Commentary:

WHEN ACCUSING SOMEONE OF INFIDELITY ISN'T ACCUSING THEM OF INFIDELITY. COMMENTARY ON "PURSUING AFFILIATION THROUGH CONFLICT IN YOUNG ADULT COUPLES' NATURAL CONVERSATIONS"

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Abstract

This commentary examines the methodological implications of the findings reported in *"Pursuing affiliation through conflict in young adult couples' natural conversations"* (2022; see this present issue of JISS). The article finds, counterintuitively, that improprieties (e.g., accusations of infidelity) can be affiliative in dialogue between existing and potential romantic partners. I argue that these findings highlight both benefits and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches to dialogue. I conclude by recommending methodological integration in dialogue research, providing three guiding questions for qualitative researchers to consider.

Keywords: Dialogue, natural conversation, methodological integration,
conflict, subjectivity, objectivity

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COMMENTARY

In his study, Korobov (2022; see this present issue of JISS) examines two secondary datasets of dyadic dialogues between 16 to 29-year-old heterosexual couples. The first dataset involves speed-dating transcripts and the second involves transcripts of pre-existing romantic partners in naturalistic settings. The study finds three improprieties – "negative category attribution of non-present others", "insults/criticism", and "accusations of infidelity" – are used to build affiliation between the romantic dyads.

This finding goes against "traditional psychology" (Korobov, 2022, p. 17) that sees improprieties as robust indicators of a person's internal states (e.g., an accusation of infidelity equates to an internal state of jealousy in the accuser). Psychology's tendency is to apply "formal coding" to dialogue, thereby reducing a speech act to a single meaning (Stivers, 2015). This presents a validity problem for traditional psychological measurements – normally quantitative – that count the frequency of speech acts and presume their measurement of a single variable (de Ruiter & Albert, 2017).

In this commentary, I first present context for Korobov's (2022) findings and how they imply a critique of formal coding and quantification. This problem is summarized as a failure of quantitative psychologists to embrace subjectivity. Second, I argue that this critique of quantitative research is undermined by qualitative researchers' reporting of quantitative results. This problem is summarized as a failure of qualitative psychologists to embrace objectivity. I conclude by outlining why an integrated mixed-methods approach to dialogue is beneficial for qualitative and quantitative psychological research on dialogue.

Quantitative research – a subjectivity problem

The discursive approach employed by Korobov (2022) is influenced by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA, Sacks et al., 1974). These qualitative approaches consider face-to-face dialogue the location where relationships and identities are (de)constructed and maintained, rather than expressions of internal cognitive states (as in traditional psychology). CA researchers therefore make no assumptions about the role of internal cognition during interaction, instead focussing exclusively on participants' observable interactional behaviours (e.g., Schegloff, 1996).

CA argues that participants co-construct meaning during dialogue, with social-psychological behaviours (e.g., agreement) being a joint-effort. The primary unit of analysis in Conversation Analysis is the dialogue "turn" (Sacks et al., 1974), defined as the set of speech acts uttered before another speaker's turn begins and, if not the first turn, after another speaker's turn has ended. A speech act is referred to here as any verbal or textual behaviour (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969). A speech act is a single behaviour expressed in a discourse, including dialogue turns. Turns can therefore contain a single or many explicit

speech acts, as well as implicit speech acts (e.g., paralinguistic communicative behaviours such as nodding and facial expressions).

A speech act has a "locutionary," "illocutionary," and "perlocutionary" level (Austin, 1975), dependent on the context within which it is uttered. The locutionary level is the meaning as conveyed directly by the language of the utterance, the illocutionary level is the meaning as it was intended by the utterer, and the perlocutionary level is the meaning as it is understood by the target of the utterance.

Korobov (2022) finds that improprieties are used by romantically-engaged dyads to build affiliation. This is in opposition with the locutionary level of the speech act. For example, an accusation of infidelity (AOI) has a negative locutionary level of being an accusation of disaffiliation (infidelity). The illocutionary and perlocutionary levels, however, need not be negative despite the valence of the locutionary level. An AOI has variable illocutionary and perlocutionary levels, where the former is determined by a speaker's intentions (e.g., to make a joke), and the latter by a responder's understanding of the initial speaker's intentions (e.g., understanding the joke).

This finding reflects a problem with the formal coding of social-psychological variables in dialogue. Formal coding is defined as assigning one possible meaning to an observed action in dialogue, such as an AOI, laughter, eye-contact, etc (Stivers, 2015). These formal codes are problematic, because the locutionary level of a speech act does not always reflect the intended or perceived meaning of the same act. Put simply, an AOI is not always intended or perceived as an accusation. Formally coding an AOI to measure disaffiliation would therefore lack validity, as it would generate false positives when the AOI was affiliative.

By formally coding a speech act, a researcher assumes that this speech act is a unit that can be counted and compared across individuals and contexts. CA, however, argues that aggregating formally coded conversational behaviours obscures the unique contexts within which the behaviours emerged. Or, summarized by Emmanuel Schegloff (1993), "parties to interaction do not laugh per minute" (p. 104).

The formal coding problem has thus fostered a mistrust of quantitative methods in CA researchers (Stivers, 2015). Compounding this mistrust is CA's problematic relationship with traditional experimental and cognitive psychology. CA practitioners are deeply sceptical of findings about social interactions derived from survey or experimental data (de Ruiter & Albert, 2017). Surveys are perceived as unreliable because participants are biased when recounting social interactions. Similarly, experimental conditions are a peculiar social context where participants are unlikely to behave in similar ways to naturalistic settings.

Qualitative research – an objectivity problem

I have argued that quantitative researchers appear often overconfident in statistical methods and measurements. This leads to problems of measurement validity and,

consequentially, empirical replications. By contrast, qualitative researchers "unashamedly" embrace subjectivity (Trafimow, 2014, p. 17) and, as part of this, assume researcher bias in conducting research. To incorporate the researcher's subjectivity into a research design, qualitative researchers practice "reflexivity", meaning they critically assess their own "partial, positioned, and affective perspectives" during the process of inquiry (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020, p. 159).

By promoting, discussing, and accepting subjectivity, qualitative researchers are free to build thick descriptions of real-world phenomena without the constraints of generalisability and replicability. For instance, Koborov's (2022) study highlights how speech acts with a disaffiliative locutionary force are not indicative of disaffiliation under certain conditions. This finding needs no quantitative input as it is simply describing observed behaviours, making no commentary on the frequency or probability of their occurrence. Generalisability, therefore, can be inferred from communication and qualitative research when discussed correctly (see Cornish, 2020). The finding that AOI *can* be used for affiliation is generalisable without quantification.

The embracing of subjectivity by qualitative research, however, is both a strength and weakness. A clear example is the well-documented CA aversion to descriptive statistics (de Ruiter & Albert, 2017; Stivers, 2015). For instance, Korobov's article (2022, p. 6) makes the following statement regarding the study's goal:

> "(…) select excerpts are presented from each data set to offer a window into the *common* ways that negative category attributions, insults/criticisms, and accusations of infidelity were negotiated."

Focussing on the AOI findings, Korobov (2022, p. 7) notes a "prominent 5-step sequential design" within which AOIs were performed. This involves a five-turn, affiliation-building, dialogue sequence where an AOI "tended to occur" in the third turn of the sequence (p. 13).

In describing AOIs, Korobov implies a quantitative finding despite providing no descriptive statistics. Quantitative researchers looking to generate hypotheses from the article's findings, however, are hindered by the absence of such statistics. To illustrate, a hypothesis generated from Korobov's finding might be: *In a random sample of romantic couples in population X, we expect AOIs to be more affiliative than not*.

This hypothesis is important to test because intimate partner homicide, violence, and economic and psychological control have all been shown to be frequently preceded by reports of AOI (Chiou, 2018; Nemeth et al., 2012; Pichon et al., 2020). The perpetrators are found to be mostly male, and the reported AOIs occurred regardless of whether any actual infidelity took place. Thus, if AOIs are found to be more affiliative than not, this would undermine a known predictor of romantic violence.

To test the hypothesis, we would have to obtain a large random sample of (naturally occurring) dialogues containing an AOI. We would then code each dialogue for AOIs and whether they are performing an affiliative function. Finally, we would test whether there is a statistically significant difference between the number of AOIs in the affiliation/disaffiliation groups.

The time and resources of a quantitative experiment of that scale would be significant, before accounting for the difficulties of obtaining a random sample of natural conversations. Even after such an experiment is performed and evidence for the hypothesis found, we would need to replicate under different cultural and demographic contexts to robustly validate the finding.

Here, we reach the kernel of why descriptive statistics are important to report when a quantitative finding is implied. If, in Korobov's study (2022), AOIs were found to be 90% affiliative (10% disaffiliative), this would justify time and investment to explore whether AOIs are more frequently affiliative and how this pertains to their roles as predictors of romantic violence. However, if AOIs were found to be 51% affiliative, the hypothesis testing is less urgent, and so time and resources are less likely to be allocated to its pursuit.

The lack of descriptive statistics, therefore, is problematic for future studies aiming to explore interesting quantitative findings (e.g. commonality of affiliative AOIs) from the original qualitative study. Furthermore, and perhaps more problematically, it reduces quantitative researchers' trust in the generalisability and significance of qualitative findings. Even though traditional quantitative psychologists have noted how valuable the CA and discursive research is (e.g., Albert & de Ruiter, 2018; de Ruiter & Albert, 2017), there remains a bias against the objectivity of qualitative research (Pelto, 2015; Trafimow, 2014).

The reporting of descriptive statistics is ubiquitous in quantitative research; it is amongst the first concepts taught in statistics, and a key component of exploratory quantitative data. When qualitative researchers fail to report descriptive statistics, it (unjustly) indexes to quantitative researchers a lack of empirical rigour.

Methodological integration

The problem of formal coding has generated healthy scepticism for quantitative findings in dialogue research. While highlighting the problem is valuable, qualitative researchers can also contribute to its resolution through adopting a mixed-methods mindset. In this section, I first give a brief description of the integrated mixed-methods mindset, followed by three guiding questions for qualitative researchers to consider.

Methodologies in the social sciences exist on a scale of qualitative to quantitative, with mixed methodologies sitting in the middle of the scale (Fetters & Freshwater, 2015). A method can be considered unipolar when it sits exclusively on either end of the scale. I deliberately choose the word "unipolar" as opposed to "pure" to indicate that research

methods exist on a continuum rather than a single binary. CA can be considered a unipolar qualitative method as it is both actively sceptical of quantitative methods and exclusively conducted through qualitative examination.

Unipolarity has its merits, with both qualitative and quantitative researchers contributing significant findings and frameworks to psychology. However, unipolarity is problematic when a qualitative or quantitative method is equated to the subjectivity of the knowledge it derives. Truly objective knowledge is impossible as researchers always imbue their subjectivity on a research design. However, just because truly objective knowledge is impossible does not mean all knowledge is subjective and socially constructed.

The statement *all knowledge is subjective and socially constructed* is a reformulation of the Liar's Paradox (see Frápolli, 2013). Despite appearing reasonable, the statement cannot be true. The phrase is a statement of fact but is claiming all knowledge is subjective and socially constructed. This implies, however, that the phrase cannot be a fact because it is itself subjective, forming the basis of the paradox. To break the paradox, we can alter the statement to *almost all knowledge is subjective and socially constructed*, with the implication that objectivity is partially achievable.

The mixed-methods mindset emerges from the "1+1=3 integration challenge" (2015). The simple equation represents the idea that adding qualitative and quantitative research together generates something bigger than the sum of its parts. $1 + 1 = 3$ implies that there exists knowledge that is only discoverable by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods together. The equation implies that, if unipolar qualitative and quantitative research existed without interaction, $1 + 1$ would equal 2, thereby reducing our total knowledge by a third.

The implication of Korobov's (2022) findings demonstrate why formal coding is problematic in dialogue research, provoking a critique of the overzealous presumption of objectivity in quantitative research. To help quantitative researchers improve their measurements, I propose three guiding questions for qualitative researchers to consider when reporting and discussing their findings. These build on previous articles that have made similar arguments (de Ruiter & Albert, 2017; Stivers, 2015).

Q1. Am I answering a question about the frequency of an observed behaviour?

The answer to this question should be yes if words such as "often" and "common" are contained within a research question. In these scenarios, then reporting descriptive statistics is recommended, even if it is just raw frequencies (e.g., out of 40 AOIs found, 30 were affiliative). Reporting descriptive statistics does not hinder or affect the validity of CA's findings (de Ruiter & Albert, 2017, p. 101; Stivers, 2015), but instead provides a straightforward way of reporting answers to simple quantitative questions and helpful information for future quantitative studies.

Q2. Is my finding generalisable and why?

The benefits of discussing generalisability in CA are exemplified in the study of "conversational repairs" (Schegloff et al., 1977). A repair is defined as any observable attempt by participants to rectify possible or transpired trouble in the dialogue. In their early work, Schegloff and colleagues describe the ubiquity of repairs in face-to-face dialogues. To confirm these descriptive observations, quantitative examination of face-to-face dialogues in 12 languages found repairs occur on average every 1.4 minutes (Dingemanse et al., 2015). Furthermore, after 5 or 6 minutes, the chance of a repair occurring approached 100% for all languages.

By generating thick descriptions of dialogue, CA's empirical findings provide quantitative psychologists with testable hypotheses grounded in empirical reality (Albert & de Ruiter, 2018; de Ruiter & Albert, 2017). Without the prior descriptive work done by CA's qualitative researchers (e.g., Schegloff, 1992), the identification of repair as a universal feature of dialogue would have been delayed. Likewise, the universality of repairs could only be confirmed through quantitative study. Considering and discussing generalisability in qualitative research facilitates opportunities for quantitative researchers to test the veracity of descriptive findings in a wider context.

Q3. Would it be possible and useful for a verbal behaviour to be formally coded?

Answering this question is ultimately the responsibility of quantitative researchers, however the findings of qualitative researchers have been essential in critiquing the measurement validity of a formal code. Korobov's study (2022) provides an excellent example of how qualitative findings question the validity of formally coding improprieties.

Mapping the variability in improprieties' illocutionary and perlocutionary levels is of empirical importance. First for providing thick empirical descriptions of human social behaviour and second for reducing the possibility of poor measurement validity when these behaviours are examined quantitatively. For instance, instead of using an AOI as a measure of interactional conflict, a researcher could now choose to separately code for AOIs that are affiliative and disaffiliative. This would allow for the removal of false positives (affiliative AOIs) and enable a more valid formal coding of disaffiliation.

Conclusion

In this commentary, I highlighted the benefits and pitfalls of qualitative and quantitative approaches to analysis of dialogue exposed in Korobov's study (2022). I argued that both qualitative and quantitative researchers would benefit from adopting a mixed-methods mindset, providing three guiding questions for the former group to consider. The future of a mixed-methods mindset in dialogue research is bright. On one hand, there are CA researchers actively contributing to the growing quantitative and

automated text analysis literature (e.g., Housley et al., 2019). On the other, there are experimental psychologists using CA findings for building stronger quantitative studies (Albert & de Ruiter, 2018). Continuing to encourage a mixed-methods mindset can grow our communal knowledge of psychology and dialogue, as well as foster mutual understanding between researchers of different methodological backgrounds. By integration of our methodological knowledge, we allow for conditions where $1 + 1 = 3$.

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