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To cite this article: Kevin Knoster , Heath A. Howard , Alan K. Goodboy & Megan R. Dillow (2020) Spousal interference and relational turbulence during the COVID-19 pandemic, Communication Research Reports, 37:5, 254-262, DOI: [10.1080/08824096.2020.1841621](https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2020.1841621)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2020.1841621>



Published online: 02 Dec 2020.



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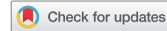
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Spousal interference and relational turbulence during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Relational Turbulence Theory proposes that when romantic partners interrupt everyday routines in response to transitions, affective arousal will be heightened in the form of more intense emotions. The goal of this study was to test this theoretical logic in a married sample of 165 spouses during the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (April, 2020). Participants completed an online survey measuring how often their spouse interfered with their daily routines, the negative emotions they experienced when interacting with their spouse, and how much turbulence they perceived in the marriage. Results of a parallel multiple mediation model provided support for the theory in the context of this global pandemic; anger and sadness toward the spouse independently mediated the effect of interference from that spouse on relational turbulence in the marriage.

KEYWORDS

Relational turbulence;
COVID-19 pandemic;
negative emotions; partner
interference

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented societal change around the world, with wide-ranging impacts on the global economy and the everyday interactions of those engaging in social distancing and self-quarantining. As individuals continuously adapt to the rapidly shifting economic and social landscape, their relationships with friends, family, and loved ones are thrust into states of perpetual transition. Although transitions constitute a natural part of any relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004), the unanticipated, far-reaching, and uncertain – but clearly destructive – influence of the COVID-19 pandemic makes the relational transitions that individuals must currently navigate particularly poignant.

For example, face-to-face gatherings were/are at some points legally restricted in parts of the United States (National Academy for State Health Policy [NASHP] Staff, 2020), and individuals sharing a household may be forced into closer physical proximity with one another for greater lengths of time than is preferable as a result of self-quarantine measures and stay-at-home orders. Moreover, the financial security and stability of a household may be compromised due to loss of employment related to COVID-19, or households may be struggling with the illness or passing of a loved one due to COVID-19 (United

Nations, 2020). Disruptions of this magnitude can precipitate crisis and upheaval in even the closest relationships, catalyzing uncertainty and undermining health and well-being (Stanley & Markman, 2020) in ways that can culminate in a variety of harmful behavioral outcomes, such as excessive alcohol consumption and domestic violence (Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020). The transitions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic thus represent a unique and acute threat to the rules, rituals, and routines which constitute one's relationships with others, as well as the overall health and well-being of the broader family systems to which one belongs (Prime, Wade, & Brown, 2020).

Previous research from the relational turbulence approach makes clear that the manner in which married couples in particular interact during transitions plays an important part in shaping how those transitions are managed (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Theiss, Estlein, & Weber, 2013). Specifically, depending on whether partners facilitate or interfere with each other's goals during times of transition, spouses may experience a variety of emotional responses which, in turn, exacerbate the turbulence experienced in their marriage (Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016). Particularly relevant to this study is research suggesting the applicability of Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT; Solomon et al., 2016) to especially intense or extreme health-related episodes (e.g., miscarriage; Tian & Solomon, 2020), revealing partners' facilitation and interference contributes to turbulence over and above the occurrence of specific episodes in and of themselves (even when those experiences are as extreme as the loss of a child). The predictive and explanatory utility of RTT in such contexts suggests there may be value in examining relational turbulence processes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – itself an extreme experience with potentially severe implications. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to employ RTT (Solomon et al., 2016) as a theoretical framework for examining spouses' experiences with, as well as responses to, relational transitions stemming from the novel context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relational turbulence theory

RTT recognizes that transitions are changes to a relational environment that can significantly alter patterns of interdependence in a marriage. Specifically, a transition refers to any “period of discontinuity between times of relative stability, during which individuals adapt to changing roles, identities, and circumstances” (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 510). As these transitions arise (e.g., job loss, career change, health issues, death of a loved one, birth of a child; Brisini, Solomon, & Nussbaum, 2018), relationships become characterized by an element of ambiguity which was not present previously, producing relational uncertainty (i.e., when individuals are unsure of their role in

a relationship, their partners' role in a relationship, or the overall state of a relationship; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004).

At the same time, relational transitions induce change in partners' receptivity to one another's influence (i.e., the extent to which partners are interdependent in pursuing goals) while performing daily tasks. That is, as partners' mutual influence increases, so does their likelihood of interrupting one another's day-to-day behaviors and routines. Partners may experience interruptions as *facilitation* (i.e., when partners assist one another in achieving goals) or *interference* (i.e., when partners prevent one another from achieving goals), which are theorized to amplify emotional reactions. RTT considers spouses' emotional reactions to interruptions as an important causal mechanism in influencing the extent to which *relational turbulence* (i.e., partners' perceptions of a relationship as chaotic) eventually develops. Central to RTT is the well-evidenced tenet that interference from partners arouses more intense negative emotional responses (e.g., sadness, anger), thereby enhancing the amount of turbulence in a relationship (Solomon et al., 2016).

Several studies have examined the salience of interference from partners and negative emotional responses (particularly anger and sadness) in romantic couples' experiences with relational turbulence, reporting that individuals experience negative emotions when their partners interfere with their daily goals (e.g., Brisini & Solomon, 2019; King & La Valley, 2019; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Brisini, 2019; Tian & Solomon, 2020). These studies have repeatedly documented bivariate associations between negative emotions, interference, and turbulence, and RTT stipulates the causal mechanisms that explain these relationships. RTT specifically proposes that "through their effect on affective arousal, interruptions from a partner, particularly those that interfere with everyday routines, cause people to experience more intense emotions in response to specific episodes" (proposition 2, p. 515), thereby enhancing relational turbulence (Solomon et al., 2016). In other words, RTT proposes that repeated exposure to emotionally charged communication episodes should mediate the association between interference from one's partner and the amount of turbulence experienced in the romantic relationship.

Applying RTT to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (2020) has emphasized the importance of individuals continuing their daily routines (e.g., regular exercise, hobbies, cleaning, contact with loved ones), characterizing those routines as essential for maintaining positive mental health and psychosocial well-being. According to RTT, spousal interference with these important routines during the pandemic should stimulate negative emotional responses which in turn, heighten relational turbulence. Based upon this reasoning, and in line with the second proposition of RTT (Solomon et al., 2016), we hypothesized that negative emotions toward a spouse (i.e., anger and sadness) will mediate the relationship between

interference from a spouse and relational turbulence for married couples navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

H: Negative emotional responses (anger, sadness) from interacting with a spouse will mediate the effect of interference from spouses on relational turbulence.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were 165 individuals in married relationships recruited from a network sample (54 men, 108 women, and three participants who did not indicate their sex). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 74 years ($M = 36.11$, $SD = 14.90$). There were 111 participants who identified as White/Caucasian, 22 participants who identified as Middle Eastern, 17 participants who identified as Black/African American, five participants who identified as Asian/Asian American, five participants who identified as Hispanic, one participant who identified as biracial,” and four participants who did not indicate their race or ethnicity. The length of participants’ marriages ranged from less than less than one year to 52 years ($M = 15.178$, $SD = 12.202$). Most spouses lived together ($n = 137$). Of those who had adult children, 64 of them moved back home during the pandemic. Forty-five spouses had been designated as essential workers, and eighty spouses had indicated they lost income from the pandemic.

Measurement

Married participants completed an anonymous survey during April 2020 including measures of interference from partners, relational turbulence, and negative emotions that were operationalized using scales developed by previous research. Interference from spouses was measured by the Interference from a Partner Scale (Solomon & Brisini, 2017). This instrument ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.24$) prompts respondents to indicate their level of agreement (on a scale from 1 [*strongly disagree*] to 6 [*strongly agree*]) with five statements describing the extent to which their partners interfere with their daily goals (e.g., “My spouse interferes with the plans that I make”). Composite reliability (ω) for this scale was .936 [95% CI: .909, .957]. Relational turbulence was assessed with the Relational Turbulence Scale (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012), which prompts respondents to describe their romantic relationship using four 6-point semantic differential scales ranging from *chaotic* to *stable* (reverse coded), *calm* to *turbulent*, *tumultuous* to *running smoothly* (reverse coded), and *peaceful* to *stressful* ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.29$). Composite reliability (ω) for this scale was .898 [95% CI: .860, .930]. Negative emotions were measured using two subscales developed by Dillard, Kinney, and Cruz (1996) which

operationalize anger and sadness. Participants were presented with the stem “During the past month of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I have interacted with my spouse, I have felt;” then responded referencing specific emotions on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Anger contained three items: angry, mad, and annoyed ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.20$, $\omega = .891$ [95% CI: .844, .926]). Sadness contained four items: sad, gloomy, depressed, and sorrowful ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.28$, $\omega = .951$ [95% CI: .929, .967]).

Results

Correlations between all study variables are provided in Table 1.

To test RTT’s second theoretical proposition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we specified a parallel multiple mediation model using ordinary least squares path analysis in PROCESS version 3.5 (Hayes, 2018). Confidence intervals for indirect effects were generated using 5,000 percentile bootstrap samples. Path estimates and effect sizes are reported in Figure 1.

Table 1. Correlation matrix ($N = 165$).

Variables	1	2	3
1. Interference	—		
2. Sadness	.424 [.271, .568]	—	
3. Anger	.453 [.303, .595]	.709 [.607, .797]	—
4. Relational Turbulence	.475 [.345, .600]	.522 [.403, .636]	.534 [.384, .663]

Confidence intervals are in brackets using 5,000 percentile bootstrap samples.

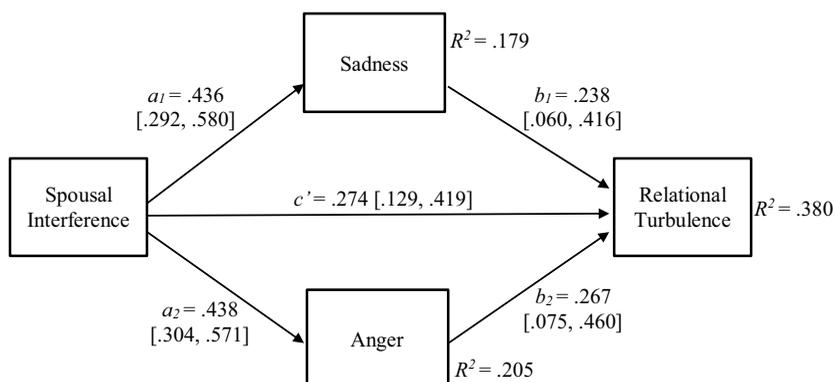


Figure 1. Parallel mediation model predicting relational turbulence. All path coefficients are unstandardized and significant at $p < .01$.

Results from the parallel multiple mediation model supported the hypothesis. Interference from a spouse indirectly increased relational turbulence independently through sadness ($a_1b_1 = .104$, CI [.011, .208]; $a_1b_{1cs} = .100$) and through anger ($a_2b_2 = .117$, [.014, .239]; $a_2b_{2cs} = .112$), controlling for each other as mediators. Notably, spousal interference also had a direct effect on relational turbulence, controlling for sadness and anger ($c1' = .274$ [.129, .419]; $c'_{cs} = .263$).

Discussion

Findings from this study augment the wealth of extant turbulence research that has confirmed substantial associations among partner interference, negative emotions, and elevated relational turbulence in the wake of a host of transitions that impact romantic relationships (e.g., Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). As RTT pivots away from a focus on transitions as the catalyst for these relational processes, more recent turbulence research has tested the theory in the milieu of comparatively intense relational experiences, often those that are particularly worthy of study due to their physical and/or psychological health implications. These studies have thus far shown support for various aspects of the theory, such as in the contexts of women's grief after miscarriage (Tian & Solomon, 2020) and service members' recent return from military deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). The current study expands this body of knowledge by providing additional evidence for the causal mechanisms proposed by RTT in the as-yet untested context of a global pandemic. While the deleterious and far-reaching impact of COVID-19 has certainly evoked negative emotional responses in and of itself (e.g., Rajkumar, 2020), this study illuminates the salience of spousal interference in exacerbating those emotional responses in a manner conducive to turbulence. In conjunction with related research, this study provides additional evidence of the robust nature of the theory's explanatory and predictive utility across a range of intense, health-related relational stressors, evincing the broad scope of the RTT.

In terms of practical implications, spouses should be cognizant of their behaviors and attempt to interfere less with each other's daily routines and activities as they adjust to challenges during the pandemic. Of course, some interruptions are likely to be inevitable due to self-quarantining and radical lifestyle changes (e.g., both spouses now working from home while also taking responsibility for their young children's education). Adjustments to the "new normal" will require husbands and wives to be mindful of the ways they might be unintentionally making things more difficult for their spouse's everyday aspirations. Based on the findings from our study, it would be helpful to pay particular attention to spouses' negative emotional states and, if a partner seems angry or upset, question the possibility that one's own disruptive behaviors played a role in provoking those negative feelings. Unhappy marriages include greater exchanges of negative affect (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995); thus, spouses might consider and inquire about the role they play in creating this

negative affect when they interfere with their spouses' daily routines. In scenarios where spousal interferences occur with regularity, proactive and purposeful communication regarding interruptions may be warranted to assist unaware spouses in recognizing ongoing interference as obtrusive and to prompt behavioral change.

The specific ways in which spouses interact may also assist in attenuating different aspects of the turbulence they experience, particularly when they engage in transition processing communication (Brisini et al., 2018). Transition processing communication between spouses in the form of *increasing interaction* (e.g., actively scheduling more quality time together during the pandemic), *promoting connection* (e.g., using open communication to disclose feelings as a couple during the pandemic), *promoting feeling situated* (e.g., trying to make sense of the pandemic and how it has changed the marriage in positive ways), and *increasing confidence in the relationship* (e.g., reaffirming to each other that the marriage will endure beyond the pandemic) may assist husbands and wives in successfully navigating their ongoing pandemic-related turbulence. Spouses might also communicate strategically with one another concerning ways in which they can enact behaviors that help support (as opposed to merely eliminating behaviors that obstruct) each other's everyday goals and activities during the ongoing health crisis.

Although this study suggests important theoretical and practical pandemic-related implications, the results should be interpreted with an understanding of the limitations that were present. The primary limitation is that the causal ordering of variables was specified from cross-sectional survey data. As such, this study's design with observational data captured at one time point cannot offer any insight into causality when testing indirect effects (Kline, 2015). Rather, the causal ordering of variables was explicitly provided by RTT in axiom 2 and proposition 2 (Solomon et al., 2016). As Hayes (2018) points out, the mathematics in testing mediation do not speak to causality; instead, causal inferences are interpreted by respecting the substantive theory that postulates causal processes. That said, future researchers interested in testing causal processes in RTT could generate novel ways to conduct experiments to test these processes. For instance, perhaps researchers could randomly assign spouses to an intervention to learn how to reduce interference, which in turn, should lessen affective arousal and help alleviate relational turbulence. Experimental designs are, of course, better suited to making causal claims of mediation (Kline, 2015).

In conclusion, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, husbands and wives who had their everyday routines disrupted by their spouses felt negative emotions toward them and perceived their marriage to be more turbulent. Married couples might consider strategies to reduce this daily interference to create more stability in their marriage during this difficult transition. By doing so, they could avoid the negative feelings that accompany the disruption of their routines, since establishing and maintaining daily routines is especially important in preserving

one's psychological health during the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Results from this study suggest that maintaining these daily routines by eliminating spousal interference and subsequent turbulence is also key for preserving relational health.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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