

**PART I   Conceptual and  
Theoretical Foundations of  
Uncertainty in Close Relationships**

## I Defining Uncertainty as a Relational Construct

“Love is uncertain. It’s incredibly risky.  
And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed.  
Yes, it’s scary and yes, we’re open to being hurt,  
but can you imagine your life without loving or being loved?”

– Brene Brown

Close relationships are fundamental to the human experience. Nearly everyone, at some point in their life, will have the experience of forming an intimate relationship with another person. Cherished friends and romantic partners are important resources for support, affection, advice, and companionship (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1993; Cutrona, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Strong relationships have innumerable rewards and benefits for the individuals who participate in them, including less isolation, more connectedness, increased life satisfaction, and improved health and well-being (e.g., Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Wu & Hart, 2002). Indeed, as Brene Brown suggests, most people would struggle to envision their life without the joys of love and friendship. Companionship, inclusion, and togetherness are some of the most basic human needs; thus, close relationships are vital threads in the tapestry of life.

Despite the myriad benefits that are derived from intimate relationships, they are not without their share of challenges and struggles. As described in the quote above, intimate relationships can be risky. There is the risk of exposing one’s inner self to another person, the risk of being hurt, the risk of being rejected, the risk of being embarrassed, just to name a few. One of the reasons relationships are risky is because they are ambiguous. Standing at the precipice of a new relationship, individuals are faced with a lot of unknowns. Does this person understand me? Where is this

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relationship headed? How long will our connection last? Will I be hurt? Could I hurt my partner? How should we behave around each other? Are we compatible as friends or lovers? Am I ready for this level of involvement? Is this a relationship I want to be in? Even in relationships with more longevity, where individuals have effectively answered these questions of engagement and successfully navigated the early stages of relationship development, they are often faced with new questions and ambiguities about the nature of involvement with their partner. How will new circumstances challenge our relationship? Has our relationship become too boring and routine? Am I still satisfied in this relationship? Can our relationship withstand this transgression? Is there something better out there for me or for my partner? Thus, relationships can be scary and they can be risky, because the answers to these questions are unknown. Individuals cannot know what their partner is thinking, how their partner is feeling, or what the future holds, so there is always a possibility that the unseen horizon contains outcomes that could be hurtful, damaging, or undesirable. In other words, the only certainty in close relationships is uncertainty.

In most social situations, the fundamental goal that guides people is the desire to achieve interpersonal understanding and shared meaning. Unfortunately, ambiguity and uncertainty about a partner or the relationship can often thwart this goal. *Uncertainty* constitutes a lack of confidence in one's perceptions of interpersonal relations, which is reflected in the inability of partners to describe, explain, or predict one another's behavior (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). The inability to understand a partner's cognitive processes or to anticipate a partner's behavioral responses can constrain people's interpersonal engagement. When people experience uncertainty, they have a restricted range of acceptable behavioral options for interaction and struggle to judge the probability of particular outcomes (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). When individuals constrain their behaviors during interaction, doubt their interpretations of a partner's actions, and question the meaning of a conversation, they

undermine their ability to achieve the goal of shared understanding with their partner. When partners fail to establish shared meaning, they hamper relationship development and the progression of intimacy.

Given that uncertainty compromises people's ability and willingness to be fully engaged in the pursuit of relational closeness, understanding the conditions that give rise to uncertainty, the markers of uncertainty, and the best strategies for mitigating uncertainty is important for helping people overcome their trepidation and enter into close relationships with confidence. Thus, as a starting point for this book, this chapter begins by explicating the construct of uncertainty. First, the chapter describes the various forms of uncertainty that can arise in interpersonal interaction and close relationships, as well as the unique forms of uncertainty that arise in response to specific relational situations. Then, the chapter discusses the qualities of close relationships that make them especially prone to experiences of uncertainty. Finally, it concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters in this book.

#### GENERAL SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

Uncertainty is a construct that appears in many different fields and disciplines. In economics, there is a focus on market uncertainty and financial uncertainty. In business, there are concerns about economic uncertainty and organizational uncertainty. In social contexts, uncertainty stems from an inability to predict or explain the thoughts and behaviors of individuals in relation to one another. Early theorizing about uncertainty in the field of communication focused on the ambiguity that individuals face during initial interactions with strangers (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975). In these situations, individuals lack sufficient knowledge and information about a partner to accurately interpret their messages or to predict their future behavior. This leaves people in an uncomfortable position of not knowing how they should respond or react to their partner under these conditions of ambiguity. Thus, two types of uncertainty are experienced in this context that reflect more general assessments of the ambiguity embedded in any

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given interaction with a new partner: cognitive uncertainty and behavioral uncertainty (e.g., Berger, 1979).

*Cognitive uncertainty* involves questions about how to interpret the content or meaning of an interaction (Berger, 1979). Thus, cognitive uncertainty refers to the ambiguity people experience when they lack sufficient information to judge a partner's internal state of mind, to assess a partner's beliefs and values, or to formulate their own interpretation of the encounter. What does my partner think about this interaction? What did my partner mean by saying that? Does my partner understand what I am trying to convey? Am I interpreting my partner's messages correctly? The questions that drive cognitive uncertainty are manifest in several broader judgments about the partner, the interaction, or the relationship. For example, cognitive uncertainty is manifest in perceptions of the *value* of a relationship, because people struggle to predict the costs and rewards of involvement under these conditions (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Sunnafrank 1986, 1990). Cognitive uncertainty is also visible in ambiguity about relationship *goals* (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Uncertainty about a partner's interest in a relationship can contribute to instability (e.g., Duck & Miell, 1986) and conflict (e.g., Siegert & Stamp, 1994) that can undermine people's hopes and plans for the future. Finally, cognitive uncertainty is reflected in an inability to *define* a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Cognitive uncertainty can make it difficult for partners to achieve consensus about the state of their relationship (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1984, 1985) or to understand the ways in which their relationship is unique (Berger, 1979). Thus, cognitive uncertainty reflects an inability to make sense of an interaction or a relationship, which can make it difficult to interpret relational meaning and establish plans for the future of an association.

Next, *behavioral uncertainty* involves questions about what actions are expected and/or appropriate for an interaction or a relationship (Berger, 1979). This can involve questions about how an individual should personally behave during the interaction, as well as expectations for the actions of one's partner. Should we shake hands upon meeting or go in for a hug? Should I laugh at my

partner's jokes, even if I don't think they are that funny? Why is my partner invading my personal space? Is he/she trying to be dominating or flirtatious? Will my partner offer to call me or make plans to see me again? Thus, behavioral uncertainty reflects ambiguity about how an individual *should* act and how a partner *will* act. In other words, behavioral uncertainty is evident in questions about the *norms* for appropriate behavior in a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). As relationships evolve, partners negotiate their rules for involvement and create a unique relational culture (Baxter, 1987; Wood, 1982). In the process of establishing this idiosyncratic relational identity, partners are bound to question the expectations for appropriate behavior, the boundaries that characterize the relationship, and the limits of suitable conduct. Until partners establish a shared understanding of the behavioral norms in their relationship, individuals will likely face ambiguity and uncertainty about the behaviors that are expected and accepted with their partner.

Taken together, cognitive and behavioral uncertainty reflect the global questions and concerns that people have about interacting with a new partner when confronted with a deficit of information. A lack of familiarity with a partner makes it difficult to interpret their behavior or to enact a plan for communicating with them (e.g., Berger, 1987). Notably, cognitive and behavioral uncertainty can emerge in any type of interpersonal context regardless of relational intent. Any type of non-intimate interaction, such as those with strangers, acquaintances, and co-workers, are susceptible to these global uncertainty assessments. Cognitive and behavioral uncertainties tend to be amplified, however, when individuals anticipate or desire future interaction with a partner (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975). When people anticipate future interaction they are increasingly motivated to reduce their uncertainty so that they can more effectively predict a partner's cognition and behavior in their next conversation. As relationships develop over multiple interactions and partners share increasingly more information about themselves, cognitive and behavioral uncertainties tend to decline as individuals are better equipped to predict and explain

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their partner's thoughts and actions. Thus, highly intimate relationships should have relatively low levels of cognitive and behavioral uncertainty, because partners have sufficient information at that point to understand one another, to interpret one another's actions, and to select appropriate behavioral responses.

### RELATIONAL SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

Although cognitive and behavioral uncertainty decline as partners increase their knowledge about each other and coordinate norms for behavior, established relationships are by no means free of ambiguity. Developing a long-term, intimate relationship simply invites new questions and different forms of uncertainty. Rather than focusing on the cognitive or behavioral content of the uncertainty, relational sources of uncertainty focus on the locus of doubt. In particular, relational uncertainty points to self-focused, partner-focused, and relationship-focused sources of ambiguity (Berger & Bradac, 1982).

*Self uncertainty* refers to a lack of confidence in one's own perceptions of relational involvement (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). In general, self uncertainty reflects a lack of awareness about the self and an inability to describe, predict, or explain one's own cognition and behavior. Do I want this relationship? Am I satisfied in this relationship? Am I comfortable with the level of involvement in this relationship? Can I see myself in this relationship for the long term? How should I act around my partner? Were my actions appropriate for this relationship? Under conditions of self uncertainty, individuals struggle to identify their own goals for the relationship, as well as the attitudes and behaviors that are required to accomplish their relational goals (Berger, 1975; Berger & Bradac, 1982). Thus, self uncertainty reflects an orientation toward the self and questions about one's own thoughts, actions, and involvement in a close relationship.

*Partner uncertainty* involves a lack of confidence in one's perceptions of a partner's involvement in the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). The experience of partner uncertainty reflects a general lack of knowledge or understanding of one's partner as a person,

which makes it difficult to anticipate the partner's attitudes and behaviors (Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982). Does my partner like me? Is my partner invested in this relationship? Does my partner see a future for this relationship? Is my partner satisfied? How will my partner respond to my ideas or actions? What is my partner's vision for this relationship? In other words, partner uncertainty tends to emerge in situations when individuals have insufficient information about a partner's unique attitudes, values, expectations, and norms for behavior (Berger, 1979; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). Thus, partner uncertainty reflects other-focused sources of ambiguity in a relationship.

The third source of relational uncertainty exists at a broader level of abstraction and encompasses questions related to both self and partner uncertainty. *Relationship uncertainty* involves a lack of confidence in people's perceptions of the relationship as an entity unto itself (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). This type of uncertainty can include questions about norms for behavior in the relationship, mutuality of feelings between partners, the definition of the relationship, and the future of the relationship. For example, what is the nature of this relationship? Where is this relationship headed? Will this relationship last? Are the things we do in our relationship typical for romantic partners/friends? How should we behave toward one another in this relationship? Relationship uncertainty focuses on the dyad as a unit, so the questions that are encompassed within this broader level of uncertainty are fundamentally different from those that focus on the ambiguity associated with the cognitions and behaviors of the individual partners (Berger, 1988; Berger & Bradac, 1982).

Self, partner, and relationship sources of uncertainty have been examined in various types of relationships, including friendships and dating relationships (Parks & Adelman, 1983; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). The largest body of research has focused on the outcomes of relational uncertainty in courtship and dating, because this is a context where individuals face a lot of ambiguity about their long-term compatibility with a partner and the future of their relationship (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Siegert & Stamp, 1994). Although some of



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the specific questions related to self, partner, and relationship-focused sources of uncertainty may be resolved in highly intimate relationships, other questions may become more salient. Knobloch (2008) investigated whether the content of relational uncertainty in marriage is similar to the content of uncertainty in dating relationships. In a study where 85 married individuals were asked to describe their sources of relational uncertainty in marriage, results pointed to 12 unique categories of uncertainty, including uncertainties about (a) having and raising children, (b) communication, (c) career issues, (d) finances, (e) health and illness, (f) commitment, (g) in-laws and extended family, (h) sex, (i) retirement, (j) religious beliefs, (k) leisure time, and (l) household chores. Notably, these findings suggest that relationship-focused sources of uncertainty are more salient in marriage than individual-focused sources of uncertainty. The uncertainties identified in this study were typically framed in terms of dyadic-level issues and pointed to forces outside of the relationship that could have an impact on the quality or viability of the relationship. Whereas self- and partner-focused sources of uncertainty may be more salient in friendships and dating relationships as partners determine their compatibility (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), uncertainty in marriage tends to focus more on external factors that could alter the relationship (Knobloch, 2008). Thus, marital uncertainty tends to encompass relationship-focused sources of ambiguity.

Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty tend to be evaluated on a global level as a general index of the questions people have about their relationship (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001), but assessments of relational uncertainty may also be triggered by unique and unexpected events (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Turner, 1990). *Episodic relational uncertainty* refers to the questions that are elicited in response to specific interpersonal episodes in close relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). Significant events in a relationship, such as the first big fight (Siegert & Stamp, 1994), instances of jealousy (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998), expectancy violations (Afifi & Metts, 1998), physical separation of partners (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and any

number of critical turning points (Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993) or problematic events (Samp & Solomon, 1998) can elicit relational uncertainty that is specifically tied to that particular experience. Although the doubts that arise in these contexts still index self, partner, and relationship sources of uncertainty, they reflect concerns about the relationship in response to a specific event, rather than concerns about the relationship as a whole. Thus, appraisals of relational uncertainty can signify global questions about the relationship, as well as momentary instances of doubt.

A related construct that has emerged in recent research specific to romantic partnerships is *commitment uncertainty*, which reflects questions people have about their desire to remain in an established relationship (Owen et al., 2014). Uncertainty about commitment is generally driven by two overarching types of commitment: dedication and constraint (Stanley & Markman, 1992). *Dedication commitment* reflects a strong couple identity, a future-oriented vision for the relationship, and a willingness to make sacrifices for the good of the relationship. *Constraint commitment* is driven by aspects of the relationship that bind partners together and make it difficult to separate, such as shared responsibilities and investments, or external pressures to maintain the relationship out of obligation to religion or family. Commitment uncertainty involves questions or ambiguity about some of the underlying facets of dedication and constraint commitment (Owen et al., 2014). For example, commitment uncertainty can reflect a weakened couple identity that motivates partners to prioritize individual aspirations over joint relationship pursuits. In addition, to the extent that commitment uncertainty undermines people's ability to envision a long-term future for the relationship, it can make individuals hesitant to make future plans and unwilling to make personal sacrifices that would benefit the partner or the relationship. Thus, the features of commitment uncertainty are similar to the sources of ambiguity that characterize self uncertainty and relationship uncertainty (e.g., Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch &