate the strength of the theory. The fourth hypothesis addresses this relationship.

H4a: Perceptions of partner interference are positively related to perceptions of turmoil in FWBRs.

H4b: Perceptions of partner facilitation are negatively related to perceptions of turmoil in FWBRs.

Topic Avoidance as a Communicative Outcome

Topic avoidance is a key communication variable in RTT research, because it pertains to the amount of communicative enactment occurring between couples (Solomon et al., 2016). Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) observed a positive correlation between relationship uncertainty and topic avoidance. The authors explain that this relationship is potentially due to partners favoring ambiguity over discussing potential relational threats (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004), however, analyzed the *number* of topics avoided rather than the *type* of topics that are avoided. Our focus is the extent to which FWB partners avoid episodes of relational talk. Research indicates that FWBRs consider relational talk to be highly problematic, with over 80% intentionally avoiding such discussions (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, 2014). Relational turbulence theory (Solomon et al., 2016) contends that such a lack of communication is due to the biased cognitions and heightened emotions experienced by partners.

If RTT can be used to explore the communicative gaps in FWBRs, it is likely that relationship satisfaction (or lack thereof) and perceptions of turmoil contribute to FWB partners' refusal to discuss the nature of their relationship. Satisfied FWBRs should be more likely to discuss their relationship, possibly desiring a transition to an ERR. Similarly, feelings of turmoil should force relational discussions in FWBRs, where partners often desire relational change (Green & Morman, 2011). In other words, we propose that the notably low levels of relational communication in FWBRs (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, 2014) are, in part, due to the unsatisfying nature of FWBRs, and the mundane perceptions of turmoil that they experience.

H5a: Relationship satisfaction is negatively related to topic avoidance in FWBRs.

H5b: Perceptions of turmoil are negatively related to topic avoidance in FWBRs.

Method

Participants and Procedures

After IRB approval from the institution, participants were recruited from communication classes at a large Southwestern university and offered extra credit for participating. To qualify, students had to be in an ERR or an FWBR at the time of participating and at least 18 years old. The sample included 521 participants (M_{age} = 21.10, SD = 3.44) with 283 women, 236 men, and two participants reporting their sex as "other." Participants self-identified as White/Caucasian (n = 339), Asian (n = 90), Hispanic/Latino(a) (n = 77), Black/African American (n = 25), or Pacific Islander (n = 11).

To ensure that participants were clear on the nature of FWBRs, Mongeau and colleague's (2013) definition and descriptions of FWBRs was provided for reference. Respondents were in either an ERR (n = 319) or an FWBR (n = 202). Those who identified as being in an ERR described their relationship as casually dating (n = 113), seriously dating (n = 193), or married/engaged (n = 13). The average length of relationship for those in ERRs was 17.34 months (SD = 4.32). The average relationship length of FWBRs was 9.34 months (SD = 5.21).

Instrumentation and Measurement

Relational uncertainty. Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) 19-item scale measured perceptions of relational uncertainty. Each item was accompanied by a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely uncertain*; 7 = *completely certain*). The stem for each item ("how certain are you about…") was followed by items designed to measure self uncertainty (e.g., "how much you like your partner"*)*, partner uncertainty (e.g., "how important the relationship is to your partner"), and relationship uncertainty (e.g., "whether or not the relationship will work out in the long run"). Items were coded such that higher scores reflected greater uncertainty. Measures of self uncertainty (α = .89), partner uncertainty (α = .89), and relationship uncertainty (α = .86) were reliable.

Partner interdependence. Participants indicated their agreement on the 10 items from Solomon and Knobloch's (2001) partner influence scale (e.g., "This person helps me to achieve my everyday goals; this person interferes with my school/work duties"). A six-point Likert scale accompanied each item (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). Both partner interference (α = .93) and facilitation (α = .91) measures were reliable.

Relationship satisfaction. Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) measure of relationship satisfaction was used (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"). A nine-point Likert scale accompanied each of the five items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 9 = *strongly agree*). The measure was reliable (α = .91).

Negative emotions. Portions of Knobloch et al. (2007) measure of relational turmoil were used to assess perceptions of relational turbulence. Participants indicated their agreement with 11 items measured on a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) that followed the prompt "at the present time, my relationship is…" (e.g., overwhelming, stressful, frenzied). This measurement was deemed reliable (α = .93).

Topic avoidance. Six items from Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) topic avoidance scale that focused on the nature of the relationship were used for this study. Participants were asked how often they avoided or engaged in discussing the nature of their FWBRs (e.g., "…The state of your relationship"). A seven-point Likert scale accompanied each item (1 = *always avoid discussing*; 7 = *never avoid discussing*). The measure was reliable (α = .91).

Results

Prior to substantive analyses, sex, ethnicity, and relationship length were tested as possible covariates using multiple regression. Both sex and relationship length were significantly related to all five measured variables in this study (R^2 ranged between .02 and .05). Therefore, throughout the analyses, sex and relationship length were controlled for but not displayed in figures or tables. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for each measured variable can be viewed in Table 1.

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to investigate the first two hypotheses. For this analysis, relationship type (ERR or FWBR) was the independent variable and relational uncertainty (self, partner, and relationship) and interdependence (interference and facilitation) were the two dependent variables. To answer H3-H5, structural equation modeling was performed to test the hypothesized relationships between relational uncertainty, interdependence, cognitions, emotions, and topic avoidance. To ensure that the proposed model was appropriate to test through path analysis an initial measurement model was run. This model demonstrated good-to-excellent fit, $\chi^2(830) = 1369.69$; $\chi^2/df = 1.65$; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .057 (95% CI: .053 - .061). Figure 1 illustrates the tested model. During SEM, only the 202 individuals who identified as being in an FWBR were included.

FWBRs versus ERRs

Hypothesis one predicted individuals in FWBRs report greater relational uncertainty (self, partner, relationship) than individuals in ERRs. Participants in FWBRs reported significantly more self uncertainty (M = 3.09, SD = 1.15) than individuals in ERRs (M = 1.74, SD = 0.91), $F(1, 520) = 218.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$. Similarly, FWBR partners reported significantly higher levels of partner uncertainty (M = 3.41, SD = 1.16) than individuals in ERRs (M = 1.77, SD = 0.95), $F(1, 520) = 303.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$. Finally, participants in FWBRs reported significantly more relationship uncertainty (M = 3.38, SD = 1.00) than those in ERRs (M = 1.94, SD = 1.17), $F(1, 520) = 243.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$. These results support H1 and can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Variables (N = 521)

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-uncertainty	---	.36***	.56***	-.17**	-.30***	-.14*	.16*	-.41***
2. Partner-uncertainty		---	.56***	-.08	-.27***	-.41***	.26***	-.27***
3. Relationship-uncertainty			---	-.15*	-.31***	-.33***	.34***	-.35***
4. Partner interference				---	.60***	.21**	-.19**	.47***
5. Partner facilitation					---	.40***	-.37***	.70***
6. Relational satisfaction						---	-.46***	.46***
7. Topic avoidance							---	-.46***
8. Turmoil								---
M	**3.09**	**3.41**	**3.38**	**2.44**	**3.00**	**4.91**	**4.20**	**3.62**
M	1.74	1.77	1.94	2.94	4.33	5.25	5.16	4.87
SD	**1.15**	**1.16**	**1.01**	**1.27**	**1.25**	**1.98**	**1.49**	**1.89**
SD	0.91	1.77	1.17	1.32	1.00	1.63	1.04	1.32

Note. Bolded number represent means and standard deviations for participants in FWBRs. Non-bolded numbers represent means and standard deviations for participants in ERRs. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

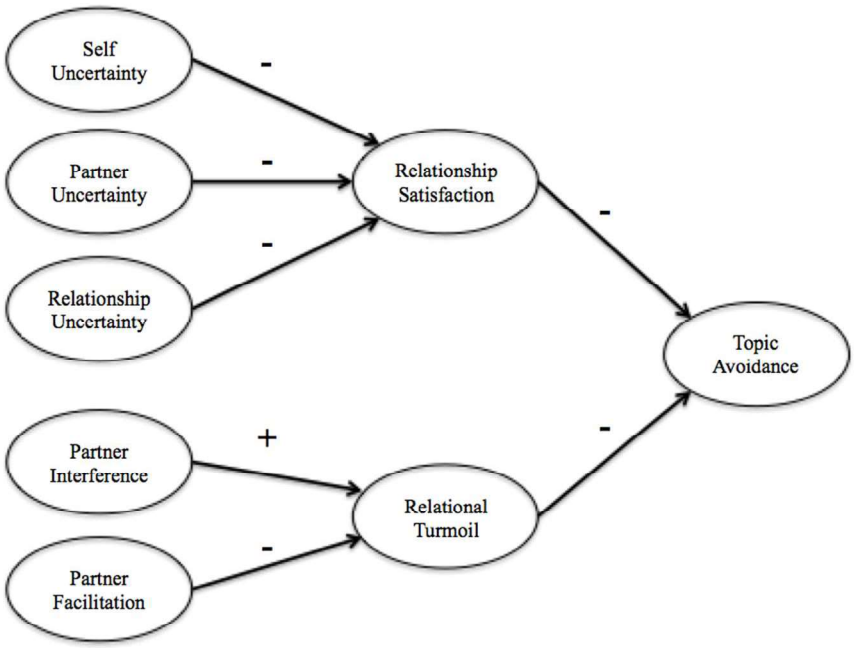

Figure 1. Proposed relationships between relational turbulence variables.

Hypothesis two predicted that participants in FWBRs report less partner interference and partner facilitation than participants in ERRs. For partner interference, FWBR participants reported significantly less interference (M = 2.44, SD = 1.27) than individuals in ERRs, (M = 2.94, SD = 1.32), $F(1, 520) = 31.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Additionally, participants in FWBRs reported significantly less facilitation (M = 3.00, SD = 1.25) than those in ERRs (M = 4.33, SD = 1.00), $F(1, 520) = 215.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$. Thus, H2 was supported (see Table 2).

Table 2
MANCOVA Results for FWBRs vs. Exclusive Romantic Relationships (N = 521)

Factor	FWBRs	Exclusive Rel.	F	p	η^2
Self- Uncertainty	3.09	1.74	51.31	***	.30
Partner-Uncertainty	3.41	1.77	69.20	***	.37
Relationship-Uncertainty	3.38	1.94	68.74	***	.35
Partner Interference	2.43	2.94	8.48	***	.04
Partner Facilitation	3.00	4.33	50.79	***	.26

Note. Sex and relationship length are controlled for, but not shown, in this table. ***$p < .001$.

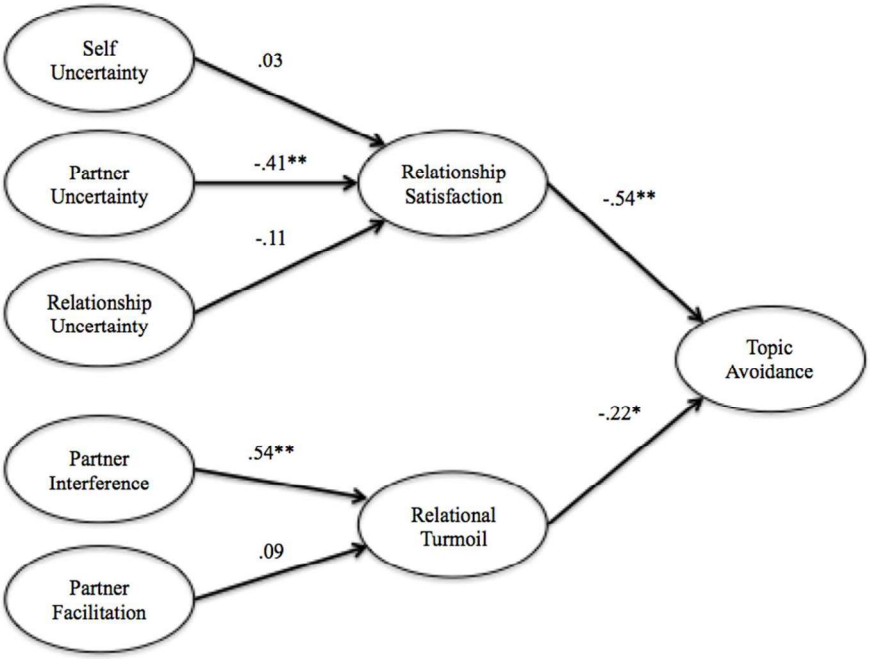

Figure 2. Results of path analysis using SEM (N = 202). **$p < .001$, *$p < .01$. Relationship length and participant sex are controlled for, but not shown in this model. Results represent standardized coefficients.

Testing RTT in FWBRs

To ensure acceptable model fit, several test of fit indices were implemented. First χ^2/df was assessed, with values under 5.0 indicating good fit and under 3.0 indicating excellent fit (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). Second the comparative fit index (CFI) was used, with values at or above .90 indicating adequate fit and .95 indicating excellent fit (Hu & Bentler, 1995; 1999). Third, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was evaluated; with values under .08 indicating good fit and values under .05 indicating excellent fit (Kline, 2005). To gauge R^2, the sum of squared correlations was observed for all endogenous variables.

For the model hypothesized in Figure 1, results demonstrated good-to-excellent fit, $\chi^2(846) = 1437.30$; $\chi^2/df = 1.70$; CFI = .91; and RMSEA = .061 (95% CI: .054 - .064). Relating to H3, partner (but not self or relationship) uncertainty significantly and negatively related to relationship satisfaction (β = -.41). The three elements of

relational uncertainty resulted in a total R^2 of .22 (.18 due to partner uncertainty). For H4, partner interference (but not partner facilitation) significantly and positively related to perceptions of turmoil (β = .54). Interference and facilitation combined for an R^2 of .37 (.35 due to partner interference). Finally, for H5, both perceptions of turmoil (β = -.22) and relationship satisfaction (β = -.54) negatively and significantly related to levels of topic avoidance. Relationship satisfaction and perceptions of turmoil generated an R^2 value of .30 (.26 due to relationship satisfaction). Therefore, H3 and H4 were partially supported, whereas H5 was fully supported.

Discussion

The goal of this manuscript was to test the RTT in two ways. First, we aimed to demonstrate that FWBRs are an appropriate relational category to test RTT's suppositions. Second, we sought to apply RTT to a strictly FWBR sample. Results demonstrate that levels of relational uncertainty and interdependence are significantly different between FWBRs and ERRs. Moreover, the generative mechanisms of RTT (relational uncertainty and interdependence) appear to function in distinct ways when applied to FWBRs. These findings provide important implications for theory development and testing, to be discussed below.

FWBRs Versus ERRs

Considerable research indicates that FWBRs are flooded with relational ambiguities (Knight, 2014), transitional trajectories (Hughes et al., 2005), and differing motivations (Karlsen & Træen, 2013). As such, it is not surprising that individuals in FWBRs experienced significantly more self, partner, and relationship uncertainty than individuals in ERRs (H1). We cannot yet claim that these differences are *because* of relational type, as there was no random assignment. However, our results fit the axioms of RTT, which posit that less committed, implicit relationships are more likely to experience relational uncertainty than monogamous, highly interdependent relationships (Solomon et al., 2016).

Consistent with H2, FWBRs partners reported significantly less interference and facilitation from partners than did people in ERRs. Group differences were considerably smaller for interference (η^2 = .04) than facilitation (η^2 = .26), possibly because facilitating behaviors are viewed as more intentional than interfering behaviors (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Nagy & Theiss, 2013). Moreover, traditional relational maintenance behaviors in ERRs, such as public affection and shared activities (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993), might be considered interfering behaviors for FWBRs, who often opt for non-romantic, non-exclusive partnerships (Hughes et al., 2005). Thus, the source and nature of interfering behaviors may differ across relational typologies.

In sum, our results demonstrate that FWBRs experience considerably higher levels of uncertainty than ERRs. Similarly, FWB partners perceive less interdependence than those in ERRs. Thus, there is ample evidence to suggest that the propositions of RTT function differently in FWBRs compared to other relationship types, such as military couples (Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), couples grappling with depression (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010), or even empty nest couples (i.e., adjusting to fewer family members in the household; Nagy & Theiss, 2013). The next section articulates the distinct functionality of RTT in FWBRs.

Testing RTT in FWBRs

The creators of RTT articulate that although the turbulence process begins with heightened levels of relational uncertainty and interdependence, the exact relationships between these measured constructs and ensuing cognitions, emotions, and communicative outcomes, however, are unclear (Solomon et al., 2016). Testing the specific relationships among the measured variables in RTT across different relationships, cultures, and transitions is a necessary step toward developing and refining the theory. The crux of our study accomplished this by considering FWBRs as a distinct relational category in which the tenets of RTT ensue.

Relational uncertainty and cognitions. Together, self, partner, and relationship uncertainty explained a substantial amount of variance in relationship satisfaction (R^2 =.22); however, when examined individually, only partner uncertainty was a negative significant indicator of this cognition. This finding is particularly important for two reasons. First, it speaks to the ways in which RTT functions differently for different relationships. RTT's creators note that, typically, the effects of partner uncertainty on biased cognitions are mediated by relationship

uncertainty (see Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). In this case, no such associations were found. Solomon and colleagues (2016) concede that the intricacies of relational uncertainty require further probing and specification. Our results are a first step toward this goal.

Second, our results speak to the ways that FWB partners perceive their relationships. Specifically, satisfaction in FWBRs appears to hinge on how people perceive their partners feel, rather than how they themselves feel. Prior studies show that people in FWBRs desire relational closeness (Green & Morman, 2011) and are often motivated by emotional connection (Hughes et al., 2005); however, people often settle for FWBRs when they are unsure if their partners feel the same way (Karleson & Træen, 2013). Our results suggest that partner uncertainty is a major generative mechanism in the relational quality of FWBRs, although self and relationship uncertainty are not.

Interdependence and emotions. Relational turbulence theory predicts that perceptions of interference and facilitation spark intense emotional reactions, although in opposite directions (Solomon et al., 2016). In this study, interference was a significant and positive indicator of the negative emotions associated with feelings of turmoil (e.g., stress, frenzy, anger). Again, this finding highlights the importance of exploring the tenets of RTT in different types of relationships. Turbulence research often reports that partner interference more frequently and strongly relates to communicative outcomes, both directly (Theiss et al., 2009) and indirectly (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). Although FWB partners experienced significantly less interference than people in ERRs, interference appears to be just as important in contributing to negative emotions in both relationships.

Facilitation, on the other hand, was not related to the negative emotions surrounding relational turmoil in this study. Theoretically, this does not necessarily run perpendicular to the axioms of RTT; however, it does draw attention to the inner workings of RTT's generative mechanisms. The FWB participants in this study perceived dramatically less facilitation than those in ERRs. It may be that FWBRs entail less facilitating behavior (e.g., Jonason et al., 2011) and therefore do not react negatively in its absence. In this way, the nature of a relationship, in part, dictates which of the generative mechanisms in RTT are most likely to influence cognitive and/or emotional outcomes.

Cognitions, emotions, and topic avoidance. Perhaps the most intriguing finding is that both satisfaction and turmoil negatively contributed to the avoidance of relational talk in FWBRs. Satisfaction and turmoil were both positively associated with increased relational talk. Previous research has demonstrated that FWBRs involve minimal relational communication (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, 2014), but this manuscript offers a theoretical explanation as to why this is the case. It is particularly interesting that both positive cognitions (satisfaction) and negative emotions (turmoil) relate to decreased topic avoidance. Given that FWBRs are particularly dissatisfying relationships (Green & Morman, 2011; Hughes et al., 2005), the relationship between such (dis)satisfaction and the avoidance of relational talk is made clear.

Similarly, it appears that the lay-belief that FWBR partners operate on a no strings attached mentality (Bogle, 2008) can help explain their propensity to avoid relational talk, despite desiring relational outcomes (Green & Morman, 2011). It may be that the notably lower levels of turmoil in FWBRs (see Table 1) contribute to the topic avoidance that FWBR partners experience throughout their relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009). It may be that FWB partners prioritize sex over platonic and romantic desires. As such, they avoid discussing the nature of their relationships, despite being dissatisfied and perceiving moderate levels of turmoil.

Most importantly, the findings of his study, as a whole, demonstrate the viability and falsifiability of RTT. By expanding the scope and displaying the nuanced relationships within RTT, this study increases the theory's explanatory power. The crux of RTT's suppositions centers on episodes of communication. That this portion of the theory received the most consistent support reaffirms the importance of cognitions and emotions as determinants of communication (in this case, lack thereof).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the current findings shed light on a number of important theoretical developments, the study is not without limits. The sample in the current study was relatively homogeneous in terms of age and ethnicity. Future research should explore the ways in which other age groups besides 18-24-year-old college students engage in FWBRs. More importantly, future tests of RTT must explore different cultures and relationships. Such replications are essential for cementing the propositions of this new theory.

A second limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study. Although the results are interesting and provide important contributions to the literature on RTT and FWBRs, the methodology of the study does not allow for tests of causality between RTT predictors and relational quality outcomes. Solomon and colleagues (2016) allude to the necessity for time-ordered studies of RTT's axioms ad propositions. Future studies should utilize longitudinal designs to examine these associations.

In sum, this study provides a unique relational category in which the tenets of RTT were tested. Results suggest that FWBR partners differ from ERR partners in their experiences of relational uncertainty, as well as perceptions of interference and facilitation. As a result, perhaps, FWBRs do not necessarily experience turbulence in the same ways that ERRs do. Our results call for a more nuanced approach to the study of turbulence and a more theoretical approach to the study of FWBRs.

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