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## A Discourse Analytic Approach to Accusations of Infidelity in Romantic Couples' Natural Conversations

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### Abstract

This study uses a discourse analytic approach to examine how twenty young adult heterosexual romantic couples (ages 19-26) formulate accusations and insinuations of infidelity in their unstructured natural conversations. The analyses demonstrate how accusations of infidelity among romantic partners work to pursue and avert relational trouble. They indirectly index local interactional breaches that may, if left unattended, lead to non-affiliative interactional outcomes. Unlike mainstream psychological work that would treat talk about infidelity as a sign of emotional insecurity or jealousy, the present study posits that accusations of infidelity may function as a brief but effective way for one partner to signal that they have been dismissed or neglected in the preceding discursive turns, and to indirectly invite the other to repair that. Inductive sequential discursive analyses specifically found a reoccurring 5-part sequential pattern in the interactional environment surrounding spontaneous accusations of infidelity. This study demonstrates that the ways romantic partners affiliate around quotidian accusations of infidelity is not random, but instead can reflect an ordered cultural pattern to the ways couples work to maintain a close relationship.

### Keywords

Infidelity, Accusations, Discourse Analysis, Romantic Relationships, Affiliation

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## A Discourse Analytic Approach to Accusations of Infidelity in Romantic Couples' Natural Conversations

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The discourse of infidelity is woven into the fabric of both our cultural and personal relationships. Although the specter of infidelity routinely makes the rounds in social media, television, and film, it is also a quotidian hot point that romantic couples must manage in their everyday private lives. In order to stymie jealousy, deepen trust, and/or maintain an intimate bond, romantic couples may find themselves routinely addressing or accounting for their ongoing interactions with potential romantic rivals. Such occurrences may be occasioned intentionally, or may casually and spontaneously crop up in conversations about a variety of other topics. The focus of this study is to use a discourse analytic approach to understand how accusations or insinuations of infidelity spontaneously emerge and function in unstructured natural conversations between young adult romantic partners. This study is intended for qualitative researchers interested in a close-up analysis of the discursive and interactional organization of talk between intimates.

### Existing Research on Infidelity

Social scientific research about infidelity is typically addressed in one of four ways. First, infidelity is a prime topic for evolutionary psychologists, who approach it as a natural and common feature for human species. Covert engagement in extra-pair copulation or double mating is found to be quite common (see Buss, 1994; Fisher, 1992). The goal is to explain the evolutionary rationale for this phenomenon, and what it tells us about patterns of sexuality, reproduction, and mating behavior (Baker & Bellis, 1995). Second, sociometric approaches to infidelity involve extant research endeavors that use survey data to explore the ways that extramarital sex and extra-dyadic sexual relations are evaluated (the moral climate

of preferences, beliefs, and views) across large composites of human societies (e.g., Airey, 1984; Janus & Janus, 1993; Wellings, Field, Johnson, & Wadsworth, 1994). These findings often inform sociological theory and justify government-funded initiatives. Third, research in social cognition psychology focuses on the cognitive processes in people's underlying beliefs and behaviors around fidelity, infidelity, and discord in close relationships (e.g., Beach, Jouriles, & O'Leary, 1985; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). The goal is to examine how certain cognitive styles may be associated with distinct attributions of causation, blame, and responsibility around relationally sensitive issues; the findings are often laundered into cognitive-behavioral therapeutic interventions. And finally, self-help psychology offers a range of advice/insight on infidelity derived from both anecdotal accounts from lay and professional therapists as well as existing psychological theory in ways that are accessible to the general public (e.g., Litvinoff, 1998; Pittman, 1993). The goal is to help people cope with the distress of marital breaches, divorce, and break-ups.

Though diverse in many respects, common to these approaches is the use of some variety of surveys, inventories, or interviews to procure researcher-prompted responses with the aim to either build theory or measure what lies behind such responses (e.g., attitudes, belief structures, cultural values, evolutionary trends, etc.). These approaches also tend to take people's responses at face value, as veridical representations of either their inner psychological lives or indices of the cultural worlds external to them. There are, of course, other ways to approach the topic of infidelity. In contrast to a factors-and-variables approach that seeks to measure infidelity, the present study uses a discourse analytic approach (see below) to examine the interactions of romantic partners to see if and when the topic of infidelity is occasioned and, when it is, what function it serves. This focus treats such talk not as a window into people's minds nor as a simple reflection of the extant cultural world, but rather as a way of organizing and negotiating pressing relational issues in the here and now. The concern is not what talk about infidelity reveals about the inner psychology worlds of couples, but rather what relational processes are managed by it. The purpose of this study of infidelity talk is to examine it as a component in the interactional business being carried out between intimates.

### **A Discourse Analytic Approach to Infidelity Talk**

A discourse analytic 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 (see Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourse analysis is concerned with 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, 1999). It is with this analytic focus that discourse analysis tends 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). A discourse analytic approach treats 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.

A discourse analytic approach is thus interested in the inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities that arise as speakers negotiate the often conflicting demands of their relationships and identities. Rather than seeing these shifts and equivocations as an analytic nuisance, they are exactly what are most interesting. They offer a way into examining how speakers manage their relational identities, which is particularly apropos in a study of intimates talk about the tricky and sensitive topic of infidelity. Seen this way, shifts and

equivocations no longer appear as contradictions or inconsistencies, but rather as openings into which the 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.

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, their 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, 2002). In contrast, the goal of the current analysis is not to simply offer arguments that support the general finding *that* couples talk about infidelity, nor is it to lay out frequency counts of the different types of infidelity talked about. Rather, it is to detail *how* and *when* infidelity is 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 (see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 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. Within a discourse analytic paradigm, the goals of descriptive rigor, context specificity, and particularization are key evaluative criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 1993).

For this particular study, a discourse analytic approach is used to examine the interactional organization of infidelity talk between actual romantic couples in their natural everyday conversations. This study looks specifically at accusations and/or insinuations of infidelity between romantic couples--that is, the casual and often spontaneous ways that speakers charge, assert, claim, or imply that their partner has or wants to engage in something emotionally or sexually inappropriate with a potential rival. In such talk, there are practical issues that have to do with the way such accusations and insinuations are prompted, how they are taken-up, and what they occasion so that relevant relational matters can be managed. Informal interactional examples of spontaneous accusations of infidelity are important for revealing the social organization of infidelity talk, since casual conversations of this kind do not contain the kind of formal institutional warrant for such talk that one would find in a structured context (i.e., a counseling session or researcher led interview), where the topic of infidelity would likely be summoned in response to queries about current relational problems or relational histories. In natural interactions, intimates are not incipiently occupying the expected positions of accuser and accused in the way they would in a counseling session or interview. In informal interactions, intimates have to construct not only the implication of infidelity, but also a relevant context for it, as well as its uptake and trajectory, all on the fly.

### **Infidelity-Talk as a Way of Pursuing Controversy**

The present study treats accusations or insinuations of infidelity among romantic partners as an interactional method for *pursuing controversy* (see Hutchby, 1996; Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). In the present study, accusations of infidelity are seen as a way of tending to the potential for disaffiliation by underscoring an interactional breach. In everyday relationships, speakers routinely monitor each other's talk for potential affiliatives and/or arguables and, when pursued, can be said to be “doing relationship” by pursuing intimacy or pursuing controversy (see Hutchby, 1996; Jefferson et al., 1987). Hutchby (1996), for

example, has detailed the ways talk-radio hosts monitor caller's accounts for potential arguables, and how hosts use a range of contrast-structures to proffer disaffiliation and thus pursue controversy. Pursuing controversy is seen as a practical achieved activity that is demonstrable, which involves speakers failing to display coordination of stance or position (Conroy, 1999; Stivers, 2008). Pursuits of controversy do not, however, always result in adversarial disaffiliation. Apropos to the current inquiry, pursuits of controversy may be used by partners in close relationships to tend to the lurking threat of disaffiliation in order to stymie or circumvent it (see Korobov, in press; Korobov & Laplante, 2013). Though counterintuitive, couples might make accusations and insinuations of infidelity (and thus pursue controversy) as part of a broader relational project of orienting to interactional breaches that call for alignment or affiliation.

Previous research on affiliation and disaffiliation between relational partners (Drew & Walker 2009; Heritage 1985; Korobov & Thorne 2007, 2009; Mandelbaum, 2003; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005, Traverso, 2009) has detailed the methods whereby partners in close relationships repair problematic or relationally disconnecting dynamics so as to maintain relational affiliation (see Svennevig, 1999), particularly while engaged in potentially adversarial actions. Focusing on accusations of infidelity, in particular, segues with a range of discursive work that shows how risky or potentially adversarial forms of interaction are often used to pursue relational affiliation. For example, Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1987) showed how speakers pursue intimacy during expanded affiliative sequences where laughter was used to modulate improprieties like rudeness and obscenities at particular interactional tension mid-points to create affiliation. Mandelbaum (2003) documents a phenomenon that she calls 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. Similarly, Glenn (2003) showed how responses to sexual improprieties often promoted affiliation by building a flirtatious encounter.

Korobov (2011a) found that when speed-daters responded to their partner's mate-preference disclosures with *inferentially elaborate probes* (see Heritage 1985), which challenged the speaker to adopt a different or stronger version of their stated mate-preference (i.e., they were risky and potentially adversarial rejoinders), these probes actually promoted mutual affective stance affiliation. They created a playful environment of expansion around potentially troublesome inferences, which provided a mechanism for burgeoning romantic partners to coordinate their stances. Korobov (2011b) also found that mate-preferences that were gendered in *non-conventional* ways also tended to function as a preliminary for affective affiliation. Resistance to gender conventionality allowed partners to construct their identities in ways that appeared idiosyncratic or finely-tuned to their potential romantic partner—all interactive features which worked as preliminaries for affective affiliation.

The central idea here is that interactional pursuits of controversial or non-normative actions can often function as preliminaries for affiliation. Risky or non-conventional methods for pursuing controversy may, counterintuitively, serve as a step in larger interactional process of pursuing intimacy. Accusations and insinuations about infidelity between intimates may sometimes be designed to smooth out interactional breaches. Understanding talk about infidelity in this way offers an alternative to more traditional psychological understandings, where accusations of infidelity would likely be interpreted a sign of psychological insecurity or jealousy, and subsequent responses seen as attempts to either allay such insecurities or counter/dismiss them. In the present study, occasioning infidelity and the subsequent responses are not interpreted as indices of psychological insecurity or jealousy, but rather as indices of interactional asymmetries that function as resources that romantic partners use to align and pursue affiliation.

## **Situating Method**

The present study is, of course, a situated project, which is to say it reflexively recognizes that knowledge is located, created, silenced, and amplified in ways circumscribed by both the researchers and the research agenda/design. As the principle investigator of this study, I am a discourse analyst and social constructionist, and am broadly interested in the dynamism of social interaction, which means I am likely to examine infidelity as a socially constructed/contested interactional process (rather than as a static attitudinal entity). I am also a gender researcher deeply interested in young adult's romantic and sexual experiences, which means I am drawn to the ways the particularities of interactional experiences are situated against the backdrop of extant gender norms and pressures during emerging adulthood. And as a discursive researcher, I am likely to seek out contradictoriness and nuance, which means I am especially curious to discover the counterintuitive ways that relational intimacy and friction will play out in real time. The design of this study (see next section for details) was expressly a "bottom-up" inductive method whereby romantic couples were create their own data by recording whatever conversations they felt were relevant reflections of their relationship. The purpose was to create an ethic of respect and ecological sensitivity.

## **Data and Method**

The current project is part of a larger series of studies interested in intimacy, identity, and romantic attraction in emerging adults. The principle investigator was the author; 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 emails. 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 thus comprised of 20 heterosexual romantic couples from the university and the local community. For reasons discussed above, the aim was to procure data from natural settings rather than researcher moderated interviews or questionnaires. We told the participants that they would be participating in a study interested in the conversations that take place between young adult couples in the spaces of their everyday home-lives. Each couple was given a digital audio recorder to take home for 2 weeks with the instruction to simply turn the recorder on whenever they were hanging out (i.e., eating meals, driving in the car, taking a walk, cuddling, watching TV, cooking, etc.). 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.

Analysis began by culling from the data set all stretches of interaction that included any accusations of infidelity from one partner to the other. An 'accusation' was broadly defined as 'any assertion, claim, or implication/insinuation that one's partner has or wants to engage in something emotionally or sexually inappropriate with somebody else'. The coders were the first author and two graduate students. The reliability of the identification of infidelity accusation segments was 93% agreement. In sum, 25 segments of infidelity accusations were reliably and inductively identified and extracted. One immediate discovery that drives the present focus of this paper was that the majority (over 80%) of segments of

accusations had an ostensibly non-serious or playful quality to them (80% agreement), and tended to result in affiliation rather than disaffiliation (88% agreement). The analysis will focus on these types of excerpts. As the analyses will show, the accusations were rarely taken seriously by the one accused, and usually functioned as a preliminary for affiliation.

The discursive analysis that follows will also specifically focus on a prominent 5-part sequential design in the interactional environment surrounding spontaneous accusations of infidelity. This 5-part sequential design was not expected, but inductively emerged as the infidelity accusation excerpts 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: accusation of infidelity towards speaker B
- Step 4: Speaker B: rejects/problematizes the accusation by treating it as absurd
- Step 5: Speaker B: eventually aligns with speaker A's question, statement, or request

In the pattern above, accusations of infidelity (step 3) typically occur after a request-rejection sequence (steps 1-2). The resistance/rejection is thus a preliminary for the accusation of infidelity in step 3. The accusations 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. In each excerpt below, the speakers have been labeled A and B to correspond to the sequential design above. Part I of the analysis offers several robust examples of the 5-part pattern, while Part II of the analysis presents notable deviations from the sequence. In discourse analytic work, deviations to established communicative patterns are often presented, along with the trouble that results when such patterns are not present. This presence of such trouble reinforces the importance (normative or expected nature) of the pattern for the speakers in conducting relevant relational business.

## Analysis

### *Part I: Exemplification of the 5-part Sequence*

The purpose of the first four examples is to illustrate the 5-part sequence, specifically showing how accusations and insinuations of infidelity are not random; they are responsive social actions to a peculiar type of give and take. And further, they are consequential. They seem to prefer an absurd rejection, in that when they are responded to with an absurd rejoinder, they work as preliminaries for content alignment and stance affiliation.

(1)(PR2.1)

- 1     A: are you going to Publix tonight?
- 2     B: 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     A: I thought we'd go together.
- 6     B: I can't (.) I gotta go get the notes.



- 7 A: 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 B: stop [so stupid  
 10 A: yep [mmhm:: okay.  
 11 B: ain't bout Rich (.) quit being ridiculous you  
 12 know I need the notes (.) I'm basically failing  
 13 that class.  
 14 A: I jus thought it'd be cool to go together.  
 15 B: fine (.) like 7:30 er 8 (.) I'll text.  
 16 A: k'cool I'll be back by then.

In the opening few turns, A poses a yes/no question (line 1) to which B displays uncertainty (“I dunno”) and notes that she “already went for us once this week,” which treats A's question as one that potentially indexes relational obligations. A'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 A: are you going to Publix tonight?  
 5 A: I thought we'd go together.

In the next step, B 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 B: 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 B: I can't (.) I gotta go get the notes.

The accusation of potentially inappropriate flirtation comes from A in the next turn (lines 7-8). Noteworthy about this accusation is that accusation about B's relationship with Rich is scripted (see 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 B and Rich are *routinely* “chattin' it up fore:ver,” which is posited as the reason why B cannot be back in time not just to go to the store, but to go “together” to the store with her boyfriend. In short, A's accusation has a function, which is to account for B's neglect of A. Step 3 can be represented as:

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

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

Accusations of infidelity were often met with exaggerated or caricatured responses. Here, B'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), absurd sounding receipts 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. Absurd rejoinders thus 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 B: stop [so stupid  
 11 B: ain't bout Rich (.) quit being ridiculous you  
 12 know I need the notes (.) I'm basically failing  
 13 that class.

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*. B has now agreed to go with A to the store, which pleases A.

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

- 15 B: fine (.) like 7:30 er 8 (.) I'll text.  
 16 A: k'cool I'll be back by then.

These next three excerpts share the same pattern, and are presented here to demonstrate the elegant nature of the sequence.

(2)(LR12.4)

- 1 A: if we're going are we're parking early?  
 2 B: like what time (.) how early are we talking?  
 3 A: I dunno but isn't Julie and them also going?  
 4 B: [Uh I  
 5 A: [can't we jus' meet them there?  
 6 B: really? what?  
 7 B: you can ride with em I'll meet up with ya'll.  
 8 A: I don't know when they're leaving (.) what's  
 9 the big deal (.) I'll be ready whenever you want.  
 10 B: uh I'd=  
 11 A: =it's not like you gotta deal with Sam impressing  
 12 my girlfriend with his band knowledge and tight  
 13 t-shirt the whole damn time.  
 14 B: haha(hh)' whatever Sam's harmless n' I don't even  
 15 know if he's coming.

- 16 A: oh he'll call (.) you two have your thing.  
 17 B: what (.) uh:: no (.)ur' crazy.  
 18 B: and besides Julie's car is in the shop so that's out.  
 19 A: oh.  
 20 B: it's fine to ride with us.  
 21 A: oh? you're actually cool with it or:: is this pity?  
 22 B: oh it's mostly pity hahah.  
 23 A: fuck(hahah) whate::ver::  
 24 B: no it's fine baby (.) but we're leaving early.  
 25 A: that's cool (.) thank you.

In this excerpt, A and B are discussing the travel arrangements to a concert. In the opening turns, A is asking to travel with B, and B is suggesting that she travel alone and that A travel with their friends and meet her there.

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

- 1 A: if we're going are we're parking early?  
 3 A: I dunno but isn't Julie and them also going?  
 5 A: [can't we jus' meet them there?  
 8 A: I don't know when they're leaving (.) what's  
 9 the big deal (.) I'll be ready whenever you want.

B's resistance to A's request, which is another relationally implicating request (can we travel together?) initially comes as a request for clarification (line 2), and then as a suggestion that he ride with their friends.

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

- 2 B: like what time (.) how early are we talking?  
 7 B: you can ride with em I'll meet up with ya'll.

The following accusation → absurd rejoinder → capitulation pattern unfolds:

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

- 11 A: =it's not like you gotta deal with Sam impressing  
 12 my girlfriend with his band knowledge and tight  
 13 t-shirt the whole damn time.  
 16 A: oh he'll call (.) you two have your thing.

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

- 14 B: haha(hh)' whatever Sam's harmless n' I don't even  
 15 know if he's coming.  
 17 B: what (.) uh:: no (.)ur' crazy.

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

- 20 B: it's fine to ride with us.  
 21 A: oh? you're actually cool with it or:: is this pity?  
 22 B: oh it's mostly pity hahah.  
 23 A: fuck(hahah) whate::ver::  
 24 B: no it's fine baby (.) but we're leaving early.

25 A: that's cool (.) thank you.

The 5-step sequence is clear again in these next two excerpts.

(3)(MK3.2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 5-part sequence is clearly evident again in this next excerpt.

(4)(KR7.3)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ***Part II: Deviations to the 5-part Sequence***

As noted earlier, deviations to a regularly occurring sequence, and the trouble that results when deviations happen, are often presented in discursive work as a means to demonstrate the importance of the sequence for accomplishing certain interactional work. Three types of deviations were common. The first was when the accusation in step 4 was not treated as absurd at all (excerpts 5-6). The second was when the treatment of the accusation as absurd in step 4 does not immediately follow the accusation, but is delayed (excerpts 7-8). And the third was when speaker B fails to eventually return and consent to speaker A's original question/statement/request in step 5 (excerpt 9). All three deviation patterns undermine the progression towards the couple eventually connecting or establishing affiliation.

### *Deviation type 1: When the accusation is not treated as absurd*

The following excerpt begins in the standard fashion with a request made by A to “put the radio on,” which is followed by a rejection and complaint sequence by B in lines 2-8. Speaker A then uses an extreme case formulation marked with emphatic stress to make an insinuation about a connection between her boyfriend and Bailey in line 9. Note B's initial response in line 10 (“oh I know”). Rather than treating the accusation as absurd, he outright agrees with it by using the turn initial “oh” + “I know” common knowledge component epistemic construction (see Korobov, 2011a; Stokoe, 2010a, 2010b) that treats the accusation as common/shared knowledge, which turns out to be a dispreferred move that derails movement towards affiliation.

(5)(ER3.2)

- 1 A: put the radio on.
- 2 B: 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 A: you and Bailey have a:: lot in common.
- 10 B: oh I know.
- 11 A: wha'how do you know?
- 12 B: because she wears fucking band shirts and shit.
- 13 A: no she doesn't (.) the only thing she ever wears
- 14 is that sweater.
- 15 B: 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 A: wo::w,
- 21 A: well I do.
- 22 B: then why do you know anything about her?
- 23 A: cause I'm friends with her friends.

- 24 B: that doesn't mean you'd know anything about her.  
 25 A: they talk about her and lie and bitch about her and  
 26 then they try to stick up for her (.) n'I still can't  
 27 believe Justin tried to tell me she wasn't a ho.  
 28 B: well she i:s (.) n'anyway (.) I barely know her.  
 31 A: w'lwe agree on the ho part.  
 32 B: ur' terrible.

A's immediate reply in line 11 ('wha'how do you know?) to B's dispreferred agreement to her accusation is a wh-question that displays surprise--that is, it orients to B's move as not being common knowledge to her that B agrees that he and Bailey have a lot in common. Her surprise stands as evidence that agreement from B 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 just what B 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 B to mitigate the accusation that he and Bailey have a connection, and B does not return to A's original request to turn the radio on. The interaction ends with B criticizing A ("ur' terrible") for the way she has pressed the issue of Bailey being a "ho."

In the next excerpt, A asks if B is coming over (line 1), to which B responds with uncertainty ("baby what?") to position the inquiry as unexpected, and then provides a vague excuse marked with emphatic stress ("I gots'ta:: GO::") to reject her request. What ensues from lines 3-20 is a protracted series of repetitive moves by A to find out where B is going and continued resistance by B to be forthcoming. The insinuation of infidelity comes from A in lines 21-23.

(6)(BJ5.4)

- 1 A: you comin'over?  
 2 B: baby what? I gots'ta:: GO::  
 3 A: where you going?  
 4 ((3.0))  
 5 A: I know you hear me talking t'ya.  
 6 B: up t'school.  
 7 A: for what?  
 8 B: I got work t'do.  
 9 A: >shut da fuck up< (.) no you ain't that excited  
 10 to go t'campus to do work.  
 11 B: I told ya.  
 12 A: you making me ma:d now don't be fucking with me.  
 13 A: what was that sound?  
 14 B: Sanchez was just texting me again.  
 15 A: psst'why you (.)uhhh=  
 16 B: =you know he don't go here no more.  
 17 B: I gotta take a shower.  
 18 A: NO why you (.) what the fuck (.) don't be trying  
 19 me (.) WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING TO DO?  
 20 B: I said going to campus.  
 21 A: no what were you and Hunt talkin'bout (.) what you  
 22 about to do? stop playing (.) you be going t'meet

- 23 some other hu:ssies s'that it?  
 24 B: nah dat ain't even=  
 25 A: =what the fuck [don't be  
 26 B: [this is,  
 27 B: this is my business.  
 28 A: no you was jus'talkin t'Hunt stop fucking tryin me.  
 29 B: w'going to campus.  
 30 A: >to do what?<  
 31 B: going to campus=  
 32 A: =to do what?  
 33 B: I don't know.  
 34 A: yes you fucking do.  
 35 B: they got a food party er'sumin' going on.  
 36 A: a food party? what?  
 37 B: a luao.  
 38 A: why the fuck >was that so hard to tell me<?  
 39 B: ha I dunno.  
 40 A: okay wow (.) whatever.  
 41 B: seriously (.) I gotta get in da shower.  
 42 A: fine (.) bye

Note that B's immediate response to her accusation is denial (“nah dat ain't even”) and then a rejection of her right to even inquire (“this is my business”). The interaction then becomes more confrontational and argumentative as the earlier pattern of A pushing for information and B resisting continues. When B does capitulate in line 35 (“they got a food party er'sumin' going on”) he effaces himself from active agency (“*they*” have a food party) and adds in an etcetera clause (“er'sumin’?) to construct the event and his knowledge about it as vague, which mitigates the appearance that he has a knowing vested interest in it. After A presses, he is more specific (“a luao”), to which A chastises him for needlessly withholding innocuous information (line 38). In the turns that follow, A again displays a surprised kind of disappointment with B's evasiveness, and B shifts topic (line 41). The interaction ends without any affiliation, as B never agrees to come over. In both excerpts 5 and 6, the *absence* of the absurd rendering of the accusation of infidelity seems to keep an air of disaffiliation present and operative.

*Deviation type 2: When the treatment of the accusation as absurd is delayed*

In the next excerpt, A is displaying suspicion about other women that B might be spending time with. There is a question posed (line 1), a rejection to the question through a defensive rhetorical question rejoinder (line 2), and then an accusation in line 3 (“who was she?”) that is met with an insult (lines 4-5), which is a dispreferred move that derails partner alignment and affiliation. This derailment, however, is temporary.

(7)(BJ3.2)

- 1 A: whatcha been doin (.) been on da'phone?  
 2 B: why ya'll always tryin' t'know er'boday I know?  
 3 A: I'm jus'saying (.) who was she?  
 4 B: ohh'o:: you think I should be home giving you a hug  
 5 the whole time (.) cuddlin?



- 6 A: what'da fuck you be doing when you're here at home  
 7 (.) what the fuck do you be doing? where you b'going?  
 8 B: chillin, ok,  
 9 A: chilling where (.) because every time I text you when  
 10 y'r at my house you b'like ((lowers voice, speaks in  
 11 cave-man voice)) oh I watching tv or (.) oh (.) I was  
 12 sleep or oh (.) I was downstairs eating.  
 13 B: guess you hit me at the right time.  
 14 A: huh? no,  
 15 B: you b'hitting me at the right time (.) now you settle  
 16 that down being all crazy bitch (.) okay (.) whatever  
 17 (.) who da' fuck cares? you mean you don't know nobody?  
 18 A: shut the fuck up (.) playa::h (.) cause you b'sounding  
 19 so stupid (.) you be telling lies.  
 20 B: I'm not telling lies.  
 21 A: what is it then?  
 22 ((3.0))  
 23 B: are we about to have a big ass debate bout'dis dumb  
 24 ass shit?  
 25 A: haahhhhaa:: well was but that's the fun part about  
 26 dis'shit (.) you can talk about it however (.) it's  
 27 like whatever.  
 28 B: mmmhmm(hhah).  
 29 B: jus'b talkin t'Sean anyway (.) da::mn.  
 30 A: hahaha big ass debate bout(hhaah) nut(hh)in'.

Rather than constructing A's initial accusation as absurd, B's response (lines 4-5) to A's first accusation (line 3) is an extension of his position in line 2, where he situates her as part of a broader group ("ya'll;" hearable as "women") and then scripts that group's behaviour according to a generalized action pattern ("always tryin' t'know er'body") that is laced with extreme case formulations, which construes it as over the top and thus aberrant. In lines 4-5, B uses the modal 'should be' to sarcastically script her expectations according to the extreme ("whole time") set of relational expectations that someone like her would have for him (i.e., being at home hugging and cuddling the whole time). This form of uptake to the accusation results in a protracted argument about what B is doing and who he is with when apart from A. In line 16, B couples a disparaging gender trope with the iterative present tense ("being all crazy bitch") to account for her suspiciousness regarding his whereabouts. In so doing, he treats her personality as absurd, not her accusation.

Speaker A thus formulates another accusation (lines 18-19), this time about his personality, by using the negative gender trope "playa::h" with two scripted manner expressions ("you b'sounding so stupid" and "you be telling lies"), both built with the iterative present tense to suggest that these traits are reoccurring on his part. Positioning him as dispositionally ignorant and deceitful mitigates his claim that she is dispositionally nosey and needy. It is not until lines 23-24, following a long transitional gap, that B finally construes the accusation as absurd ("a big ass debate about some dumb ass shit"). The absurd rendering of the accusation is thus delayed. There is a telling shift that follows, as A markedly shifts register by laughing and re-framing the entire exchange as a "fun" repartee that they are able to simply do as a kind of non-serious game. B then capitulates (line 29) to her original query about who he's been talking to, and A joins B in his absurd rendering of the entire exchange as "a big ass debate about nothing."

In the next excerpt, A makes a request (lines 1-2), B resists it with a minimal response token, which is followed by A probing into B's texting behavior, to which B formulates a counter-claim. The interaction escalates, and insinuations of infidelity are sprinkled in by A through the use of epistemic markers of certainty ("I know he showed you a picture"), dispositional scripts of negative gender tropes ("lying ass males"), and constructions of regular action patterns ("be looking at pictures of other girls").

(8)(LB6.1)

- 1 A: baby my throat be hurting (.) need ya to take care  
 2 of me.  
 3 B: hmmm.  
 4 A: need some medicine (.) you talking to Jay?  
 5 A: whatch' ya'll be talking bout?  
 6 B: you always think shit b'going on n'nothing is.  
 7 A: cause I know he showed you a picture.  
 8 B: didn't show me a damn thing.  
 9 A: so what made you be like 'man, we should've went'?  
 10 B: yeah we should've went.  
 11 A: fucking lying ass males (.) FUCK YOU (.) shut up.  
 12 B: always up'n my business.  
 13 ((5.0))  
 14 A: ((starts singing)) Let let me show you a good th',  
 15 man my throat hurt.  
 16 B: what your throat gon'hurt?  
 17 A: I tell you I'm getting sick here () you gonna take  
 18 care of me (1.0) or be looking at pictures of other girls?  
 19 B: bahahhhaa (.) man you b'all crazy girl(hahhhaa),  
 20 A: hhaa what the fuck? why the fuck are you laughing(hah)?  
 21 B: you be trippin' me out (.) like you playin' me that's  
 22 crazy and shit.  
 23 A: whatever (.) you gonna take care of me.  
 24 B: look at me (.) I don't know shit,  
 25 A: you gonna take care of me (.) hehee.  
 26 B: you know I always do baby(hh).  
 27 A: that's it(hah) mmhhh.

Rather than diffuse her accusations through absurd renderings, B initially challenges them. Not only does he emphatically refute her insinuation ("didn't show me a damn thing"), but he returns the dispositional scripting by characterizing her as "always think shit b'going on" (line 6) and "always up'n my business" (line 12). Following a long transitional gap (line 13) and brief topic segway that features A singing (line 14), we see a complete repetition of the first three steps of the sequence. A restates that her throat hurts (line 15), B rejects the implicit request for help by questioning her (line 16), which is followed by another accusation of infidelity by A in lines 17-18. The repetition of the sequence is occasioned, it seems, by the failure by B to render the first series of accusations as absurd. This time, however, B jovially laughs at her accusation and finally treats it as absurd (lines 19, 21-22). This is soon followed by B acquiescing (line 26) to her original request ("you know I always do baby"), and terminal affiliation. In short, the absurd rendering of the accusation in the second sequence leads to a very different outcome.

*Deviation type 3: When speaker B fails to capitulate to speaker A's original question or statement/request*

In some instances, the final step of B circling back and agreeing to A's original question or statement/request does not occur, and the interaction does not end with affiliation. In the excerpt below, A asks a question (line 1), B offers a minimal non-answer (line 2), A then makes a request (line 3), and B does not take up the request but instead comments on the woman seen on the TV. This occasions an insinuation of promiscuity and potential infidelity from A in lines 5-6.

(9)(ER8.3)

- 1      A: why are you watching this?  
 2      B: cause.  
 3      A: can we turn it?  
 4      B: she looks like someone I used to be friends with.  
 5      A: I don't wanna know how many girls you've been  
 6      <frie:nds> with.  
 7      B: oh whatever (.) jesus that is ridiculous (.) it's not  
 8      like I said I fucked her (.) it's not like I said I did  
 9      anything with her (.) I said she looks like someone I  
 10     used to be friends with.  
 11     A: mmhm'k.  
 12     (3.0)  
 13     A: well there are two of us sittin here y'know.  
 14     B: I don't care (.) I'm watching this.  
 15     B: you've said stuff like oh that reminds me of someone.  
 16     A: no.  
 17     B: okay Rach'sure.  
 18     A: whatever.

A's elongated and affective stress on “friends” in line 6 is hearable is an indirect euphemism for 'girlfriends', which is ratified by B's use of “it's not like I said I fucked her” in the next turn. B then trivializes the insinuation ('oh whatever'), and then treats it as absurd, both directly (“that is ridiculous”) and through two exaggerated “it's not like” contrast claims (“it's not like I said I fucked her” and “it's not like I said I did anything with her”). In line 11, A offers a minimal agreement token (“mmhm'k”), which is followed by a long transitional gap. The gap here is noteworthy. Rather than return and consent to A's original query, which would be expected, B does nothing. In line 13, A fills the gap with the “well” preface (which signals incipient disagreement, perhaps marking an unmet expectation from B) and then a reminder that 'there are two of us' sitting watching TV. This turn is hearable as a reorientation to her original request in lines 1 and 3 that he consider turning the channel. However, when stated in the form of “there are two of us here,” the request becomes more relational than instructive. In other words, the request is hearable now as not simply about turning the channel, but about acknowledging that she is present too, and that her desires might also matter. The “y'know” tag is a common knowledge component token that treats such a noticing as the kind of thing about which they both ought to be aware. Instead of completing the sequence by capitulating to A's request, B again dismisses her statement (line 14), and returns to problematizing A's insinuation (line 15). Neither alignment nor affiliation occur,

and the interaction quickly dissipates. In short, achieving affiliation through the interactional trouble that comes with insinuations of infidelity seem to require not only an absurd rendering of the accusation, but also a reorientation by one accused to the social business which drove the insinuation in the first place, which is typically an invitation to tend to a relational request of some kind by speaker

### Discussion

This study has used a discursive approach to examine how accusations and insinuations of infidelity spontaneously emerge and function in unstructured natural conversations between young adult romantic partners. A discourse analytic approach was chosen in order to better understand how casual references to infidelity crop up seemingly spontaneously and function in micro-time to negotiate prescient interpersonal disjunctions in the moment. It is only with a finely-tuned discursive sensitivity to the ways these accusations are built and function across small windows of interaction that we are able to see that these accusations of infidelity are not simply about tending to jealousy or fears, as is often the psychological assumption, but are also methods that participants use to tend to small interactional transgressions. The inductively discovered 5-part pattern that made this visible, and the systematic analysis of it, is only possible with an up-close discursive analysis.

The analyses demonstrate how accusations of infidelity among romantic partners work to pursue (and avert) relational trouble. They indirectly index interactional breaches that may, if left unattended, lead to non-affiliative interactional outcomes. In other words, the speaker who makes the accusation of infidelity is doing so immediately after having been dismissed in some way. The accusation thus makes this dismissal relevant, and invites the other to repair the breach, which is what ordinarily happens. The accusation can thus be said to be doing interactive (rather than intrapsychological) work. Again, this kind of emphasis on the interactive (rather than the intrapsychological), is part of the rich value of a discourse analytic approach. Unlike mainstream psychological work that would treat talk about infidelity as a sign of emotional insecurity or jealousy, the present study posits that accusations of infidelity may function as a brief but effective way for one partner to signal that they have been dismissed or neglected in the preceding discursive turns, and to indirectly invite the other to repair that. And a discursive approach is ideal for showing exactly how this happens across micro-interactional time.

The analyses reveal two very important features of infidelity formulations. First, and more broadly, infidelity formulations were typically 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. There was no evidence from the dialogue that the accusations tapped into chronic patterns or acute instances of infidelity, though it is still possible. Instead, accusations had a light touch to them, and were seamlessly nested in local interactional sequences about other topics. They were 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 accusation seemed to have performed its appropriate 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. Again, this further supports the value of an up-close discourse analytic approach to ways social actions (like accusations of infidelity) function for participants in their everyday relationships.

Second, and more specific as a micro-analytic finding, accusations of infidelity were not random, but were found to be part of an ordered sequence. Within discourse analytic approaches, patterns like this are extremely important to identify, as they constitute the ways

that sociality is ordered, and how such order (when it is repeated over time) constitutes culture. The analyses revealed a prominent 5-part sequential design in the interactional environment surrounding spontaneous accusations of infidelity. Accusations tended to occur after a request-rejection sequence. The rejection functioned as a preliminary for the accusation or insinuation of infidelity. Accusations were then routinely dismissed and treated as absurd, and the one making the accusation 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. Accusations 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. And, in deviation cases where accusations 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.

In the environment that followed the absurd rendering, the accused almost always came around and capitulated to speaker A's original request/question, which led to alignment of stance between both speakers, and often also relational affiliation. In interactional terms, the accusation can be interpreted as a way of prompting the accused that "you owe me something," which re-indexes the original request-rejection sequence. It is an invitation to repair the misalignment that left the accuser in a one-down position. When the accused did not capitulate back to the original request, affiliation often did not occur, which seemed to be the function of the accusation. The inductive discovery and analysis of this 5-part pattern, and the deviations to the pattern that further legitimate the robustness of the pattern, represent the heart of the analytic contribution of this study, and again are massively important within discourse analytic research. Other discursively trained researchers can now take this pattern and look for elements of it in related types of conversations, and can thus build on it and extend it as a way of understanding how cultures of interactional are ordered.

The findings of this study closely parallel the way accusations sometimes work between rivals in political campaigns. In heated political contests, candidates will sometimes make accusations about one another that they know are false. The point of making the accusation is not to make it stick. The point is simply get the other to go on record with a public denial of it. Even if it is not true, denying its truth out loud nevertheless attaches the subject matter of the accusation to the one denying it, to some degree, and it invites the media to speculate and make conjectures, which can be damaging. The public rejection also gets a candidate to tend to what his/her rival is saying about them, which demonstrates that the rival has their attention. Although it is different in many respects within the context of romantic couples everyday banter, accusations about sensitive topics (like infidelity) may work similarly insofar as they effectively solicit a rejoinder (a denial), which tends to and repairs a prior dismissal and confirms that the other is relationally attuned. There is some rather elegant and counterintuitive at work here, which can only be seen through an up-close and systematic analysis of the ways these accusations are built, brought off, and rejected. In this way, it can be argued that the ways romantic partners affiliate and connect around quotidian accusations of infidelity is, counterintuitively, an important part of the work of maintaining a close relationship.

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