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Interdependence and Affective Processes in Relational Turbulence Theory

Karly R. Quaack, San Bolkan, & Alan K. Goodboy

Studies guided by relational turbulence theory (RTT) emphasize negative emotions as the affective mechanism responsible for turbulence arising from interfering partners. However, a more complete examination of RTT's affective mechanisms should study how interference and facilitation indirectly predict turbulence through intensified negative and positive emotions. We report results from 349 individuals after examining interference and facilitation together to estimate indirect effects on turbulence through negative and positive emotions. Results revealed a positive direct effect of interference on turbulence, and a positive indirect effect of interference on turbulence through negative and positive emotions. We observed a negative indirect effect of facilitation on turbulence through positive emotions. RTT processes originating from interference and facilitation were contrasted and found to be equivalent in strength.

Keywords: Facilitation; Interdependence; Interference; Negative Emotions; Positive Emotions; Relational Turbulence Theory

Partners in romantic relationships will inevitably encounter events or episodes that cause instability in their relational environments. The way individuals experience and navigate these episodes has received much attention in communication research (e.g., Rusbult, 1980; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon et al., 2016). One perspective that interpersonal scholars have taken to explain people's reactions to

Correspondence to: Karly R. Quaack, Department of Communication Studies, University of Texas – Austin, 2504A Whitis Ave. (A1105), Austin, TX 78712-0115, USA. E-mail: karlyquaack@utexas.edu
Karly R. Quaack (M.A., California State University - Long Beach, 2019) is a doctoral student at the University of Texas - Austin. San Bolkan (Ph.D., University of Texas - Austin, 2007) is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University – Long Beach. Alan K. Goodboy (Ph.D., West Virginia University, 2007) is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University.

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potentially destabilizing episodes focuses on relational turbulence. In particular, both the relational turbulence model (RTM) and more recently, relational turbulence theory (RTT) explain how specific relationship parameters shape individuals' reactions to specific episodes that make relational information salient (Solomon et al., 2016).

The RTM was originally developed to explain relational partners' experiences with, and responses to, times of transition (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). According to the model, relational transitions create periods of discontinuity that alter partners' previously established patterns of behavior and require them to renegotiate their roles and routines to adapt to the new conditions. The RTM was later expanded to RTT to offer causal mechanisms that lead to relational turbulence by way of cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactivity that partners experience as they encounter these changing circumstances, and as they navigate their relationship experiences more generally (i.e., even in times without major transitions; Solomon et al., 2016).

According to RTT, two relationship parameters contribute to experiences of reactivity including relational uncertainty and partner interdependence (Solomon et al., 2016). Our study focuses on the latter to demonstrate how both hindering and helpful interruptions from a partner are linked to relational turbulence, which is defined as "a global and persistent evaluation of the relationship as tumultuous, unsteady, fragile, and chaotic that arises from an accumulation of specific episodes" (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 518). RTT argues that as relational partners establish interdependence in each other's lives, they become susceptible to influencing each other's daily goals and routines by way of interference and facilitation (Solomon et al., 2016). Partner interference refers to the extent that partners inhibit the achievement of the other's daily activities or goals. Partner facilitation occurs when partners assist one another in accomplishing daily routines or goals (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004).

RTT scholars argue that both interference and facilitation prompt intensified emotional reactions in close relationships and predict experiences of relational turbulence. In particular, interference is predicted to prompt negative emotions whereas facilitation is predicted to prompt positive emotions (Solomon et al., 2016). Nonetheless, as the theory is stated, "interruptions from a partner, particularly those that interfere with everyday routines," are likely to be important in circumstances involving relational turbulence (axiom 2, proposition 2; Solomon et al., 2016, p. 515). Perhaps because of this, studies examining partner interference have generally been prioritized over studies examining partner facilitation (Goodboy et al., 2020). Similarly, most turbulence research studying both types of partner interruptions and subsequent emotional experiences has focused on how interference and facilitation prompt negative emotional reactions within relationships (Knobloch et al., 2007; Solomon & Brisini, 2017, 2019). Theoretically however, to more fully test proposition 2, researchers should model how interruptions from a partner, in the form of interference and facilitation, impact relational turbulence through

heightened negative *and* positive emotional reactions to determine the comparative magnitude of these theorized parallel processes. Practically, this information should prove useful to communication scholars to the extent that positive emotional experiences stemming from partner facilitation may benefit relational stability by reducing perceptions of turbulence. More generally, communication scholars may also benefit from a better understanding of how positive and negative experiences work together in interpersonal contexts.

Partner Interdependence and Experiences of Turbulence

As a basis for the RTM, Solomon and Knobloch (2001, 2004) draw upon logic from Berscheid's (1983) emotion-in-relationships perspective to suggest that frequent interruptions to a person's normative behavioral patterns stimulate emotional arousal. Crucially, whether a person appraises interruptions as impeding or assisting their goal-directed efforts determines the valence of the emotional response (Berscheid, 1983). Subsequent research has confirmed this to be the case and indicates that interference evokes negative emotions (Knobloch, 2008; Knobloch et al., 2007; McLaren et al., 2011; Solomon & Brisini, 2019) whereas facilitative behaviors typically elicit positive emotions (Ellis & Malamuth, 2000).

Although a central assumption of RTT is that partner interruptions, whether in the form of interference or facilitation, amplify both negative and positive emotional reactions, respectively, empirical studies guided by RTM and RTT have typically prioritized the importance of partner interference and negative emotional arousal on perceptions of turbulence (e.g., Knobloch et al., 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). In fact, RTT explicitly emphasizes the importance of interference from a partner compared with facilitation as proposition 2 states that "interruptions from a partner, particularly those that interfere with everyday routines, cause people to experience more intense emotions in response to specific episodes" (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 515). More recent theoretical discussions echo this sentiment as RTT scholars continue to emphasize that "both interference and facilitation from a partner contribute to intense positive and negative emotions, according to the theory, but of the two, interference from a partner should be more emotionally evocative because disruptions tend to be more visible than aid" (Knobloch et al., 2022, p. 367).

Unfortunately, evidence for the importance of partner facilitation as it pertains to relational turbulence and its effect through positive affective arousal is scant. Again, this may be the case because RTT explicitly emphasizes the importance of interference in everyday routines over facilitation. To this point, Solomon et al. (2016) explained that the effects of facilitation are likely to be habituated over time and thus, "the theoretical logic suggests that patterns of interference from a partner may be especially likely to amplify emotional reactions to specific episodes" (p. 515). That said, partner facilitation has been shown to correspond with variables in the RTM/RTT literature including perceived helpfulness from network members (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006), increased perceptions of intimacy (Knobloch & Solomon,

2004), and reduced experiences of relational turbulence (Goodboy et al., 2020). The general conclusion from these studies seems to be that facilitation evokes positive experiences and carries with it the potential to reduce turbulence.

The tendency for researchers to study only the interference component of RTT's interdependence parameter is justified considering that a specific focus on partner interference and negative emotional reactivity has been sewn into the axioms and propositions associated with theoretical formulations; however, it runs the risk of being perpetuated into future scholarship. Though RTT acknowledges that amplified experiences in romantic relationships can be positively valanced, the theoretical focus and logic is that "negative polarization is more common … and interference from a partner is more salient than facilitation" (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 518). Still, despite focusing on disruptive interruptions, Solomon et al. (2016) noted that "experiences of facilitation can promote positive emotions and thereby offset the arousal of negative emotions" (p. 515). In support of this assertion, evidence for the ability of positive affective responses to correct for, or undo, people's negative experiences has been substantiated in general forums of scientific literature that focus on the role of emotions in people's lives (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson et al., 2000).

Although interdependence is operationalized using two types of interruptions, and despite facilitation being a core component of the RTM and RTT, the study of partner interference and facilitation together as they amplify individuals' negative and positive emotional reactions in tandem, has been largely unexplored. To address this, Solomon et al. (2019) encouraged scholars to examine the veracity of "the theory's logic about the amplification of both positive *and* negative emotion [which] remains an empirical question" (pp. 321–322). Indeed, the dearth of research related to how partner interdependence influences relational turbulence through the combined mechanisms of both negative and positive emotions raises questions given that various emotions correspond with distinct action tendencies in RTT (Solomon et al., 2016). Ultimately, we argue that examining the role of interference alongside facilitation as they relate to both negative and positive emotions (as parallel mediators) will provide a more comprehensive test of RTT's second proposition.

Theoretical Model

RTM/RTT research is primarily based on bivariate predictions (Goodboy et al., 2020) and scholars often test segments of theory in isolation. Despite ample evidence that demonstrates correlational support for RTT's logic, scholars argue for the need to test the theory in a more comprehensive manner (Goodboy et al., 2020; Solomon et al., 2019). Specifically, Solomon et al. (2016) argued that "attention to theoretical mechanisms is needed to guide tests, rather than applications of the framework" (p. 509). Heeding this call, our objective in this project was to examine the emotional mechanisms responsible for turbulence in close relationships as these pertain to proposition 2 from RTT.

RTT assumes that frequent goal interruptions cause people to experience both negative and positive emotions more intensely (Solomon et al., 2019). Thus, to get a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of interdependence processes as they pertain to relational turbulence, we examined interference alongside facilitation to document the effects of these interdependence variables on people's experiences of emotions toward their partners. Importantly, reports examining the effect of partner interdependence have found crossover effects by documenting the impact of facilitation on negative emotions, for example, (e.g., Knobloch et al., 2007; Solomon & Brisini, 2017). As such, we might expect interference and facilitation to uniquely associate with both negative and positive emotions. Furthermore, because RTT posits relational turbulence as an endogenous variable, our goal was to examine how negative and positive emotions served as mediators between relational interdependence and turbulence. Finally, meta-analytic scholarship has shown that partner interference and facilitation are correlated with experiences of relational turbulence (Goodboy et al., 2020). Thus, we might expect to find direct effects from these antecedents to turbulence. Considering these possibilities, we offered a theoretical path model (see Figure 1) to test specifications of RTT consistent with proposition 2 (Solomon et al., 2016).

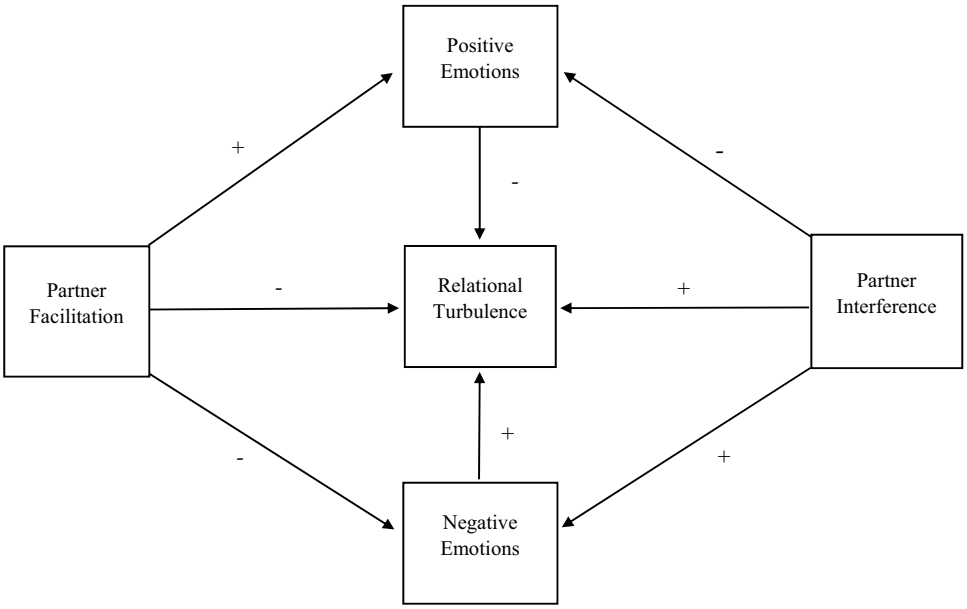

Figure 1 Proposed Parallel Multiple Mediator Model.

Method

Participants and Procedure

After obtaining acknowledgment from respective institutional review boards, participants were recruited to take part in this study through social networking and from upper and lower communication studies classes at universities located in the south and on the west coast of the United States. Students who were recruited from classrooms were offered minimal extra credit for their participation. Individuals could take part in this study if they were in a romantic relationship. After agreeing to participate, individuals were directed to an online survey where they provided data pertaining to their relationship. Participants in this study included 95 men and 246 women (eight individuals did not respond) with ages ranging from 18 to 68 (M = 23.0, Mdn = 21, SD = 7.3). These individuals reported being in their relationship for an average of 2.5 years (Mdn = 1.2, SD = 4.9). The number of years in the relationship was added to our model as a covariate.

Instrumentation

For all measures, reliability was calculated by estimating omega (ω) with 5000 bootstrap confidence intervals (Goodboy & Martin, 2020). Interdependence was measured using instruments to assess participants' perceptions of both partner interference and partner facilitation (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Solomon & Brisini, 2017). Each scale included five Likert items with response options ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree*. In particular, interference reflected perceptions of a partner hindering one's daily routines and was measured with the Interference from a Partner Scale. This scale asked participants the extent to which they agreed with statements such as: "My partner interferes with the plans I make" (M = 2.38, SD = 1.17; ω = .91, CI: .88, .93). Facilitation reflects a helpful aspect of interdependence in romantic relationships and was assessed using the Facilitation from a Partner Scale. This scale asked participants the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as: "My partner helps me to do the things I need to do each day" (M = 4.23, SD = 1.13; ω = .89, CI: .86, .91).

The emotions individuals experienced in their romantic relationships were measured using the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988). This measure asked participants about the extent to which they had experienced specific feelings/emotions in their relationships in the past few weeks. Responses were collected in a Likert-type format with options ranging from (1) *not at all* to (6) *extremely*. Experiences of negative emotions included being "upset" and "irritable," for example, (M = 2.28, SD = .98; ω = .95, CI: .87, .96). Examples of experiences of positive emotions included being "interested" and "excited" (M = 4.18, SD = 1.03; ω = .91, CI: .90, .93).

Relational turbulence was measured with the Relational Turbulence Scale (McLaren et al., 2011). This scale included four items reflecting individuals' experiences in their relationship, measured in the form of a six-point semantic differential. For

example, participants responded to this measure by indicating the extent to which their relationship had been experienced as "calm/turbulent" and "peaceful/stressful" (M = 2.69, SD = 1.20; ω = .91, CI: .89, .93).

Results

We tested our theoretical model using path analysis with maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus 8.7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Specifically, we tested a parallel multiple mediator model (Hayes, 2022) to examine whether interference and facilitation, would associate with relational turbulence, both directly and indirectly through amplified negative and positive emotions (controlling for one another) while holding constant the number of years individuals had been in their relationship. Confidence intervals for indirect effects were generated using 5000 percentile bootstrap samples. Correlations between study variables are displayed in Table 1.

The global fit of the model allowed us to retain it: χ^2 (1) = .004, p = .949; *RMSEA* = .000 [.000, .013]; *CFI* = 1.0, *TLI* = 1.0, *SRMR* = .001. However, we caution against emphasizing excellent global fit for any path model with 1 degree of freedom because it is nearly saturated (Goodboy & Kline, 2017). The standardized residuals of the model were small (ranging from −.170 to .204) indicating no issues with local fit. Results indicated that partner interference and facilitation were associated with both negative and positive emotional experiences. Our parallel multiple mediator model (with mediators controlling for each other) revealed: (1) a positive indirect effect of interference (holding constant facilitation) on relational turbulence through an increase in negative emotions experienced in the relationship (a_4b_2 = .149, Bootstrap CI: .092, .213), (2) a positive indirect effect of interference (holding constant facilitation) on relational turbulence through a decrease in positive emotions experienced (a_3b_1 = .062, Bootstrap CI: .024, .111), and (3) a negative indirect effect of facilitation (holding constant interference) on relational turbulence through an increase in positive emotions experienced (a_1b_1 = −.187, Bootstrap CI: −.266, −.121). Finally, controlling for emotions and facilitation, partner interference had a direct and positive effect on relational turbulence (c'_2 = .119 [.020, .217]). However, there was

Table 1 Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Partner Facilitation					
2. Partner Interference	−.417**				
3. Positive Emotions	.584**	−.389**			
4. Negative Emotions	−.287**	.450**	−.235**		
5. Relational Turbulence	−.426**	.443**	−.524**	.516**	
6. Years in a Relationship	.054	−.016	.127*	−.141**	−.090

Note. ** = correlations are significant at $p < .01$, * = correlations are significant at $p < .05$ (2-tailed).

no direct effect of partner facilitation (controlling for interference) on relational turbulence (c'_1 = −.069 [−.177, .039]). See Figure 2 for a complete reporting of unstandardized and standardized path coefficients, and Table 2 for unstandardized and standardized indirect effects.

Because RTT predicts more intense emotional responses from interference (proposition 2; Solomon et al., 2016), we compared parallel theoretical processes by examining the relative strength of the positive indirect effect originating from interference (a_4b_2 = .149; interference → negative emotions → relational turbulence) as it compared to the negative indirect effect originating from facilitation (a_1b_1 = −.187; facilitation → positive emotions → relational turbulence). To do so, we relied on methods proposed by Hayes (2022) to compare indirect effects that are different in sign. Specifically, Hayes (2022) recommended reporting a percentile bootstrap confidence interval for the sum of two indirect effects (in our case, a_1b_1 + a_4b_2 = −.038) to test if the mediated processes are the same in magnitude but opposite in sign. As Hayes (2022) explained, "if a confidence interval of the sum of those specific indirect effects includes zero, then the two specific indirect effects can be deemed equal in strength, whereas if the confidence interval excludes zero, then that is interpreted as a difference in the strength of the two indirect effects"

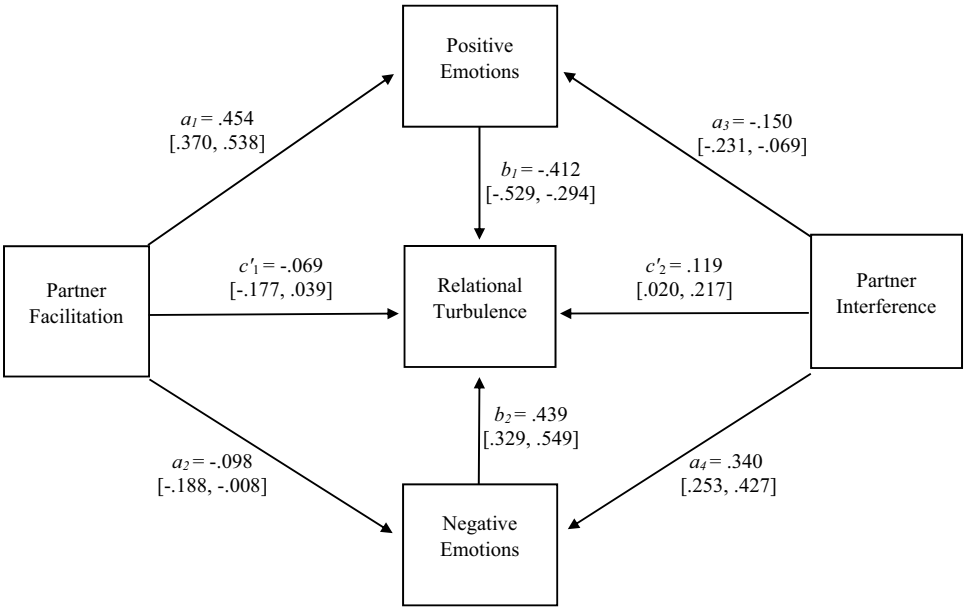

Figure 2 Parallel Multiple Mediator Model.

Note. Path coefficients are unstandardized. Years in a relationship was used as a covariate, but is not pictured. The following are unstandardized coefficients for the covariate: B = .020 [−.003, .043] on positive emotions, B = −.026 [−.039, −.013] on negative emotions, and B = .003 [−.019, .025] on relational turbulence. Standardized path coefficients are: a_1 = .502 [.419, .584], a_2 = −.112 [−.213, −.010], a_3 = −.172 [−.263, −.081], a_4 = .402 [.307, .497], b_1 = −.351 [−.447, −.255], b_2 = .363 [.276, .449], c'_1 = −.065 [−.165, .035], c'_2 = .116 [.021, .211].

Table 2 Unstandardized and Standardized Indirect Effects through Positive Emotions and Negative Emotions as Parallel Mediators

		LLCI	ULCI
Unstandardized Indirect Effect of Facilitation on Relational Turbulence	*ab*		
Positive Emotions	−.187	−.266	−.121
Negative Emotions	−.043	−.096	.005
Unstandardized Indirect Effect of Interference on Relational Turbulence			
Positive Emotions	.062	.024	.111
Negative Emotions	.149	.092	.213
Standardized Indirect Effect of Facilitation on Relational Turbulence	ab_{cs}		
Positive Emotions	−.176	−.246	−.117
Negative Emotions	−.040	−.090	.002
Standardized Indirect Effect of Interference on Relational Turbulence			
Positive Emotions	.060	.023	.106
Negative Emotions	.146	.088	.210

Note. *ab* = unstandardized indirect effect. ab_{cs} = completely standardized indirect effect. LLCI = Lower 2.5% of bootstrap confidence interval. ULCI = Upper 2.5% of bootstrap confidence interval. 95% (percentile) bootstrap confidence intervals from 5000 samples. The indirect effect of facilitation on relational turbulence through positive emotions is significantly different (i.e., a stronger process) compared to the indirect effect through negative emotions (−.144; Bootstrap CI: −.240, −.051). The indirect effect of interference on relational turbulence through negative emotions is significantly different (i.e., stronger) compared to the indirect effect through positive emotions (−.087; Bootstrap CI: −.170, −.003).

(p. 179). The percentile bootstrap confidence interval (5000 samples) accompanying the sum of the parallel indirect effects included zero (95% Bootstrap CI: −.137, .053) indicating equivalent indirect effects. These results provide evidence that the indirect effect of interference on turbulence through negative emotional experiences and the indirect effect of facilitation on turbulence through positive emotional experiences may be considered equal in strength.

Discussion

Research on the RTM and RTT has documented correlations between relationship parameters and experiences that coalesce into relational turbulence. Though these correlations are robust (Goodboy et al., 2020), the associations between partner interdependence and intensified emotions as both negative and positive experiences have not received as much scholarly attention (Solomon et al., 2019). Because the theoretical focus of interdependence within RTT is typically centered on its ability to produce negative emotions as a response to daily disruptions (e.g., Knobloch et al., 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Solomon & Brisini, 2017, 2019), researchers have not thoroughly explored the possibility that there may be a parallel process at work through positive emotions that could explain increases in stability in relationships.

Indeed, results from our study indicate that interference and facilitation are similarly associated with relational turbulence through partners' experiences of emotions in the relationship. As such, we didn't find evidence for a special emphasis for the role of interference in affective arousal. Instead, it appears that the indirect effect of partner facilitation on relational turbulence because of individuals' positive emotions is similar in magnitude (but opposite in sign) to the indirect effect of interference on turbulence by way of negative emotions. Considering our findings, the results from our study highlight the value of measuring both negative and positive emotions stemming from partner interruptions including both partner interference and facilitation. Thus, as research on relational turbulence moves forward, researchers may be wise to take into account model specifications that include helpful behaviors and positive emotions as they continue to test propositions of RTT.

Still, the results from our study demonstrate that partner facilitation and interference may associate with relational turbulence in different ways. For instance, although partner facilitation was associated with decreased negative emotional experiences, we found that its relationship with relational turbulence only occurred indirectly and through its association with positive emotions. Moreover, the direct effect of facilitation on turbulence was nonsignificant, indicating that helpful experiences in romantic relationships are not central to experiences of turbulence after controlling for emotions. Partner interference, on the other hand, had a more thorough association with turbulence. Specifically, interference was associated with turbulence indirectly through both negative and positive emotions (controlling for each other). In addition, interference was directly associated with turbulence. These results indicate that partner interruptions associate with people's experiences of their relationships as being chaotic above and beyond the emotional arousal they produce. Ultimately, despite similar indirect effects between interference and facilitation as these pertain to relational turbulence through experiences of negative and positive emotions (respectively), the results noted here lend support to the sentiment that exists in axiom 2 and proposition 2 of RTT regarding the special role of partner interference in the turbulence process (Solomon et al., 2016). If these results can be further substantiated, they would indicate that interference more comprehensively associates with turbulence compared to facilitation and corroborate the argument that they are particularly salient to people's experiences of turmoil in their relationships (Solomon et al., 2016).

From a practical perspective, our results may help individuals who are currently in romantic relationships. Specifically, considering that interference and its negative emotional consequences are inevitable in close relationships (Knobloch et al., 2007), individuals might take comfort knowing that experiences of turbulence can potentially be reduced with the addition of positive emotional experiences stemming from facilitation. If this is the case, then positive emotional experiences that occur in romantic unions as the result of partner facilitation stand to benefit relational stability to the extent that they may reduce perceptions of turbulence and facilitate a more harmonious impression of these relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without its limitations. For instance, our measure of emotions was operationalized at a general level to reflect a broad sense of negativity or positivity within romantic relationships. Moving forward, turbulence scholars might choose to include measures of discrete emotions (such as happiness, surprise, sadness, or anger) to provide insight regarding how specific emotions impact turbulence in more nuanced ways. Moreover, the results of our project are limited by the nature of the sample used to collect data. Though we ensured that all individuals reported in this study were in romantic relationships, most of our participants were enrolled in college and most were women. Thus, results from this project may not generalize to all people and to those who are in different stages of their lives.

Another limitation includes the cross-sectional nature of our data collection. Because data were only collected at one point in time, we had to rely on participants' memories of their relationship as it pertained to variables such as their experienced emotions and turbulence. In addition, the nature of our data makes it impossible to produce causal claims. Because interference and the facilitation of daily routines are an everyday manifestation of interdependence, moving forward, an intensive longitudinal study using experience sampling (e.g., daily surveys or daily diaries) would allow researchers to collect data from participants as they experience their relationships in daily life. Furthermore, an intensive longitudinal methodology would allow researchers to specify the causal order of variables as it applies to the specific mechanisms linking interdependence, emotional experiences, and relational turbulence (e.g., yesterday's interference from a partner predicts today's anger toward the partner; more facilitation from a partner for the week predicts positive emotions that week and next week) as purported by RTT.

Conclusion

In RTT, interdependence between relational partners is modeled to associate with intensified emotions and, in turn, relational turbulence. Our study verified this to be the case as we showed that both interference and facilitation were associated with relational turbulence through heightened emotional experiences. Still, our study demonstrated that while interference was associated with relational turbulence directly and indirectly through both an increase in negative emotions and a decrease in positive emotions, partner facilitation was associated with relational turbulence only through its ability to foster positive experiences. Importantly, however, we showed that the indirect effect of interference on turbulence through negative emotions and the indirect effect of facilitation on turbulence through positive emotions were roughly equal in strength. That said, as it pertains to proposition 2 of RTT, it seems reasonable to (tentatively) conclude that parallel and unique emotional processes are at work that explain chaotic relational states from interdependent partners who interrupt daily routines.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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