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Mate-Preference Talk in Speed-Dating Conversations

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In contrast to experimental psychological speed-dating research in which mate preferences are typically measured as survey responses triggered by a live interactional manipulation, the current study uses a discursive psychological perspective to examine actual mate-preference talk by potential romantic partners in live conversational contexts. Drawing on a corpus of 36 speed-dating interactions, this study examines how mate preferences were elicited, initially formulated, and how responses to mate-preference disclosures were organized across their environment of expansion. Three broad trends emerged. First, the vast majority of mate-preference disclosures were not only prompted, but were prompted in ways that occasioned delayed responses. Second, the majority of initial mate-preference formulations were delayed or mitigated, revealing that requests for and disclosures of mate preferences were delicate social actions. And finally, delayed responses often occasioned protracted expansion sequences which, at minimum, promoted cooperative topic expansion and, in some cases where the probes were inferentially elaborative (and thus more risky), topic expansion as well as affective participant stance alignment. This study reveals that stance affiliation may reflect the extent to which participants are able to incrementally coordinate inferential conjectures, a finding that suggests that social scientists interested in the genesis of close relationships would benefit enormously from an up-close analysis of the actual relational contexts in which relationships emerge.

Within social psychological approaches to interpersonal relations, research on initial romantic attraction or *mate preference* has shifted markedly over the last few decades from demonstrating the principles of attraction in hypothetical laboratory scenarios to studying attraction among real romantic partners in ongoing close relationships. Research on initial attraction has traditionally involved relying upon retrospective self-reports of early romantic attraction, reports that are often prone to systematic memory and selection biases (see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007; Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991). To avoid these problems, the speed-dating research paradigm emerged within experimental social psychology as a useful way of studying initial mate preferences when the attraction first occurs in the live speed-dating event (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Finkel et al., 2007; Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 2006; Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008). Speed-dating research thus became an exemplar of a trend in close relationships research of studying relationships in live interactional settings.

By using actual interactions, speed-dating researchers have revealed that participants' stated *a priori* mate preferences (preevent) turn out to be poor predictors of mate preferences that emerge as a result of actual or live interactions (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Finkel et al., 2007; Fisman et al.). Since it is the utilization of live interactional contexts that allow for these findings, it is crucial to understand exactly how live interactions are conceptualized and analyzed. In perhaps the most well-known example of speed-dating research in the United States, Eastwick and Finkel (2008) treat the interactional or natural speed-dating context as an experimental intervention (for a critique, see Stokoe, 2010). Eastwick and Finkel do not analyze the actual speed-dating interactions *per se*; rather, the interactional context serves as an experimental manipulation that allows researchers to test whether preevent ideal mate preferences are related to postevent assessments and "yes" or "no" overall decisions about whether couples would like to date again. Mate preferences are thus circumscribed to responses on surveys that are administered independently from the interactional contexts in which preferences emerge, are relevant, and are negotiated. There is thus a problematic disconnect in psychological speed-dating research between claims about the importance of utilizing interactive relational contexts and the actual analysis of them.

MATE PREFERENCES FROM A DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Clearly mate preferences point to something significant about how romantic relationships begin and evolve. However, when we come to this topic not from an experimental "factors and variables" (see Edwards, 1997) approach, where "preference" is an operationally defined dependent variable and the social context an independent manipulation, but from a discursive perspective (Edwards & Potter, 1992), the notion of "mate preferences" as empirical phenomena changes significantly. First, mate preferences are no longer conceptualized as "attitudinal objects" with cognitive or affective manifestations (see Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Second, mate preferences are not reducible to trait descriptors (e.g., "physically attractive," "ambitious," "fun") that can be mapped onto a language game of semantic differentials ("funny/serious," "tall/short") or numerical judgments (Wiggins & Potter, 2003). And third, and perhaps most importantly, the contexts in which mate preferences are displayed (e.g., the speed-dating event) are not treated as experimental manipulations that remain unexamined in an analytic "black box" (Stokoe, 2010). Rather, the interactions are precisely the sites most appropriate for analysis, since mate preferences are arguably a delicate and equivocal interpersonal phenomenon that wax and wane in live contexts between people.

From a discursive perspective, mate preferences are treated as *actions* done in social contexts as part of the dual business of conducting close relationships while managing the subject-side of self-presentation (Edwards, 2005, 2007). Traditional psychological notions are not helpful in recognizing the various ways that preferences work as practical rhetorical tools for performing actions. For example, in Wiggins and Potter's (2003) analysis of everyday food assessments, they show that preferences can be formulated as subjective ("I like cheese") or objective ("cheese is good"), and that these differences matter enormously—for instance, subjective preferences are less likely to be weighed in on by other speakers, are less adversarial, and often function as a privileged resource for making refusals accountable; preferences stated objectively may work well as compliments, as forms of persuasion, but are often riskier and may invite disputation.

Preferences may also be categorical (“I like cheese”) or item-specific (“this cheese is good”), a distinction that may impact the ways that the implications of preferences are heard, conflict is managed, actions are justified, and preferences are built to appear enduring (or not) over time. The general point here is that preference talk actively contributes to a range of social practices that have personal and relational implications.

Traditional psychological approaches to mate preferences wash these distinctions out, telling us very little about how speakers might *actively* make themselves understood to be “preferring” some “object” in the course of interaction. Treating mate preferences as situated interactional practices locates this work in the discursive psychological tradition of Edwards and Potter (1992). Here, traditionally psychological phenomena, like remembering (Edwards, Middleton, & Potter, 1992), self-disclosing (Antaki, Barnes, & Leudar, 2005), explaining (Potter & Edwards, 1990), categorizing (Edwards, 1991), and for the current study, mate preferences, are understood not as internal or mental, but as external public business carried out in talk. Discursive psychology is apropos for examining what potential romantic partners are doing, as part of the business of first encounters in potential romantic relationships, when they talk about their lives in ways that make relevant their mate preferences.

The current study takes a discursive psychological perspective on how potential romantic partners design their talk in first encounters to occasion mate preferences, and what such preferring does in the environments of its occasioning. This study aligns closely with Stokoe’s (2010) recent conversation analytic work on speed-dating conversations. Although Stokoe’s work focuses specifically on how couples talk about their relationship history and relational status, and not on mate-preference talk per se, it shares some important features with the current study, such as a focus on the reciprocal and sequential organization of disclosures about sensitive topics, as well as a focus on the design features that manage the delicacy of such talk. The current study also draws significantly from research on cooperation, and affiliation/disaffiliation between friends and relational partners (Drew & Walker, 2009; Heritage, 1985; Korobov & Thorne, 2007, 2009; Traverso, 2009), as well as the ways subjectivity, stance, and positioning are managed (see Edwards, 2007; Korobov, 2010; Stivers, 2008). Mandelbaum (2003) and Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005), for instance, have detailed the methods whereby partners in close relationships repair problematic or relationally disconnecting dynamics so as to both manage the subject-side of self-presentation (Edwards, 2005, 2007) and maintain relational affiliation, or what Staske (1998) calls *normalizing problematic emotion*, which has the effect of smoothing out the interaction and keeping partners aligned, particularly in first encounters (see Svennevig, 1999). First encounters are especially delicate as sites where strangers make disclosures about sensitive topics (e.g., what they are attracted to) that likely have both personal and interpersonal implications.

In drawing on Sacks’s (1974) and Jefferson’s (1978) work on how storytellers make relevant the taking of a stance by the recipient, Stivers (2008) has found that there is a preference for recipients of storytellings to affiliate not simply with the content but also (and importantly for the current study) with the position/stance of the teller toward what is narrated. In short, in response to a variety of discursive action (i.e., storytellings, accounts, descriptions, evaluations, and preference disclosures), particularly where sensitive information is disclosed, it is likely that sociorelational demands will outweigh informational demands (Stivers, 2008). Speakers may work to affirm similar stances. In the context of the current study, in first encounters with potential romantic partners, prompts and disclosures about mate preferences may be formulated in

certain self-presentational sequences (Svennevig, 1999) so as to increase the probability of topic expansion and speaker affiliation.

Topic-proffering sequences (Schegloff, 2007) are one of the more common and useful components of the self-presentational sequence that unacquainted pairs use to generate expansion around personal topics (Svennevig, 1999). Topic-proffering sequences are often initiated by other-orienting questions that prefer expanded responses (rather than minimal *answer long* responses) in which the recipient is the authority and the response aligns with the polarity of the question. Dispreferred responses to topic-proffering queries involve answers that are minimal, polarity subverting, and/or involve the speaker denying access to the resources needed to develop the topic proffer. Affiliation between unacquainted speakers around sensitive topics may therefore depend on whether topic proffers are met with preferred or dispreferred responses.

In the context of speed-dating interactions, it is reasonable to speculate that topic proffers about mate preferences may be met with a mixture of preferred and dispreferred responses. In other words, proffers may promote topic expansion, but because of subject-side risks, recipients may resist straightforward authorship as well as the preferred trajectory of the question. If asked “so what are you looking for in a mate?,” it may be common for second pair-parts to not immediately offer an expanded, authoritative, or polarity-aligned answer; instead the speaker may hedge, equivocate, or not really offer an answer, even though an answer may be highly relevant for determining if there is a match. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) have found that this sort of dispreference structure is a common second to first-turn queries about personal matters, since hedges and delays ward off potential negative identity inferences, e.g., in the case of speed dating that the speaker has incompatible desires or a preexisting checklist of preferences. In initial encounters between unacquainted potential romantic partners, there may be a dispreference for a clear and unambiguous initial uptake of topic-proffering queries about relevant personal information.

Warding off negative identity inferences may, at minimum, be part of the business of managing the subject-side of personal disclosures (they inoculate against negative dispositional inferences); they may also manage subject-object relations (Edwards, 2007) by constructing an “object” (here, a preference for a certain kind of person) that may work as a preliminary for interpersonal affiliation. For research on close relationships, this suggests that in natural interactional contexts, it may be important to know how mate preferences are interactively done and how such doings contribute to (or stymie) the genesis of close relationships. The current study specifically focuses on the architecture of mate-preference talk between speed daters in first encounters, and how such talk is characterized by a press for position/stance affiliation, which may be common in initial encounters between strangers (O’Halloran, 2005).

DATA AND METHOD

The current study was modeled around a typical speed-dating event, which involves romantically available individuals attending an event where they participate in a series of uniformly short “dates” (e.g., 3- to 8-min conversations) with other attendees. After the event, participants anonymously “yes” or “no” their dates; if two speed daters “yes” one another, a match occurs, and they are allowed to contact each other to presumably arrange a more traditional date. The data for the current study were derived from 36 speed dates involving 12 participants (six male;

six female), with each date lasting approximately 6 min. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 23, were enrolled as students at a large university in the Southeast United States, and were recruited verbally through campus announcements. All participants gave full consent to be recorded and were given pseudonyms. Participants were offered a thorough explanation of what speed dating was and how the 6-min conversations would work. The women remained seated in different rooms and would operate the recording devices while the men rotated every 6 min. Each of the 36 speed-dating conversations was audio recorded and transcribed according to Jefferson's (2004) conversation analytic transcription conventions.

It is important to note that, unlike actual clients of speed-dating events, the speed daters in this study took part in an event staged for research purposes. In order to mitigate this problem, care was taken to only allow participants who reported being "presently open, interested, and available for a potential romantic relationship." Each participant reported genuinely wanting to attend a speed-dating event, regardless of the reason the event was designed. It was also important that the analytic focus of mate preferences be a relevant topic in 19–23-year-olds' dating lives. Were the analytic focus, for instance, on dating after divorce, dating with children, or how singles look for marriage partners (see Finkel et al., 2007), an older sample would likely be more appropriate. Finally, the event was conducted on campus rather than the more typical upscale bar/restaurant (where alcohol is often present/integral) in order to avoid the alcohol issue for underage participants and (importantly) because campus spaces are common sites where these particular participants connect and mingle with potential romantic partners. The current study aimed to create a quasinatural, ecologically relevant, and self-contextualizing speed-dating context where sequences of talk about mate preferences would be common and relevant occurrences between unacquainted potential romantic partners.

Analysis proceeded by culling from the corpus all instances in which speakers were asked about or volunteered any features (personality, physical, or otherwise) of actual or potential/imaginary partners. Twenty-eight sequences of mate-preference talk were identified across the 36 conversations. The use of *preferences* and *disclosures* in the following analysis of mate preferences or mate-preference disclosures are meant as discursive actions, and thus do not refer to the ways these terms are used in psychology (as intrapsychic or cognitive phenomena); additionally, the term *preference(s)* when used to describe mate *preference(s)* is entirely different from the conversation analytic notion of preference.

A first pass through this subset of data revealed two broad trends. First, 27 of the 28 instances were prompted (i.e., elicited through a question) as opposed to volunteered (see Stokoe, 2010, for a similar finding regarding relational status/history talk between speed daters). As will be shown in the analyses, these mate-preference prompts were generally exemplars of topic-proffering sequences (Schegloff, 2007) that are designed to elicit topic-expansive answers. Second, the majority (21 out of 27, or 78%) of initial responses to such prompts did not involve immediate disclosures about mate preferences, but instead involved the delaying of an answer (through hedging, equivocating, displaying uncertainty, etc). Part I of the analysis therefore focuses on prompted responses, and, within that category, the distinction between prompted immediate responses and prompted delayed responses.

Most central in the forthcoming analysis, however, is how prompted delayed responses often occasioned topic-proffering sequences where the speaker who formulated the initial prompting would take up the other speaker's delayed preference disclosure by representing or paraphrasing select elements of them, thus projecting the disclosing teller's reported preferences over further

turns, inviting the teller to expand, confirm, or deny them. To describe the sequential nature of these expansion sequences, Heritage's (1985, pp. 106–109) distinction between “cooperative recyclings” and “inferentially elaborative probes” is used. In a cooperative recycle, the prompting speaker represents select elements from the other speaker's position in an agreeably cooperative and ostensibly accurate way so as to develop the speaker's position (see Heisterkamp, 2006; Heritage, 1985; Lawrence, 1996). An inferentially elaborative probe also hones in on some aspect of the speaker's position, but goes further by making reference to what might be seen as implicated or presupposed by that position (see Heritage, 1985; van der Houwen, 2009). They invite or challenge the speaker to adopt a different or perhaps stronger version of their position. Part II of the analysis focuses on two types of receipt formulations to delayed mate-preference disclosures, each of which engender different expansion sequences: *cooperative recycling* and *inferentially elaborative probes*. Inferentially elaborative probes comprised the majority of delayed response formulations (16 of 21, or 76%).

ANALYSIS

Part I: Prompted Immediate Response vs. Prompted Delayed Response

Prompted first responses. Excerpt 1 begins as the two speakers (in all examples, M = male and F = female) finish up discussing their discovery of a mutual female acquaintance whom M says has a particularly nonchalant attitude toward dating. There is a notable transitional gap (line 2), followed by M's launching of a mate-preference prompting (line 4).

Excerpt 1 (F4M1)

- 1 M: n'with her always mak'it seem like she don't care.
 2 (1. 0)
 3 F: [ye] h
 4 → M: [s'] so what do you like about a guy?
 5 → F: I like >tall dark ↑n'handsome<
 6 [mh] mmheh,
 7 M: [mm] () like Ving Rhames?
 8 F: >I dunno what that is<.
 9 M: th'dude that put it on Baby-Boy.
 10 (0. 5)
 11 M: [mmhmm]
 12 F: [MMHMM] (.) hehe he's good actor.

M's mate preference prompting in line 4 reflects two features common to the majority of mate-preference promptings in the data set. First, it is designed to appear transitionally relevant and connected to prior talk. In her analysis of relational status/history promptings, Stokoe (2010) found that speed daters' probes often contained turn-initial indexicals (e.g., “so”) and trail-off tags (e.g., “or”). M's “so” indexical in line 4 positions the interrogative “what do you like about a guy?” as a continuation of some prior action, in this case, of talking about what their

mutual acquaintance is like in line 1. M's question about what F likes in a guy can be seen as a continuation of talk about what they like in people. Additionally, it may index the kind of "incipient action" (Bolden, 2008, p. 302) that would be expected in such conversations. Solicitations of mate preferences may be pending actions waiting to happen in first encounters between potential partners where compatibility issues are relevant. M's "so" thus positions his question as expected, thereby securing its context relevancy. As will be shown in the forthcoming examples, nearly all promptings were designed with turn-initial components that indexed prior or incipient action. These design features ensured a smoothness of transition into the topic of mate preferences.

Second, M's prompt, like many of the prompts in this data set, is topic proffering, since it is formulated as a general query not about what F *specifically* likes in *actual* guys that she knows, but rather is about what she *generally* likes in "a" (hearable as "generic") guy (see Wiggins & Potter, 2003, for discussion of categorical vs. item descriptions). It is thus topic expansive. Counterintuitive as it may seem to ask about general preferences when it is her specific preferences that are arguably most relevant, asking about general preferences mitigates the questioner's stake or interest in the response (Edwards & Potter, 1992); M can appear open and relatively uninvested in F's response. General questions also project an array of general responses, which help manage the recipient's face. F is thus free to describe herself in terms of a broader/generic categorical (or subcultural) affiliation, i.e., as a general type of person who "likes" type X or Y "guy." By allowing F to position her preferences via broad categorical affiliations, M's question implicitly projects a range of culturally available candidate responses (Pomerantz, 1988), which may be useful for F in resisting an overly personalized disclosure of preference.

Quite unlike the majority of cases that will follow, F's response of preference in line 5 is what Raymond (2003) calls a "type conforming answer" (p. 946). It conforms to the constraints embodied in the grammar of the question. The *wh*-interrogative "*what* do you like about a guy" plus the subject-verb ordering makes relevant a personalized subject-verb ("I like") formulation about a type of person, which F delivers. The result is a traditional question-answer adjacency pair.

- 4 → M: [s'] so what do you like about a guy?
 5 → F: I like >tall dark ↑n'handsome<

Although question-answer adjacency pairs are common as parts of yes/no interrogatives (see Raymond, 2003), M's query may be seen as the first part of a topic-proffering sequence, which prefers an expanded (not one-answer) response. Research has shown that in cases among strangers where questions introduce sensitive identity-relevant material, it is common for recipients to offer "nonconforming responses" (Raymond, 2003, p. 950) that essentially depart from the constraints of the question, i.e., responses that begin with clarification or insertion sequences, or partial and incomplete self-descriptions (Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). In the previous example, F's response does none of this. It is worth noting that her response is followed by knowing laughter, which may be a marker of deviance that accounts for the dispreferred structure of the response. It is also worth noting that the topic expansion that follows her first response (and of the limited number of first responses in the corpus) is markedly brief. After several turns, the topic shifts to talk about famous actors. While rejections or delayed answers may threaten the smooth flow of conversation and potentially undermine speaker alignment (see Schegloff et al., 1977), the opposite seems true in this data set. Type-conforming answers to mate-preference queries invariably led to very

brief follow-ups, which is to say, they are dispreferred responses to topic proffers. As we will see in the excerpts to come, second pair-parts to mate-preference proffers that were nonconforming responses were both more common and often followed by protracted expansion sequences.

Prompted delayed responses. Excerpts 2 and 3 illustrate delayed responses to mate-preference promptings. Delayed responses comprised the vast majority of receipt formulations (all remaining excerpts feature this type of response). In line 4 of Excerpt 2, M formulates the kind of prompting described previously; the response, however, is delayed and protracted.

Excerpt 2 (F5M1)

- 1 F: so how are thou?
 2 M: fine.
 3 F: go:od.
 4 M: so Carol (.) what type of man do you look for?
 5 F: heheh [heh.
 6 M: [you kno (h) w hehe.
 7 F: so (h) we jus' gonna jump right'in to the chase (.) or?
 8 [heheheh.h
 9 M: [hehehehah
 10 we : : ll you could tell me bout' yourself,
 11 F: [hehehheheh.
 12 M: [n'I'd end up asking all these uh <how are you>
 13 questions and I ain't end up gettin to what I
 14 wantin' to know (.) o : r [right? haha.
 15 F: [hehehehheh
 16 so what type? (.) well I'll answer your question
 17 uhmm (.) wow I haven't been asked this in a lo:ng time.
 18 M: mhm okay.
 19 F: I mean I'm pretty much open to all'kinds a'things

Like the previous excerpt, M's initial prompt is both incipient ("so") and a categorical proffer about a "type of man." F's laughter in line 5 is an indexical that points to the potential trouble in M's question, while not rejecting the question itself. In general, the laughter throughout this excerpt softens the prior actions and displays an understanding of the potential trouble of such actions and sensitivity to how each person will understand the action. The laughter therefore modulates the course of action that follows, which in line 6 involves a bid for intersubjectivity ("you kno(h)w") plus interpolated and stand-alone laughter from M. The stand-alone laughter at turn completion functions as a "post stance completion marker" (Schegloff, 1996, p. 90), or a way for M to ask that they together treat his question nonseriously, with the "you know" doing the work of affiliating with F; mate-preference talk becomes a delicate activity for both speakers.

Asking about preferences requires an account to justify its asking, which is partly provided by F herself beginning in line 7. F's "so" preface recycles (indexes) it as the topic to pursue, and the "we" indexes M's intersubjective "you know," thus signaling that for F as well this project will be coconspiratorial. The "jus'gonna" marks the joint action as abrupt, and as such we might hear it as a slight complaint, in which case a delayed response may be in order. The "jump right'in to the chase" gives an idiomatic account for the activity, that is, she forwards the candidate possibility that this action they are undertaking, though abrupt, may be a way of getting to the heart of the

matter, i.e., a side-stepping efficient method for gauging compatibility so as to determine if they will pursue (or “chase”) one another. The “or?” is a trail-off tag that preserves the possibility of misunderstanding or alternative action (see Stokoe, 2010). It manages the subjective side of such an insinuation (she may have misunderstood M’s intent) while offering M the chance to disagree and offer an alternative explanation.

The overlapping laughter in line 8 and 9 yet again indexes the potential trouble of F’s formulation while not rejecting it. In line 10 M does not reject or (directly) affirm F’s formulation, but instead affirms it circuitously by launching an alternative *scripted* account of what they could do instead (see Edwards, 1995). M’s scripted alternative is built through the use of modals (“could,” “I’d,” “ain’t”), the iterative present tense (“end up asking,” “end up getting to,” “wantin’ to know”), extreme case formulations (“all these”), and generic types (“<how are you> questions”). It is capped with a trail-off “or,” which both projects alternative action and, by virtue of the fact he has already offered an alternative action in line 4, indexes his original question as the alternative action they might choose. Lines 14–15 feature joint laughter as yet another way of noticing the potential trouble while formulating it as shared trouble.

In F’s final turn, she ratifies M’s projected alternative by recycling the “what type” from M’s original question, then says she will answer his question, but does not. Instead, she self-corrects her course of action, signals surprise (“wow”), which given the interactive context and her hitherto display of shared understanding of M’s actions, is arguably less an index of psychological surprise than an interactive method for attending yet again to the sensitive and delicate matter of revealing one’s preferences on the spot. The “wow” is thus a sanctioning for more delay, while also serving to preface an account (line 17) where she positions herself as caught off-guard, where, in such contexts, a nonaction may be expected. All of this delaying could be taken as a harbinger of interpersonal conflict and disalignment between speakers. But we shall see as we explore more excerpts where delays are protracted and answers are not forthcoming, that the opposite is actually true.

Excerpt 3 is similar to the previous excerpt in several key ways, but is unique in the way the delay is handled by F during the environment of expansion, revealing another way in which delayed responses make mate preferences delicate.

Excerpt 3 (F3M2)

- | | | |
|----|----|---|
| 1 | M: | I’ve been going back n’forth to class not du’in nuthin. |
| 2 | F: | yeh (.) so what about you (.) relationship wise (.) |
| 3 | | li : : ke whaddaya’ like? |
| 4 | M: | I like uhh : : (.) uhh heheh alright (h) ah. |
| 5 | F: | ya (h) aheh, |
| 6 | M: | relationship wise I like to be (.) for a girl to |
| 7 | | be (.) for some attraction >from my point’v view < |
| 8 | F: | s’what’s attractive t’ya? |
| 9 | M: | I dunno (.) just you know like if you seem to try (.) |
| 10 | | at least appear to care bout’ya’self (.) I’m for that. |

F’s initial query is not about mate preferences per se, but rather asks what M likes “relationship wise.” It is included here because M ends up orienting to it by talking about what he likes in a girl. Interestingly, M’s answer in line 4 is type conforming, at least grammatically (“I like”), but then fails to conform to the *wh*-interrogative press for him to state *what* kind of relationship he

likes. Like the second excerpt, the delaying involves self-corrected false starts (line 4, 6–7, 9–10) laced with breathy and plosive laughter from both speakers (lines 4–5), hedges and displays of uncertainty (line 4, 9), and the use of scripted accounts of general preference about generic relationships or generic guys/girls (lines 6–7, 8, 9–10). Of particular importance, however, is M's turn beginning in line 6, which is a two-part self-correction plus qualification. M drops the pronoun "I" in "I like to be" and self-corrects to the agentless "for a girl to be," which is risky since he is speaking with a female who may or may not embody what he is about to describe. He then self-corrects again and shifts to a completely agent-less position with "for some attraction." The person deixis is obscure, and it is unclear who the object and subject of the attraction is, or what the features of attraction are. However, he does add, as a rushed-through qualification, that this "for some attraction" is "from my point'v view." One could argue that the "my" is indexical, thus suggesting what the null anaphora would be before his second self-correction, thus making "for some attraction" hearable as "for *me (to have)* some attraction."

M's terminal tag of "from my point'v view" is a telling qualification that suggests that there are alternative attractive features that are not the sorts of things to which he is attracted. Recall that what was accountable in the last excerpt was asking about the topic of mate preferences itself; what M makes accountable here with his qualification are the actual features of attraction. The turn initial "so" (line 8) in F's topic proffering latches and invites continuation of M's turn, and the "t'ya" indexes M's "from my point'v view." In short, F treats M's specific mate preferences as the pending next thing to state, thus colluding with M in treating them as accountable items. This sort of on-the-spot proffering of a personal-preference disclosure could easily lead to conversational trouble or participant disalignment. What typically happens, however, is that inference-rich queries like F's occasion further delays, as is the case here with M's response (lines 9–10). The remainder of the analysis thus focuses on how prompted delayed responses evolve into patterned expansion sequences that seem at minimum to promote cooperative topic expansion and, in some cases, participant stance alignment as well.

Part II: Cooperative Recycling and Inferentially Elaborative Probes

We now turn to an analysis of the environment of expansion following delayed responses to mate-preference prompts. The point of these analyses is to consider how delayed/mitigated mate-preference formulations are developed across future turns and whether stance affiliation is affectively displayed. As we will see, questioners generally made some attempt to handle mate-preference delayed responses by maintaining focus on a select aspect of the preference so as to project its development over subsequent turns. At minimum, the questioner might represent or "cooperatively recycle" some aspect of the reported preference; alternatively, the questioner may reply with an extrapolation that is "inferentially elaborative" (Heritage, 1985, pp. 106–109).

Cooperative recycling. Cooperative recycles (CRs) have been analyzed predominately as an interviewer receipt style in formal interviews, news interviews, and therapeutic contexts (Heisterkamp, 2006; Heritage, 1985; Labov & Fanshel, 1977; Lawrence, 1996). CRs allow the questioner to appear as a cooperative neutral party in assisting the speaker in getting his/her views across. They help develop select aspects of an account so that it fits into a digestible narrative for a particular audience. In these situations, interviewers will often avoid affiliating

with the speaker's felt position. At other times, however, when asking about sensitive topics, an interviewer may mix cooperative recycles with affiliating displays of agreement or empathy toward the interviewee's stance. These affective display tokens may help maintain appropriate footing so that a topic can be developed.

In Excerpt 4, note the use of CRs (marked with arrows) by M in lines 15, 17, 19, and 23 and their contribution with respect to topic expansion and stance affiliation.

Excerpt 4 (F6M1)

- 1 M: I really like it here (.) this room.
 2 (0.5)
 3 M: so Jess what do you look for from a guy?. for
 4 personality (.) [let's say.
 5 F: [hmmph
 6 HUH (.) guys >from guys<?
 7 M: from guys,
 8 F: uhmm (.) personality wise OH I like SLY :: LY FUNNY
 9 hehah no [just heheh.
 10 M: [mhph
 11 M: [is ()]
 12 F: [you know (.) what I mean? like not over the top
 13 like goofball (.) but witty? (.) I dunno (.) SMART
 14 kind of funny? (.) I go for that (.) sometimes (hehe),
 15 M: → looking for a funny guy?
 16 F: [yah
 17 M: → [n'smart about it?
 18 F: yeah yeah yep (.) n'd uh: n'somebody who cares.
 19 M: → cares=
 20 F: =about books,
 21 M: mhm,
 22 F: bout'stuff like that (.) guess we all want that.
 23 M: → it's common yeah.
 24 (1.0)
 25 F: so you take Spanish with uh Dr. Godfrey?

Like the previous excerpts, M's prompt in line 3 is constructed as an incipient action ("so Jess. . .") about a generic class of "guys." There is a transition space repair at the end of M's turn (lines 3–4), where he inserts "personality" as the candidate category of mate preference that he is asking about, underscoring again that a range of mate-preference features are available. M's "let's say" trail-off tag constructs "personalities" as one potential hypothetical option (i.e., not the only option), which again reveals that querying about specific features of attraction is a delicate action (as in Excerpt 3). As is the pattern, F responds with a variety of delay/mitigating formulations (lines 5, 6, and 8–9, and 12–14). Since the mitigating methods that accomplish delays have been already discussed, as well as the functions served by such delays, let us turn to a consideration of the environment of receipt and expansion that begins in line 15.

Lines 15, 17, and 19 are all paradigmatic CRs that take the form of verbatim repetitions of select aspects ("funny," "smart," and "cares") of F's preference items. The repetition both confirms that F has taken a position and maintains a focus on developing the content of the position. M's CRs are met with escalating agreement from F, from "yah" in line 16 to "yeah yeah yep" in line 18, with the latter followed by an expansion of preference in line 18 ("n'somebody who

cares”). M then recycles “cares,” and F orients to this repetition as a request for elaboration in offering “about books.” Across these six turns (lines 15–20), M’s use of CRs has been sequentially cooperative in transforming F’s delayed/mitigated preference disclosure into a selectively coproduced consolidated list of mate preferences.

In line 21, M breaks form and does not produce a CR, but instead offers a minimal response token (“mhm”), which derails topic expansion. In the absence of a selective recycling of some aspect of F’s preferences, its expansion ceases. As a response, F produces a generalized extender (Overstreet, 1999) (“stuff like that”), which she follows with a bid for intersubjectivity (“guess we”) and normativity (“all want that”). F’s movement from specifics to generalities may be a practice for a closing sequence where affiliation is not forthcoming. As Stokoe (2009) points out, there is often the expectation that speakers will engage in reciprocal self-disclosure, a norm indexed by gaps, questions, or in this case, by F’s formulation of generality. Rather than producing a reciprocal self-disclosure (i.e., a stance affiliating move), M produces a downgraded agreement (from “all” to “common”). This downgrade, coupled with the continued lack of reciprocal self-disclosure, are both dispreferred actions, as evidenced by the gap that follows in line 24. Although the CRs have been elegant for structurally expanding the content of F’s mate preferences, their stance neutrality stymies the potential for M and F to coordinate stance.

Excerpt 5 features another string of CRs to manage topic expansion, but unlike the previous excerpt, M’s last CR (line 17) is punctuated with a positive personal evaluation (stance affiliation) of F’s preference for “simple guys.”

Excerpt 5 (F6M1)

- 1 M: ummhm aghemh (.) um'r you (.) how should I say now
 2 (.) uh (.) are you looking for a relationship that
 3 leads you to marriage n'kids?
 4 F: mmhmp (.) ah'I dunno >kinda going with the flow<,
 5 M: → yeh going with the flow,
 6 F: yeah umm I just got out [of like] like :::
 7 M: [mmhh hh]
 8 [n'that's t' ()]
 9 F: [three consecutive] relationships with different guys
 10 n'I'm just phwwwh like'hehe SO over it (.) I'm just I
 11 need time (.) t'myself heheh,
 12 M: → time alone?
 13 F: for a little bit (.) but uh yeah (.) I'm just going with
 14 the flow right now (.) hanging out having fun.
 15 M: mmhm.
 16 F: keepi't simple (.) I like simple guys.
 17 M: → not complicated yah, I think that's good.
 18 (0.5)
 19 F: thanks: (.) yeah (.) oh'who [o :: =
 20 M: [()
 21 F: =this chair keeps moving.
 22 M: yeh so's this one.

M's first recycle in line 5 of "going with the flow" attends to the idiomatic portion of F's prior turn, but omits "kinda," and in so doing selectively represents F as potentially uncommitted or unserious about pursuing a dating relationship. That "going with the flow" is part of a general action pattern, and thus scripted, suggests that her course of action may be dispositional. Given that this is a speed-dating context where participants have agreed that they are looking for (or are at least open to) a relationship, a "going with the flow" disposition is arguably accountable. F orients to it as accountable, as her response (lines 6, 9–11) provides a minimal narrative of having just been in three consecutive relationships with different guys and, as a result, needing "time (.) t'myself." Rather than recycle her narrative, M's response ("time alone?") is a selectively paraphrased recycle that preserves topical focus on her *current* disposition toward dating, which again is arguably accountable in this context. To account for it, F mitigates her stance with "for a little bit," and although she recycles "going with the flow," she softens it with the case softener "just" and couples it with the temporal indexical "right now." She then completes turn with "hanging out having fun," which is hearable as a euphemistic idiom for relational moratorium. F continues her idiomatic euphemism with "keepin' it simple," and then finishes the turn with "I like simple guys." These expressions reflect what Drew and Holt (1998) call "figurative expressions," which are useful for initiating topic closure, summation, and in this case, a kind of generic assessment detached from the empirical particulars of her three previously failed relationships. They offer her a certain power to figuratively summarize and close the topic in a way that manages the subject-side of her self-presentation. By turn's end, F has delicately transformed her action from the potentially troublesome display of dispositional disinterest in dating to a display of interest in "simplicity" and "simple guys." She has thus taken up the incipient action of displaying mate preferences, an action made possible because of the way M's CRs maintained topical focus on her current disposition toward dating. Her mate preference emerges as a structurally cooperative social action.

In line 17, M offers another CR in the form of a paraphrase stated in the negative ("not complicated yah"), and then completes the turn with a stance-affiliating evaluation ("I think that's good"). His display of stance affiliation is an action not present in the previous excerpt. It is a different sort of action than a CR, since it aligns with her stance rather than with the structure of her disclosure. It is thus uncooperative structurally, since it displays stance affiliation and not content elaboration. Though it may derail topic expansion, it enables speakers to affectively display being in sync with one another. Interestingly, F responds by thanking M ("thanks:"), which treats M's action as a compliment rather than as a bid for affective affiliation. By orienting to M's appreciation as a compliment, F orients to her display of mate preference as the sort of thing one might objectively compliment. No affective affiliation occurs. This suggests that participants may not orient to CRs, or even a combination of CRs and positive displays of stance appreciation, as a preliminary for displays of mutual affective affiliation.

It is reasonable to speculate that in the previous excerpt there was simply not enough stance affiliation from M to elicit mutual affective affiliation around a delicate topic like mate preferences. This issue is addressed in Excerpt 6, as M couples all of his four CR receipts with positive stance-affiliating formulations (marked with arrows).

Excerpt 6 (F3M5)

- 1 M: school's tough (0.5) so you (.) li' what about
 2 you (.) what do you like?
 3 F: like?
 4 M: in a guy,
 5 F: o : : h heheh (.) I'm not sure.
 6 M: → not sure? **ogh** I hea:r that.
 7 F: not really looking too hard. feel like I'm too selfish
 8 right now hh.
 9 M: → se : lfish w'l yah uv'course. that's cool.
 10 F: I wanna get my degree.
 11 M: → yep get the degree (.) **that's good, I like that.**
 12 F: want to have my career.
 13 M: → mmhm ogh yah (.) career, I feel that.
 14 F: mmhm (.) >so what do you want to do<?

Excerpts like this were actually quite common within the cooperative recycles category. Most recycles actually came as the first part in the two-part sequential couplet: CR + positive stance-affiliation formulation. M delivers four of these couplets with the positive stance-affiliation formulation coming at the terminus of the turn, marked in bold:

- 6 M: → not sure? **ogh I hea : r that.**
 9 M: → se : lfish w'l yah uv'course. **that's cool.**
 11 M: → yep get the degree (.) **that's good, I like that**
 13 M: → mmhm ogh yah (.) career, **I feel that.**

Although M's four CRs are all *repetitions* of the sort discussed previously, the fact they are coupled with stance-affiliating bids modulate the action of the CRs in at least two important ways. First, with the exception of line 9, all of his stance affiliations are formulated with person pronominal markers ("I hea:r that," "I like that," "I feel that"), which explicitly personalize the appreciations. This explicit marking is rare, particularly in informal interactional contexts where subject pronouns are often dropped. More common would be M's elision of a personal pronoun at the end of line 9 ("that's cool"), where "I think" is absent though pragmatically inferable. That M formally marks his other three stance affiliations with explicit pronominal markers is telling. It produces a string of stance affiliations that seem to go out of their way to appear personalized. Second, in three places (lines 6, 9, and 13), after the CRs and before the formal stance-affiliating formulations, M interjects three plosive aspiration tokens "ogh," "w'l yah," and "ogh" (see Potter & Heßburn, 2010, for a discussion of this in laughter). These aspiration tokens are affect indexical. As tying devices, they backwardly signal affect-intensive understanding of the recyclable item (i.e., an affect-intensive understanding of F's position) as well as projecting affect intensity with the forthcoming stance-affiliating formulation (i.e., an affect-intensive personal alignment with F's position). In short, these two features of the terminal stance-affiliation formulations modulate the action of the CR by intensifying M's bid for alignment with F.

So what is the effect of M's "CR + stance-affiliation formulation" couplets, complete with explicit pronominal appreciations and affect-indexical aspiration tokens? In short, they promote

the same kind of topic expansion as seen in the previous excerpts. They allow F to expand on her preference disclosure, but they do not occasion affective mutual affiliation from F toward M. To explore how mutual affective affiliation occurred, consider Excerpt 7 from the cooperative recycle category. This excerpt is actually a transitional excerpt, as it contains mostly CRs (marked with arrows), but at one particular juncture (line 13), M formulates an inferentially elaborative probe, which results in a type of receipt from F not seen thus far.

Excerpt 7 (F4M5)

- 1 M: alright lemme ask like (.) what type of dudes do
 2 you get along with?
 3 F: I get along with (.) uh well heheh (.) I don't know (.)
 4 well (.) I can be a li:l'bossy,
 5 M: [ahahah
 6 F: [ya gotta take my attitude (.) like a person got'be able
 7 take it (.) if he can take my way >my attitude< (.) it'be
 8 alright (.) so uh I think I'm the one that's hard
 9 to get along with (.) but I get along with everybody (.)
 10 but it's >I can be hard< hh.
 11 M: → mhm yv'got attitude n'you have a certain way,
 12 F: YES (.) I have a certain heh (h) way heh.
 13 M: w'l hopefully only in certain instances,
 14 F: yeah I mean yah sometimes ya have'ta jus'like let
 15 it roll cause ya'gotta compromise too (.) ya'gotta
 16 >I'm w'ich'ya there<,
 17 M: → compromise (.) yah that's part'v it.
 18 F: mhmm.
 19 (1.0)
 20 F: so what classes you taking?

Like in previous excerpts, M begins with the turn-initial topic proffering “alright,” which indexes incipient action, and follows this with a query about generic categorical preferences in “dudes.” F begins to reply but predictably delays with self-interruption (“uh well”), laughter (“heheh”), displays of uncertainty (“I don't know”), mitigations (“li:l'bossy”), and then a three-part concession (see Antaki & Wetherell, 1999) in lines 8–10:

“I'm the <u>one</u> that's hard to get along with”	[proposition]
“but I get along with everybody”	[concession]
“but it's >I can be hard< hh.”	[reprisal]

The concession and reprisal mitigate the potential extremity of the initial proposition, thus attending to the subject-side of her self-deprecation. In line 11, M offers two cooperative recycles in the form repetitions, the second of which adds the qualifier “certain,” which selectively draws attention to the idiosyncratic nature of F's “way.” Though this occasions agreement from F, F's agreement comes laced with laughter, thus displaying a self-conscious knowingness about the quality in F that M has selectively projected as topical.

In line 13, M does not cooperatively recycle, but instead formulates an inferentially elaborative probe in the form of a challenge to F's stance with "w'l hopefully only in certain instances." M's turn-initial "w'l" indexes F's prior contribution and signals forthcoming disagreement (see Schiffrin, 1987), his "hopefully" projects an alternative, the "only" and "certain" underscore the potential extremity of the nonalternative as well as the nature of the desired alternative, and the use of "instances" scripts her stance as (problematically) dispositional rather than context specific. F responds by mitigating and then elaborating on her disclosures, building in a situational preference for "compromise" and, most importantly, at turn's end signals stance alignment with M (">I'm w'ich'ya there<"), something not present in any of the excerpts thus far (notice that M's response in line 17 is yet another CR, which stymies the expansion of stance affiliation). As we shall see in the forthcoming section, although inferentially elaborative probes of the kind found in line 13 are risky because they potentially invite disputation, or at least repair and elaboration, in this data set they are often a harbinger of mutual stance affiliation.

Inferentially elaborative probes. Inferentially elaborative probes (IEPs), and the sequences populated by them, comprised the most common type of expansion sequence in the data set. IEPs maintain topical focus by drawing attention to what is potentially implicated or presupposed by a speaker's position (see Heritage, 1985; van der Houwen, 2009). Unlike CRs, IEPs invite the speaker to say what may be intimated but not explicitly named, which may entail adopting a different or perhaps stronger version of their position. In news interviews (see Heritage, 1985), IEPs are typically structurally uncooperative, though that was not generally case in this date set. In mate-preference talk, where delays are typical as first responses, IEP receipts may be risky because they make relevant inferences about a person's mate preferences and, by extension, about the kind of persons they are, which may be face-threatening. Alternatively, IEPs may be helpful in giving the respondent an opportunity to reject, amend, or reinterpret an implied inference, resulting in mutual coordination that may affectively align the speakers.

In Excerpt 8, consider the four IEPs formulated by M (marked with arrows) and the effect they have on stance affiliation.

Excerpt 8 (F3M2)

- 1 M: what kind of relationships you into?
 2 F: I'm open to all sorts of things (.) >like t'be
 3 treated well< (.) typical things.
 4 M: → you like to be spoiled?
 5 [hmm?
 6 F: [hehe me : : : ?
 7 M: mm : : hm : : : hh.
 8 F: <I lo : : ve it>hh (.) but okay (.) for some reason guys
 9 that I've dated (.) I don't know what happened
 10 but like ya'll'l put lot of effort (.) like honestly
 11 trying to make it work (.) but I've learned you can't
 12 make something work if it ain't gonna work.
 13 M: umhumm.
 14 F: I gave up on that.
 15 M: → but'cha still like the spoiling?
 16 F: w'l ya : : h b'li : ke okay for real I do feel things for them,

- 17 M: → you put effort in.
 18 F: oh yah (.) like last guy was never there for me n'I was
 19 for him (.) like I'm there for the person but he wasn't
 20 for me (.) never (.) like Valentine's and whatever (.)
 21 I never got nothing.
 22 M: that isn't fair (.) that's cold.
 23 F: yep (.) it was (.) I be the one always giving stuff
 24 n'I don't care cuz' I'm not the type of the female
 25 that's like you kno (h) w heheh ya'know,
 26 M: → yeah but ya' gotta ask for a small token'v appreciation
 27 (.) that'd be easy for him,
 28 F: yeah (.) well maybe you're letting me know there are
 29 different kinds of guys out there.
 30 M: oh yeah.
 31 (1.0)
 32 M: [there are]
 33 F: [yeah ()] you're giving me [hope
 34 M: [me heheh.
 35 F: okay (ha) oka (h) y heheh that's good to know

M's first IEP in line 4 selects F's "like t'be treated well," but instead of cooperatively recycling it, escalates it by treating it as a euphemism for "lik[ing] to be spoiled," which has negative dispositional implications for F. However, instead of orienting to it as a threat, F laughs and displays a knowing and exaggerated surprise ("me::?"), thus treating M's IEP as a playful provocation. M shapes his reply in kind by recycling F's elongated affect with an exaggerated smile voice agreement of "mm::hm::," which F parallels with "<I lo::ve it>hh." In effect, M's IEP occasions a three-part repartee: F appears playfully coy, M appears playfully suspicious, F appears playfully honest.

F then shifts out of the play frame in line 8 ("but okay") and notes that although she loves being spoiled, some guys try too hard when the relationship is not working, to which M responds with another IEP that recycles the gist of his first IEP: "but'cha still like the spoiling." The inference is again potentially negative, i.e., that F knowingly takes advantage of her partner's generosity. The opening part of F's response in line 16 ("w'l ya::h") is a *sine dicendo* rhetorical response that treats his question as having an obvious answer and proceeds to select that obvious answer. She positions the two of them as sharing obvious knowledge, which suggests that her disposition preference for liking to be spoiled is normal. Like her turn in line 8, it is after a jocular rejoinder that she turns to the second part of her turn to deflect possible negative inferences. Following this, M's IEP receipt in line 17 ("you put effort in") does not project negative dispositional inferences, but instead states the implication of her prior statement that she feels things for her partners, which negates his earlier IEP that suggested she might be manipulative. By line 17, the two appear in sync, despite the riskiness of M's IEPs.

Lines 18–25 are topic expansive, with F providing a relational history account where her generosity and support were freely given but unreciprocated by her last male partner. Although M aligns with her stance in line 22, which promotes topic expansion, he proposes closure to her relational history account with an IEP in line 26 ("but ya' gotta ask for a small token'v appreciation"). He adds that such appreciation would be "easy" for her partner to show. The potentially negative dispositional inference here is that F may be a pushover because she cannot

or will not ask for what she wants, when what she wants is an “easy” thing for her partner to give. Curiously, F does not treat this as a criticism, but rather treats it as a presentation of alternative possibilities—i.e., as a way that M is letting her know that there are different kinds of guys available. Given the speed-dating context, F’s response positions M as perhaps having a stake or interest (Edwards & Potter, 1992) in making such an observation. In short, F’s response treats M’s IEP not as a criticism, but as a method by which M is signaling that he may be one such alternative possibility (a possibility ratified by M in line 34). F thus orients to M’s IEP as a flirtatious bid, which is taken up again across the final turns of the excerpt.

In Excerpt 9, notice the ways that F’s IEPs occasion (and elicit from M) the features of a dis-preferred female partner, and of the way their coordination around these dispreferences occasion stance affiliation.

Excerpt 9 (F6M1)

- 1 F: what do you look for in a lady?
 2 M: oh umhm (.) personality wise? I try to be open um
 3 (.) to a balance between personality n’ attraction
 4 so (.) [personality wise,
 5 F: {attraction ()
 6 M: I don’t know (.) like maybe genuinely happy no matter
 7 what circumstances? easy to get along with? <overall>.
 8 F: → not into the complaining women?
 9 M: no hh. I don’t like that (.) complaining (.) I
 10 def’don’t like that [n’
 11 F: → [gossipy n’all that?
 12 M: oh yeah (hha) (.) no hehe,
 13 F: no hh. me’neither (.) it ain’t worth th’time,
 14 M: f’real n’some r’jus like that (.) n’I ain’t saying
 15 they’re bad or [()
 16 F: [I-() I’was gonna say >women say’dey
 17 don’t like it< but they get caught up n’t then it’s routine,
 18 M: mm: :hm:: yup,
 19 F: → you know wt’I mean? (.) you pr’bly been w’girls that think
 20 valuable conversations’bout talkin’bout evry’body elses
 21 business [ya y’you know?]
 22 M: [yep I have] girls who do that (.) who
 23 always complaining r’ moaning r’ naggin’ or talkin’bout
 24 others just use all the energy up.
 25 F: exactly (.) it uses up the energy.
 26 M: right I like a woman who focus on themself n’not others
 27 so it’s not all negativeness but it’s positiveness.
 28 F: that’s what I’m sayin’ (.) I like that (.) you
 29 know (.) you n’me might be onto something heheh.
 30 M: that’s righ(h)t (.) might be.

Like CRs, IEPs are topic expansive, but do so by redirecting or escalating it, which can be interpersonally risky. F’s first two IEPs (lines 8 and 11) are a case in point. They are built as rhetorical question escalations of M’s preference for “easy to get along with.” They treat M’s preference as a potentially euphemistic nonstatement about disinterest in “complaining” or “gossipy” type women. It would be unsurprising were M to resist these inferences, since they may

perpetuate stereotypical or sexist views of women, thus damaging the subject-side of M's self-presentation. But he does not, perhaps because F's IEPs are built in a tongue-and-cheek way. The turn-initial solicitation structure "not into" (line 8) has a casual feel to it, indexing the language one might use to evaluate something jocularly. Also, because the probes are about broad and scripted categories of undesirable features ("complainers," "gossipy n'all"), they prefer a "no" answer, with their extremity inoculating against any damage agreement might do. And because these features are extreme, they enable M to affiliate with F's inference while not appearing to be the source of the inference, which he does through repetition ("I don't like that (.) complaining") and escalation ("I def'don't like that"). By line 13, the tables have turned—F displays affiliation with M ("me'neither") toward a stance she originally elicited from M via her IEPs.

A similar pattern repeats itself in the second half of the excerpt. After some coordinated topic expansion about undesirable female features (lines 14–18), F formulates another IEP (lines 19–21) that suggests that M has probably been with girls that have these undesirable qualities. F's IEP here parallels M's IEP in lines 26–27 of the previous excerpt, where M suggests that F may be a pushover who enables her male partners to be selfish. The responses in each excerpt are also parallel. Neither recipient orients to the IEP as a criticism or stance disaffiliating provocation. In the previous excerpt, rather than orienting to it as a jab, M treats it as a credentialing of sorts—as a positioning of him as potentially having the kind of knowledge she has, that is, up-close experiential knowledge about what is unhealthy. Orienting to him this way effectively positions them as comembers of the same mate-preference category. In short, her IEP is not taken as a challenge, but as a bid for stance affiliation. He signals this alignment through agreement, topic expansion, and escalation (lines 22–27), after which she is then able to display affiliation ("that's what I'm sayin'" and "you n'me might be onto something") toward M about a stance she originally solicited with her IEP in lines 19–21. There is an elegant orchestration here with respect to the way IEPs couple topic expansion with stance affiliation.

Excerpt 10 begins at a point where M and F have returned, after a digression and delay, to F's preference for "balance."

Excerpt 10 (F3M6)

- 1 M: like how you said balanced (.) y'know (.) balanced,
 2 F: right (.) it's jus'like I like em' t'have a world
 3 view (.) b'educated a lil'bit in everything (.)
 4 be eclectic (.) cause I like a lil'bit ev'rything.
 5 M: → ut'o : : h (hh) sh'wants everything?
 6 F: oh ye (h) s ye: :s hehe,
 7 M: → yah nah I feel ya (.) you want somebody that
 8 → enjoys aw'kinds uv'stuff >n'brings< their own new
 9 → stuff (.) like a'mutual kinda=
 10 F: =exa: :ctly
 11 M: same here (.) in my last relationship I had'ta
 12 take all the initiative.
 13 F: oh I like takin' initiative.
 14 ((bell sounds signaling time is up))
 15 [ogh we was just getting somewhere.
 16 M: [ah is that it already ()

M's first IEP in line 5 projects the inference that she may want "everything," i.e., she may be selfish or entitled. Yet, his preface "ut'o::h(hh)" is a self-conscious and exaggerated potential marker of trouble, which undermines the force of the inference. Typically, the preferred response to a negative projected dispositional inference would be disagreement. F agrees, however, and does so in an exaggerated way with laughter, thus casually colluding with the attention M has drawn to her potential self-interest. His "yah nah" in line 7 is a two-part stance-affiliating preface. In the first part, the "yah" latches to her prior turn and signals alignment with the action of playful collusion; secondly, as a preface to "I feel ya," the "nah" negates his IEP in line 5, suggesting that his IEP was, as F correctly interpreted, a faux stance. The "yah nah I feel ya" thus affiliates both with the action of F's turn and with her interpretation of M's social action. The IEP has thus worked to coordinate social action and align them affectively.

M then formulates another IEP (lines 7–9) that projects what is arguably a charitable inference that eventually solicits stance affiliation from F toward him. The inference of liking "a little bit of everything" is now tilted to imply wanting a guy with wide-ranging interests who can also contribute to the relationship mutually. She latches with expressive agreement ("=exa::ctly"), thus aligning with M's IEP and projecting further expansion. However, M's rejoinder "same here" treats her "exa::ctly" not as an agreement token, but as an affirmation that his IEP aligns with her preference. M can then display agreement and thus stance affiliation. It is in the latter half of M's turn in lines 11–12 where we see how he uses his IEP in lines 7–9 as a segue to the disclosure of his own preference for a partner who takes initiative, to which F signals that she is that sort of person (line 13). Like in Excerpt 9, the tables have once again turned. By the end of the expansion sequence, it is the person who first disclosed their preference (F) who is signaling alignment with the person formulating the IEPs (M).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In contrast to experimental social psychological speed-dating research in which mate preferences are typically measured as survey responses triggered by a live interactional manipulation, the current study has used a discursive psychological perspective to examine actual mate-preference talk by potential romantic partners in live conversational contexts. The aim was to examine the interactional black box that typically goes unexamined in traditional speed-dating research. The analyses therefore examined how mate preferences were elicited, initially formulated, and how responses to disclosures were organized across their environment of expansion. In looking closely at what happens inside the black box, three broad trends emerged. First, the vast majority of mate-preference disclosures were not only prompted, but were prompted in ways that occasioned delayed responses. Second, the majority of initial responses to such prompts were in fact delayed, revealing that requests for and disclosures of mate preferences were at the very least delicate and, at times, accountable topics. And finally, delayed responses often evolved into patterned expansion sequences that, at minimum, promoted cooperative topic expansion and, in some cases where the probes were inferentially elaborative (and thus more risky), topic expansion as well as affective participant stance alignment.

Nearly all mate-preference prompts were designed to appear transitionally relevant with turn-initial components that indexed incipient or prior action. Prompts were generally exemplars of topic-proffering sequences (Schegloff, 2007). Because they were generally about the other's

preferences for broad and generic categories (like “guys” in general), they seemed to prefer expanded sequences. In looking closely at this portion of the black box, we see that speed daters did not ask about mate preferences in the same way they are asked about them on questionnaires. Rather than being yes/no (or forced choice) interrogatives about specific preferences, queries usually came as the first part of a topic-proffering sequence that preferred expanded (not fill-in-the-blank) answers. Queries seemed less about gathering specific information so much as initiating an open process of topic exploration. Moreover, these sequences both mitigated the questioner’s apparent stake or interest in the response and made available an expansive array of culturally available candidate responses, allowing the recipient to resist an overly personalized or narrow disclosure of preference, thus managing the subject-side of self-disclosure.

Bald and often incipient prompts about one’s preferences often appeared abrupt, and thus the sort of thing that signals potential trouble, which may explain why they were often met with nonspecific, broad, or delayed receipts. Type-conforming responses to mate-preference prompts were rare, both in terms of the grammar and polarity of the answer. When asked “so what do you like in a girl/guy?,” respondents rarely replied with an “I like x, y, and z” response. Instead, initial responses (second pair-parts) were generally nonconforming responses, revealing a dispreference for straightforward answers. In analyzing this portion of the black box, it would be inappropriate to conclude that such resistance reveals that speakers do not want to talk about their preferences; rather, it suggests that sociorelational demands may outweigh informational demands. Simply put, we see that it is not so much what we prefer, but how we prefer what we prefer, and how this preferring impacts the unfolding interaction.

Delayed responses revealed that mate-preference disclosures, like the prompts that occasion them, are also delicate actions. The delaying underscored the sensitive and delicate nature of revealing information relevant for determining compatibility to someone who is both a stranger and a potential romantic partner. Seen this way, delayed mate-preference disclosures function as interactional resources for managing the delicacy of subject-side descriptions (Edwards, 2005, 2007), and not necessarily (as traditional psychologists might speculate) as psychological indices of uncertainty or confusion. They attend to the subject-side task of appearing open and exploratory about an interpersonally sensitive topic, which in the present context involved dual rhetorical purposes. As a defensive rhetorical tool, the delays worked to downplay the appearance of having a preestablished preference for a certain type of partner. Offensively, delayed answers functioned to help sustain and open up the conversation (see Stokoe, 2010). In this way, the delay is not actually a form of dispreference for the topic-proffering prompts; rather, the delaying makes possible cooperative expansion. They indirectly invited the recipient to help cocreate an answer, or to at least get one started so that the original discloser had something to react to, which increased the likelihood of mutual topic expansion. As such, delayed responses are commodities in the social business of promoting compatibility.

Rather than derail topic expansion or stymie the potential for speaker alignment, delayed formulations of mate preferences were often harbingers of protracted expansion sequences where topic expansion and stance affiliation were likely. Two styles of receipt formulations for managing delayed mate-preference disclosures were conspicuous—cooperative recycles and inferentially elaborative probes, the latter comprising the majority of instances. Cooperative recycles generally promoted topic coordination and expansion but not stance affiliation. Even when CRs were coupled with positive stance-affiliating bids, listeners did not orient to them as preliminaries for displays of mutual affective affiliation. At best, the positive stance-affiliating bids functioned to help

maintain appropriate footing so that topic expansion could continue. Although CRs have been shown to be quite common (and helpful) in contexts where there is a more clearly defined asymmetry of roles between speakers (e.g., news interviews or therapeutic contexts), their display of neutrality in this particular speed-dating context proved unhelpful for promoting affective mutual stance affiliation. This suggests something important about topic-proffering sequences in speed-dating contexts—that is, being afforded a nonjudgmental, open, and encouraging space for elaborating on positions around certain delicate positions (like mate preferences) is not necessarily sufficient for procuring affective connection. Because CRs focus on expanding and appreciating the intrapersonal disclosures of the other, they may have limited interpersonal mileage.

Like CRs, IEPs are topic expansive, but do this by playing up inferences, which can be interpersonally risky. One of the striking findings of this study was that rather than backfiring, the disputative, escalating, and negative dispositional inferential nature of IEPs seemed to actually promote mutual affective stance affiliation. IEPs seem to work in at least two ways. First, they projected inferences of mate preferences that were troublesome, but often did so in a tongue-in-cheek way, which provided the speaker who is delaying something to playfully react to, which usually engendered a jocular coordination of stance. Because it was play around potentially troublesome inferences, the speed daters could appear in sync around what is at stake before further exploring their preferences. Second, speakers would often formulate IEPs that extended a select aspect of the delayed mate-preference disclosure, but did so in ways that tilted the preference toward a mate-preference stance commensurate with the questioner's own preference. Since the tilt is designed to encompass both speakers' preferences, agreement with it could be (and often was) interpreted as evidence of mutual affiliation. IEPs solicit stance affiliation as much as they projected it; they allow affiliation to be cycled between both speakers. In short, evidence of mutual affective affiliation, or what might be glossed as a "match" in the language of speed dating, seemed likely when the risks of IEPs were present. What seemed to predict affective stance affiliation was not the content of the mate preferences per se, but was instead the extent to which speakers could remain in sync across topic-proffering sequences; doing so meant using risky inferentially elaborative probes to tease out or tilt preferences in ways that could be shared.

There is a crucially important implication here that segues with traditional psychological speed-dating research findings. Recall that one of the central findings of experimental speed-dating research is that participants' preevent reports of what they thought they were attracted to do not generally predict what the types of partners they actually ended up preferring. From a discursive psychological perspective, this suggests that participants do not simply haul their preexisting attitudes to the discursive scene and use them in direct decision making. Rather, attitudes (e.g., mate preferences) are talk's business. They are fluid, partial, emergent, and revisable tools for managing and coordinating stance (Edwards & Potter, 1992). There may be a gulf between the way mate preferences are treated in experimental speed-dating research and the way they are treated by participants in actual interactions. When squared with the findings of the present study, at least two implications emerge. First, compatibility may not involve participants successfully coordinating their a priori mate preferences. Rather, an analysis of the black box reveals that stance affiliation (or compatibility) may reflect the extent to which participants are able to incrementally affiliate through inferential conjectures about mate-preference formulations on the fly. Second, rather than treating interactions as experimental manipulations, social scientists interested in the genesis of close relationships would benefit enormously from an up-close analysis of the actual relational contexts in which closeness springs to life.

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