

Speed-dating as a methodological innovation

Paul W. Eastwick and Eli J. Finkel argue that this unusual data collection technique is high in external and internal validity

Every night, researchers who investigate relationships and person perception miss out on great opportunities. Millions of parties and social gatherings take place throughout the world, and no one is there to measure the interpersonal dynamics taking place in these real-world environments. As researchers of romantic attraction, we think about all the single people meeting each other for the first time – chatting for a few moments, deciding whether or not they'd like to get to know each other better – and we are heartbroken not to be observing unobtrusively.

We find some solace by reminding ourselves that parties and bars are not exactly perfect research environments. It is true that people at parties can often form real relationships with real futures, and this external validity makes such social gatherings ideal sources of data on real-life mating behaviour (Eastwick & Finkel, in press). But at a party, there are many

uncontrolled factors that weaken internal validity. For example, not all romantically eligible people have a chance to meet one another, and some people can get cornered for half the evening stuck in a dreadful conversation. How terrific would it be if there existed a type of social gathering with just a bit more structure; something that romantically eligible individuals would want to attend, but that would also permit data collection and experimental control?

About a decade ago, a rabbi in Los

Angeles named Yaacov Deyo provided the answer: speed-dating. In speed-dating, romantically eligible individuals attend an event where they have a chance to meet all the attendees of the sex that they romantically prefer. Each date lasts just a few minutes, and the attendees use their quickly generated impressions to decide whether or not they would ('yes') or would not ('no') be interested in seeing each of their speed-dates again. Typically, mutual yesses ('matches') are then given the ability to contact each other after the event to further explore any romantic possibilities.

At first glance, it might seem that individuals would only be able to learn shallow or trivial information about a potential romantic partner in just a few short minutes (e.g. how attractive he is). However, this notion is contradicted by an avalanche of evidence demonstrating that individuals can make remarkably sophisticated social judgements based on 'thin slices' of social behaviour lasting five minutes or less (Ambady et al., 2000). Perhaps unknowingly, the rabbi invented speed-dating by applying this social psychological gem to a romantic context. If participants are able to accurately judge teaching effectiveness (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993) or personality (Kenny, 1994) within minutes, they might just as quickly glean accurate information regarding romantic compatibility. Thus, speed-dating essentially lies at the intersection of person perception research and popular culture (Finkel & Eastwick, in press). Researchers can harness the power of speed-dating to do high-quality, high-impact research while at the same time providing a rewarding and enjoyable experience for participants.

The basic structure of a speed-dating study

A speed-dating study typically consists of three parts. First, as individuals sign up to participate,



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the researcher will want to assess background information about each of them. Using a paper-and-pencil or online questionnaire, researchers can assess demographic, personality and attitude measures. Time permitting, researchers might also assess baseline levels of biomarkers such as cortisol and alpha amylase, and, in women, contraception use and menstrual cycle phase. Researchers can readily customise the background information they collect depending on their research interests.

Second, there is the speed-dating event itself. Commercial speed-dating companies will try to recruit many individuals to attend each event,

thus maximising revenue and, consequently, the total number of speed-dates. However, there are several reasons why researchers might want to restrict event attendance, perhaps limiting participants to a dozen dates or so. For one, some evidence suggests that participants have a better speed-dating experience when they go on a moderate number of dates rather than a large number (Fisman et al., 2006). Secondly, with the time freed up by including fewer dates, researchers can administer a questionnaire at the end of each date to assess participants' impressions of each speed-dating partner. These questionnaires provide an invaluable source of data that go beyond the simple yes/no response and allow for data analysis using Kenny's (1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984) Social Relations Model (e.g. Eastwick et al., 2007) – see box. If resources are available, researchers might also wish to take photographs of participants or to audio- and video-record the speed-dates themselves.

Third and finally, researchers can follow up with their participants in the wake of the speed-dating event. In some cases, researchers will be content to assess

who has said yes to whom and which matches have subsequently contacted one another. However, very little research has explored the span of time between an initial encounter and the formation of a romantic relationship. Therefore, we encourage researchers to consider administering one or perhaps several

questionnaires in the wake of the speed-dating event. Using a diary-type format (Bolger et al., 2003), researchers can assess information about participants' lives in general as well as specific details about their relationships with each speed-dating match.

This discussion is intended to provide a general overview of speed-dating procedures. Elsewhere, we have provided an extensive how-to manual for researchers planning to conduct their own speed-dating research, reviewing issues such as recruitment strategies, institutional review board concerns, payment considerations, and use of the internet (Finkel et al., 2007).

Recent research

Several different research teams have used speed-dating in recent years to explore a wide variety of topics. For example, we have used speed-dating to explore men's and women's preferences for a romantic partner's physical attractiveness and earning prospects (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). In contrast to the large corpus of findings in which participants report their stated preferences for these two characteristics in a romantic partner, our results revealed no sex differences in the

The Social Relations Model in action

In speed-dating, participants meet multiple individuals and are met by multiple individuals. This design permits researchers to make use of the Social Relations Model (SRM), should they choose to administer a questionnaire about each speed-date.

Imagine that such a questionnaire included a measure of romantic desire. SRM distinguishes between three independent reasons why Maria might desire Trey:

- | Compared to the other female speed-daters on average, Maria might desire all of her speed-dates. In this case, Maria would have a strong *actor effect*.
- | Compared to the other male speed-daters on average, Trey might be desired by all of his speed-dates. In this case, Trey would have a strong *partner effect*.
- | Maria might desire Trey above and beyond her actor effect and his partner effect. In this case, Maria would have a strong *relationship effect* with Trey.

The ability to calculate relationship effects is one of the exceptional features of SRM. In the above example, the relationship effect assesses the unique romantic desire speed-daters experienced on each date; this unique desire is similar to the colloquial concept of 'romantic chemistry'.

importance that participants placed on physical attractiveness and on earning prospects at and following a speed-dating event. Other researchers have also noted that stated mate preferences don't predict actual choices of dating partners, but they do find that women are more selective than men at speed-dating events (Todd et al., 2007; see also Kurzban & Weeden, 2005). Speed-dating also offers an opportunity to study interracial dating dynamics: for example, individuals are more likely to prefer same-race over interracial speed-dating partners if they grew up in a location characterised by strong opposition to interracial marriage (Fisman et al., 2008).

In short, speed-dating presents an excellent opportunity for researchers to study a variety of topics related to interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, straightforward extensions of speed-dating (e.g. speed-networking) also help to broaden the scope of this method. We anticipate that many scholars will find speed-dating to be a useful methodological tool.

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