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"Have you been married, or…?":
Eliciting and accounting for relationship histories in speed-dating interaction

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Abstract: Studies of personal relationships have often been conducted in the laboratory, on the self-report questionnaire or in the interview. In contrast, this paper studies relationships via a corpus of thirty British 'speed-dating' encounters between 30-45 year old heterosexual couples, in which talk about previous relationships was pervasively relevant. The analysis examines how talk about prior relationships, and current relationship status, was occasioned and accounted for. The first section shows that, in the overall structure of the date, talk about relationship histories was located after talk about other matters (e.g., occupation, place of residence). Second, relationship history questions contained design features for managing the delicacy of answering them (e.g., trail-off 'or' turn endings), as well as paired categorial items (e.g., a question about 'children' was answered in terms of one's 'marital' status and vice versa). In the final section, the analysis shows that and how participants treat some relationship histories as more accountable than others (e.g., being 'never married'). The analysis revealed a more general set of accountabilities: of being 'single', of being previously unsuccessful in relationships, of being unable to meet people in 'natural' settings, and, therefore, for attending speed-dating events. Overall, the paper demonstrates the importance of examining the richly detailed brief encounters of social life, in order to better understand people's understandings of, troubles with, and goals for their personal relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Like many other social science topics, studies of personal relationships have very often been conducted in the laboratory, on the self-report questionnaire or in the interview. Indeed, because personal relationships are just that – *personal* – they are often thought to be unstudyable outside of the research setting (Feeney, 2006). The personal relationships 'field' comprises a vast literature, covering aspects of the formation, trajectory, and breakdown of family, sibling, community, friendship, romantic and virtual relationships. Within this body of work, there are numerous studies of, and theories about, how romantic partners meet (often referred to as 'mate selection'), including what makes people attractive to one another, and, relevant to the current study, how initial interactions impact on the development of a relationship (e.g., Buss, 1989; Derlega, Winstead & Greene, 2008; Mulford et al, 1998; Sprecher, Wenzel & Harvey, 2008).

Largely missing in this literature, however, are studies of actual encounters between newly or recently acquainted partners: their initial interactions or daily conversations in which they maintain, negotiate and progress their relationships. It is, by now, an old criticism of social science that it has often failed to study people in the natural settings of their social lives. Instead, researchers remove people from such settings and extrapolate findings gathered from survey reports, experiments, observations or experiential accounts to generate theories about sociological, communicative or psychological processes (e.g., Baxter & West, 2003; Gottman &

Driver, 2005; Kruger & Fisher, 2008). Despite years of criticism, social scientific knowledge of *personal* relationships remains based obstinately in data gathered from *impersonal* settings.

This paper has two main aims. First, as part of a wider project on dating encounters, it promotes a study of personal relationships that is grounded in real-life social interaction. Second, it develops existing understandings of how interaction works in settings of various kinds. These aims bring together two disparate literatures: traditional, non-interactional research on relationships, and conversation analysis which is, by definition, the study of interacting parties who are in some kind of relationship with each other. Although conversation analysts do not typically write under the banner of 'personal relationships', nor publish in journals dedicated to such topics, I argue that social scientists have much to learn from conversation analytic studies of interaction that happen to analyse conversations between friends and partners.

The paper draws on a corpus of 'speed-dating' materials. Speed-dating is a match-making service run by companies who organize events with the aim of introducing lots of (heterosexual) single people to each other in one evening. It originated in the USA but has, during the past decade, become popular in the UK and throughout Europe. Participants are given numbers or other identifiers, and are rotated to meet each other over short dates lasting approximately five minutes. At the end of each five minute interval, the organizer sounds a bell and one party, usually the man, moves onto the next date. At the end of the evening, participants complete questionnaires about who they might like to see again or exchange contact information with.

Speed-dating as an empirical topic

Speed-dating has attracted limited academic attention over the past few years. Within this small literature, there are two main types of studies. First, the speed-dating process has been modelled to study 'mate selection preferences' (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008a; 2008b; Fisman et al, 2006; Provost et al, 2006). The aim is to provide a naturalistic setting for the study of such preferences, often focussing on gender differences. As Finkel and Eastwick (2008: 193) write, "speed-dating procedures allow researchers to study romantic dynamics dyadically, with regard to potentially meaningful relationships, and with strong external validity". Such dates are often organized under "experimentally controlled conditions" and take numerous pre- and post event measures from the participants (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008: 348). In their USA-based studies, Eastwick and Finkel recruited undergraduate students to take part in a "study of romantic-attraction processes" (2008b: 248, see also Luo & Zhang, 2009). As well as running a two-hour speed-dating event, they collected pre-event stated mate preferences to compare with the preferences that emerged for each potential match following actual speed-dates. A second strand of speed-dating research has investigated partner preference data collected before, during and after real (rather than student-generated) speed-dating events (e.g., Belot & Francesconi, 2006; Houser, Horan & Furler, 2008; Kurzban & Weeden 2005; Todd et al, 2007; Wilson, Cousins & Fink, 2006). Such studies collect numerous measures from participants to assess what factors determine speed-dating 'success' and future dating decisions. Again, these studies collect data via a battery of questionnaires which are then correlated with data about the outcomes of the actual dates themselves.

Despite providing some insights into speed-dating outcomes, there are several problems with this body of research. In the first set of studies, participants remain *research subjects* engaged in experiments, rather than genuine 'clients' of speed-dating organizations. Their subjects were undergraduate students, recruited via flyers posted on college campuses. However,

and as Finkel et al (2007: 153) themselves point out, "investigators interested in examining attraction dynamics following divorce, among singles in their 30s, or for individuals looking for immediate marriage partners will frequently find undergraduate samples lacking". In the UK, event organizers group participants into 10-15 year age bands, starting well above the average age of undergraduates, at around 25. There are two misalignments here, then, between the usual age and occupations of participants in the experimental versus real life setting, and between their reasons for attending both types of event. It is likely that the stakes are lower, or different, for undergraduate students attending a speed-dating event for 'course credit' (Luo & Zhang, 2009), than for thirty-something participants in a real speed-dating event.

More problematically, in both sets of studies the actual interactions of the speed-daters go unexamined in an analytic 'black box'. Such black boxes are common in the social sciences: researchers collect 'pre- and /or post- [X] measures', where [X] may be an interaction, an intervention, an experimental manipulation, a survey or test of some kind, leaving [X] itself unexamined – despite being the thing that presumably accounts for the difference between pre and post [X] measures. It is particularly salient that studies of *relationships* fail to analyse the interactional processes through which relationships are initiated and developed. In contrast, discursive psychologists and conversation analysts have made dramatic contributions to our understanding of 'analytic black boxes' across many settings, showing how conversational practices are designed, ordered and action-oriented (see Edwards, 2007; Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Drew, 2005; Heritage, 2005 for overviews of discursive psychology and conversation analysis). In additional to medical, legal, therapeutic, and educational settings (e.g., Antaki, 2008; Stivers & Heritage, 2001; Stokoe, 2009a; Waring, 2002), there are numerous studies of conversations between friends and partners (e.g., Edwards, 2005; Holt, 2000; Schegloff, 1987; M. Goodwin, 2007) and several analysts have focused on 'personal relationship' topics explicitly. For example, Mandelbaum (1987, 2003) and Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005) have investigated the way 'coupleness' is displayed in collaboratively built narratives, as well as how people make relevant and hold each other accountable for membership of particular relationship categories (see also Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Fishman, 1978; Staske, 1996; 1998; Stokoe, 2008). In a series of studies of 'Relate' marriage guidance counselling interaction, Edwards (1994; 1995; 1998) showed how event descriptions may be 'scripted' in ways that characterize parties' motivations and dispositions for doing things and manage blame and accountability for those events. Recently, conversation analysts have examined how people display affiliation and disaffiliation in conversations between friends and family members, and what happens when parties become misaligned (e.g., Drew & Walker, 2009; Stivers, 2008; Traverso, 2009)

Perhaps most relevant to research on speed-dating is Svennevig's (1999) study of how people get acquainted in initial interactions. Svennevig collected five tape-recorded conversations between previously unacquainted persons who were meeting for the first time for some "real-life purpose" (p. 88). The recordings were made in participants' homes or in a bar or restaurant. Svennevig analysed numerous features of these initial interactions, including how participants introduce and move between different topics and how they solve the problem previously unacquainted persons often have, which is their lack of shared contextual knowledge. He also examined how people introduce and talk about personal information, what Svennevig calls the "self-presentational sequence". Rather than take for granted that 'acquainted' and 'unacquainted' people talk differently, he showed how 'lack of acquaintance' is oriented to by participants using particular conversational practices.

In addition to the sorts of personal-biographical topics that Svennevig's participants used to 'get acquainted' (e.g., where they live; their occupations), a distinct topic that the speed-daters addressed was their previous romantic attachments. This paper focuses on how participants elicit and establish talk about each other's relationship histories and statuses. It examines how such talk is occasioned; how people ask and answer relationship-relevant questions, what sorts of histories are treated as problematic, and how people account for their past romantic lives. For speed-daters, in which decisions must be made about the romantic potential of each encounter, it is likely that information about past relationships is relevant to such decisions. Relationship history talk may therefore be one of the most important topics for discussion. Yet although the participants talked *about* their relationships, there was a noticeable absence of flirting or any explicit orientations to, or assessments of, each other *as* possible partners. Rather, the dates took on an 'interview' character. One explanation for this absence is that a key function of flirting is to make romance relevant where it might not already be. In these dates, romance is programmatically on the agenda, as the unspoken reason for the encounter.

DATA AND METHOD

The data were collected as part of a larger project on speed-dating and its various organizational and interactional features (Stokoe, forthcoming). Thirty dates, each lasting between three and eight minutes, were recorded by participants at a real speed-dating event in the UK. Participants were aged 30-45. Because the organization of the event meant women remained seated while men rotated between them, women participants were asked to operate the recording device. Only women who agreed at the start of the event to participate in the research operated devices, and only those dates in which men participants also gave their consent were recorded. The recorded data were transcribed according to Jefferson's (2004) system for conversation analysis. Like other institutional materials, these short dating encounters between previously unacquainted parties are ideally suited to conversation analytic study because each date is self-contextualizing: the analyst, like the participants, knows just what each party chooses to reveal to the other.

Each transcript was read alongside the recording and collections were made of all instances in which speakers first disclosed a relationship-relevant item of their personal biography. Three sections of analysis focus on the way relationship history talk was elicited and occasioned; how questions about the topic were designed and, finally, what sorts of relationship histories were treated as problematic and how participants accounted for their romantic biographies.

ANALYSIS

Eliciting and occasioning relationship history talk

This section focuses on where in the date, and how, talk about relationship histories is initiated. Such disclosures were either 'volunteered' or 'prompted'. By 'volunteered', I mean that one party disclosed information about their previous relationships, almost always by reference to a previous marriage or having children, without being asked to do so. Volunteered disclosures were either formulated in response to a question about something other than relationship histories, or embedded in narrative description that was not responsive to any particular question. 'Prompted' disclosures were, in contrast, done in turns that answered direct or indirect questions

4

about prior relationships. By 'disclosure' I do not refer to the technical concept as used in psychology (e.g., Derlega, Winstead & Greene, 2008); nor to a recognized conversation analytic term for a particular social action (although see Antaki et al, 2005; Kidwell & Gonzalez Martinez, 2010; Stokoe, 2009b, for conversation analytic studies of talk glossed as 'self-disclosure' in various settings). For the purposes of the current paper, I use 'disclosure' to refer to the participants' formulation, presentation, or talk about biographical information to an unknowing recipient. The most common way for relationship history to be occasioned was in response to a question about it, midway through the date. Relationship histories were often discussed mutually, with one party asking first and the other following up with a reciprocal question.

Extracts 1-3 illustrate some of the ways relationship history talk was occasioned. The specifics of *question design* and *answers* will be studied in subsequent sections of the paper. To start, then, in Extract 1 the couple is halfway through a seven minute date and have been discussing their jobs and where they live. Earlier in the date, M told F that his sister persuaded him to attend the speed-dating event.

1. SD-23

```
1     F:    So- (.) apart from your sister, (.) uh how come you::
2           uh (.) [sort of- (0.2) you're here tonight.=
3     M:           [Yeh.
4     M: →  =<W'll I've- (0.2) I've been- (0.2) we:ll I've been
5           on my own fo::r a coupla years,=I've been married
6           [      a:nd       u:h        ↑yeh,        ]
7     F:    [You've been married: 'ave you got kids]
8                 (0.6)
9     M:    I've gotta daughter yes.=she's four an' (   ).=
10    F:    =Ye:h,=
11    M:    =U::m she lives with my ex?
12                (1.2)
13    M:    And u::m (0.7) ↑we've got a good relationship,=I s-
14          see my daughter most days: [u:m ]
15    F:                               [Yeh,]
16                (0.6)
17    M:    U:m if I'm back in Newtington in time I- (0.2) I try
18          an' pick her up from the childminder an' stuff and
19          u:m: (0.5) (y'know) (   ) (.) I've got me own house:
20          live in Buxmoor and u:h (0.7) that's it really,
21                (0.3)
22    F:    Yeh?
23                (0.8)
24    F: →  I'm- (0.4) NOt married? […]
```

The target lines are M's volunteered disclosure (line 4) and F's reciprocal volunteered disclosure (line 24). Of course, each of these turns is *occasioned* by a prior, but neither M nor F is responding to a direct question about their relationship histories. At line, 1, F asks M about his reasons for attending the speed-dating event: "How come you:: uh (.) sort of- (0.2) you're here tonight." The perturbations in her turn may orient to some pervasively relevant matters for speed-daters, to do with the accountability of being 'single', of being previously unsuccessful in relationships, of being unable to meet people in 'natural' or 'routine' settings, and, therefore, for attending speed-dating events. And despite the fact that F's question was not directly about M's

relationship history, the speed-dating setting makes programmatically relevant matters of future and past relationships , which provide a general organizing frame for these interactions. So here, F's question about why M is 'here tonight' is taken up as relationship-relevant, and as a prompt for disclosing relationship history details, which it might not be in other contexts.

Thus at line 4, rather than answering with a specific account (e.g., "my friend asked me to come with him"), M uses his turn to embed details of his relationship history, the turn-initial "W'll", alongside other features of his turn (repair initiators, restarts, pauses), indicating that this might indeed not be a straightforward response to F's initial question. M describes his relationship with his ex-wife, before concluding his story with an explicit narrative-closing device "that's it really" (line 20). After a gap, F invites M to continue but, after a second gap develops, she launches a new sequence about her own relationship history and 'not married' status (lines 21-24). Note that M has not, at the end of his narrative, asked F explicitly about it. F's narrative is therefore occasioned *sequentially* as reciprocal disclosure and second story, rather than as the second pair part of a question-answer *adjacency pair*. I examine M's answer, and F's subsequent account, later in the paper.

In Extract 2, the parties have again initiated their conversation with talk about their occupations and where they live. We join them as they finish talking about their difficulties finding the location for the speed-dating event.

2. SD-1

```
1    F:     […] anybody who's never done it befo:re is like (0.2)
2           I- >I mean< I'm quite nervous cos: this is all like
3           ne:w to me but I've £↑Come along.£
4                  (0.3)
5    F: →  £Um::£ (0.3) I'm- (0.9) (t-) (0.5) thir'y fi:ve,
6           (0.7) single, (0.5) um::: (0.3) three childre:n,
7                  (0.2)
8    M:     Ri:ght, uh [huh
9    F:                [So::: (.) I jus' thou:ght (.) well,
10                 (0.5)
11   F:     .hh and because of my jo:b, (1.0) a:nd >sort'f< my
12          hec- (0.7) quite hectic social ↓life really, with °my
13          kids at home (0.3) where do you actually go to meet
14          someone.°
15                 (0.3)
16   F:     That's:: sort of what- (0.2) what brought me to
17       →  coming here.=I don't know about yourself.=what about
18       →  yo:u.
19                 (0.2)
20   M:     Yeh I'm much the sa:me.
```

In this extract, the target lines are line 5, in which F starts describing her relationship history, and lines 17-18, in which she formulates a question about M's background. Note that in contrast to M's disclosure in Extract 1, which was embedded in a response to a question about a different topic, F's disclosure launches a new sequence and occurs in a turn that is taken up with the topic of her relationship history and status. There are some perturbations (pauses, restarts) in her disclosure, which might indicate a difficult or sensitive topic. The "£Um::£" at the start of line 5 not only signals possible delicacy but its smile-voice delivery invites M to treat what is coming as funny or light-hearted. F reveals that she is "thir'y fi:ve, (0.7) single, (0.5) um::: (0.3) three

childre:n," (lines 5-6). Each categorial item in this list carries with it further, inferentially available, information, such as that F is a 'mother', that she has been in a prior serious relationship, and that any future relationship will have to make room for the fact that she has (somebody else's) children. After an acknowledgement and continuer from M, F selects 'single' as the accountable item in that list and we explore her account later in the paper about why she has come to speed-dating "to meet someone" (lines 13-14). M's subsequent disclosure is elicited by F, whose question at line 30 builds sequentially off her own prior disclosure.

Like the previous two extracts, the participants in Extract 3 have so far discussed where they live and their occupations. We join them as the topic of M's job as an actor, and the problems in getting work, draws to a close.

3. SD-5

```
1     F:      Same as dating really,=y'have t'ave the right fa:ce.
2             =do:n't you.
3                   (1.0)
4     M:      Just 'ave to think ye:ah I quite like that person,
5                   (0.5)
6     F:  →   So [what's your:] (0.2) history then.=relationship
7     M:         [(           )]
8     F:      history.
9                   (0.4)
10    M:      (Well) in what way.
11                  (0.5)
12    M:      Have I ha:d them befo:re, £yes [I have.£
13    F:                                     [>Yeh I kno:w< of course
14            you ha:ve, I'm £su:re,£
15             (0.6)
16    F:      Uh heh .hh
17    M:      'Ow ma:ny [(   )
18    F:  →             [Well I'd ho:pe so: heh heh .hhh [↑no are you-]
19    M:                                                 [Um:         ]
20    F:  →   were you: I'dun- are you divor:ced?='ve you got
21            chil[dre:n?     ]
22    M:          [I'm no ma-] never been marri:ed?
[120 seconds later]
23                  (0.3)
24    M:  →   So are you married, divor:ced, separated:
25                  (0.7)
26    F:      Divorced seven years ago.
27                  (0.4)
28    M:      Children:
29                  (0.5)
30    F:      Two […]
```

Extract 3 is an instance of the most common elicitation pattern observed across the data, in which both parties' relationship histories are disclosed following a question about them. F initiates the first disclosure with a question at line 6, which follows a gap and launches a new sequence, like F's disclosure in Extract 2. There is small evidence, then, that talk about relationship histories is a resource for sustaining the interaction when prior topics 'dry up'.

At line 6, F asks M explicitly about his "relationship history". Note the repair at the end of the first turn constructional unit: "So what's your: (0.2) history then.", inserting "relationship"

to specify the aspect of M's 'history' she is inquiring about. The turn-initial "So", which often occurs in turn-initial position in 'topic-proffering' turns, constructs her question as built off a prior topic (as does "then" at the end). Bolden (2008) discusses the use of 'so' in topic-initial turns, showing how it functions as "a marker of 'emergence from incipiency'"; that is, it "serves to characterize the upcoming action as introducing the conversation's first intended topic – something that was projected by the very act of initiating the contact and oriented to by participants as having been pending or incipient" (p. 302). F's question, "So what's your: (0.2) history then.", as suggested earlier, brings "into current relevance something that was already on the conversational agenda" (Bolden, 2006: 666). Two minutes later, M issues a question to F about her own relationship history. Like her first question in this extract, and F's volunteered disclosure in Extract 2, M's question at line 24 follows a gap and launches a new activity and topic. However, the turn-initial 'so' again ties it to the earlier sequence.

This first section of analysis has shown that, and how, talk about prior relationships may be occasioned in speed-dates. In each instance, these sequences were located after other topical talk about the parties' occupations and where they live. However, in contrast to Svennevig's (1999) data, the participants ensured that talk about 'prior relationships' did occur, and was relevant to *their* 'getting acquainted' encounter. That such talk occurs between previously unacquainted persons on dates, but not in Svennevig's (1999) 'getting acquainted' conversations, tells us something about the participants' goals for interaction. If this topic had arisen between Svennevig's participants, it may have looked like 'flirting', or changed the nature of their encounter from 'getting acquainted' to 'potential date'. But while the speed-daters talked *about* relationships, they did not do much that could be interpreted as 'flirting' (e.g., doing compliments, flattery). They did not need to: romantic relationships were already on the agenda and the reason participants talked to each other at all. Speed-dates may be likened to interviews, in which one party's attributes were assessed by the other, as a practical item on a list, including their romantic biographies.

The fact that relationship history talk was occasioned some way into the date indicates that it is more sensitive, or at least less readily available, than other topics used to launch the dates. The delicacy of asking about prior relationships, and answering such questions, is explored in the next two sections.

Asking relationship history questions

In this section, I focus on the design of the questions used to initiate talk about relationship histories. We start with Extract 4, returning to the parties previously encountered in Extract 2. Prior to this sequence, F has volunteered her currently 'single-with-children' status, and talked about the difficulties in 'meeting new people'.

4. SD-1

```
16    F:    That's:: sort of what- (0.2) what brought me to
17       →  coming here.=I don't know about yourself.=what about
18       →  yo:u.
19              (0.2)
20    M:    Yeh I'm much the sa:me.=it's a bit of a male- well
21          >more o' less< a male only establishment.=so I don't
22          meet anyone through wo:[rk,
23    F:                          [Yea:h exact[ly.
```

```
24   M:                                          [I live in a
25        village that's a bit restrictive,
26             (0.5)
27   M:   So ye:ah.=it's sort- this is sort'f a good way to
28        meet- (0.5) to meet people.=
29   F: → ='ve y'got children as we:ll or[::
30   M:                                  [No: I've never
31        [be- (been married) (    ) no children:] no:. […]
```

We focus here on F's questions to M at lines 17-18 and 29. It may be her first F's question ("what about yo:u.") was designed to elicit talk about his age, relationship history and his reasons for attending speed-dating; that is, talk that matches – detail by detail – her own prior disclosures. However, M focuses on the latter issue of what has brought M to "coming here". Like F, M accounts for his presence at a speed-dating event in terms of his job and home life, neither of which offer opportunities to "meet people" 'naturally' (line 28; in F's account she says "where do you actually go to meet someone."). Note that in both M and F's accounts, they use gender- and romance-deleting rather than more direct references ("to meet *people / someone*" rather than "to meet a woman"), which again orients to the delicacy and accountability of meeting a partner at an organized event rather than in a culturally normative way (see Drew's [1992: 489] study of a rape trial whereby, in response to an attorney's question about being somewhere '*girls* and *fellas meet*', a female victim states she was somewhere '*people go*', deleting the romantic resonances of 'meet' and 'girls and fellas').

At line 29, F issues a second question, this time formatted as a yes-no interrogative rather than an open wh- question: "'ve y'got children as we:ll or::". This question selects 'children' as the topic to ask about and contains an indexical component "as we:ll", which refers back to F's own disclosure that she has "three childre:n,". Finally, the question ends with a trail-off "or::". These design features manage the delicacy of asking such a question, and F's lack of 'stake' in the answer – M can disclose any prior marital or parental status without attracting negative inferences (Edwards & Potter, 1992). They also work to manage the 'subject side' of M's account; that is, the characterological inferences that are made available through a speaker's actions, such as F being 'pushy' in asking M personal questions (Edwards, 2005; 2007).

Let us consider three possible formats for F's question "'ve y'got children as we:ll or:: " as a way of understanding the work done by the indexical item and the 'or'. Asking "'ve y'got children" does not seem to be tilted in favour of a particular answer to the same extent that adding "as we:ll" does. Adding this feature tilts the preferred answer towards 'yes', given that this would mean that F's circumstances matched M's and the pair would be 'matched' in this relationship-relevant detail (see Raymond, 2003). However, F adds a further item to her turn, which trails off, and it is during the trail-off that M answers her question with "No:" (line 30). F's addition of the trail-off 'or' displays a sensitivity towards M, as her recipient, as someone who may not be in a position to give the preferred response. The 'or' does not reverse the preference but neutralizes it, making either answer 'no problem' for F. Given that M could have begun his answer after "'ve y'got children", that he does not may signal to F that a 'no' is on its way (see C. Goodwin, 1979; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974, on the notion of 'recipient design'). We return to their date later to see how M's account for his 'never married' status unfolds.

Here is another example of a relationship history question.

5. SD-8

```
1     M: →                                    [Are-  are
2         →  y'divorced ↓then o::r [single or:
3     F:                           [Ye:ah. seven years ago.
4              (0.6)
5     F:    Are you,
6     M:    Yeh[.
7     F:       ['Ve y'got children.
8              (0.6)
9     M:    Teenagers.
```

In Extract 5, M's question to F about her relationship status contains the same component features as we saw in Extract 4: it takes the grammar of a yes-no interrogative, it ends with a trail-off "or:", and contains an indexical component ("↓then") that constructs the current question as built off some prior turn or continuing some prior action. It also contains a candidate answer after the first "o::r". F may be therefore be 'divorced' or 'single', with the trail-off 'or' projecting a list of further potential relationship-status categories. After F replies to M, she asks M a reciprocal question ("Are you,"), and then a follow-up ("'Ve y'got children."). Extract 6 provides a further example.

6. SD-18

```
1     F: →  An' are you (0.2) divo:rced? or:
2              (0.4)
3     M:    No: I'm- I've ne:ver bin married.
[16 lines cut]
4     F:           [Uh: ↑no k- any] kid- no kids:=
5     M:    =No:
```

Like the previous examples, F's question takes the grammar of a yes-no interrogative; it ends with a trail-off "or:", and contains an indexical component "An'". Like Extract 5, a question about marital status is followed by a next question about children. This follow-up question is particularly interesting, as it stops and starts several times. In the first formulation, F begins to propose that M has "↑no k-" ('no kids?'). Unlike F in Extract 5, it is a negative interrogative and contains an assertion that, because he has 'never been married', he must not have children. However, she halts the production of this question and reformulates it, substituting 'no' for 'any'. In so doing, she upgrades M's entitlement to know his status with regards to children, and downgrades her entitlement to make assumptions about it (Koshik, 2002). But this version of the question is also cut off, and she returns to articulate fully the first, negatively formatted version: "no kids:". There are at least two possible interpretations of F's use of negative interrogatives. On the one hand, proposing knowledge of one's recipient is a way of building intimacy, by showing that you have been attending to what has thus far been disclosed sufficiently to risk making inferences about their life. On the other, it risks being seen as 'pushy', and as working against the trail-off 'ors' which delete any preferences associated with relationship history questions.

Extract 7 contains the same features, but with a slightly different design.

7. SD-11

```
1    F: →  'Ave y'never been married then.=or::
2              (0.2)
3    M:    A long time ago [yes.
4    F: →                  [Oh right yea:h.=[so y'ad no children]=
5    M:                                     [I mean I've lived  ]=
6    F:    =[(or) ]
7    M:    =[with ]somebody- didn't have any children.=
```

Again, F's question to M is asked as a yes-no interrogative, with an indexical component that proposes her question is built off something prior, and is completed with a trail-off "or::". Like the other examples, she asks a first question about whether or not M has "been married" and then a follow-up question about whether he has children. In contrast to previous extracts, however, *both* of her questions are constructed with 'reversed polarity' ('have you never been married' versus 'are you divorced'; 'so you had no children' versus 'have you got children'). Like F in Extract 6, she is not just *asking* M about his status, she is *proposing* her knowledge of it based on her encounter so far. Indeed, the indexical components in both questions ('then' and 'so') build her questions as deductions or upshots from previous talk. However, F treats M's disclosure that he was once married as news to her ("Oh right"), and her follow-up proposal that he does not have children seems to be based on assumptions she had made about his previous relationships.

In the final example of relationship history questions, we return to the date we first analysed as Extract 3.

8. SD-5

```
1    F:    Same as dating really,=y'have t'ave the right fa:ce.
2          =do:n't you.
3              (1.0)
4    M:    Just 'ave to think ye:ah I quite like that person,
5              (0.5)
6    F: →  So [what's your:] (0.2) history then.=relationship
7    M:       [(          )]
8    F:    history.
9              (0.4)
10   M:    (Well) in what way.
11             (0.5)
12   M:    Have I ha:d them befo:re, £yes [I have.£
13   F:                                   [>Yeh I kno:w< of course
14        you ha:ve, I'm £su:re,£
15         (0.6)
16   F:    Uh heh .hh
17   M:    'Ow ma:ny [(  )
18   F: →            [Well I'd ho:pe so: heh heh .hhh [↑no are you-]
19   M:                                              [Um:         ]
20   F: →  were you: I dun- are you divor:ced?='ve you got
21        chil[dre:n?     ]
22   M:        [I'm no ma-] never been marri:ed?
```

Like the woman in Extract 4, F issues more than one history-eliciting question: a 'wh-' question ("what about yo:u.", "what's your: (0.2) history then.") followed by a yes-no interrogative ("'ve y'got children as we:ll or::", "are you divor:ced?='ve you got childre:n?"). In both cases, the 'wh-' question does not accomplish what F seemed to be pursuing. In Extract 4, M does not reveal his relationship history. In Extract 8, M *counters* with an (ironic) question, asking F to specify the meaning of hers. After a gap develops (line 11), he provides a candidate reformulation of, and answer to, the gist of F's question: "Have I ha:d them befo:re, £yes I have.£" (line 12). M's smiley tone of voice mitigates the possibly challenging implications of her question. This mitigation also manages the hearability of M's reformulation as carrying an assessment of F as the type of person who would ask such a question. F responds in overlap to assure M that his interpretation was incorrect, matching his smiley voice ">Yeh I kno:w< of course you ha:ve, I'm £su:re,£" (lines 13-14). With both parties smiling, and with F's laughter (line 16), they maintain an affiliative stance towards one another despite the delicacy of the topic under discussion. M provides a second candidate interpretation of F's question "'Ow ma:ny" (line 17).

At the end of line 18 F asks her second question, this time asking more specifically whether M is "divor:ced?" or "got childre:n?". Note that there is no trail-off 'or' at the end of her turn, although the inclusion of candidate answers and the coalescing of marital with parental status mirror the design of previous questions. In response, M reveals that he has "never been marri:ed?" and has "N:o children,". In M's reciprocal question, he follows the same format by embedding candidate answers into the question, and following up with a one-word question about children:

9. SD-5

```
24    M: →  So are you married, divor:ced, separated:
25              (0.7)
26    F:    Divorced seven years ago.
27              (0.4)
28    M:    Children:
29              (0.5)
30    F:    Two […]
```

This section has described patterns found in the way speed-daters ask each other questions about their relationship histories and statuses. Question-answer pairs contained particular category pairs, such that a question about 'children' could be answered in terms of one's 'marital' status and vice versa, and questions about 'marriage' or 'children' were often followed by a second question. For these participants, then, the categories 'married-children' were treated as 'going together'. It is in such pairings that the moral, normative meanings of a culture's categories are constructed and maintained: here, the constitutive categories of a heteronormative 'family' (see Kitzinger, 2005). In addition to these categorial components, questions were built with features to handle the delicacy of asking about personal matters. In the final section, we examine people's responses to such questions, and how some relationship histories are treated as problematic in this setting.

Accountable relationship histories

In each example in this section, one party reveals that they have never been married. It was this type of relationship history, rather than being divorced or having children, which was universally treated as accountable, sometimes by both parties. Being currently single but with previous long-term commitments was not accountable in the same way, although participants still attended to the issue of why they needed speed-dating to meet a partner. In Extracts 10-12, we revisit the participants first encountered in Extracts 1-3. In Extract 10, we return to the first couple, focusing now on the way they describe and account for their previous romantic attachments, and current single status.

<u>10. SD-23</u>

```
1     F:    So- (.) ap<u>a</u>rt from your sister, (.) uh how come you::
2           uh (.) [sort of- (0.2) you're here tonight.=
3     M:           [Yeh.
4     M:    =<W'll I've- (0.2) I've been- (0.2) we:ll I've been
5           on my own fo::r a coupla years,=I've been married
6           [     a:nd      u:h        ↑yeh,      ]
7     F:    [You've been married: 'ave you got kids]
8                 (0.6)
9     M:    I've gotta <u>daughter</u> yes.=she's four an' (  ).=
10    F:    =Ye:h,=
11    M:    =U::m she lives with my ex?
12                (1.2)
13    M:    And u::m (0.7) ↑we've got a good relationship,=I s-
14          see my daughter most days: [u:m ]
15    F:                               [Yeh,]
16                (0.6)
17    M:    U:m if I'm <u>back</u> in Newtington in time I- (0.2) I try
18          an' pick her up from the childminder an' stuff and
19          u:m: (0.5) (y'know) (  ) (.) I've got me own house:
20          live in Buxmoor and u:h (0.7) that's it really,
21                (0.3)
22    F:    Yeh?
23                (0.8)
24    F:    I'm- (0.4) <u>NO</u>t married?
25                (0.3)
26    M:    N:[o, (                    ]   )?
27    F:      [<u>Never</u> have been married,]
28    F:    Um (0.3) <u>dated</u> a guy for about five or six years,
29          [um: which was hopeless,
30    M:    [Yeh.
31                (0.4)
32    F:    U::m an' then that- that finished about two years
33          ago,
34    M:    Yeh.=
35    F:    =U:::m (0.4) an' I <u>jus</u>'- (0.2) my- (0.4) my
36          lifesty::le I- (0.6) I- (0.5) used t'travel around
37          Europe an' y'know (0.2) an' jus' it's not been the
38          best way to meet people.
```

At line 4, M's first disclosure is that he has been on his "own fo::r a coupla years,". This is followed swiftly by another detail: he has "been married". It is possible to see that the second detail works to delete the negative inferences of the first. Across the data, it emerged that being single for a long period of time, or not having had prior long-term relationships, were accountable matters for speed-daters, perhaps particularly because of their age group (i.e., it is unlikely that 18 year old speed-daters would need to account for never being in a long-term relationship; hence it is unlikely that such accounts occurred in the experimentally modelled speed-dates with undergraduates discussed in the Introduction). Here, then, M may be managing the characterological inferences of his self-description; that is, he is someone who *has* had a prior committed relationship and, by implication, is a person who can engage *in* such a relationship. As M continues his turn (line 6), F, in overlap, receipts the detail that M has "been married:" with a repetition and, using the same categorial connections as we saw in the previous section, builds a follow-up question from it: "'ave you got kids" (line 7).

In response to F's follow-up question, M tells her that he has a daughter (line 9). M expands on this basic answer with a narrative, punctuated with continuers from F, about his daughter and his relationship with his ex-wife. Some of the details of his account are relevant to the current context of meeting a potential new partner: he reveals that his daughter "lives with" his ex-wife (and so he does not have full time childcare responsibilities), that he has a "good relationship" with his ex-wife (and is not embittered or in a current state of tense negotiations about childcare, etc.), and that he has his "own house:" (and is not, like stereotypically divorced dads, living in rental accommodation). Like Stivers and Heritage (2001: 154) found with patients' answers to doctors' questions, speed-daters often expanded upon initial disclosures about their relationship history to "pre-empt negative inferences which might otherwise arise from unelaborated answers". The final detail is about where M lives and he concludes his story with an explicit narrative-closing device "that's it really" (line 20).

At line 24, F launches a new sequence about her own relationship history. "I'm- (0.4) NOt married?" is delivered with contrastive emphasis on the "NOt", distinguishing her experience from M's. Following a newsmark ("N:o,") and an inaudible further comment from M, she takes a second turn that perhaps disambiguates the first "Never have been married," (line 27). This fixes the possible implication she was married and is now divorced. F then continues with her own narrative, again punctuated with continuers from M and again containing contextually relevant details with regards to her self-presentation. She tells M that she "dated a guy for about five or six years," (and hence can 'do' long term relationships), that the relationship ended "about two years ago," (matching M's two-year period as a single person). However, F then starts to account for her 'never married' status. The account she gives is framed in terms of her "lifesty::le", specified as 'travelling around Europe' which was not "the best way to meet people" (lines 35-38). 'Travel' was regularly used as a reason 'never married' participants gave for their relationship histories. It is a category that supplies particular, positive resonances for the speaker, as someone who is worldly, sophisticated, experienced, and single for legitimate reasons.

In Extract 11, we rejoin the parties that we first met in Extract 2.

11. SD-1

```
1     F:    […] anybody who's never done it befo:re is like (0.2)
2           I- >I mean< I'm quite nervous cos: this is all like
3           ne:w to me but I've £↑Come along.£
```

```
5                    (0.3)
6    F:  →   £Um::£ (0.3) I'm- (0.9) (t-) (0.5) thir'y fi:ve,
7            (0.7) single, (0.5) um::: (0.3) three childre:n,
8                    (0.2)
9    M:    Ri:ght, uh [huh
10   F:              [So::: (.) I jus' thou:ght (.) well,
11                   (0.5)
12   F:    .hh and because of my jo:b, (1.0) a:nd >sort'f< my
13         hec- (0.7) quite hectic social ↓life really, with °my
14         kids at home (0.3) where do you actually go to meet
15         someone.°
16                   (0.3)
17   F:    That's:: sort of what- (0.2) what brought me to
18         coming here.=I don't know about yourself.=what about
19         yo:u.
20                   (0.2)
21   M:    Yeh I'm much the sa:me.=it's a bit of a male- well
22         >more o' less< a male only establishment.=so I don't
23         meet anyone through wo:[rk,
24   F:                          [Yea:h exact[ly.
25   M:                                      [I live in a
26         village that's a bit restrictive,
27                   (0.5)
28   M:    So ye:ah.=it's sort- this is sort'f a good way to
29         meet- (0.5) to meet people.=
30   F:    ='ve y'got children as we:ll or[::
31   M:                                   [No: I've never
32         [be- (been married) (    ) no children:] no:. never=
33   F:    [y'not- you've not been married before.]
34   M:    =been- I- I've g- (.) I've always said that I li:ke
35         children, but I've just never been in the right
36         relationship at the right ti:me really.
37                   (0.7)
39   F:    °Right°
39                   (0.4)
40   M:    Um:: I'm forty,
41                   (0.5)
42   F:    °Right°
```

Like Extract 10, the details of both F and M's account for their currently single status do 'subject side' work that manages their self-presentation. This self-presentation starts before F's disclosure, in her comment that speed-dating is "ne:w" to her but she has "£↑Come along.£" (lines 2-3). The smile-voice with which these words are delivered, as well as the selection of verb ('come') and adverb ('along') infers a casualness to her activities: she has not personally planned the occasion in detail (e.g., rather than say, "I decided to come"). F also constructs a list of activities that occupy her time, her "jo:b,", "hectic social ↓life" and "kids at home" (lines 13-15), partly to account for why she has no time to meet men and hence has "come here", to speed-dating (lines 18-19). Speed-dating is itself an accountable activity, and something that almost all participants attended to at some point in the date. M, following an question from F, aligns with her ("Yeh I'm much the sa:me.") and gives his account for coming to speed-dating; that he works in a "a male only establishment." and lives in a "restrictive" village (lines 22-27), both of which reduce his opportunities for meeting women in the context of his daily life. Both

participants therefore construct speed-dating as a site to meet people (lines 15-16, 28-29) because the ordinary routines of their lives do not provide such a site.

Finally, in response to F's question about whether or not M has children, M reveals not only that he has no children but also that he has never been married. As his response unfolds, he begins to account for his childless, never-married status, formulating part of his account using the idiom "right relationship at the right ti:me" (lines 35-36). As Drew and Holt (1995) have shown, idioms often work to assess what is being talked about. M has said that he likes children, but adds no further information. The idiom that follows provides the upshot of "what those pieces of empirical information amount to" (p. 125). Here, M's use of this particular idiom ("right relationship at the right ti:me", a variant on 'right place at the right time') assesses his situation: he is single because of circumstances, not because he is inadequate. Drew and Holt also found that idioms appear regularly at topic closings. Here, its location at the end of M's account proposes that no further unpacking is needed: the idiom also shortcuts a host of cultural meanings that F is supposed to share. As Kitzinger (2000: 121) points out, "idiomatic formulations are often successful in achieving affiliative responses: They are hard to challenge both because their generality makes them independent of the specific details of any particular person or situation, and because they invoke and constitute the taken-for-granted knowledge shared by all competent members of the culture". Taken together, these observations about idioms suggest that they may be used to halt detailed examinations of an accountable aspect of one's life. At line 40, M moves on to discuss his age and other matters.

A similar idiomatic account is invoked in the next extract, in which M has just responded, somewhat ironically, to F's direct question about his 'relationship history'. Here, we see his response to her follow-up question.

12. SD-5

```
19    M:                                              [Um:]
20    F:    were you: I'dun- are you divor:ced?='ve you got
21          chil[dre:n?      ]
22    M:        [I'm no ma-] never been marri:ed?
23          (0.3)
24    F:    No:?
25    M:    N:o children,
26              (1.0)
27    M:    I've no attachments:
28              (0.9)
29    M:    Um:[:
30    F:       [Why:
31              (0.5)
32    M:    Becau::[:se I-
33    F:           [Not at the right place at the £right ti:me.£
34              (1.0)
35    M:    Because I've travelled arou:nd a bit,
36              (0.4)
37    M:    In between twenny an' thirty:: I moved every year?
38              (1.6)
39    M:    Uh- a:nd it's only: after thirdy that I didn't move so
40          much.
```

At line 22, M reveals that he has "never been marri:ed?" and has "N:o children,", which receives no affiliating or aligning uptake from F (line 26). At line 27, M formulates an upshot of his prior

turns: "I've no attachments:". In the current context, this might be a positive revelation: M is free and single with nothing to hinder his forming a new relationship. However, it is clear that F does not see things the same way. After a further lack of response from F (line 28), M starts another turn "Um::", and F, in overlap, asks perhaps her most direct and challenging question so far: "Why:" (line 30). In so doing, she explicitly *asks* M to account for his 'never-married' and childless status, rather than letting M volunteer such an account.

At line 32, M begins to provide an account, but is interrupted by F who provides a candidate in the form of the same root idiom we saw in Extract 11: "Not at the right place at the £right ti:me.£". This may be an affiliative move on behalf of F, to soften her earlier challenge. Note, however, that M does not ratify F's suggestion; nor does he reciprocate her smiley tone of voice in his delayed, restarted account. His description of the circumstances that stopped him getting married echo the accounts provided by the 'never married' participants in Extracts 10 and 11, about moving around, travelling and not settling down. Interestingly, following his account, M starts talking about his age, much as M did in Extract 11. In the next extract, another 'never married' participant accounts for their relationship history in a similar way.

13. SD-3

```
1      F:      'Ve ↑you been married be:fore then.
2                   (0.3)
3      M:      ↑No:. never been- [  been mar- been married no:.      ]
4      F:                        [Never been ma:rried.=so y've got no]
5              children::,
6                   (0.2)
7      F:      Ri::ght.
8      M:      No no. (↑Thing is with me) (  ) I used t'be in the RAF
9               ((Royal Air Force)) so I've always moved aro:und
10             so [I've never just settled down in one area,
11     F:         [Oh:::
12                  (0.2)
13     F:      Ri:ght.
14                  (0.7)
18     M:      I used[-
19     F:            [What did you do in the ar- (0.3) ar ay e:ff.
20     M:      I used t'work as […]
```

Like many previous examples, F's relationship history question (line 4) initiates a new sequence. It does not contain a trail-off 'or' but does have an indexical component "then". The format of the question prefers a yes response (the "then" implies that F has deduced something about M's situation), but here M discloses that he has "never been- … married" (line 6). F then delivers the – now familiar – follow-up question about children as an upshot ("so…") of M's answer to her first question. M confirms that he has no children (line 11), and then launches an account for his 'never-married' and childless state. He recruits work and, like F in Extract 10, travel, to explain why he has not been in a relationship-conducive context: "'ve always moved aro:und so I've never just settled down in one area,". Again, such accounts are designed to locate any blame for being single in life's circumstances, not in the single person themselves.

In the final extract, the accountable and problematic status of disclosing a 'never married' status is dealt with directly.

```
1    M:    So 'at's what we di:d.
2               (0.4)
3    F:    An' are you (0.2) divo:rced? or:
4               (0.4)
5    M:    No: I'm- I've ne:ver bin married.
6    F:    Have you no:t?
7    M:    No.
8    F:    Gosh:
9    M:    Um:
10              (0.7)
11   M:    Uh:*:* I'mean I've bi:n in- (0.2) um- (.) some
12         rela:tionships that um: (0.2) >rea:lly< (0.7) I
13         thought were heading that wa:y, we thought were
14         headin' that way but uh:[: it never quite worked]
15   F:                            [The whe:el dropped off.]
16   M:    ou:t.
17   F:    Yea:h:
18   M:    (Well) the w- ↑yeh the ↑wheel ↓dropped off.
19              (.)
20   M:    Yea:h [absolu:tely.   ]
21   F:          [Uh: ↑no k- any] kid- no kids:=
22   M:    =No:
23   F:    No:[:
24   M:       [No.
25   M:    No I didn't-=
26   F:    =£hhoh de:ar.£
27   M:    So- I [kno:w it's uh hh      ]
28   F:          [↑↑HAH ↑↑hah ↑heh ↑hah] ↑hah hah hh
29   M:    I know:.=it's:: not ticking any [of those boxes]=
30   F:                                    [£ T R A : :   ]=
31   M:    =[(I know)] (this is) [te:rrible isn't it]=
32   F:    =[G I C £ ]           [↑↑HAH ↑↑hah        ]
```

F treats M's disclosure that he has "ne:ver bin married." as newsworthy and surprising (lines 6 and 8); that is, accountable. After a gap develops, M launches his account, disclosing that he has had "some rela:tionships" but that they never "quite worked". Like previous extracts, F offers a candidate account in the form of an idiom "The whe:el dropped off." (line 15) although unlike Extract 12, M ratifies her candidate by repeating it (line 18) and upgrading his commitment to it (line 20). As we have come to expect, F issues a follow-up question (line 21) and M confirms that he has no children. As M begins a new turn (line 25), F produces a negative assessment of M's situation "=£hhoh de:ar.£", with smiley voice which works to mitigate its potentially disaffiliative stance. While M displays understanding of the implication of F's assessment "I kno:w it's uh" (line 27), he does not join in with either her smiley intonation nor her subsequent laughter (line 28). M then formulates explicitly the common-sense understanding that has been implicit in all of these extracts: "it's:: not ticking any of those boxes" (line 29). In other words, M shows his understanding that being 'never-married' and childless are not attractive qualities in a potential partner. F assesses his circumstances as laughable and "£TRA:GIC£, and M agrees that his situation is "te:rrible" (lines 30-32), both treating their assessments as ironic to perhaps handle the delicacy of the territory they are now in.

The preceding extracts provide examples of the (sometimes uncomfortable) conversations that occur between speed-daters, and how they manage, not always maintaining affiliation, talk about delicate topics. Being 'never-married' and not having children, regardless of the gender of the participant, was accountable, although only men were, in my data, explicitly treated as such by their female recipients (in Extract 10, F volunteered an account for her childless and 'never-married' state, but was not laughed at nor probed on the topic as the men were in Extracts 12 and 14). In all cases, 'never married' participants locate the reason for their relationship histories in the circumstances of their lives, rather than in their character.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has examined the way previously unacquainted parties in speed-dating encounters enquire about and disclose their relationship histories. A distinct feature of these 'getting acquainted' interactions was that, despite there being surprisingly few compliments, flattery, or other potential 'flirting' activities, talk *about* relationships was on each couple's conversational agenda. So while one might expect 'dating interaction' to be littered with romance-oriented actions, they were more like interviews in which one party's attributes were assessed by the other, as a practical item on a list, including their romantic biographies. Because a possible outcome of each date is the start of a new romantic relationship, information about past attachments may be important in making decisions about such outcomes. Thus the analysis started by showing the ways through which participants occasioned talk about their romantic biographies, as 'volunteered' or 'prompted' direct or indirect responses to questions, or embedded in narrative description. Relationship history talk occurred after other topics had been explored, such as occupation and place of residence, in contrast to other studies of 'getting acquainted' encounters (e.g., Svennevig, 1999).

The fact that relationship history talk was located well after the start of the date suggests that it would be inapposite as a topic for launching these brief encounters. The delicacy of asking questions about relationship histories was one focus of the second analytic section, which identified patterns in question design, and in question-answer pairs. First, questions about relationship histories contained features designed to manage recipients' possible or projected difficulties in supplying a particular response. So, yes-no interrogatives such as 'have you been married?' contained trail-off 'or' turn endings to delete any preferences made relevant in the first part of the question. In so doing, speakers managed their own identity as someone who is not 'pushy' or invested in whatever response recipients might give, while at the same time managed recipients' 'face' such that disclosing any relationship information would not attract negative inferences about them. Second, the questions included indexical or connective components that constructed them as continuing some prior action, or as deductions based on previous turns. Finally, relationship history questions were often formulated in terms of recipients' current or prior marital and parental status. Questions about marriage were followed with questions about children and vice versa; similarly questions about marriage prompted answers about both categories. Through their mutual orientation to this pairing of 'married-children' categories, participants displayed understandings that it is expectable for people who are married to have children, and for people who have children to have been married. These question-answer pairs therefore configured and sustained a particular, heteronormative notion of the family.

A striking finding about dating, and relationships more generally, was that and how participants held themselves and each other accountable for their past relationships. In particular,

participants who disclosed no prior marriage or long term relationship, or that they had no children, provided accounts for their status in relation to both categories ('never-married' and 'childless'). Interestingly, and perhaps counter-intuitively (for the participants themselves, on occasion!), the ideal 'date' was not someone without relationship 'baggage', but someone who could demonstrate substantial prior experience of a long term relationship. Furthermore, it was mainly men participants who seemed to be most at risk of the potentially negative inferences of neither being married nor having children. Participants invoked their jobs and travel as reasons why they remained single, and accounts often included idiomatic expressions. In other words, participants attributed their 'never married' biography to life circumstances, rather than to any aspect of their own character.

Overall, this paper has demonstrated the complexities involved, and regular patterns found, in speed-daters' disclosures of their relationship histories. As such, it provides a counter to mainstream social science that deletes the importance of interaction as something which may shed light on relationship processes. We cannot assume, before looking, what dating interactions will look like, how they will be organized, or what the participants will treat as important. Hopefully researchers may begin to examine the richly detailed brief encounters of social life, in order to better understand people's understandings of, troubles with, goals for, and management of their personal relationships.

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