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Indirect Pursuits of Intimacy in Romantic Couples Everyday Conversations: A Discourse Analytic Approach

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Key words:

criticisms;
infidelity;
discourse
analysis; young
adult; romantic
relationships;
affiliation

Abstract: A discourse analytic approach was used to examine how twenty young adult romantic couples (ages 19-26) employed criticisms and insinuations of infidelity in their natural unstructured interactions to indirectly and creatively pursue closeness. The research has been motivated by an expanding arena of research that shows that ostensibly contentious interactional moments among young adult intimates may not be adversarial, but rather may be methods that promote a playful repartee that leads to affiliation. I demonstrate how criticisms are both often highly gendered and typically formulated and responded to in tongue-in-cheek, non-serious ways that involve the creative use of various forms of irony, laughter, rekeyings, abrupt non-sequiturs, and topic shifts that mitigate the potential for the criticisms to become adversarial. Similarly, the insinuations of infidelity were often designed by the couples to attend to interactional breaches. They functioned as a brief but effective way for one partner to signal that they had been dismissed or neglected in the preceding discursive turns. My central finding is that young adult romantic couples maintain closeness amidst potential conflict in their natural everyday conversational interactions.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Intimacy Pursuits Among Young Adult Intimates](#)
- [3. Criticisms and Insinuations of Infidelity](#)
- [4. A Discourse Analytic Approach](#)
- [5. Data and Method](#)
- [6. Analysis](#)
 - [6.1 Part I: Criticisms](#)
 - [6.2 Part II: Insinuations of infidelity](#)
- [7. Discussion](#)
- [Appendix: Transcription Conventions](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

1. Introduction

In this article, I explore the conversations of young adult heterosexual couples in romantic relationships in order to understand how they pursue closeness or intimacy in their natural everyday contexts. To date, research on the natural conversations of romantic couples is rare within the field of language and discourse studies. With few exceptions (KOROBOV, 2016, 2017; PICHLER, 2017), the majority of research on couple's talk is often carried out either within traditional social psychological paradigms, which use a factors and variables approach to measure interpersonal dynamics using non-natural methods (self-reports, questionnaires), or within the sociolinguistic traditions which emphasize "dominance" (e.g., collaboration vs. competition), "difference" (e.g., speech/conversational styles of men vs. women), or speech acts (e.g., the use of phrases like "I love you," pet names, or compliments as indices for affection) (for extended discussion, see KOROBOV, 2017; PICHLER, 2017). In contrast, my aim is to understand how romantic couples create closeness and pursue intimacy when they are not being asked to talk or think about it or their relationships; that is, when it simply emerges spontaneously as part of their everyday routines and exchanges. [1]

Researchers within the field of language and discourse studies have shown that spontaneous displays of intimacy, closeness, and affection between romantic couples in their everyday natural interactional contexts do not always present in conventionally expected ways (KOROBOV, 2016, 2017; PICHLER, 2017). I have shown that young adult couples sometimes achieve affiliation after ostensibly contentious or adversarial moments of play fighting, argument, or conflict (KOROBOV, 2017). PICHLER (2017) has similarly detailed the indirect, playful, and idiosyncratic ways that couples express affection, which include the switching of frames, voices, codes, non-verbal cues, and personas, as well as the use ritualized insult sequences and the playful occasioning of gender roles. PICHLER shows how these performances of affection highlight what JAFFE, KOVEN, PERRINO and VIGOROUX (2015, p.136) call the "ambiguity of heteroglossic speech," which underscores the "playful polyphony" of how multiple forms of discursive expression can coexist without a singular or definite meaning. What counts as an intimacy pursuit or expression of closeness or affection may differ tremendously when the research focuses on spontaneous talk in natural settings versus intimate expressions in non-natural research settings. [2]

I will begin with a discussion of the unique nature of intimacy pursuits among young adult couples (Section 2). Afterwards, I introduce the two most salient discursive methods that the young adult couples employ to indirectly and creatively pursue intimacy (Section 3). I will then justify a discourse analytic methodology for working with this type of conversational data (Section 4), and then an account of the data collection process and procedural methodology (Section 5). The data analysis section is separated into two parts: The first part (Section 6.1) details the use of *criticisms* by young adult couples, and the second part (Section 6.2) examines *insinuations of infidelity*. I conclude with a Discussion of the findings and implications for further research (Section 7). [3]

2. Intimacy Pursuits Among Young Adult Intimates

The conversations of young adult heterosexual adults (ages 18-25) offer an especially apropos developmental niche for seeing intimacy and closeness pursued in indirect, creative, and unexpected ways. Social scientists have noted that, for an increasingly confessional millennial generation of young adults now saturated in webs of social-networking, interactional rituals that may promote closeness and display affection may appear in the form of play fighting, verbal tiffs, irony/sarcasm and other faux-aggressive forms of communication. Because of social media saturation, communication is often built around a myriad of references to pop cultural idioms (memes, movie/songs, viral videos, vines, etc.) that promote this "playful polyphony" of meanings. Young adults' resulting interactional rituals are thus constantly connected to a wider world of cultural subtexts, and now perhaps more than in the past, it is normative to toggle between various cultural tropes in playful and indirect ways (CHIOU, 2006; GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2001; KOROBOV & LAPLANTE, 2013; VALKENBURG & PETER, 2009; WEISBUCH, IVCEVIC & AMBADY, 2009). In what follows, I take an up-close look at young adult couples' spontaneous interactions, particularly focusing on the ways that closeness is often pursued circuitously and indirectly by occasioning what may on the surface look like playful banter or even conflict, but which may be sociable and affiliative (and not necessarily adversarial) in nature. [4]

To examine how closeness is indirectly pursued, I integrated a range of discursive methods to examine the indirect ways that affiliation is pursued in conversational interaction. For example, JEFFERSON, SACKS and SCHEGLOFF (1987) showed how speakers pursue intimacy during expanded affiliative sequences where laughter was used to modulate improprieties. MANDELBAUM (2003) has explored conversational "tit-for-tat," describing it as an interactive method for constructing relationships whereby a speaker orients to a potentially problematic or non-normative activity (like name calling), but in a *reciprocal* way, thereby rendering the potentially disjoining action as conjoining. SACKS (1978) has detailed a similar conjoining action through the use of dirty jokes. And GLENN (2003) showed how responses to sexual improprieties often promoted affiliation by building a flirtatious encounter. Similarly, KOROBOV (2011a, 2011b) has detailed how risky inferentially elaborative probes (see HERITAGE, 1985) and non-conventionally gendered mate preferences can engender affective affiliation between romantic partners. The connective idea between these various threads of research is that risky or non-conventional forms of relating may (counterintuitively) sometimes engender closeness in natural conversations. As STRAEHLE (1993, p.227) has noted, "contentious banter displays and nurtures, rather than threatens, their closeness." My goal is to bring this idea to the nascent arena of research on pursuits of closeness and intimacy in young adult heterosexual romantic couples' natural talk. [5]

3. Criticisms and Insinuations of Infidelity

I specifically examine two discursive methods that young adult romantic couples use to indirectly and creatively pursue closeness. They are criticisms and insinuations of infidelity. Although more will be said about how these strategies were procured from the conversational data in the Methods section that follows, an overview of these two methods in discourse and interpersonal communication research is warranted here. Criticisms (and/or insults) are typically treated as a special, and potentially more aggressive (than sarcasm or irony) form of disparagement (JANES & OLSEN, 2000). They are often studied in the form of gendered ritualized insults or verbal critiques/duels, where men and women engage in different ways in tit-for-tat exchange of barbs, gossip, etc. (ABRAHAM, 1974; KOCHMAN, 1983; RAMPTON, 1995). There are, of course, other ways that criticisms may be used by speakers. Rather than being preliminaries for duels, games of one-upmanship, or social ostracizing, the kinds of criticisms examined here are (counterintuitively) often mobilized as forms of social solidarity, as discursive actions nested in the practice of being in a "with," as GOFFMAN (1971) put it. EVALDSSON (2005) has found that in contexts where relationality demands are high (e.g., in romantic couples' conversations), criticisms may be formulated as invitations to a playful repartee. Recipients may treat them as methods to create closeness through a *shared* transgression of socio-relational norms. [6]

In this particular corpus of criticisms, partners often oriented to *gender* in their criticisms. Although the use of gendered roles, norms, and behaviors by young adult romantic couples as fodder for generating relational tension/affiliation is perhaps expected (CONNOLLY & JOHNSON, 1996; FEIRING, 1999), given the ubiquity of gender in everyday life, the ways that this is done are not well researched. In the analysis, I focused on the ways criticisms occasion participants' orientations to gender. A close discursive analysis of gender has been shown by researchers to be useful in the analysis of relationship construction, which entails a focus on the ways speakers conduct interaction and build relationships as members of particular relational categories, such as "friend," "mother," or for these participants, "romantic partner" (MANDELBAUM, 2003; POMERANTZ & MANDELBAUM, 2005; WILKINSON & KITZINGER, 2008). The analysis presented here focuses on the ways romantic partners index gender to construct the content of the criticisms. Gender is a central ingredient in the relational work that takes place during such conflict talk, functioning as a rhetorical tool for launching, negating, and inoculating various positions with respect to what it means to be a romantic partner. [7]

Researchers typically conceptualize infidelity either through an evolutionary psychological orientation, a sociometric approach, a social cognition approach, or through self-help popular psychology therapeutic understandings and interventions (for brief overview, see KOROBOV, 2016). Far less common is research that explores how romantic partners talk about infidelity, or make insinuations or accusations about being unfaithful to one another, in natural everyday interactions as parts of daily social rituals. As a quotidian part of

spontaneous interaction, bids and insinuations about being unfaithful may have an altogether different complexion. As such, I am interested in moments where partners insinuate infidelity as a way of organizing and negotiating immediate relational issues in the here and now (that may be part of a sequential project of pursuing closeness). Unlike the aforementioned approaches to infidelity, my concern is not what talk about infidelity reveals about the inner psychological worlds of couples, our broader culture, or the evolution of our species, but rather what here-and-now relational processes are managed by making infidelity relevant in everyday banter. Infidelity talk is therefore examined as a component in some type of local interactional business being carried out between intimates that may be part of the project of managing intimacy. [8]

4. A Discourse Analytic Approach

I used a discourse analytic (DA) approach to examine the indirect and subtle ways that heterosexual couples pursue closeness and intimacy. A discursive approach is a social constructionist approach to talk and social interaction that applies ideas from discursive psychology, conversational analysis, and ethnomethodology to the analysis of talk and texts (EDWARDS & POTTER, 1992; POTTER, 1996; POTTER & WETHERELL, 1987). Discourse analysis is useful for identifying the *rhetorical* and *argumentative organization* of talk. This means paying close attention to the way talk is rhetorically and argumentatively organized, often sequentially, and often in the form of contradictory and inconsistent versions of people, motives, states of mind, or events (BILLIG, 1987). It is with this analytic focus that discourse analysts tend to part company with the majority of traditional psychological research that attempts to treat talk as a referential medium into minds (interiority) or worlds (sociality). Discourse analysts treat talk as a form of social action that tends to some bit of local social business that is relevant in the here and now for speakers. [9]

I have used a DA approach to examine the inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities that arise as speakers negotiate the often conflicting demands of their relationships. Rather than seeing these shifts and equivocations as an analytic nuisance, they are exactly what are most interesting. By attending to them, I am able to examine how speakers manage their relationships and identities, which is particularly relevant for showing how intimates use criticisms and insinuations of infidelity as ways to pursue closeness. Seen this way, shifts and equivocations no longer appear as contradictions or inconsistencies, but rather as openings into which the discourse analyst can delve and see how such multiple attending and rhetorical finessing is used to work up positions that tend to contextual and relational demands. [10]

In contrast to some ethnographic and content-analytic approaches, the goal with discourse analysis is not simply to report a general compendium of findings, nor is it to simply offer summary snap-shots, paraphrases, or general themes of the conversational data. While these forms of analysis are useful for handling large amounts of qualitative data, the analyses and interpretations are usually conducted off-stage, and the claims are justified through argument rather than

binding to actual data. The findings are often presented as summaries or frequency counts of *what* happened in general (rather than *how* it happened), and thus run the risk of recapitulating common sense (see KOROBOV, 2014). In contrast, my goal is not to simply offer arguments that support the general finding *that* couples use certain methods to pursue intimacy, nor is it to lay out frequency counts of such strategies. Rather, it is to detail *how* and *when* certain forms of talk are made relevant, and what such doings interactively accomplish for the couples. Although there are limitations to focusing in detail on relatively small amounts of data, it is a common practice within discourse analytic research (HUTCHBY & WOUFFITT, 1998; TEN HAVE, 1999). The benefit of such a micro-analytic focus is that it addresses the "how" question, it binds the claims to actual data, it reveals (rather than conceals) how the analysis was conducted, it invites reflexive re-interpretations, and it provides a concrete model for analyzing similar segments of data. Discourse analysts aim for descriptive rigor, context specificity, and particularization (EDWARDS & POTTER, 1992; KOROBOV, 2014). [11]

5. Data and Method

The project reported from was part of a larger series of studies interested in intimacy, identity, and romantic attraction in young adults. The principle investigator was myself; two graduate students helped with recruitment, data collection, and initial coding/reliability checks. Proper IRB approval was secured and proper ethical protocol was followed at all times, including the provision of safety, privacy, and anonymity for all of the participants. Young adult couples (ages 19-26) were recruited from a large university in the Southeast USA through word of mouth, posters, and e-mails. To be eligible to participate, all couples had to report being in a committed romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Though the study was open to both heterosexual and homosexual couples, all of the couples that agreed to participate were heterosexual. The resulting participant pool was comprised of 20 heterosexual romantic couples from the university and the local community. [12]

For reasons discussed above, my aim was to procure data from natural settings rather than researcher moderated interviews or questionnaires. 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 two 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, relaxing, watching television, cooking, etc.). At the end of the two weeks, the digital recorders were returned and the participants were paid \$25. In sum, each couple produced an average of approximately 7 hours of recorded conversational interaction, for a total of approximately 140 hours of conversational data. [13]

In our first pass of the data, we were immediately struck with the amount of playful conflict that seemed to be present in the couple's conversations. When we isolated these segments, we began to notice that these particular types of conflicts often took the form of criticisms and insinuations of infidelity. We began

our analysis by first culling from the data all stretches of interaction that included criticisms and insinuations of infidelity of one partner towards another. Coders were the first author and two graduate students. To achieve an acceptable rate of agreement, only segments that were over 20 seconds in length were included. The reliability of the parsing of criticism segments was 82% agreement. The reliability of the identification of infidelity insinuation segments was 93% agreement. In sum, 45 segments of criticisms and 25 segments of insinuations of infidelity were reliably identified and extracted. One immediate discovery was that the vast majority (over 76%) of these segments had an ostensibly non-serious or playful quality to them (83% agreement). Like SCHIFFRIN's (1984) analysis of "sociable disagreements," the criticisms and infidelity insinuations in this corpus were often laced with laughter, rekeyed at various points through irony, and almost always terminated quickly with playful non sequiturs and topic shifts, and rarely ever returned to in the conversation. Most functioned as preliminaries for affiliation, and most were highly gendered. [14]

With respect to insinuations of infidelity, there often appeared to be a 5-part sequential design. This 5-part sequential design was not expected, but inductively emerged as the infidelity insinuation segments were closely analyzed. As noted earlier, discourse analysts look for patterns in talk and texts. Patterns reflect regularities, and regularities constitute culture. The sequential design is:

- 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: insinuation of infidelity towards speaker B;
- Step 4: Speaker B: rejects/problematises the insinuation by treating it as absurd;
- Step 5: Speaker B: eventually aligns with speaker A's question/statement/request. [15]

In the pattern above, insinuations of infidelity (Step 3) typically occur after a request-rejection sequence (Steps 1-2). The resistance/rejection is thus a preliminary for the insinuation of infidelity in Step 3. The insinuations are typically treated as absurd (Step 4), and are dismissed. However, in the environment that follows (Step 5), the accused almost always capitulates to speaker A's original request/question, which leads to alignment of stance between both speakers, and often also relational affiliation. Several robust examples of criticisms and insinuations of infidelity are presented. All excerpts are presented according to a light version of JEFFERSON's (2004) transcription conventions (see [Appendix](#)). [16]

6. Analysis

6.1 Part I: Criticisms

The first three excerpts in this section feature criticisms that involve the policing of gender norm violations. In the first excerpt, F criticizes M for preferring "girly" alcoholic drinks. M's management of F's teasing is particularly telling.

- 1 M: need to go to the movie tavern and get a drink.
- 2 F: hahahah yeah (.) okay (.) you are ridiculous,
- 3 M: listen,
- 4 F: you talk about ohhh:: I don't want girly drinks
- 5 I just drink manly man drinks (.) and what are your
- 6 first legal drinks? margaritas,
- 7 M: there's nothing wrong [with
- 8 F: a::nd mojitos (.) those are
- 9 feminine drinks,
- 10 M: no they're not.
- 11 F: really? mint and lime (.) oh that's totally manly.
- 12 M: well it's not just what but (.) it's I'm gonna
- 13 drink a lot (.) so you (.) can (.) suck it.
- 14 F: you know what? (.) you can never make fun of Brad ever
- 15 again.
- 16 M: there's a difference (.) you wanna know why? cause a manly
- 17 man will even drink a margarita [cause
- 18 F: on his first drink? no,
- 19 M: it has tequila in it (.) and rum (.) and Bacardi:: baby::
- 20 F: for his [first drink?
- 21 M: [and all that stuff.
- 22 F: no (.) he would drink a beer.
- 23 M: well my first drink was actu:ally a So'Co so you are dumb.
- 24 F: bless your heart (.) so where are we going?

Excerpt 1 [17]

F polices/teases M for pretending to be manly in his choice of alcoholic drinks. F criticizes M for drinking "girly" drinks (margaritas and mojitos) and for the hypocrisy of teasing his friend Brad for drinking girly drinks. The fascinating part

of the exchange, however, is the way M manages F's critique. He does so by assuming a faux-defensive position that is markedly tongue-in-cheek, and thus self-deprecating, in several key places. For instance, in line 13, he pauses and with a dramatic and metered affect adds the colloquially "you can suck it" idiom, which indexes a juvenile, intentionally-staged ironic comeback. In lines 16-17 and 19, M again slows his speech, sets up a rhetorical question ("you wanna know why?") to hold the floor by feigning insight, before rattling off a list (with dramatic pauses and inflection) of the three types of alcohol, punctuated with the tag "baby::." This move is, again, a caricature of a typical defensive posture, as it is knowingly exaggerated and stylized with idiomatic tags. It keys the conflict that may result from F's criticisms as non-serious, and his position as playfully going along for the ride. In line 23, he again stylizes a faux matter-of-factness ("was actu:ally"), which mocks the earnestness of the argument, and then adds another colloquially juvenile comeback tag ("so you are dumb"). [18]

In sum, M neither distances himself from the stereotypical masculine position nor does he embrace it fully. As is the case with most of these excerpts, the content of the criticism is not what is central. This is not really about M's alcoholic preference, nor is it simply about whether M is really a man or not. It is true that F is holding M accountable to gender norms related to masculinity and alcohol preferences, but not in an adversarial way; instead, she's having a go at M, which is a common interaction ritual for couples. M is able to playfully react enough to F's positioning to keep her performance going, but not so much that it becomes caustic or volatile. While this comes off quite seamlessly and elegantly, it is an elegant orchestration for the purposes of keeping their interaction playful. The positions being worked up and deflected here thus function to engender relational affiliation and play. The interaction thus stays buoyant, which is made clear as it ends with F offering her own sarcastic and colloquially Southern USA idiom "bless your heart," which aligns with M's playful mocking tone. [19]

This next excerpt picks up about three minutes after where the first has left off. The same topic is spontaneously reintroduced by M in line 3, but this time the tables become turned as M polices (and thus criticizes) F around gender norms related to women gaining weight.

- 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 F: =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?

Excerpt 2 [20]

In line 3-4, M returns to the topic as he emphasizes that he's "totally" going to "drink a margarita," that it will be 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 broaches the topic of women gaining 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 ("big Susan") as the face of an overweight beer drinking women. [21]

As in the previous excerpt, 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 caricatured form of the blackcent 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 signals 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. [22]

In the next excerpt, M is preparing food in the kitchen when F comes in and starts to take over, which upsets M, resulting in M criticizing F for "trying to take the fuck over here." F sarcastically (line 4-5) blames her intervention on the gender role expectation that she must simply "do my duty," and then uses the opportunity to criticize M for being hypocritical.

- 1 M: see you think you know everything (.) come in the
2 kitchen (.) trying to take the fuck over here.
3 F: hahhaahahhh (.) well you be asking me questions (.)
4 so I simply must do my duty n'come in and intervene
5 and help you.
6 M: what I mean (.) even [if I was takin care of it you
7 F: [nah you know what? I figured out
8 your trick though (.) mmmh-hmm::
9 M: na' I don't (.) I don't umm,
10 F: no I figured it out because when we was in Vegas (.)
11 you told Yvonne (.) you was like (.) watch (.) I'm
12 gonna get everything prepared and started (.) make it
13 look like I'm a team player n'then (.) my sister gonna
14 come and take over (.) and you's like (.) n'I'm gonna
15 let her (.) n'I'm gonna sit down and drink a beer (.)
16 hhaahha so you be doing that same thing here (.) you
17 get err:::ything started but then::,
18 M: ha'right, I have no idea whatch'u talkin' bout(ahaha)
19 F: you want to be like (.) ((male voice)) hey uh you wanna
20 come show me how to do this(hahahaa),
21 M: mmhm(aha) oh dis' is gettin' good(hhah)
22 F: mother-fucker (.) hhahha'l done caught on to you, had me
23 coming in and just take over when you suppos't'be cooking.
24 M: haaha, what I'm tryin[t'say
25 F: [ewwhahahahaha I love it.

Excerpt 3 [23]

The excerpt begins with M criticizing F for usurping his kitchen duties, but quickly turns into F launching a tongue-in-cheek criticism of M for feigning egalitarianism. F calls M's attempt to appear to help out a "trick," and she positions herself as

self-satisfied that she has figured it out. The play frame has thus been set up; F has caught M pretending to be something that he is not, and she takes pleasure in exposing him. The bulk of F's contribution comes in lines 10-17 as she recounts a story where M manipulated his sister into taking over the kitchen duties so that he could "sit back and drink a beer." Again, what is key here is not so much the content, but the way the content is animated and performed by F. She not only employs a smile-voice and laughed-through deliveries, exaggerated reported speech, hyperbole, profanity laced with knowing exasperation, but also self-referential amusement at her own story. In short, F is performing something like a roast of M. Because it is set up in this frame, it is inoculated against appearing genuinely confrontational. M is thus able to playfully display ignorance at each of his turns, a move that works in concert with her performance of calling him out, thus creating an affiliative repartee. Exposing someone works more seamlessly if the other feigns resistance by playing dumb. M obliges (which is important as part of the dance of maintaining closeness), and by the end, F has policed the male gender role, and with a light touch she has playfully circumscribed M back into it. [24]

The last two excerpts involve criticisms that play off of the couple's formulation (and supplanting) of gender stereotypes that are generally culturally recognized as disparaging. The next excerpt opens with M flipping through the television channels while F types on her computer. The criticisms here involve M scripting F as someone who is regularly bitchy and F scripting M as being a predictable male pervert.

- 1 M: let me click on something,
2 F: well all I see is sexy underwear ads.
3 M: no that's all you're paying attention to cause it
4 gives ya something (.) as usual (.) t'bitch at me about.
5 F: that's just wha::t I sa::w (.) n'when I happened to look
6 there was a picture::: of lingerie::: ((whiny voice))
7 M: you're a picture of lingerie.
8 F: that was your comeback?
9 M: yep.
10 F: I wish I looked like that.
11 ((2.0))
12 M: no comment.
13 ((3.0))
14 F: you being a pervert? [you boys are so: predictable.
15 M: [course
16 F: mmhm

- 17 M: yes (.) oh how bout that dress?
18 F: not unless I was like skinny skinny.

Excerpt 4 [25]

M orients to F's evaluation of his channel choices as a potential criticism of him for choosing "all" "sexy underwear ads," and responds (lines 3-4) with a turn initial emphatic disagreement token ("no") followed by a dispositional scripting (EDWARDS, 1994, 1995) of F as someone predisposed to habitually seek out things "t'bitch at me about." F's rejoinder (lines 5-6), though straightforwardly defensive, is laced with a whiny high-pitched affect that sounds child-like, and thus non-serious. M's reply follows in kind, and is formulated as a non-sequitur rejoinder that recycles the terminal bit of F's turn, thus indexing the idiomatic "no you are" rejoinder common in playful conflict exchanges. F recognizes it and jokingly calls it out as a staged attempt at a "comeback" (line 8). We are thus arguably in the arena of play at this point, a frame that holds throughout the rest of the excerpt. [26]

M's casual "yep" rejoinder ratifies F's interpretation, and F's topic shift (line 10), the long pauses (lines 11 and 13), and M's ironic use of suppression (or "biting the tongue"; see GOUGH, 2001) in line 12 solidify the play frame. F's dispositional and gendered scripting of M in line 14 as a predictably perverted boy is, interestingly, not only instantly owned by M (line 15), but is owned with a kind of matter-of-factness ("course") that constructs male perverseness as normative and thus expected, at least within the play frame. The play frame assures that M's position is hearable as ironic, thus preserving plausible deniability, which is key in moments where the relational dynamic is less about the content of their identities per se, and more about the form or style of the relational dance. [27]

The final excerpt from this section involves M taking the floor and having a go at F. It represents an elegant call-and-response performance of criticisms within a play frame where gendered stereotypes are again occasioned and used to construct the criticisms.

- 1 M: ya know (.) I always trying to b'cooperating but what
2 you want is a perfect world (.) n'to me (.) that's
3 funny (.) I mean so what I don't clean up your room
4 I don't wash your clothes (.) I don't bullshit like that
5 (.) see it's all dis'screaming bout wha'ya'll wantin't'have
6 ((shifts to high pitched female voice)) I don't want no
7 stereotypical relationships (.) can't have no average guy
8 ((voice lowers)) ya'll need to open up your eyes (.) in the
9 end we might not do ery'thing but it fuckin gets do:ne

recognizes this as a stylized rant in response to her prior turn, and is thus free to orient to it as entertainment. Because his rant involves dispositional gendered scripting (of F as belonging to a general and gendered class of "ya'll"), he can be seen to be re-positioning F back into a traditional set of gender role expectations for women, but with a light touch. F and M are thus able create a faux-conflict where they playfully criticize one another while staying affiliated. [30]

6.2 Part II: Insinuations of infidelity

As noted above, insinuations of infidelity were often built as a 5-part patterned sequence. They are thus not random, but are ordered and responsive social actions. And further, they are consequential. They seem to prefer an absurd rejection, which in turn works as a preliminary for pursuits of intimacy. In this first excerpt, M and F discuss going to the grocery store together.

- 1 M: are you going to Publix tonight?
2 F: uh (.) I dunno if I have time I gotta pick
3 up notes from class (.) I already went for us
4 once this week.
5 M: I thought we'd go together.
6 F: I can't (.) I gotta go get the notes.
7 M: if it wasn't from Rich I know you'd be back cause
8 ya'll wouldn't be chattin' it up fore:ver.
9 F: stop [so stupid
10 M: yep [mmhm:: okay.
11 F: ain't bout Rich (.) quit being ridiculous you
12 know I need the notes (.) I'm basically failing
13 that class.
14 M: I jus thought it'd be cool to go together.
15 F: fine (.) like 7:30 er 8 (.) I'll text.
16 M: k'cool I'll be back by then.

Excerpt 6 [31]

In the opening few turns, M poses a yes/no question (line 1) to which F displays uncertainty ("I dunno") and notes that she "already went for us once this week," which treats M's question as one that potentially indexes relational obligations. M's turn in line 5 makes relevant the relational nature of the question as he uses the epistemic marker "I thought" plus modal (we'd) to show that he is asking far more than a simple yes/no question. His addendum in line 5 is hearable as a suggestion that they go to the store together. It is thus relational in nature. The

opening step in the pattern can thus be reported as *Step 1: Speaker A asks a question or makes a statement or request.*

- 1 M: are you going to Publix tonight?
5 M: I thought we'd go together. [32]

In the next step, F resists the request, and does so across two turns. In lines 2-4 she initially provides an excuse but also displays an awareness that there are relational implications to his question, though she treats the query as being about relational duty ("I already went once for us this week") rather than about a desire to be together. She again in line 6 rejects the request with a balder and more straightforward rejection ("I can't") that provides an excuse ("I gotta go get the notes"). This next step can be represented as *Step 2: Speaker B resists or rejects Speaker A's question/statement/request.*

- 2 F: uh (.) I dunno if I have time I gotta pick
3 up notes from class (.) I already went for us
4 once this week.
6 F: I can't (.) I gotta go get the notes. [33]

The accusation of potentially inappropriate flirtation comes from M in the next turn (lines 7-8). Noteworthy about this accusation is that accusation about F's relationship with Rich is scripted (EDWARDS, 1994, 1995; KOROBOV, 2011b). A uses the epistemic maker "I know" and an extreme case formulation "forever" to claim, using the iterative present tense, that F and Rich are *routinely* "chattin' it up fore:ver," which is posited as the reason why F cannot be back in time not just to go to the store, but to go "together" to the store with her boyfriend. In short, M's accusation has a function, which is to account for F's neglect of A. Step 3 can be represented as *Step 3: Speaker A accusation of infidelity towards Speaker B.*

- 7 M: if it wasn't from Rich I know you'd be back cause
8 ya'll wouldn't be chattin' it up fore:ver. [34]

Accusations of infidelity were often met by speakers with exaggerated or caricatured responses. Here, F's response to the accusation is to construct the accusation as absurd ("so stupid"; "ridiculous"). The exaggerated responses generally took the form of subject-side asymmetrical overreactions that positioned the accusation as absurd. Absurdity, as ANTAKI (2003) notes, is good interactive camouflage. Unlike a po-faced or serious response (see DREW, 1987), speakers use absurd sounding receipts to project a kind of levity that is not easily countered or undermined. Further, they can be retracted or laughed off quite easily. This suggests that exaggeratedly absurd sounding retorts to accusations of infidelity may work to dismiss or dilute the accusation itself and, by extension, to attend to the subject-side risks of both the one formulating the accusation and

the one receiving it. Speakers may use absurd rejoinders to render the accusation as innocuous, the person delivering it as irrational, and the recipient as unthreatened, if not mildly entertained. Step 4 can thus be presented as *Step 4: Speaker B rejects the accusation and treats it as absurd.*

- 9 F: stop [so stupid
11 F: ain't bout Rich (.) quit being ridiculous you
12 know I need the notes (.) I'm basically failing
13 that class. [35]

Curiously, in the environment following the absurd rendering of the accusation, the accuser never once debates the veracity of the accusation. It is as if the content of the accusation matters less than what it functionally accomplishes. In the environment following, the one accused typically capitulates to the original request from step 1 of the sequence, which is a capitulation (line 15) to a request that realigns the speakers *as a couple*. F has now agreed to go with M to the store, which pleases M, *Step 5: Speaker B aligns with speaker A's question/statement/request.*

- 15 F: fine (.) like 7:30 er 8 (.) I'll text.
16 M: k'cool I'll be back by then. [36]

In this next excerpt, M and F are in a sandwich shop. The insinuation occurs in line 7.

- 1 F: ohh I'm mad at her (.) fucking ho forgot to put
2 it on (.) ya gonna help? (.) gimme some ketchup?
3 M: w'l' dunno how many she fucking gave you.
4 M: and how is she a hoe? n'why ya speaking quietly?
5 F: cuz she's a:ctin like'a hoe.
6 M: how? she made sandwiches and then got confused.
7 F: cause you two are all giggling with each other.
8 M: HOLY SHI::T you are losing it (.) wo::w.
9 F: funny hahaha not'funny.
10 M: holy(hahhaa)shit (.) you messed that up(ahahha).
11 F: [shu'upp::]
12 M: [here baby] take mine (.) use this one=
13 F: =hahahahaah shu:::t up(ahahaah)thank you.

Excerpt 7 [37]

F uses the interrogative voice construction "going to help?" in line 2 to ask (and perhaps suggest) that M 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 M. Additionally, her question has obvious relational implications (i.e., that he *ought* to help/align with her). In what follows, M rejects her request, her way of talking ("speaking quietly"), and her construction of the female clerk as a "ho." F then accuses M of inappropriately flirting with the clerk, M dismisses the accusation as absurd, they have a laugh over some malapropisms before M capitulates to F's request to help her with the ketchup, which occasions alignment and affiliation. [38]

In this next excerpt, F insinuates that M might fall in love with another woman because he is hanging out with her so much.

- 1 F: I wish you'd move over to the east apartments.
2 M: aggh na:h
3 F: >why not<,
4 M: jus' I dunno (.) it's good(.) I'm good here.
5 F: all this hanging out with Shay (.) you ain't
6 gonna fall in love with her er'something?
7 M: that is soo ill.
8 F: what's so ill?
9 M: >that's whack baby<
10 F: 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 M: hahhahahhhha that's so: dumb baby.
14 F: you said it was du:mb?
15 M: mmhmm(hahaa) listen to you.
16 F: <shu::t up> Richard(hhaha).
17 F: you ne:ed to move.
18 M: I'll move (.) y'know I gotch'ya baby.
19 ((4.0))
20 F: I have t'wash my hair today (.) it's detrimental.
21 M: then go'on wash your pretty hair baby.

Excerpt 8 [39]

F makes a relational request (line 1 and 17) that M move closer to her, which M rejects across multiple turns (line 2 and 4). This sets the stage for F's insinuation of infidelity in lines 5-6 and 10-12, which is staged in the iterative present tense ("all this hanging out") and tagged with a vagueness token ("er'something?"), which both expands and dilutes the exact nature of what might happen. This is important to note, since again the function of the insinuation is not so much about infidelity per se as it is about occasioning an impropriety of some kind in order to tend to something previous in the turn that was neglected. M predictably treats both the insinuation as absurd (line 9 and 13) and the F as absurd (line 15) for saying it out loud. Yet, shortly thereafter, M capitulates to F's request (line 18) and agrees to move, adding the important relational tag of "y'know I gotch'ya baby," which explicitly demonstrates interpersonal affiliation with F. In other words, it's not just that he's aligning with what she's asking, he's reassuring her that he "gets her" and is, as GOFFMAN (1971) would argue, "in a with" with F. [40]

In this last excerpt, there is a deviation to the 5-part sequence. In discursive work, analysts often show the interactional trouble that results when deviations occur to expected patterns. This is very important as a way of demonstrating the importance of the sequence for accomplishing certain interactional work. The following excerpt begins in the standard fashion with a request made by F to "put the radio on," which is followed by a rejection and complaint sequence by M in lines 2-8. F then uses an extreme case formulation marked with emphatic stress to make an insinuation about a connection between M and Bailey in line 9. Note M's initial response in line 10 ("oh I know"). This response is a deviation to the 5-part sequence. Rather than treating the insinuation as absurd, he outright agrees with it by using the turn initial "oh" + "I know" common knowledge component epistemic construction (KOROBOV, 2011a; STOKOE, 2010) that treats the insinuation as common/shared knowledge, which turns out to be a *dispreferred* move that derails movement towards affiliation.

- 1 F: put the radio on.
2 M: no (.) there's nothing on the radio at all (.)
3 ever (.) and ev:ery time we get in the car
4 together you say something about how all I ever
5 listen to anymore is country music (.) n'ya
6 need't get yr'shit straight (.) it's just all
7 I listen to that you don't totally have a bitch
8 fit about.
9 F: you and Bailey have a:: lot in common.
10 M: oh I know.
11 F: wha'how do you know?
12 M: because she wears fucking band shirts and shit.

- 13 F: no she doesn't (.) the only thing she ever wears
14 is that sweater.
15 M: the few times I've seen her she's fucking wearing
16 stuff (.) that's how I know (.) n'considering
17 all the shit you've talked about Bailey (.) you
18 shouldn't know (.) everything you say about Bailey
19 implies that you hate the bitch.
20 F: wo::w,
21 F: well I do.
22 M: then why do you know anything about her?
23 F: cause I'm friends with her friends.
24 M: that doesn't mean you'd know anything about her.
25 F: they talk about her and lie and bitch about her and
26 then they try to stick up for her (.) n'l still can't
27 believe Justin tried to tell me she wasn't a ho.
28 M: well she i:s (.) n'anyway (.) I barely know her.
31 F: w'lwe agree on the ho part.
32 M: ur' terrible.

Excerpt 9 [41]

The insinuation about a potential inappropriate connection between M and Bailey is brought off by F in line 9 through an exaggerated ("a:: lot") characterization of M and Bailey's connection, which is hearable as an insinuation that their connection is more than what would be conventionally expected between a male and female friend. Rather than disagree, M agrees in line 10. F's immediate reply in line 11 ("wha'how do you know?") to M's *agreement* to her accusation is a wh-question that displays surprise—that is, it orients to M's move as not being common knowledge to her that he agrees that he and Bailey have a lot in common. Her surprise stands as evidence that agreement from M was not the preferred or expected response to her accusation. The interactional environment that follows (lines 12-32) is thus an unusually protracted back-and-forth argument regarding what M and Bailey have in common, as well as negative characterizations of Bailey's personality, and who has the rights to such knowledge. Although they eventually agree on the characterization of Bailey as a "ho," little is done by M to mitigate the accusation that he and Bailey have a connection, and M does not return to F's original request to turn the radio on. The interaction ends with M criticizing F ("ur terrible") for the way she has pressed the issue of Bailey being a "ho." In short, rejecting the insinuation (step 3 of the 5-part pattern) is important, as it shifts the focus away from something adversarial and

towards repairing the lurking trouble in the request-rejection that occurred previously. [42]

7. Discussion

I have used a discourse analytic approach to examine how young adult romantic couples use gendered criticisms and insinuations of infidelity as interactional methods for (counterintuitively) pursuing affiliation. Because we know little about non-researcher mediated conversations between romantic partners, an in-depth, qualitative, and contextually-sensitive study was performed to better understand the real time interactional functions that these sorts of playful conflicts engender as they spontaneously emerge as parts of intimates' relational practices. [43]

The criticisms were often heavily gendered, suggesting that for romantic couples, gender is a salient tool for orchestrating affiliation. This comes as no surprise, as researchers have shown that orientations to gender are especially pronounced during late adolescence and early adulthood (see CONNOLLY & JOHNSON, 1996; FEIRING, 1999). Interestingly, the orientations to gender were malleable and creatively stylized. The gendered positions taken up were built in self-referential and plausibly deniable ways; orientations to different gendered positions were thus able to be easily embraced, cast off or onto to another, deflected, hedged, ironized, or laughed off with conspicuous ease and flair. I showed that the putative content (i.e., the gendered positions assumed around a particular conflict topic) appeared to matter less than the interactional style or affiliation bid that was occasioned vis-à-vis the gendered content. Gender seemed to be a preferred discursive mechanism by which to test out possibilities for connection. [44]

In digging a bit deeper, a common thread was that, at least on the surface, the couples reinforced traditional gender norms. However, these orientations were built to be dismantled and upended. The result is that traditional gender norms and dispositions were interactionally made accountable by the couples, which indirectly challenged the status quo. In other words, incipient contrasts to gender-appropriate behavior were occasioned and made relevant in the couple's banter, which suggests that part of their work involved rejecting traditional category membership by showing how one was *not* attached to the conventional features of gender categories. Flouting gendered expectations may be a way for romantic partners to stand out to one another. Couples' faux-resistance, nonchalance, and levity around projected ascriptions to traditional gender norms may also have the effect of creating the appearance of being unique, idiosyncratic, or progressive. After all, what better way to look hip than to ironically play up traditional gendered expectations, but in a nonplussed way? Further research is needed to better understand how and when traditional gendered positions are subverted in the interactions of romantic couples. [45]

Second, although criticisms are generally thought of as a dispreferred relational impropriety, the criticisms in this corpus actually proved to be more constructive and affiliative than adversarial. The bulk of conflicts that arose appeared, in terms

of their design and uptake, to neither index serious conflict issues nor result in an adversarial emotional outcome. Although it is always possible that serious relational issues lie beneath these apparently playful interactions, it is telling that there was never an indexing of a personal back story or relational history of these issues in the present interactions. When the actual, spontaneously occurring criticism banter was analyzed, the majority of episodes were built like drive-by tiffs, spats, or flare ups that were initiated and terminated with regularity and ease, often resulting in affiliation. [46]

Third, the criticisms were typically formulated and responded to by the speakers in tongue-in-cheek, non-serious ways. The majority of criticism exchanges were saturated with the creative use of various forms of irony, laughter, rekeyings, abrupt non-sequiturs, and topic shifts that mitigated the potential for the conflict to escalate or become visibly adversarial. The couples were discursively dexterous at picking and prodding while maintaining an ostensibly obvious play frame. One potential, albeit counterintuitive, reason that these sorts of conflict exchanges seemed to work well is that they were used by couples to create potentially troublesome inferences (i.e., they were risky, especially with respect to the ways couples used them to index gender norm expectations, which are highly relevant indices of relational fit), which provided a mechanism for the couples to continually test out the compatibility of their relational or interactional styles. [47]

Couples engaged in playful or non-serious conflict in order to work up and test out various culturally gendered understandings concerning what it means to be a girlfriend or boyfriend within a contemporary romantic partnership. And, by being abrupt, curt, or playfully aggressive, the couples used criticisms 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. Though obviously quite tricky, a playfully punchy way of doing conflict can thus be seen as a preferred communicative resource for young adults for gauging and/or enhancing connection and compatibility. Conflict is thus a kind of flirtatious banter that is perhaps safer and less maudlin than straight-away compliments. Although this is conjecture based on the present analysis, it certainly warrants further investigation. [48]

Insinuations of infidelity were used by the couples to pursue (and avoid) relational trouble. Insinuations of infidelity indirectly indexed interactional breaches that had the potential, if left unattended, to lead to non-affiliative interactional outcomes. Unlike mainstream psychological researchers who would treat talk about infidelity as a sign of emotional insecurity or jealousy, I showed that insinuations of infidelity functioned as a brief but effective way for one partner to signal that they had been dismissed or neglected in the preceding discursive turns, and to indirectly invite the other to repair that. [49]

Infidelity insinuations were always embedded in ongoing activity so as to appear spontaneous and not part of a premeditated invitation by one partner to seriously discuss fears, concerns, or past occurrences of infidelity. The insinuations did not seem to tap into chronic patterns or acute instances of infidelity. Instead, the

couples created insinuations that had a light touch to them, and were seamlessly nested in local interactional sequences about other topics. They were formulated by speakers as rhetorically responsive social actions designed to attend to a precise bit of social business (a dismissal of some kind), and when that business was tended to, the insinuation seemed to have performed its duty and did not lurk or figure back into the conversation at a later point. This is important to note, since talk about infidelity is often taken as a more serious and stand-alone relational occurrence. [50]

As a more specific micro-analytic finding, insinuations of infidelity were not random, but were often part of an ordered sequence. There was a prominent 5-part sequential design in the interactional environment surrounding spontaneous insinuations of infidelity. Insinuations tended to occur after a request-rejection sequence. The rejection functioned as a preliminary for the insinuation of infidelity. Insinuations were then routinely dismissed and treated as absurd, and the one making the insinuation was often positioned as paranoid, crazy, or ridiculous. There was never a case where the accused responded in a way that displayed their love, fidelity, or empathy for the accuser. Insinuations 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, which is not to create tension but to ameliorate its potential. And, in cases where insinuations were not treated as absurd, or when the absurd rejoinders were delayed, interactional trouble seemed to result, which highlighted the importance of the absurd rendering. [51]

In the environment that followed the absurd rendering, the accused almost always came around and capitulated to the first speaker's original request/question, which led to alignment of stance between both speakers, and often also relational affiliation. In interactional terms, the insinuation can be interpreted as a way of prompting the accused that "you owe me something," which re-indexes the original request-rejection sequence. It functioned as 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 often did not occur, which seemed to be the function of the accusation. [52]

In sum, the central take-away is that in natural everyday interactional contexts, it may be important to know how culture, here in the form of playful and often highly gendered banter around ostensibly adversarial topics, is actively occasioned and mitigated, and how such (inter)actions may prove to be part of the interactional glue that binds together romantic relationships. Further, there is a need for more up close, ecologically sensitive, and qualitative examinations into everyday conversational interactions, as well as a need to empirically demonstrate how close relationships evolve in micro-interactional spaces. [53]

Appendix: Transcription Conventions (from JEFFERSON, 2004)

(.)	Short pause of less than 1 second
(1.5)	Timed pause in seconds
[overlap]	Overlapping speech
?	Rising intonation / question
°quieter°	Encloses talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk
LOUD	Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
>faster<	Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk
<slower>	Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk
((comments))	Encloses comments from the transcriber
Rea:::ly	Elongation of the prior sound
=	Immediate latching of successive talk
<u>underline</u>	Emphasizes talk that has emphatic stress

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