

Original Article:

**PURSUING AFFILIATION THROUGH CONFLICT IN
YOUNG ADULT COUPLES' NATURAL CONVERSATIONS**

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Abstract

This study utilizes a discursive approach to examine how affiliation is pursued within the context of natural conversations that involve various types of conflict between actual or potential young adult romantic partners. Rather than being adversarial, the central (albeit counterintuitive) finding across multiple data sets is that those various forms of conflict, in the form of conversation improprieties, were occasioned and used to pursue connection and affiliation. Delicate social activities that might otherwise look problematic are doing affiliation and relational development and are doing so in consistent ways across various discursive practices, carefully managing the potential seriousness or trouble such activities can provoke.

Keywords: romantic relationships, conflict, discourse analysis, affiliation

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INTRODUCTION

Although we know quite a bit about the ways romantic partners report on their relational issues and conflicts to researchers in lab settings (see Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Trapp & Hoff, 1985), we know very little about the ways couples actually pursue and manage everyday conflicts as they spontaneously emerge, in real time, as part(s) of their everyday interactions. We know very little about the everyday, quotidian moments of conflict that occur among romantic couples in their natural interactional contexts. To that end, this article presents an overview of several empirical studies (see Korobov 2011a, 2011b; Korobov, 2016, 2017; Korobov & Laplante, 2013) that have examined how actual and potential intimates navigate potentially conflictual interactive moments in their everyday exchanges. Rather than being adversarial, the central (counterintuitive but consistent) finding across all the data sets is that these moments are used to pursue connection and affiliation. Delicate social activities that might otherwise look problematic are doing affiliation and relational development; and even more fascinatingly, they are doing it in consistent ways across various discursive practices, carefully managing the potential seriousness or trouble such activities can provoke.

This finding is not without precedent. It segues with a burgeoning arena of research that suggests that contentious banter does not always pose the kind of face-threats for young adult intimates in the ways that would be traditionally expected according to politeness theory (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Instead, disagreement, arguments, and conflicts may be expected, routine, and even playful or sociable, and by extension, young adult romantic relationships may be increasingly characterized by a kind of openness and candidness that may result from the friction created by casually arguing, telling each other off, or speaking one's mind (see Georgakopoulou, 2001; Korobov & Laplante, 2013). There is reason to think that "contentious banter displays and nurtures, rather than threatens, their closeness" (Straehle, 1993, p. 227). In short, young adult intimates in contemporary western cultures may pursue playful forms of conflict as a means of exploring compatibility and creating affiliation.

Pursuing Controversary as a Method for Creating Affiliation

The present overview specifically examines the use of a range of conversational improprieties among romantic partners and treats them as interactional methods for '*pursuing controversy*' (see Jefferson et al., 1987; Hutchby, 1996). In everyday relationships, speakers routinely monitor each other's talk for potential affiliatives and arguables and, when pursued, can be said to be 'doing relationship' by pursuing intimacy or pursuing controversy (see Jefferson et al., 1987; Hutchby, 1996). Hutchby (1996), for example, has detailed the ways talk-radio hosts monitor caller's accounts for potential arguables, and how hosts use a range of contrast-structures to proffer disaffiliation and thus pursue controversy. Pursuing controversy is seen as a practical achieved activity that is

demonstrable, which involves speakers failing, at least initially, to coordinate stance or position around a delicate topic (Conroy, 1999; Stivers, 2008). The key idea, however, is that pursuits of controversy do not always result in adversarial disaffiliation. Apropos to the current inquiry, pursuits of controversy may be used by partners to test out compatibility and connection as part of the process of pursuing affiliation (see Korobov, 2017; Korobov & Laplante, 2013).

Discursive work on affiliation as a practical achieved activity has received wide attention. A range of research has focused on the affiliative and disaffiliative potential of certain actions, like questions/questioning (Steensig & Drew, 2008), assessments (Ruusuvaori, 2005), and complaints (Drew & Walker, 2009), to name a few. Clark and colleagues (2003) have shown how salespersons elicit verbal expressions of affiliation from customers by reciprocating second-assessments which build on or repair customers own assessments. Drew and Walker (2009) have examined the disaffiliation that can result when a speaker goes too far in constructing a 'complainable' on behalf of another, and of the resulting repair work needed to smooth out the disaffiliation. Waring (2005) has, similarly, also examined the production format of repair initiations as a vehicle for affiliation in graduate student seminars. Others have focused on the way disaffiliation is repaired through specific discursive devices, like change of state tokens (Emmertsen & Heinemann, 2010) or amplitude shifts (Goldberg, 1978). Hutchby (1996) has detailed the ways talk-radio hosts monitor caller's accounts for potential arguables, and how hosts use a range of contrast-structures to proffer disaffiliation and thus pursue controversy.

Jefferson et al. (1987) showed how speakers pursue connection during expanded affiliative sequences where laughter was used to modulate improprieties (rudeness, obscenity, etc) at interactional tension mid-points to create affiliation. Jefferson et al. (1987) detail a wide range of responses to improprieties that range from rejection to enthusiastic affiliation, noting that recipients of improprieties typically begin by resisting it and then, in response to repeated offers, come to show appreciation and affiliation. Similarly, Glenn (2003) examined laughter in response to teases and other sexual improprieties, showing that potential interactional breaches in propriety may promote connection by building a flirtatious encounter. In Sacks (1978) discussion of dirty jokes, he notes that dirty jokes are recipient-designed objects that invite listeners to signal membership in the identity category that the impropriety indexes. Improprieties index culturally defined activities, rights, obligations, and predicates that are expected for members of certain relational categories.

Korobov (2011a) found that when speed-daters responded to their partner's mate-preference disclosures with risky *inferentially elaborate probes* (see Heritage, 1985), which challenged the speaker to adopt a different or stronger version of their stated mate-preference (i.e., they were risky and potentially adversarial rejoinders), these probes actually promoted stance affiliation. They created a playful environment of expansion around potentially troublesome inferences, which provided a mechanism for burgeoning

romantic partners to coordinate their stances. Korobov (2011b) also found that mate-preferences that were gendered in *non*-conventional ways also tended to function as a preliminary for affective affiliation. Resistance to gender conventionality allowed partners to construct their identities in ways that appeared idiosyncratic or finely-tuned to their potential romantic partner—all interactive features which worked as preliminaries for affiliation.

The main idea is that among close friends or intimates, pursuing controversy through the use of improprieties (or other risky/delicate social actions) may be potentially relationally constructive, as they may allow speakers to explore and negotiate contentious topics as well as cultural understandings about what being a romantic partner or being in a romantic partnership means to them (see Mandelbaum, 2003; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2008). And, more specifically, delicate forays into the use of improprieties may allow speakers to show themselves as a certain type of romantic partner or they may allow speakers to indirectly propose the distinct category of romantic partnership they are interested in pursuing (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005; Stokoe, 2004, 2008). Consonant for the present inquiry, Glenn (2003) has aptly noted that improprieties may be particularly useful as a kind of relational barometer in courtship relevant interactions, where the relationship has the potential for romance, intimacy, and long-term partnership.

A Discursive Approach

The discursive approach being advanced here is an outgrowth of several strands of research, namely discursive psychology (e.g., Billig, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996), ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1997), and the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Packer, 1987). Within this discursive approach, talk is not a means of expressing a cognitively held internalized senses of self/other, but is the site where relationships (and personal senses of identity) are *constituted* and *contested* in and through social interaction, meaning that the analysis of personal and social/relational development must focus on the sequential unfolding of everyday discourse. Relationality arises in social contexts, and thus should be studied as a situated, joint activity, not as the net sum of individuals interacting. Moreover, a discursive approach considers what is socially relevant for the participants. Analysts must thus be attentive to in situ moments when participants engage in interactively relevant social actions, such as the negotiation of deviance, transgressions, and improprieties as part of the everyday social business of conducting their relationships. We must ask: what social business is being conducted or accomplished by the rhetorical project of interacting, here and now? This leads to an analysis of the discursive actions, sequences, repertoires, devices, and positioning activities that are employed when improprieties are occasioned to manage an array of interactional exigencies.

This study utilizes a discursive approach to specifically examine how affiliation is pursued within the context of conversations between young adult romantic partners. Although the contexts in which the conversations between the young adult intimates analyzed here are described in more detail below, it is worth noting that the researchers never gave the couples any specific direction as to what to discuss or how to interact. The interactions were all spontaneous. In talking about everyday topics, evaluatively rich self/other attributions and descriptions arose naturally. While there was a wide range of different forms of talk, there were three types of interactively occasioned improprieties that routinely emerged in the present data corpus and were managed by the couples quite delicately across two separate data sets, which are elaborated on in the forthcoming sections. They include 1) negative category attributions of non-present others, 2) insults/criticisms, and 3) accusations of infidelity. These three types of improprieties comprise the analytic focus of this article.

METHOD

Participants

The data here come from two distinct data sets collected from 2013-2015. The first data set, which include the negative category attribution of non-present others, is a corpus of 72 speed-dates involving 24 potential romantic partners (12 males and 12 females; ages 19-26). The second data set, which include the insults/criticisms and accusations of infidelity, includes 20 young adult heterosexual romantic couples (ages 19-26) engaged in spontaneously recorded natural conversations in their natural ecological contexts. Both data sets are part of a larger series of studies interested in intimacy, identity, and romantic attraction in emerging adults (see Korobov 2011a, 2011b; Korobov, 2016, 2017; Korobov & Laplante, 2013).

Procedure

Briefly, the speed-dating study was modeled around a typical speed-dating event which involved romantically available individuals attending an event where they participate in a series of uniformly short “dates” (about 6-minute conversations) with other attendees. Recruitment began at a large university in the Southeast USA through word of mouth, posters, and emails. To be eligible to participate, all participants had to report being ‘single’ and ‘currently interested in a romantic relationship’. The goal was to create an actual event with participants that were genuinely motivated and interested in speed-dating. All young adult participants gave full consent to be recorded. Each of the 72 speed-dating conversations occurred as part of a University sponsored speed-dating event, occurred without the actual presence of any researchers, were audio recorded and transcribed according to Jefferson’s (2004) transcription conventions.

The second data set, from which insults/criticisms and accusations of infidelity were derived, involved spontaneously recorded conversations between actual young adult romantic couples in their natural lived contexts. This study involved couples that reported being ‘in a committed romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Though we were open to both heterosexual and homosexual couples, the couples that agreed to participate were all heterosexual. Participants were told that they would be participating in a study interested in the conversations that take place between young adult couples in the spaces of their everyday home-lives. Each couple was given a digital audio recorder to take home for 2 weeks with the instruction to simply turn the recorder on whenever they were hanging out (i.e., eating meals, driving in the car, taking a walk, cuddling, watching TV, cooking, etc.).

Although each data set are markedly different in tone and interactional accomplishments, the focus of this inquiry is in the ways they nevertheless both contain similar forms of intimacy pursuit by using improprieties. As such, the analyses that follow are not presented here as an exhaustive summary of similarities and differences of each data set or the extant findings for each study. Rather, select excerpts are presented from each data set to offer a window into the *common* ways that negative category attributions, insults/criticisms, and accusations of infidelity were negotiated. The aim is to offer an up-close discursive analysis to show that the in situ interactional pursuits of affiliation among intimates is an *active* process that is markedly quite different than a cognitive or personality approach that would treat discourse as a rather neutral medium where speakers bring or display understandings or competencies to social situations.

Negative Category Attributions of Non-Present Others

Negative category attributions of non-present others are akin to what Bergmann (1993) called “diversion gossip”, i.e., negative talk about non-present others that tends to arise as a by-product of small talk in non-structured settings. Such talk has a situational embeddedness to it, involves mutually known topics, and can be treated by participants as a risky, potentially injurious form of sociability. Engaging in this kind of delicate discourse often requires differentiation, which involves formulating contrasts to categorical ‘others’ who are positioned as embodying attitudes, behaviors, or dispositions that define membership in a non-desired group (see Stokoe, 2004; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1997). Differentiation, however, can be tricky, especially if the target category is one to which one of the speakers belongs. Resisting category membership entails delicately undermining one’s position with respect to those undesirable features through contrastive counter claims (Speer & Potter 2000; Stokoe, 2004). Such contrasts may have the effect of establishing oneself as a *unique* member of such a category. And even without the delicate counter-claim work, simply talking negatively about non-present can be relationally risky, since it can make speakers appear malicious or gossipy.

Insults and Criticisms

Couples also engaged in a kind of playful and quite gendered repartee involving insults and criticisms. Insults and criticisms, when they are directed at the other, are typically treated as a special, and potentially more aggressive (than sarcasm or irony) form of disparagement (see Janes & Olsen, 2000). They involve characterizations of a recipient as defective in some socially relevant way (Goodwin, 1990), or may involve disparaging comments about a person's behavior, possessions, preferences, or appearance (Evaldsson, 2005). There are, of course, other ways that insults and criticisms may be used by speakers. They may be mobilized as forms of social solidarity, as discursive actions nested in the practice of being in a 'with', as Goffman (1971) put it. Apropos for this approach to insults and criticisms, Evaldsson (2005) has found that in contexts where relationality demands are high (e.g., in couple's conversations), insults and criticisms may be formulated as invitations to a playful repartee. Though very risky and potentially relationally injurious, the recipients may sometimes orient to them in ways that mitigate the face-threatening or adversarial nature of them, and instead treat them as methods to create alignment through an implicit, but *shared* transgression of socio-relational norms. Insults and criticisms are thus ripe sites to see affiliation pursued in creative and perhaps surprising ways.

Accusations of Infidelity

On the face of it, accusing your partner of cheating has obvious relational risks. Accusations and/or insinuations of infidelity between romantic couples involve the casual and spontaneous ways that couples charge, assert, claim, or imply that their partner has or wants to engage in something emotionally or sexually inappropriate with a potential rival. Unlike mainstream psychological work that might treat talk about infidelity as a sign of emotional insecurity or jealousy or extant fidelity issues, the data here show that accusations of infidelity may function more locally as brief but effective ways for one partner to signal that they have been dismissed or neglected in the preceding discursive turns, and to indirectly invite the other to repair it. In other words, the issue is not the cheating per se, but the interactional breach that the accusation of infidelity highlights. Using something as serious as an accusation of infidelity to draw attention to brief slights and dismissals is relationally risky. The analyses specifically reveal a prominent 5-part sequential design (discussed below) in the interactional environment surrounding spontaneous accusations of infidelity.

The general, albeit surprising, finding across all three types of these relationally risky forms of impropriety is that far from being adversarial, which we might expect, these social actions tended to be useful for pursuing affiliation precisely because they presented interactive trouble. These three forms of relational impropriety indirectly indexed local interactional breaches that could, if left unattended, lead to non-affiliative interactional outcomes. Successfully navigating and repairing the interactive trouble seemed to increase a subjectively shared sense of familiarity, which promoted affiliation. As the analyses will

show, these locally occasioned risky forms of social action tended to serve as preliminaries for affiliation between potential romantic partners. The data thus show that the ways romantic partners affiliate around quotidian relational breaches can be part of the nitty-gritty work of maintaining a close relationship.

RESULTS

Negative Category Attributions (NCA's) of Non-Present Others

In all the excerpts, there is a male speaker (marked as 'M') and a female speaker (marked with 'F'). In this first excerpt, the negative category attributions are formulated by M about 'women', which can be heard as the perpetuation of gender stereotypes about women and thus an implicit criticism of F. Although F orients to this as trouble, she ends up co-participating in the negative category construction and then swiftly differentiates from such features near the tail end of the excerpt.

(1) (F4M5)

- 1 M: I had flowers but I left them in the car (.) sorry.
 2 F: well?
 3 M: and they died (.) ladies don't go for that.
 4 F: (hh)that's so disappointing(hahhh).
 5 F: off white? (.) yeah I like carnations (.)
 6 some girls don't like carnations.
 7 M: I know cause they think they're cheap
 8 F: yep(hhah).
 9 M: th'judge a guy based on his finances before
 10 they even know him.
 11 F: ((laughing)) hahhh (.) I like carnations though
 12 I think they're pretty.
 13 M: I like that(ha) hhahahhh bout' you.
 14 F: off to a good start(hhheh).
 15 M: yeah (.) so how are you?
 16 F: I'm good (.) yeah(hhah).

This excerpt reflects the most common pattern in the way negative category attributions (or NCA's) were formulated and managed. M initiates an incomplete (hedged or mitigated) NCA (across lines 1 and 3). The hedging and mitigation treat the NCA as delicate, thus attending to the subject-side and recipient-side risks (Edwards, 2005, 2007) of staging a complaint about a category to which one's interlocutor is a member. In response, F treats the NCA as an expected or incipient topic (lines 4-5). F orients to it not only as an expected action, but goes further by demonstrating knowledge about the NCA, thus co-developing it topically, doing so with intermittent laughter (see Jefferson et al., 1987) which constructs it as non-serious, thus showing that she is not seriously implicated by the NCA (lines 5-6 and 8). Since both M and F share the intermittent laughter, it's possible to see the laughter here as modulating potentially non-aligning actions to avoid a

full out argument (see Potter & Hepburn, 2010; Shaw et al., 2013). F's co-participation in topic expansion and levity work as a preliminary for M to further develop the NCA in a less mitigated and more inoculated way (lines 7 and 9), where both speakers begin to appear to be in sync around it. F then constructs a swift and succinct formulation of contrast, or differentiation, from the negative features of the co-constructed category (lines 11-12). M then appreciates the differentiation, and both pursue affective affiliation across the final turns.

In some cases, a couple would capitalize on a self-deprecating admission from their interlocutor and position their partner's personal admission as a reflection of an NCA. Interestingly, moves like this rarely resulted in interactive trouble, but rather were taken up in ways that promoted affiliation. In the following example, F positions M's self-confessed pickiness about women as a breach in what would normatively be expected from 'guys.' M then differentiates from the type of 'guy' implicated by F's positioning while preserving affiliation with her.

(2) (F5M4)

- 1 F: well not here in school but=
 2 M: =>yah'yah< I understand.
 3 F: so ya'looking for a girlfriend here?
 4 M: I'm just (.) so picky (.) n'I don't know why
 5 (.) I'm the worst one to be picky.
 6 F: I've never heard a guy t'be picky though (.) that's
 7 so craz(h)y.
 8 M: [yeah
 9 F: [yeah that's a girl thing.
 10 M: like my roommates in college used to pick on me
 11 so much (.) b'like how'd ya'get get a good looking girl
 12 t'go out with you (.) n'then I'd dump em'in three months
 13 (.) but (.) I mean I ain't wasting my time.
 14 F: right (.) we're too old to waste our time now.
 15 M: yeah if it ain't what I'm looking[for
 16 F: [right right
 17 M: I'm not gonna lead a [girl on
 18 F: [yeah yeah
 19 M: if I know it ain't gonna work.
 20 F: so with you there.

M's initial receipt of F's topic proffer is to position himself as 'picky', and to then problematize that formulation with a display of uncertainty ('n'I don't know why') and self-deprecation ('I'm the worst one to be picky'). The display of uncertainty and self-deprecation is recipient oriented—it attends to, and perhaps mitigates, the potential interactional trouble of coming off as 'picky' to a potential romantic partner. In other words, his admission anticipates negative uptake. Although in many instances self-deprecation prefers disagreement (see Pomerantz, 1978), in this exchange F's initial receipt is not disagreement. What she attends to is not his evaluation of his pickiness, but rather is the fact of his pickiness as a member of the category 'guy'. F's evaluation is not about his

individual pickiness but is a scripted NCA that the pickiness of any ‘guy’ is out of the realm of normalcy (‘I’ve never heard’) and is generally and psychologically aberrant (‘that’s so crazy’). Not only is it non-normative for ‘guys’, but it is ‘a girl thing’.

M is left to attend to two discursive tasks. First, he must realign himself with some activity which inscribes him back into the category ‘guy’. And second, since ‘pickiness’ is a ‘girl thing’, he must offer an account for his ‘pickiness’ that is stance affiliating. M’s differentiation process begins by first expanding his regular action pattern to involve not simply being routinely picky, but also to being someone who routinely ‘gets a good-looking girl’ and then ‘dumps them’, where getting attractive females and disposing of them are arguably dispositional action patterns that index what might be stereotypically expected from ‘guys’. To account for being picky, M claims that it results from a superordinate dispositional commitment to not ‘wasting time’, or ‘not leading a girl on’. His pickiness thus comes off as a mark of relational integrity, not ‘girliness’, to which F expresses alignment and affiliation (lines 16, 18, 20). Note the elegant orchestration here: M’s initial receipt (lines 4-5) of F’s topic proffer has the effect of eliciting from F a positioning of M as a guy who is resistant to gender conventionality. Although risky, F’s receipt opens a space for M to offer an expanded gender-relevant account of himself that simultaneously reclaims membership into category ‘guy’ (it is thus face-saving) while nevertheless providing something novel and idiosyncratic, which is an account for his resistance that functions as a preliminary for affiliation.

Insults and Criticisms

These next three excerpts from the natural conversations between romantic couples feature insults and criticisms that play off the couple’s creative formulation (and supplanting) of gender tropes that are generally culturally recognized as disparaging. This first excerpt involves a variety of insults and criticisms (via disparaging gender tropes) that are ultimately softened, serving as preliminaries for relational affiliation.

(3) (LB6.1)

- 1 M: you always think shit b’going on.
 2 F: cause I know he showed you a picture.
 3 M: didn’t show me a damn thing.
 4 F: so what made you be like ‘man, we should’ve went’?
 5 M: yeah we should’ve went.
 6 F: fucking lying ass males (.) FUCK YOU (.) shut up.
 7 M: always up’n my business.
 8 ((5.0))
 9 F: ((starts singing)) Let let let me show you a good th’,
 10 man my throat hurt.
 11 M: what your throat gon’hurt?
 12 F: I tell you I’m getting sick here () you gonna take
 13 care of me (1.0) or be looking at pictures?
 14 M: bahahhhaa (.) man you b’all crazy girl(hahhhaa),
 15 F: hhaa what the fuck? why the fuck are you laughing(hah)?
 16 M: you be trippin’ me out (.) like you playin’ me that’s

17 crazy and shit.
 18 F: whatever (.) you gonna take care of me.
 19 M: look at me (.) I don't know shit,
 20 F: you gonna take care of me (.) hehee.

In lines 6 and 14, F and M use two negative gender tropes ('lying ass males' and 'b'all crazy girl'), both employing dispositional scripting (see Edwards, 1995; Korobov, 2011c) ('lying' in the iterative present tense; 'b'all crazy girl' as a regular action pattern). An array of other instances of dispositional scripting is also present, as M works to deflect F's accusations of his infidelity by scripting her as 'always think shit b'going on' (line 1), 'always up'n my business' (line 7), and 'be trippin' me out' and 'playing me' (line 16). F deflects his ascriptions of her through caricatured affect and exaggeration (line 6), long pauses (line 8) abrupt topic shifts (lines 9-10), laughter (15), and displays of nonchalance (line 18), as well as her own creative (and counterintuitive) use of scripting M as someone who is actually 'gonna take care of me' (lines 18 and 20), which can be heard less as a description than as a way for F to critique M by telling him how she would like to be treated. She is thus indirectly and jovially coaching M, a move that he is quick to laugh off and deflect (line 19). What begins as another everyday tiff drawing on disparaging and scripted gender tropes, turns into a playful occasion for affiliation and solidarity.

The disparaging gender tropes generally involved the men positioning the women as needy, nosey, or controlling, and the women positioning the men as sneaky, deceitful, or aloof, but in ways that were plausibly deniable for both. These positions thus appear more like tools used in a broader repartee of affiliation and relational play than as serious reflections of their feelings towards one another. In this next excerpt, F criticizes M for being the kind of guy who is always trying to get rid of women, to which M responds by positioning her as emotionally reactive due to PMS. As might be expected, this enactment is undone as quickly as it is built.

(4) (KA7.4)

1 M: babe?
 2 F: ((humming song)) yeah,
 3 M: babe go ahead n'go if ya need to.
 4 F: huh? what,
 5 M: I sorry (.) go ahead baby (.) go ahead n'hang out (.)
 6 get on with your day.
 7 F: stop rushing me off the phone.
 8 M: huh?
 9 F: stop rushing me off the phone (.) you guys always tryin
 10 to get ridduv' us,
 11 M: e::w (.) all pms n'moody?
 12 F: good one (.) very original.
 13 M: ba::by com'on,
 14 F: okay okay I'm going (.) I'm going (.) uggghh (.) now
 15 ya'gettin on my ner::ves.
 16 M: ((softly)) I lo::ve you,
 17 F: love you too (.) but my God (.) lemme just say you
 18 gonna hate when umm (.) we get married (.) cause

19 everything's be the galaxy (.) everything (.) like I'm
 20 gonna be like cooking dinner and my apron is gonna be
 21 the galaxy hahahahaha.

In the moments prior to the beginning of this excerpt, there is quite a bit of dead space in the conversation, something that M seizes as an opportunity to let F get off the phone and get on with her day (lines 5-6). F responds to this less as a genuine act of courtesy by M and more as an indirect way that M is trying to rush her off the phone (line 7). M displays confusion, which softens his actions in the previous turn, F recycles her criticism (line 9) before dispositionally scripting M as part of a class of 'guys' that are 'always' trying to get rid of women (lines 9-10). M's deflection is equally culturally formulaic, as he shifts the blame onto her with a prefatory high-affect reaction token ('e::w') and dispositional scripting of her as 'all pms n'moody'. What then follows is the predictable softening and ironizing of the exchange, as F uses exaggeration and sarcasm to compliment M on his 'very original' comeback. M shifts into a romantic register in line 13 and offers a bid for play and openness in not taking this too seriously. F agrees to say goodbye, but not before using a demonstrably exaggerated play/smile voice to tell M that he is getting on her nerves. Her quip is designed to appear light and is taken up that way by M who mirrors her register in telling her he loves her (line 16). It literally only takes a few seconds for the conflict to smooth out and for the two to relationally re-affiliate. As usual, an abrupt topic shift signals the end of the topic.

This next excerpt features insults and criticisms that involve the policing of gender norm violations. M mentions that he is going to drink a margarita, which leads to M policing (and thus critiquing) F around gender norms related to women gaining weight.

(5) (SD6.3)

1 F: we turn here? do you know how to get there?
 2 ((2.0))

3 M: totally gonna drink a margarita tonight (.) gonna
 4 b'my first drink too (.) as a man,

5 F: w'l my first drink's gonna be a bunch of beers.

6 M: a'ight (.) if you wanna get fat.

7 F: OH RA:HILLY? do you know how many calories and sugar
 8 is proly in your little fruity girl drink?

9 M: baby I don't drink it all the time,

10 F: I'm just saa::yin (.) sh'it (.) you gon' tell me I'm
 11 gon'get fat? ont'a:h,

12 M: if you drink beer all the time,

13 F: I didn't say I was gonna drink it all the time,

14 M: I know this is really bad bu::t when I think of a girl
 15 drinking beer (.) I automatically think of big Susan=
 16 =hhahaahaa well [you ain't seen me drink beer,

17 M: [n'I'm like ple::ase never again

18 F: you can go around this slow poke.
 19 ((3.0; car engine sounds))

20 F: are we leaving our cars at the Walmart again?

In line 3-4, M returns to the topic as he emphasizes that he's 'totally' going to 'drink a margarita', that it will his 'first drink', and that he will do so 'as a man'. The entire turn is staged with faux-confidence and exaggerated affect on distinct recycled items from the previous excerpt. In a tit-for-tat response style, F immediately counters by orienting to a traditionally masculine position ('gonna drink a bunch of beers'), a position that stands as a poignant foil to M's. The tables are then turned in line 6 as M polices gender norms around women's weight by setting up the conditional that drinking beers is 'a'ight' *if* F wants to get fat, a stance he later (line 14-15) amplifies by construing an overweight acquaintance of theirs ('Susan') as the face of beer drinking women.

What stands out is the way the recipient of the gender norm policing manages the criticism in order to avoid disaffiliation. In lines 7-8, F completely shifts register, and begins with the idiomatic 'OH RA:HILLY?', which is hearable as a parroted line from Jim Carrey's character from the *Ace Ventura* movies. It's playful and designed to be heard as a feature of a silly perturbation, which provides distance from the insult, making accountable the non-serious nature of their banter. Then, in lines 10-11, she shifts into a highly staged and caricatured urban vernacular affective speech style, which is designed to appear overdone, and thus ironic. Her laughter (line 16) in response to M's mention of Susan also works to distance her from the projected alignment with Susan, as does the differentiating ('well') move in which she notes 'you ain't seen me drink beer'. And finally, her abrupt topic shift in lines 18 and 20 further signal the non-seriousness of the conflict. What we have here yet again is a policing of potentially adversarial gendered identity positions by the couple but taken up and managed in a way that maintains affiliation, thus preserving the possibility for playful affiliation.

Accusations of Infidelity

Accusations of infidelity tended to occur in step 3 of the following 5-part sequential pattern:

Step 1: Speaker A: asks a question or makes a statement or request

Step 2: Speaker B: resists or rejects Speaker A's question/statement/request

*Step 3: Speaker A: morally loaded **accusation/insinuation of infidelity** at speaker B*

Step 4: Speaker B: rejects/problematicizes the accusation by treating it as absurd

Step 5: Speaker B: eventually aligns with speaker A's question/statement/request

In this first example, A accuses B of flirting with another woman.

(6) (MK3.2)

- 1 A: ohh I'm mad at her (.) fucking ho forgot to put
 2 it on (.) ya gonna help? (.) gimme some ketchup?
 3 B: w'l'I dunno how many she fucking gave you.
 4 B: and how is she a hoe? n'why ya speaking quietly?
 5 A: cuz she's a:ctin like'a hoe.

- 6 B: how? she made sandwiches and then got confused.
 7 A: cause you two are all giggling with each other.
 8 B: HOLY SHI::T you are losing it (.) wo::w.
 9 A: funny hahaha not'funny.
 10 B: holy(hahhaa)shit (.) you messed that up(ahahha).
 11 A: [shu'upp::]
 12 B: [here baby] take mine (.) use this one=
 13 A: =hahahahaah shu:::t up(ahahaah)thank you.

A and B are in a sandwich shop, and A uses the interrogative voice construction 'going to help?' in line 2 to ask (and perhaps suggest) that B help her in locating ketchup, particularly given that she has been mistreated by the 'ho' at the front counter. Her choice of 'ho' derogates the potential female rival, which positions female clerk as undesirable, thus proffering alignment from B. Additionally, her question has obvious relational implications (i.e., that he *ought* to help/align with her). In what follows, B rejects her request, her way of talking ('speaking quietly'), and her construction of the female clerk as a 'ho'. A then accuses B of inappropriately flirting with the clerk, B dismisses the accusation as absurd, and then they have a laugh over some malapropisms before B capitulates to A's request to help her with the ketchup, which occasions alignment and affiliation. The sequential order is thus:

Step 1: Speaker A: asks a question or makes a statement or request

- 1 A: ohh I'm mad at her (.) fucking ho forgot to put
 2 it on (.) ya gonna help? (.) gimme some ketchup?

Step 2: Speaker B: resists or rejects Speaker A's question/statement/request

- 3 B: w'l'I dunno how many she fucking gave you.
 4 B: and how is she a hoe? n'why ya speaking quietly?
 6 B: how? she made sandwiches and then got confused.

Step 3: Speaker A: accusation of infidelity towards speaker B

- 7 A: cause you two are all giggling with each other.

Step 4: Speaker B: rejects the accusation and treats it as absurd

- 8 B: HOLY SHI::T you are losing it (.) wo::w.

Step 5: Speaker B: aligns with speaker A's question/statement/request

- 12 B: [here baby] take mine (.) use this one=
 13 A: =hahahahaah shu:::t up(ahahaah)thank you.

The 5-part sequence is evident again in this next excerpt as speaker A implies that B may fall in love with his friend Shay.

(7) (KR7.3)

- 1 A: I wish you'd move over to the east apartments.
 2 B: aggh na:h
 3 A: >why not<,
 4 B: jus' I dunno (.) it's good(.) I'm good here.

5 A: all this hanging out with Shay (.) you ain't
 6 gonna fall in love with her er'something?
 7 B: that is soo ill.
 8 A: what's so ill?
 9 B: >that's whack baby<
 10 A: well I don't want ya'll ta'be hanging out with
 11 each other (.) then falling in love n'I jus get
 12 pushed out da'picture.
 13 B: hahhahahahhha that's so: dumb baby.
 14 A: you said it was du:mb?
 15 B: mmhmm(hahaa) listen to you.
 16 A: <shu::t up> Richard(hhaha).
 17 A: you ne:ed to move.
 18 B: I'll move (.) y'know I gotch'ya baby.
 19 ((4.0))
 20 A: I have t'wash my hair today (.) it's detrimental.
 21 B: then go'on wash your pretty hair baby.

In this excerpt, A requests that her boyfriend move closer to her. He rejects this request across two separate turns and claims to be fine just where he is. It's at that point that A uses the iterative present tense ("all this hanging out with Shay") to imply a regularly occurring pattern where B is spending time with another woman that A then goes to express concern about ("you ain't gonna fall in love with her er'something?" and "then falling in love n'I jus get pushed out da'picture"). As expected, B treats the accusation as absurd across three different lines (9, 13, and 15) and even flips it back on her (line 15). Eventually after some playful banter, B capitulates and agrees to move and take care of his partner's feelings. The pattern is thus:

Step 1: Speaker A: asks a question or makes a statement or request

1 A: I wish you'd move over to the east apartments.
 17 A: you ne:ed to move.

Step 2: Speaker B: resists or rejects Speaker A's question/statement/request

2 B: aggh na:h
 4 B: jus' I dunno (.) it's good(.) I'm good here.

Step 3: Speaker A: accusation of infidelity towards speaker B

5 A: all this hanging out with Shay (.) you ain't
 6 gonna fall in love with her er'something?
 10 A: well I don't want ya'll ta'be hanging out with
 11 each other (.) then falling in love n'I jus get
 12 pushed out da'picture.

Step 4: Speaker B: rejects the accusation and treats it as absurd

9 B: >that's whack baby<
 13 B: hahhahahahhha that's so: dumb baby.
 15 B: mmhmm(hahaa) listen to you.

Step 5: Speaker B: aligns with speaker A's question/statement/request

18 B: I'll move (.) y'know I gotch'ya baby.

In both excerpts, the accusation of infidelity is designed to attend to an interactional breach. A's requests have been rejected. The injury of the rejection is amplified by the accusation of infidelity. We cannot know for sure whether A truly believes B is cheating or will cheat, and from a discursive approach that matters little, since the participants themselves do not pursue its resolution. What a discursive approach allows us to see with fine clarity is how the accusation is used at a specific juncture in the preceding turns where a slight has occurred. As expected, the accusation is downplayed through an absurd rendering, which is key as a segue towards repairing the dismissal and re-building affiliation. In short, the force of the accusation of infidelity paves the way not towards an adversarial outcome or any kind of debate or argument about relational issues between them, but rather towards a local quotidian repair of a dismissal and then a kind of jovial reconnection.

DISCUSSION

This article has summarized a series of empirical findings regarding the ways several types of relational improprieties were formulated and used within the context of conversations between actual or potential young adult romantic partners. These conversations were either ecologically natural conversations that spontaneously emerged in the couple's home environments or spontaneous exchanges during an initial romantic encounter. In both contexts, conflictual banter was not the intended focus, nor were the couples asked or encouraged to talk about anything having to do with contentious issues. Their talk covered a vast range of everyday topics. In so doing, descriptions, attributions, evaluations naturally arose as epiphenomena of other prescient issues and were relationally managed in due course. The central interest is in the ways that the couples managed contentious topics, and for what purposes. A discursive approach was used to offer an up-close micro-analytic lens to understand the sequential unfolding of the doing of conflict as relational actions that are designed to manage some bit of interpersonal business in the here and now, rather than chronic or extant relationship issues.

Analyzing these findings across two broad data sets and several noteworthy empirical studies advances a range of important ideas. First, the bulk of discursive research looking at pursuits of affiliation vis-à-vis controversy have been conducted in arenas such as radio-talk, sales, grad seminars, the telling of dirty jokes, or a variety of mundane natural conversational contexts. The present findings highlight the presence of this phenomena in a range of natural conversations between burgeoning romantic partners. This suggests that in contexts where relationality demands are high (e.g., in romantic couples conversations), risky pursuits of affiliation by way of controversial methods may function as invitations to a playful repartee, and the recipients may sometimes orient to them in ways that mitigate the face-threatening or adversarial nature of them, and instead treat them as methods to

create alignment and affiliation through an implicit, but *shared* transgression of socio-relational norms.

Secondly, this may be especially true for young adult romantic couples, which has obvious developmental implications. More than any generation prior, contemporary young adults are saturated in webs of social-networking and are communicatively interconnected in complex ways through social media, which suggest that interactional phenomena like play fighting, verbal tiffs, irony/sarcasm, and other ostensibly aggressive forms of what youth call 'keeping it real' are likely tantamount to being candid, and that now, more than ever, it may be trendy to be candid — i.e., edgy, real, open, and disclosing (Chiou, 2006; Nosko et al., 2010; Weisbuch et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), as a way of proposing distinct forms of romantic relationships that are more casual and exploratory. The range of findings here with respect to young adults show the ease with which risky forms of interacting arise and dissolve on the fly and how they may counterintuitively be sociable and affiliative (and not necessarily adversarial) in nature, and why these forms of interacting cater to the unique demands of their culture milieus. This finding calls for future exploration.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of discursively oriented qualitative approaches for understanding the nuances of how relationships emerge in real time. As the findings show, in natural everyday interactional contexts it may be useful to explore with empirical precision how everyday interactive moments of conflict between couples emerge and function as interactional discursive resources that are actively occasioned and managed to facilitate pursuits of affiliation. When approached this way, conflict-talk is not a static window into the couples ideational or dispositional personalities (which would be the view in traditional Psychology) but is a living and ever-evolving relational resource for handling an array of interpersonal vagaries. The more that social scientists use discursively-qualitatively oriented methods for studying the actual conversational interactions that comprise relationships, the deeper and more nuanced our understandings will be for seeing how closeness and intimacy is built, especially in ways we may not have expected.

With respect to the negative category attributions of non-present others in the speed-dating exchanges, the key finding was that rather than functioning as adversarial or stance disaffiliating discursive resources, these risky social actions were harbingers of mutual affective stance affiliation. When negative category attributions of non-present others were occasioned, the recipients of such disclosures tended to orient to the negative attributions as if they themselves might be implicated, and would thus work to *differentiate* themselves from such categories of persons, which resulted in affiliation. This differentiation was appreciated by the other, resulting mutual affiliation/intimacy. In other cases, speakers would self-select a negative category attribution about their own identity category and would ease into a process of both formulating and soliciting differentiation, a process that segued with the establishment of affiliation.

These moral improprieties seemed to be useful for pursuing intimacy precisely because they seemed, at least at the surface level, to be troublesome. At first blush, this may seem counterintuitive given that theories of interpersonal attraction generally stress the importance of socially desirable actions during the initial onset of a relationship. However, when considering the interactional flow of first encounters in a series of speed-dating events, where speakers are vying against others for potential partners, there is likely a press to do or say things that stand out or are idiosyncratic. Being too polite may be tantamount to being forgettable in the arena of initial romantic dating. As such, although spontaneously non-normative discursive acts, like improprieties, may be less socially desirable or safe, they may work well as preliminaries for moments of memorable repartee. This seems particularly true *if* the impropriety is formulated and responded to in non-adversarial ways. During initial romantic encounters, couples may therefore stand out to one another when they delve into the risky arena of using improprieties, provided they are able to tilt the impropriety away from trouble and towards commensurate affective stance affiliation. Improprieties may thus engender intimacy pursuits because they increase a subjectively shared sense of familiarity. In short, they may be useful for creating interactional sequences that allow the couples to feel like they ‘get one another’s style’ or are ‘connecting’.

With respect to the emergence of insults and criticisms, the types that appeared among the established romantic couples proved to be more constructive and affiliative than adversarial. When the actual, spontaneously occurring insult/criticism banter was analyzed, most of the episodes were built like drive-by tiffs, spats, or flare ups that were initiated and terminated with regularity and ease, resulting in affiliation. The couples seemed discursively dexterous at the art of picking and prodding. Also, and as noted above, by being abrupt, curt, or playfully aggressive, insults and criticisms arguably enabled the couples to indirectly signal authenticity, candidness, and transparency—all features that could easily be glossed as invitations to a genuine or honest romantic partnership, especially in contemporary youth culture.

Very similar findings were discovered when accusations of infidelity were analyzed between the couples. A sequential discursive approach was useful for seeing how casual references to infidelity function to negotiate prescient interpersonal disjunctions in the moment. Consonant to the findings for negative category attributions and insults/criticisms, the analyses demonstrate how accusations of infidelity among romantic partners work to pursue (and avert) relational trouble. They indirectly index interactional breaches that may, if left unattended, lead to non-affiliative interactional outcomes. Unlike mainstream social scientific work that would treat talk about infidelity as a sign of emotional insecurity or jealousy, the analyses here showed how accusations of infidelity function as brief but effective ways for one partner to signal that they have been dismissed or neglected in the preceding discursive turns, and to indirectly invite the other to repair that. Like the insults and criticisms, a key finding was that accusations or insinuations of infidelity were rarely

taken seriously, which seemed to be the preferred response. A serious response might have seemed patronizing and would have missed the point altogether. In the environment that followed the absurd rendering, the accused almost always came around and capitulated to the initial speaker's original request/question, which led to alignment of stance between both speakers and relational affiliation. In interactional terms, the impropriety (the accusation) can be interpreted as a way of prompting the accused that 'you owe me something', which re-indexes the original request-rejection sequence. It is an invitation to repair the misalignment that left the accuser in a one-down position. When the accused did not capitulate back to the original request, affiliation did not occur, which again underscored the affiliative function of the impropriety.

In sum, this article has drawn on several key studies to advance the view that in natural everyday interactional contexts it may be useful to view everyday interactive moments of conflict between couples as an interactional discursive phenomenon that is actively occasioned and managed. When approached this way, conflict-talk is less of a window into the couples ideational/dispositional personalities, and more of a relational resource for handling an array of interpersonal vagaries. In the data examined here, couples regularly worked up improprieties in fleeting micro-interactional spaces in order to pursue affiliation, which demonstrates that engaging in conflict is not simply about revealing one's own (or reflecting one's cultural) moral beliefs or values, but is also useful for creating and sustaining relationality.

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