Uncertainty is a pervasive part of human interaction (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991; Brashers, 2001; Kramer, 2004). It echoes through the hallways of hospitals, corporate headquarters, and shopping malls. It softens the claims of meteorologists who forecast the weather on the television news. It surrounds expectant mothers and fathers who assemble to learn about the birthing process. It envelops the trading frenzy on the floor of the stock exchange. It permeates the faces of teachers and students on the first day of school. It blankets airport travelers in their quest to clear security checkpoints, board flights, and retrieve luggage. It pervades negotiations between foreign diplomats. It fills casinos and racetracks with excitement. It qualifies the predictions of pollsters on Election Day. It even penetrates day-to-day interactions between friends, siblings, and spouses.

Perhaps because uncertainty is such a fundamental part of relating to others, it occupies a central place in the study of interpersonal communication. Uncertainty has received systematic attention for its role in shaping communication between acquaintances (Sunnafrank, 1990; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), doctors and patients (Brashers, 2001; Gordon, Joos, & Byrne, 2000; Mishel, 1999), employers and employees (Kramer, 2004), and strangers hailing from different cultural backgrounds (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). Work on close relationships has investigated uncertainty between parents and children.
My program of research examines how people communicate when they are grappling with questions about the nature of a close relationship. I believe that this topic is important to understand for two reasons. First, relational uncertainty predicts the well-being of relationships (Knobloch, 2008; Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Perhaps more notably, how people communicate under conditions of relational uncertainty predicts whether relationships succeed or fail (Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). Both reasons suggest that relational uncertainty merits study because it is closely tied to the health of intimate associations.

I devote this chapter to telling the story of the relational uncertainty construct. By describing how scholarship has unfolded, I hope to accomplish three objectives. One is to organize the literature. A second is to describe the lessons I have learned while conducting research on relational uncertainty. A third is to identify how recent conceptual advances may inform future research. I begin the story by explaining the origins of the uncertainty construct within the field.

The Roots of Uncertainty Within Interpersonal Communication

Uncertainty occurs when people are unsure about their environment (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). More specifically, uncertainty arises from the quantity of possible outcomes and the probability that each outcome may transpire (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Uncertainty is low when only one alternative is likely to happen; it is high when several alternatives are equally likely to happen. Uncertainty exists when individuals lack confidence in their ability to predict future outcomes and explain past outcomes (Berger & Bradac, 1982). People have difficulty predicting future outcomes when they are unsure which possibility is most likely to occur. Individuals have difficulty explaining past outcomes when they are unsure why an event happened. In short, uncertainty denotes people’s confidence in their predictive power and explanatory power (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

The construct possesses a storied history in the field of interpersonal communication (Bradac, 2001). Over half a century ago, information theory first considered the role of uncertainty in the transmission of messages (Shannon...
The theory employed a mathematical model to specify how much information messages can carry with minimal distortion. Messages containing unique information are most effective for reducing uncertainty. Because noise limits the amount of information messages can convey, messages optimize signal transmission by balancing predictable redundancy with unpredictable data. Information theory laid a foundation for scholars to explicate uncertainty in dyadic interaction.

Theories of attribution also paved the way for conceptualizing uncertainty. Heider (1958) characterized people as “naïve scientists” who are motivated to make sense of the world around them. He proposed that individuals discern the causes of behavior to render their surroundings predictable. Other scholars extended Heider’s (1958) ideas by claiming that people make attributions for behavior in terms of locus, stability, control, and globality (e.g., Kelley, 1971; Manusov & Harvey, 2001; Weiner, 1986). Attribution theories shed light on uncertainty by arguing that individuals are motivated to generate explanations for behavior.

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) examined uncertainty in the domain of acquaintance (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). URT built on information theory and attribution theories to explicate how strangers behave in initial interaction. From information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), URT borrowed the idea that uncertainty stems from the number and likelihood of alternatives that may occur. From attribution theories (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1971), URT derived the premise that individuals are motivated to predict and explain their surroundings. URT argued that uncertainty is salient in acquaintance because strangers lack information about each other’s attitudes, values, and characteristics. The theory also proposed axioms linking uncertainty with five features of message production (verbal communication, nonverbal expressiveness, information seeking, intimacy of communication content, and reciprocity) and two features of message processing (judgments of similarity and liking).

After a decade that saw an explosion of research on uncertainty (for reviews, see Berger, 1987, 1988), predicted outcome value theory (POV) reformulated the axioms of URT by arguing that individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Sunnafrank, 1986, 1990). Whereas URT suggested that principles of uncertainty reduction are superior to principles of resource exchange for predicting people’s behavior in initial interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), POV embraced the opposite position. POV employed a social exchange perspective to derive competing predictions about how individuals communicate with acquaintances (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). POV proposed that reducing uncertainty helps individuals decide whether additional
interaction with a stranger will be rewarding or costly. Consequently, POV posited that people’s motivation to dispel uncertainty is subordinate to the goal of anticipating the advantages and disadvantages of relationship development. Berger (1986) defended URT by claiming that uncertainty reduction must occur before individuals can forecast the rewards and costs of subsequent interaction.

The Emergence of Relational Uncertainty

As the debate about the relative merits of URT and POV raged on (e.g., Grove & Werkman, 1991; Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990; Sunnafrank, 1990), some scholars discarded the acquaintance context in favor of examining uncertainty within intimate associations (e.g., Berger & Bradac, 1982; Prisbell & Andersen, 1980). For example, Parks and Adelman (1983) found that individuals are particularly uncertain when they have limited contact with a dating partner’s friends and family members. Gudykunst (1985) observed that uncertainty is negatively correlated with similarity and liking between friends. In a pair of studies, Planalp and Honeycutt (1985) and Planalp et al. (1988) discovered that people experience events that cause them to question some aspect of a friendship or dating relationship. These investigations provided empirical evidence that uncertainty is salient beyond the bounds of relationship formation.

Vestiges of URT and POV were apparent in the early forays into the context of close relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). Perhaps the most notable holdover was a focus on questions about partners. URT and POV emphasized partners as the most relevant source of uncertainty within acquaintance (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991; Sunnafrank, 1990), and scholars continued to privilege doubts about partners in the first studies of intimate associations. All of the investigations employed a version of the Clatterbuck Uncertainty Evaluation Scale (CLUES) (Clatterbuck, 1979), the instrument prominent in research on URT and POV. The CLUES items gauge uncertainty by asking people how confident they are in their ability to make attributions for a partner’s behavior. Sample items include the following: (a) How confident are you of your general ability to predict how your partner will behave? (b) How accurate are you at predicting the values your partner holds? (c) How well do you know your partner? The conceptual and operational definitions of uncertainty in early work on close relationships mirrored the partner predictability issues foregrounded by URT and POV.

Over time, scholars began to consider how uncertainty may be different within established relationships versus acquaintances. Turner (1990)
conducted a pioneering but unheralded study in which she worked to tailor the uncertainty construct to the context of marriage. She developed a relationship-focused measure of attributional confidence (RECLUES) modeled after Clatterbuck’s (1979) scale. Sample items include the following: (a) How confident are you of your general ability to predict the future of your relationship? (b) How sure are you about the closeness of your relationship? (c) How confident are you in your ability to explain the events in your relationship? Six years later, W. A. Afifi and Reichert (1996) created a scale measuring people’s uncertainty about their partner’s commitment to a courtship (e.g., “If you were asked about what this person envisions for your relationship, how certain would you be with your answer?”). Both investigations marked initial attempts to examine the themes of uncertainty in established relationships.

I began my program of research with the goal of reconceptualizing uncertainty within the domain of close relationships. A first task was explication. To that end, Denise Solomon and I defined relational uncertainty as the questions people have about involvement within close relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). We crafted the construct to possess a more narrow scope than the one spotlighted by URT and POV. Whereas relational uncertainty refers to the doubts individuals have about participating in a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a), uncertainty in URT and POV encompasses any issue that could spark doubts about another person.

**Sources of Relational Uncertainty**

A next step was to identify the sources of relational uncertainty. We trained a research assistant to interview individuals about their experiences of uncertainty within courtship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Participants discussed partner and relationship predictability issues, but they also identified another source of doubt. Most participants mentioned uncertainty about their own involvement in the relationship (“Do I really like this person?” “I’m not sure if I want to get involved in a relationship.” “I don’t know how much I am willing to commit to this relationship.”). At first, we were struck by the novelty of people’s focus on their own doubts. A careful rereading of Berger and Bradac’s (1982) seminal book, however, revealed that they had anticipated this insight years earlier: “In fact, we would argue that in order for a relationship to continue, it is important that the persons involved in the relationship consistently update their fund of knowledge about themselves, their relational partner, and their relationship” (pp. 12–13).
We proceeded to conceptualize relational uncertainty as an umbrella term that refers to questions arising from self, partner, and relationship sources (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a). Self uncertainty involves the doubts people have about their own involvement in a relationship (“How certain am I about my feelings for my partner?”). Partner uncertainty encompasses the questions individuals have about their partner’s involvement in a relationship (“How certain am I about my partner’s feelings for me?”). Relationship uncertainty includes the doubts people have about the relationship as a whole (“How certain am I about where this relationship is going?”). Whereas self and partner uncertainty focus on individuals, relationship uncertainty exists at a higher level of abstraction because it considers the dyad as a unit (Berger & Bradac, 1982).

Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty are interrelated yet distinct constructs (Knobloch, 2007a). Although their bivariate correlations typically range from \( r = .60 \) to \( r = .85 \) (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002b, 2005), the strong positive zero-order correlations mask more complex associations. Self and partner uncertainty are negatively associated when relationship uncertainty is partialled out (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), which implies that people tend to experience either self uncertainty or partner uncertainty when relationship uncertainty is held constant. Moreover, the three sources diverge in their associations with people’s appraisals of interference from partners (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), their perceptions of how much social network members hinder their courtship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006), the directness of their communication about irritations (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b), their feelings of jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a), and their reports of how much time they spend thinking about their courtship (Knobloch, 2007b). Not surprisingly, then, the sources of relational uncertainty do not form a unidimensional first-order or second-order factor (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002b; Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

Levels of Relational Uncertainty

Relational uncertainty occurs on both global and episodic levels (Knobloch, 2007a). Relational uncertainty on a global level encompasses people’s general doubts about the nature of a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a). It can be assessed by asking individuals to report their overall perceptions of self uncertainty (“How certain am I about how much I want to pursue this relationship?”), partner uncertainty (“How certain am I about how much my partner wants to pursue this relationship?”), and relationship uncertainty (“How certain am I about the future of this relationship?”).
Global relational uncertainty is useful for predicting message production and processing under routine circumstances (Knobloch, 2006; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). Perhaps for this reason, most research has examined relational uncertainty on a global level (Knobloch, 2007a).

Relational uncertainty on an episodic level refers to the questions people experience due to a discrete event (Knobloch, 2005; Knobloch & Solomon, 2003; Planalp et al., 1988). Scholars have documented the kinds of events that spark episodic relational uncertainty within friendships and dating relationships (W. A. Afifi & Metts, 1998; Emmers & Canary, 1996; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp et al., 1988), within cross-cultural relationships (Sodetani & Gudykunst, 1987), and within marriages (Turner, 1990). According to this work, relational uncertainty increasing events often involve deception, competing relationships, and surprising changes in a partner’s behavior (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Planalp et al., 1988; Turner, 1990).

Episodic relational uncertainty can be measured in two ways. One option is to ask participants to report on an event they have experienced recently (“How much did this event increase my uncertainty about my view of this relationship?”). A second alternative is to solicit participants’ appraisals of a hypothetical event (“How much would this event increase my uncertainty about my partner’s view of this relationship?”). Episodic relational uncertainty is valuable for documenting the strategies people use to communicate about unexpected events (Knobloch, 2005; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b, 2003).

**Themes of Relational Uncertainty**

Whereas the sources and levels of relational uncertainty are relevant across interpersonal associations, the themes of relational uncertainty vary by dyadic context (Knobloch, 2008). Dating partners tend to experience relational uncertainty about issues internal to their courtship, including questions about their desire for the relationship, their goals for its development, and the mutuality of feelings between partners (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Spouses usually grapple with relational uncertainty about external forces that may affect their marriage, including questions about children, finances, extended family, household chores, and career trajectories (Knobloch, 2008). Within the context of illness, people often contend with relational uncertainty tied to their diagnosis, including questions about how to disclose their illness, seek social support, and set boundaries for interaction (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Brashers et al., 2003). These nuances demonstrate that the themes of relational uncertainty are linked to the dyadic context under investigation (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a).
In sum, scholars recognized the relevance of relational uncertainty to intimate associations very shortly after the birth of URT (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Prisbell & Andersen, 1980). Initial investigations followed URT’s lead by emphasizing questions about partners (Gudykunst, 1985; Parks & Adelman, 1983), but later work accentuated self, partner, and relationship sources of doubt (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Other research provided a more nuanced view of the levels (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Turner, 1990) and themes (Knobloch, 2008; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a) of relational uncertainty. This explication laid a foundation for investigating the outcomes of relational uncertainty. I turn to that chapter of the story next.

**Outcomes of Relational Uncertainty**

Scholarship on the outcomes of relational uncertainty implies that relating is difficult when people are unsure about involvement (Knobloch, 2007a). This finding is consistent across investigations of cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, message production, and message processing. I describe the research on each outcome in the following subsections.

**Cognition**

Work on cognitive outcomes suggests that relational uncertainty corresponds with a pessimistic outlook. Relational uncertainty is positively correlated with people’s appraisals of the severity of irritating partner behavior (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b) and the severity of unexpected events (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b) within courtship. It also is positively associated with people’s perceptions that conversations with their spouse are threatening to themselves and to their marriage (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007). Relational uncertainty is negatively correlated with individuals’ reports of the stability of their courtship (Knobloch, 2007b). Similarly, it is negatively associated with people’s perceptions that their friends and family members are supportive of their courtship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). In sum, individuals experiencing relational uncertainty may unfavorably evaluate their partner, their relationship, and even members of their social network.

**Emotion**

Research on emotional outcomes hints at similar negativity. Relational uncertainty on a global level is positively correlated with dating partners’ feelings of anger, sadness, and fear (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007).
Similarly, global relational uncertainty is positively associated with jealousy according to both cross-sectional (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Knobloch et al., 2001) and longitudinal (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a) research. Episodic relational uncertainty is positively correlated with dating partners’ reports of anger, sadness, and fear in conjunction with unexpected events (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). These results suggest that people grappling with relational uncertainty may feel more negative emotion.

**Message Production**

Communicating with a partner can be hazardous when people lack information about the nature of a relationship (W. A. Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Knobloch, 2006; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Myriad embarrassing outcomes can transpire: Individuals may damage their image, appear needy or clumsy, make the other person uncomfortable, discover that partners are mismatched in their feelings, and/or jeopardize the relationship (W. A. Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Because people experiencing relational uncertainty do not possess the contextual information they need to rule out potential pitfalls, they may have to attend to every possible face threat (Knobloch, 2006). Accordingly, communicating with a partner may be more risky under conditions of relational uncertainty.

Data imply that individuals are more reluctant to talk about face-threatening episodes when they are experiencing relational uncertainty. In fact, relational uncertainty is negatively correlated with people’s propensity to discuss jealousy with their partner (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a) and their willingness to confront their partner about unexpected incidents (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). Similarly, partner and relationship uncertainty are negatively associated with direct communication about irritating partner behavior (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). These results suggest that people may evade communicating about embarrassing events under conditions of relational uncertainty.

If individuals experiencing relational uncertainty are reticent about specific episodes, then they may hesitate to communicate about a host of face-threatening topics. My colleague and I worked to identify the breadth of issues that may be off-limits under conditions of relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). We asked 216 participants in dating relationships to identify the topics they avoid discussing with their partner. Consistent with previous research (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), individuals reported avoiding issues such as (a) the state of the relationship, (b) norms for appropriate behavior, (c) extradyadic activity, (d) prior romantic relationships, (e) conflict-inducing topics, and (f) negative life experiences.
Relational uncertainty was positively associated with the number of avoided topics participants identified. Also as we predicted, relational uncertainty was positively associated with people’s appraisals of how much talking about the avoided topics would damage their image and harm their courtship. Our results cohere with similar studies documenting a positive correlation between relational uncertainty and topic avoidance within cross-sex friendships (W. A. Afifi & Burgoon, 1998) and family relationships (T. D. Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Bevan et al., 2006).

A similar propensity for avoidance may be apparent in characteristics of messages. In a recent study (Knobloch, 2006), I hypothesized that individuals experiencing relational uncertainty may be reluctant to assert a definition of their courtship that may not be shared by their partner. I tested my logic by asking 248 participants to simulate leaving a date request voice mail message for their partner. Then, I trained research assistants to rate the messages along several dimensions. Findings indicated that relational uncertainty was negatively associated with the affiliativeness, relationship focus, and explicitness of the messages. Accordingly, people’s hesitation to go on record with an explicit characterization of their relationship may extend to features of messages.

Message Processing

Perhaps because URT and POV emphasized uncertainty as a predictor of message production, limited work has examined relational uncertainty as a predictor of message processing. Ample theorizing from other domains, however, implies that people draw on information about their surroundings to make sense of utterances (Dillard, Solomon, & Samp, 1996; Honeycutt, Cantrill, Kelly, & Lambkin, 1998; Planalp & Rivers, 1996). By extension, individuals who lack knowledge about their relationship may have difficulty interpreting their partner’s messages.

Within the context of courtship, the challenges of message processing may be manifest in a tentativeness bias such that people experiencing relational uncertainty may have difficulty drawing firm conclusions from conversation. Denise Solomon and I conducted a study to evaluate this reasoning (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). We asked 120 dating couples to (a) complete measures of relational uncertainty, (b) engage in a videotaped conversation, and (c) report their thoughts and feelings about the conversation. We also trained research assistants to identify the relationship-focused speaking turns in the conversation. Relational uncertainty was negatively associated with people’s reports of relationship talk after covarying the perceptions of the coders. In other words, individuals may have trouble recognizing relationship talk under
conditions of relational uncertainty. Relational uncertainty also was negatively associated with the extremity of people’s judgments of the intimacy of their partner’s messages. Hence, people grappling with relational uncertainty may have problems drawing definitive conclusions about how much intimacy their partner displayed. Both findings suggest that dating partners may interpret messages tentatively under conditions of relational uncertainty (see also Hewes, Graham, Doelger, & Pavitt, 1985).

Within the context of marriage, the challenges of message processing may be apparent in a pessimism bias such that spouses who are unsure about their marriage may evaluate conversation negatively. My colleagues and I collected self-report and observational data from 125 married couples who engaged in two videotaped conversations (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007). As we predicted, individuals experiencing relational uncertainty interpreted their spouse’s messages as less affiliative, more dominant, and less involved. Notably, however, relational uncertainty did not predict coders’ perceptions of affiliation, dominance, or involvement. We interpreted these findings to be consistent with a pessimism bias: Spouses grappling with relational uncertainty had negative reactions to conversations that seemed normal to outside observers.

An intriguing implication is that people may experience relational uncertainty differently in courtship versus marriage. Courtship is a period of discernment in which individuals may expect to experience doubts as a diagnostic byproduct of the mate selection process (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), so they may be cautious in interpreting their partner’s messages under conditions of relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). In contrast, marriage entails a legal contract that carries personal, moral, and structural obstacles to termination. Marriage is considered a long-term commitment, it requires bureaucratic action to dissolve, and it yields joint assets such as property, children, pets, and memories that are impossible to divide (e.g., Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Doubts about the future of a marriage could be a precursor to divorce, so spouses experiencing relational uncertainty may be pessimistic in interpreting their partner’s relational messages. Thus, relational uncertainty may correspond with a tentativeness bias within courtship but a pessimism bias within marriage. More broadly, these findings underscore the importance of attending to the dyadic domain when theorizing about relational uncertainty (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a).

In total, research suggests that relating is more complicated under conditions of relational uncertainty. People experiencing relational uncertainty tend to draw negatively valenced cognitions and feel negatively valenced emotions (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). Perhaps because of elevated face
threats, individuals grappling with questions about the nature of their relationship may avoid communicating openly with their partner about sensitive topics (T. D. Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Moreover, people confronted with relational uncertainty may be susceptible to message processing biases (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). Irony exists in the latter pair of findings: Those who most need insight into their relationship are least likely to discuss the issue with their partner and to interpret their partner’s messages accurately.

Lessons Learned About Relational Uncertainty

While investigating the cognitive, emotional, and communicative outcomes of relational uncertainty, I have learned several lessons about how to study the construct. I gleaned some of these insights from designing studies, mulling over data, and working to reconcile competing findings. Other insights emerged from feedback that colleagues, editors, and reviewers provided on my work. I describe these lessons in the hopes that other scholars can profit from them.

Lesson 1: Do Not Overlook the Benefits of Relational Uncertainty

One insight is to attend to the rewards (as well as the costs) of relational uncertainty. To date, most empirical results suggest that relational uncertainty is detrimental to intimate associations. Relational uncertainty may spark pessimistic cognitions and negative emotions (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). It also may elevate the complexity of message production and processing (Knobloch, 2006; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). In a recent study that offers the most direct test of this logic, I found that relational uncertainty was negatively associated with spouses’ reports of marital quality (Knobloch, 2008). Ample findings imply that relational uncertainty is an obstacle to maintaining satisfying relationships.

Although the benefits of relational uncertainty are easy to ignore, neglecting them would be a mistake. Relational uncertainty may be rewarding in at least three ways. First, it may add spice to a languishing partnership (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). If too much certainty dampens excitement (Livingston, 1980), then relational uncertainty may be valuable for inciting passion, alleviating boredom, and offering occasions to reaffirm devotion (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). Second,
relational uncertainty may shield individuals from face-threatening blunders when relationships are fragile. If ambiguity increases the salience of identity threats (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), then relational uncertainty may play a protective role by encouraging people to produce messages mindfully, cautiously, and prudently (Knobloch, 2006). Third, relational uncertainty may prevent individuals from learning bad news. If questions about involvement make people reluctant to engage in direct information seeking (T. D. Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; W. A. Afifi & Burgoon, 1998), then relational uncertainty may insulate them from disappointment, at least temporarily (e.g., W. A. Afifi & Weiner, 2006; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). A danger in disregarding the rewards of relational uncertainty is that it fosters a simplistic view of the construct.

Lesson 2: Attend to the Salience of Relational Uncertainty

A second lesson is that relational uncertainty varies in intensity across populations. This principle is illustrated by the heterogeneous mean values observed in recent research. In the context of courtship (N = 525), Knobloch, Miller, and Carpenter (2007) observed midrange mean scores for self uncertainty (M = 2.74, SD = 1.20), partner uncertainty (M = 3.07, SD = 1.57), and relationship uncertainty (M = 2.93, SD = 1.28; 6-point scale). T. D. Afifi and Schrodt (2003) asked individuals to complete a variation of the CLUES scale about their family members (N = 601 adolescents and young adults); they documented a mean of 1.91 (SD = 0.68; 7-point scale). Bevan et al. (2006) solicited data on siblings’ uncertainty about behavioral norms (N = 212); they reported a mean of 1.37 (SD = 1.09; 7-point scale). Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al. (2007) collected observations from 125 married couples; they obtained very low mean values for self uncertainty (M = 1.40, SD = 0.54), partner uncertainty (M = 1.51, SD = 0.69), and relationship uncertainty (M = 1.48, SD = 0.62; 6-point scale). These descriptive statistics suggest that the magnitude of relational uncertainty may vary across types of relationships.

Although all four studies identified an association between relational uncertainty and a communication variable, the latter three investigations were likely plagued by floor effects. Would those studies have documented larger effect sizes if more variance in relational uncertainty was free to covary with the dependent variables? One way to answer that question would be to target individuals grappling with more acute doubts about the nature of their relationship. Collecting data from people who are questioning their relationship intensely (e.g., couples seeking counseling, families in transition, spouses contemplating divorce, friends negotiating major life
changes) would shed light on the predictive power of relational uncertainty when doubts are particularly salient. Another strategy would be to evaluate whether employing convenience samples underestimates the magnitude of relational uncertainty experienced in the population. All four studies gathered observations from individuals who volunteered for a study of communication in relationships, which may have artificially restricted the mean levels of relational uncertainty. The general challenge is to design research in ways that solicit ample variation in relational uncertainty.

Lesson 3: Recognize That Both Insiders and Outsiders Experience Relational Uncertainty

A third insight concerns the link between relational uncertainty and message processing. As previously noted, studies have documented evidence of both a tentativeness bias (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005) and a pessimism bias (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007) when individuals process messages under conditions of relational uncertainty. How did my colleagues and I identify bias? In both studies, we examined how people’s perceptions of relational uncertainty predicted their own views of the conversation versus independent judges’ views of the conversation. Dating partners experiencing relational uncertainty perceived the conversation to contain less relationship-focused talk after controlling for the judgments made by outside observers (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). Spouses experiencing relational uncertainty felt that their partner behaved less constructively in conversation, but relational uncertainty did not predict judges’ ratings of behavior (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007). Hence, we concluded that biases were present because relational uncertainty predicted the perceptions of participants but not coders.

This interpretation is not wholly straightforward. Of course, outsiders are blind to the nuances of dyadic history, so their judgments should be free of the biases that may cloud insiders’ perceptions under conditions of relational uncertainty. At the same time, outsiders possess no information about the nature of the relationship, so their judgments may be swayed by questions of their own. Perhaps observers hesitate to draw firm conclusions about conversation because they are not completely confident in their interpretations (e.g., Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007). If so, then scholars who evaluate message processing under conditions of relational uncertainty are faced with a dilemma: Where does the bias lie? If the vantage point of observers is deemed accurate, then any divergence is attributed to the bias of insiders. If the vantage point of insiders is accepted at face value, then scholars forfeit the ability to gauge the bias of insiders experiencing relational uncertainty.
My overarching advice is to carefully consider what view to privilege when investigating the link between relational uncertainty and message processing (e.g., Cappella, 1991).

**Lesson 4: Use Multiple Methods to Investigate Relational Uncertainty**

A fourth lesson is a fundamental principle of social scientific inquiry: Employ multiple methods to triangulate findings (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). A notable advancement in this regard involves episodic relational uncertainty. Early work asked individuals to describe a relational uncertainty–increasing event they had experienced recently (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Knobloch & Solomon, 2003; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Turner, 1990). A variation on this strategy involves training participants to recognize unexpected episodes and instructing them to complete a questionnaire after they have encountered one (Planalp et al., 1988). More recently, scholars have solicited people’s appraisals of hypothetical events (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b).

Both strategies have strengths and weaknesses. An advantage of self-reported episodes is that they are germane, authentic, and noteworthy to participants. A disadvantage is that people’s retrospective descriptions are subject to memory biases. Fortunately, individuals’ recall should be fairly accurate because unexpected events tend to be salient (Knobloch, 2005; Planalp et al., 1988). One advantage of hypothetical scenarios is that they allow the content of the episodes to be standardized across participants. They also provide insight into people’s immediate cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and behavioral intentions. On the other hand, hypothetical scenarios may not be believable to participants. Researchers have sought to circumvent this weakness by crafting scenarios that participants see as realistic (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). The majority of studies have examined either self-reported events or hypothetical scenarios in isolation (cf. W. A. Afifi & Metts, 1998; Emmers & Canary, 1996; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b, 2003; Planalp et al., 1988), which limits the capacity to identify differences between the two methods.

I conducted an investigation to shed light on this issue (Knobloch, 2005). I recruited 278 individuals involved in a dating relationship to (a) report on a recent unexpected event and (b) appraise a hypothetical unexpected event. The order of tasks was counterbalanced across participants. Results indicated that the associations between the independent variables (intimacy, cognitive appraisals of the event, emotional reactions to the event) and the dependent variables (behavioral responses) did not differ for the self-reported versus hypothetical episodes. Hence, the method of data collection
did not moderate the substantive findings. Notable mean differences were apparent between the two data collection strategies, however. The self-reported events evoked (a) more episodic self and relationship uncertainty, (b) more negatively valenced cognitions, (c) more anger and sadness but less happiness, and (d) more destructive behaviors. Thus, participants viewed the self-reported episodes to be more detrimental than the hypothetical episodes.

What explains the divergence? One possibility is that the self-report strategy solicits the most striking unexpected event individuals have experienced. Another explanation is that the hypothetical strategy allows people to forecast their potential reactions more optimistically than their actual reactions. A third possibility is that the self-report strategy favors volatility but the hypothetical strategy privileges the realism of the event. Gauging the validity of these explanations will require additional data. Other methods also await investigation. A laboratory study would illuminate people’s proximal responses to episodic relational uncertainty, but it may not generalize to how individuals experience unexpected events in their daily lives. A diary study would shed light on how people respond to unexpected events over time, but if participants become sensitized to episodic relational uncertainty, then their perceptions may be tainted. All four strategies have unique strengths and weaknesses, so scholars should employ multiple methods to disentangle the true variance from the method variance.

**New Directions for Research on Relational Uncertainty**

Echoing this volume’s focus on new directions for interpersonal communication, I nominate avenues for future work on relational uncertainty along both theoretical and applied lines. I begin by considering directions for additional research that arise from recent theoretical advances within the field of interpersonal communication. Then, I discuss avenues for further scholarship that fall outside the dyadic context of interpersonal communication.

**Inside the Domain of Interpersonal Communication**

For decades, scholars turned to URT (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and POV (Sunnafrank, 1990) to conceptualize the link between uncertainty and interpersonal communication. Remnants of URT and POV are still apparent in the literature on relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Miller, 2008; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a), but three emerging theories have begun to alter the conceptual landscape of work in this area. In the following
paragraphs, I identify directions for future research that stem from relational dialectics theory, the relational turbulence model, and uncertainty management theory.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Whereas URT and POV suggest that individuals prefer predictability (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1990), relational dialectics theory argues that individuals possess competing desires for certainty and uncertainty in their relationships (Baxter, 2004, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & Braithwaite, Chapter 3, this volume). It proposes that the tension between certainty and uncertainty stems from a dialectic interplay between unified but opposite forces. Predictability may be comfortable, but it also may lead to stagnation and monotony (Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Livingston, 1980). Novelty may be exciting, but it also may foster anxiety and vulnerability (Berger, 1987). Hence, relational dialectics theory underscores the importance of examining people’s needs for both certainty and uncertainty.

This insight implies a new direction for the study of relational uncertainty. Most work has assumed that individuals eschew relational uncertainty (Knobloch, 2007a, 2008), but relational dialectics theory suggests that people’s desire for predictability versus novelty may depend on the situation. Consequently, scholars should identify the conditions under which relational certainty and uncertainty are valuable for individuals within close relationships. Do people gravitate toward excitement during early stages of relationship development but toward predictability during later stages? Do couples prefer to be uncertain about occasional breaks from daily routines but certain about their long-term commitment to the relationship? Do repeated attempts at novel activities (e.g., spur-of-the-moment getaways, surprise gifts) become monotonous over time? Do people’s personality characteristics, socioeconomic status, and cultural background shape the relational uncertainty issues they find exciting versus worrisome? Recent conceptual advances by relational dialectics theory raise these questions as agenda items for future research.

Relational Turbulence Model

URT and POV imply that uncertainty recedes as relationships develop over time (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1990), but the relational turbulence model proposes that relational uncertainty is prominent during times of transition (Knobloch, 2007b; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon,
Weber, & Steuber, Chapter 6, this volume). The model argues that relational uncertainty leads people to be cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally reactive when relationships are in flux (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Accordingly, the model implies that relational uncertainty shapes how individuals communicate during times of transition. It advances the current understanding of relational uncertainty by emphasizing that people’s doubts about involvement may ebb and flow as relationships progress (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b).

Although tests of the relational turbulence model have focused on the transition from casual dating to serious involvement within courtship, the model is designed to be more broadly applicable to other kinds of transitions (Knobloch, 2007b). Thus, a direction for future expansion is to evaluate the role of relational uncertainty in transitions across the life span of close relationships. Does relational uncertainty heighten reactivity between friends when they negotiate the transition from a geographically close to a geographically distant relationship? What questions are partners unsure about when they become first-time parents? How does relational uncertainty shape people’s communication as their children leave home and they transition to an empty nest? What part does relational uncertainty play when individuals adjust to retirement? All of these questions stemming from the relational turbulence model await future research.

Uncertainty Management Theory

URT suggests that individuals are fundamentally motivated to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975); POV proposes that people seek to dispel uncertainty when they anticipate receiving rewards (Sunnafrank, 1990). In contrast, uncertainty management theory identifies uncertainty reduction as only one of several options for dealing with ambiguous situations (Brashers, 2001). Individuals also may choose to (a) seek information to preserve uncertainty, (b) discount information, (c) cling to inaccurate information, or (d) avoid information altogether (Brashers, 2001; Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). According to uncertainty management theory, people select these latter communication strategies to foster hope, maintain optimism, circumvent fear, cultivate self-efficacy, and avoid feeling overwhelmed (Brashers et al., 2000). This theory offers a more nuanced portrayal of the association between uncertainty and information seeking.

Uncertainty management theory has informed investigations of how individuals manage uncertainty about illness (Brashers et al., 2000), but it has implications for uncertainty about relationships as well. For example, Brashers et al. (2003) found that people living with HIV have questions
about how others will respond to them, how to prevent social isolation, how to initiate new relationships, and how to maintain current relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. These findings suggest that relational uncertainty is relevant to the ways in which individuals seek and avoid health information. Accordingly, a direction for future research is to examine how doubts about involvement intersect with people’s experience of illness. Does relational uncertainty predict how friends communicate when one partner is suffering from depression? Does it play a role in how spouses interact when one person is grappling with a cancer diagnosis? Does it govern the choices partners make when one individual is battling an addiction to nicotine, alcohol, narcotics, or gambling? A next generation of research on relational uncertainty is poised to tackle these questions sparked by uncertainty management theory.

Outside the Domain of Interpersonal Communication

Other directions for future research involve broadening the relational uncertainty construct beyond the dyadic boundaries of interpersonal communication. One possibility is to conceptualize relational uncertainty as a family-level construct as well as a dyadic-level construct. In a recent pioneering study, T. D. Afifi and Schrodt (2003) verified that individuals experience uncertainty about their family as a whole. Findings indicated that participants in postdivorce single families and stepfamilies felt more uncertain about their family than those in first-marriage families. T. D. Afifi and Schrodt’s (2003) work is innovative because it implies that relational uncertainty may be relevant to groups of people as well as individuals. An avenue for additional work is to capitalize on this idea by documenting the content, predictors, and outcomes of relational uncertainty at the level of the family.

Relational uncertainty may be relevant to organizations as well. Of course, individuals may experience dyadic-level relational uncertainty about their associations with supervisors and colleagues (e.g., Kramer, 1999; Morrison, 2002). Moreover, they may grapple with dyadic-level questions about how to manage the professional versus personal interactions they have with coworkers who also are friends and romantic partners (e.g., Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Kramer, 1999). At a more macro unit of analysis, people may be unsure about their loyalty to an organization, their role within an organization, and their value to an organization (Heath & Gay, 1997; Kramer, 2004; Kramer, Dougherty, & Pierce, 2004). This research implies that relational uncertainty may have utility as an organization-level construct. Hence, an agenda item for future research is to document the themes, causes, and consequences of relational uncertainty at the organization level (Kramer, 1999).
Perhaps the broader task is to integrate but demarcate findings across contexts. The themes of relational uncertainty may vary within acquaintance (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1990), courtship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002a), marriage (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, et al., 2007; Turner, 1990), family (T. D. Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), and coworker (Kramer, 1999, 2004) relationships. Each of these domains may foster doubts about different kinds of issues. On one hand, tailoring the relational uncertainty construct to the context under investigation is vital for capturing the ambiguity salient to people (Knobloch, 2008). On the other hand, failing to assimilate findings across contexts leads to fragmentation in the literature. Advancing universal claims is impossible if scholars conceptualize and operationalize relational uncertainty in idiosyncratic ways. This issue poses two challenges for scholars. First, they must be mindful of the domain under investigation while seeking generalizable conclusions. Second, they must be willing to collaborate with scholars working in related subdisciplines such as family communication and organizational communication. It is a complex assignment, to be sure, but an essential one.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have chronicled how scholarship on relational uncertainty has unfolded. Although I have emphasized the theoretical and empirical implications of the literature, I would be remiss not to return to the pragmatic examples of uncertainty that opened the chapter. Questions abound in the interactions individuals have with strangers, acquaintances, coworkers, family members, friends, and romantic partners (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Kramer, 2004). Clearly, relational uncertainty matters in people’s lives (e.g., Berger & Gudykunst, 1991; Mishel, 1999). For that reason, scholars should continue to accumulate knowledge about how individuals negotiate relational uncertainty.

References


In many ways, the “story” of the uncertainty area in the communication discipline provides insight into the workings of scientific inquiry, generally, and interpersonal communication scholarship, specifically. The introduction of Berger and Calabrese’s uncertainty reduction theory (URT) in 1975 brought attention to the construct of uncertainty among interpersonal communications scholars and served to shape the landscape of that area for years. Generations of students, myself included, were introduced to the theory as one of the few original theories developed by interpersonal communication scholars and were intrigued by its precision and heuristic utility. The theory was primarily founded on two principles: (1) individuals react negatively to uncertainty and (2) information reduces uncertainty. So one of the essential predictions was that individuals responded to uncertainty by seeking information.

With one notable exception (see Sunnafrank, 1986), that ideological lens to uncertainty and its behavioral outcomes dominated interpersonal communication research for nearly two decades. In fact, Johnson, Case, Andrews, and Allard (2005), in their review of this research area, referenced the long-held idea of a universal desire for uncertainty reduction as a one-time “shibboleth”