From Novice to Dating Expert in

10,000 Hours:

Two Theories Explaining the Role of Deliberate Practice

and Intuition in Superior Dating Ability

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Abstract

Why are some heterosexual males so fast, intuitive, and "expert" at initiating romantic relationships with female strangers? Is it a rare talent or "gift" some individuals are born with, or is there another explanation? This thesis draws on the *psychology of expert performance*—the leading field of research on optimal performance—to propose two theories that challenge our understanding of dating expertise. The first theory, *dating skills deliberate practice,* argues that—like expertise in chess, music, and sports—superior dating skills are developed by accumulating thousands of hours of *deliberate practice* (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). The second, *the four pillars of expert dating intuition,* forwards that, similar to elite fighter pilots, sports stars, and chess masters, dating experts' superior decision making relies on sophisticated powers of intuition. The theory identifies four characteristics which underlie dating experts' intuition: *dual processing, expert perception, emotional attunement,* and *autonomous adaptability.* The theories were developed by analysing interview data from a sample of arguably the most skilled male dating experts (*n* = 15) to have been subjected to scientific research, who were all adjudged to be "superior performers at dating initiation." Thematic analysis revealed that, while all the participants were novices at the start of their developmental journey, after a minimum of 5 years (range, 5 to 16 years) and thousands of hours of dating skills deliberate practice (seven participants were calculated to have accumulated over 10,000 hours), they all developed expert dating skills. Their practice in nightclubs, coffee shops, and other public spaces, was highly repetitive, challenging, goal-orientated, and relied on feedback. This research is the first to associate deliberate practice with dating expertise. The findings challenge prevailing giftedness theories that assert superior dating ability is the preserve of naturally talented individuals, being derived from relatively fixed heritable traits said to include physical attractiveness, personality, and intellect. The findings also challenge Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1988) influential characterisation of expert intuition and decision making, arguing they overemphasise the role of "unconscious" System 1 style processing, and understate the role of conscious System 2 style reasoning. The research findings could facilitate new clinical dating skills training methods, thereby helping people whose shyness, social anxiety, and low dating skills undermine their ability to establish rewarding romantic relationships.

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IV. Terminology

This thesis incorporates a wide range of terminology, which is largely a result of drawing on research from three main domains of psychology including expert performance, expert intuition, and dating. It also includes terminology and jargon used by members of the *Pickup Community*. This section provides definition for terms from academic literature, followed by terms from the Pickup Community.

Academic terminology

Approach anxiety: The feeling of nervousness and anxiety experienced when initiating an interaction with a stranger.

Automatism: Automatic behaviour that is spontaneous and occurs without conscious thought, facilitating rapid decision making.

Chunks: Perceptual stores of knowledge in long-term memory that are tied to actions. Experts differ from novices in that they have acquired through extended practice more, and larger, chunks. Chase and Simon (1973) notably estimated that it took chess masters 10 years to amass 50,000 to 100,000 chunks.

Cues: Internal or external events which affect learning and behaviour. The general view is that experts are skilled at using what Simon (1992) describes as "valid cues," facilitating better decision making. A related term is *dating cues*, which means the internal and external cues used in the context of dating. *Proceptive solicitation cues,* such as maintaining eye contact and preening the hair, are used by females to encourage males to initiate. Research suggests skilled male daters are particularly perceptive at recognising and responding to solicitation cues.

Dating capital: A term conceived in this thesis which draws on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *social capital*. Dating capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviours, skills and social assets that can be drawn on by individuals to demonstrate dating competency. It is posited in this thesis that the Community acts as a forum through which dating capital is acquired.

Dating expert: A person who is a "superior performer at the task of dating initiation" (see definition of dating initiation below). The definition of dating expert is relative as it is based on *skill*, with dating experts said to be more skilled than novices or intermediates at dating initiation.

Dating initiation: "The act of initiating a dating interaction with a stranger." Researchers often use the term *relationship initiation* (e.g., Sprecher, 2009) to mean the same thing. The term *dating initiation*, or just *initiation*, is the generally preferred term in this thesis to indicate a heterosexual male initiating an interaction with a female stranger who is of romantic interest. Although terms such as *dating* and *courtship*

can refer to short, medium, or long-term wooing, in this thesis, unless stated, they are used to refer to the initial initiation. In this thesis, a number of terms are used interchangeably to refer to dating initiation, such as *performance trial*, *opening*, and *approaching*.

Dating intuition: "The ability to rapidly recognise and respond to key features and patterns to solve the problem of initiating a date." Dating experts are said to be better at using dating intuition to solve the problem of initiation.

Dating knowledge architecture: A term developed in this thesis alongside an original conceptual model (see Section 11.5 for the *Conceptual model of dating knowledge architecture*) to refer to the *chunks*, *templates* and *mental representations*—knowledge structures that are developed through exposure to particular phenomenon—which provide a store of knowledge and information that enables people to execute skills in a particular context (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Dating knowledge architecture is hypothesised to enable dating experts to anticipate events and evaluate alternative courses of action in order to generate superior dating performance.

Dating skills deliberate practice (DSDP): A theory developed in this thesis, dating skills deliberate practice is defined as a "challenging form of practice specially designed to improve dating performance." Dating skills deliberate practice has four main features being: (a) repetitive, (b) feedback orientated, (c) goal orientated, and (d) challenging. It is proposed as a sub-theory of the general theory of *deliberate practice* (Ericsson et al. 1993), sharing various similarities but also embodying key differences.

Dating skills training: A form of *social skills training* delivered by clinicians, therapists and psychologists to help raise peoples' social and dating skills. It typically involves breaking complex social repertoires into their sub-components and doing focused training on each component. Also referred to as *skills training, or microteaching*.

DEEPA model: *The DEEPA model of expert dating intuition* (see the four pillars of dating intuition definition below).

Deliberate practice (DP): A theory developed by Ericsson et al. (1993). It is described by Ericsson (2016) as the "gold standard" of practice. Four features of deliberate practice are emphasised in this thesis, being practice that is: (a) repetitive, (b) feedback orientated, (c) goal orientated, and (d) challenging.

Dual processing: In cognitive psychology *dual process theories* propose that decision making is guided by two cognitive systems. The first, *System 1,* is fast, intuitive, automatic, unconscious, and high capacity—able to process large amounts of information. The second, *System 2,* is slow, conscious, deliberate, and low capacity—able to process only small amounts of information. This thesis contends that System 1

processing is essential to intuitive expert dating performance and that synergistic System 1 and System 2 processing facilitate efficient decision-making. Dual processing is the first of the four pillars of dating intuition (see below).

Emotional attunement: Emotional attunement in dating initiation is: "A kinesthetic, emotional, holistic sensing of ones-self, others, and the situation, that facilitates the creation of a two-person experience of connectedness and attraction." Dating experts are said to distinguish themselves from novices by being more emotionally attuned to their interactional partners.

Expert: Following Gobet (2016), who defines experts as individuals "who obtain results that are vastly superior to those obtained by the majority of the population" (p. 5), this thesis adopts a relative skill based definition of experts. Experts distinguish themselves within a particular frame of reference. For instance, a chess expert would be expected to out-perform less adept peers at a competitive game of chess. Experts are said to have accumulated a large amount of tacit procedural knowledge or know-how, which enables them to consistently perform at a high level.

Four pillars of expert dating intuition, The: An original theory proposed in this thesis, developed by interviewing dating experts and synthesising research on expert performance, expert intuition, and dating. The theory demystifies expert dating intuition by identifying four main characteristics, or pillars, that underlie fast, fluid, intuitive dating performance. The four pillars, (1) dual processing, (2) expert perception, (3) autonomous adaptability, and (4) emotional attunement, are encapsulated in the acronym DEEPA ("D" for dual processing, "E" for emotional attunement, "EP" for expert perception, and "A" for autonomous adaptability), and the theory is therefore also referred to in this thesis as the *DEEPA model of expert dating intuition*. (*The four pillars of expert dating intuition* is often abbreviated to *the four pillars*).

Giftedness hypothesis of expert dating, The: Refers to the view that superior dating skills are attributable to heritable characteristics or innate talent, such as physical attractiveness, body morphology, personality, intellect, and an instinctive feel for courtship. This thesis argues that the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating is fundamentally flawed and fails to account for the role of practice in superior dating ability. (The giftedness hypothesis of expert dating often abbreviated to *the giftedness hypothesis*).

Growth mindset: People who possess a *growth mindset* are said to be motivated to practice to improve performance, which is contrary to a *fixed mindset,* said to be held by those who believe performance is largely determined by innate talent (Dweck, 2012).

Hookup: Used to describe a wide range of sexually intimate acts with a member of the preferred sex. This can range from *making out* to having sexual intercourse.

Intuition: The Oxford Dictionary defines intuition as, "The ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning" ("Intuition," 2019). While this definition usefully highlights the role of rapid comprehension without the need for conscious reasoning, this thesis draws on a Richman et al's (1996) two part definition from cognitive psychology, which discusses intuition in terms of pattern recognition and problem solving, where intuition is (a) the ability to recognise key features and patterns in situations while accessing relevant information, and (b) the ability to solve problems by search.

Knowing-how and knowing-that: Highly skilled and intuitive experts are said to possess two types of skill or knowledge, known as *declarative* and *procedural knowledge*. Declarative knowledge involves *knowing-that* something is the case, for instance knowing what instrument to use during surgery, or that x + x equals 2x. It is conscious in that it can be verbalised. Contrarily, procedural knowledge involves *knowing-how* to do something, such as possessing the skill to ride a bike, speak one's native tongue, and recognise someone's emotions. Such skills are largely tacit or non-conscious, and recognised as a fundamental component of intuitive performance.

Pickup Community Terminology

Calibration: Refers to a person's ability to calibrate or adjust their behaviour in response to changing circumstances. A person said to be "highly calibrated," is considered skilled at adjusting their behaviour in light of their partner's non-verbal and verbal cues.

Community or Pickup Community, The: A community of males dedicated to practicing dating skills established in numerous parts of the world including the United States of America, Europe, Australia, and China. In this thesis, the *Pickup Community* is generally shortened to *Community*. The participants who were interviewed are, or were once, members of the Community. In this thesis the participants are also referred to as *performers* or *dating experts*.

Dating initiation models: Community theories suggest that courtship can be broken down into specific phases. For instance, *The Emotional Progression Model* (Savoy, 2007) suggests courtship has the following six stages—*Opening, Transitioning, Attraction, Qualification, Comfort*, and *Seduction*. Developing knowledge and skill relating to the following stages is said to improve one's dating game. (Also referred to as *courtship models*, *relationship initiation models*, or *initiation models*).

Day game: Initiating dating interactions during the day time. Day game may be practiced in public spaces such as coffee shops or museums. Day game is said to require a different skill-set to *night game* (practice at night, typically in bars and nightclubs).

Demonstrating higher value (DHV): A person's ability to imbue an interaction with words and

behaviours that "demonstrate high value," or desirable traits (such as intelligence, wit, kindness and status). Well-perceived demonstrations of high value are said to increase attractiveness to interactional partners.

Field: Refers to the social situations in which dating practice occurs. *In-field* practice refers to practice in public (e.g., initiating in a bar or coffee shop). *Out-field* practice refers to practice in private spaces, such as at home.

Field reports: Detailed reports written by Community members detailing their dating initiation experiences. Field reports facilitate self-reflection, and can be shared to obtain feedback and enable peers to learn from their experiences.

Game (gaming): There are many definitions of the term *game*. It can be used to refer to a person's dating ability (e.g., a person has "good game"), or the act of practicing dating initiation (e.g., "I might game today," or, "I went gaming yesterday"). The term can also relate to a person's deeper internal or external mental representations of dating (also see *inner game* and *outer game* definitions below).

Indicator of initial interest (IOI): Cue(s) a person gives off to indicate romantic attraction to another person (e.g., preening of the hair, a long gaze).

Inner game and outer game: Inner game refers to the internal mental representations a person holds that influence efficacy at dating, such as self-esteem, confidence in their attractiveness, and broader conceptualisations of dating. Outer game refers to the behavioural repertoires and skills that are used in dating initiation, for instance the opening lines and routines people have memorised.

Limiting belief: Beliefs a person holds about their ability (or game) which influence their confidence and chance of success. Examples of limiting beliefs include: "Women find me undesirable because I'm unattractive/short/boring/have an accent."

Kino: Derived from *kinology*—the study of physical movement and touch—kino and how to use touch appropriately is considered an important non-verbal form of communication during initiation.

Natural: A "natural" is person said to innately talented at dating initiation. Being a natural is typically attributed to being endowed with a mixture of desirable traits such as being physically attractive, outgoing, charismatic; and/or having benefited from early environmental learning that provided a deep appreciation of dating and sexual communication.

Number closing: The act of requesting a target's telephone number. The aim is to do so in a manner that maximises the likelihood of acceptance.

Opening: The act of initiating is often referred to in Community parlance as *opening* (as in "opening" a dating interaction). The term *cold approach initiation* is used when the initiator and target are strangers. *Approaching* and *sarging* are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to initiation.

Pickup: The art of "picking-up" or attracting a member of the opposite sex.

Pickup artist: A male who belongs to the Community and has practiced dating initiation.

Set: A group of people. A set that contains two people is called a 2-set, one that has three is called a 3-set, and so on.

Target: The person the initiator is romantically interested in (e.g., the female the male initiator is interested in interacting with). The term is sometimes adopted in research by psychologists and sociologists (e.g., Davis, 1973), as a convenient shorthand for conveying the goal-orientated nature of dating initiation.

Wings: Two or more peers who assists each other when initiating dating interactions. Wings may assist in numerous ways; for instance by engaging in conversation with people in the target's group, or providing advice and emotional support to a co-wing following a rejection.

V. Preface: Chapter Overview

This thesis comprises a total of twelve chapters arranged in four parts. A brief overview of each part and chapter is briefly described below.

Part 1—Introduction & Methods

Chapter 1: Introduction & Executive Summary—describes the thesis' overall purpose, which was to investigate how heterosexual male dating experts become so skilled and intuitive at initiating dates with females. It provides an overview of the thesis' rationale, investigations, research questions, and main findings.

Chapter 2, Methods—describes the overall research design, which included retrospective interviews with 15 dating experts who satisfied the definition of "superior performers at dating initiation." A full description is provided of the investigations and research questions, as well as the methods used for data collection and analysis.

Part 2—Investigation 1: Is Dating Expertise a Rare Talent or Learnable Skill?

Part 2 consists of five chapters focusing on whether dating expertise is an innate talent or can be developed with practice.

Chapter 3: Deliberate Practice Literature Review—reviews research on the psychology of expert performance and deliberate practice, discussing what it reveals about the relationship between practice and expertise.

Chapter 4: Dating Literature Review—discusses dating initiation using research from evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and social and dating skills training.

Chapter 5: Deliberate Practice & Dating Expertise: Conceptual Framework and Research Questions—sets out Investigation 1's research questions and delineates a number of conceptual models linking deliberate practice to dating expertise.

Chapter 6, Thematic Analysis: Becoming a Dating Expert through Dating Skills Deliberate Practice—presents thematic analysis from interviews with the 15 dating experts, describing in detail the quantity, quality, and type of dating practice completed by the 15 dating experts.

Chapter 7: Review of Investigation 1 Findings—reviews Investigation 1's five findings. The theory of dating skills deliberate practice is forwarded as the best account of how the 15 performers became dating experts.

Part 3—Investigation 2: Is Dating Expertise a Form of Expert Intuition?

Part 3 consists of four chapters concerned with evaluating the main characteristics of expert dating intuition.

Chapter 8: Expert Intuition & Dating Conceptual Literature Review—reviews literature revealing parallels between dating intuition and intuition in traditional domains of expertise.

Chapter 9: Dating Intuition, Conceptual Framework and Research Questions—builds on Chapter 8's

review by proposing that dating experts embody four main characteristics, or pillars, of intuition. It also describes Investigation 2's research questions.

Chapter 10: Thematic Analysis, The Four Pillars of Expert Dating Intuition—presents analysis from interviews with the 15 dating experts, revealing how each of the four pillars is supported in the data.

Chapter 11: Review of Investigation 2 Findings—reviews Investigation 2's findings and proposes the *four pillars of expert dating intuition* as an original theory that accounts for the fast, fluid, intuitive, skills of dating experts.

Part 4—Discussion & Implications

Part 4, consists of the final chapter, *Chapter 12: Discussion & Implications*—reflects on the findings, research strengths and weaknesses, implications, and possible future research.

PART 1

INTRODUCTION & METHODS

Chapter 1. Introduction & Executive Summary

1.1 The Research Puzzle: The Giftedness Hypothesis of Expert Dating

Why are some males so effective at sparking attraction with female strangers? Walking through a crowded cocktail bar they detect the briefest of solicitation cues—a darting look, a preening of the hair, a lustful smile—and without hesitation they approach the person of their desire. With a command that defies the complexity of courtship, they open with a line that instantly endears, and captivate with anecdotes and tales that appear too effortless to be unrehearsed, and yet too natural to be contrived. In minutes—or even seconds—they forge an intimacy and connection that leaves observers in a state of admiration or bemusement.

At ease in their "natural" habitat of coffee shops, bars, nightclubs, or any locale where people seek-out serendipitous romantic connections; skilled daters anticipate the contingencies that inevitably arise when two people court in public: the inquisitive friends keen to interrogate the charming stranger; the waiter patiently hovering nearby to take an order; the male challenger in surveillance mode, scanning for cues suggesting that he may still have window of opportunity.

The fluidity with which such "dating experts" act is readily interpreted as an innate talent, a unique "gift," or even a "mysterious" ability that defies comprehension. Indeed, an extensive body of research supports this view—a view this thesis terms "the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating"— arguing select individuals' superior success in the dating arena stems directly from "naturally" alluring traits (Barber, 1995; Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Miller & Todd, 1998). Such research posits that women distinguish attractive traits in as little as 100 milliseconds (Grant-Jacob, 2016), using a "brain system evolved to enable the chooser to discriminate between courtship displays and prefer those who advertise superior genes" (Aron, Fisher, Strong, Acevedo & Riela, 2008, p. 326), homing in on cues and "honest indicators" of genetic fitness that differentiate certain men as more desirable (Miller & Todd, 1998).

According to this school of thought, a person's ability to intrigue, delight and attract is attributed to an intoxicating combination of intrinsic qualities such as physical attractiveness, raw intellect, charismatic personality, *Vitruvian Man* proportions, and instinctive feel for the courtship dance. History provides notorious examples of such dating maestros, epitomised by infamous libertines and lotharios Lord Byron and Giacomo Casanova, whose seductive powers are enshrined in legend, in poems, plays, and portraits hanging in national galleries. While ladykillers divide our sensibilities, historians such as Prioleau (2013) celebrate their *joie de vivre* and assert we need more "real" Casanova's today, arguing his only "mistake was being 'born for the [opposite] sex,' being too good at it, and incurring envy at every

turn" (p. 7).

So compelling and pervasive is the giftedness view, that its proponents willingly attribute such seductive powers to innate talent. Yet, despite the persuasiveness of this argument, is the giftedness hypothesis of dating true? Does superior dating success stem from innate talent, or is it just a myth?

1.2 Questioning the Giftedness Hypothesis

The belief that some people are born innately talented, or inherit "gifts" that determine eminence in a given domain, has become an established view in society (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson, 2006b). This thesis proposes that the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating—the view that superior dating is determined by innate abilities—is fundamentally flawed. This conclusion was reached by scrutinising decades of research from three domains of psychology—expert performance, expert intuition, and dating—and designing empirical research which included recruitment of arguably the most skilled sample of heterosexual male "dating experts" to have been studied. The research resulted in a wealth of findings, the development of numerous conceptual models, and two new theories exposing the fallacy of the giftedness hypothesis that has obscured scientific understanding of dating success. As a result, the thesis reveals how so-called "untalented" males—those who experience anxiety, frustration, and fear initiating dates—can transform themselves into fast, fluid, intuitive, dating experts. Before sharing the findings, first we return to the beginning of the research journey to trace how it all begun.

1.3 Psychologist's Curiosity in Dating Skills

Beyond a "typical" young male's interest in dating and relationships, my deeper psychological fascination with dating skills started in 2009 when I came across a unique community referred to as the *Pickup Community* (abbreviated to *Community*). Members of the Community claimed to have drawn on evolutionary and social psychology research to develop theories on female dating psychology. The most influential theories were described in books running hundreds of pages, such as in famed Community "guru" von Markovik's, *The Mystery Method* (2006)—described by the author as a proven "step-by-step game plan that structures 'courtship'" (p. 3)—which based courtship around three phases consisting of *Attraction*, building mutual *Comfort and Trust*, and *Seduction*.

Community members claimed to have put these theories to the test, initiating hundreds or even thousands of dating interactions with women in bars, clubs, coffee shops and other public spaces, and, through a process of trial and error, increased their efficacy at dating. It was a bold assertion that challenged my conception of dating and attraction. The psychologist within me was compelled—I had to find out more.

Despite having spawned a lucrative multi-million dollar coaching industry, with commercial companies providing dating skills training on "bootcamps" that often cost over $3,000, it wasn't until the publication of New York Times bestseller *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (Strauss,

2005), that the Community rose from its somewhat secretive underground origins to establish "sub-communities" with thousands of members in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and further afield. Mediated by the internet, online Community forums attract thousands of members keen to transform their skills. For instance, popular Community forum www.pick-up-artist-forum.com claims to have over 180,000 members who have written more than 900,000 posts (as of 2019, February 8).

Growth led to recognition in mainstream culture, with the Community featuring in the press-media (see for instance, *The Times* article *The Secrets of Male Pickup Artists*; 2007, December 7), as well as capturing the attention of academics such as Grazian (2008) and Smiler (2012). The Journal *Evolutionary Psychology* published a paper by Oesch and Miklousic (2011) which evaluated Community dating initiation theories and concluded they are "grounded in solid empirical findings from social, physiological and evolutionary psychology" (p. 899). However, despite the Community's rise, limited impartial information existed about their practices and there was no empirical research on actual members. The void left too many unanswered questions to ignore: Why were people joining the Community? What was its impact on members? Was the main motivation for joining casual sex, a quest for lasting love, or everything in-between?

Intrigued, in 2011 I enrolled at Brunel University London, where I commenced a psychology masters degree focused on investigating the growing popularity of the Community. Using *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (Smith & Osborn, 2008)—an intensive psychological interviewing technique designed to explore peoples' phenomenological experience and underlying motivations—I recruited and interviewed two males from the Community considered "intermediates" in terms of their dating ability. The participants reported in vivid detail why males like themselves were joining the Community. Exasperated by their lack of dating success and concerned that they were falling behind peers, they hoped to learn what they had failed to learn themselves: how to successfully meet and attract women.

The participants' accounts resonated with social cognitive theories of *self-discrepancy* (Higgins, 1987) and *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which argue people are motivated to reconcile discrepancies between their *actual selves* and *desired selves*, providing a valuable insight for understanding the complex processes underlying why men join the Community. One of the participants, "Zack," described his discovery of the Community as "an epiphany, and a moment of clarity." The other participant, "Paul," described the following:

[Before joining the Community] I didn't realise that attraction… was a *skill* that you can learn. Then I read *The Game* [a book written by a renowned Community member]; that was what I loved about it, it was like, "This [dating] is a skill, you can learn it." And I was like "Wow! I thought 'it' was something that was 'You,' but it's not, it's just a skill…" I went "I want that! I want to be good with women," and so I did it.

And that's two years of experience [dating practice]. And when you go out and talk to, like a thousand, two thousand, women in a year; every weekend out, every weekend you're talking to 15

to 20 new people in a cold approach situation; when you go to a house party and you can just own that house party! It's not hard… Before they were really intimidating. (Ereku, unpublished masters thesis, 2011).

Paul's statement, "I thought 'it' [dating ability] was something that was 'You,' but it's not, it's just a skill," conveyed that for much of his life, he, in line with popular wisdom, had believed in the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. However, on joining the Community and completing years of arduous initiation practice, he came to recognise this belief was a fallacy. Dating ability was not rigidly determined, but was a *skill* that could be developed with specially designed practice. Paul reported improving his social and dating skills beyond recognition, disproving not just his own beliefs; but also those of people who doubted his competency—including his own father:

> Well my dad always told me when I was little, because he saw the same things in me that he was, he said, "Paul you're just not a people person, you're not a people person." And that frame that I just wasn't a people person stuck with me until I was 27… [When I started practicing] I was like, "F**k that!", because I realised you can become a people person if you apply yourself. And I think for the future I will be.

The quotes above capture the essence of why men like Paul and Zack joined the Community, and provided the germ that inspired this PhD. In terms of Markus and Nurius' (1986) possible selves theory*,* the Community offered a compelling opportunity for men to overcome years of romantic isolation by reprioritising their relationship skills and reconciling their *actual dating self* with their *desired dating self.*

While my Masters research focused on understanding *why* men had joined the Community, this thesis pursues a line of inquiry that focuses on the *how* and *what*: *how* can people significantly improve their dating skills, and *what* characteristics mark some people out as highly skilled and intuitive dating experts? Accessing an elite sample of dating experts associated with the Community proved essential to resolving these questions.

1.4 Summary of the Present Research

1.4.1 The problem statement and two investigations

To investigate the validity of the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating, the thesis was designed to evaluate the puzzle encapsulated within the problem statement:

How do dating experts become so skilled and intuitive at dating initiation? Is it a "gift," or does *deliberate practice* (Ericsson et al., 1993) facilitate the development of dating expertise?

The research had two investigations, each with one proposition and associated research questions. To collect the data, I adapted a method called *retrospective interviewing* (Sosniak, 2006), pioneered by researchers of expert performance for evaluating the factors that give rise to expertise. A purposeful outlier sample of 15 heterosexual male dating experts was recruited from the Community who all satisfied a test designed specifically for this research called the *Test of Dating Expertise* (see Appendix 1). Dating experts were classed as "superior performers at the task of dating initiation," with dating initiation defined as "the act of initiating a dating interaction with a stranger." As current or previous members of the Community, all of the dating experts had taken advantage of the unparalleled opportunity to learn theories on dating and accumulate large quantities of purposeful dating initiation practice. In total, they had amassed 124 years of dating initiation practice, with the average being 8 years of practice (range of 5 to 16 years of practice). Retrospective interviews were completed with the participants and the transcripts were analysed using *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a qualitative research method that involves detailed analysis revealing underlying patterns in data.

1.4.1.1 Investigation 1: Is dating expertise a learnable skill?

Investigation 1 has the proposition (Proposition 1): *the dating experts developed their superior skills through extensive deliberate practice*. It has the following five research questions:

1. Did the dating experts engage in deliberate practice?
2. Does deliberate practice account for how the dating experts developed their superior skills?
3. How does deliberate practice facilitate superior dating skills?
4. Does a particular "mindset," or set of attitudes, facilitate the development of dating expertise?
5. Are Community postulates (i.e., theories and techniques) grounded in empirical research?

1.4.1.2 Investigation 2: Is dating expertise a form of expert intuition?

Investigation 2 has the following proposition (Proposition 2): *the dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuition*. It has the following four research questions [note: the numbering continues from Investigation 1's questions]:

6. What are the main characteristics of the dating experts' skilled performance?
7. Do these characteristics underlie skilled dating?
8. Does dating intuition share characteristics with intuition in traditional domains of expertise?
9. Does deliberate practice play a role in the development of intuitive dating skills?

Investigation 1 focuses on the *how* question; seeking to understand the process of becoming a dating expert by being the first study to evaluate Ericsson et al's (1993) theory of deliberate practice in respect of the development of dating expertise. Investigation 2 focused on the *what* question, concerned with identifying the key characteristics that underlie dating expertise and ascertaining whether such superior performance relies on intuition. It should be noted that, except for Research Question 5, all questions were assessed using thematic analysis. Research Question 5 was evaluated using secondary analysis of Community literature and empirical research.

1.4.2 Identifying the gap in the field

This research challenges misconceptions regarding superior dating skills by synthesising research on dating with a field of cognitive psychology referred to as the *psychology of expert performance*—the leading area of research on how people develop expertise in domains as varied as chess, sports, firefighting, music, ballet, and medicine. Investigation 1 drew on seminal research by Ericsson et al. (1993) on a sample of elite violinists at Berlin's renowned *Music Academy of West Berlin,* which revealed that what distinguished the best performers was not innate talent, but rather the time spent engaged in a particularly challenging form of practice they termed *deliberate practice (DP)*. By the age of 20, the "best" violinists had accumulated an average of over 10,000 hours of deliberate practice, some 2500 hours more than the "good" violinists, and about 5000 hours more than the "teacher" group (see Ericsson, 2006b). Their research, which has been cited more than 9,000 times (source, Google Scholar), making it a citation classic many times over, encouraged a wave of research in numerous domains of expertise revealing that superior performance is less about giftedness and more about accumulating some 10,000 hours of deliberate practice—a finding that gave rise to the viral 10,000 hour, or 10-year, rule to expertise, popularised in *New York Times* best selling books (such as Gladwell's *Outliers*, 2008, and Coyle's *The Talent Code*, 2010).

Despite research revealing deliberate practice is synonymous with expert performance, no research had evaluated the theory's applicability to dating skills, or day-to-day interactional social skills. Intrigued by this omission, Greene (2003), an interpersonal skills researcher, pondered, "it is not

unreasonable to suggest that the '10-year rule' for developing expert levels of performance… may apply just as much to social interaction skills as to behavioural domains" (p. 81). My investigation into why this gap in the literature existed led to the discovery of a body of research on *social and dating skills training* (also referred to as *skills training*) tracing back to Argyle (1967) and Martinson and Zerface (1970), establishing a clear association between specially designed practice and improvement in dating skills. However, skills training research was limited to only researching low-to-average dating skills—a level far below this thesis' focus on expertise.

While dating expertise is a very different to "traditional" domains of expertise such as chess and sports, synthesising research on skills training with deliberate practice provided the basis for theorising whether dating expertise might also be associated with deliberate practice.

For Investigation 2, the research was again influenced by the cognitive study of expertise—this time focused on the sub-field of expert intuition. Although intuition was for a long time considered too mystical and enigmatic for scientific scrutiny (Gobet, 2016), seminal research by Dutch chess master and psychologist Adriaan de Groot (1946/1978) invigorated the cognitive study of intuition, prompting a significant amount of research revealing that experts' skills rely on sophisticated intuition and cognitive abilities such as search (de Groot, 1978), pattern recognition (Chase & Simon, 1973) and the accumulation of *chunks* and *templates* in long-term memory (Gobet & Simon, 2000).

The view that experts rely on sophisticated powers of intuition was most venerated by the influential work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1988), who construed experts as superior "non-reflective" problem solvers, spared from the rigours of conscious reasoning; instead executing skills "unconsciously, automatically, naturally" (p. 32). While little research exists that systematically integrates the cognitive study of expert intuition with dating, research does suggest skilled communicators rely on facets of intuition such as cue recognition (Moore, 2010), and the use of cognitive schemata, chunks, or *mental representations* for navigating interactions (Hargie, 2006). Surveying the research revealed that to further our understanding of superior dating it was necessary to design a study centred on *actual* dating experts, which could be achieved by recruiting a sample of men from the Community.

1.4.3 The findings

Analysis of the dating experts' interviews generated over 500 pages of data, 1500 units of coding, 160 pages of thematic analysis, and nine main findings (five for Investigation 1 and four for Investigation 2), providing an unparalleled insight into the factors underlying superior dating ability.

The findings directly challenge existing conceptions of dating expertise, and lead to rejection of the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. For instance, Findings 1 and 2 reveal that the 15 dating experts had engaged in thousands of hours of dating initiation practice over a minimum of 5 years (range 5 to 16 years) which satisfied the definition of deliberate practice, making this the first research to reveal an association between deliberate practice and dating. The analysis suggests that—just like chess, music, sports, and traditional domains of expert performance—dating expertise is attainable through deliberate

practice.

Investigation 2's four findings demystified the nature of the dating experts' fast, fluid, intuitive skills. For instance, Findings 6 and 7 suggested that the dating experts' superior skills relied on clearly identifiable facets of intuition such as cue detection, pattern recognition, chunking, and *System 1* (Evans, 2010) responding in stereotypical situations. Dating experts' ability to enter a social setting and rapidly forge romantic connections, appears to rely on the same superior powers of intuition that underlie chess masters' ability to rapidly home-in on the best move in the first few-seconds of thought (Gobet & Simon, 1996). The analysis also generated additional research-based insights about dating expertise, such as:

- Why dating practice should be approached like learning a sport. Just as tennis players concentrate on training specific skills, such as their serve, smash, lob, or volley; dating experts deconstruct dating into component skills such as: opening, building attraction, and developing emotional connections—and repetitively practice them to systematically improve their overall dating ability.

- Why a dating expert is essentially a hard-to-replicate "decision engine" not unlike *AlphaGo*, the *Go* playing program built on Google's *Deep Mind*. Through experience, dating experts have amassed a hard-won repository of dating know-how and honed their intuition.

- The reason why preprepared opening lines and routines are often unsuccessful, leading to social awkwardness and rejection; and the situations where they are effective.

- Why "dutch courage," the confidence boosting effect derived from drinking alcohol, actually undermines dating initiation; impairing emotions which serve as a fast acting heuristic and cognitive "guidance system" essential for intuitive decision making.

- The inverse relationships between dating expertise and innate talent. Being handsome, tall, and physically imposing, are less important to *elite* dating than we are often led to believe. Such innate "talents" are best viewed as providing "a foot-in-the-door but not a seat at a table." While they pique the interest of potential mates, such attraction is easily extinguished by poor relating skills. Expert daters rely less on their physical appearance, and more on their *dating IQ* to develop lasting attraction.

- Why *approach anxiety*—the debilitating fear people experience when initiating a date—wreaks havoc with decision making; and how *visualisation techniques* favoured by elite sports stars help dating experts take control of their emotions.

- The reason why some people never develop beyond a dating novice; yet why years of dating frustration and sub-par dating performance need not define your future—provided you embrace *one* specific mindset fostered by dating experts.

1.4.3.1 New models conceptualising dating expertise

The findings were supported by the development of a number of original conceptual models to facilitate a new appreciation of expert dating performance. For instance:

- The figure, *Dating expertise as a function of accumulated deliberate practice* (see, Section 7.3), suggests deliberate practice plus experience underly dating expertise.
- The conceptual model, *Three types of dating mental representations* (Section 7.4), proposes how mental representations developed through practice assist skilled daters in planning, evaluating, and monitoring their performances.
- The *Proposed model of default-interventionist responding in dating* (Section 9.4) proposes that while skilled daters rely heavily on System 1 intuition in stereotypical situations, in novel situations where no adequate chunks exist, their System 1 and System 2 work synergistically like a "committee" to facilitate rapid decision making.

The conceptual models complement two theories proposed by the thesis. The first relates to Investigation 1 and the second to Investigation 2.

1.4.3.2 The theory of dating skills deliberate practice

The thematic analysis in Chapter 6, *Thematic Analysis: Becoming a Dating Expert Through Dating Skills Deliberate Practice,* provides such a detailed account of the quantity, quality, and type of deliberate practice completed by the dating experts, that it resulted in their practice being titled *dating skills deliberate practice (DSDP),* which is defined as a "challenging form of practice specially designed to improve dating performance"(see Figure 1 for a model illustrating the theory's main characteristics).

Figure 1. *The four components of dating skills deliberate practice.*

The theory proposes that sustained dating skills deliberate practice facilitates the development of dating expertise. It shares numerous similarities with Ericsson and colleagues general theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2008; Ericsson et al., 1993) being practice that is: (1) highly repetitive, (2) designed around feedback, (3) challenging, and (4) goal orientated. Yet, the theory of dating skills deliberate practice also has key differences that distinguish it from the general theory, and for this reason is best construed as a sub-theory of deliberate practice. Not only can such practice be intrinsically enjoyable (something Ericsson et al., 1993 dispute), but, as argued by Gobet and Ereku (2014), there are grounds to question the monotonic assumption forwarded by Ericsson and colleagues that talent plays no role in superior performance. Dating skills deliberate practice recognises that heritable characteristics such as height, physical attractiveness, and intelligence do influence dating. For this reason, the theory does not suggest that everyone can readily attain elite dating skills. However, it does agree that the giftedness view is overly talent centric and fails to acknowledge the pivotal role of practice. The skills that underlie dating expertise appear to be highly trainable and, to the extent that people overcome developmental constraints such as opportunity to practice and learn from knowledgeable coaches or peers, they can significantly improve their dating skills.

1.4.3.3 The four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model

The thematic analysis provides a deep insight into the specific characteristics embodied in expert dating performance. These were captured in the thesis' second original theory titled *the four pillars of expert dating intuition* (see Figure 2; often abbreviated to *the four pillars*), which asserts dating experts' performance embodies four main characteristics, or pillars, of intuition: *dual processing, expert perception, autonomous adaptability*, and *emotional attunement*. It is also referred to as *the DEEPA model of expert dating intuition,* as the titles of each pillar are captured in the acronym D.E.EP.A (although the acronym, which was developed to aide recall, presents the pillars in a different order).

Figure 2. *The four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model.* Analysis of interviews with 15 dating experts provides empirical support for the four pillars which proposes dating experts skills rely on four main pillars of intuition.

Starting with the "D," the first characteristic of expert dating intuition is *dual processing* (Järvilehto, 2015), which captures dating experts' synergistic use of unconscious cognitive processing (System 1), and conscious cognitive processing (System 2) to solve the "problem" of how best to attract mates. The first "E" stands for *emotional attunement,* which posits dating experts' emotions serve as a fast acting heuristic and emotional guidance system, intuitively directing behaviour and helping them to develop a sense of relatedness with potential mates. "EP" represents *expert perception,* which posits the dating experts' possess sophisticated search and pattern recognition, enabling them to home-in on subtle verbal and non-verbal cues. Finally, the "A" stands for *autonomous adaptability.* With a wealth of accumulated dating routines, scripts, chunks and mental representations, in the vast majority of dating situations experts encounter they are highly autonomous and rely on routinised skills; yet when faced with novel dating situations they are flexible and able to improvise using *adaptive expertise* (Hatano & Inagaki, 1984).

While the identification of four pillars may be critiqued on the grounds that they are not "truly" separate; the research supports this distinction because, although there is significant overlap and integration between the various characteristics, each pillar embodies fundamental differences in the way experts process and experience dating initiation. A key strength of the model is that it unifies major

theories of expert intuition in one holistic model—for instance, emphasising the role of emotions, which, as argued by Chassy and Gobet (2011), is overlooked by researchers of expert intuition. It also challenges influential characterisations of expertise such as Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1988), who downplay the role of conscious deliberation in expert decision making, presenting an idealised image of experts as "unconscious" and "non-reflective" (Gobet & Chassy, 2008; Peña, 2010); whereas the first pillar, *dual processing*, accounts for how System 2 deliberation interacts with System 1 intuition to facilitate fast, fluid, flow-like performance.

1.4.4 Importance and implications

The importance of this research can be viewed in terms of its theoretical and applied significance. Addressing the theoretical significance, this research is the first to evaluate and confirm the relevance of the theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) to dating skills. This led to the development of the theory of dating skills deliberate practice—which provides the most comprehensive research-based account of how to develop dating expertise. The second theory, the four pillars of expert dating intuition, demystifies the nature of intuitive dating performance. By combing research on expert performance with dating the thesis establishes that—like chess, sports, and other traditional domains of expert intuition—dating should be considered a "domain of expert intuition," providing new research opportunities.

The ideas generated by this view of dating provide fresh insight into existing debates in expert performance, such as "What role does talent play in the development of expertise?" and "How do experts use intuition to solve problems in dating and other complex social environments?" Future research, could draw on the two theories to generate original hypotheses that can be tested with experimental research (see Section 12.3 for future research recommendations). The findings also provide researchers of evolutionary and social psychology interested in courtship with the grounds to challenge deterministic theories that contend superior success in the dating arena is determined by relatively fixed inherited traits such as height, intelligence, physical attractiveness, body morphology, and other qualities regarded as indicative of genetic fitness or *social exchange value* (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

When developing this research, it was important not to lose sight of the *human* implications of dating. Although a lack of dating competence was trivialised in the past, since the 1960s it has been recognised as a major precursor of serious psychological disorder. For this reason, psychologists now treat deficiency in dating skills as "a behavioural problem of genuine clinical significance" (Twentyman, Boland, & McFall, 1981, p.523), developing training programs to help men (and women) improve their dating skills. This training exists because the ability to attract a romantic partner is an important determinant of well-being and happiness, yet many people fail to develop the requisite dating skills for adequate social functioning (Segrin & Givertz, 2003). The findings of a recent nationally representative survey of over 4,000 published in the report *Single in Britain Today* (Relate, 2018) reveal just how challenging the dating environment is today. Single people are concerned about loneliness, the absence of

intimacy, and a lack of ability to develop dating relationships, with over a fifth of singles (21 percent) agreeing with the statement "I worry I will be single forever." The findings of the report also reveal an underlying desire for people to improve their dating and relating skills, with over two out of five people (41 percent) keen to receive dating support and advice.

1.4.4.1 The "prize" of unconscious dating competence

With respect to this last finding on the desire to improve dating ability, Gobet and Simon (2000) explain that a key goal of research on expert performance is to generalise from experts to non-experts, to help non-experts raise their performance. While we do not all have the desire or motivation to complete the challenging practice to become a *Formula One* driver, renowned chef, or expert typist—there is a true benefit from developing our abilities at driving, cooking, and typing to an everyday standard so that we can perform them competently and efficiently, free from cognitive overload and stress. While this thesis reveals that it requires a foreboding amount of challenging practice to become an elite dating expert operating at a level of "unconscious excellence"; for the general population such expertise or quantity of practice is unlikely to be necessary or even desirable.

However, understanding the building blocks underlying superior dating ability means we can identify the most efficient way to build dating skills so that meeting potential partners is transformed from a stressful and foreboding experience, to one people anticipate with a sense of optimism and confidence. We could label this "the prize of unconscious dating competence *not* unconscious dating excellence." The four pillars and dating skills deliberate practice take advantage of decades of research and the "language" and "conceptual tools" of the cognitive study of expert performance—the leading field of psychology on optimal performance—to illuminate how men can improve their dating skills. By identifying the building blocks that support superior dating ability, dating skills deliberate practice could potentially become the new "gold standard" for dating skills training, aiding dating therapists and clinicians assist people in an important part of their lives: establishing rewarding romantic relationships.

1.5 Chapter 1 Summary: Built not Born

If by chance a proponent of the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating encountered any one of the 15 dating experts initiating a date, reason suggests—without acquiring a history of the experts' experience—they would deduce that their superlative skills were due to "innate" talent. The problem with such a deduction is that it would be wrong. The dating experts were "built not born." All 15 participants were dating novices at the start of their journey. For years they struggled with dating, and there was no evidence to suggest they possessed unique abilities that would give rise to a different outcome. Yet, armed with new knowledge and a motivation for learning and growth, over the process of accumulating thousands of hours of dating skills deliberate practice, they systematically built their skills and transformed themselves into highly intuitive dating experts. These findings challenge talent centric views that assert superior dating skills are the preserve of individuals bestowed with rare gifts at birth. Rather, even people long deemed as untalented, below average, or incompetent, can dramatically increase their dating ability; not just to the level of tolerable, or competent, or even good, but to the level—this thesis reveals—of *expert*.

Chapter 2. Methods

2.1 Introduction and Overview

This chapter describes the overall research strategy for examining the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating and evaluating whether dating is a form of intuitive expertise. The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2.1, provides an introduction, a summary of the two investigations and research questions, and discusses ethics. Section 2.2, *Research Sample,* describes the inclusion criteria used to recruit a sample of 15 dating experts who were "superior performers at dating initiation." It also provides a description of the Community from which the sample was recruited. Section 2.3, *Data Collection: Retrospective Interviews,* describes how qualitative semi-structured *retrospective interviews* (Sosniak, 2006)—an interviewing method used by researchers of expert performance to evaluate the developmental processes underlying experts' skills—were designed and carried out with the participants. Section 2.4, *Data Analysis,* describes how the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. While criteria for evaluating research quality are discussed throughout the chapter, Section 2.5, *Research Quality*, provides a definitive statement regarding how the thesis meets standards of quality expected of qualitative research. Section 2.6, *Summary*, concludes by reflecting on the overall research strategy and whether the decisions taken were supported in light of the research objectives.

2.1.1 The two investigations and propositions

The research was structured around two investigations, each of which had what Yin (2009) terms *propositions*. The propositions were designed to help clarify the boundaries of research, facilitate theory development, and evaluation of the evidence. Proposition development relied on integrating both deductive and inductive reasoning (as proposed by Ali & Birley, 1999) to synthesise three fields of research—expert performance and deliberate practice, expert intuition, and dating. This enabled *a priori* knowledge to be used to develop theoretical arguments and identify new concepts for illuminating expert dating. Investigation 1 and 2's propositions and research questions are described below. Further discussion on the role of integrated deductive-inductive reasoning is provided in this chapter (Section 2.3.4) as well as the final discussion (Section 12.4.3).

2.1.1.1 Investigation 1: Is dating expertise a learnable skill?

Proposition 1 was: *the dating experts developed their superior skills through extensive deliberate practice.* To evaluate the proposition, the investigation drew on dating research and the theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). If the findings indicate that deliberate practice provides the best explanation for the performers' superior skills, then this would challenge the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. To

guide the research and facilitate evaluation of Proposition 1, the following five research questions were developed:

1. Did the dating experts engage in deliberate practice?
2. Does deliberate practice account for how the dating experts developed their superior skills?
3. How does deliberate practice facilitate superior dating skills?
4. Does a particular "mindset," or set of attitudes, facilitate the development of dating expertise?
5. Are Community postulates (i.e., theories and techniques) grounded in empirical research?

The research questions facilitated the exploration of further questions, such as: does the practice the performers engaged in meet Ericsson's (2008) criteria for deliberate practice, being (1) highly repetitive, (2) designed around feedback, (3) challenging, and (4) goal orientated? Did other factors, such as personality and physical attractiveness, influence participants' development? Does empirical evolutionary and social psychology research support theories and techniques espoused by the performers and members of the Community? While Research Questions 1 to 4 were evaluated by analysing the 15 interviews, Research Question 5 was assessed via secondary analysis of academic research and Community literature.

2.1.1.2 Investigation 2: Is dating expertise a form of expert intuition?

Investigation 2 had the proposition: *The dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuition,* and aimed to evaluate whether dating is a form of intuitive expertise. There were four questions in total.

6. What are the main characteristics of the dating experts' skilled performance?
7. Do these characteristics underlie skilled dating?
8. Does dating intuition share characteristics with intuition in traditional domains of expertise?
9. Does deliberate practice play a role in the development of intuitive dating skills?

The research questions facilitated the exploration of related questions such as: Are there parallels between perception in dating and chess? Does System 2 style deliberation undermine or support dating performance? Is dating intuition refined with practice?

2.1.1.3 Ethics and dating initiation

The research received approval from the ethics committee at Brunel University London. While the study sample consisted of male participants affiliated with the Community, the research did not encourage participants to engage in dating. It does not endorse or support the Community, or advocate that people affiliate themselves with dating coaching organisations or communities. As an impartial "outsider," I have never been a member of, or otherwise affiliated with, the Community.

An important ethical question relating to this study concerns dating initiation and how people go from strangers to intimates. The process of dating initiation lends itself to potential objectification, with targets being treated as "things" that exist for the sexual pleasure and appraisal of others (Davids, Watson, & Gere, 2019). While both men and women can be objectified as sexual objects of desire (Davids et al., 2019); the objectification of women is more prevalent and consequential, in part due to the prevailing societal norm that heterosexual males are generally expected to directly initiate dates (Bredow, Cate, & Hudson, 2008; discussed further in Section 4.2.1.2), exerting pressure on women to conform to particular standards of behaviour and physical beauty linked to sexiness and worth (Szymanski,. Moffitt, & Carr, 2011).

While the majority of men initiating dates may conduct themselves politely and appropriately, cultural beliefs that prescribe men ought to be confident, efficacious, dominant, persistent, powerful, and sexually potent (Grazian, 2007), can promote behaviour that runs counter to this; resulting in unwanted interactions that are embarrassing, sexualised, and intimidating. The dating environment is further complicated by research that suggests men who conform to stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity—such as being more confident, competitive, and comfortable taking risks—are attractive (Vincke, 2016).

In light of the reassessment of the way men treat women and express their sexual interest—issues that have been brought to the fore in recent years, including by the MeToo movement—dating as a form of expertise raises various ethical considerations as well as profound questions about modern dating. Unbeknownst to women, men engaging in initiation practice may not have genuine intentions of entering into a romantic relationship, being instead focused on improving and developing their skills. Women may therefore be misled, believing that the initiators are interested in pursuing some form of relationship; only to be left confused and distressed when men fail to follow through.

For this reason, the Community and its members have been criticised in the press for their practices (e.g., The Washington Post, *The Gene Pool: Sex and Deceit*; 2008, March, 5). As a researcher aware of the controversies, it was important to maintain a scientific lens; the ability to meet and establish romantic relationships is essential to wellbeing and our ability to develop healthy relationships, making it an important social skill to be understood and researched. In seeking to understand the causal chain that gives rise to dating expertise, I embraced the spirit of Bauman (1987) and Pinker (2002), who encourage researchers to document "reality" even where reality may cause discomfort. This line of reasoning is consistent with the *naturalistic fallacy* (Wilson, Dietrich & Clark, 2003), which contends that just because a phenomenon is *True* does not mean it is justified or morally defensible.

In conducting the research, I sought objectivity, aiming to contribute to scientific knowledge which could help us understand the problems related to modern dating and potentially give rise to new training techniques that could be used by clinicians and dating skills therapists to assist the many people who struggle with dating and establishing romantic relationships. Research plays an important role addressing problems that people encounter in life and, if the academic community fails to illuminate such problems, people may seek solutions from alternative sources.

Experts endeavour to be at the forefront of change. Just as chess experts were compelled to

evolve with the rise of artificial intelligence and sophisticated chess programs (Gobet, Retschitzki, de Voogt, 2004)—expert dating requires skills adapted to modern social conventions. It does not require highly sexualised techniques that undermine respect for women's boundaries. On the contrary, expert daters should be ethical daters, possessing the know-how and skill to behave appropriately and respectfully. With the rise and popularity of alternative methods of relationship initiation such as dating apps and online dating, a domain that was once highly stigmatised (Sprecher, 2009), we may ask whether the process of initiating dates in public will one day disappear from society, or whether traditional dating conventions, such as males being the "wooers" and making the first steps to initiate, will be replaced?

2.2 Research Sample

2.2.1 The participants and broader Community

The Community attracts males from a broad spectrum of society who vary widely in age, ethnicity, and dating experience. Identifying and recruiting a sample of "genuine" dating experts was essential to the success of the research. In total, 15 dating experts from the Community qualified for the final sample (five did not satisfy the conditions; see Section 2.2..1.3 for further information). Due to the limited pool of men who satisfied the criteria of dating expertise, participants were recruited from various countries. All participants resided or had lived in one of three different regions of the world. Six were from the United Kingdom, six from the United States of America, and three from Australia. A questionnaire (the *Dating and Sexual History Questionnaire*; see Appendix 9) was administered to gather details regarding how long participants had been engaged in purposeful dating practice, the number of hours of practice they had typically completed each week, their dating ability prior to joining the Community, and skills and achievements indicative of expertise (see Table 1 below, which includes biographical details for each participant; names and characteristics that might undermine anonymity have been changed).

In terms of age, members of the Community typically range from late adolescence to late 30's, although it is not unusual for members to be in their 40's or older. Members have varied relationship experiences. Some are newly divorced or out of long term monogamous relationships; others have little or no sexual experience and are long-term singletons; others' dating experiences are typical of males their age. Motivation for membership is similarly diverse. While media reports commonly forward that men are motivated to join the Community for short-term casual sex; Smiler (2012), a leading researcher on male sexual behaviour, provides more balance when accounting for why people join the Community, writing, "10 percent of the guys who attend workshops, buy books, and appear on discussion boards are interested in being Casanovas. The majority, about 75 percent or so, are guys looking for girlfriends (and possibly wives) and have little or no experience or success in dating" (p. 30).

The participants recruited for the research had significant short-term dating experience. This was

not unexpected, as long-term relationships pose constraints to accumulating dating skills practice. The participants' ranged from 25 to 38 years in age, with the mean age being 34. Participants had been purposively practicing dating for between 5 to 16 years, with the average duration being 8.2 years. Together, the participants had amassed a total of 124 years of practice. Before joining the Community and commencing purposeful practice, nine participants reported that their dating skills were "significantly below the average" male, two reported their dating skills as being "below average," and four reported their dating skills as being "average."

Table 1

The 15 Participants: Their names, years of practice, typical weekly practice in hours, and characteristics indicative of expertise

Name	Years	Wkly Practice	Characteristics "indicative" of expertise
Damien	7	21-39	Voted number one coach for a large dating coaching company in 2010. Coached hundreds of students, created numerous dating programs and seminars, and presented at numerous dating events. Recognised for his skill at non-verbal communication.
Neil	6	21-39	Voted number one instructor for a large dating company. Taught hundreds of students and awarded a prize for being the teacher who taught the most students for the large company in one year. Recognised for his ability at day game.
Stephen	6	21-39	A noted authority on the largest UK dating forum. Has written over three thousand dating related posts and given numerous talks at dating conferences. Recognised for his Community role as a mentor and advisor, and specialist ability at nightclub game.
Ruben	7	21-39	CEO of one of the largest dating coaching companies and voted one of the top dating experts at a Community industry awards. Made notable appearances on national television to provide dating advice. Authored a popular book on how to meet and attract women.
Brian	16	Over 40	A dating coach of over 10 years, trained hundreds of students, led over 100 datings bootcamps and provides 1-on-1 training that costs over £700. Voted as the number one pickup artist in the UK Community in industry awards. Created numerous dating training products and DVDs. Renowned for his wide knowledge of dating initiation routines and nightclub game.
Charles	8	21-39	Eight years practice and five years of coaching. Taught hundreds of students in over five countries. Presented at hundreds of seminars and produced dating programmes for large dating company. Renowned for inner game, Comfort, and natural game.
Gavin	5	13-20	A dating instructor for a leading dating company. Has coached over 80 students in various countries; presented at numerous events in the United States and Canada. Recognised for his skill at fast escalation and understanding of differing dating cultural practices.
Peter	8	21-39	Coached over 100 students. Presented at numerous events. Recognised for his day game and large amount of approaching, and pioneering new techniques at direct game.
Ronnie	9	21-39	A dating coach for over five years, having coached over 300 students. Written a number of books. Recognised for his breadth of dating routines and knowledge of dating in different cultures.
Ben	10	21-39	A decade of practice, an instructor for three years. Written numerous articles on dating forum he co-created. Recognised for his knowledge on different cultures, his inner game, and the large amount of approaching he does each training session.
John	8	21-39	A recognised authority in the scene having written over 3000 posts on a Community forum. Thousands of hours of practice. Presented at a number of Community events. Mentored numerous men, and an instructor on a weekly dating session provided for men seeking to improve their dating skills.

Robert	5	13-20	Dating instructor, having coached for 1 year for a large company. Written over 1000 forum posts, recognised as a mentor and guide. Coached over 30 students. Recognised for his street game.
Connor	9	21-39	Has his own dating coaching business having coached hundreds of clients. Written thousands of posts on Community forums. Recognised for his "bar-game."
Julian	10	13-20	Experienced coach at a leading company. Taught hundreds of students. Written and developed numerous dating programs. Recognised as a day game specialist.
Leon	10	21-39	Experienced coach at leading company. Known for his expertise on dating in "exclusive" circles and his fluid, rapid initiation skills.

2.2.1.1 Why just study heterosexual male initiation?

In line with the Community's population, the 15 participants identified as heterosexual males. While researching heterosexual female, homosexual, or non-normative dating initiation may have just as much relevance to dating expertise; the research focused on heterosexual male dating initiation for three key reasons. First, heterosexual relationships remain the most common form of relationship in the United Kingdom, with only 2 percent of the population identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Office of National Statistics, 2017). Second, there is more research on heterosexual relationships, providing an extensive body of literature for contextualising heterosexual dating initiation as a form of expertise. Third, the size of the Community, the amount of literature its' members produce, as well as the manner in which members systematically practice dating initiation, facilitated rigorous analysis of the developmental journey from novice to expert.

It is interesting to note that, as with heterosexual males, dating advice targeted at helping heterosexual females establish romance has perhaps never been so in vogue. Books promoting tips and strategies for women meeting and picking up men sell widely, such as, *Get the Guy: Use the Secrets of the Male Mind to Find, Attract and Keep Your Ideal Man* (Matthew Hussey, 2013), and *Men Chase, Women Choose* (Maslar, 2016). In recent years, dating bootcamps for females mirroring Community style training have gained traction. Dating coach Matthew Hussey is reported to command $10,000 for one-on-one instruction for women (see *The Times* article *Why Are Women Paying $10,000 for This Man's Dating Advice?,* 2017, July, 8*).* A bootcamp for women led by dating coach Hayley Quinn was given an extensive write-up by journalist Abigail Malbon (2010, May, 30) for *Cosmopolitan.com*, who described it as good value for money at £1,300. The bootcamp included a weekend of training in London's bars, where attendees practiced their initiation and "pulling skills," as well as more subtle techniques such as maintaining open and friendly body language, standing in close proximity to men to encourage them to initiate, and segueing into flirtatious conversations by asking men for a favour such as whether they will take a photo.

While this thesis focuses on male led initiation, the rise of female dating advice suggests that that people are seeking new methods to make sense of the modern dating environment and improve the odds of meeting romantic mates. This implies that there could be increased demand for scientific research on female led initiation, something discussed further in Section 12.3.2's recommendation for future research.

2.2.2 Sampling procedure and recruitment

Recruiting a sample of genuine dating experts presents specific challenges to researchers of expert performance (Sosniak, 2006). In this thesis, recruitment posed two main challenges. The first involved developing inclusion criteria to identify dating experts, and the second, the recruitment of said experts.

2.2.2.1 Developing inclusion criteria

Developing inclusion criteria involved: (1) defining dating expertise; (2) operationalising dating expertise to develop inclusion criteria; and (3) recruiting only those dating experts who satisfied the inclusion criteria.

2.2.2.1.1 Dating expert defined

For researchers of expertise, defining and identifying experts in a particular field can be problematic. In many domains, the definition of what constitutes an expert differs greatly, and, in certain fields, no clear well-established criteria of "expertness" exists (Ericsson, 2006b; Gobet, 2016). As there is no consensus on what constitutes a dating expert, a definition was developed for this thesis which was:

"A dating expert is someone who is a superior performer at dating initiation."

Three main considerations led to this definition. First, the definition draws on Ericsson's (2006b) contention that an expert is a person that can produce, "reproducibly superior performance for representative situations" (p. 689). The representative situation that was considered most relevant was the task of "dating initiation," as it is the first and arguably most pivotal stage of courtship (see for instance Bredow et al., 2008, and *The Handbook of Relationship Initiation*, Sprecher, Wenzel & Harvey, 2008, dedicated to the topic). Dating initiation is seen a crucial because if the initial interaction does not satisfy both parties requirements for a potential romantic partner, then it is unlikely a romantic relationship will develop. Dating initiation is defined as, "the act of instigating an interaction with a person the initiator has not formally met, with the desire of generating romantic interest." Thus, dating initiation consists of three main elements: (1) initiating the interaction, (2) with someone whom the initiator has not formally met, and (3) generating romantic interest. Dating experts are therefore classed as superior performers at these three elements of dating initiation.

While a stereotype, the concept that males "chase" and women "choose" (Maslar, 2016) conveys that a males' ability to initiate successfully is constrained by women who will vary in their responsiveness and desire to go from strangers to intimates. While male experts should be skilled at navigating courtship interactions, women will have equivalent forms of expertise, which frame the likelihood of a successful interaction; using cues, for instance, to encourage men with "come-on" solicitation cues, or to terminate the interaction (e.g., Moore, 2010, see also Section 8.6.2.2).

This definition of dating expertise *does not* take into consideration the subsequent stages in courtship, such as going on second dates or developing long-term monogamous relationships. Latter stages of courtship emphasise specific skills related to building what Sternberg (1986) termed *companionate love,* which centres on three main qualities: intimacy, commitment, and passion. Arguably the participants in the sample are no more skilled at developing long-term relationships than the average person and, while they are "experts at initiation," they are not "experts in companionate love."

The second main consideration was the definition should be readily operationalisable, so that participants' dating ability could be measured and inclusion criteria developed. Third, the term "dating expertise" should be relatively easy for research participants (and readers) to conceptualise. This was important to enable, for instance, research participants to reflect on their dating skills and report their level of proficiency.

2.2.2.1.2 Inclusion criteria using the Test of Dating Expertise

Researchers of expert performance emphasise the need for clear criteria for selecting experts. The term "dating expert" was operationalised, using an approach used by Sosniak (2006) consisting of developing "criterion measures" which acted as a test or inclusion criteria for identifying genuine experts. To this end, an original *Test of Dating Expertise,* was developed around three main criterion measures, with it being defined as follows:

> The Test of Dating Expertise consists of three criterion measures for evaluating whether a person satisfies the definition of being a dating expert. The three criterion measures are: (1) *dating initiation expert*, (2) *achievements indicative of expertise*, and (3) *standards of dating expertise*. For each criterion measure, participants' had satisfy a score, or rating, set at a benchmark for being a dating expert. (Figure 3 below, provides a visual representation of the test)
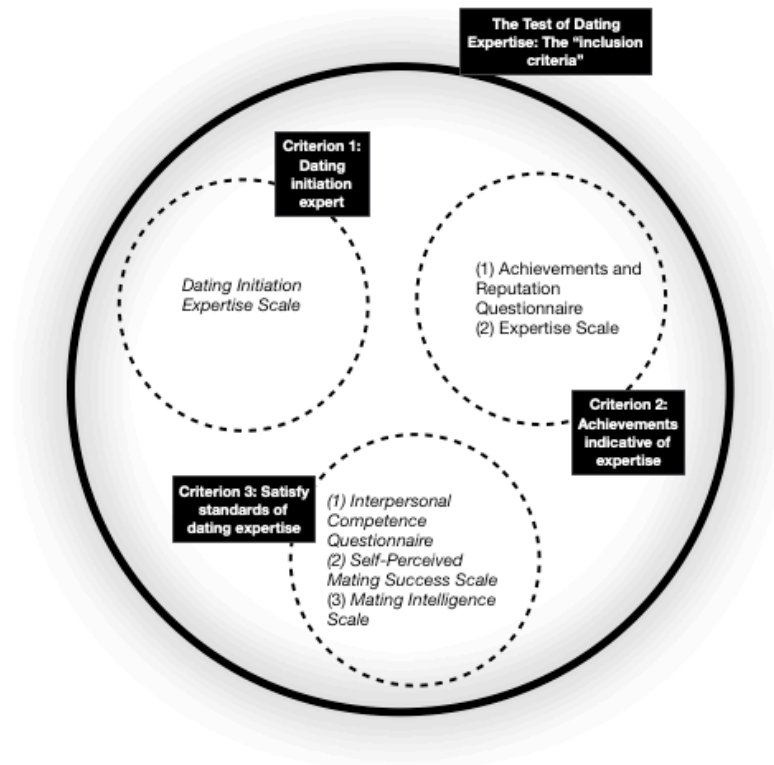
Figure 3. *Visual representation of the test of Dating Expertise.* The three criterion measures and the questionnaires included in the Test of Dating Expertise.

Each criterion measure was composed of a number of questionnaires. Two of the questionnaires were specifically developed for the thesis (the *Dating Initiation Expertise Scale* and the *Achievements and Reputation Questionnaire*). The other questionnaires were existing measures used by researchers to evaluate ability relating to dating initiation or mating success (e.g., the *Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire*, Buhrmester et al., 1998; the *Mating Intelligence Scale*, Geher et al. 2016), or level of expertise in a given domain (i.e., the *Expertise Scale*; Reysen, 2008).

Table 2 below sets out each criterion with the associated questionnaire, the scores needed to satisfy the benchmark of being a dating expert, and aggregated scores for the 15 participants. Appendix 1 provides the full overview of the questionnaires that constituted the Test of Dating Expertise. Appendices 3 to 7 provide the complete set of questionnaires.

Table 2

The Test of Dating Expertise: the maximum score and benchmark required to satisfy the definition "dating expert" for the three criteria and associated questionnaires, and the 15 participants' actual scores (Note: the average scores are provided for the Criterion 3 questionnaires)

Criterion and Questionnaire	Maximum possible score	Benchmark	15 Participants' Scores
Criterion One: Dating initiation expert			
Dating Initiation Expertise Scale	"expert" at all four criteria	"expert" three out of four criteria, including expert at "standard initiating"	12 achieved "expert" for all four criteria, 3 achieved "expert" for three criteria and "proficient" for one criterion
Criterion 2: Achievements indicative of dating expertise			
Achievements and Reputation Questionnaire	"Significantly above average at initiation"	"Significantly above average at initiation"	All satisfied benchmark
Expertise Scale	"Expert"	"Expert"	All satisfied benchmark
Criterion 3: Satisfy standards of dating expertise			
Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire	40	36	39 (average)
Self-Perceived Mating Success Scale	56	45	49 (average)
Mating Intelligence Scale	24	20	22 (average)

2.2.2.1.3 The four step sample recruitment process

Once the Test of Dating Expertise was designed, the sample was recruited. As is common with expert performance, a purposeful sample was recruited. Purposeful sampling involves identifying a sample that is especially experienced and knowledgeable about a particular domain or phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, 2015). Given the small number of cases that satisfied the stringent selection criteria for being a dating expert, the approach can be further delineated as *outlier case sampling* (Palinkas, 2015), or *extreme case sampling* (Patton, 1999), which "focuses on cases that are rich in information because they [the cases] are unusual or special in some way. Unusual or special cases may be particularly troublesome or especially enlightening, such as "outstanding successes or notable failures" (Patton, 1990, p.1690).

Sample recruitment consisted of four steps (see Figure 4). In *Step 1, Introduction*, men from the

Community were contacted by sending messages over Community forums, by emailing, or cold-calling companies that provide dating coaching (a total of 36 who expressed meaningful interest were contacted). Snowball sampling proved invaluable for recruiting new people, with existing participants providing introductions to people who might satisfy the selection criteria.

| Step 1. Introduction Introduction to potential research participants | Step 2. The inclusion criteria *Assess dating expertise* by administering The Test of Dating Expertise | Step 3. Notification Inform potential participants if they satisfied the inclusion criterion | Step 4. Schedule interviews Arrange interviews with consenting participants |
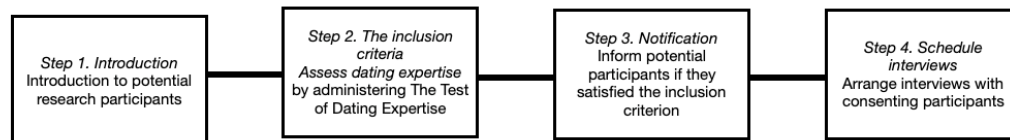
Figure 4. *The four step sample recruitment process.* All dating experts went through a four step selection process and had to pass the Test of Dating Expertise to satisfy the inclusion criteria.

Recruiting participants presented a number of obstacles. The most significant stemmed from the stringency of the inclusion criteria, which was, by definition, designed to exclude the vast majority of men in Community who would fall short of being dating experts. Persistence contacting members, building rapport, and seeking referrals were all essential to the recruitment process. Potential participants were keen to validate my credentials and, being able to present what can be described as an "academic self," appeared to aid recruitment. In this regard, it was important to demonstrate a clear vision of the research, have well designed procedures, possess a detailed grasp of academic research on dating, and exhibit an awareness of broader issues relating to modern dating. Concrete credentials also served to validate my role—for instance, I was able to direct people to my research profile on Brunel's, College of Health and Life Sciences website.

Following the initial introduction at Step 1, potential participants were provided with further information on the research and criteria for participation. *Step 2, The inclusion criteria*, consisted of administering The Dating Expertness Test, which a total of 21 men completed. At this stage I also engaged in building rapport, and gauged whether potential participants appeared committed and able to articulate their experiences in sufficient detail for the interview to yield rich data. The test was administered in person or online. Where administered in person, participants completed the test using paper-based questionnaires; where administered online, participants completed questionnaires using *Google Forms*.

Once completed, test scores were quantified, and *Step 3, Notification*, commenced. This consisted of informing test takers whether they had satisfied the inclusion criteria. Out of the 21, five did *not* satisfy the criteria and were informed. *Step 4, Schedule interviews*, involved ensuring participants remained agreeable to the interviews, setting a date and time for the interview, and building further rapport. This last step was essential to avoid participation attrition. It is notable that, of the 16 who made it to step four, only one was not included in the research due to unavailability. The lack of attrition can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the four step selection process required significant commitment to complete, meaning

the participants were "invested" in the research. Second, the participants appeared to embrace the underlying "cause" of the research. For many of the participants, dating had been a source of frustration in their formative years and, as a result, they were interested in contributing to research that increased our understanding of dating which might also help other people.

2.2.3 Critical evaluation of the sample

A number of criticisms could be levelled at the sampling methodology. Some criticisms are common to expert performance, some to qualitative research, and some to the specifics of the research. Most criticisms were either circumvented or justifiable in terms of the research design.

2.2.3.1 Selecting genuine dating experts

The problem of whether experts included in research are indeed "experts," is common in studies of expert performance. Failure to adequately address the criticism undermines the claims any research seeks to draw. The research addressed the problem in two ways. First, as Gobet (2016) and Ericsson (2006b) argue, the research adopted a skill based definition for expertise. This is more appropriate than selecting for length of experience, qualifications, or peer review, all of which can produce experts with extended experience or knowledge, but who lack skill (Gobet, 2016; Sosniak, 2006). Despite this limitation, selection based on "popularity or reputation…is widely accepted [by researchers of expert performance] as a reasonable strategy, at least for certain domain of expertise where other measures of competence might not be available" (Sosniak, 2006, p. 293). With this regard, the Test of Dating Expertise with its three criterion measures, most of which aimed to assess skill can be considered especially robust. In addition, to skilled based inclusion criteria, the participants all also satisfied other characteristics considered indicative of expertise. For instance, all were highly knowledgeable and held in esteem by experienced peers (this was assessed by Criterion Two: Achievements and reputation indicative of dating expertise). Experienced peers consisted of current or ex-members of the Community who had dedicated themselves to long-term dating skills practice. Typically, experienced peers satisfied the criteria for experts themselves and/or ran successful dating companies. Having an extensive appreciation of the Community, they were well placed to substantiate if potential participants were amongst the most skilled Community members.

The participants also had extensive experience, all having completed more than five years of dedicated dating skills practice. As such, readers can be confident that all the dating experts, were indeed experts and superior performers at the task of dating initiation.

2.2.3.2 Purposeful "outlier" sampling

The research involved the recruitment of a purposeful non-random *extreme case sample* of 15 dating experts. As "outliers" participants had special characteristics which suggested they might have the qualities of being *critical* or *revelatory cases* (Yin, 2009) which enabled the research to challenge prevailing notions on the process of becoming a dating expert. The nature of purposeful sampling methodology comes with limitations. It can be criticised in terms of bias and lack of quantitative standards of generalisability. Yet, given the goals of the research, such limitations were justified. In effect, the forfeiture of *statistical generalisability* was traded for qualitative standards of generalisability including *theoretical generalisability* or *analytic generalisability* (Firestone, 1993), which relates to whether findings support the generation of theories; and *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which concerns the extent to which findings can be used to make inferences about other designated groups. Transferability is achievable if analysis of the phenomenon is *thick* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), providing a rich and detailed description that is relevant to other populations.

Due to the rarity of dating experts, it would have been unfeasible to use probabilistic sampling or recruit a large sample that met the stringent inclusion criteria. Purposeful sampling facilitated the recruitment of dating experts who were available and willing to be interviewed. Crucially, the final participants were what Patton (1990) describes as "information rich," being able to communicate their experiences in great detail; delivering compelling data for increasing our understanding of dating expertise.

2.2.3.3 Size of the sample

The discussion of generalisability from purposeful samples leads directly to an enduring question in research: what sample size is appropriate? Research on expert performance and intuition often relies on small samples: Collins, Collins, and Carson's (2016) study of sports coaches' intuitive decision making had a sample of 18; Baker, Côté, and Abernethy (2003) studied 15 expert sports decision makers; Côté's (1999) study of athletes development consisted of 4 experts. Hensman and Sadler-Smith (2011) completed a study of intuitive decision making by 15 banking executives. Two of the most seminal studies on expert intuition completed by de Groot (1978) and Chase and Simon (1973) had samples of 10 and 3 chess players respectively.

While this suggests research on expertise is generally accepting of small samples (partly due to the rarity of experts, see Section 2.3.4), qualitative researchers argue that small samples are often unjustly criticised due to the different standards for quantitative research. Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young (2018) reviewed 15 years of qualitative interview studies published in peer reviewed journals and concluded:

> Qualitative sample sizes were predominantly—and often without justification—characterised as insufficient (i.e., 'small') and discussed in the context of study limitations. Sample size

insufficiency was seen to threaten the validity and generalizability of studies' results, with the latter being frequently conceived in nomothetic terms. (p.1).

A key problem is the lack of "formal criteria" for determining sample size in qualitative research. Guidelines in articles and books generally suggest samples ranging anywhere between 5 to 50 are sufficient (Dworkin, 2012). Yet, different qualitative approaches have very different conceptualisations of the appropriate size. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which focuses on inductive theory development and broad generalisations, tends to use samples of approximately 25 (yet as low as 5; Thompson, 2011). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osbourne, 2008), which focuses on detailed research into individual experiences and typically seeks to make less generalisation, often uses small samples from one to six (Brocki & Wearden, 2014). As Smith and Osbourne (2008) write, "IPA studies have been published with samples of one, four, nine, fifteen and more. Recently there has been a trend for some IPA studies to be conducted with a very small number of participants" (p. 56).

As the above reveals, even within qualitative traditions there is significant divergence. This is inevitable given qualitative research is so varied and requirements change depending on a wide range of factors such as the "quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the use of shadowed data, and the qualitative method and study designed used" (Dworkin, 2012, p. 1320).

Undoubtably, the "gold standard" in qualitative research for determining sample size is *saturation* (Saunders et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018), a concept originally derived from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While there are different ways of conceptualising and defining saturation, effectively it is used to make decisions about whether to stop increasing data collection (and/or analysis) in terms of *informational redundancy*, which relates to whether further analysis would prompt new understandings or theoretical development about the phenomenon (Vasileiou et al, 2018).

Due to the idiosyncrasies of qualitative studies, Saunders et al. (2018) argue that researchers operationalise saturation in a way consistent with their own research questions and theoretical position. In this regard, saturation was operationalised for this thesis in terms of two main criteria:

1. *Theoretical saturation—or theoretical consensus:* Once additional data collection would no longer reveal additional insight on core constructs, theories, or patterns relating to dating expertise/intuition.
2. *Volume and richness of reporting:* Once the data collected was considerable and provided a richly textured understanding of dating expertise/intuition which could not be improved upon with further analysis.

This thesis settled on 15 participants as the two criteria were satisfied. Following analysis of approximately two thirds of the interviews, no new concepts were identified, although the remaining interviews were coded in order to develop a better understanding of the characteristics across the sample. Further discussion regarding saturation can be found in Section 12.4.2.

2.2.3.4 Sample heterogeneity

A potential criticism of including dating experts from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia is that the sample would be too heterogenous, diverging in important characteristics. However, recruiting a sample from one region was difficult due to the rarity of dating experts. Moreover, "dating expertise," *not* ethnicity or culture, was the critical characteristic selected for. The Test of Dating Expertise ensured that all participants shared the crucial characteristic of being dating experts. Indeed, the variation in regions can be considered a research strength. For instance, regardless of region, the role of deliberate practice was reported as essential to the development of dating expertise. Such evidence, provides additional weight to arguments supporting theoretical generalisability and transferability.

2.2.3.5 No control group of non-experts

Another possible criticism is that a control group of non-experts was not interviewed. Typically, qualitative research does not use a control group, and studies only using samples of experts is consistent with seminal expertise research (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Zuckerman, 1977). In this regard, Sosniak (2006) argues that using a sample of non-experts is not necessary when one is purposefully studying a distinct elite group. The research aimed to assess how dating experts became experts; not to examine how novices became intermediates. A sample of intermediates and novices could have been recruited, but it would have been less efficient and unnecessary in terms of the research goal. For instance, the dating experts were able to recount their experiences as intermediates and novices, thus enabling the research to also evaluate how practice influences novices and intermediates.

2.3 Data Collection: Retrospective Interviews

Data collection consisted of qualitative retrospective semi-structured interviews with the 15 dating experts, which enabled the research to evaluate the developmental processes underlying dating expertise.

2.3.1 The interview schedule

Before the interviews commenced, a semi-structured interview schedule was produced as a guide (*The Dating Skills Developmental Interview Guide*, see Appendix 8). The schedule design was influenced by Sosnaik's (2006) and Côté, Ericsson, and Law's (2005) approach for designing retrospective interviews, which consisted of designing semi-structured interviews for evaluating participants' engagement in dating-related activities, and the factors that influenced the amount and quality of practice they completed, and their dating performance. My knowledge of the Community from previous research as well as piloting (see Section 2.3.5), reading Community articles, books and perusing forums, was also

important when designing the interview questions. The interview schedule was structured around four main categories. Three of the categories were derived from Ericsson et al's. (1993) constraints to expertise (the resource constraint, motivation constraint, and effort constraint), with the fourth category focused on dating performance. The four categories with example questions are set out below.

1. The resource Constraint: e.g., Can you tell me about the type of Community resources you drew on that helped you to improve your dating skills?
2. The Motivational Constraint: e.g., Looking back, what motivated you to do dating skills practice?
3. The Effort Constraint: e.g., Can you tell me about the amount of dating skills practice you've done?
4. Past and Current Level of Dating Performance: e.g., Comparing before you joined the community with now, are there differences in your *effectiveness* at dating?

While the interview schedule enabled the propositions and research questions to be assessed, they were designed for flexibility and to minimise leading questions. The position adopted was that the dating experts were the experiential experts and, while the two propositions were developed using access to existing theory, the research prized new conceptual understanding, allowing the participants to lead the findings.

2.3.2 Four step interview procedure

Given participants were from three regions of the world, completing all the interviews in person was impractical. Interviews with participants based in the United Kingdom, and a selected number from Australia and the United States, were conducted in coffee shops, restaurants, and at participants' homes. In person interviews were recorded with a dictaphone. Where meeting in person was not possible, interviews were conducted using *Skype* and recorded using *Apple's* OSX software *QuickTime Player*.

Interviews consisted of a four step procedure illustrated in Figure 5. In *Step 1*, in accordance with the ethics procedure, informed consent was obtained, and a pre-interview questionnaire titled the *Dating and Sexual History Questionnaire* (see Appendix 9) was administered.
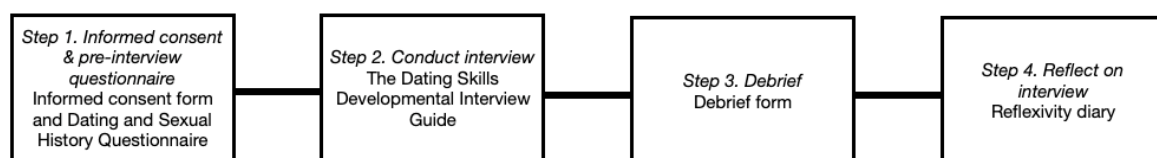
Figure 5. *The four step interview procedure.* The interviews followed a four step procedure and were carried out either in person or over Skype.

The Dating and Sexual History Questionnaire was specifically designed for the research, providing an overview of participants' dating and sexual history, and helped to contextualise the line of questioning during the interviews. In *Step 2*, *Conduct interview*, the interview commenced using The Dating Skills Developmental Interview Guide. In *Step 3*, once the interview was completed, participants were debriefed and thanked, and provided with my contact details for any follow-up questions they might have (see Appendix 10 and 11 for the consent and debrief forms). In *Step 4*, following each interview, thoughts and reflections on the interview were noted down in a reflexivity diary to be revisited later.

2.3.3 Interview technique: Interviews as conversations

As a method of collecting data, interviewing requires significant skill and know-how, given that the way in which researchers ask respondents questions fundamentally affects the quality of the findings (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As a researcher with previous experience conducting interviews, my approach was influenced by integrating "best practice" guidelines with techniques and concepts I have found productive. Conceptually, the approach to interviews taken can be best viewed as encompassing a "top-down" conceptual appreciation of "interviews as conversations," and "bottom-up approach" to asking targeted, probing questions, that facilitated a fine grained appreciation of participants' experiences.

2.3.3.1 Top-down appreciation of interviews as conversations

Following Rubin and Rubin (1995), interviews were framed as "conversational partnerships." This was more than a "gambit" to engage with the participants. Interviewees were viewed as the "experiential expert" whose insights would facilitate a detailed understanding of the relationship between practice and dating expertise. Constructing interviews as conversations, was a frame that embodied a fine balance between what I term "interviewer explicit priorities" (my research priorities as an interviewer), and the "interviewee's implicit priorities" (interviewee's priorities as a contributor to scientific research).

For an interviewer, explicit role priorities include: being a researcher who has designed a study, who needs to use verbal and non-verbal skills to build rapport, set interviewees at ease, ask questions related to the research goal, all while meeting personal and ethical obligations. Such explicit priorities are clearly the responsibility of the interviewer. On the other hand, the interviewee's role priorities, are best construed as "implicit." The Interviewee's role is to provide a truthful, comprehensible, and hopefully insightful, narrative suitable for scientific analysis. This is implicit in that the full detail of interviewee's priorities are not necessarily acknowledged or shared. Furthermore, they are implicit given the quality of the research is ultimately the overriding concern of the interviewer, not the interviewee.

As an interviewer, it was therefore necessary to "frame" the interviews, imbuing respondents with what Goffman (1956) describes as the appropriate "definition of the situation," that enabled the accomplishment of the implicit and explicit priorities. In this regard, I sought to establish in the mind of interviewees, an appreciation of the scientific nature of the research, a sincere obligation to report their experiences accurately and honestly, while ensuring they felt at ease, and open to share their experiences.

While the study called for in-depth interviewing, researchers need to be careful not to cause interviewee distress through the recollection of painful past memories (Patton, 1990). For this research, topics that presented the potential for emotional distress related to romantic rejection, loneliness, and isolation. For this reason, if there was any indication of potential distress I was prepared to stop sensitive questions, and participants were made aware they could terminate interviews at any time. However, unlike studies where researchers may need to delve deeply into highly emotive topics such as husband-wife conflict or childhood abuse (Patton, 1990), the interviews did not generate any moments where interviewee distress was a concern. Rather to the contrary, participants appeared to enjoy the opportunity to share their experiences of dating with a neutral listener and contribute to scientific research.

2.3.3.2 Bottom-up approach to asking probing questions

While interviewees were viewed as experiential experts, this did not mean statements were not scrutinised. Adopting Rubin and Rubin's (1995) advice, three principle types of interview questions were used: *main questions, probe questions,* and *follow-up questions*. Main questions initiated and guided the interview. Probe questions explored issues in greater detail, deepened understanding, enhanced the depth of the responses, and checked the validity of the participants' statements. Follow-up questions were used to explore novel lines of enquiry that arose during the interviews and that appeared relevant.

The three types enabled precision when identifying participants' actual behaviours, cognitions, beliefs and experience; providing flexibility to probe, demonstrate indirect knowledge, or use targeted questions to "mine" greater detail, and obtain transparent information. They also proved useful where concerns about exaggeration, distortion, or opposing versions of events cropped up. In addition, they were invaluable where precision and tact were called for, such as when discussing sensitive issues which, given the nature of dating, were not uncommon (for instance when participants recalled emotionally poignant dating situations or dating rejection episodes).

2.3.3.3 An "outsider" seeking an "insider's" view

As an "outsider" seeking an "insider's" understanding of dating expertise, framing the interviews as conversations proved crucial to the success of the data collection. As someone with no affiliation to the Community, there was no pressure to present a favourable view of participants. Rather, my main concern as a non-member centred on building sufficient rapport with participants so that they felt comfortable sharing crucial information. Participants were aware of the sensitive nature of dating initiation and the negative press coverage it could attract, yet the forthcoming nature of the interviews suggests they felt comfortable to speak openly and honestly. A number of factors likely contributed to this, including being a male of roughly similar age who had done my "homework" on the Community; as well the mode of my introduction to participants, which was often through peers, serving as a form of endorsement. But, attempting to be reflexive, perhaps most important to building rapport was the psychological lens that I tend to adopt as a psychologist—viewing people as more less conventional

actors shaped by their social circumstances (rather than as inherently good or bad actors). By attempting to place no judgement on the participants' actions, it appeared to encourage open and candid dialogue.

2.3.4 Justification of Retrospective Interviews

2.3.4.1 Expert performance as a special case.

Research on expert performance is concerned with understanding the processes and factors that lead to superior performance (Gobet, 2016). This objective has prompted a vast amount of research as investigators seek to discover what is generalisable within or across domains of expertise. Research on expert performance can be considered a "special case," with particular research traditions and methods of working (Sosniak, 2006). The designation of special case logically follows from two important considerations. The first stems from the essential quality that—by definition—experts are rare, and possess unique knowledge, behaviour, and skills. Thus, in any one particular domain, there will be a limited number of experts to study. The second consideration derives from an appreciation that expertise arises in a complex environment, and that identifying the variables that give rise to the superior skills experts possess is highly challenging as the researcher faces the predicament of having to design research to analyse a small number of cases that illuminate the factors that give rise to experts' skills.

2.3.4.2 Learning from experts

Reflecting on the nature of researching experts, Grubber (1982) wrote, "If we want to know how people become extraordinary adults, we can start with some of the latter…and then try to find out how they came to do it" (p.15). This statement embodies the main reason retrospective interviews were selected. Dating experts could be identified and questioned to assess what gave rise to their superior dating skills. Sosniak (2006) wrote retrospective interviews provide the opportunity for, "advanced learners can [to] teach us about their knowledge, skill, and ways of working" (Sosniak, 2006, p.297). Retrospective interviews facilitate this through "experience mining," providing a detailed long-term view of the developmental processes that give rise to experts' skills which would be difficult to obtain using other methods such as questionnaires (Sosniak, 2006).

Research drawing on interviews with experts are almost universally retrospective because of the nature of expertise: it takes many years to become an expert and, many who endeavour to become experts, will fall short. As Wagner, Stanovich and Ericsson (1996) point out, prospective studies of the development of expertise are largely unworkable; it is implausible to identify individuals and then trace their progress for years, or even decades, in the hope that they become experts. The (reported) high attrition rate of people who join the Community, but do not stay active, confirms that a prospective study was not a feasible option for my research.

One of the most problematic issues with retrospective research concerns respondent ability to recall past events accurately. People forget and reconstruct their experiences, which raises the question:

can experts accurately recall the practice they engaged in? Concerns about people's ability to accurately recall past experiences, while valid, are not severe enough to dismiss retrospective interviews. For instance, research indicates that following a phase of childhood amnesia, there is a simple retention in memory for the last 20 or 30 years of a person's life (Rubin & Shulkind, 1997). For their research on the development of expertise, Bloom (1985), Campitelli and Gobet (2011), Côté (1999), Ericsson et al. (1993), all relied on participants' recall of practice activities. Relative to the studies cited above, in terms of autobiographical recall, there is arguably less ground for criticising this thesis. Whereas the studies cited required participants to recall practice experiences going back 20 years or more, this research focused almost exclusively on participants' recall of practice in the last decade (only two participants had been actively practising dating skills for longer than this), with only occasional reference to earlier highly pertinent experience.

An additional problem with interviews is people's ability to be introspective and report on their higher order cognitive processes. Despite concern, there is a long tradition of studies on expertise where participants are required to be highly introspective stemming all the way back to de Groot (1978), where he asked chess masters to "think aloud" and describe how they came to their move selections. In more recent years there have been numerous studies on intuition completed using interview methods such as the *critical incident technique* (see, Akinci, 2014), designed to "catch intuitions" and explore cognitive processes and fleeting emotional experiences. Nonetheless to address the concern, a principal aim was to ensure the interview reports were grounded in highly salient events to improve their accuracy, a point established in a classic paper by Nisbet and Wilson (1977):

> Though people may not be able to observe directly their cognitive processes, they will sometimes be able to report accurately about them. Accurate reports will occur when influential stimuli are salient and are plausible causes of the responses they produce, and will not occur when stimuli are not salient or are not plausible causes. (p. 231)

2.3.4.3 The advantage of qualitative studies

Another important justification of retrospective interviewing, is that qualitative research is a valued technique as it provides the opportunity to look for underlying regularities or inconsistencies with quantitative research (McAdam & Pals, 2006). The vast majority of research on expert performance has been completed using quantitative methods. Notable exceptions carried out include interview-based studies discussed in the literature review, such as Bloom (1985), and Côté (1999). Their studies provided support for the theory of deliberate practice in fields as broad as swimming, tennis, mathematics, and science, just as this thesis supports the theory of deliberate practice in the field of dating.

As well as confirming regularities with the theory of deliberate practice, the research was designed to facilitate the discovery of inconsistencies (for instance, I theorised that the view deliberate practice is *not* intrinsically enjoyable may not be fully correct—something later confirmed by the research; see the findings in Chapter 7). In this regard, the integrated deductive and inductive nature of the

research and interview design proved critical. The deductive elements enabled the research to assess whether deliberate practice and expert intuition extended to the field of dating. In addition, an important benefit of the deductive interview questions is that they respect participants' time (Sosniak, 2006). For instance, if previous studies have shown that practice is important to expertise, choosing to ignore previous findings could result in interviews exploring areas that are not relevant to expertise, thus making poor use of participants' time. Inductive elements of the research facilitated divergent thinking and the development of new lines of theory, which ultimately led to aspects of deliberate practice and intuition being questioned. It is worthy to note, that at the outset it was not planned to do a detailed investigation into intuition; but the intuitive nature of dating performance was so vividly reported by the dating experts that it lead to Investigation 2 focusing on dating intuition.

In conclusion, the retrospective interviews provided a unique opportunity to learn in great detail about the behavioural and cognitive processes underlying dating skill improvement and dating intuition. Quantitative research would have been unable to provide similar rich, detailed, subtle insights into the realities of years of dating practice which lead to the development of the thesis' two theories.

2.3.5 Piloting

In research, piloting is commonly used to explore the feasibility of a main study, and/or to develop and pre-test particular research methods (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). This thesis used piloting for both reasons. Five dating experts were included in piloting for a total of eight sessions. The sessions ranged from 40 to 120 minutes each. For each session, an agenda and relevant paperwork was prepared.

In terms of the feasibility of the main study piloting proved valuable for the following:

- Assessing the feasibility of meeting and recruiting a sample of dating experts.
- Assessing whether dating experts would be able to report their experiences accurately, vividly, and convincingly.
- Gaining a more detailed appreciation of dating experts' practice activities and how they actually conceptualised dating initiation and practice.
- To calculate the specific amount of deliberate practice accumulated (see Appendix 13: *Quantity of Dating Initiation Practice*).
- Developing the investigations, propositions, and research questions.
- Developing initial theory on the relationship between dating practice, expertise, and intuition.

In relation to the development and testing of questionnaires and interviews, piloting helped with the following:

- Refining the definition of a dating expert.

- Developing inclusion criteria and The Dating Expertise Test.
- Developing and piloting the semi-structured interviews.
- Developing and piloting questionnaires.
- Determining the best methods for interviewing the participants.

The piloting was important to the overall success and quality of the research. It enabled confirmation of the feasibility of the research, it facilitated the determination of specific research ideas, and enabled the development of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interview guide prior to commencing the interviews. Piloting provided me, as researcher, with the knowledge that I had the resources and procedural know-how to execute the research and deliver on the two investigations, while making an original research contribution.

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 Six stages of thematic analysis

The 15 interviews were analysed using *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an analytical technique used by qualitative researchers that enables qualitative information to be organised into manageable categories that facilitates an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six stage process. The interviews generated a large amount of information to manage, organise and analyse. The longest interview lasted 2.5 hours, providing over 40 pages and 17,000 words to analyse. In total the interviews produced some 500 pages to analyse.

Analysis was a recursive process, involving detailed examination of the transcripts; moving back and forth to compare and arrange the data into manageable meaning units or codes. Meaning units (also referred to as codes or coding units) were arranged into specific categories or themes, where a theme can be seen as capturing "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82).

The first phase involved transcription and familiarisation with the data. Each interview recording was transcribed verbatim (utterances such as "Uh huh" or "Hmm" were removed if they did not influence the meaning), and then read actively to become familiar with the script and search for initial meaning and patterns. The second phase involved examining the transcript in great detail and coding specific excerpts. The coding was done using qualitative computing software *NVivo.*The codes identified *semantic meaning* in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where things are identified at the explicit or surface meaning; as opposed to the *latent level* (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which an attempt is made to understand the assumptions behind the statements (as in *discourse analysis*; Boyatzis, 1998). Theory-driven aspects of

the research meant coding focused on searching for confirming and disconfirming evidence for specific questions, while inductive elements meant being open to new emerging concepts.

The third, fourth, and fifth phases involved organising all the coding into overarching themes and sub-themes. It was a highly recursive process that involved identifying the significance of the underlying data and considering whether themes needed to be merged, refined, or separated. Two main considerations when selecting themes were Braun and Clarke's (2006) *prevalence of the reporting*, and *keyness* in relation to the research questions. Themes were reviewed in-line with Patton's (1990) criteria for *internal homogeneity* and *external homogeneity,* which aimed to ensure that there are clear distinctions between themes and the data contained within each theme were meaningful. Coding was considered complete once saturation was satisfied in line with the definition in Section 2.2.4.3.

The final phase involved presenting the thematic analysis in the findings chapters. Rich, vivid, extracts were used to capture the essence of the data and reflect the prevalence of themes.

2.4.2 Justification of thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was justified for three main reasons. First, the aim of the research was investigate whether practice influenced dating expertise. The thematic analysis enabled themes and patterns to be identified within and across data sets relating to the participants' development and intuitive performance. Second, and related to this, thematic analysis was selected for the purely pragmatic reason that it is considered rigorous, credible, and has well elaborated procedures which facilitated the analysis and management of the large amount of data generated by the interviews. Third, thematic analysis matched the underlying theoretical assumptions of the research. Thematic analysis can be used with research from a diverse range of analytic and epistemological traditions, and is concordant with this research, which is conducted in line with the *realist/experiential* tradition that sets out to be less interpretative and subjective in how it reports participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4.2.1 Thematic analysis and deductive-inductive reasoning

Thematic analysis was chosen because it is concordant with both deductive and inductive reasoning which both played an important role in the research design. This section discusses how deductive and inductive reasoning influenced coding and thematic analysis. If we imagine the approach to coding on a spectrum running from highly deductive to highly inductive, the analysis for Investigation 1 can be considered highly deductive. For Investigation 1, existing theory strongly influenced my coding lens, and I actively sought evidence that confirmed or refuted the theory of deliberate practice.

This manifested in three main ways. First, data was scrutinised to see whether the dating experts' practice failed to satisfy the criteria of deliberate practice. Participants' practice may have been extensive and exhaustive, for instance conforming to the idea that "practice makes perfect"—which suggests expertise stems from quantity of practice, not (necessarily) quality, but it may not have qualified as deliberate practice. Second, if participants' practice did qualify as deliberate practice, I was not wedded to

a view that such practice would incorporate the specific components of deliberate practice identified in Proposition 1 (see Section 2.1.1.1). While some authors present the deliberate practice framework as firmly established, in reality there is significant variation in how deliberate practice is construed in research by Ericsson and other academics (see the discussion in Section 3.5.2, *What constitutes deliberate practice?*). As interviews were analysed, and confidence in emerging patterns increased, themes became more concrete. Third, ever mindful of influences such as confirmation bias, I sought to maintain an "inductive mindset" when conducting analysis—actively seeking fresh leads, scrutinising interpretations of the data, and ensuring themes were representative. The inductive mindset proved invaluable and resulted in themes that had not initially been conceived (such as *practice mindset*) to emerge, enriching our understanding of how people make the transition from dating novice to expert.

Compared to Investigation 1, the coding for Investigation 2 can be categorised at the other end of the deductive-inductive spectrum, being highly inductive and "bottom up." Disciplinary theory had significantly less influence on how the data was coded and scrutinised. That said, as each interview was analysed, codes were applied, patterns began to form, and evidence supporting specific themes grew and, as a result, there was a tendency to become more deductive in-line with emerging patterns.

2.4.2.2 Interrater reliability

An important point to discuss in relation to thematic analysis is the lack of *interrater reliability* tests, which are used to ascertain the degree to which two or more different raters interpret or code the same data (Davey, Gugiu, & Coryn, 2010). While it has become more common in recent years to report or discuss interrater reliability, the majority of qualitative researchers do not carry out the tests, or fail to describe them adequately (Campbell, Quincy, Osseman, & Pederson, 2013). For instance Cook (2012) reviewed 64 published qualitative articles and revealed that only 31% reported interrater reliability. Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) reviewed 137 published qualitative interview studies and found only 69% (n=137) contained *any information* on interrater reliability and in most cases the information provided was extremely ambiguous and/or brief.

While interrater reliability is increasingly recognised as good practice, the decision was taken not to complete it for various reasons. Interrater reliability is especially valuable in large scale studies where applying codes consistently is a problem due to different researchers being involved in data collection and analysis. As a sole researcher for a PhD, consistency between different researchers was not a concern. Furthermore, given the nature of the study where analysis required deep appreciation of key research areas—expertise, intuition, dating, and the Community—involving other researchers in data analysis presented limitations. Much of this reasoning is embodied in Campbell et al's (2013) statement:

> There is not much guidance in the literature for researchers concerned with establishing reliable coding of in-depth semistructured interview transcripts. And there is virtually none for establishing reliability in the situation where coding is left up to a single coder, particularly one who needs to be knowledgeable enough about the subject matter in question to identify subtle

meanings in the text. The need for knowledgeable coders is especially important when working with in-depth semistructured interviews. Coding this type of data often involves interpreting what respondents mean in their answers to questions. Doing so correctly requires that coders have sufficient background knowledge in the subject matter of the interviews. (p. 297)

As a result, I determined that the quality of the findings would be supported by the richness of the thematic analysis, and triangulation using interview extracts and quantitative counts. That said, with hindsight, if I was to do the study again, I would do an interrater relatability test as a matter of good practice. Not only is it increasingly seen as desirable, but the processes of involving another researcher would aid the overall process by providing the opportunity to reflect on the themes.

2.5 Research Quality

There are many approaches to measuring quality in qualitative research. Qualitative research is not a single homogenous field; it is enriched from a variety of disciplines, paradigm, and epistemologies, and embraces multiple standards of research (Morrow, 2005). Tracy (2010) argues that the main concern in qualitative research is to complete research that is of good quality, in that it is rigorously conducted, credible, study a topic worthy of research, and follows ethical procedures. Tracy asserts that her approach provides:

A common language of excellence for qualitative research and a useful pedagogic compass… A conceptualization for qualitative quality that transcends paradigm encourages scholars to reflect on the variety of crafts available, develop their own style, yet respect and learn from the practices of others. (p.849)

Throughout this methods chapter, important issues relating to the research were critically discussed, ensuring it delivered high standards of quality. That said, additional points can be highlighted here. Given there was no "off the shelf" research strategy for conducting this research, the thesis drew heavily on methods used by other researchers for each of the main components—selecting the sample, collecting the data, and analysing the data—to ensure it was rigorously conducted. The retrospective interviews were designed around how other researchers had applied them (e.g., Sosnaik, 2006; Côté et al., 2005). The research went to great lengths to ensure, for instance, that guidance was used to develop rigorous selection criteria for selecting dating experts, which resulted in a new Test of Dating Expertise. Thematic analysis drew on Braun and Clarks' (2006) six stage model, and also used their *15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis* to assess the quality of the thematic analysis. The checklist included questions such as: Are themes internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive? Do the extracts illustrate the analytic claims? Are the assumptions about the thematic analysis clearly explicated?

Throughout, the methods adopted were clearly described and details were provided, facilitating

confidence and credibility in the findings. Ethical permission for the research was obtained in line with Brunel University London's College of Health and Life Sciences ethical standards, and all personal and ethical obligations to the participants, such as gaining informed consent and ensuring anonymity, were carried out (see Appendices 10 and 11).

2.5.1 Reflexivity Statement

Reflexivity, the act of reflecting on one's role and impact on the research, is an important component of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Being aware of ones strengths, weakness, values, and biases, helps researchers identify problems and "bracket" them to minimise the negative impact (Ahern, 1999). While some researchers write extended reflexivity statements in one section, Braun and Clarke (2013) warn against this approach, stating: "in *general*, we would advise against having a separate 'reflexive section'… as it nearly always works better to weave your (personal) reflections throughout your report in relevant sections (e.g., introduction, methods, discussion)" (p. 303; emphasis in original).

In line with this, discussions related to reflexivity are integrated throughout the thesis. Throughout Chapter 2, strengths and weaknesses are discussed and I report on how my underlying epistemology influenced research decisions. For instance, Section 2.1.1.3, describes why I sought to approach the sensitive subject of dating objectively and through a scientific lens. The sub-sections in 2.3 reflect on why I chose a deductive-inductive research design, the realist position adopted for interpreting interview data, and my impact on the interview process. The reflexive process is rekindled in Chapter 12, where, for instance, I reflect whether other researchers analysis of the data would have been consistent with mine.

2.6 Chapter 2 Summary

This methods chapter described how the 15 dating experts were recruited, interviewed, and their transcripts analysed. Throughout the chapter, research decisions were justified in terms of the goals of the research and my underlying epistemology.

PART 2

INVESTIGATION 1: IS DATING EXPERTISE A LEARNABLE SKILL?

Chapter 3. Deliberate Practice Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 critically discusses research on expert performance and deliberate practice. By doing so, it lays the foundation for Chapter 4's review of dating literature and Chapter 5's conceptual arguments which contend dating skills are a form of expertise that can be improved with practice. This chapter is structured as follows. First, it discusses what expertise is; seeking a definition that captures the essence of expert performance. Second, it provides an overview of deliberate practice, delineating what it is and how partaking in it leads to performance improvement. Third, it looks at contested areas of research on deliberate practice; focusing on whether practice is "all it takes to become an expert."

3.2 What is an Expert?

Research on deliberate practice is concerned with understanding the process by which people become experts. Therefore, the question of what constitutes "expertise" is an important one. This section critically discusses the literature, eventually arriving at a definition of experts as "superior performers."

3.2.1 No consensus on experts and expertise

"Expert" is a status that is respected and even revered (Gobet, 2016). Intuitively, the term expert calls to mind select individuals who have achieved eminence in a particular field: chess grandmasters, sports stars, seasoned physicians, illustrious scientists, coveted lawyers, and musical virtuosos. We can identify why we admire experts: for their mesmerising skills on a football pitch, their panache creating art on a canvas, or their capacity to saves lives in the operating theatre. Yet, despite the ubiquity of expertise, there is no universal consensus on a definition that can be applied to the different fields (Gobet, 2016). Indeed, the pervasiveness of expertise is partly why definitions differ so significantly. What is more, even within specific fields, no clear well-established criteria of "expertness" exists (Ericsson, 2006b). As a result, the term expert has been undermined by its misuse, sometimes being attributed to individuals irrespective of any "real" competence (Gobet, 2016).

At the crux of this matter, when we talk about expertise we are interested in competence, skill and eminent performance—or at least we should be (Ericsson, 2006b). However, as the discussion will reveal, researchers of expertise have not always adopted this approach.

3.2.2 Arriving at an academic definition of expertise

Given the diverse fields in which we find expertise, Stein (1997) has argued the term "expert" should only be used if a specific frame of reference is identified. A common frame of reference defines expertise in terms of length of time spent in a domain (Chi, 2006). Given expertise develops over time (Bloom, 1985; Chase & Simon, 1973), the approach has some strengths. However, recent research has been critical of this approach, pointing out that time spent in a field can be a poor predictor of skill and true expertise (Chi, 2006; Ericsson, 2006b; Gobet, 2016), with lengthy experience offering no guarantee a person possesses the requisite competence and skill (Ericsson, 2006b). As most people will likely recognise, just because a person has driven a car, played tennis, or ice skated for 10 years does not automatically make them an expert. Furthermore, even if a person was once a competent car driver or tennis player, their skills could have declined over time.

Common alternative frames of reference to delineate expertise include social reputation, education, and accumulated knowledge. Yet, these too can fail to identify performers who satisfy standards expected of experts. When peers nominate colleagues as experts based on reputation, research shows their performance can be unimpressive. For example, computer programmers have been found to be less competent at programming than computer science students, and physics students at UC Berkeley outperformed physics professors on introductory physics problems (Ericsson, 2006b). Tetlock's (2005) research on political forecasters is one of the most renowned studies that highlights the fallibility of reputation. Collecting over 80,000 predictions about future political events from 284 respected political and economic professionals, Tetlock's research revealed their predictions were as poor as leaving it to chance—a finding that prompted him to describe expert political forecasters as producing "poorer predictions than dart-throwing monkeys" (p. 219).

3.2.2.1 Elo Rating: An idealised method for categorising experts

If categorising experts based on experience or reputation is fallible, what is a better approach? In scientific terms, an ideal method for defining expertise involves rank ordering performers in terms of their relative results over certain periods (Gobet, 2016), with the "top" expert being the person ranked *Number 1*. Unlike the approaches described previously, rank ordering leads to experts being identified in terms of their actual skill. Rank ordering is used in sports such as tennis (by the *Association of Tennis Professionals*, or *ATP*) and football (by the *International Federation of Association*, or *FIFA*). Not all approaches to rank ordering identify the most skilled experts with the same precision. For instance *ATP* takes into consideration only performers' results in the prior year, and ignores the strength of their opponents, whereas the Elo rating system used for chess, table tennis, and Scrabble, is considered the finest rank ordering system by some margin (Gobet, 2016). The Elo system enables the outcome of a game and the level of skill of the competitors to be taken into account, producing a measure of ability

that facilitates the ranking system to distinguish between the participants' various skill abilities with fine precision (for instance a Grandmaster has an Elo rating of 2500 or above, whereas an International Master is in the range of 2400 to 2499). Based on sound mathematical modelling, the Elo rating has been shown to produce highly accurate predictions of expertise and outcome based on players' level of skill (Gobet, 2016).

3.2.2.2 Intuitive expertise and "knowing-how"

When we look at performers who typically feature at the top of rank ordering scales (the Roger Federers and Magnus Carlsens of the world), it is often claimed that such elite performers distinguish themselves from their less rivals peers in terms of *intuition*. While intuition is discussed at length in *Chapter 8: Expert Intuition & Dating: Conceptual Literature Review*, it is useful to briefly discuss key points here as, for some theorists, intuition—the ability to perform fluidly, rapidly, holistically, and unconsciously—is viewed as the defining feature of expertise (e.g., Dreyfus & Drefus, 1998).

Such intuitive experts can be said to possess two forms of skill or knowledge referred to as *declarative* and *procedural knowledge* (Fitts & Posner, 1967). Declarative knowledge involves *knowing-that* something is the case, for instance that x + x equals 2x, or a surgeons knowledge of what instrument to use during an operation. Such knowledge is conscious and can be verbalised. On the other hand, procedural knowledge involves *knowing-how* to do something, such as possessing the skill to ride a bike, speak one's native tongue or recognise another persons emotions. Such know-how is largely tacit or non-conscious (Fitts & Posner, 1967).

Of the two, know-how—actually having the embedded skills and competency to execute a consummate performance in a non-conscious way—is arguably the better definition of expertise. While certain scientists, especially in earlier decades, emphasised the role of declarative knowledge in assessing expertise, a significant amount of research reveals that it is not uncommon for experts performing at the highest level to possess less declarative knowledge than their more adept peers, being less able to articulate the reasoning for how they solve problems (Gobet, 2016; Williams & Davids, 1995). Defining experts as intuitive performers who know-how rather than know-that, recognises that those who score highest on ranking systems that measure *relative* performance in their given field are *the* imminent experts. With this appreciation in mind, we can work towards a satisfactory definition of expertise.

3.2.2.3 Experts as "superior performers"

In the vast majority of domains studied by researchers of expertise, no Elo rating style exists to rank performers according to their skill. Given the diverse, complex and unique domains in which expertise is studied, establishing such a universal rating style to take into account know-how is unrealistic. Nonetheless the benefits of ranking performers according to their relative skill provides the source for arriving at a broadly applicable definition of expertise.

Gobet (2016) and Ericsson's (2006b) approach for defining expertise provides the most practical

and valid measure for researchers of expertise. Gobet (2016) defines experts as individuals, "who obtain results that are vastly superior to those obtained by the majority of the population" (p. 5). Ericsson defines experts as those individuals who, "exhibit superior performance for presented representative situations" (p. 689). Both are relative definitions, which have two key merits. First, they emphasise *performance* and provide a standard indicative of expertise—"superior"—that can be readily quantified by the investigator. Duration of practice, reputation, and declarative knowledge, are less significant than ability. Second, a relative definition facilitates comparison in terms of the *actual* abilities performers' possess, and their capacity to execute specific skills at a standard considered indicative of expertise. This enables scientific prediction to be made between experts and non-experts, such as novices and intermediates. Skills can be operationalised using diagnostic measures to rank order performers, or representative tasks designed to test competency—such as an expert radiologist's ability to outperform novices at identifying abnormal mammograms; an expert piano player's superior ability to outperform an intermediate player at reproducing a score after first hearing it; an elite golfer's putts being much closer to the putting holes relative to a novice player. Importantly, this relative approach allows for the social context to be taken into account to develop clear definitions of expertise regardless of the field. Even fields of expertise as atypical as dating, can be conceptualised using these relative definitions, where, as described in Chapter 2, *Methods*, dating experts are performers who are superior at initiating dates relative to dating novices or intermediates.

3.3 Deliberate Practice and Expertise

If experts are superior performers with high levels of know-how, how is such exceptional ability attained? While proponents of the giftedness hypothesis expound the role of heritable characteristics and innate talent, an alternative view emphasises the role of practice. The theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) has been the most influential theory forwarding that practice, not talent, is the true determinant of expertise. Sections 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 discuss key components of deliberate practice and highlight keenly contested debates in the field.

3.3.1 Experts as built not born: A developmental approach to expertise

For even the most renowned sports stars and musical composers, it is clear they were not "born" experts (e.g., Helding, 2011). The theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) is concerned with how such people become superior performers. It is concordant with a research tradition that adopts a *developmental view* of human potential, which emphasises the importance of examining a person's developmental history to determine how practice influenced their ability. Bloom's (1985) research is recognised as a precursor to the theory of deliberate practice. Curious to uncover what made some people achieve great eminence, Bloom designed a pioneering study based on 120 exceptional individuals including Olympic swimmers, tennis champions, concert pianists, and mathematicians. Using a

retrospective interview process that consisted of a detailed analysis of performers' verbal reports describing the factors that influenced their skill development, he found that such development occurred over three stages labelled *the early years*, *the middle years*, and *the later years*. During these years, performers' skill development from novice to expert was shaped by clearly identifiable environmental factors including parental support at an early age, access to elite coaching, access to a pool of high performing peers to practice and compete with and, most significantly, years of dedicated and highly arduous practice. At the time of publication, Bloom's findings were contrary to the widely held view of superior performance that emphasised the role of "inborn talent" (Ericsson, 2006a).

3.3.2 Expertise as a result of accumulated deliberate practice

Bloom's (1985) research revealing the importance of overcoming environmental obstacles laid the foundation for ensuing research on the development of expertise, including Ericsson et al. (1993). Ericsson and colleagues built on Bloom's research by classifying the obstacles to expertise in terms of *three constraints*, and by focusing on identifying the type of practice most associated with expertise. The three constraints they identified were: *resources*, such as access to teachers, training material, training facilities; *motivation*, such as high levels of intrinsic or/and extrinsic motivation to practice and improve performance; and *effort*, which was considered to mean engaging in effortful practice for a dedicated period of time. Over an extensive period of engagement in deliberate practice, these constraints could be overcome, and the type of practice required to become a superior performer could be accumulated.

To understand the influence of practice in more detail, Ericsson et al. (1993) conducted research at Berlin's elite *Academy of Music*, recruiting 30 violinists that had been characterised as either "elite," "good," or "teachers"; with elite being the most skilled and teachers the least. Using an interview and diary procedure to gather details of the quantity, quality, and type of practice the violinists had accumulated, they discovered that what differentiated the participants across the three skill sets was *not* talent, but rather *how much* deliberate practice they had accumulated. Deliberate practice, which consists of "activities that have been specially designed to improve the current level of performance" (p. 368), was deemed to be the most challenging and arduous practice that the violinists completed.

Ericsson and colleagues discovered differences in the extent of deliberate practice among the participants. By the age of 20, the elite violinists had accumulated an average of over 10,000 hours of deliberate practice, which was 2,500 more than the good violinists, and 5,000 more than the teachers (see Ericsson, 2006). This finding demonstrated that the accumulated hours of deliberate practice could be used to predict the differing skill levels of the violinists, *not* "talent." Ericsson and et al., (1993) also completed a second study on 24 pianists which was consistent with the findings with the violinists. It revealed that the pianists considered to be "experts" had accumulated significantly more deliberate practice then those considered to be "amateurs," with the experts having accumulated an average of over 10,000 hours of deliberate practice by the age of 20, compared to an average of around 2,000 hours for amateurs. The two studies led them to conclude that deliberate practice, not talent, provide a better

account for the development of expert performance, explaining:

> Contrary to the popular "talent" view that asserts that differences in practice and experience cannot account for differences in expert performance, we have shown that the amount of a specific type of activity (deliberate practice) is consistently correlated with a wide range of performance including expert-level performance. (p. 392)

Contesting the popular giftedness view of expert performance prompted a succession of studies in numerous domains of expertise supporting Ericsson et al's. finding that deliberate practice is a better predictor of superior performance than talent, including studies in nursing (Bathis, Wilson, Potempa, 2018; Chancey et al., 2019), chess (Campitelli & Gobet, 2011; Charness et al., 2005), figure skating (Deakin & Cobley, 2004), football (Helsen, Starkes & Hodges, 1998), surgery (Hashimoto et al., 2015), wrestling (Hodges & Starkes, 1996) and workplace performance (Sonnentag & Kleine, 2000). Even the prodigious ability of people heralded as the very symbol of giftedness such as Mozart and Picasso have been demythologised using the deliberate practice framework. For instance, retrospective studies suggest that Mozart's private tutelage starting from the age of three led to the accumulation of 10,000 hours of deliberate practice by early adolescence, which people failed to appreciate when considering the factors that gave rise to his brilliance (Weisberg, 2006). This new appreciation has led some to argue that even prodigies of Mozart's standing are "made and not born" (Helding, 2011).[1]

3.3.3 The four components of deliberate practice

Part of the popularity of the theory of deliberate practice stems from its relatively precise, yet versatile, conceptualisation which enables researchers to design studies corroborating or repudiating the theory. In addition, the theory was popularised by science writers (such as Gladwell, 2008) who repackaged the theory for the public, presenting empirical research relating to human potential and personal development.

Ericsson et al. (1993) and Ericsson (2006b, 2008) present deliberate practice as a very specific form of practice, which can be broken down into four key components. For practice to meet the standards of deliberate practice, it should include:

1. *Repetitive practice:* practice should be highly repetitive, providing the opportunity to target specific skills and accumulate a large amount to master such skills.

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[1] Note: the phrase "made and not born" (or "made, not born") means different things depending on the author. Some interpret the phrase as meaning talent plays no role in a persons' development (e.g., Hambrick et al. 2016). Authors such as Helding (2011) adopt the phrase to emphasise that practice plays a crucial role, without which—even if talent does contribute—expertise will not develop. In this thesis "built not born" is used interchangeably with "made not born" and is adopted in the same tone as Helding to emphasise the crucial role of practice which is often downplayed. This does not exclude a role for innate talent (indeed Helding argues it does play a role), but it does support the view that even those who appear to lack talent can go on to reach levels of performance previously thought unattainable given the right opportunities, training, and habits. And it does suggest even the talented will need to engage in significant amounts of practice before they become experts.

2. *Feedback orientated practice*: feedback should be used to assess current levels of performance and gauge areas for improvement.
3. *Challenging practice:* practice should be designed for continuous improvement, not fun. Such practice is typically arduous and challenging.
4. *Goal orientated practice:* practice should be designed with targets that address specific areas for improvement.

For Ericsson (2006b), superior performance inevitably arises by engaging in practice that "specifically designed to improve performance" that satisfies the criteria for deliberate practice for sufficient time (p.693). Accumulating such practice is challenging, as such activities are arduous to maintain for long periods of time (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson, 2008)—such as intensive study and memorisation of chess moves (Campitelli & Gobet, 2011), physically laborious mat work by expert wrestlers (Hodges & Starkes, 1996) or repetitively attempting punishing jumps and spins by elite figure skaters (Deakin & Cobley, 2003). For this reason, Ericsson et al. (1993) argue that such practice lacks enjoyment and requires significant *extrinsic* motivation; or motivation from the fruits of labour, rather than pleasure and intrinsic motivation being derived from engaging in practice *per se*; a topic that is returned to later.

3.4 How Deliberate Practice Facilitates the Development of Expertise

Deliberate practice may be specially designed to improve performance, but "how" does it succeed in creating highly skilled experts? Our understanding of the effectiveness of deliberate practice extends from decades of research on cognitive psychology and motor skills which reveal that development of skills relies on ongoing challenges, as this fosters improvement and facilitates the development of *mental representations* (Ericsson, 1998), as discussed in Section 3.4 below.

3.4.1 Challenging automaticity by staying in the cognitive-associative phase

A fundamental challenge for theorists of expert performance is to explain *why*, despite years of practice, some performers asymptote, while others continue to improve. Traditional explanations of skill acquisition (Anderson, 1982; Fitts & Posner, 1967) emphasised a natural tapering of skill at the ceiling of an individual's ability. Fitts and Posner identify three stages that people pass through sequentially as they enhance their skills and build more refined cognitive representations in the developmental journey to expertise: the *cognitive phase,* the *associative phase,* and the *autonomous phase.* Those that make it to the autonomous phase are shown to benefit from many of the positive attributes associated with being highly intuitive; their performance becomes highly integrated, fluid, rapid, and requires little conscious attention. Performers are highly adapted to their specific domains; for instance, in racquet sports, they develop

refined anticipatory skills for predicting the direction of the ball (Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996) or, in chess, they accumulate a vast number of chunks in long-term memory that enable them to quickly identify the best move (Chase & Simon, 1973). However, Ericsson (2006b) argues that traditional theories of skill acquisition misrepresent the developmental phases as they occur in truly elite performers. Unlike Fitts & Posner's (1967) conceptualisation, Ericsson argues that automaticity should be avoided as it results in arrested development. Instead, as illustrated in Figure 6, those wishing to keep improving should seek to remain in the *cognitive and associative learning phases*, by continuing to engage in challenging practice that induces further adaptation in the targeted physiological system. Ericsson (2006b) summarises this as follows:

> The key challenge for aspiring expert performers is to avoid the arrested development associated with automaticity and to acquire cognitive skills to support their continued learning and improvement. By actively seeking out demanding tasks—often provided by their teachers and coaches—that force the performers to engage in problem solving and to stretch their performance, the expert performers overcome the detrimental effects of automaticity and actively acquire and refine cognitive mechanisms to support continued learning and improvement. (p. 696).
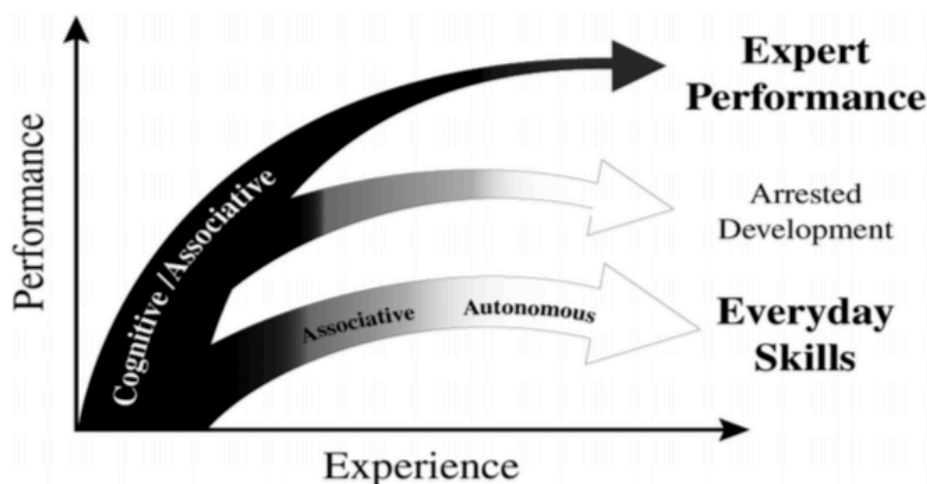
Figure 6. *An illustration of the qualitative difference between the course of improvement of expert performance and everyday skills.* Reproduced from Ericsson (2006b, p. 687).While the goal for everyday activities is to reach a satisfactory level that is stable and autonomous, experts overcome arrested development by doing challenging activities that keep them in the cognitive-associative phase.

The challenging nature of deliberate practice is argued to keep people in the cognitive associative phase. Engaging in deliberate practice in this phase arguably leads to the development of the

sophisticated *mental representations* (Ericsson, 1998; 2006b) that mediate superior performance.

3.4.2 Expert performance is mediated by mental representations

Research indicates skilled performers have a large store of mental representations relevant to their domain of expertise (Richman, Gobet, Staszwski & Simon, 1996). Such mental representations are essential to mediate expert performance, with Ericsson (2008) writing:

> Expert performance is primarily mediated by acquired mental and physiological representations that allow experts to evaluate alternative courses of action, to anticipate courses of action, and to control relevant internal and external factors in order to generate superior performance. (p. 204).

Mental representations have a long history of research in cognitive psychology. They are also referred to as *representations*, *schemas*, or *chunks,* although the terms may be used to emphasise different aspects of cognition. De Groot's seminal work (1978), a precursor to influential work on chess, amassed evidence for more sophisticated mental representations (or *chunks* to use de Groot's adopted term) in the best players, that enabled them to evaluate, plan, and explore potential sequences of moves much more rapidly than less competent peers (e.g., Gobet & Charness, 2006; Gobet & Simon, 1996; Simon & Chase, 1973). Mental representations and schemas can be defined precisely as, knowledge structures that are developed through exposure to particular phenomena, which provide a store of knowledge and information that enables people to execute skills in a particular context (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002).

A concrete example of a mental representation is a chess master's ability to visualise a chess position so precisely that they can play chess blindfolded, or a pianist's ability to imagine a desired performance standard and recreate it as they play; monitoring their performance and changing it in light of the audience's reaction (Ericsson, 1998).

Experts and novices differ significantly in the sophistication of their mental representations and how effective they are at mediating performance (Dixon & Johnson, 2011; Ericsson, 1998). When linking mental representations to expert performance, it is important to highlight that such representations have a dual role. First, they enable performers to plan, reason, execute skills, and monitor their performance (Ericsson, 1998). And second, mental representations are *themselves* modifiable and are incrementally altered through practice to improve performance (Ericsson, 2009). Therefore, engaging in specially designed practice for *extensive* periods of time to remain in the cognitive-associative phase is key to developing mental representations that mediate expert performance.

While the above discussion improves our understanding of *how* deliberate practice mediates expert performance, it raises other questions, such as how extensive a period of deliberate practice is required? Indeed, this is one of the most debated aspects of deliberate practice. The next section discusses key debates relating to deliberate practice.

3.5 Contested Debates on Deliberate Practice

Even among the most ardent proponents of the theory of deliberate practice there are marked differences of opinion on various aspects of the theory. Two overarching debates are of primary relevance. The first, relates to whether variables aside from practice—such as innate talent—also influence the development of expertise. As Hambrick et al. (2013) ask, "is deliberate practice essentially all it takes to become an expert?" (p. 3). The second, concerns what *quality* of practice meets the standard of deliberate practice. For scientific purposes, it is important to identify what qualifies—and what does not—as deliberate practice. For instance, can highly effective practice be enjoyable as Araújo et al. (2010) claim, or is deliberate practice essentially arduous in nature as Ericsson et al. (1993) argue?

3.5.1 The role of talent and "The 10 Year Rule" is not a rule

3.5.1.1 The monotonic assumption and the 10 year rule

The length of time it takes to become an expert is one of most debated aspects of the theory of deliberate practice. In part, it generated significant discussion because Ericsson et al's. (1993) research fuelled a rather provocative, yet compelling, claim that there existed a "10 year rule to expertise"; suggesting that expert performance in a wide variety of domains is attainable with 10 years of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993; Lehmann & Ericsson, 1997)—an assertion that garnered public attention following the publication of Gladwell's *Outliers* (2008).

Ericsson posits that in many domains the minimum amount of practice required for expertise is 10,000 hours or 10 years of deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2006b, 2008), and that a monotonic relationship exists between deliberate practice and superior performance (Ericsson et al., 1993)—a position that leaves little room for arguments about the role of talent in attaining expertise. As Ericsson et al. (1993) write, "our framework predicts a monotonic relation between the current level of performance and the accumulated amount of deliberate practice for individuals attaining expert performance." (p. 387). Given the extensive body of research on differences between individuals classed as superior performers, this is a remarkably bold assertion, because, *if* the monotonic assumption is right, it implies that people who accumulate the same amounts of deliberate practice *should* reach the same standards of performance. Various notable researchers have agreed that a minimum of 10 years of sustained practice appears to be a necessary precondition for developing expertise in many domains (e.g., Baker et al., 2003; Côté et al., 2003). This notion can be traced back to seminal work on chess expertise by Chase and Simon (1973) who observed that no one had reached the level of a grandmaster "with less than about a decade's intense preparation" (p.402). Their research demonstrated that grandmasters' recall of chess positions was vastly superior to less-accomplished players, and they forwarded that, after 10 years, grandmasters had acquired some 100,000 cognitive chunks, which facilitated their superior ability to recognise patterns and recall positions from long-term memory and enabled them to rapidly select the "best" move in a game of

chess. This research contributed to a shift from conceptualising grandmasters' superior skill as being attributable to innate talent (and high general intelligence), to being attributable to vast amounts of practice whereby they acquired cognitive mechanisms underlying superior performance.

3.5.1.2 History of the talent perspective

The theory of deliberate practice was developed to challenge what Ericsson (2006a) describes as an overly deterministic view of expert performance, which emphasises the importance of innate biological characteristics in determining superior achievement. This view has its roots in work pioneered by Sir Francis Galton who, in *Hereditary Genius* (1869/1979), set out to classify "men according to their natural gifts" (p. 6). Galton observed that eminent individuals of the age—scientists, politicians, judges, and painters—were nearly always the offspring of a small number of elite, "well born," families. This led him to the conclusion that superior mental capacities were "inborn," being inherited through family lineage. While training played a role in development, skill was ultimately fixed and bound until, "maximal performance becomes a rigidly determinate quantity" (p.150). This determinate quantity was set by the inherited characteristics that, "nature has rendered him [a person] capable of performing" (p.16). Galton's work proved compelling and influential, with a lasting impact on today's view of talent and expertise (Ericsson, 2006a). Galton's assumptions about the basic unmodifiable elements of performance is consistent with Anderson's (1981) and Fitts and Posner's (1967) contemporary theories of skill acquisition (Ericsson 2006b), while conflicting with Ericsson and colleagues' (1993) monotonic assumption which argues elite performance is the result of deliberate practice.

3.5.1.3 Deliberate practice: Necessary, but not sufficient

The theory of deliberate practice challenges the popular view that talent is a significant (or ultimate) determinant of success. While the idea that people are born equally talented has meritocratic appeal (Hambrick et al., 2013), recent research has brought into question the ubiquity of deliberate practice and the monotonic assumption. Campitelli and Gobet (2011) and Meinz and Hambrick (2010) are standard bearers of the view that talent has a determining role in expertise; arguing that as an explanation for expertise, deliberate practice is "necessary, but not sufficient." Drawing on their respective research fields of chess and music, they present convincing research on the role of talent. They are among a number of researchers that support this view. In 2014 the journal *Intelligence* compiled a special volume titled *Acquiring Expertise: Ability, Practice, and Other Influences* (Detterman, 2014), where both proponents and protagonists of the monotonic assumption put forward their views in a series of papers. From the various debates stem four main points that need to be discussed so as to critically examine whether talent has a decisive influence on expertise: (a) the quantity of deliberate practice accumulated, (b) the role of intelligence and basic cognitive abilities, (c) the critical period, and (d) the role of personality.

3.5.1.3.1 Varying quantities of deliberate practice

When scrutinised, does the 10 year rule stand up to examination? No—and even Ericsson (2006b) and the strongest proponents of deliberate practice agree with this view. Different fields require varying quantities of deliberate practice to attain the highest level of expertise. Indeed, while the 10 year rule has attracted significant attention, a more substantive argument is, "in a given field, will performers who have completed the same amount of deliberate practice be equally skilled?"

From this viewpoint we could ask, why have expert performers in the field of sport, such as Roger Federer in tennis, Usain Bolt in sprint, Michael Schumacher in Formula One and LeBron James in basketball, so spectacularly dominated their fields? Is it really the case that they simply accumulated more deliberate practice than their peers? What about chess prodigy Magnus Carlsen of Norway, the current *FIDE World Number 1*. He became a grandmaster at 13, just five years after picking up chess seriously (Gobet & Ereku, 2014), which was considerably quicker even than the prodigy Bobby Fischer who become a chess master in just nine years of practice (Ericsson, 1993). Magnus Carlsen's domination of the field of chess for several years prompted Gobet and Ereku (2014) to ask the question, "Does Carlsen have a particular talent for chess?" (p. 2).

To explore Carlsen's rise to expertise, Gobet and Ereku (2014) analysed biographical information and ran an analysis based on projections of the amount of deliberate practice completed by the top 11 chess players in the world (as of June 2014). Gobet and Ereku's research revealed that, counter to the theory of deliberate practice, Carlsen had amassed significantly fewer years of deliberate practice than opponents who he far out-ranked. With 18 years of deliberate practice, Carlsen had a rating of 2881. His competition, such as the then world number 5 Ananad Viswanathan, had accumulated more than double the years of deliberate practice (38 years) as Carlsen had, yet he then ranked four places below Carlsen, with a rating of 2785. While Gobet and Ereku's findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the small sample and the assumption that all top players practiced with similar dedication and training techniques, these criticisms could be levelled at many studies used to support the monotonic assumption, and is methodologically consistent with research constrained by the difficulties of investigating the few top-level performers that exist in the most competitive fields. This noted, the implications of Gobet and Ereku's findings are readily apparent: Carlsen has an advantage over his peers that does not seem attributable to deliberate practice alone—could it be that he is more motivated or capable of learning quicker than others; or that his practice is more proficient than others? Another point which relates to future discussion in Section 3.5.2.2 is that Carlsen claims to enjoy his practice, explaining "in chess training, I do the things I enjoy" (Gobet & Ereku, 2014, p. 2), as do many of imminent experts at the top of their field, such as renowned scientists and Nobel prize winners (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This enjoyment and satisfaction could contribute to their ability to maintain the years of demanding practice that leads them to distinguish themselves from peers.

Gobet and Ereku's research is bolstered by Gobet and Campitelli's (2007) primary research that gathered data on the amount of deliberate practice amassed by 104 Argentinian chess players ranging from weak amateurs to grandmasters. Their findings support deliberate practice as a major factor in chess

skill, revealing that it was clearly required to achieve high levels of performance. Yet as Gobet and Ereku's research (2014) suggested, there was significant variation in the amount of deliberate practice accumulated at any given skill level. For example, a significant number of grandmasters (31.3%, n=5) had completed *less* deliberate practice than the mean of the expert group one skill level below. To become a grandmaster, the average amount of total deliberate practice accumulated was 11,000 hours, yet the maximum was 14,200 hours and the minimum was *just* 3,000 hours. These results reveal that some chess players clearly develop their skills *significantly faster* than others. Hambrick et al's. (2013) research lends further support to this argument. They completed analysis of six chess studies and found that deliberate practice explained 34% of the variance in performance, leaving 66% potentially explainable by other factors. Together, the studies provide convincing evidence that other factors influence skill development and, therefore, as an explanation of expertise, deliberate practice is necessary but not sufficient.

3.5.1.3.2 Intelligence and basic cognitive abilities

Ericsson and colleagues (1993) argue that, except in specific domains (such as basketball, where height provides an advantage), talent does *not* influence expertise. General intelligence and basic cognitive abilities, which are heritable and fit the definition of "talent," are not accepted by Ericsson and colleagues as determinants of skill (Hambrick et al., 2013).

However, research suggests that in domains such as chess, cognitive ability could influence development. Frydman and Lynn (1992) revealed that young chess players had a higher than average *intelligence quotient* (IQ) of 129, compared to a sampled population average of 100; and that the level of IQ was highest among the best players. Grabner, Neubauer, and Stern (2006) found that, even in highly rated players, their level of IQ positively predicted performance on representative chess tasks (such as selecting the best move).

However, findings on chess skill and cognitive ability have been mixed. Bilalic, McLeod, and Gobet (2007) found that the level of IQ *was not* a significant predictor of ability in a sample of elite young chess players after statistically controlling for practice. Using a visual memory test, Waters, Gobet, and Leyden (2002) found no differences in the level of IQ among chess players and non-chess players. Why the contradicting views across studies? One potential reason offered, is that chess training may transfer to intelligence tests, and that people with high cognitive abilities may be attracted to chess.

Research in other domains also lends support to the view that heritable cognitive abilities influence skill. Research on *working memory capacity* (the ability to maintain information in a highly active state) (Hambrick et al., 2013) provides particularly strong evidence in this regard. For instance, Kopiez et al. (2016) found that working memory capacity was associated with sight-reading ability in all but the most difficult levels of music.

The identification of certain children as "prodigies" has long been a persuasive argument for proponents of the giftedness hypothesis. Ruthsatz and Urbach (2012) administered the *Stanford-Binet Test* to eight child prodigies, six of whom were considered musical prodigies. Despite having levels of IQ that ranged from as low as 108 (just above average) to as high as 147 (just below the cutoff for "genius"), all

of the prodigies were at, or above, the 99th percentile for working memory.

A key piece of evidence for assessing how deliberate practice and working memory both contribute to skill is provided by Meinz and Hambrick (2010). In their study of 57 pianists, they found that nearly half (45.1%) of the variance in pianists' skill was attributable to the amount of deliberate practice performers had accumulated. This left more than half of the pianists' skill unaccounted for. Of that, their research revealed that working memory capacity account for a significant 7.4% of the variance. It should be noted that Ericsson and colleagues have argued that measures of working memory capacity themselves reflect acquired skills (Ericsson & Delaney, 1999). However, in Meinz and Hambrick's (2010) study, working memory capacity and deliberate practice correlated near zero, and they concluded that there was also *no evidence* for a *Deliberate Practice x Working Memory Capacity* interaction. Working memory capacity was no less important a predictor of performance for pianists with thousands of hours of deliberate practice than it was for beginners with significantly less accumulated practice.

3.5.1.3.3 Critical period

Parents keen for their children to become highly competent at sporting or musical endeavours may worry whether their children started training early enough, at a stage where the brain and body are considered to be highly adaptable. Such a "common sense" notion does, in fact, have support in the literature, where research suggests there is a *critical* or *sensitive period* for engaging in practice where brain plasticity facilitates increased receptivity to learning. Understanding the research on this can help us to unravel the complex relationship between talent and practice.

Gobet & Campitelli (2007) found that starting age was an important variable predicting superior performance at chess. Almost all players who achieved the *FIDE* master title (or higher) had commenced chess practice at 12 or earlier. Howard (2012) found that players who started practicing younger had a significant developmental advantage, independent of how much deliberate practice they had accumulated. Simonton's (1991) study of eminent and less eminent composers, found that the greatest composers started composition lessons when younger and took less time to compose.

This evidence suggests that many domains have a critical period where complex cognitive and mechanical skills are more easily acquired. It should be noted, however, that while proponents of the monotonic assumption do acknowledge that in some domains, such as language acquisition and absolute pitch, skills are acquired more easily in specific periods (Ericsson, 2016), the main argument forwards that starting age is important because the younger a person starts to engage in deliberate practice, the greater their opportunity to accumulate more hours of practice (Ericsson et al., 1993).

3.5.1.3.4 Personality, motivation, and predisposition to practice

The question as to whether some people have personalities that facilitate success is an important one in expert performance literature. The discussion has centred on *motivation*, and whether people are born with a natural proclivity to engage in particular forms of challenging practice. In fact, this is the one

substantive identified area (beyond height) where Ericsson and colleagues (1993) accept that genes may play a role. However, they see motivation as having an "indirect effect" on the development of expertise *via* deliberate practice. As they write:

> Returning to Galton's framework, we reject any important role for innate ability. It is quite plausible, however, that heritable individual differences might influence processes related to motivation and the original enjoyment of the activities in the domain and, even more important, affect the inevitable differences in the capacity to engage in hard work (deliberate practice)… Individual differences in emotionality and general level of activity are also likely influences on the capacity to engage in sustained practice as well as on the preference or dislike for this type of isolated activity. (p. 399)

Research on deliberate practice supports the view that personality is an important mediator of motivation to practice. Duckworth et al's. (2011) study of Spelling Bee contestants found that grit, a personality trait defined as the "tendency to pursue long-term challenging goals with perseverance and passion" (p. 175) positively predicted the amount of deliberate practice the spellers engaged in, which in turn predicted spelling ability.

Recent research on *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2012) has shed further light on the question of how motivation and psychology impact a person's willingness to engage in challenging practice. The research has examined whether a person's *actual beliefs* about whether skill is a result of innate talent or environmental learning influence their commitment to learn (e.g., Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). The research reveals that, in certain circumstances, such as when faced with a challenging task, people with a growth mindset are more motivated to practice diligently than those that have a *fixed mindset* (Dweck, 2012). As Haimovitz & Dweck (2017) note:

> Beliefs about the capacity to grow one's abilities are called implicit theories or mindsets. Children with more of a fixed mindset believe that they have a certain amount of ability and they cannot do much to change it. Children with more of a growth mindset instead believe that they can develop their abilities through hard work, good strategies, and instruction from others (see Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). These two beliefs are ways that children understand themselves, and they create different paths for learning. (p. 1849)

What has emerged is that people with a growth mindset have a greater confidence in the power of practice than those with a fixed mindset (who are more likely to view performance as innate and genetically predetermined). The findings that growth mindset is not a fixed trait but a learnable one (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017) has significant implications for the giftedness hypothesis. Furthermore, recent research suggests that students are more likely to engage deliberate practice where a growth mindset is encouraged. As McClendon et al. (2017) write:

Growth mindset is grounded in the view that one's abilities are not set. In other words, individuals can develop cognitive skills through practice, training, and a clearly structured method (Dweck, 2015). Effective faculty members facilitate a growth mindset by creating a safe, secure environment where students can learn and engage in deliberate practice without fear of failure (Bromley, 2014). (p. 13)

3.5.1.3.5 Deliberate practice is not the only piece in the puzzle

All performers who dominate their fields have amassed vast quantities of practice. Magnus Carlsen's ability to solve complex chess problems in miliseconds developed after years of practice and, while standing 6 feet 8 inches tall, LeBron James was not born with his unique mix of court skills and famed basketball "IQ." The research discussed above clearly establishes the view that large quantities of deliberate practice are required to climb to the top in highly competitive fields. But, in concluding this, one must also ask—is the dominance of elite performers such as Carlsen and LeBron James simply the result of amassing more deliberate practice than their competitors?

In the 1800s when Galton concluded that elite individuals from high-born families dominated their field due to superior genes, he was arguably blind-sighted to disparity of opportunity to accumulate effective practice; unaware of the extent to which privilege facilitates the ability to overcome constraints to expertise and accumulate such practice. We now know vastly more about the intricacies of practice, and research on deliberate practice reveals that such a highly deterministic view emphasising talent and genes over environment is demonstrably wrong. In every field where deliberate practice has been studied, practice was shown to be a key determinant of ability. But it is important to recognise that such an extreme disparity in opportunity to practice is not evident among today's top performers. Magnus Carlsen's and LeBron James' adversaries have the opportunity to amass large amounts of deliberate practice and, as in the case of Magnus Carlsen, potentially significantly more (Gobet & Ereku, 2014). This suggests variables besides deliberate practice such as cognitive ability, personality, motivation, and training in the critical period, influence the development of superior performance. In short, deliberate practice is not the only piece in the puzzle.

Hambrick, Macnamara, Campitelli, Ullen, and Mosing (2016) have argued persuasively that not only do we need to recognise all environmental and genetic variables that influence performance, but that we should adopt an integrative view that considers how environmental and genetic factors interact. This can help explain, for instance, why people with particular abilities develop interests in particular fields, which—provided the right environmental resources are available—can be a catalyst for later success. In this regard, Schmitt (2014) has argued that introversion and fluid intelligence can strongly determine an intellectual curiosity for learning, which is in turn a primary cause for occupational and academic performance. But without encouragement or the right *education capital* later success might never come to fruition (Hambrick et al., 2006). In summary, failing to acknowledge both sides of the debate fails to represent the richness and complexity of expertise, and this thesis agrees with Campitelli and Gobet's

(2011) position: as an explanation of expertise deliberate practice is necessary, but not sufficient.

3.5.2 What constitutes deliberate practice?

The second area of discussion on contested areas of deliberate practice relates to what *quality* of practice actually constitutes "deliberate practice." While the theory of deliberate practice is forwarded as a general framework for understanding the development of expertise, when we examine the body of literature we find research that suggests the theory may need some revision when applied to other domains of performance (Kennedy & Fairbrother, 2019).

3.5.2.1 Practice alone

In Ericsson et al's. (1993) study of violinists, *practice alone* (i.e., practice by themselves) was the only activity categorised as deliberate practice. The authors viewed *practice alone* as, "the most important activity for improvement of violin performance" (p. 375). This was based on ratings from the violinists regarding which activities they considered to be most relevant to their improvement. Although other forms of practice such as *lessons*, *music theory*, *practice with others*, and *solo performance*, contributed to skill development, Ericsson and colleagues did not consider these types of practice as falling within the ambit of deliberate practice. This raises the question, "Why not?" *Practice alone* did have the benefit of being "remarkably stable" and performers were able to report it "reliably." While convenient to only specify *practice alone* as deliberate practice, its relevance to improvement was rated by the musicians as 9.82 on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the most relevant to improvement), which rating was only slightly higher than other forms of practice such as, *taking lessons* (9.63) and *solo performance* (9.03).

Not only were other practice activities such as lessons crucial to skill development, but a performer's ability to, say, effectively practice alone, may be severely hindered without, for instance, being coached on the best practice methods or more challenging aspects of the activity, or receiving feedback on their practice alone. Indeed, without the benefit of lessons, could a performer realistically reach the peak of a highly competitive field like classical music, regardless of how much practice they completed by themselves? The recognition that *practice alone* is the only variety of practice that meets the criteria for deliberate practice is a striking omission, especially as Ericsson et al. (1993) repetitively emphasise the importance of lessons and the need for performers to complete goal orientated practice directed by instructors in their field. Thought provokingly, this raises the question "Is there a sweet spot of practice alone combined with instruction to achieve deliberate practice?" As discussed in the next two sub-sections, other researchers have included other forms of practice within the remit of deliberate practice.

3.5.2.2 Can deliberate practice be enjoyable? Solo versus team practice

The violinists in Ericsson et al's. (1993) study rated *practice alone* as relatively low on the pleasure scale (7.23 out of 10). This agreed with Ericsson and colleagues view that, "deliberate practice requires

effort and is not inherently enjoyable. Individuals are motivated to practice because practice improves performance" (p. 368). Ericsson et al. argued that the enjoyment elite performers experience when engaging in deliberate practice stems from *extrinsic* rather than *intrinsic* factors. By this, they argued that while deliberate practice was not enjoyable in and of itself, significant pleasure can be derived from the *results* of deliberate practice, such as winning competitions, achieving recognition and the feelings of increased efficacy. Playful practice, which "includes activities that have no explicit goal and that are inherently enjoyable" (Ericsson et al., 1993, p. 368) was not considered deliberate practice. These activities rated higher in terms of pleasure and enjoyment and were viewed as not being sufficiently designed to improve performance. Yet when we look at research, even research on deliberate practice, there are grounds to question this view.

Ward et al's. (2004) study of elite youth football players used a definition of deliberate practice which included relevance, effort, concentration *and* enjoyment. Playing competitive matches, which were enjoyable, was correlated with skill development; although not as highly as other deliberate practice activities, such as working with a coach. As the researchers predicted, the elite players spent a greater proportion of their time in deliberate practice than less-skilled players who spent the majority of their time in play. This therefore suggests that enjoyable practice can be an important determinant of development, although less so than other forms of deliberate practice. Indeed, research by Araújo et al., (2010) suggests that highly unstructured and playful practice in the form of street matches and backyard games can be a vital form of practice for the development of certain skills, and is likely a contributing factor for Brazilian football players' famed technical, adaptive and creative skills.

In an attempt to provide a formula that recognised the role that play and less enjoyable practice has on improvement in performance, Baker, Côté and Abernethy (2003, 2007) developed a continuum including *free play, deliberate play, structured practice*, and *deliberate practice*, to distinguish between various practice activities. They proposed that deliberate play, defined as activities which are "designed to maximise inherent enjoyment" (p. 95), could be as important to expert development as deliberate practice. Deliberate play activities typically occurs during the sampling *years* of sport participation (ages 6–13 years), before the *specialisation years* (ages 13–16 years) and the final *investment years* (approx. ages 17+ years). Deliberate play activities, for instance neighbourhood pickup games like park football and street basketball, include developmental activities that are intrinsically motivating, gratifying, and enjoyable. While they may not often be engaged in with the specific intent of improving performance, they may drive the development of expertise (Côté, 1999; Côté et al., 2003).

3.5.2.3 Is public performance deliberate practice?

A point of contention concerns whether public/competitive performance should be considered deliberate practice.

3.5.2.3.1 No, it should not

Ericsson and colleagues (1993) oppose the view that public performance facilitates the type of learning required for the most effective practice. They posit that public performance is "highly constrained by external factors," (p.375) and, arguably, the "goal" of such performances is not to improve skills, but to deliver the best performance in that moment. If a mistake is committed during public performance, performers cannot stop midway for feedback from a coach, or go back and repeat the step until mastered. This sort of cognitive attention my be impossible during a performance. Ericsson et al. (1993) cite Auer to explain:

> A necessary precondition for practice, according to Auer (1921), is that the individual be fully attentive to his playing so that he or she will notice areas of potential improvement and avoid errors. Auer (1921) believes that practice without such concentration is even detrimental to improvement of performance. On the basis of an extended study of Olympic swimmers, Chambliss (1988, 1989) argued that the secret of attaining excellence is to always maintain close attention to every detail of performance 'each one done correctly, time and again, until excellence in every detail becomes a firmly ingrained habit.' (p. 371)

For Ericsson and colleagues, the benefits of public performance are "motivational" and provide "short-term goals for specific improvements" (Ericsson et al., 1993). Rather than directly facilitating opportunities for effective practice, public performance may motivate performers to practice more intently so that they, for instance, minimise the chance of public mistakes and are more successful during such performance.

3.5.2.3.2 Yes, it should

There are good grounds to argue that public performance is more than motivational and can actually be essential to the development of expertise. Even within deliberate practice research, there are numerous examples of public performance being classified as deliberate practice. Sonnentag and Kleine (2000) applied the concept of deliberate practice to working environments, to research whether deliberate practice was correlated with insurance agents' productivity and ability. They viewed deliberate practice as "regularly performed activities which aim at competence improvement" (p. 87). Their research supported the link between public performance and performance improvement. Sonnentag and Kleine's definition of deliberate practice is significantly more inclusive than Ericsson et al's. (1993). Using Sonnentag and Kleine's definition, activities such as *lessons*, *music theory*, *practice with others*, and *solo performance*, would all

have qualified as deliberate practice.

Singer and Janelle (1999) support the argument that match-play experience is important for skill development in sports. MacMahon, Helsen, Starkes, and Weston (2007) cited a published study of elite and sub-elite football players which found that public match-play satisfied the criteria for deliberate practice and included activities that are rated high in relevance, effort, concentration, and enjoyment. In MacMahon, et al's. (2007) own study of referees, they found that competitive refereeing done in public was essential to skill acquisition, and therefore classified it as deliberate practice. While noting that the public nature of competitive match refereeing would not satisfy Ericsson et al's. (1993) conceptualisation of deliberate practice, the authors made the point that the opportunity to receive feedback or coaching will differ significantly in different domains and so deliberate practice will take different forms depending on the field.

Another reason why public practice can be essential in some domains is because of the psychological pressure of performing in front of an audience. For instance, concert musicians (Kenny, 2006), actors (Lemasson, André, Boudard, Lippi, & Hausberger, 2018), and sports people (Reeves, Tenenbaum, & Lido, 2007), are subject to forms of psychological pressure performing in front of a public audience that they are not exposed to in private practice settings. Consider the pressure placed on a football player taking a penalty in front of packed stadium, or a golfer lining up a final putt to win a PGA Tour—cognisant of the cost of failure at this one task while aware "all eyes" are on them. In such situations, performance anxiety and "choking under pressure"—the paradoxical phenomenon where people perform worse when the pressure and incentive to give their best performance increases—is a very real possibility (e.g., Baumeister, 1984; Lewis & Linder, 1997; Reeves et al., 2007).

Indeed, research suggests that practice in public is important for improving ability to manage performance anxiety (Gröpel & Mesagno, 2017). The case for public performance as a vital aspect of deliberate practice is all the stronger given—as Ericsson (2006b) argues—typically, the litmus test of expertise *is* public performance. Performers' ability is measured by winning competitive public matches, not by winning during private practice behind "closed doors." Therefore, it is inconsistent to roundly dismiss public performance as a form of deliberate practice, when learning to manage pressure is crucial to expert performance in some domains.

3.6 Chapter 3 Summary

This thesis investigates whether superior ability in dating stems from "giftedness." To this aim, this chapter examined research on the psychology of expert performance and deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993)—the leading field of research that challenges the giftedness hypothesis.

Most people agree that experts are highly skilled and able to execute skills rapidly, efficiently and accurately. For academic purposes, the most useful definition of experts is that of "superior performers," able to outperform the vast majority of individuals in their chosen field. Research shows that to become an expert, individuals need to accumulate vast amounts of deliberate practice. Such practice has four main components—it is highly repetitive, feedback orientated, challenging, and goal orientated. Due to the arduous and challenging nature of deliberate practice, having a growth mindset may encourage people to stay motivated in the face of such practice (McClendon et al., 2017). This mindset is arguably an important driver of expertise, as challenging practice is thought to keep performers in the cognitive-associative learning phase, enabling them to resist arrested development and build sophisticated mental representations facilitating superior performance (Ericsson, 2006b).

The most ardent supporters of the theory of deliberate practice suggest that there is a monotonic relationship between expertise and deliberate practice, and that talent has little influence on expertise beyond influencing commitment to learn and motivation to engage in practice. Given the extensive history of research linking innate talent to differential performance, some researchers (e.g., Gobet & Ereku, 2014; Hambrick et al., 2013) have challenged extremist positions, asserting that research on intelligence and basic cognitive ability provides evidence to support the necessity but not the sufficiency of deliberate practice as an explanation of superior performance. Despite research rightly acknowledging the significance of natural talent, the evidence clearly emphasises the importance of deliberate practice, as well as supporting a more integrative view that suggests expertise is the result of a combination of both talent and practice (Hambrick et al., 2016).

In this regard, deliberate practice research overturns the flawed and enduring arguments rooted in Galton's (1869/1979) deterministic view which provides little support for factors besides innate talent. Not only does greater awareness of the role of deliberate practice challenge erroneous myths about talent and genetic superiority—beliefs which can be damaging and demotivating (Dweck, 2012; Helding, 2011)—but it facilitates widely applicable generalisations which can help people in numerous domains to improve their performance (Ericsson, 2006b). Indeed, authors such as Greene (2003) and Hargie (2006) suggest generalisations about deliberate practice may equally apply to fields as diverse as interpersonal communication, such as dating; a topic which the next chapter addresses.

Chapter 4. Dating Literature Review

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 is structured around two main segments. The first, Segment 1, *Why are Some Males More Successful at Dating?,* draws on dating research to critically discuss the processes that underlie dating and romantic attraction. Given the breadth of research on dating, this chapter focuses only on the most pertinent literature, especially as it relates to Chapter 5's conceptual framework linking dating expertise to deliberate practice. Dating research is discussed throughout the thesis and, by the end, the reader is treated to a wide ranging discussion of literature. An advantage of this approach is that research literature is cited where most relevant. For instance, dating research associated with intuition is discussed in Chapter 8, *Expert Intuition & Dating: Conceptual Literature Review.*

The second, Segment 2, *Are Community Postulates Grounded in Empirical Research?*, aims to address Research Question 5, and draws on dating research to assess whether it supports the effectiveness of Community theories and techniques.

Chapter 4, Segment 1

Why are Some Males More Successful at Dating?

4.2 Differences in Dating Ability

4.2.1 Dating initiation

4.2.1.1 Dating initiation defined

While the "science" of romantic interpersonal relationships now spans many psychology sub-disciplines (Berscheid, 1999), this thesis focuses on a sub-domain commonly referred to as dating or *relationship initiation* (Sprecher et al, 2008); the term *dating initiation*, or just *initiation*, is generally preferred in this thesis. While research on dating can encompass issues relating to the latter-phases of relationships, such as how people develop deep emotional bonds and maintain—or terminate—ties (Burleson, 1995), research on dating initiation focuses on the first time two people meet, and how they establish attraction.

At its most simple, dating initiation is "asking others for dates" (Berger, 1987). Seal and Ehrhardt (2003) conceived of dating initiation as, "approaching and becoming acquainted with women" (p. 297). As this quote suggests, there is a long-held social convention that remains to this day, which places on men the primary role of initiating dating interactions between strangers (Sprecher, Regan & Orbuch,

2016). Although this social convention has shifted in recent years following decades of increasing equality between the sexes, research by Mills, Janiszewska, and Zabala (2011) on a sample of 87 heterosexuals (31 males, 55 females) reveals that the sizeable majority of women (93 percent) still prefer to be asked out on a date, and that the majority of men (83 percent) prefer to do the asking (see Figure 7 for an illustration). Interestingly, a greater proportion of the men preferred to be asked out (16 percent) compared to the proportion of women who preferred to do the asking out (6 percent). This suggests that 10 percent of men may be waiting for a woman to ask them out on a date.
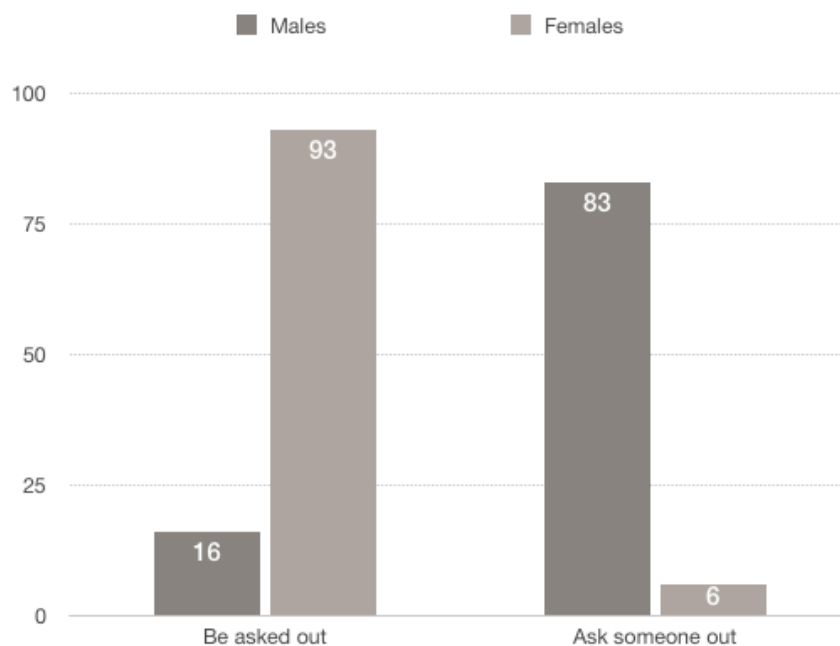
Figure 7. *Who initiates with who?* Percentage of males and females who would prefer to be asked out, or to ask someone out. Reproduced from Mills (2011).

By comparison, online dating company Match.com's 2016 study of over 5,000 single people in the United States found that while 95 percent of men were in favour of a woman asking for their phone number and initiating the first kiss, only 13 percent of women actually ask for a man's number and 29 percent of women initiate the first kiss. In addition, as highlighted by Whitbourne (2015), widely selling dating books targeted at women, advise them to act coy, play "hard to get," and never initiate a relationship. For example, Fein and Schneider, authors of *The Rules* (1995) and numerous subsequent books aimed at a female readership, espouse "Women who played hard to get, either deliberately or by accident, were the ones who got the guys, while the women who asked guys out or were too available were the ones who got dumped" (cited in Whitbourne, 2015).

As a result of the enduring social convention, typically males are the first to engage in direct initiation strategies (Bredow et al., 2008), or what Farrell (1986) termed *risky initiation*. Risky initiation involves direct and unambiguous dating behaviours which are overtly accepted or rejected, such as introducing oneself, offering to buy the first drink, arranging a second encounter, and making initial sexual overtures (Clark et al., 1999).

In contrast, research reveals women play a leading role in *indirect initiation* or *proceptive behaviours* (Moore, 1985, 2002), which involve using subtle nonverbal initiation behaviours which set the tone as to whether a male should approach or not, such as smiling, primping, brief glances, holding eye contact, raising of the eyebrows, hair flips, and drawing attention to attractive parts of the body. The potential ambiguity of proceptive signals, which are open to various interpretations, leave the signaller less exposed to the risk of direct personal rejection, since such signals can be interpreted as either an initiation or as just very friendly behaviour. Interestingly, while both men and women can perform such signalling behaviours, Clark (2008) found that the use of nonverbal proceptive behaviours are generally more effective when performed by women than men.

Risky initiation, such as the act of walking up to a stranger to directly initiate a date, presents significant challenges for the would-be initiator. Not only does generating romantic interest require significant skill, but would-be initiators can experience significant "approach anxiety," or a feeling of embarrassment and social anxiety arising from a fear of rejection (Wenzel & Kashdan, 2008). First time initiations are particularly risky because the initiator has no prior history of acceptance by his target; as Farrell (1986) noted, "the 'first time' is the most important time, when the risk of rejection is by far the greatest" (p. 126). As such, while some males are confident about initiating interactions (Buhrmester et al., 1988), many, particularly those who are minimal daters (Leck, 2006), as well as those who struggle with interpersonal communication, are anxious, or suffer from a fear of judgement, tend to avoid initiating dates (Wenzel & Kashdan, 2008; Metts & Milkucki, 2008).

Evidence indicates that some males are vastly more proficient and "expert" at dating initiation, being more adept at building rapport and attracting mates (Berger, 1987). However, the reason as to why some males are more attractive and effective at dating initiation is highly contested. A significant body of research suggests that differences in dating success stem from inherited "talent."

4.2.2 Dating and "giftedness"

There is a pervasive view that our ability to meet romantic partners depends on being gifted, and some men are born with innate qualities marking them out as vastly more successful at attracting women. Surveying a wide range of research (e.g., Buss, 1989; Cox & Fisher, 2008; Geher, Miller & Murphy, 2008; Miller & Todd, 1998), three main arguments are typically deployed to support this view. The first, physical attractiveness; the second, personality; and the third, social status.

When we initially meet a potential romantic partner, a cluster of visual, olfactory, and auditory

signals rapidly converge and we form an impression of their attractiveness. If we perceive them as attractive, there is an increased emotional desire for social interaction and romantic involvement (Albada, Knapp, & Theune, 2002). Evolutionary biologists forward that during initial encounters women discriminate between men with superior genes (Aron et al., 2008), ranking males on a "sexual selection continuum" that orders them from low to high in terms of the traits that they possess (Kokko, Brooks, McNamara, Houston, 2002). If a male is "gifted," or fits the "good genes hypothesis" (Barber, 1995), or its related cousin, the "sexy son hypothesis" (Koko et al., 2002), they possess physical qualities correlated with dating success such as more systematical faces, above average height, broad shoulders, and heightened masculinity (Barber, 1995; Frederick & Haselton, 2007). Men who have a *beauty premium* reap many benefits, including having a longer list of female suitors (Olson & Marshuetz, 2005).

Biologists such as Fisher (1998) explain that physical attraction stems from brain activity promoting a release of feel good hormones neurochemicals dopamine and norepinephrine, and a decrease in serotonin, promoting a craving for lust, sexual gratification, and emotional union. So rapid is this neural mechanism that research suggests women use cues of fitness to near instantaneously evaluate suitably attractive sexual partners in as quickly as 100 milliseconds (Grant-Jacob, 2016). Such findings suggest "love at first sight," or a least, "lust at first sight," is a realistic prospect for those fortunate enough to benefit from superior traits. Research by social psychologists is concordant with the hypothesis that traits underlie dating success. *Social exchange theory* (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and trait based hypotheses of dating (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Prestia, Silverston, Wood & Zigarmi 2002) reveal that when it comes to both short and long-term dating success, being physically attractive is decisive in the dating game; with less attractive males more likely to remain unattached or "left" to choose from matching females in a comparable position on the desirability scale (Kalick & Hamilton, 1986).

In additional to physical traits, researchers assert that other honest indicators of genetic fitness such as social status, general intelligence, wit and humour, underpin dating success (e.g., Miller & Todd, 1998). Drawing on personality research, psychologists argue that traits posited to have a strong genetic basis such as the Big Five personality traits—neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and extroversion—are major determinants of desirability. For instance being high in extroversion (Back et al., 2011; Hendrick & Brown, 1971), and low in neuroticism (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008), are said to be attractive traits. While females' (and males') dating decisions are framed by numerous factors, such as whether they are seeking short or long-term relationships (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008), the giftedness line of reasoning is clear: a subset of males inherit traits that predispose them to be vastly more attractive and sexually desirable to the opposite sex. This position is aligned with what Segrin and Givertz (2003) describe as a *trait model* of dating, which views a person's interpersonal effectiveness as a stable and enduring personality trait.

As compelling as the above narrative might appear, when we examine the literature more broadly —even within the fields of research described—we uncover competing research that emphasises factors besides innate endowment are crucial determinants of dating ability. Not only does dating ability have a large learnt component (discussed at length in Section 4.4), but research that highlights the role of *indirect*

selection emphasises the need to appreciate the interaction between genes and the environment (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Barton, 1997).

While indirect selection models predict that traits have high heritability (Hadfield, et al., 2006)—fitness indicators such as wealth and social status also have an acquired component, being influenced by privileged access to resources, social capital, and learnt skills. Furthermore, as a social species, the courtship process involves behaviours and rituals that are culturally specific and must be learnt (Rehear & Kaufman, 2013). Even ardent supporters of the good genes hypothesis would likely acknowledge that learning such display rituals is essential to mating success, which suggests people who allocate time to learnt components of attraction can significantly increase their efficacy attracting partners. The remainder of Chapter 4's first segment explores this in two ways. First, it draws on social psychology to discuss the dynamics underlying how two people first meet and become attracted; and second, it draws on research that suggests dating is a learnable skill comparable to playing tennis or driving a car.

4.3 Dating Initiation as a Process

Seal and Ehrhardt's (2003) conception of dating initiation as approaching and becoming acquainted with women, could be viewed as implying a simplicity and randomness to courtship. However, research suggests the acquaintance process is actually highly intricate with clearly definable "stages" or phases to navigate which can be "modelled" using *relationship initiation models* (Bredow et al., 2008; Fox, Warner & Markstaller, 2013; Knapp, 1978—also referred to as dating initiation models or *courtship models* in this research). Davis (1973), was the first to provide a systematic breakdown of dating initiation into stages, or "tasks," as he described:

> In order for one stranger to pick up another successfully, he must accomplish six tasks: (1) determine whether a particular other possess the *qualifiers* that make it worth his while to begin; (2) determine whether the other is *cleared* for an encounter and a relationship; (3) find an *opener* that engages the other's attention; (4) discover an *ingratiating topic* that interests the other as well himself; (5) project a *come-on self* the will induce the other to want to continue the present encounter and seek future ones; and (6) schedule a *second encounter*. (p. 4; emphasis in original)

Dating initiation models are popular with social exchange theorists to this day (Fox et al., 2013), and, despite the passage in time, remain remarkably similar to Davis' (1973) model. Bredow et al's. (2008) model, shown in Figure 8 on the next page—which drew directly on Davis' model—integrated research on evolutionary psychology, social exchange theory, and interdependence theory, to develop a four staged conceptualisation of the dating initiation process which portrays "the sequence of appraisals and events that bear upon whether an encounter is successful" (p. 10). The four steps from *Stage 1: Appraisal of Initial Attraction* to *Stage 4: Build-up of Rapport*, have been included below to convey the procedural nature of dating initiation.
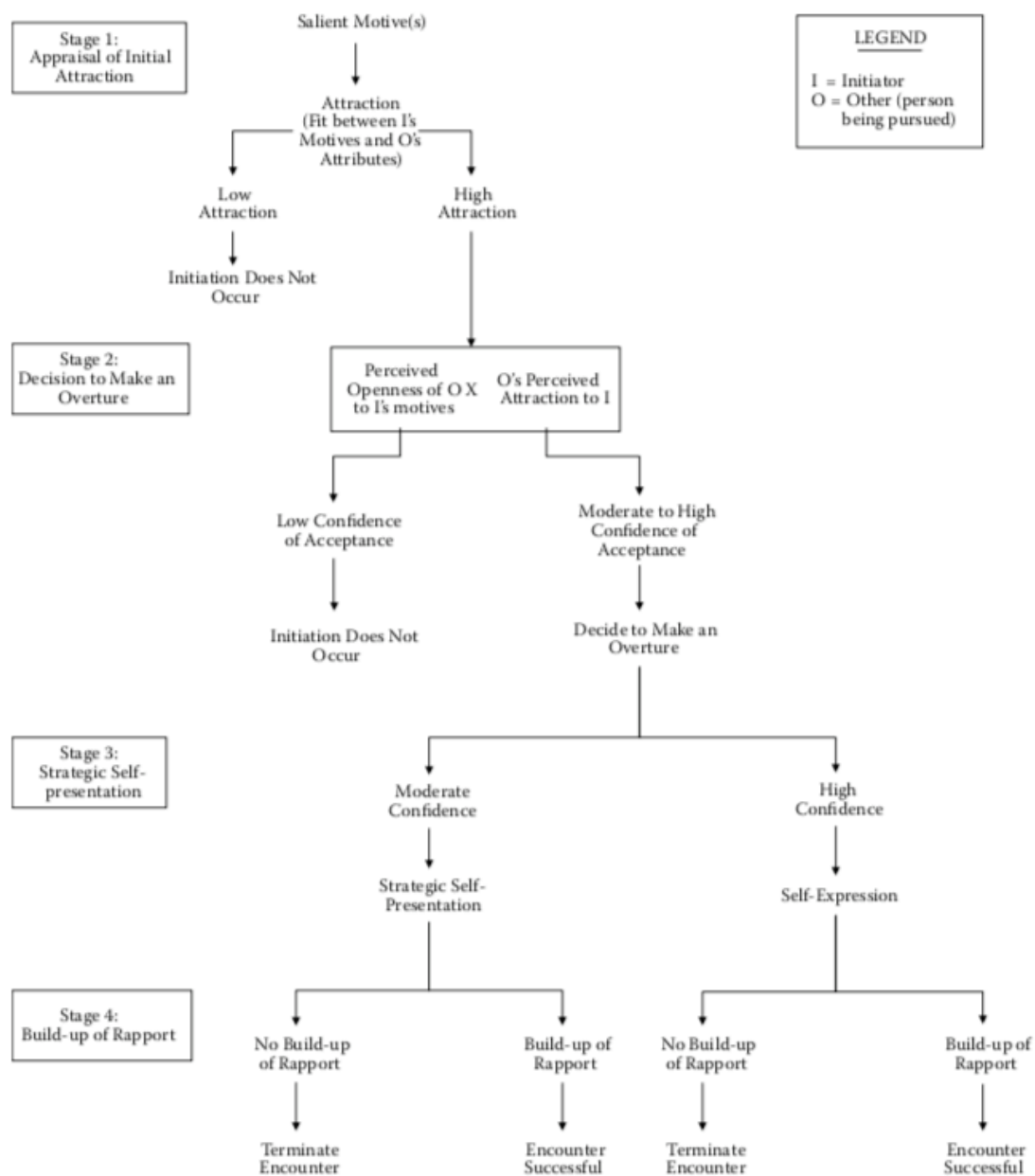
Figure 8. *Flow chart depicting a conceptual model of initial romantic encounters*. Reproduced from Bredow et al. (2008, p. 9). Included here to illustrate how researchers conceptualise dating using courtship models.

When we consider these models, they also illuminate what I term the *dating initiation paradox*. Each initiation is dynamic and unique, and yet also features predictable elements. The key to navigating an interaction and increasing what Davis (1973) describes as the "probability of success" (p. 4), relies less on talent or natural ability, but rather on a person's ability to traverse the various phases of courtship, and *skilfully* and *strategically* manage the paradox of dating to present an alluring "come-on self." Research reveals a wide gambit of skills influence attraction, including verbal and non-verbal skills (Moore, 2010), perception (Tenhula & Bellack, 2008), how well we dress (Hargie, 2006), as well as the ability to self-monitor and adjust our behaviour (Snyder & Simpson, 1984). Also important are the embedded schemata underlying males' use of "heterosexual scripts" for initiating and guiding interactions (Eaton & Rose, 2012). While some males competently employ initiation *scripts*, research suggests individuals differ significantly in the proficiency (Metts & Mikucki, 2008). The ability to employ initiation scripts in dating highlights how ability depends on a wide variety of behavioural skills and conceptual knowledge, be that in the form of scripts, cognitive schemata, chunks or mental representations (Hargie, 2006). As discussed in the review of deliberate practice, conceptual knowledge facilitates a deep awareness of a situation. In social interaction, it is thought that such mental representations enable people—analogous to a chess grandmaster— to "sum up" complex situations and rapidly determine the best move in the circumstances (Hargie, 2006). To increase our appreciation of how such abilities develop in dating, the next section turns to discuss a field of research that has contributed most towards revealing that success at dating—like playing tennis, driving a car, or any other motor ability—depends not on innate talent, but rather on practice.

4.4 Training Dating Skills Through Specifically Designed Practice

4.4.1 Dating relative to tennis

The idea that dating is a skill has been most throughly researched in a field referred to as *microteaching* (Argyle,1967/1983), *social skills training* (Segrin & Givertz), or just *skills training* (Hargie, 2006), which includes interpersonal skills such as dating skills training (Nyatanga, 1989; Segrin & Givertz, 2003; Hargie, 2006). Researchers of the field reject *trait-based* views for *molecular views* (Segrin & Givertz, 2003)*, arguing dating and interpersonal effectiveness is based on learnt abilities not natural traits (Tenhula & Bellack, 2008).

Argyle's (1967) early work was highly influential in the field's development. Drawing on the leading research of the time on skill acquisition—which was based on perceptual and motor skills (Bryan & Harter, 1897; Fitts & Posner, 1967; Welford, 1965)—Argyle argued that interpersonal skills are learnt in a similar way to motor skills, which is by breaking down complex acts into their sub-components and then completing focused training on each of the components. This view is succinctly summarised by Hargie (2006), when he described how "models and methods successfully employed for over 100 years in

the study of motor skill can usefully be applied to interpersonal skill" (p. 8), explaining that social skills (such as dating skills) can be learnt like tennis:

> Tennis players in training concentrate on specific aspects, such as the serve, smash, lob, volley, and backhand, in order to improve their overall game… The rationale in all of these instances is to analyse the overall complex act in terms of simpler component parts, train the individual to identify and utilise the parts separately, and then combine the parts until the complete act is assimilated. (p. 554)

4.4.2 Dating and socials skills training

While there are many types of skills training (Hargie, 2006), a core shared tenet draws on the assertion that "practice is *necessary* for skill acquisition… To state this is to state the obvious to anyone who has attempted to hit a golf ball, drive a car or ride a bicycle" (Trower, Bryant & Argyle, 1978, p. 71, emphasis in original). Modern skills training, which has burgeoned into major domains of clinical practice (Segrin & Givertz, 2003), embodies the philosophy that practice is necessary for skill acquisition, taking complex social repertoires (such as dating or making friends) and breaking them down into discrete steps (such as initiating conversations with strangers, or asking for a telephone number). Skills trainers instruct clients using modelling, repetitive roleplaying, feedback, and *homework assignments* where clients practice outside of the therapeutic setting (Segrin & Givertz, 2003), such as in coffee shops, bars, and other public spaces. Over the course of 2 to 3 sessions per week for 8 weeks or so, participants improve their competency at initiating dates, managing anxiety, and developing romantic connections.

Indeed, the strongest evidence supporting the argument that dating is a skill, comes from the track record of clinically and therapeutically delivered training. As early as the 1970's, Martinson and Zerface (1970) took 24 shy males who struggled with dating and found that a 5 week practice dating program significantly improved their dating skills and reduced their dating anxiety. Other research reveals that dating skills can be improved by practicing how to initiate conversations, express emotions, and asking for a date (Valenti-Hein, Yarnold & Mueser, 1994); and even practicing skills as subtle as reading and responding to interpersonal cues (MacDonald, Lindquist, Kramer, McGrath, Rhyne, 1975). In addition, research reveals that interpersonal deficits stemming from a lack of exposure to dating environments can be rectified by arranging "practice dates" with members of the opposite sex (Arkowitz, Hinton, Perl & Himadi, 1978). A meta-analysis of 20 skills training interventions suggested shyness and anxiety was a major cause behind male dating deficits, and training that targeted "dating anxiety" was successful at "desensitization" and improving dating outcomes.

4.4.3 Criticisms of the skills model of dating

There are two main criticisms of the skills model of dating that are particularly pertinent to the thesis' conceptualisation of dating as a form of expertise. The first criticism is aligned to *Gestaltism*, the philosophy that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." For proponents of this view, deconstructing dating is reductionist, unnatural, and does not convey the complexity and nuances of social interaction (Hargie, 2006). Linked to this is the view that such training results in artificial, "robotic" interactions, whereby the "beauty" and naturalness of interaction is lost. However, this argument is countered by proponents of skills training. While skills training does single out and target individual skills, they are constructed as part of an integrated whole and, while artificial interactions can result, these are viewed as a temporary "training dips." When practiced extensively, skills become embedded and automatic, resulting in people becoming more expressive, improvisational, and natural. The following quote comparing interpersonal skills with motor skills deconstructs the developmental process:

> Training dips are also encountered in the learning of motor skills. Thus, someone being coached in tennis may find that having to focus on the component elements of, and practice separately, the serve, lob, smash, or volley actually interferes with the overall performance. It is only when the tennis player has a chance to 'put it all together' that performance begins to improve. (Hargie, 2006, p. 558)

Research on deliberate practice also suggests that targeting specific skills is not only desirable but often necessary for the development of tightly integrated skilled performance (Ericsson, 1998).

A second more germane criticism concerns the *quantity* of practice required to dramatically improve social and dating skills—to one who could be considered an "expert." While Greene (2003) asserted, "it is not unreasonable to suggest that the '10-year rule' for developing expert levels of performance… may apply just as much to social interaction skills as to behavioural domains" (p. 81), no research has demonstrated that training can lead to expert social or dating skills; with significant uncertainty regarding the *type*, *amount*, and *quality* of practice that would give rise to such skilled performers. Chapter 5, which sets out the conceptual framework linking deliberate practice to dating, proposes a partial counterargument on the basis that a key reason for critiquing skills training, is not one of *quality* but rather one of *quantity*. Given expertise requires years of practice (Ericsson et al., 1993), the lack of research linking clinically delivered skills practice to expert interpersonal skills is no surprise. Clinically delivered dating skills training typically spans no more than a few months (Segrin & Givertz, 2003), and typically seeks to improve clients' interpersonal skills to levels that facilitate adequate social responding rather than to the level of "expert." Quite simply, 10,000 hours of dating skills practice is a constraint that clinical training would struggle to accommodate.

4.5 Modern Relationships and Dating

An important aspect of appreciating dating initiation as a skill and form of expertise is the understanding that the ability to forge romantic relationships is not only challenging, but necessary. Research suggests romantic relationships are vital to wellbeing, happiness and a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), yet a growing body of evidence reveals that increasingly men (and women) are struggling to form and maintain intimate relationships, spending longer periods single and in isolation (Budgeon, 2008). Some populations are particularly prone to being excluded, such as the shy and anxious (Arkowitz et al.,1978), and those with cognitive impairments (Tenhula & Bellack, 2008; Valenti-Hein et al., 1994).

Being unskilled at initiation—the crucial first step—is a barrier to establishing rewarding long term romantic relationships. In this context, developing skills to attract females is a feature of social life that young males feel pressured to conform to (Grazian, 2008). While there is a popular stereotype of young males being insatiably driven for sexual conquest, the vast majority of males do not practice this vision of masculinity; with estimates suggesting that less than five percent of the male population exhibit such "Casanova-Like promiscuity," averaging less than four or more sexual partners a year over a four-year span (Smiler, 2012). In reality, far more males (and females) feel overwhelmed by the modern dating scene and suffer from the effects associated with *minimal dating* (Leck, 2006), including loneliness, stigmatisation, low confidence, pressure to develop longterm relationships, and concern about their lack of dating competence and ability forming romantic relationships. And while males and females both engage in modern *hookup culture*, surveys show that that most men and women who engage in it actually do so in the hope it will lead to a long-term relationship (Geher & Kaufman, 2013).

The continuously evolving nature of dating, with different rules of etiquette and social appropriateness—from the normalisation of pre-marital sex in the post-1970 modern dating system (Bredow et al., 2008), to the rise of mobile dating applications like Tinder—presents potential problems for both males and females keen to find love (LeFebvre, 2017), as they try to adapt to modern modes of intimacy (Goodwin, 2009). Males, conforming to traditional scripts that assert that men should initiate and "woo" are faced by the potential for crippling *approach anxiety* (Wenzel & Kashdan, 2008); while females are faced with having to reject someone, which can be associated with feelings of guilt, embarrassment, awkwardness, or harassment (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2008). Indeed, this dilemma highlights why clinical and therapeutic training recognises the need to help people improve their dating skills (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2008). Not only can improved skills help alleviate the initial uncomfortableness of meeting a stranger, it can also help men to perceive and decode cues (that are conspicuous to the trained) that indicate when an initiation is unwanted well before it becomes invasive (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2008). Linking dating to skills training and expert performance helps us identify what qualities actually underlie effective dating initiation, increasing our understanding of how people can conduct themselves appropriately yet still attain the rewarding romantic relationships so vital to wellbeing.

This is all the more significant given research reveals that encounters as trivial as striking up small talk with strangers can increase feelings of wellbeing. In a series of experiments, Epley and colleagues (Epley, Nicholas, Schroeder & Juliana, 2014) found that train and bus commuters who struck up conversations with fellow passengers had a more pleasant journey—even when they believed they would prefer the solitude of using their phone or reading a book. As social creatures we have a deep need for belonging and social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and dislike feeling excluded or invisible. The Germans even have a specific term capturing the phenomenon—*wie Luft behandeln*—which means "to be looked at as though air." Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater and Williams' (2012) research revealed that nonverbal communication as subtle as a brief smile or eye contact increase a person's sense of social connection. Conversely, being ignored, or looked at as though air, increase feelings of being disconnected. Such research reinforces that, despite living in highly populated cities, people experience a sense of disconnectedness and social anxiety that stops them from engaging in meaningful everyday interactions as basic as smiling or saying "Hello."

4.6 Summary for Segment 1

Dating skills are essential for instigating and developing romantic relationships. Segment 1 of this chapter argued that dating initiation is best conceived as a staged process whereby two strangers meet and decide whether to become romantically involved. It highlighted two rival arguments for explaining why some males are more successful at navigating initiation. The first is concordant with a giftedness view of dating, emphasising the role of genes in superior dating ability. The second posits that dating ability—like playing tennis, driving a car, or any motor skill—is highly trainable. The giftedness view emphasises the relatively fixed nature of dating, while the second emphasises its malleability and suggests, regardless of whether a person possesses an abundance of innately desirable traits or not, training is a highly effective way for maximising dating success. The next section continues to review academic literature on dating, but this time in the context of Research Question 5.

Chapter 4, Segment 2

Evaluating Research Question 5—Are Community Postulates Grounded in Empirical Research?

Segment 2 focuses on answering Research Question 5, which evaluates whether Community "postulates"—Community theories and techniques regarding dating and attraction are supported in empirical dating research. This approach has parallels with Oesch and Miklousic (2011), who drew on empirical research to evaluate whether some of the Community's "most important and nearly-universal concepts" were supported in evolutionary and social psychology (p. 900). A number of the theories examined in this chapter are similar to those considered by Oesch and Milklousic—for instance the claim

that dating initiation has prototypical phases. However, Research Question 5 had a different focus; if Community postulates are supported in the research, it would provide further evidence supporting the view that dating skills are improved by carefully identifying and practicing specific skills.

At the heart of the Community is the philosophy that dating initiation skills can be improved if the process of attraction is understood. With thousands of members across the globe, it would be fallacious to suggest there is complete consensus across the Community about how this is best achieved. There are many different voices and "schools" in the Community that adopt different positions. For instance, one school of thought emphasises the importance of practicing and improving "outer game"; the concrete skills, routines, techniques that can be used to imbue a dating initiation. The other suggests "inner game"—a person's internal cognitions and sense of self—underlies dating success. However, Oesch and Miklousic (2011) noted that notwithstanding the differing schools of thought within the Community, we can identify theories that are pervasive and widely espoused.

For Research Question 5, a total of six postulates were identified and reviewed. The first three focus on what are termed *Community theories*, or "overarching philosophies or theories which are said to underlie male-to-female attraction." The second three focus on *Community skills*, or "specific routines, techniques, or procedures that—if practiced— are claimed to increase efficacy at dating initiation."

4.7 Community "Theories": Postulates 1 to 3

4.7.1: Postulate 1: Adopt dating initiation models as an attraction blueprint

4.7.1.1 The argument presented

At the heart of Community theories is the concept that successful dating initiation follows specific stages or phases that can be identified and incorporated in Community dating initiation models. Proponents claim to have created their models by integrating dating research on evolutionary and social psychology with their first-hand experience of initiating dates with thousands of women. Oesch and Miklousic (2011) focused on Community "guru" von Markovik's framework, which models attraction around the phases: Attraction, building mutual Comfort, Trust, and Seduction (Markovik, 2006); described by the author as a proven "step-by-step game plan that structures 'courtship'" (Markovik, 2006, p. 3).

Another popular model is *The Emotional Progression Model* (Savoy, 2007), from the dating company *Love Systems* which places emotions at the centre of attraction. The model suggests that across the following six stages—Opening, Transitioning, Attraction, Qualification, Comfort, and Seduction— females evaluate males' attractiveness by seeking to maximise rewards. The model is delineated in the book, *Magic Bullets* (Savoy, 2007), which goes into intricate detail about the model and how to navigate each stage. Examples of specific techniques used across the phases are described in Section 4.8.

While the Community acknowledges dating is not strictly linear, a key argument is that

behaviours that are inconsistent with its basic stages undermine attraction. For instance, the Comfort phase, in which people "build an emotional connection and get to know each other" (p. 84), should come before Seduction, which is where the relationship becomes more intimate. As described in associated text, the *Love Systems Routines Manual* (2007), "We know that few women could 'feel aroused by your touch without awkwardness or embarrassment' (Seduction) before they 'feel comfort and connection with you' (Comfort)" (p. 9-10).

4.7.1.2 Support in research

As suggested in Section 4.3, there is significant support in the research for the theory that dating initiation has distinct phases which can be modelled. Fox, Warner, and Markstaller (2013)—who reviewed social psychologists' conceptualisation of dating using initiation models—support the legitimacy of such initiation models, arguing that they are rooted in Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) principles of social exchange and have been "widely tested and applied over the past 40 years to explicate the steps of romantic relationships" (p. 773).

Studying The Emotional Progression Model (Savoy, 2007) it is readily apparent that there are a large number of parallels with Davis' (1973) and Bredow et al's. (2008) research-based models described earlier. For instance, all three models identify the stages that must be navigated, in Davis' (1973) words, "in order for one stranger to pick up another successfully" (p.4). They also emphasise the role of skill as a learnt ability—skills such as "finding an opener," searching for ingratiating topics, presenting a "come-on self," and scheduling a second encounter, which Davis argued enable people to increase their probability of success. All three models also suggest that, across the stages, females actively evaluate males and seek to maximise rewards; a view that is consistent with social exchange theory and evolutionary psychology, which is examined further in Postulate 2.

4.7.1.3 Evaluation: Significant support for Postulate 1

The evidence provides convincing support for Postulate 1. The parallels between Community and researched-derived social psychology models are clearly evident. In their review, Oesch and Miklousic (2011) also found significant support in evolutionary psychology for initiation having specific phases. However, there are also grounds for being cautious in support of Postulate 1. Be they Community or research-based initiation models, two main criticisms can be levied against them. The first criticism is that courtship models misrepresent the process by artificially deconstructing dating into neat, discrete stages; when in-fact dating initiation is a dynamic and holistic process. This criticism can be readily countered, as both Community members and researchers acknowledge the integrated nature of dating initiation, highlighting that the value of initiation models lies in their ability to shed light on the process and act as guides during pivotal moments in dating interactions.

The second criticism is that, despite researchers' (and Community members') regard for courtship models, there is a lack of empirical research substantiating them. While this is a point that

requires recognition, it should be noted that some research has evaluated initiation models (e.g., Avtgis et al., 1998; Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009). In addition, the popular use of initiation models by psychologists over the last 40 years suggests their value and relevance for conceptualising romantic attraction (Fox, Warner & Markstaller, 2013).

4.7.2 Postulate 2: The assortative and competitive, nature of the mating market

4.7.2.1 The argument presented

The Community argues that dating occurs in a highly competitive "mating market," where women (and men) seek to maximise their returns by forming relationships with people who "demonstrate high value" (or DHV, in Community jargon). To understand what characteristics DHV for females, Community members draw on evolutionary biological principles which hypothesise that women and males evolved different mating psychologies which fundamentally influences the traits they find attractive. They suggest that women value, in particular, cues that are indicative of social status, such as intelligence, confidence, wealth, ambition, and masculinity.

4.7.2.2 Support in research

For the lay person, the extent to which academics assert that dating occurs in a competitive mating market, in which males and females have clear *mate preferences* (Miller & Todd, 1998)*,* may be surprising. Indeed, there are vast bodies of literature supporting this notion, both in evolutionary psychology and social psychology. For instance, *sexual strategies theories* (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) argue that women and men faced different adaptive problems throughout evolutionary history that have profoundly influenced their mating psychology and the traits they value. One example of this would be that due to the sex differential in reproduction, females are less willing to engage in short-term casual sex (Buss & Schmitt, 1993); and "universally" show a strong preference for intelligence, wealth, status, and kindness (Buss, 1989).

Evolutionary theorists agree that dating occurs in a highly competitive market which operates along the lines of *inter-sexual competition*, whereby males are in competition with females, and *intra-sexual competition*, where males are in competition with other males (and females with other females).

Similarly, social exchange theory, which derives from social learning and economic theories of human behaviour (Thibault & Kelly, 1959)*,* and is arguably the pre-eminent social psychology theory on the assortative nature of the dating market, views the outcome of dating interactions as the result of a marketplace evaluation, where women and men seek to mate with a partner of equivalent or higher "value." Women are attracted to physical attractiveness, social status, humour, and intelligence. The higher the exchange value of a female the more socially desirable she expects her partner to be (Back et al., 2011; Liu, 2012). In summary, as Geher et al. (2016) write:

The result of competition and selection is positive assortative mating (Thiessen & Gregg, 2000). Individuals with like 'mate values' ultimately pair together… Each individual in a couple is trying to maximise his or her genetic returns by securing a mate with the best possible combination of traits, offering both the potential to be a good parent and possessing good genes. The mate-decision algorithm operates on personal mate value, shopping for wanted traits in a triaged fashion. For example, individuals who are the equivalent of seven out of ten will end up with other individuals of the same value. (p. 3)

4.7.2.3 Evaluation: Significant support for Postulate 2

Given the size of the Community, simplistic representations of evolutionary and social psychological theories are not uncommon. However, at the broader level, there is strong consensus in research which supports the view that males and females have different mating psychologies, and that they seek to maximise exchange value when selecting a partner. Criticisms that some academics levy at evolutionary psychologists—such as the view that differences between male and female preferences are not as rigid or hardwired as proposed, being strongly determined by environment and culture (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 1999)—could also be levied at the Community. However, in practice evolutionary psychologists (and members of the Community) do acknowledge the flexibility of human mating psychology. For instance, *strategic pluralism theory* (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) argues there is no single "best" mating strategy for males and females, but rather strategies are conditional and highly adapted to the specific environment. This accounts for the rich diversity of mating strategies that exist, and can be used to explain specific behaviours such as why, in certain circumstances, females are highly motivated to engage in short-term mating and males in long-term mating strategies.

In terms of social psychology research, *interdependence theory* (Rusbult & Lange, 2003), provides for somewhat greater adaptability in female and male behaviour than exchange theory. As Bredow et al. (2008) write:

Whereas exchange theory tends to focus on the idea that people's value in the marketplace is closely tied to their social status—for example, their looks, education, or income—interdependence theory lends itself to the idea that people value partners for reasons that often have little connection to such attributes. (p.20)

Interdependence theory provides further allowance for the view that—while dating embodies general market values—it is fluid, dynamic, and shaped by the situation. Across the course of the various stages of an interaction, people make decisions about whether to, for instance, *initiate or not*, or *accept the overture or not*— based not just on general market values but also their individual personalities, their attachment style (e.g., *avoidant*, *secure*, or *anxious*; Shaver, Hazan & Bradshaw, 1988) and the dynamics of the situation. Community theories similarly emphasise this view; indeed the most skilled daters are

typically seen as being highly adaptive and able to "break the rules" when necessary.

4.7.3 Postulate 3: Strategic presentations of cues results in attraction

4.7.3.1 The argument presented

Postulate 3 builds on the previous two, directly addressing the view that dating skills can be enhanced with specially targeted practice. In light of the view that females (and males) have evolved to prefer particular traits in each other, the Community contends that (a) females are sensitive to cues that suggest high value, and (b) that skilled males can generate romantic attraction consistently and predictably by integrating cues in their performances that demonstrate high value (DHV).

The literature stresses the link between emotions and attraction, and how select cues can trigger attraction. The Love Systems Routines Manual (2007) notes:

> Men who are successful with women espouse the principle 'change her mood, not her mind'…
> The emotional triggers that govern women's decision–making are fairly consistent across
> different ages, cultures, and characters. (p. 8-9)

Community material describes thousands of ways people can learn how to integrate cues and trigger attraction, and the skills described in Section 4.8 delineate three such ways.

4.7.3.2 Support in psychology research

There is significant support for Postulate 3's two arguments that (a) women use cues to evaluate males characteristics, and (b) that men can make themselves more attractive by strategically presenting specific characteristics.

With regards to the first postulate, research suggests women (and men) are highly sensitive to mate value (Back et al., 2011; Cox & Fisher, 2008), which is the sum of traits perceived as desirable; with these traits hypothesised to represent genetic fitness and potential for reproductive success (Geher et al., 2016). It is argued that females seek to assess perceived sexual cues to the following four traits: health/ fertility, neurophysiological efficiency (e.g., intelligence), provisioning ability/resources, and capacity for cooperative relationships (Miller & Todd, 1998). Buss and Shmitt (1993) further argue that not only can females (and males) assess such traits, but that to do so is adaptive. In terms of the second postulate, there is strong evidence suggesting that males (and females) are highly adept at strategic self-presentation and exert conscious effort to embody the traits desired by romantic partners (Clark, Shaver & Abraham, 1999). As Greer and Buss (1994) write:

> Men who embody women's desires and women who embody men's desires are most effective at
> achieving their sexual goals. Because the desires of men and women differ, the tactics that are

most effective for men and women differ. (p.198)

However while individuals "proffer signals of fitness and the promise for investment based on aesthetics and behavior" (Geher et al., 2016, p.4), the ability to be successful in this regard is considered highly variable. Females are attuned to seek for "honest indicators" of genetic quality that are not easily strategically presented (Geher et al., 2016; Miller & Todd, 1998). It appears some males are better able at strategically presenting desirable qualities. In this regard, Geher and Kaufman developed the construct of *mating intelligence* which they describe as "a collection of dozens or hundreds of distinct psychological processes and *learned skills* that affect the mating domain based heavily on context" (p.14, emphasis added). As well as highlighting the role of genetic traits in our ability to attract mates, mating intelligence emphasises that learnt behaviours underlie our ability to present our most attractive qualities.

4.7.3.3 Evaluation: Significant support for Postulate 3

The evidence supports Postulate 3. Not only are females sensitive to cues that suggest high value, but there are grounds to argue skilled daters can generate romantic attraction by integrating cues in their performances that convey attractive qualities. Of these, the second is more contentious, not least because of the highly personalised ways people make dating decisions discussed in the previous postulate. The discussion of Community skills in Postulates 4 to 6, suggests ways in which people might integrate such cues into their performances.

4.8 Community "Skills": Postulates 4 to 6

4.8.1 Postulate 4: Rehearsed routines can spark attention

4.8.1.1 The argument presented

A key conversation in the Community is how to best display cues that generate attraction. In this regard, one of the most debated areas is the role of pre-prepared openers and routines which can be used in predicable situations. Used skilfully, it is argued that such routines can be used to "DHV" which demonstrate attractive qualities such as humour, creativity, resources, status, kindness, empathy. The Community provides many thousands of routines for the vast majority of stereotypical situations that occur in dating initiations. The *Love Systems Routines Manual* (2007) notes:

> There's nothing "weird" about using routines. Everyone does it whether they know it or not. Any story you've told more than a couple of times is a routine. We're here to help you make and use the best material. Which brings me to a big caveat: "game" is not just spitting routines. There is much, much more to it: proper delivery, calibration, having an attractive identity, physical

escalation, genuineness, having a unique and congruent style, and much more. Guys who have great game have all of these areas mastered in addition to having a formidable arsenal of routines in their heads. (p. 4)

It is argued that routines such as openers can be effective for multiple reasons. For instance: (1) dating situations are predictable (and so stereotypical communication can be effective); (2) openers allow performers to quickly display a wide range of attractive qualities such as sociability, humour, intelligence and resources, using compelling lines that differ from the more predictable, humdrum conversations the occur between daters; and (3) using "tried and tested" openers provides performers with confidence.

4.8.1.2 Support in psychology research

There is significant support for the theory that dating, like other interpersonal domains, has predictable elements, and that successful communicators use scripted behaviour in a highly routinised fashion (see the previous discussion in Section 4.4 and Chapter 10's thematic analysis). In terms of openers and chat-up lines, the research suggests these are important in courtship display (Geher & Kaufman, 2013), with some being more effective than others.

Cunningham (1989) tested the value of direct, innocuous, and cute-flippant opening lines in naturalistic setting such as bars. They found that women responded more positively to direct (67%) and innocuous opening lines (62%), with very few responding well to cute-flippant opening lines (19%). Females assessed opening lines to reflect on men's sociability and perceived intelligence—traits they found attractive. However, there is significant variation in the types of opening lines women prefer and in what context. Research suggests this means men are better served by having a wide repertoire of opening gambits, with the key thing being their ability to tailor them to meet the target's desired values (such as the desire for intelligence or sociability) (Cunningham, 1989). In this light, Kleinke (1986) advises in his book *Meeting and Understanding People*, that dating skills can be improved by increasing a person's familiarity with opening routines. In addition, there is also a large body of research that suggests other forms of routinised performance can be effective. For instance, storytelling has a strong rehearsed component and males who are good storytellers are considered more attractive to females (Donahue & Green, 2016).

4.8.1.3 Evaluation: Significant support for Postulate 4

Postulate 4, has significant support in the academic research and literature. Two of the biggest criticisms of rehearsed routines are that they, (a) are not relevant to enough situations that daters encounter, and (b) that they produce robotic performances, undermining fluid, intuitive interaction. Community members acknowledge these criticisms, but counter these with arguments similar to those previously raised in Section 4.4.3 on Gestaltism; contending that robotic performances are often the result of a lack of familiarity and practice, and that rehearsed routines are best used as "training wheels," enabling people to familiarise themselves with new routines and techniques which can be relinquished

once they have become more proficient. In addition, as noted in the above Love Systems quote, highly calibrated performances are required for skilled delivery. These arguments are discussed further in the deliberate practice thematic analysis (Section 6.2.3.2), and again in the intuition thematic analysis (10.5.3).

4.8.2 Postulate 5: Demonstrate pre-selection

4.8.2.1 The argument presented

Community members propound the use of a concept known as "pre-selection," defined by online Community dictionary *Pualingo* as, "The communication of the PUA's [pickup artist's] value based on his ability to provide evidence of already having women in his life, thereby being 'pre-selected' by females" ("pre-selection," 2008). An example of pre-selection that Community members claim to be effective is termed *mate choice copying*, whereby they posit males can strategically increase their attractiveness to females in, say, a bar, by being accompanied by an attractive female. Savoy (2007) suggests pre-selection works because:

> Women know—and their biological impulses certainly know—that whether other women are attracted to a man is a useful guide for them. While individual tastes differ, most women know that they are looking for roughly the same qualities as the rest of their gender: health; confidence; status; and so on. When women are interested in you, you are pre-selected and more interesting to other women. (p .33)

One reason why techniques such as pre-selection (and also the skill discussed in the next postulate) are said to be so effective, is due to the highly complex nature of dating. Limited by the bounds of cognitive resources, when people are making complex mating decisions with numerous variables to assess, they prioritise rapid decision-making and gut feelings to evaluate potential partners, which are influenced by relatively simple heuristics (Lenton & Francesconi, 2010) such as mate choice copying.

4.8.2.2 Support in psychology research

Research exists to support the notion of mate choice copying. Biologists have shown that this effect exists among female guppies, for instance, who ignore physically attractive males for moderately attractive males that receive greater female attention (Dugatkin, 1992). Findings indicate that this notion also transfers to humans, suggesting that the simple act of a man walking into a room with an attractive woman makes that man more attractive to other women. Social psychology research by Berschield and Walster (1974) supports this view, revealing that men walking into bar with attractive women are considered more attractive by other women and assumed to have various positive qualities. Prestia et al. (2002), summarised the research stating "males gain considerable prestige by associating with *physically attractive* females" (p. 5; emphasis given).

Similarly, research by evolutionary psychologists also supports this view. As suggested by the Community, it is thought to be an example of a heuristic whereby the male with an attractive female is a cue, and leads females to instinctively infer that he possesses desirable personality traits and high social value (Cunningham & Barbee, 2008). Hill and Buss's (2008) study of 847 men and women revealed a similar finding. In what they termed the *desirability enhancement effect,* they found the mere presence of women around a man led women raters to consider him more desirable.

4.8.2.3 Evaluation: Significant support for Postulate 5

There is significant support for Postulate 5; however numerous contextual factors influence real-world dating decisions. Using such nuanced behaviour is a highly skilful endeavour—one that must be exercised with care—as strategic self-promotion can be a deterrent if detected. The broader point that dating is a cognitively demanding domain carries stronger support in the literature (see for example, Geher & Kaufman, 2013), and is treated to detailed discussion in Section 8.5.4 *Dating as Cognitively Demanding.* For instance, dating is highly complex, with numerous cues and situational exigencies; time pressured, and a shifting environment, for instance with interruptions liable at any moment. In such cognitively demanding situations, people often resort to simple heuristics on which to base their decisions. For instance, research shows that in speed dating events, where people are forced to make choices with little information, they depend on simpler heuristics (such as height and weight, which are easier to discern than personality) than in less-pressured dating environments (Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). This is discussed further in Chapter 8 in the context of dating intuition.

4.8.3 Postulate 6: How we demonstrate value, the example of accomplishment introductions (intros)

4.8.3.1 The argument presented

The Community considers the ability to demonstrate a higher value as an essential yet subtle skill; with some forms of DHV'ing viewed as more effective than others. For instance, listing one's accomplishments can come across as sanctimonious and boastful. Rather than a performer explicitly indicating to their target that they are intelligent or kind, Savoy (2007) writes that it is more effective if the target personally perceives it, or is informed of this fact by another source. While a target's friends are seen as the preferred source for discovering an initiator's desirable qualities, even receiving such information from a biased source like the initiator's friend is still preferable than the initiator directly telling the target about their attractive qualities.

One example of this is what the Community describes as "accomplishment introductions" (typically shortened to "accomplishment intro's") which is where a peer supporting the initiator conveys the initiator's positive characteristics to the target by embedding DHV's. Von Markovik (2007, p. 109) describes a simple formula for accomplishment intro's describing how the initiator (the

"player") and his "wing" might execute it:

1. The player has opened a set and has had enough time to pass the social hook point. The wing approaches the player.
2. Player faces the wing and greets him.
3. Player then says, "Hey, guys, this is my friend [name]; he's making me a very rich man." "Great people." "One of the smartest men I know."
4. Wing responds, "Pleasure," then runs the set for a minute.

4.8.3.2 Support in psychology research

Research confirms that personally describing one's best qualities to a potential mate can come across as unattractive. As Bredow et al. (2008) write:

> Would-be ingratiators may seek to attract interest by promoting their talents or drawing attention to their athleticism, their knowledge, or their pedigree. If they are not careful, however, they run the risk of seeming conceited, narcissistic, or self-important, all of which might undermine their appeal. (p.16)

They further add, "It is far better to have someone else brag about one than to do the bragging oneself" (p. 16). A naturalistic experiment conducted by Guegen (2010), demonstrated the importance of a person perceiving the initiator as possessing a desirable characteristic rather than being informed of such fact by him (or her). In the study, three attractive male confederates went to a bar and waited until a female was in earshot. The men then began a pre-planned script, with two of the confederates heaping praise on the other, suggesting he was humorous. In one condition, the praised male approached the nearby female and asked for her number, and in the other, the males who did the praising approached the female. The researchers found that the praised male was almost *three times as likely* to receive a phone number than those who were observed laughing at a friend's joke instead.

4.8.3.3 Evaluation: Partial support for Postulate 6

The view that how we display our qualities influences attractiveness is strongly supported in research. Indeed, there is agreement that bragging is unattractive and that it is better for our peers to doing the praising. While no direct research was found on accomplishment intro's, Guegen's (2010) study could be considered an examination of "*indirect* accomplishment introductions," and Community members also engage in such indirect methods for boosting their wings attractiveness.

4.9 Chapter 4 Summary

The first part of this chapter drew on various fields of dating research to challenge trait-based views that emphasise the role of giftedness in superior dating performance. In addition, it addressed Research Question 5, identifying and evaluating six Community postulates—five of which were supported in empirical research and one which received mixed support. When discussing research supporting the relationship between practice and dating ability, it was noted that this research focused on how low-to-average dating skills can be improved—a level far below expert. To redress the gap in the literature, the next chapter develops a conceptual framework linking deliberate practice to dating expertise.

Chapter 5. Deliberate Practice & Dating Expertise: Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 synthesises discussion from the previous two chapters to develop theory linking dating expertise to practice. It sets out three conceptual arguments that provide the basis for Investigation 1's proposition (*the dating experts developed their superior skills through extensive deliberate practice*), and five research questions (see Chapter 2) which, if supported, provide the grounds for challenging the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. Key concepts from the previous two chapters which support the arguments presented in this chapter, are:

- Experts are "superior performers" in a particular field, with dating experts defined as "superior performers at dating initiation."
- Expertise is developed by accumulation of large quantities of challenging deliberate practice.
- Dating is a "skill" that, like tennis and other motor skills, can be developed by adopting a microtraining approach, which breaks down complex skills into their individual components for targeted training.
- Deliberate practice is seen as effective because it enables performers to remain in the cognitive-associative learning phase, facilitating the development of increasingly sophisticated mental representations.
- Specially designed dating skills practice leads to the development of increasingly sophisticated behavioural repertoires, scripts, and knowledge structures, which can be used to navigate the various phases of dating initiation.

5.2 Conceptual Argument 1: Types of Dating Activities that Constitute Deliberate Practice

Deliberate practice consists of specifically designed practice to improve performance (Ericsson et al., 1993). Ericsson (2008) identifies four key components of deliberate practice which reveals it is repetitive, designed around feedback, challenging, and goal orientated. The discussion on dating and social skills training revealed that microtraining has parallels with deliberate practice. For instance, Trower et al., (1978) suggest that interpersonal skills are improved with carefully designed practice. They argue that repetitive practice, while "*necessary* to skill acquisition, is not *sufficient*" (p. 73); practice must target the component parts of complex interactional skills. They also emphasise the need for feedback—or what they termed "knowledge of results"— suggesting that, as with motor skills, coaching can be vital to help learners improve. By drawing on the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4, we can hypothesise that dating expertise can be developed by engaging in practice that embodies the four components of deliberate practice see Figure 9.

Figure 9. *The four components of dating skills deliberate practice.* This model identifies four components of dating practice that are concordant with deliberate practice which are hypothesised to underlie expert dating skills.

We can further delineate the types of activities that we might expect dating experts to have completed within each of the four components of deliberate practice. Table 3 provides examples of the

four components of deliberate practice within three domains: a traditional domain of expertise (chess), clinically led dating skills training, and the type of practice Community members complete.

Table 3

Example deliberate practice activities in three domains

Component of deliberate practice	Three domains of practice		
	Chess practice	**Clinical dating practice**	**Community dating practice**
Repetitive	Hours of repetitive practice e.g., studying moves and analysing games	Repetitively practicing dating initiation, in classrooms and in public	Approaching many hundreds of women, practicing lines and routines
Designed around feedback	Using feedback from coaches; reflecting on opponents' moves; watching back games	Using feedback from clinicians, peers, interactional partners	Using feedback from coaches, peers, interactional partners
Challenging	Mentally taxing practice; highly focused, repetitive	Completing practice that challenges current skills, which can be anxiety provoking	Mentally and physically arduous practice spending days initiating; anxiety provoking practice with the threat of social rejection
Goal orientated	Developing tactical awareness; studying moves; developing perceptual awareness by learning blindfold chess to, win 5 chess tournaments	Developing satisfactory dating skills. Learning set verbal and non-verbal skills; memorising gambits; learning etiquette for requesting a telephone number	Becoming highly skilled at initiating dates. Mastering particular verbal and non-verbal skills. Setting goals, such as practicing initiating dates for 100 consecutive days

The table highlights parallels between the three domains. For example, chess players undertake considerable amounts of repetitive practice; such as repetitively memorising the chess plays of previous masters, or practicing against chess computer programs. In clinical dating skills training, clients repetitively practice different components of dating initiation, such as how to introduce themselves to strangers, what cues to look for, or the etiquette for asking for a telephone number. Similarly, Community practice has repetitive components, such as practising opening lines and routines in private and public. Feedback is important in each of the three domains. Chess players receive feedback from coaches, as do members of the Community; while clinicians provide their clients with regular feedback and guidance. In

all three domains performers are challenged by engaging in tasks that are designed to incrementally improve their skills. Finally, the practice is goal oriented. For instance, chess players design practice with specific goals in mind, such as developing tactical awareness. In clinical skills training, clinicians design practice around the goal of making clients more proficient in particular facets of dating—such as how to manage the end of an interaction. For Community members, the goal or becoming more skilled at dating is deconstructed into numerous sub-tasks, such as becoming more skilled at verbal or non-verbal communication, or memorising dating initiation models.

5.3 Conceptual Argument 2: Dating Expertise as the Result of Accumulated Deliberate Practice

Research in a wide range of domains including chess, medicine, mathematics, spelling, wrestling, and football, reveals that expertise relies on accumulated deliberate practice. Could dating expertise also be achieved through accumulated deliberate practice? Analysis of the literature on deliberate practice and dating skills training provides grounds for hypothesising that it does. In this regard, the relationship between deliberate practice and dating can be modelled as shown in Figure 10, with dating performance increasing as a person amasses deliberate practice.
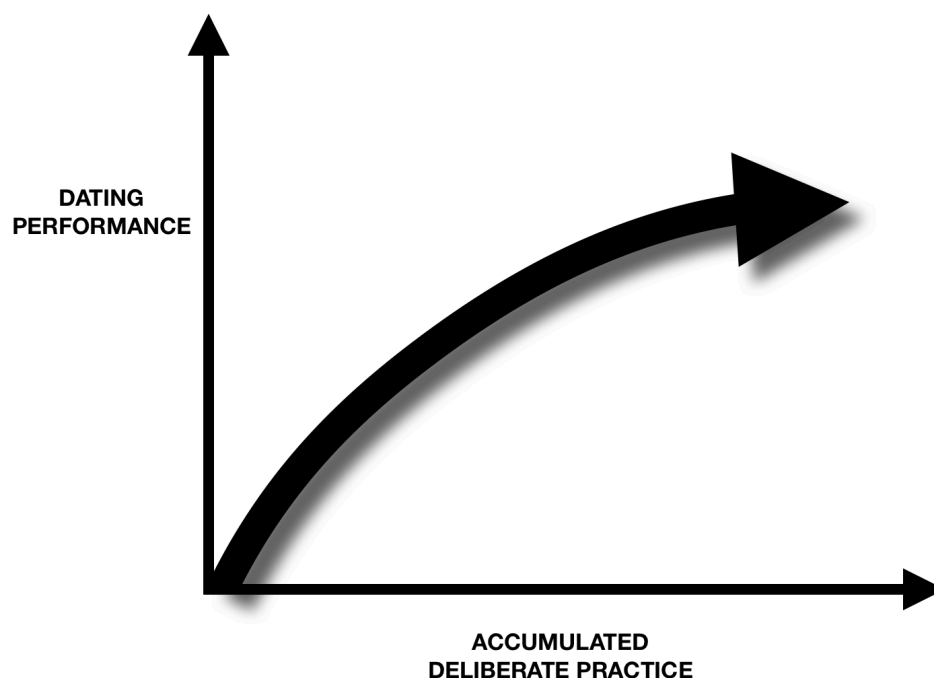
Figure 10. *Dating expertise as a function of accumulated deliberate practice.*

When devising the theory of deliberate practice, Ericsson et al. (1993) drew on principles of motor skill acquisition that determine the development of superior motor skills (Anderson, 1982; Fitts & Posner, 1967). Early skills training theorists (e.g., Argyle & Kendon, 1967) drew on the same principles of motor skill acquisition, providing the foundation for our understanding of how men (and women) can improve their social and dating skills. This provides a conceptual link between dating skills and deliberate practice and grounds for reasoning that, just like other skills, dating skills can be learnt and improved through deliberate practice.

A point to be acknowledge is that although skills training has similarities with deliberate practice, it *is not* designed to raise clients' dating skills to the level of "expert." Rather the typical aim is to raise peoples' dating skills to a level that facilitates "adequate social functioning." Clients are not expected to partake in challenging practice for long periods. This differs significantly from the training completed by the 15 participants, who had years of intensive Community practice.

5.4 Conceptual Argument 3: How Deliberate Practice Facilitates Expert Dating Skills

Traditional explanations of skill acquisition (Anderson, 1982; Fitts & Posner, 1967) emphasised a tapering of skill in the *autonomous phase,* in accordance with the limitations of a person's talent. Ericsson (2006b) argues that performers can avoid arrested development if they continue to seek out challenging practice that keeps them in the cognitive-associative phase, which facilitates increasingly sophisticated mental representations, linking knowledge to skilled action.

Just as most people do not continuously seek out the challenging practice required to become a Formula One driver, a renowned composer, or an eminent writer; arguably, most people do not set out on an extensive program to develop their dating skills. For many, improvement in dating skills is not a conscious goal; rather, through somewhat irregular application, people acquire dating scripts and repertoires which are sufficient for finding a romantic partner (Grazian, 2008; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003) but are unlikely to develop much more than average dating skills.
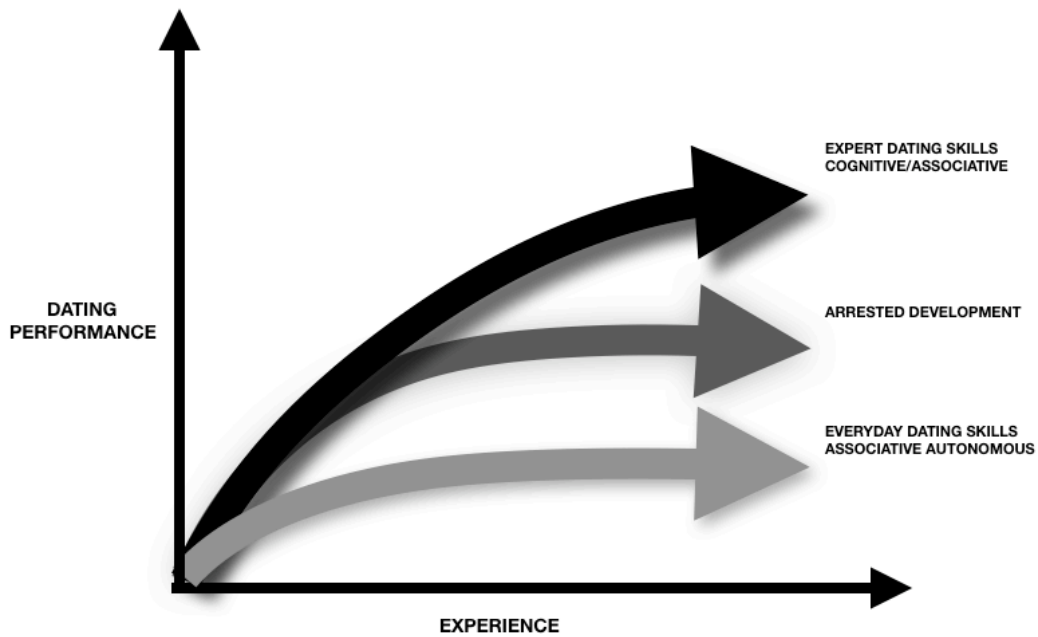
Figure 11. *Dating expertise and practice in the cognitive-associative phase.* Is dating expertise a result of accumulating challenging practice that keeps performers in the cognitive-associative phase?

As represented by the lowest of the three arrows in Figure 11, through unconscious practice of dating skills, performers may attain dating skills that are sufficient for day-to-day interactions. However, engaging in specifically designed practice for a sufficient length of time may enable performers to significantly improve their dating skills and develop dating expertise. Such challenging practice could keep performers in the cognitive-associative phase (represented by the top arrow in Figure 11), where they continue to enhance their skills and develop increasingly sophisticated mental representations. As with other domains of expertise, socially skilled individuals rely on mental representations to perform optimally (Smith & Queller, 2004). To resist arrested development, experts need to keep developing their stores of mental representations (Ericsson, 2008). Given this, we can hypothesise that, after years of dating practice, performers who fail to maintain challenging activities will hit a plateau in their dating skills (as illustrated by the middle arrow in Figure 11).

5.5 Chapter 5 Summary

The idea that some people possess unique talents that predict success is a prevalent view in society (Ericsson, 2006a). Yet recent research on deliberate practice has challenged the view that giftedness is the main determinant of expertise. By synthesising research on expert performance, deliberate practice, and dating skills, this chapter has presented three conceptual arguments that dating expertise could stem from deliberate practice. These arguments led to Investigation 1's proposition—*the dating experts developed their superior skills through extensive deliberate practice*—and five research questions (set out in Chapter 2, Section 2.1.1.2).

Chapter 6. Thematic Analysis: Becoming a Dating Expert through Dating Skills Deliberate Practice

6.1 Introduction and Overview

This chapter presents thematic analysis from the retrospective interviews with the 15 dating experts. The thematic analysis was designed to facilitate the evaluation of Investigation 1's research questions and proposition, *the performers' dating expertise is not the result of an innate talent or "gift." Rather their expertise is the result of years of deliberate practice.* The thematic analysis provides a detailed examination of the quantity, quality, and type of practice completed by the participants and reveals that a special type of practice termed dating skills deliberate is the best explanation of how each of the 15 participants made the journey from dating novice to dating experts. As a result, the analysis challenges the enduring giftedness hypothesis of expert dating and the suggestions that superior dating skills are the preserve of rare innately talented individuals.

6.1.1 Overview of the themes
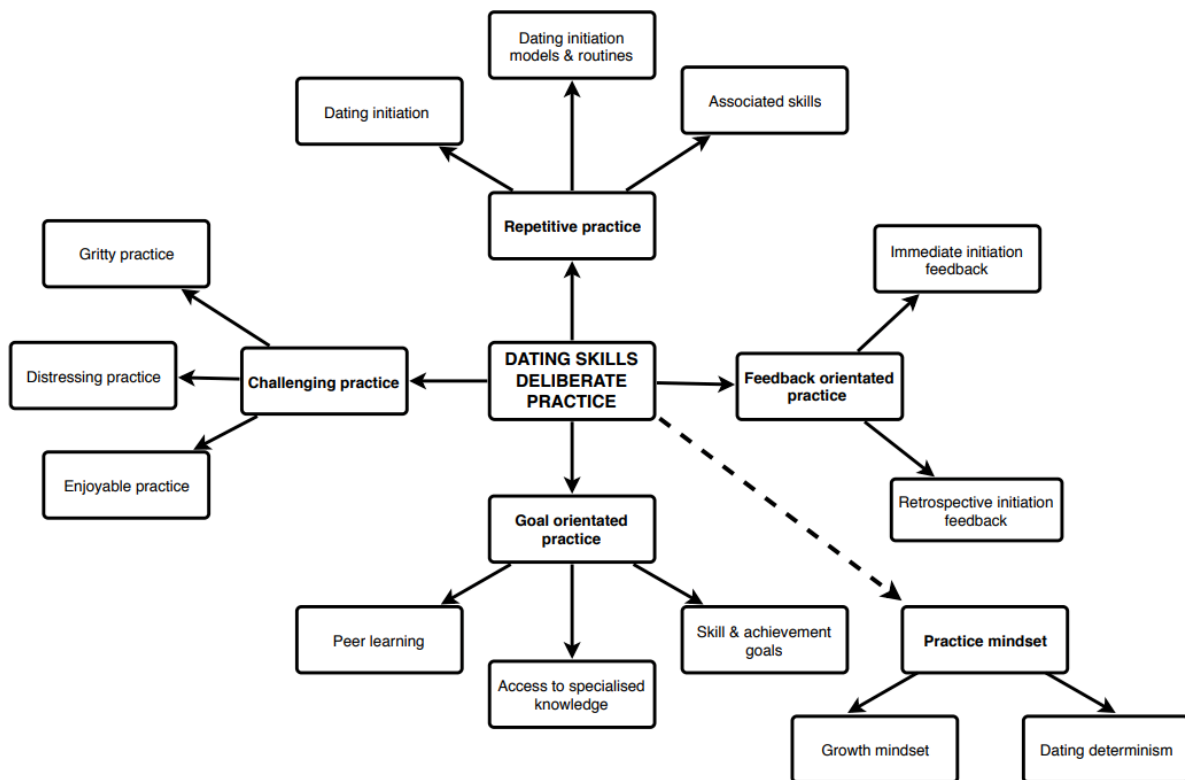
Figure 12. *Themes for Investigation 1*. Thematic analysis resulted in the superordinate theme *dating skills deliberate practice*, which had four main level-2 and eleven level-3 themes. In addition the "satellite" level-2 theme *practice mindset,* with two level-3 themes, also emerged from the analysis.

Using thematic analysis, the interview data was organised into themes capturing pattens in the data to provide a rich and detailed evaluation of how the performers developed their superior dating skills. As illustrated by Figure 12, the themes were organised into a hierarchy consisting of one *superordinate theme* (or *level-1 theme*), five *level-2 themes*, and 13 *level-3 themes*. The superordinate theme, *dating skills deliberate practice,* captures the meaning and essence of all the sub-themes. Of the five level-2 themes, the first four corresponded to the four main components of Ericsson's (2008) theory of deliberate practice. The performers' practice was highly repetitive, designed around feedback, highly challenging, and goal orientated. The fifth level-2 theme was *practice mindset* which is described as a "satellite theme" as, unlike the other level-2 themes, it does not capture data relating to a particular *variety* of practice; rather it examines how the performers' mindset influenced their motivation to practice. Under the level-2 themes, were the level-3 themes. The level-3 themes captured interview data at the explicit or semantic level, and are also referred to as meaning or coding units (see Chapter 2, *Methods* for a discussion).

6.1.2 Summary quantitative counts

Quantitive counts were produced for all of the themes. In total, 1162 meaning units (the level-3 themes) were coded. Table 4 and Figure 13 provide a full breakdown of the meaning units recorded for each theme.

Table 4

Complete Level-2 Themes for Investigation 1

Level-2 Themes	Level-3 Themes	Sources	Meaning units
Repetitive practice		15	445
	Dating initiation	15	282
	Dating initiation models and routines	15	78
	Associated skills	15	85
Feedback orientated practice		15	182
	Immediate initiation feedback	15	115
	Retrospective initiation feedback	15	67
Challenging practice		15	213
	Gritty practice	15	101
	Distressing practice	15	65
	Enjoyable practice	15	47
Goal orientated practice		15	375
	Skill and achievement goals	15	142
	Access to specialised knowledge	15	110
	Peer learning	15	123
Practice mindset		15	160
	Dating determinism	14	31
	Growth mindset	15	129
			1162

Of the level-2 themes, *repetitive practice* and *goal orientated practice* produced the highest number of meaning units, with 445 and 375, respectively. While *feedback orientated practice* and *practice mindset* produced the lowest number of meaning units, with 182 and 160, respectively, the large amount of coding registered for all themes provides veracity to *dating skills deliberate practice* and demonstrates the themes were grounded in the data. This is further bolstered by the rich, vivid, "thick," interview excerpts illustrating each theme.
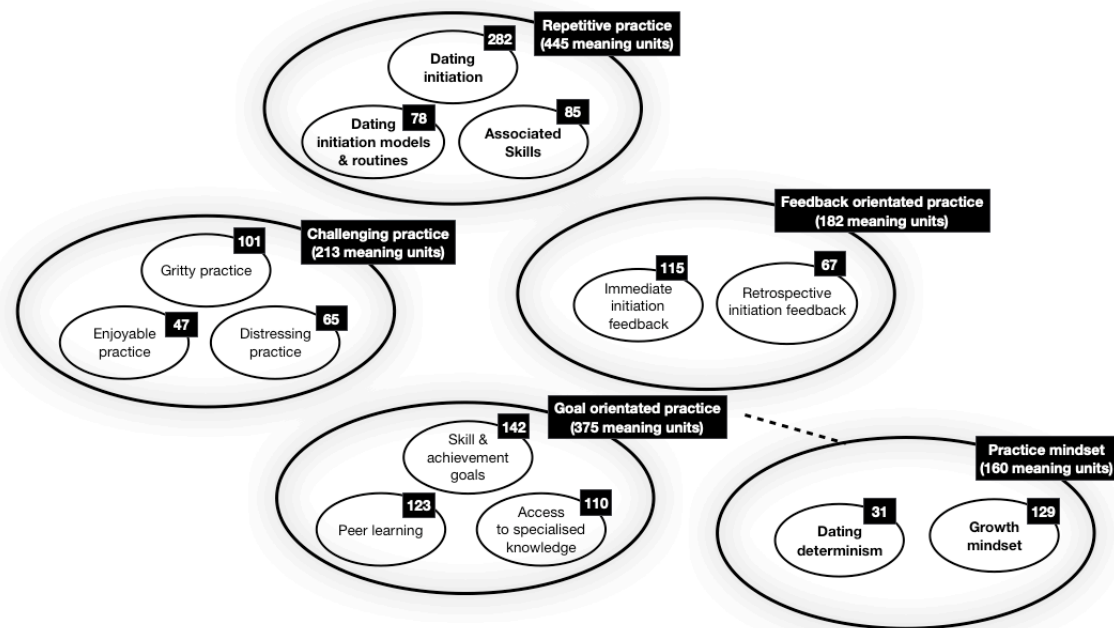
Figure 13. *Dating skills deliberate practice themes with counts.* Thematic analysis resulted in the superordinate theme *dating skills deliberate practice*, which had four level-2 and eleven level-3 themes. In addition the "satellite" level-2 theme *practice mindset* with two level-3 themes also emerged.

6.1.3 The presentation of thematic analysis

The remainder of this chapter presents the thematic analysis for dating skills deliberate practice. Each of the five level-2 themes are presented sequentially in the following format:

1. *Introduction:* A brief description is provided for the level-2 theme and associated level-3 sub-themes. A diagram is included which presents the number of meaning units recorded for the theme. A number of "indicative statements," or short excerpts from the interviews capturing the essence of how the data supported the themes, are provided in a table.

2. *Thematic analysis:* thematic analysis using extensive excerpts from the interviews is presented for the level-3 theme's. At selected points, academic research is drawn on to contextualise the data.

3. *Summary:* a brief summary is provided at the end of the level-2 theme.

4. Steps 1 to 3 are repeated until all five level-2 themes and sub-themes are analysed.

6.2 Thematic Analysis for Repetitive Practice

"I had to consciously do it [dating initiation practice], do it, do it, do it, do it, do it. Then I got so good at it that now, I don't even think about it."[2]

6.2.1 Introduction and overview
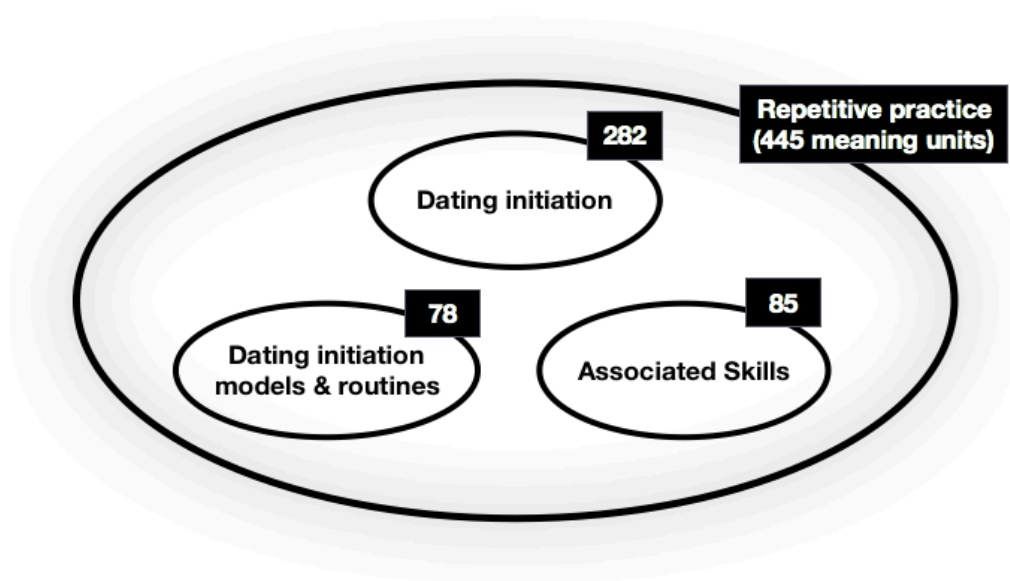
Figure 14. *Repetitive practice* and sub-themes. The first component of dating skills deliberate practice is *repetitive practice*. The 15 performers completed large quantities of highly repetitive practice during their developmental journey from dating novices to dating experts.

Of the five level-2 themes that constitute *dating skills deliberate practice*, *repetitive practice* was the most cited theme, with 445 meaning units. This illustrates just how repetitively the performers practiced dating related skills. The large amounts of practice they amassed is consistent with research on deliberate practice which demonstrates experts accumulate vast quantities of practice on the road to expertise (Ericsson et al.,1993). This is also consistent with research on dating and social skills that emphasises the importance of repetitively practicing new skills until they feel natural and intuitive (e.g., Hargie, 2006).

As illustrated by Figure 14, *repetitive practice* had three sub-themes. Of these, *dating initiation* was the most highly reported theme with 282 meaning units. This reflects the importance of initiation practice, with all dating experts viewing it as the most crucial variety of practice for developing dating ability. Related to this form of practice, *dating initiation models and routines* were vital components of dating skills deliberate practice, being coded 78 times. Similarly, *associated skills* (with 85 meaning units) confirmed the importance of other types of repetitive practice, such as taking improvisation classes, coaching, and

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[2] Each section for the thematic analysis starts with a quote from one of the participants. Here it is Damien's.

visualisation.

6.2.1.1 Indicative statements for repetitive practice

Before the detailed analysis, Table 5 provides indicative statements from the interviews, capturing the essence of how the data supports each of the three level-3 themes that constitute *repetitive practice*.

Table 5

Indicative Statements for Repetitive Practice

Dating initiation
I went out 100 out of 102 days. I'd do two or three hours in the afternoon, walking around the streets practicing getting good at this stuff [dating initiation]… I went out to the point where my feet were so blistered I had to take a couple of days off, I couldn't walk!
I had to consciously do it [dating initiation practice], do it, do it, do it, do it, do it. Then I got so good at it that now, I don't even think about it.
If we were being conservative, we were doing, four nights a week, four hours a night. And that's 16 hours. That's a minimum. That doesn't count during the day. That's not the weekend and going out during the day as well.
There was this old theory floating around in the Community… The first 2,000 approaches don't count.

Dating initiation models and routines
I was drawn to Mystery Method. Because it broke it down [initiation] into a kind of linear process, even though it's not strictly linear.
When you don't have really super-strong conversational skills [maintaining interactions is] always a bit of a problem. And so yeah, I would use [prepared] openers all the time.
The [prepared] lines were there just to help me through basic conversation that gets you through to the next phase.
I had a strict stack. I would go through a certain opener, and then a certain thing, and then a certain routine. And it was really clunky, looking back now, but that was all I knew. I would go through that and it got me results.

Associated skills
I go, "Well, what could I have done? How did that go wrong?"… And I'll mentally visualise that, redo it, put the spikes in and correct the conversation, know what I mean?
Improv comedy classes were really helpful… [They're] actually really, really good, for just getting, good reactions and being able to just kind of think on your feet, which is difficult.
How would I practice the voice? There were things that I would do as an actor, to be loud and heard in the club; change tone, become more intimate, storytelling. You'd practice how you deliver things.
I look after my body, I look after my appearance…[They're] supporting aspects of becoming good with women.

6.2.2 Dating initiation

"I've talked to, you know, probably 10,000 girls."

The general theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) assumes a *monotonic relationship* between performance and the accumulated amount of deliberate practice. As Ericsson and colleagues describe:

> Our basic assumption—the "monotonic benefits assumption"—is that the amount of time an individual is engaged in deliberate practice activities is monotonically related to that individual's acquired performance… It follows from this assumption that individuals should attempt to maximise the amount of time they spend on deliberate practice to reach expert performance. (p. 368)

If such a monotonic relationship also exists in dating, it would mean dating expertise depends on practice; *not* talent or giftedness. The performers who most increased their dating skills would be the ones who dedicated the most time to activities that prompted the greatest development. While the research revealed that performers engaged in a wide variety of practice, all performers—without exception—considered dating initiation the most important form of practice.

Over years of practice, performers accumulated thousands of hours of dating initiation practice, having interacted with thousands of women. Questionnaires completed by the participants revealed that, two of the men typically completed 13-20 hours a week, twelve 21-39 hours a week, and one over 40 hours. Dating initiation consisted of going to "target rich" environments—for instance nightclubs, bars, or coffee shops where there were lots of opportunity to initiate numerous dating interactions. Every session, performers might interact with anywhere between 5 and 60 women, with each interaction providing the opportunity to work on specific facets of dating such as Opening, managing conversations, humour, and using stock routines and lines. Damien, provided a conservative estimate of the time he dedicated to dating initiation:

> If we were being conservative, we were doing, four nights a week, four hours a night. And that's 16 hours. That's a minimum. That doesn't count during the day. That's not the weekend and going out during the day as well.

When asked how many interactions he would typically initiate during a four hour practice session, Damien replied: "When I was learning hard, it was at least 12 a night, because that was the number Mystery [a noted dating guru] said… you know, 12 sets a night. At least 12 sets a night." Doing the math, that totals some 48 dating interactions a week, and over 200 a month. Full analysis of Damien's practice revealed that at his height he was completing 60 interactions a week or over 1,400 a year (see Figure 15 below).

Another performer, Brian, who had been practicing for 16 years (the longest out of the 15 participants) was renowned as a devoted trainer. Brian initiated up to 60 dating interactions a day, typically practicing a minimum of 5 days a week. Like a number of performers, he quite aptly compared dating initiation to a job:

It would be like a double shift at work. So it would be all day, all night. So what's that? It could be anything from 10 hours to 15. Sometimes you'd go into the next day because you go back to an after-party and then you just carry on the next morning. So that could be anything from 5 to 7 days a week. Um, the only time you would stop for breaks is to sleep or to have sex. And that was just constant throughout my life, really.

John described the amount of initiation practice he completed:

So that would have been three or four hours on a Thursday, maybe eight hours on Friday, ten hours on Saturday with the day game, and Sunday night if you went out you would maybe do a couple of hours at the most. Over a weekend you'd be doing 30-plus hours of practice, of interactions where you're talking to people. And it does take a toll on you. So I think the better I got the less I was actually going out. So I'd keep it to a Friday and a Saturday night. And then in more recent times I'd end up going out later and I'd be home by midnight. So I'd only put two or three hours in on a Friday night, two or three hours in on a Saturday night and still have really good results because of the quality of people I was meeting and the quality of skills I was exhibiting.

While the extent of practice fluctuated over the years, which is discussed below, the performers rarely afforded themselves the luxury of extended breaks. Performers constructed challenging targets around accumulating vast amounts of repetitive practice. For example, Neil took a "100-day challenge" to initiate a minimum of six dates every day for 100 consecutive days over the summer of 2011. As he explained:

I went out 100 out of 102 days. I'd do 2 or 3 hours in the afternoon, walking around the streets practicing getting good at this stuff [dating initiation]. Just talking to girls for the sake of getting the skill down… I went out to the point where my feet were so blistered I had to take a couple of days off, I couldn't walk!

By taking on the challenge, Neil initiated some 600 dating interactions in just over 100 days. Such repetitive amounts of practice provided performers with an exhaustive number of interactions or "performance trials" to test and develop their dating initiation skills. As suggested by Neil's comment, "my feet were so blistered I had to take a couple of days off, I couldn't walk!," as well as being highly

repetitive, the practice was extremely arduous; a finding reviewed in *challenging practice*. Similarly, Peter described how he would go through "I was pounding the streets so much, I went through sneakers [sports trainers] at a rate of knots."

Although Connor generally sought to limit his *night practice* to Fridays and Saturdays, he would do highly intensive "60 day" and "30 day challenges" if he felt he was "lagging." He drew inspiration from the comedian and writer Jerry Seinfeld. As Connor described:

> I used to do 60 day challenges or 30 day challenges. I read this interview with Jerry Seinfeld and the interviewer said, "Why are you so prolific? After all these years you're so prolific. All this fresh comedy, everything." And Jerry said, "I never break the chain." And basically what Jerry Seinfeld does I think at the start of every year is he buys a calendar for the year and then every day he sits down and writes an hour of comedy and he marks it off. And the next day another hour and he marks it off. He said it builds a chain. So I kind of thought, "Yeah, I'm just going to do one approach a day for 30 days." Any time that I felt that I was lagging I would just commit to 30 [consecutive] days of practice… They really helped me get out of the rut that I was in at that time.

Performers used adjectives such as "obsessive" and "religious" to convey their devotion to accumulating dating initiation practice. John regularly accumulated 30 hours of dating initiation practice over four days. He noted that, with experience, he became more efficient, achieving greater skill development in less time. The performers' drive to improve their efficiency was a common theme, as John described:

> So I became really obsessed with pickup and I would do it a lot. I do work full time so I really limited my pickup time to Thursday nights, Friday nights, Saturday, and Sunday early on… So that would have been three or four hours on a Thursday, maybe eight hours on Friday, ten hours on Saturday with the day game, and Sunday night if you went out you would maybe do a couple of hours at the most. Over a weekend you'd be doing 30-plus hours of practice, of interactions where you're talking to people. And it does take a toll on you. So I think the better I got, the less I was actually going out. So I'd keep it to a Friday and a Saturday night. And then in more recent times I'd end up going out later and I'd be home by midnight. So I'd only put 2 or 3 hours in on a Friday night, 2 or 3 hours in on a Saturday night and still have really good results because of the quality of people I was meeting and the quality of skills I was exhibiting.

Damien saw his obsession as an important determinant in his development. Indeed, without significant motivation and commitment it's unlikely a person will accumulate the practice hours necessary to become a superior performer within any domain of expertise (Ericsson et al., 1993), especially one that involves as many skills as dating initiation.

The quantity of practice described above was not remotely unusual among the performers. The repetitiveness with which they practiced dating initiation was succinctly captured by Neil when he proclaimed: "There was this old theory floating around in the Community… The first 2,000 approaches don't count." The view was that anyone serious about becoming highly proficient would need to exceed 2,000 dating initiations many times over. To convey how repetitive this is, 2,000 approaches is 5 approaches a day for 400 days—which would take hundreds of hours to accumulate.

Gavin, practiced *day game* (dating initiation during the day time, often practiced in the street, coffee shops, museums etc.) three days a week, and *night game* (dating initiation in the night time, most emblematically practiced in nightclubs and bars) 2 or 3 nights a week, doing approximately 10 approaches each session. He described not realising initially how much practice was required to develop his dating competency:

> [In] the very beginning, I didn't realise that you had to do hundreds or thousands of approaches to get good. In the middle years, I was going out and consistently approaching. I just had a better idea of what an interaction was and what the general landmarks were and I was navigating that a little more confidently.

Once he increased the quantity and repetitiveness of dating initiation, Gavin progressed markedly: "messing up a lot but eventually getting the successful ones [interactions] where things would go well." "Messing up a lot" was crucial to the process of developing an understanding of the requirements for dating initiation and continuously testing and retesting their skills (what is referred to as "the test-retest cycle" is discussed further in *repetitively practicing dating initiation models, theories, and routines*).

While the quantity of repetitive initiation practice was extremely high for all of the dating experts, there were variations in how much practice they did, and the amount fluctuated depending on where they were in their developmental cycle. Stephen described his position:

> Some people say, "I'm going to do 10, 20 approaches every night" and they do it almost religiously. I never took that approach, because I thought if one [approach] goes well I'm not going to just sack it off just to make up my other 19! That made no sense. But the promise I made to myself at the start is that I'd go out three nights a week and be proactive. Very proactive. I'd meet women and master, at least to some extent, how this works.

Peter also described himself as "obsessed" although, like many of the performers in his later years, his practice shifted from focusing on "quality" rather than "quantity," as the described: "Practice was my everything. I was obsessed. If I wasn't reading, I was out approaching. I lived it, breathed it… Four years in, I took my foot off the throttle and focused more on the quality of each set—but I was still out there four to five days a week." Connor described his commitment to repetitive practice stating, "in the last 7 years I could probably count the Friday and Saturday nights that I've *not* been out on two

hands." Similarly, Neil shared, "[I] never really took too much time off; maybe 2 or 3 weeks at a time for exams or Christmas." Midway through his practice years, Gavin did approximately 10 initiations each practice session, which was significantly more than he competed as a novice explaining: "It still varied [the number of initiations] but around 10, give or take 3 or 4. On a bad night, it might have been 5 and on a good night, it might have been 12. But it was up there and, in the beginning, it was probably 2 per night, so that's not even a warmup."

The amount of time spent engaging in deliberate practice was estimated for five dating experts during piloting using a questionnaire that drew on Côté et al's. (2005) method for calculating elite performers' accumulated deliberate practice. Damien's practice is captured in Figure 15 below. It reveals that each year he accumulated between 880 hours and 1400 hours of practice, and between 1600 and 2800 initiations. In total, over 7 years he amassed approximately 8,600 hours of practice and 16,000 dating initiations. His quantity of practice peaked in the second and third years where he practiced for 30 hours a week for 48 and 47 weeks of the year (Appendix 13: *Quantity of Dating Initiation Practice* provides the questionnaire used to ascertain the amount of practice along with a table detailing the amount of practice completed each year by five participants).
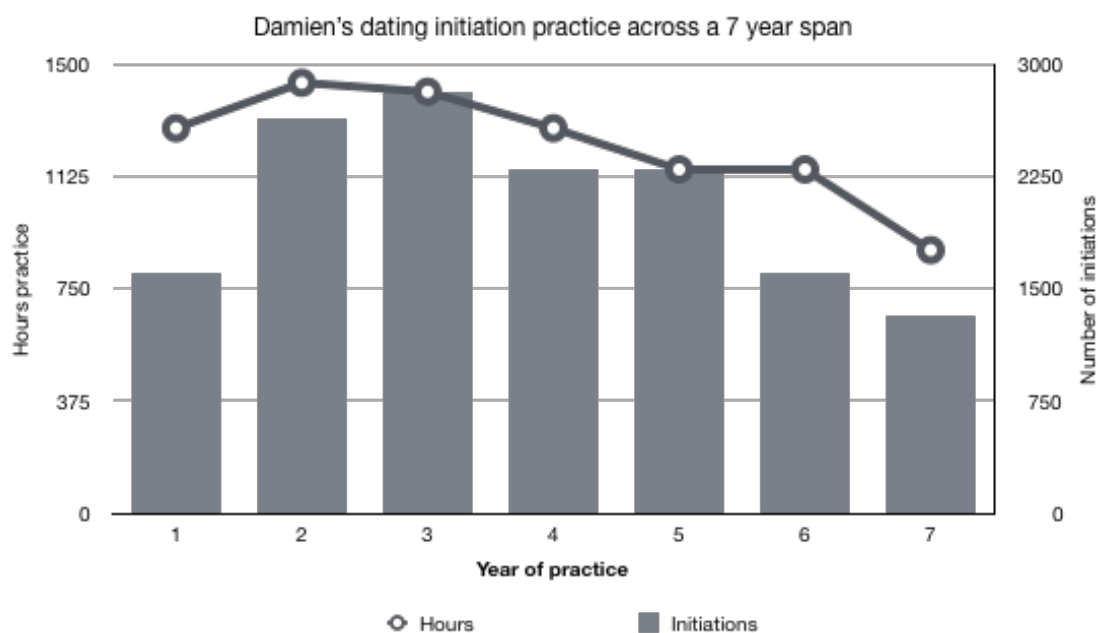
Figure 15. *One performer's yearly practice.* Includes hours of practice and number of dating initiations.

Figure 16. below provides the quantity of practice hours for the five performers (range 7,036 to 13,292 hours). Two of the dating experts had accumulated over 10,000 hours, the amount of deliberate practice widely agreed upon to become an expert in numerous fields (e.g., Ericsson, 2006b. Note, a different method was used to estimate the amount of practice for another four participants who also accumulated over 10,000 hours. Due to the different approach for estimating their practice, their statistics are not included in the table—see Appendix 13 for further details. The graph shows that the hours of practice peaked in the first four years, being above 1,200 hours per year, and ranged between 1200 and just under 900 hours for the subsequent years.
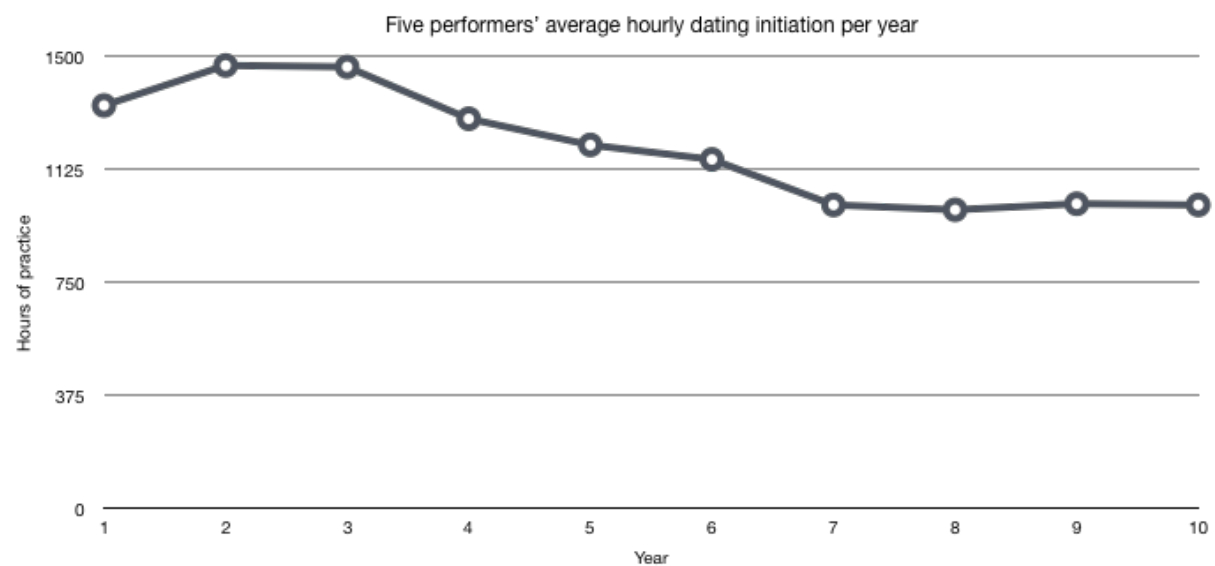
Figure 16. *Five performers' yearly practice*. The average hours of dating initiation practice accumulated each year.

During the interviews, Connor and Neil also alluded to the figure of 10,000, but here to refer to the number of dating interactions they estimated they had completed over the years. Connor explained, "I've completed 10,000 approaches easy. Easy. For sure. I'm definitely into five figures for approaching." He further shared: "Back in my prime I'd clock 10 [dating initiations] a night easy. Easy. And then you go out and do day sessions on top of that. And that accumulates over time and just it's going to be thousands of approaches." Neil reflected, "I've talked to, you know, probably 10,000 girls." Neil further explained why he willingly completed so much practice:

> You realise that the pain you go through, through meeting these girls and getting rejected a bunch it makes all that other pain seem less, I think, and you need that. You need those 10,000 approaches and getting rejected to meet that one dream girl and not screw it up.

Repetitively initiating many thousands of interactions was viewed as a prerequisite to developing

the ability to pull-off a superlative performance when it was most called for (e.g., to complete a "difficult" initiation, such as a woman at a table with five friends, or to meet that "dream" partner). As Damien described: "I had to consciously do it [dating initiation], [clicking fingers] do it, do it, do it, do it, do it; then I got so good at it, that now, I don't even think about it." The inference from this statement is that with exhaustive repetitive practice, Damien developed *unconscious competence* (Hargie, 2006), with his skills becoming fluid and natural. Investigation 2, explores the development of such intuitiveness in more detail.

Effective deliberate practice is more than just repetitive practice. It is highly refined and focused practice that involves testing different methods to facilitate continuous improvement. This was embodied in how the dating experts approached practice; as Damien described, "These are skills that you'd have to go out and test, and practice, and practice, and practice." Their willingness to keep testing and refining skills was also succinctly summarised by Ruben:

> I was always trying to refine my method, approach, technique whatever it would be. So I would seek out new tools for specific areas. Where I had a weakness I would read books and/or watch things and write down a bunch of notes, and then have those things to try next time I went out. So there was this, this process of analysing what happened, and refining, and trying new things constantly; you know constantly tweaking things. Not just doing the same thing over and over.

Not only does this statement aptly capture the performers' approach to improving their dating skills, but it also demonstrates how the two domains of practice, *in-field* practice (for instance in bars) and *out-field practice* (for instance at home), provided them with opportunities to discover new techniques out-field, which could be repetitively tested in-field. Connor explained in broad terms how he challenged himself to innovate and broaden his skill-set by testing out new skills in bars:

> I went out to bars and I didn't drink. I talked to girls and I paid attention to how they reacted to everything that I said. And I took notes and…I tried new things. So I'd try things that were outside my comfort zone; I'd try being bold, I'd try dancing even though I wasn't good at dancing. I'd try just giving a girl, you know in the middle of conversations, just kissing her and stuff like that. And I saw how those things worked and developed a good kind of skill-set around it… That's totally the way that I do things. If something's not working, I stop doing it. And if something works, I do it a lot. And then you learn, 'Okay, well, this works in this kind of situation. This works in another kind of situation,' etcetera.

Connor's statement alludes to what can be described as the *test-retest cycle*: Executing skills, observing the outcome, and then adapting the skills to observe whether this leads to improved results. Analysis revealed three main sources of feedback influencing the test-retest cycle. Connor's statement alludes to two of these, feedback from women and feedback from self-analysis. These and a third source

of feedback (from peers and coaches) are analysed in the theme *feedback orientated practice*. Gavin described how in the process of going through the test-retest cycle he'd "overdone everything":

> Oh yeah, [I test skills] all the time. To this day. You test everything. You test your teasing, your Qualification, your touching, your sexualisation. You're always—I've overdone everything, I've overdone everything many times, gotten weird reactions, gotten surprisingly good reactions sometimes.

> You're always tweaking because with Game, one of the things that makes this so hard is there's a lot of variation, unlike, say, chess. Chess is a mathematical game. Your opponent is only going to move the pieces to a certain square, that's it. He's not going to—the way he moves the piece doesn't matter, his personality doesn't matter, his mood that day doesn't matter. You only need to focus on the board.

> With Game, there's enormous variability. There's different personalities of women, there's different approaches, there's subtext. There's all these variations and it makes it a lot harder to progress. So yeah, you need to constantly test, to develop a sense of who this woman is, where she's at in the interaction, how far you can get with things. Basically what's her blueprint.

Repetitively testing skills appeared to enable the performers to develop a repertoire that was broad and flexible enough for the wide variety of environments and personalities they encountered (this is discussed at length in the theme *autonomous adaptability* in Chapter 10's intuition thematic analysis). It also enabled them to optimise their dating skills. John compared repetitively testing his dating skills to trying different techniques in the gym:

> It's like going to the gym and then reading about a different technique for doing dead lift and a different technique for doing quads. And so [I was] always willing to try different techniques and different processes… And then over time you, and you just end up optimising your own skills. And when it [a skill] doesn't work and leaving that behind. But preparation-wise I would spend a couple of hours throughout the week watching videos, reading articles, writing posts on forums, asking questions of people.

As the above quotes suggest, finding new techniques to repetitively test their skills involved seeking advice from peers and targeting which skills to practice. This is further explored in *goal orientated practice* which reveals that, without the Community to draw on and skilled peers to model, it is highly unlikely the performers would have discovered the wide variety of practice activities required to become dating experts.

6.2.3 Dating initiation models and routines

"I was drawn to Mystery Method. Because it broke it down [dating initiation] into a kind of linear process, even though it's not strictly linear"

When first introduced to a complex skilled activity, such a driving a car or playing tennis, the first phase of learning requires gaining an appreciation of the requirements, and breaking down the skill into discrete components, so that performers can focus on the more manageable task of executing component skills (Ericsson, 2006b). Microtraining (Hargie, 2006), used in dating skills training, embodies the approach of breaking down complex dating skills into discrete learnable units. For instance, detailed guides provide clients with elaborate explanations of the various components of dating interactions, enabling clients to follow them in a play-by-play fashion.

This level-3 theme illustrates how the performers' repetitive use of dating initiation models or courtships models (models that divide dating initiation into discrete phases; see Chapter 4's discussion of the dating literature for further detail), *dating scripts* and *dating routines* (varieties of Community opening lines, games and routines specifically developed for dating interactions), mirrored many of the principles of deliberate practice and microtraining. The models enabled performers to systematise their dating skill development by breaking it down into individual components, serving as "training wheels."

6.2.3.1 Using dating initiation models to deconstruct dating

As described in Chapter 4, dating initiation can be divided into discrete stages (e.g., Bredow et al., 2008; Davis, 1973). Davis (1973) was one of first to set out a model conceptualising the stages of dating initiation. His model has parallels with popular "dating initiation models" used by members of the Community, such as Von Markovik's (2006), Mystery Method, and The Emotional Progression Model (Savoy, 2009), which divides courtship into six discrete stages: Opening, Transitioning, Attraction, Qualification, Comfort, and Seduction.

The performers consulted books, video programs, peers and coaches to derive detailed courtship models which they memorised through repetition. These models "small-chunked" the courtship process into smaller, highly elaborated, less intimidating phases, facilitating repetitive practice of specific components of dating interactions. Damien explained why he used Mystery Method:

> I was drawn to Mystery Method because it broke it down [dating initiation] into a kind of linear process, even though it's not strictly linear. He had a system, a system for making it happen, you know what I mean? Opening, building Attraction, Qualifying, building connection and rapport. It had all these things in stages so you go, 'Oh, that's the process for… creating a new sexual relationship.' So it was there. There was a blueprint.

Damien would write the Mystery Method stages on a piece of paper which could be referred to

during in-field practice in case he struggled to recall the various phases, explaining, "I used to have a piece of A4 paper, and then we'd print it double-sided so then we had, we had A1, A2, A3… What was it? A, C and S, so *Attraction*, *Comfort* and *Seduction*."

The terms Attraction, Comfort, and Seduction refer to the different stages of the courtship model within the Mystery Method, with A1, A2, and A3 representing the three phases of courtship. The models provided detailed play-by-play explanations on each phase, while also integrating a significant amount of knowledge on topics related to successful dating initiation, such as those included in Table 6.

Table 6

Examples of Techniques and Methods the Performers Practiced

Scripted opening - how to initiate a conversation using pre-prepared lines.
Situational opening - how to initiate a conversation using an opener specifically adapted to the situation (such as openers for bars, coffee shops, museums, or the clothing or hairstyle of the partner etc.).
Recognising IOI's (indictors of interest) - how to spot whether someone is interested/attracted by the behavioural cues they provide.
Accomplishment intro - a form of peer endorsement where a wing uses scripted or improvised introduction of a peer that integrates DHV's (demonstrations of higher value), designed to highlight and endorse their peers attractive traits.
DHV'ing (demonstrating higher value) - how to imbue an interaction with words and behaviours that demonstrate high or desirable value (such as intelligence, wit, and social success).
Hook point - the moment in the interaction where the target's romantic interest is peaked, and is interested in the possibility of a romantic relationship.
Pre-selection - how to negotiate social situations to be perceived as popular/desirable (for instance, by being in a social group with other attractive women, by knowing key gatekeepers in a nightclub such as bouncers, DJ's, bar staff).
Instant date - how to propose leaving the current location to continue the interaction in another location (such as a coffee shop).
Number closing - how to ask for a telephone number, in a manner that minimises rejection.

Each phase of dating initiation models had associated routines and gambits which performers would write down and practice repetitively at home before applying in-field. As Damien further explained, "For all of the three stages [Attraction, Comfort and Seduction] I would have a list of routines to use. And if I got stuck or the conversation stalled, then I would have my routines to refer to." The next section turns to analyse how the performers integrated routines and gambits into their practice.

6.2.3.2 Stacking routines

Research demonstrates that how a dating interaction is initiated, such as the opening lines used, can have a significant bearing on success (Bale et al., 2006; Kleinke et al., 1986). Performers' opening lines and routines were designed to be engaging, funny, unique, and demonstrate traits such as intelligence, ambition, kindness and humour, which research reveals women find attractive (see Chapter 4's review of the dating literature for examples).

The performers practiced and memorised hundreds of opening lines, routines, and conversational gambits to enrich their performances and present their best and most-attractive self. Rehearsed in the "back-stage," the performers would repetitively use the same routines, enabling them to gradually improve the delivery and mastery of their performances in the "front-stage," the bars and spaces where they initiated dates.

The performers experimented with hundreds of openers and routines, typically developing an affinity with those that they found effective and/or reflected their interests and personality. As Neil described: "There's one routine in particular that I love. It was my favourite one because I knew it would get the girls hooked and talk to me if I did it right. I did that 200 times." The routine, known as the *Expressive Face Routine*, enabled Neil to initiate interactions reliably and to test routines while gauging his efficacy by drawing on the interactional partners' responses. The analysis in Section 6.3 for *feedback orientated practice* provides detailed analysis of the *Expressive Face Routine*, examining how Neil used the routine to test and improve his skills using a test re-test cycle loop that drew on the feedback provided by conversational partners.

Routines were compiled into "stacks," which are multiple routines designed to run consecutively (termed stacks because each routine "stacks" on top of the previous routine to provide a long succession of routines that can run continuously). The stacks were used to structure interactions, making them more manageable and predictable. John explained his approach to using scripted stacks which enabled him to "fake it to you make it":

> With a routine stack I'd have quite a few rehearsed I guess you could say conversations. At first they were somewhat scripted and not necessarily the truth. So once again coming back to the method fake it to you make it. So in the Mystery Method book when he talks about having different threads, different conversation threads, and stories to talk about when you're talking to a girl. And Mystery goes on to say that if you don't have stories of your own by all means use these pre-rehearsed or pre-defined stories but over time you're going to want to substitute them with your own stories and tales. And I took that onboard and at first I used a lot of scripted routines I guess you could say. And then as time progressed I started using my own stories and my own experience in set and I've become a lot better.

Gavin explained how he used a "strict stack" when he first started his practice:

In the beginning, when I started with this the teaching was still very routine-oriented. In 2008/09 it was starting to transition to natural Game and it was just some instructors starting to think about that and starting to teach that, but the general wave was still routines. So yeah, definitely, I had a strict stack. I would go through a certain opener, and then a certain thing, and then a certain routine. And it was really clunky, looking back now, but that was all I knew. I would go through that and it got me results.

Stacks have a number of parallels with what researchers of expertise describe as *scripts*, a form of mental representation or schema, defined by Gobet (2016) as: "Scripts are schemas where the emphasis is on the sequence of events that typically occurs in a given situation and on the actions that should be carried out given those events" (p.232). Given that interactions fall into patterns with predictable phases and behavioural expectations about how an interaction should proceed (Schank & Abelson, 1977), arranging scripts into stacks enabled performers to build rapport, familiarity, and intimacy, repeatedly, and consistently use the most effective routines.

A conversation with Ronnie revealed he practiced for some time before developing a routine stack. Rather early on, he had developed what he described as a "routine *sack*," which was a large variety of memorised routines that could be dipped into during interactions in an *ad hoc* fashion. Ronnie found his initiation became more effective once he structured routines into *stacks* which corresponded to specific phases of courtship; helping with management of the interaction and *calibration* (calibration refers to how responsive a performer is to their partner in terms of their use of routines and micro-behaviours; a highly calibrated performer is highly responsive to their partner and uses behaviours effectively and appropriately). Ronnie explained:

It's funny. Back in the day I never had a routine stack. I always had what I called a routine *sack* where - because I think I'd already been doing a lot of cold approach, I had a lot of lines already. I just didn't know how to apply them or where to use them effectively. When I had structure, I could then go, "What do I have in here that's good for this? Ooh, this'll be good."

I give guys a routine stack when I teach them but I always tell them, "You don't have to use anything that's on here if you don't want to. I don't really care." The idea of the routine stack is it gives you a model for what you should be doing and it gives you a fallback if you don't know what to do or say. If you use this stuff, you see the reactions that you get, any new material that you decide to use, you will be able to calibrate the reaction to that against the reaction of the stuff that we have here, that we know works.

While rehearsing routines and developing stacks might appear "artificial," "contrived" and

"reductionist," forms of scripted training and behavioural rehearsal are acknowledged to be highly effective for improving social and dating skills (e.g., Segrin & Givertz, 2003; Spence, 2003). With sufficient practice and memorisation, stacking leads to an increase in interactional skill and fluidity (Hargie, 2006). Compared to clinical dating skills training, the performers took the amount of practice to new heights, spending hundreds of hours practicing routines. The next section examines in more detail the benefits of such repetitive training in promoting continuous development.

6.2.3.3 Repetitive use of routines as training wheels

Like stabilisers on a learner's bike, initiation models and routines served as "training wheels," helping performers to become more adept with the basic components of courtship. Charles explained why he spent hours repetitively memorising openers (lines and gambits designed to engage the interest of a specific person or group used at the beginning of the initiation) in the early years of his practice:

> I think one thing that a lot of guys face early on is they go, 'What am I going to say? What am I going to say to this girl?' And when you don't have really super-strong conversational skills, it's always a bit of a problem. And so yeah, I would use [pre-prepared] openers all the time, like, 'Here's something you could say to a girl that really starts off a conversation nine times out of ten.' That kind of stuff is really valuable… It's especially really valuable for guys that are new, who are dealing with anxiety and there's a bunch of things going on in their head at the same time. So, you know, using an opener just means you can focus on your body language a little bit more. You can focus on the other things that you need to control to sort of… make a good first impression.

For Ben, following dating initiation models and associated routines was as important for developing dating skill as following a curriculum at university was for a degree, or grasping the basics of grammar for learning English, explaining:

> It's good to have a structure [in dating]. It's like at university you have a curriculum that you follow. And that gives you a structure, which you build your knowledge around, [from] which you can then decide to pursue other topics which might interest you.

> … It's like [learning] English. I mean we might not realise it, but we learn structure in the beginning. We learn conjugation and grammar. And once we're good at it then, okay, then you can start putting in new words, mixing it up with new things. But you start with a structure.

> In pickup once you get that basic conversational structure set it lays the foundation [for development]… Because most beginners [at dating], they're just focusing on conversation. They're not even thinking about all the other things that are happening in the interaction [i.e.,

non-verbal cues, other people in the environment etc]. They're just focused on the conversation. It's impossible to take it all on. First you need to get a structure, to have conversations that will work, before you get the real improvement… With those thousands of conversations [dating interactions], with time you implement new ideas, new concepts, speed-up…

Reflecting on how rehearsing routines helped, Damien compared dating to driving a car:

If you're focusing on something new to you, other skills that you may have been working on can suffer if they haven't been hardwired. I'm not the neuroscience guy, but I know that there are studies where, when you're working on a certain skill, the pre-frontal cortex is firing off. Then once you've mastered it, it no longer fires off; it's all hardwired. So that part, it gives you freedom to focus on other things simultaneously…. Like, say, driving a car; if they were scanning your brain when you were driving a car when you're first learning, all that stuff is firing off and your brain's going, "Oh shit! I've now got to consciously change clutch and change gear," all that kind of stuff, and then now you can talk on the phone, you can eat your burger while you're driving. None of that's firing off.

It's a skill [dating initiation]. It's like any skill. It's like literally any skill. How do I tease? Okay, teasing is about push/pull or it's about saying something nice and then kind of balancing that with something mean or pulling and pushing, know what I mean? So now I've got a few lines that I'm going to use over and over and over to get the feel of it, because I know that they work and I get the feel of it. I understand what it is so I can do it [clicking fingers] over and now I've got my delivery right. I've got the delivery so it hits. So you can practice that over and over and over and over until now, you know how to deliver a line.

Repetitively practicing routines appeared to facilitate memorisation and the "hardwiring" of behavioural repertoires so that, when in set, the performers no longer had to spend extensive time consciously searching for funny, engaging or seductive things to say. With practice, aspects of performance could be left to operate on autopilot. This view of dating expertise resonates with the *four stages of competency* (Hargie, 2006) where, through practice, people progress from *unconscious incompetence*, to *conscious incompetence*, to *conscious competence* and, finally, *unconscious competence* where skilled behaviours are carried out automatically and autonomously. This is discussed further in Chapter 10's intuition thematic analysis.

When asked whether having a prepared stack helped initiation, John described how stacks gave him confidence to "keep going":

Yeah of course [having stacks helped]. Yeah for sure. It certainly did. It gave me a base to learn from as well. And it also gave me the confidence to keep going, knowing that even though you

might not be doing 100% or doing it perfectly you know that you're on the right track at least. Stephen described why he practiced openers:

Back in the day I practiced specific openers. Like some I'd made up myself. Some were just around in the Community. I wouldn't have that presence and self-belief [to initiate dating interactions]. The lines were there just to help me through basic conversation that gets you through to the next phase [of attraction].

Charles compared memorising lines to playing guitar, suggesting that you need to learn the basics before you can improvise and be more creative.

When we're talking about these structures and systems and these lines that I give to guys, you know, they're training wheels. They're a way to get to a point where you're having free flowing conversation. But for a guy who doesn't have experience doing that, he doesn't really know how to do it... It's like, you know, playing guitar; you can noodle around on the guitar and just play, you can solo in any key you want and you can play jazz but before you do that and play improv jazz, you've got to learn how to play a Bob Dylan song and you've got to learn how to play a blues progression… And so the stuff that I teach isn't necessarily exactly what I do. It's what the students need to get up to a certain level where they can throw away the guidelines that I've given them.

Charles' analogy of learning the guitar reflects a common theme. As the performers became more adept at dating initiations, they began to phase out the conscious use of canned material, becoming more spontaneous, natural and fluid in how they interacted with women.

6.2.3.4 Becoming more "natural" and developing mental representations

Intuition has been described as the hallmark of expertise (Gobet, 2011). While the performers used rehearsed courtship models and routines, all of them aspired to become more natural and fluid at dating. In the early stages of their development, repetitively drawing on courtship models and routines provided the performers with confidence to practice and the *know-how* and *know-what* required to become more autonomous, creative and intuitive. When asked about how his performance changed over the years, Gavin explained that, with experience, it became "weird" to consciously use rehearsed routines, so he gradually started abandoning them and becoming more "natural":

On one hand, I felt like I didn't need those routines anymore and it was almost weird to use them. At the same time, the company and the field was moving towards more of a natural vibe as well, so everybody was starting to talk about it. There were tools, there were exercises we were developing for it. There were things like practicing being funny, practicing teasing, things like that

were more natural, more organic.

… At the same time, I was more confident. I gradually would abandon routines. In the beginning I would still use some canned lines that I knew worked, but in between those I would just freestyle, and I started to notice that was actually fine. I did just as well when I was freestyling. So I gradually started abandoning all the routines. It was just a gradual process, from one day to the other. It wasn't like—I didn't quit cold turkey.

The research revealed that the pattern of relying less on rehearsed material and being more autonomous was true for *all* performers. When asked whether he relied on scripted routines, Brian explained he was now 80 percent natural with 20 percent pickup:

Well, [I rely on scripted routines] less and less. You start getting your own game and your own way of doing things. It's always good to get a new thing to try out for a laugh or maybe I'd mould something in a different way, so you know, maybe someone's made a routine up but I use 20 percent of it because I've devised a better way of doing it.

[During an initiation] I use basically now use 80 percent my natural self, with 20 percent my pickup stuff that I throw in. A woman might talk about shoes, and I've got a million routines for shoes so I can go, "Oh, yeah. What about *this*?" Throw that [routine] in, or make a statement about it that I know works, and then it's put in naturally so it's not forced upon them. See, [some] pickup artists tend to force a line on someone; and maybe that conversation within that routine deviates to something else, but they'll be rigid and want to finish what they're talking about [even if their partner has steered the conversation elsewhere]. Well, that's not going to work.

The analysis clearly revealed, that through the repetitive practice, performers internalised routines until they became unconscious. As experts, the performers still used routines and behavioural repertoires they had once practiced; however they were now calibrated to the situation. Ronnie succinctly captured this message; when asked whether routines had become internalised, he stated "Yeah, definitely. If you were to watch me run, let's say, 10 sets, you're going to hear similarities. You're going to hear similarities for sure. It's fairly rare that I say something that is totally novel."

In light of research on deliberate practice, the performers' increased autonomy and intuition is not surprising. Research shows that the effects of large amounts of repetitive deliberate practice are extensive, including physiological adaptations, significant improvement in performance, and acquired mental representations (Ericsson, 1998). Mental representations provide a store of knowledge about how to behave in a particular context. Through practice, experts amass a vast store of such representations (Richman et al.,1996), enabling them to intuitively respond to a wide range of situations. The analysis suggests that practice was essential to the process of building up the mental representations to become

more natural and fluid at dating. This aspect of the dating experts' development is discussed later in this Chapter and Part 3's investigation on intuition.

6.2.4 Associated skills

As I replay that [a dating initiation], I go, "Well, what could I have done? How did that go wrong?"… And I'll mentally visualise that… and correct the conversation.

Deliberate practice is characterised as the practice activities "specifically designed to improve the current level of performance" (Ericsson et al., 1993; p.368). Research typically reveals a variety of activities improve performance. For instance, in Ericsson et al.'s (1993) study of violinists at the *Music Academy of West Berlin*, performers all engaged in *practicing alone, practice with others*, *music theory*, and *taking lessons*; although *practicing alone* was most highly correlated with development and defined as "deliberate practice." Clinicians delivering dating skills training, typically engage clients in a range of practice activities, such as role play, modelling, feedback and reinforcement, rehearsing conversational gambits, improvisation and cognitive adjustment (Spence, 2003).

When asked which three activities improved their dating competency, invariably the interviewees described dating initiation as the most important. For instance, Gavin's response to the question was: "Number one, approaching women, of course." However, the analysis revealed that the performers engaged in a wide variety of other practice activities that aided skill development. In total, 13 forms of practice were categorised (see Table 7), with Appendix 12 providing a full definition of each activity.

Table 7

Varieties of Practice Engaged in by the Participants

1. Approaching, in-field
2. Practice, not in-field
3. Paid dating skill coaching
4. Unpaid dating skill coaching
5. Coaching others (paid)
6. Coaching others (unpaid)
7. Regular socialising
8. Advice and discussions regarding dating skills (unpaid)
9. Self-analysis and reflecting on past and future performance
10. Passively, consuming material related to dating skills
11. Mental rehearsal and visualisation techniques
12. Non-dating social skills training
13. Working on physical attractiveness and health

The types of practice that the dating experts engaged in can be further grouped into five main categories:

1. *Dating initiation.*
2. *Back-stage presentation practice* (e.g., rehearsal at home, word association exercises, voice training, body and health, dress, touch, posture, improvisation and acting classes).
3. *Analytical/self-awareness practice* (e.g., visualisation, self-analysis, journaling/field reports and reflection).
4. *Coaching and modelling practice* (e.g., attending coaching and watching role models).
5. *Affective management practice* (e.g., practice for anxiety/fear management and confidence).

While there is overlap between these categories—for instance aspects of *coaching and modelling practice* (4) could also be in *back-stage presentation practice* (2)—analysis in this section focuses on practice

relating to aspects of *back-stage presentation practice* (2) and *analytical/self-awareness practice* (3). *Coaching and modelling practice* (4) is treated to detailed discussion in *goal orientated practice*, and *affective management practice* (5) in *challenging practice*.

6.2.4.1 Back-stage presentational skills training

If, using the analogy of the stage, dating initiation practice takes place in the *front-stage*, with the performer and target interacting in social environments such as bars or coffee shops; presentational skills practice, such as rehearsal, voice training or word association exercises, completed alone at home or with peers, can be construed as taking place in the *back-stage*.

Skills repetitively practiced in the back-stage facilitated skilled execution in the front-stage. The dating experts dedicated significant time and resources to such repetitive back-stage presentational skills practice. As revealed in *repetitively practicing dating initiation models*, rehearsing and memorising dating initiation models and routines was essential to their practice. As Neil described: "When I started [practicing dating], I mean, you *have to* memorise them [routines] to go out."

While memorising routines enabled the performers to amass a stock of behavioural repertoires, or "content," for dating interactions, they were acutely aware of the importance of *how* they communicated. They therefore dedicated significant time practicing delivery; focusing on the subtleties of verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as *subcommunication* (Community jargon for messages that are communicated subtly, often unconsciously; such as through body language or tone of voice).

Voice can play an important role in seduction as revealed by Anolli and Ciceri (2002) in their research demonstrating that a "seductive voice" is highly alluring. Damien, who was a trained actor, would spend hours on vocal exercises to improve the projection, pitch and clarity of his delivery. He described his reasoning:

> How would I practice the voice? There were things that I would do as an actor that I would use, to be loud and heard in the club. That was probably one that helped. Being able to, when I go into isolation, change tone, become more intimate; that sort of stuff, you know what I mean? And storytelling, being able to engage people. Um, so you'd practice that stuff. Yeah, you'd practice that stuff; how you deliver things.

Neil explained how he would work on controlling his vocal tonality by recording his phone conversations, as he revealed in an exchange:

> *Neil:* I tried to work on my voice because I kept losing it… in loud bars.
> *Interviewer:* So what did you do?
> *Neil:* I did that actually, controlling my vocal tonality. Um, I would talk on the phone and when you talk on the phone. I guess it forces you to pay attention or there's a bit of feedback or whatever, and I remember when I talked on the phone, I'd control my tone as I spoke so I

wouldn't go up and break into my voice like that, which was a habit of mine, this losing control of my voice tonally. So I did that… I did record myself, um, in the daytime as far as a tape recorder in my pocket, just to hear what I was saying, because what I needed to do during the day was figure out a structure. What ended up happening was I'd go, I'd have this first line, I'd stop the girl and I'd get lost. And that helped me recognise a pattern of what got me into the deeper conversation.

Neil's vocal practice involved recording his front-stage performance so that in the back-stage he could undertake analysis and corrective work; a repetitive process which helped him recognise patterns and stop getting "lost." (Additional analysis undertaken by the performers using audio and visual recording is provided in *feedback orientated practice)*.

As well as working on their delivery at home, a number of the performers also took acting and improvisation classes. Charles took two six-week classes, which he found effective for improving his ability to be spontaneous, creative and think on his feet, as he described:

Improv comedy classes were really helpful. I took improv comedy classes with *The Second City* and that's actually really, really good, for just getting, good reactions and being able to just kind of think on your feet, which is difficult.

Ben did three hours of improv comedy a week for three months, and found it helped him to connect to his emotions and feel more "alive," explaining:

I did improve comedy because I'd had a hard time connecting to my feelings. I think it was due to my life—I'd moved around a lot and I had naturally shut off my feelings to avoid the pain that comes with that. So improv comedy helped me open up…. I was very reserved. But that doesn't work well when you're sitting next to a woman and she says, "Why do you like me?" or "How do you feel about me?" That kind of reserved mentality is not going to work. You have to connect to your feelings. She's going to look in your eyes. She's going to see if you're for real. You can't fake that. Well you can, but that takes practice. But would you want to [fake it]? That's another question… Improv comedy helped reverse how emotional restricted I was. Helps me overcome mental blocks, and let my emotions come out.

I was doing three hours a week of improv comedy for three months. I still remember in that third month something changed. I felt more alive. I felt like I was expressing my humour. Something had changed and it's been like that ever since. And I'm really glad. That was probably one of the best investments I ever did.

Dress and attire mediates whether we find someone physically attractive (Buckley, 1983), with

skilled communicators devoting time and attention to projecting a suitable image, and carefully dressing and adorning themselves for parties, interviews, and dates (Hargie, 2006).

Yet, to convey the "right" impression, to "look the part," to select appropriate clothing and apparel, takes knowledge, attention to detail, and skill. Damien captured this in his statement: "That is, a learning curve in itself; learning how to dress well, learning how to wear clothes that accentuate your best features or stuff that makes you stand out or fits well." Damien elaborated on how he dedicated practice to improving his sense of style and dress:

> That [learning to dress well] was a long road, man. I read some books on it, [I'd] speak to girls. I'd go into the shops and speak to the shopping assistants as well. You start to slowly develop a taste, you start to slowly develop an understanding of what works for you then you go out and you get feedback from people in the field. You see how women respond. Because we were out in the clubs all the time, we would see promoters who were naturals and how they'd dress and they were good at dressing… And so I think the biggest thing that stops guys from dressing well is…a block in their mind, like a mental block that goes, "That's just not me. That's not me. I don't wear that sort of stuff."

To become a more sophisticated dresser was a "long road," requiring repetitive effort, feedback, knowledge, modelling, and a conscious effort to work on one's identity. Like many of the performers, Damien also spent significant time and attention improving his health and fitness. Stephen described appearance and looking after his body as "ancillary" to developing his dating skills:

> I've also done things that help feed into success with dating. I pursue sports, I look after my body, I look after my appearance. Those things all, all help a lot. They've helped a lot for me, but I would say they're not specifically dating related. They're more like ancillary, or foundational, supporting aspects of becoming good with women.

Research suggests that the performers' efforts to enhance their appearance were not without good reason. Research reveals that women rate men who are tall and slim, with medium-wide shoulders, medium-thin lower trunk and a slim stomach, as more attractive (Argyle, 1988).

6.2.4.2 Analytical/self-awareness practice: The role of visualisation

Experts have developed sophisticated mental representations (Ericsson, 1998). Mental representations serve three important functions for experts: "to form an image of desired performance, to monitor their concurrent performance and to identify discrepancies between their desired and actual performance" (Ericsson, 1998, p.93).

Perhaps no other activity was as symptomatic of the relationship between mental representations and skill development than the performers' use of visualisation techniques. Visualisation—also referred

to as *guided imagery*, *mental practice*, or *mental rehearsal*—is cognitive rehearsal of a task prior to performance (Driskel, Copper & Moran, 1994), which is thought to help the execution of appropriate behavioural responses to stimuli by reinforcing neural connections (Fits & Posner, 1967). Not only are many superior sports stars as renowned as Muhammad Ali and Tiger Woods reported to use visualisation (Adams, 2009), but there is a large amount of research demonstrating its effectiveness in a number of other fields (Ranganathan et al., 2004).

After each night of practice Damien would journal and engage in visualisation to create a "blueprint," or mental representation, for what the ideal courtship would look like:

> This part of the process was about journaling. So at the end of every night, I'd go back and I'd analyse my sets and I would replay them and correct the shit that I did wrong. So let's say, for example, I went in and…it was just kind of like a casual conversation, there were no spikes in it and then it just failed out. So I go, "Okay, cool. It ended this way." As I replay that, I go, "Well, what could I have done? How did that go wrong? What could I have done in order to spike some attraction there?" And I'll mentally visualise that, redo it, put the spikes in and correct the conversation, know what I mean? And that was a major difference because then you're giving yourself a blueprint. You're kind of creating that blueprint. Then I would go out again and be like, "Ah! Instead of saying this, I'm going to say that because I know that spikes attraction". Do you know what I mean?

Through visualisation, Damien was able to monitor and critically examine his performances, reflecting on what he could improve in future. His reasoning is strikingly evocative of Ericsson's description of the role of mental representations, namely that "expert performers have acquired mental representations that allow them to plan and reason about potential courses of action, and these representations also allow experts to monitor their performance, thus providing critical feedback for continued complex learning" (Ericsson, 1998, p. 75).

To develop visualisation techniques, the performers consulted their peers or sought out information online. Many of the performers had read *Psycho Cybernetics*, a best selling book on visualisation by Maltz (1960/1989), and applied the cognitive-behavioural visualisation techniques prescribed for improving performance to dating. Having read *Psycho Cybernetics*, Neil was a keen proponent of visualisation. In his formative years as a skilled ice hockey player, he had used visualisation, and subsequently applied it to dating; as he described:

> I would do visualisations for, like, 15 minutes a day. Um, you know, for me it was no different. I did the same thing with hockey; visualise myself making saves so I'd visualise myself picking up girls. Everybody recommends the book *Psycho Cybernetics* and I read through that book a little bit and I was like, "This is the same thing as preparing for a hockey game, no different" and what I learned through hockey was it's not so much. Like, in pickup, it wouldn't be so much about,

um…doing the imagery so I'd memorise how to do a line or something. It was to put me in the right emotional state. I would visualise with hockey, I had a concise routine that was down to exactly 7 and a half minutes; that I would imagine myself from when I woke up from my pre-game nap to when I stepped onto the ice to start the game.

As well as repetitively using visualisation to evoke the quintessential performance, Neil also found visualisation helpful for confidence and motivation; concurring with research that reveals visualisation can also help with affective aspects of performance, such as anxiety and confidence. Similarly, Charles described using visualisation for the affective benefits; however he also used visualisation while in-field, such as in bars:

So one thing I do, sometimes I'm in a bar and I feel uncomfortable and that tends to make my body language… I tend to slouch a little bit when I do that, I tend to hold my hands in front of my body or wring my hands or just something like that if I'm feeling nervous and ill at ease. And so the antidote to that is visualising some sort of power inside and you're visualising something like positive energy inside of you and when you visualise that, your shoulders kind of straighten out and you stand a little bit taller and you improve your body language and you feel good when you visualise positive energy flowing through you.

And women pick up on that. They pick up on the subtle body language cues that are coming from this mental state that you're creating in yourself through visualisation. And then when you stop doing it, you still have a little bit of adrenaline or a little bit of confidence rolling around inside and you feel more comfortable approaching and you interact with people in a slightly different way because you've pumped yourself up a little bit.

The performers found visualisation valuable for two main reasons. First, to form mental representations of consummate performance, seemingly aiding them to gradually adjust their behaviour in line with these representations (for example, to identify mistakes in their actually performances, mentally correct their behaviour to be in line with what a good performance should look like, and "hardwire" more appropriate responses). Second, for emotional and motivational purposes. Visualising themselves as successfully initiating dates with women helped to alleviate anxiety and put the performers in a more positive and success orientated mindset, encouraging them to initiate dates they might otherwise not have done due to fear or lack of motivation. It should be noted that, while repetitively practicing visualisation was far from an easy form of practice, the performers found it highly effective. Indeed—somewhat remarkably—research has revealed that with particular skills, mental visualisation can be almost as effective as actual physical practice, and that combining both is more effective than either on its own (Ranganathan et al., 2004).

6.2.5 Repetitive practice: Summary and relationship to other themes

An expert, "somebody who obtains results that are vastly superior to those obtained by the majority of the population" (Gobet, 2016, p. 5), has to accumulate vast amounts of repetitive practice. Indeed, repetitive practice is a key tenet of deliberate practice, with experts amassing many thousands of hours of practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). The analysis revealed that the dating experts completed thousands of hours of repetitive practice on their journey from dating novices to dating experts. Indeed, of all the level-2 themes, *repetitive practice* was the most cited aspect of practice with 445 meaning units.

Repetitive practice had three sub-themes: *Dating initiation, dating initiation models and routines,* and *associated skills*. Of the varieties of practice, *dating initiation* was the most crucial for improvement and, with 282 recorded instances, it registered the most number of meaning units for any level-3 theme by a wide margin. The performers approached dating initiation like "work." Estimates revealed that many of them completed over 1,000 hours of initiation practice a year, and over 10,000 hours in total (see Figure 16 and Appendix 13: *Quantity of Dating Initiation Practice*). In this way, they had many more interactions to refine their dating skills then a typical person would—as one performer divulged: "I've talked to, you know, probably 10,000 girls." The repetitive practice was, as later themes discuss further, highly refined (for instance, see *feedback orientated practice*), physically and emotionally taxing (see, *challenging practice*) and carefully designed (see, *goal orientated practice*).

Dating interactions come with expectations about how they should proceed. For instance, before asking a stranger to exchange contact details, one would be expected to build rapport and ingratiate themselves. Through practice, skilled performers acquire the behavioural repertoires required for such skilled responding (Hargie, 2006). In this regard, the performers' practice paralleled microtraining used in clinical dating skills training, breaking down the complex task of dating into more easily tackled component skills. The performers' repetitive practice of *dating initiation models and routines* (78 meaning units) appeared crucial in this respect; and was used by them as "training wheels," enabling them to structure and practice particular components of dating initiation and, gradually, iteratively, improve component skills until they began executing highly co-ordinated and fluid performances.

The performers practiced a wide range of *associated skills* (85 meaning units). Visualisation, which has a long history of use in sports and other domains of expertise, was one of the most widely reported. Such practice appears important for aiding the formation of mental representations that facilitate superior performance. For instance, being able to repetitively visualise an act can improve cognitive-motor coordination and the execution of skills, providing performers with a model from which to judge and assess their performance. Using models to develop representations is further discussed in the fourth theme, goal orientated practice*,* where using role models was evaluated as important for development.

While proponents of the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating suggest that only select few have the innate talent to become a highly intuitive dating expert, the analysis reveals otherwise. Repetitively initiating many thousands of interactions was essential to performers' eventual development from dating novices to dating experts, not talent. As Damien described: "I had to consciously do it [dating initiation], [clicking fingers] do it, do it, do it, do it, do it; then I got so good at it, that now, I don't even think about

it." Such constant practice resulted in dating becoming "second nature," and—as Chapter 10, which focuses on dating intuition reveals—performers becoming fluid, rapid and highly intuitive.

6.3 Thematic Analysis for Feedback Orientated Practice

"I was sensitive to the feedback and I really used it as a mirror to see myself."

6.3.1 Introduction and overview
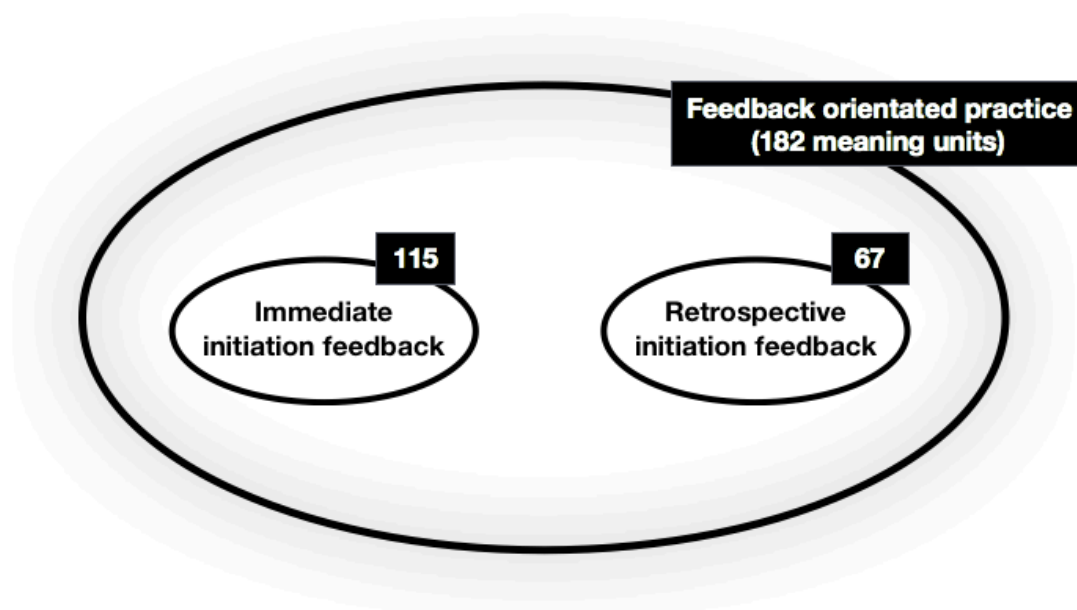
Figure 17. *Feedback orientated practice and sub-themes.* The second theme of dating skills deliberate practice is *feedback orientated practice.*

Repetitive practice is a key tenet of deliberate practice, enabling skills to be practiced until mastered. However, the value of repetitive practice is limited without feedback to gauge performance. As Ericsson et al. (1993) write, "Subjects should receive immediate informative feedback and knowledge of results of their performance. The subjects should repeatedly perform the same or similar tasks" (p.367). Furthermore, being able to integrate critical feedback enables performers to develop sophisticated mental representation enabling them to monitor their performance (Ericsson, 1998). Skills training also emphasises the benefits of utilising feedback. Tourish and Hargie (2004) explain that for interactants, the more channels of "accurate and helpful feedback we have access to, the better we are likely to perform" (p. 188). During dating skills training, clinicians set tasks for clients and monitor them, providing feedback. Similarly, when clients are given "homework" (e.g., the task to keep practicing their dating skills after the session by initiating interactions in public) they can draw on feedback from interactional partners and report back their experiences to clinicians for additional advice.

The analysis suggested that using feedback during practice was crucial to the performers' development. The hundreds of dating initiation performance trials completed by the performers provided ample opportunity for feedback. Of the five level-2 themes that constitute *dating skills deliberate practice*, *feedback orientated practice* recorded the second lowest number of meaning units (182). Nonetheless, this reflects a significant amount of coding supporting feedback—and its significance is confirmed by the richness of the performers' descriptions and the finding that *all* of them emphasised the value of feedback.

As shown in Figure 17, analysis of the transcripts revealed two sub-themes for *feedback orientated practice: immediate initiation feedback* and *retrospective initiation feedback*. The former had 115 meaning units recorded and the latter had 67. The performers drew on *immediate initiation feedback* and *retrospective initiation feedback* from their peers, coaches, interactional partners and self-analysis. The crucial distinguishing feature between the two types of feedback orientated practice is that *immediate initiation feedback* is typically in-field (taking place *during or immediately after* a dating initiation performance trial), whereas *retrospective initiation feedback* occurs *after* the performer is no longer in the field (for instance on returning home after a practice session), where performers have ample opportunity to reflect on the performance (be that by journaling, posting field reports online for feedback or phoning experienced peers).

6.3.1.1 Indicative statements for feedback orientated practice

Before presenting the thematic analysis, Table 8 provides indicative statements capturing the essence of how the interview data support each of the two sub-themes that constitute *feedback orientated practice.*

Table 8

Indicative Statements for Feedback Orientated Practice

Immediate initiation feedback
You're watching everything—"Is she responding to that [action]? Did that hit? Did that land?"
When something goes really well you save it, you're like "Oh! Doing that leads to a positive reaction. I'll save that!" It's something you'll do again, if the right opportunity arises.
I'd get a phone number of a girl or I'd kiss a girl or she'd want to go on a date with me and I'd be like, "You know what? This is validating."
With experience you become more reactive. Once you've really learnt the skills you go off a lot of feedback that's provided by the girl moment by moment.
Retrospective initiation feedback
Every time I'd go out, I'd spend an hour, say, the next day, or half hour. I'd write what we call a "field report"… I'd write, "Okay. Step one, her name was this. I said this. She said that. Then I did this and she did this."
He [a mentor] would give me very, very pointed feedback on what I was doing and he would say, "Do less of this, do more of this. What you need to work on is this thing here." That was the big, big push. If it wasn't for him, I'd never have taken off.
Afterwards, in the aftermath when you come home, there's a time to be analytical, a time to be unbiased and go, "Okay, here's what you did well, here's what you didn't do well, here's where you need work."
I've at times [video] recorded my interactions and gone over them and really gone, "Okay, at this stage I should've done more of this. Here it didn't work so well."

6.3.2 Immediate initiation feedback

"You're watching everything; 'Is she responding to that [action]? Did that hit? Did that land?'"

Three aspects of immediate initiation feedback emerged through the analysis. The first, involved being responsive to interactional partners' feedback; the second, involved feedback as validation of improvement and, the third, involved feedback from peers and coaches.

6.3.2.1 Being responsive to interactional partners' feedback

During interactions, people are bombarded by a constant stream of verbal and non-verbal feedback (Hargie, 2006). In dating interactions, such feedback can reveal how attracted an interactional partner is. Ruben explained the importance of being "sensitive" to the feedback from interactional partners:

> Yeah that's another thing where guys fail on the LSS [The London Seduction Society]. They say that what she says doesn't matter, you know. They basically ignore the woman and they are kind of on their own rails, and they are just going ahead doing their thing and if she gives them negative feedback, it means she is stupid or something. But I was, I was sensitive to the feedback and I really used it as a mirror to see myself. I didn't take it personally because I knew that was shit and I needed to, to get better. In those early days, I was paying, you know very close attention to the feedback and the different points where things went wrong and why… I would think okay you know, but try not to let it affect me emotionally because once you know what it is, you can fix it.

By using the feedback as a "mirror," Ruben was able to identify skills which required improvement and then practice these skills repetitively until further feedback indicated that they had been sufficiently honed. The ability to be sensitive to interactional partners is well established as a key facet of social skills. Ruben's ability to react in light of interactional partners is evocative of Snyder's (1987) seminal research, demonstrating that the capacity to *self-monitor* and adjust behaviour in light of interactional partners is associated with high social skills. Ruben, it appears, used feedback to improve his ability to self-monitor and adjust his behaviour appropriately in dating situations.

The dating experts demonstrated that, when practicing in social environments, they were *not* there to "enjoy themselves." Rather, in accordance with the above quote, performers were focused on improving, and were highly attentive to the feedback their partners provided, scrutinising minor cues, something that made practice very demanding (see *challenging practice* for further detail on the arduous nature of dating skills deliberate practice). Damien conveyed how attentive he was to feedback, stating: "You're watching everything; 'Is she responding to that [action]? Did that hit? Did that land?'" Such feedback from interactional partners could range from the blatant ("I'm not interested!") to the subtle

(e.g., a sigh, a slight voice inflection, a micro-expression; or an action such as moving a hand to prominently display, or hide, an engagement ring).

Such subtle cues are described as *backchannel behaviour* (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000). Backchannel behaviour allows interactional partners to feedback information (such as agreement or interest) in a continual and unobtrusive basis, with skilled people especially sensitive to such subtle communication cues (Hargie, 2006). Neil provided an example of the subtle ways in which he drew on backchannel feedback, discussing a routine he used hundreds of times called the *Expressive Face Routine*.

> Let me just spell it out for you to give you the context. This routine I'm talking about was called the *Expressive Face Routine*. So I'd walk up to the girl, starting the conversation by saying, "Whoa! Wait a minute. You have a really expressive face." She'd go, "Oh, really? Yeah?"

> And her friend would look at her and there'd be this moment and I'd say, "Yeah, you know a girl I used to date was an actress. She told me that there is a big difference between the faces of comedians and those who do drama. People who do comedy are really good with their eyebrows, the way they raise them; whereas people that do drama, they're very serious and have smug looks. I bet you'd be a good comedic actress. Can you raise an eyebrow for me?"

> So if I do this properly, she's attracted and she'll play along, right? She's following my lead in all this, whereas a typical guy might just walk up with a standard opening line, he might tease her, and he might get a laugh but this is more intriguing… So this is the thing; if I did good, she'd try to raise the eyebrow. If I did bad, she wouldn't try. If it was somewhere in the middle sometimes she'd ask me to raise my eyebrow!

The three reactions: attempting to raise the eyebrow, not attempting to raise the eyebrow and asking Neil to raise his eyebrow, provided backchannel feedback for Neil to alter his delivery, timing, body positioning, and other verbal and non-verbal behaviours. The analysis revealed that repeatedly using the exact same routine in practice was crucial to how all of the performers took advantage of the test-retest process. Doing so enabled them to become calibrated and sensitive to subtle cues, contextualising feedback from the many performance trials. Being highly calibrated was viewed as an essential skill, as it meant the performers were able to respond fluidly and appropriately to partners' behavioural cues.

When asked whether he was sensitive to his partners' feedback, Stephen used a basketball analogy to illustrate how he fine-tuned his delivery:

> Yeah, you do! [alter your performance] But you do it subconsciously. You know like, it's like a guy, a guy standing on a fixed point and trying to shoot basketball hoops. He doesn't miss it and then go, "Yeah definitely just need one degree further to my right and with force 8/10 as opposed to force 7/10 on my next throw." He doesn't think that. He just resets and goes again in

the knowledge that he needs to improve and refine what he's doing.

Sam's statement illustrates the fluidity with which performers integrated feedback and adjusted their performance. He further shared how such feedback would influence the behavioural repertoires he chose to use in future: "When something [a routine or action] goes really well you save it, you're like 'Oh! Doing that leads to a positive reaction. I'll save that!' It's something you'll do again, if the right opportunity arises."

As with other novel situations, dating interactions can be problematic to navigate without relevant schemas. The process of "saving" good gambits and stories is an example of how the dating experts expanded their behavioural repertoires, developing *schemas* or *chunks* (Gobet, 2016), facilitating rapid pattern recognition and the execution of effective behaviours. Repetitive practice and feedback, it appears, was at the heart of the process of developing a vast body of what this thesis entitles *dating schemas* and *dating chunks*.

The vast amount of repetitive practice drawing on feedback prompted dating experts to become so attuned to interactional partners that they felt they could see "The Matrix" (a reference to a popular film, where the protagonist, *Neo*, is able to intuit the future attacks of opponents). As Brian described:

> It felt like I could literally see *The Matrix*, as people would say. When I'm interacting with a woman it feels like I can read the future; like literally, you go, "Oh my God! I knew she was going to say those exact words"… Obviously you're not but you're getting so good at reading micro-expressions, body language, and predicting how people respond to certain things you say. And you're picking up smaller signals that you don't realise it, because our unconscious mind is reading it all. It picks up hundreds of cues, but our conscious brain can only manage a few things at once… Hence all those thousands of hours pay off.

The performers' ability to better predict and read interactional partners' behaviours with experience is explored in depth in Chapter 8, during the analysis for Investigation 2 on dating intuition. Of course, accurately reading a micro-expression, raising an eyebrow at the right moment, or predicting your partner's behaviour, does not define a successful dating overture. In many ways, the acid test to a successful dating initiation is the successful *end* to a dating interaction.

6.3.2.2 Feedback as validation of improvement

The ultimate feedback is success. Experts are those who obtain, "results that are vastly superior to those obtained by the majority of the population" (Gobet, 2016, p.5). In terms of dating initiation, this relates to the ability to reliably attract strangers. As they developed their skill-set, the performers experienced numerous forms of validation that their skills were improving. For instance, "number closing" (obtaining the telephone number from a partner), going on an "instant date" (e.g., after the initial interaction, moving to another venue to spend time together), or "kiss closing" (kissing before ending the

overture), all enabled the performers to gauge their abilities. Successfully initiating dates with women was also validating.

Neil described the satisfaction that he derived from a successful dating interaction as follows:

I'd get a phone number of a girl or I'd kiss a girl or she'd want to go on a date with me and I'd be like, "You know what? This is validating"… And that made me want to go to the next level.

By wanting "to go to the next level," Neil conveyed that feedback provided evidence of improvement, which in turn motivated him to keep practicing and developing. While exchanging telephone numbers or a kiss would indicate that an interaction had been skilfully handled, conversely, being painfully rejected or being placed in the "friendship zone" (where a person decides they see the partner as a platonic and non-romantic friend), would indicate that performers were faltering in the process and that they needed to adapt accordingly. The impact of rejection, and how it influenced the performers' practice, is explored in detail in *challenging practice*. Neil provided another example of how the feedback he received from women demonstrated just how skilful he was at dating initiation, explaining: "The last girl I went on a date with, she asked me, "What's the catch?" Like, "You're too good to be true. What's the catch?""

Charles provided an example of how, on learning he was a dating coach, women would scrutinise his performance to assess whether he was "awesome." While they were a "self-selected sample," it was validating feedback nonetheless:

I tell them [women] what I do for a living, right. So usually the first reaction is, "Really?!" and they start to judge me very harshly. They start to go, "Okay, so you're some f****ing dating coach? Then this had better be awesome." And then if I meet their expectations, I get a lot of compliments like, "Wow, yeah, you're really good. I can definitely see why you're a dating coach," and it makes things really good. And I think if I do a bad job, I don't hear from them again [laughter]. So it's a bit of a self-selected sample.

Stephen provided example of dating feats that had once been "inconceivable," such as getting "the hottest girl in the club":

Just some really, really ridiculous experiences I've had and maybe I didn't even imagine that this would happen in my wildest dreams… In the early days, it was quite simple. On a few occasions I might get the hottest girl in the club. The hottest girl, by my recognition, going home with me and having a one-night stand. To me before, that would be unimaginable.

Analysis also revealed the important role that feedback from peers and coaches played in the performers' development. While they might spend hours practicing "solo" (by themselves) typically, the

performers practiced with their peers who provided social support, camaraderie and counsel. Gavin divulged how the feedback from an experienced friend he regularly practiced with fast tracked his development:

> I ended up meeting this guy and initially he had in mind this little program of a couple of weekends of going out, but we ended up becoming friends and so when he went out he would always call me and I would go out with him, for maybe about a year, maybe longer than that. Basically he would give me very, very pointed feedback on what I was doing and he would say, "Do less of this, do more of this. What you need to work on is this thing here." That was the big, big push.

While peers were significant sources of validation, for Stephen and the other participants, it was the *actual experiences,* such as the one described in Stephen's quote above, that performers emphasised as being particularly validating. As Stephen explained:

> I got a lot of positive feedback [from peers and other sources]. When I think about the things that actually confirm it [his level of expertise], it's the actual experiences. I mean I've met girls I didn't imagine even existed. How intelligent they are, how much we have in common. How much great stuff we have to talk about. And how gorgeous I find them. More than I ever imagined.

Feedback from peers and coaches could be both immediate or retrospective. *Retrospective feedback* is examined in the next section, while aspects of *immediate feedback* provided by coaches and peers is further analysed in Section 6.5, *goal orientated practice.*

6.3.3 Retrospective initiation feedback

Afterwards, in the aftermath when you come home, there's a time to be analytical, a time to be unbiased and go, "Okay, here's what you did well, here's what you didn't do well, here's where you need work."

Performance can suffer when people are overly attentive to feedback during the performance itself. A football player participating in a cup final, a pianist performing to a packed concert hall, or a person attempting to initiate a date with the "partner of their dreams," might find their execution suffers if, during the performance, they dedicate cognitive resources to examine the intricacies of their behaviour. To improve performance, feedback need not be immediate. For instance, research shows that even when feedback is delayed by 24 hours, people can use it to improve on a skilled task (Trower et al., 1978).

Analysis revealed that all of the dating experts found *retrospective initiation feedback*—feedback after a dating initiation interaction has ended—as valuable for analysing and reflecting on their performance. *Retrospective initiation feedback* was obtained from a variety of sources, including interactional partners,

peers, coaches, and self-analysis. After the courtship, performers might ask women about specific aspects of the interaction ("What made you to feel comfortable with me?" "When did you first feel attracted?" "Did that line about 'x' engage you?"). The performers wrote and posted *field reports* (reports detailing their dating initiation performance trials) on dating forums, describing in fine details their courtships, enabling their peers to scrutinise their reports and provide detailed feedback. They would discuss "blow-for-blow" dating initiation accounts with their peers and coaches. Some of the performers went to the lengths of video-recording themselves and replaying the footage so they could critique themselves and assess areas for improvement. As Gavin explained, "at times, I recorded my interactions and gone over them and really gone, 'Okay, at this stage I should've done more of this. Here it didn't work so well,' so breaking it down. It's almost like recording a game and then the coach watches the game again and breaks down what happened." The following section will focus on journaling, the form of retrospective initiation feedback most widely reported by the performers.

6.3.3.1 Journaling

The majority of the performers documented their practice sessions by journaling. Typically, this consisted of performers writing detailed journal reports (often referred to as "field reports") when they returned home from a practice session. Participants described journaling as, "homework," as "powerful," and as important for examining "internal processes" and "correcting what went wrong." As a technique, it enabled the performers to reflect on their practice and see where they might improve. Neil provided a description of journaling in his field report:

> Every time I'd go out, I'd spend an hour, say, the next day, or half hour. I'd write what we call a "field report." I got really succinct with it in time. I'd write, "Okay. Step one, her name was this. I said this. She said that. Then I did this and she did this so I thought", and I always remembered to keep my thoughts in mind because I knew that was what was controlling it. Um, and I'd make the big focus, "Okay, then I touched her like this and when I put my hand on her waist, she pulled back just a little but she kept eye contact. So I know that by keeping that eye contact next time, if she still keeps eye contact, I'll pull her in really close to me and say "You're bad news." Okay? That I know is good but then I also have a report, say, the next night – "I did it and she didn't keep eye contact and I pulled her in close and she went 'Aaah! What are you doing?"

Gavin, who now journaled every time he practiced, emphasised the importance of not getting "lazy" and keeping up journaling, as it helped him avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly and "push to a new level."

> Actually, journaling is something that I didn't do a lot historically and that was a big mistake. If I went back, I would've started that from day one. But that's something that I started recently, with this new wave where I just got pissed off at myself and I was like, "Let's push this to a new

level." I didn't realise how powerful it could be but that's one big thing that I harp on a lot with my students—journal, definitely journal. Don't get lazy with that. We tend to think, "It's fine, I remember what happened." No, you don't. If you don't write it down, you'll repeat the mistakes over and over again.

Journalling appears to have helped minimise the likelihood of the performers repeating the same mistakes. Research reveals that the ability to retrieve knowledge held in long-term memory from previous practice facilitates better decision making in the future (Meyer, 2006). Ronnie described journaling as aiding memory retention and patten recognition, enabling him to keep improving:

What writing helps a lot with, is it helps with memory retention of the experience. So by having a better retention of the experience, it makes it easier for you to learn from it. Also, I think if you write you can see more patterns. There's some things in pickup it's going to take you—it could take you 20, 30, 40 interactions before you're able to spot a certain pattern. If you're writing then you can start to see. I often tell my guys, "You need to write…because it'll allow me to see the patterns," the recurring patterns that maybe underlie your inability to get beyond a certain level.

John discussed how journaling enabled him to gauge his progression over three years:

I kept a journal from 2008 till 2011. And it's locked down now on *Google* but I had maybe 80 or 90 journal posts and reading through it now I can actually see changes in my behaviour. I left notes for myself on things I should do next time: "What did I learn [in the interaction], how did I do this [skill], how did I handle this [situation]?" And those learnings are instrumental to the person that I've become now. So I think journal keeping and journal writing for anything, for any type of improvement that you're doing is great because it lets you at some stage sit back and reflect on the progression that you've had. So even going to the gym, taking photos of how you used to look versus how you look now because the gains you'll get in every day are just so small but when you look at the gain you've had from now to three years ago the gains are huge. And that inspires you to keep going and it motivates you to keep pushing things.

On a day-to-day basis, dating skills development could be so subtle that gauging improvement could be difficult. Maintaining a journal over a period of three years enabled John to compare himself as if using "before" and "after" photographs showing muscle development from working out. Journaling helped the performers see patterns and optimise their skills. As John described:

I'm a very analytical person. So I would analyse things and I'd constantly write things down and sit there and try and use logic to understand how interactions went and when they went off track or what made them work. And it'd really come down to trying to optimise my own technique

because with pickup I don't believe there's one technique that works for anybody. I think everybody has to use and develop their own technique to find out what works for them, to maximise their own inner traits that are deemed attractive. So everybody has attractive qualities. It's just a matter of finding what those qualities are then being able to display them and be proud of them and embrace them.

Journaling also assisted with the performers' "inner game;" the mental aspects of dating initiation that can be seen to underlie efficacy, such as confidence and self-esteem. Dating experts were particularly keen to gain mastery over "limiting beliefs" (beliefs that, if held, make people pessimistic about their dating ability; examples include, "Women find me unattractive because I'm short/dull/have an accent"). Gavin described how journaling helped him reflect on his "psychological processes" and work on his inner game:

> Now I'm consistently approaching the hottest girls, just pushing the envelope, then I come home and I go over what I did, I go over what I could do better. A lot of it is internal work. It's not so much the words but going over your psychological processes. "What happened when you did this? What did you feel? Does that make sense? What should you be focusing on instead?" A lot of what we call inner game.

Gavin's quotes convey the analytical side of dating initiation practice and the amount of thought performers would give to both their, and their interactional partners', cognitions. Communication researchers refer to this type of thinking about oneself and others as *metacognition*. Metacognition can be an important facet of skilled communication, with the caveat that too much of it can become inefficient or "cumbersome." As Hargie (2006, p.44) writes:

> In order to interact successfully… one must have the capacity to form cognitive conceptions of the others 'cognitive conceptions.' Such metacognition is very important in forming judgements about the reasons for behaviour. However, as with many of the processes in skilled performance, there is an optimum level of metacognition, since, if overdone 'all of this thinking about thinking could become so cumbersome that it actually interferes with communication' (Lundsteen, 1993, p. 107). In other words, it is possible to 'think oneself out of' actions.

The interviews revealed that performers were acutely aware that, during in-set practice, over-analysis, or too much attention on metacognition, was sub-optimal. Gavin succinctly captured this, describing being too analytical as a "two-edged knife:"

> The analytical mindset definitely helps. [But] It's a two-edged knife. It's a skill that helps to have

but you want to be able to control it at the same time. There are times to be analytical and there are times to switch off the analysis. In field, talking to a woman, if you don't learn to switch off the analysis part of your brain, you're in trouble. Things are going to happen. That's something I had to go through. I had to learn to switch that off, not be thinking of strategies or theories, in the moment, just be thinking of, "You're talking to this beautiful girl. It's fun. Have fun and bring the good emotions to her."

That was why retrospective analysis was so important to the performers. Scrutinising feedback and the minutiae of skill execution during dating interactions could undermine what Csikszentmihalyi (2002) describes as the "flow state"; an optimal state for skill execution. Being overly analytical drew the performers out of flow, causing them to be overly concerned about their performance and to lose focus on a key aspect of being a valued interactional partner: being attentive and enjoying the moment. As Gavin described, such analysis could be done afterwards:

Afterwards, in the aftermath when you come home, there's a time to be analytical, a time to be unbiased and go, "Okay, here's what you did well, here's what you didn't do well, here's where you need work." There's a time to be honest with yourself and to be your own teacher, in a way.

6.3.4 Feedback orientated practice: Summary and relationship to other themes

Consistent with deliberate practice research in other domains of expertise, the findings suggested the effectiveness of repetitive dating practice is significantly reduced if feedback is not an integral part of the practice. Analysis revealed that two forms of feedback—*immediate initiation feedback* and *retrospective initiation feedback*—were crucial components of dating skills deliberate practice.

A major source of *immediate initiation feedback* stemmed from the deliberate and attentive manner in which the performers practiced. The example of the *Expressive Face Routine* demonstrated how repetitive practice that integrated feedback was associated with the development of dating related repertoires. Such practice served as a "mirror" from which the performers could evaluate and adapt their performance in light of the mental representations they held of how the interaction should be progressing. As a performer described, "I was sensitive to the feedback and I really used it as a mirror to see myself." Yet, the analytical mindset that enables the performers to perceive and react to feedback, was also a "double edged sword" which could hinder performance.

In this regard, *retrospective initiation feedback* played an important role. For instance, the performers analysed their performance after initiations by journaling and obtaining feedback from their peers (*goal orientated practice* expands on how performers used advice and feedback from their peers and coaches). Immediate and retrospective feedback had a symbiotic relationship, and the performers' use of it was evocative of what Gobet (2016) described as being "expert learners"; leaners who are highly sensitive to

feedback and metacognition, using it to evaluate what skills are missing and then using this knowledge to strategically change their behaviour. The findings provided support for the model of mental representations provided in Conceptual Argument 3 in Section 5.4. In the field, the performers executed skills, responding to feedback and backchannel behaviour in light of the mental representations they held of desired performance. Post performance, they further refined their acuity and understanding, searching for patterns that pinpointed what they needed to improve. The next time performers returned to the field, they sought to integrate the feedback and execute the same skill more effectively. As one performer described, this approach enables you to "be your own teacher."

Thus, self-analysis and the ability to diagnose problems and formulate a prognosis, seems to support the development of dating expertise. It appears that such a capacity *is not* a unique gift only rare individuals possess, but rather something all the performers developed and refined through practice. Given the cognitively demanding nature of such self-analysis, it is unlikely a person who was not highly dedicated to dating improvement would regularly engage in such an onerous exercise; a topic that is further discussed in the next theme, *challenging practice*.

6.4 Thematic Analysis for Challenging Practice

"There is no Cupid's arrow. You can't fire an arrow and just win everybody over. It's impossible… The real key is dealing with that and understanding it's not rejection. It's just incompatibility."

6.4.1 Introduction and overview
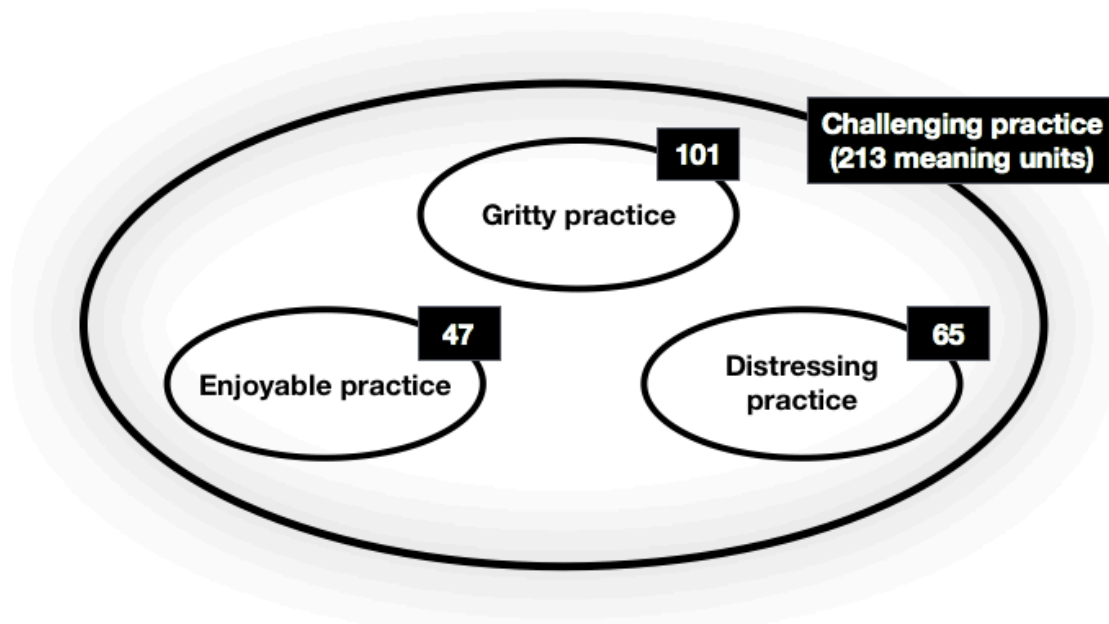
Figure 18. *Challenging practice and sub-themes. Challenging practice* had three sub-themes, *gritty practice, distressing practice* and *enjoyable practice. Gritty practice* was defined as practice which was "challenging, arduous, or gruelling." *Distressing practice* was, "emotionally affecting practice which provokes anxiety, distress, fear or anguish." *Enjoyable practice* was, "pleasurable, entertaining, or satisfying practice."

To become an expert, people need to practice activities correlated with improvement (Ericsson et al., 1993). Yet, Ericsson and colleagues assert that such practice is demanding and *not* enjoyable. As they write, "deliberate practice requires effort and is not inherently enjoyable. Individuals are motivated to practice because practice improves performance" (p. 368).

The analysis revealed that the performers' practice was arduous, thus meeting the third component of deliberate practice: challenging practice. As illustrated in Figure 18, thematic analysis resulted in the level-2 theme *challenging practice* which had three sub-themes: *gritty practice, distressing practice* and *enjoyable practice. Gritty practice,* which was defined as practice that is "challenging, arduous, or gruelling," recorded the most meaning units with 101. Counts for *gritty practice* were further analysed to distinguish between *moderately gritty practice* and *highly gritty practice*. There were almost double the instances of *highly gritty practice* (67) than *moderately gritty practice* (34), further emphasising the challenging nature of the performers' practice.

Not only was initiation practice gritty, but it could also be very distressing. Initiating dating interactions with strangers can be stressful and anxiety provoking (Greca & Mackey, 2007; Grover, 2008; McClure et al., 2010), especially when a person suffers from low self-esteem or believes they lack basic social competency (Allen et al., 1998). So highly reported was the stress and anxiety of initiation that the theme *distressing practice* was created to record examples of practice that was emotionally affective and resulted in either anxiety, distress, or fear.

In domains of expertise where deliberate practice has been studied, "distressing practice" resulting from anxiety and fear has not featured as a reported variable. Although performers in other fields such as concert musicians and stage actors can experience significant performance anxiety related to the highly public nature of their craft (Lemasson et al., 2018), dating anxiety and fear of rejection is a unique and particularly debilitating form of anxiety that can result in severe psychosocial distress (Greca & Mackey, 2007) and lead people to completely avoid initiating dates. Such fear does not seem uncommon. Symons (2005) captured the potent fear of dating initiation on behaviour as both "dysfunctional" and a "striking feature of human courtship—in its broadest sense," pointing out that, "sexual/romantic rejection hurts; the memory of being rejected hurts; the thought of being rejected hurts" (p. 256-257). Given this, it is unsurprising that performers' behaviour was significantly influenced by fear of rejection, and that learning how to mange this fear was crucial to becoming adept at initiation.

Despite the anxiety provoking nature of initiation, the analysis also revealed a feature of deliberate practice that may be somewhat unique to dating expertise: aspects of it appear intrinsically enjoyable. This is a finding that conflicts with the Ericsson et al's. (1993) general theory of deliberate practice (although see Section 3.5.2.2 for researchers who agree it can be enjoyable). All participants mentioned that practice had enjoyable elements, registering a total of 47 meaning units. The analysis that follows draws on evolutionary and social psychology to understand why, unlike some domains, deliberate practice for dating improvement might be inherently enjoyable.

6.4.1.1 Indicative statements for challenging practice

Table 9 includes indicative statements from the analysis, providing a snapshot of how *challenging practice* and the three sub-themes were supported by the data. The following findings provide a more detailed analysis.

Table 9

Indicative Statements for Challenging Practice

Gritty practice

Approaching takes some courage. A lot of guys, I'd say 90 percent if not more that start don't adhere to the practice. That's because it's damn hard.

You're studying [dating skills] six hours a day until your eyes get sore on the computer and you're writing journals and you're breaking down [dating interactions] to the one sentence that you might have screwed up… It's like going to the gym and your muscles never get any bigger. That's very, very painful to a part of your life where you already have pain.

It wasn't about going out and having fun, or talking to my friends, or hanging out. It was really all about going out and practicing skills.

There were stages where you think, "Oh, I really don't want to approach." No one wants to go out. It can be mentally and physically very taxing.

Distressing practice

"I've put so much into this," and it's just rejection, rejection, rejection. That hurts.

I used to have a general social anxiety and a general anxiety of having people look at me. Holding eye contact and everything. Then slowly each of those fell away.

Where I was from, it wasn't the norm to go up to different people, strangers, and start a conversation. It wasn't the norm so it brings an enormous amount of anxiety.

As far as going out, there's been times I went home with tears in my eyes. Um, it felt like I was beating my head against a wall. I wanted this so bad

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Enjoyable practice

It was really exciting. It was a lot of fun. I mean, it's a big thrill, er, and intrinsically rewarding, even.

Well, it's fun but it's scary. It's fun but it's terrifying. It's like… once you get into the mindset of having fun then it's awesome.

I wanted to do it. I loved doing it so it wasn't work for me. It's pleasurable and it was some of the happiest times for me, because I felt the improvement, and could see the goal and all of, of those elements, so it was pleasurable.

6.4.2 Gritty practice

"There were stages where you think, 'Oh, I really don't want to approach.' No one wants to go out. It can be mentally and physically very taxing."

As *repetitive practice* illustrated, performers completed a vast amount of dating initiation practice. While this practice was essential for development, it was physically and mentally taxing. Neil's quote on the 100 day challenge was a prime example of how motivated he, like the other performers, was, to complete arduous practice, even though by the end he "couldn't" walk:

> I went out 100 days straight. I went out to the point where my feet were so blistered that I had to take a couple days off; I couldn't walk.

Neil's also added, "once I had it [the skill] down, there was no more need to go [practice] that hard," demonstrating a common theme: the performers were willing to adhere to challenging practice for the *instrumental* goal of dating expertise.

Brian described how it was not just physically taxing, but also mentally taxing. "There were stages where you think, 'Oh, I really don't want to approach.' No one wants to go out. It can be mentally and physically very taxing." The performers' instrumental view of practice was captured again by Brian who —in the quote cited in *repetitive practice*—compared practice to work, describing practice, "like a double shift at work. So it would be all day, all night… that could be anything from 5 to 7 days a week." Considering their practice as "work," meant that the performers were committed to practice even when feeling less motivated. Ruben explained:

> Everyday I needed to say, "Okay come on let's go do it [practice]," as part of me wanted to stay in bed of course… But if, if I didn't know that I would later be able to enjoy the result, I wouldn't do it. It wasn't very pleasurable in the moment.

Similarly, Ronnie drew on discipline which he had cultivated in part through martial arts:

> There was the other aspect which I told you about, was with martial arts. I had a certain level of discipline that I think a lot of guys who come into this, they just don't have that level of discipline. There's a very interesting problem, actually, where I think people in general have a very hard time motivating themselves to do something that they personally want. I think it's because of the way we were brought up. Most of our lives in school and stuff, we develop the skills of being motivated. I wouldn't even call it motivation; of being able to take consistent action despite our feelings, but only for things that we don't actually want, especially the guys who get into

pickup.

When asked how he kept to his strict practice sessions, Gavin emphasised how difficult it was to maintain and estimated 90 per cent of people would cease practicing because it's "damn hard":

It has required significant effort, both at home when I'm looking at stuff or analysing things, journaling, and definitely in the field. I've had to face my fears many times, analyse - look at myself and go, "Why did this not go well? Why all this fear? Why this, why that?" So yeah, approaching takes some courage. A lot of guys, I'd say 90 percent if not more that start don't adhere to the practice. That's because it's damn hard. Not only do you have to face other people's weird reactions, the social anxiety and the social tension, but also you have to face your own judgment of yourself and you have to look at yourself deep, deep within, and face your fear and overcome them. That makes it pretty hard.

Stephen agreed that many people struggle to maintain practice, stating:

The going out and actually approaching for sure [is the most important practice]. You have to do it, so many people you know don't actually do it. [They] Will talk about it, "Blah, blah," but when it when it really comes to it, [they] just don't do it. You have to do that and get over that. Yes that's definitely essential. Going out and approaching hundreds of women over months.

Neil compared the vast amount of practice he was doing with going to the gym to build muscles.

But back then, it's like this [development] is in the forefront of your mind. It's everything you're studying six hours a day until your eyes get sore on the computer and you're writing journals and you're breaking down [dating interactions] to the one sentence that you might have screwed up… It's like going to the gym and your muscles never get any bigger. That's very, very painful to a part of your life where you already have pain.

Neil's quote "It's like going to the gym and your muscles never get any bigger. That's very, very painful to a part of your life where you already have pain," illustrates, the strategic and long term view he, like other performers, took to improvement, which is further discussed in the analysis for *goal orientated practice*. The sentence "you're breaking down [dating interactions] to the one sentence that you might have screwed up," serves to highlight just how draining and meticulous the performers' practice was.

John reflected on how, with practice, he learnt how to forge connections with interactional partners, which meant rejection became the exception rather than the rule. He described "learning more from getting shut down [rejected] than I did from actually succeeding":

[I] wrote numerous posts, I spoke with lots of friends and even female friends. And I think once again collaborating with people was great, but at the same time just pushing yourself, just hanging in there is actually enough to get through that [rejection and low success]. And it's a bit like if you might be down for winter, summer is just around the corner. So knowing that if you hang in there everything will be okay. And once again it's like going to the gym. You're going to go to the gym. You're going to lift some heavy weight, you're going to be sore for a few weeks, but once you're sore that's when you start making your gains. You learn from that point when you are sore. That's when your muscles build. So much like pickup, you learn more or I found I learn more from getting shut down than I did from actually succeeding. So you need these plateaus and these negative experiences to really tighten up your game and to work out what you're not doing right.

As John's final line reveals, challenging experiences were important for his development. While most of the analysis revealed that performers practice for long-term instrumental goals relating to development; a large motivation for initiating dates was the more immediately gratifying motivation of sexual intimacy. Continued dating initiation without developing relationship intimacy could be frustrating, as Ronnie described:

Were there times when I felt sick of it [practice]? Yeah, actually, a little bit. I would have to go out maybe five or six times to get one *lay* and then it's a one night stand because I'm travelling. The return is not great so I got really frustrated. I don't know if the word is frustrated but I got really frustrated with pickup. It just seemed pointless. I like to get dividends.

While the training could be challenging and dispiriting, extended practice came with a result: greater skill. As Neil discovered by doing the same *Expressive Face Routine* an astounding—if not unusual for the performers—200 times:

I did it [the *Expressive Face Routine*] on 200 girls and what I found was by the end of it… two things. One, I hated this routine and I'm just like, "Aaah! I'm so sick of saying this. This is so predictable." What ended up happening was when I got sick of it, was the point that I got bored, but also, very interesting, is that I learned.

As discussed in *repetitive practice*, while repetition made practice dull—to the point of feeling "sick"—it was crucial if performers were to learn and master key components of dating. Performers such as John, emphasised that practice was *not* about having "fun," but rather about improvement:

In the early years I was pretty obsessed with pickup. And the reason was, I lived and breathed it. Everything I read about was pickup related. And I'd go out on the weekends with the goal of

chatting to girls. It wasn't about going out and having fun, or talking to my friends, or hanging out. It was really all about just going out and practicing skills. It was like going to the gym…

Focus was the key to practice, even if it made it less enjoyable. Gavin discussed how focus meant his practice was now much more productive than it had previously been:

Right now, I'd say yeah, [my practice is] close to that peak of the middle year. Not quite as [much] - because that middle year, there was a point where I was basically unemployed and I was just a bulldozer. I was going out three, four nights a week and then four days a week so that was a lot. Not doing quite that much now in terms of; I'm not doing as much in terms of time spent in field but I am spending quite a bit of time in field and when I'm in field, in half an hour now I learn as much and I practice as much as in three hours before. It's more focused, I know what I'm doing, I learn faster. Yeah, I just am more aware in general.

Connor described how other less focused members of the Community might be drinking beers and talking while he would be practicing with "purpose":

So I would say a couple of years after I arrived in Melbourne because when I got to Melbourne no one really cared [about focused practicing]… So I'd go out with a big group of people and I guess a lot of those guys would kind of just stay in a big group and chat and stuff. And like I mentioned to you before we were recording, I've never been much of a bloke's bloke, getting my beer and standing around in a group and talking about stuff. For me it's like if I'm out doing something I have a purpose. So when we'd be out in a group I'd be constantly dialling up and approaching. I guess after a while guys just started to notice… "We've been here for half an hour and this guy's already got a number and spoken to three people."

The performers' focus and determination conforms with Ericsson et al.'s (1993) view that the type of practice that leads to greatest improvement in skill (deliberate practice) should be concentrated on the task of skill development rather than done for enjoyment. As Ericsson et al., (1993) write:

The goal of deliberate practice is not "doing more of the same." Rather, it involves engaging with full concentration in a special activity to improve one's performance. As deliberate practice is not inherently enjoyable, there doesn't seem to be any reason for engaging in it or prolonging its duration unless the individuals and their teachers believe that their performance improves as a result. Many other domain-related activities are judged to be more enjoyable than deliberate practice and they should be preferred. Hence, there doesn't seem to be any reason for engaging in deliberate practice, and especially prolonging its duration, unless the individuals and their teachers believe that their performance improves as a result. (p.390-91)

An aspect of the performers' training particularly emblematic of the above quote, related to the approach many of the took regarding drinking alcohol during practice. Many completely abstained from its consumption during practice to remain focused on skill development, which is a stark contrast to many young men frequenting bars who consume alcohol for enjoyment and to prompt "Dutch courage" (strength or courage gained from drinking alcohol). As Damien explained:

Another good thing is when you're training properly, you stop drinking so you spend less.
Interviewer: Can you explain why you stop drinking?
Damien: Because you want the skill. Because you can get over your anxiety by drinking but that doesn't mean you've got the skill. You have to have control over your emotions so you have control over the situation and so when you stop drinking, you go, "I know this. I'm teasing her. This is a part of me, not this alcohol that's loosening me up or taking down my inhibitions"… So I stopped drinking. I do it every so often now. I just go onto pineapple juice. Yeah but, you know, it really depends on how serious you are.

Damien's abstinence from alcohol during practice is consistent with what we would expect from performers determined to improve their skills. Dating skills deliberate practice should be highly focused and concentrated on improvement in performance, not enjoyment. As Damien demonstrated, he was determined to become highly proficient and, in his words, whether someone is willing to make sacrifices depends on "how serious you [they] are."

Similarly, Ronnie avoided alcohol as he considers it a substance that "dulls your mind," and also another "thing to manage," taking away focus from practice. Ronnie explained that if he was consuming alcohol then he was no longer practicing, rather it was "break time." As he described:

No, not at all. Me and my friends really didn't drink [when practicing]. Drinking gets in the way, not only because it dulls your mind but it's a bad habit because it becomes - alcohol is an anchor, regardless of its actual effect on you. It's an anchor and you now anchor approaching girls or talking to girls to being in an environment with alcohol or to having alcohol. I think that that's an association, an anchor you just don't want to create.That's the first problem.

The second thing is that essentially, a drink is another thing you have to manage. You have to put it somewhere or you have to hold it. It's something to manage and it means that you can't be as fully engaged with the person or with the set… It restricts your movement, it restricts your freedom to a certain extent. For me, if I have a drink, drink time is break time.

Brian also believed it was best to avoid mixing alcohol with practice, but recognised that alcohol could be used to motivate and provide some *Dutch courage*:

But a good rule is if you're someone that really, really feels they need a bit of Dutch courage, every five sets, allow yourself a beer or a shandy or have an orange juice in between them five sets as well, and that way you're never ever going to get drunk. It's a reward, give yourself a reward; "If I talk to five girls, I'll reward myself with a shandy or a beer."

But his stance on alcohol was revealed by his preference for beverages that were not too strong, such as shandy (a mixture of beer and lemonade), or better still orange juice. Thus, where alcohol was used, it was essentially a tool to encourage practice; rather than used explicitly for enjoyment. The idea of using alcohol as a tool for Dutch courage recognises how difficult and even frightening dating initiation could be, which leads to the next theme, *distressing practice*.

6.4.3 Distressing practice

"There was times when I'd come back after a night and I was crying. It was hard."

Regulation of emotions is a crucial component of skilled interaction (Hargie, 2006), with dating initiation being a particularly anxiety-provoking form of social interaction (Greca & Mackey, 2007). *Approach anxiety*, the anxiety experienced when initiating an interaction or date with a stranger, is perhaps most emblematic of how distressing dating initiation can be. All the performers emphasised the distressing nature of initiating dates (a total of 65 meaning units were recorded). At its most debilitating, approach anxiety resulted in the performers feeling emotionally overwhelmed, 'choking,' unable to speak and think of what to say. As Gavin conveyed:

When the women were really attractive, it was almost like my feet were stuck to the ground. In a way, my eyes were glued on her but my feet couldn't move and I didn't know what to do… It's strange because it's not rational, it's just a girl.

For Gavin, it would feel like his feet were "stuck to the ground," for others the anxiety of approaching manifested in different ways. When asked, "were there times where doing the approach was scary or difficult to do?" Stephen conveyed how fearful it could be drawing on a sketch by comedian Louis CK:

Approaching is one of the things that separate the men that go on and improve and those who don't. The one's who are able to say, "It's nerve wracking but I'll do it. I'll approach." That's how they build the skill-set… I mean I was sat about a week ago with my girlfriend at my place watching the new Louis CK comedy. He's a comedian, and we were watching his latest show and he has a bit where he is talking about men approaching women and he said, "You're shaking and everything in your mind is screaming 'No stop it, just go home and jack off! Don't do it! Don't approach!'" [Laughs] And I think there is some truth in it. It's really true. But I just felt like,

"Bloody do it anyway!" I was driven. There were of course times I wouldn't when the nerves got the better of me. But I did it more often than not then the anxiety just fades away.

Despite the mind "screaming 'No, stop it, just go home and jack off!'" for Stephen and the performers the willingness to manage the fear and keep practicing, "separate[d] the men that go on and improve." This is consistent with Ericsson et al's., (1993) notion that prolonged engagement in the "special activity" most related to development is what leads to expertise. For dating expertise, dating initiation is the special activity, and, regardless of the fear and anxiety, the analysis suggests that being willing to engage in distressing practice was essential to the development of such expertise. For this reason, the performers approached dating initiation with what Brian described as a "feel the fear and do it anyway mentality."

Approach anxiety was so pervasive that the distress and negative arousal extended beyond the present moment of an interaction. Negative effects could linger and grow, leaving the performers emotionally distraught long after their interactions. Damien described: "There was times when I'd come back after a night and I was crying. It was hard."

When asked "Do you have any painful recollections about picking up women?" Damien's response inferred that, as well as the rejection, affective arousal stemmed from pressures they put on themselves to improve and worries of failing to find a partner:

In my early days as a pickup artist there were some occasions where, where rejection did get to me. You're always putting yourself on a pedestal, testing yourself… There was this occasion after a bad night out, I remember walking home and putting my head in my hands distraught, saying, "What have I done, will I ever get another girl like my ex-girl friend." It was really painful. Confusing. Not being successful with women can be a lonely place. You reflect on your past and wonder where you went wrong.

The impact of rejection was heightened due to the vast quantity of practice and effort the performers exerted. As Neil described, "I've put so much into this [practice] and it's just rejection, rejection, rejection." That hurts":

I'd go back [to practice] the next night and I'm like, "Okay, we're going to breakthrough, I can finally feel myself getting to this next level." And I'd go up to a girl and it's just rejection and I go up and it's rejection and I go up and it's rejection. And when you get a little bit of ego tied to it where you know that you can do it. and you turn to one girl and she doesn't like you and the next girl doesn't like you, and you're like, "Man, the night before, I was doing this! Like, I've put so much into this [practice] and it's just rejection, rejection, rejection." That hurts.

John described how rejection was an "emotional roller coaster."

Okay so early on, yes, I often felt terrible after being rejected many times. I mean even to the point where you get a girl's number and you text her and she's texting back and you're flirting and then she realises that she gave her number to two guys that night and she got the names mixed up and she thought you were the other guy. So things like that.

… These sorts of things, these are real things. And at first they were really hard to deal with because as a person you go through an emotional rollercoaster of feelings because on one hand you have a night where you meet a girl, you might make out with her in the club, and the next night you might go out and get shut down. So you're on this emotional rollercoaster. One night you're good, one night you're bad. And that has a toll on you as a person as well. But the thing is I never got too upset about it to the point where I cried or anything like that. But I did get quite upset early on.

With experience, the performers experienced a decline in fear and anxiety associated with initiations. The performers drew on their experiences and advice from peers and coaches, adopted new techniques, and developed new schemas for reframing their fears. Ruben, who described himself as formally highly anxious, explained how the anxiety began to *"fall away"*:

I used to have a general social anxiety and a general anxiety of having people look at me. Holding eye contact and everything. Then slowly each of those fell away for the things that I forced myself to do and from the act of approaching lots of women and yeah finally, it, it got to the point where, although some situations would still scare me, they would never stop me to the point of stopping me from taking action.

Due to the distressing nature of dating initiation, performers would come up with methods to compel themselves to keep approaching, keep practicing, and keep improving. Gavin had a system where he used fear of losing money to motivate himself:

Now when I'm in field, we have systems, me and my regular wings, where we push each other. We've got to do a minimum number of approaches, it's got to be the hottest girls, it's got to be the hardest situations. Because at any level you still have anxiety and if you don't push yourself, you're going to fall back on not doing anything or just doing the easy shit. So it's been pretty recent, maybe one month, month-and-a-half where I really stepped on the gas. I go out and I give my wings money. I'm like, "Okay, I got to do this many approaches otherwise I don't get my money back."

Damien reassured himself with the knowledge that some of his most skilled peers had similarly

experienced severe approach anxiety:

> Let's say for approach anxiety, for example. Knowing that some of my closest friends now but the guys who I really looked up to in this field, knowing that they had equal if not more anxiety than me is like, "Oh, so I'm not weird."

Having a support network also encouraged the performers to remain disciplined with practice. As Gavin described:

> There were a number of things [that encouraged me to keep practicing]. Throughout, the drive to get better at this is part of it. Another part of it is creating a network of people that are working on the same thing. It makes it much, much easier. I always had guys that were interested in going out and so we'd push each other to go out more. It's harder to say, "No, I'm not going out" if there's another guy going, "Let's go, let's practice," especially now. Every day, every weekend at least, I have somebody texting me going, "Do you want to go out?" That was part of it.

All performers described how approach anxiety decreased with experience and regular exposure. Damien explained that anxiety would also fluctuate during practice. As a general pattern, anxiety tended to be more severe at the beginning of a practice session (although this would depend on environmental and psychological factors). Damien used the analogy of jumping into a cold pool to describe how it felt doing the first set of the practice session, saying the "first one [set] hurts":

> Once I've built my momentum, I can go and start doing direct [approaching], or I can just go, "You know what? I see someone who I'm attracted to" and just dive in. "First one hurts" [approach/rejection]. "Let's just do it [approach]," you know what I mean? That's what it's like [the first approach in a session]; jumping into the cold pool again. It's like jumping into a cold pool.

John also used the metaphor of jumping into the pool to address approach anxiety. He explained that although he experienced approach anxiety, it was not as debilitating for him as it may have been for others. His fears, which on occasion stalled his initiations, related more to whether he would be "good enough" in the eyes of his interactional partner.

> Approach anxiety was never a real issue or concern for me. I always had the ability to sort of bite down on my teeth really hard and just go in with a set, say something silly, and look like the class clown. But the real anxiety for me came when it was time to get the girl's number, and thinking, "Am I good enough to go on a date?" or "This girl is really hot. I don't know if I'm good enough

to be with her." And that was where my anxiety came in. My anxiety wasn't an approach anxiety. But as I explained before, approach anxiety still existed within me, even today. Like if I go up and approach a girl I will still get that rush of fear.

That's built in [approach anxiety]. It's programmed in. I cannot change that. Anyone who says they don't have it probably doesn't have the intention of picking up the girl. And for me I know it's a necessary evil. It's like jumping into a swimming pool. You can walk in slowly and let the cold water affect your skin and send shivers down your spine, or you can just jump in head first and absorb the rush and then in two or three seconds everything is fine. So I always approach knowing that hell if I just do it and jump in whatever happens will happen. And you've done your 50 percent. Let's see what the girl has to offer. And let's see how the girl responds.

John's words, "That's built in [approach anxiety]. It's programmed in. I cannot change that," reflects another rationalisation the performers used to coax themselves into initiating. Many performers read accounts on evolutionary psychology (such as, Buss, 2003; and Ridley, 2003) and drew on this to understand and reframe their fears and approach anxiety—viewing such anxiety as an archaic cognitive module that evolved as romantic rejection could have had profound implications for survival and replication in our evolutionary past. One of Ruben's techniques for managing approach anxiety was to remove himself from "caring about the initial reaction," and consciously remind himself that the vast majority of people are friendly:

I've had everything. Approaches that I wanted to do and didn't do, that's probably the hundreds or thousands. All kinds of [reactions] - when you do this for a while, you do thousands of approaches, you get everything. You get girls that almost fall in love with you the minute you walk up, you get girls who look at you like they didn't know they stacked shit that high. You got a full range of reactions. You stop caring about the initial reaction. But most people are very kind and are nice, if you're nice to them. The vast majority of people are actually friendly, nice. The extremes are less common.

Ruben's statements reflects his attempt to reframe his beliefs and cognitive schema and adopt a more rational and mature view of rejection. John mirrored this with his analogy of *Cupid*—the Greek 'god' of desire and love—and acknowledgement that there are "two many variables" to avoid rejection:

There is no *Cupid's* arrow. You can't fire an arrow and just win everybody over. It's impossible. You're a fool to think that you can win everybody over because not everybody is going to love you. There's going to be people that warm to you and there's going to be people that hate you. And the real key is dealing with that and understanding it's not rejection. It's just incompatibility. And knowing that just because one girl doesn't like you doesn't mean anything because the next

girl may love you. And it really comes down to being comfortable in doing that and putting yourself on the line and being outcome independent. So going into a set and although you want a positive outcome not being phased or disturbed if it doesn't go your way. Because there's so many variables when you approach a girl. Once again you don't know if she's single or if her boyfriend is in the bathroom. You don't know if she's just broken up. You don't know anything about her. So you've got to put yourself on the line. You go up and do what you do. And you may have a great conversation with her, you may not. But being good at pickup isn't necessarily about the pickup process. It's more about dealing with that interaction and being okay with it going any way. If it works with a girl that's great. If I don't that's also great. I'll just talk to the next girl. Because beautiful girls are everywhere and that's something else that was really important to remember. There's beautiful girls everywhere.

The emotions involved in dating initiation are complex and multi-faceted. On the one hand, performers faced distressing rejection and, on the other, joyous acceptance and validation. Stephen captured this with the following description of his dating initiations: "It's fun [dating initiation] but it's scary. It's fun but it's terrifying. It's like… once you get into the mindset of having fun then it's awesome." The next section examines the enjoyable aspects of dating initiation practice.

6.4.4 Enjoyable practice

"I loved doing it [dating initiation], so it wasn't work for me".

While performers reported how challenging dating initiation could be, they also described it as having intrinsically enjoyable aspects. A total of 47 meaning units were recorded for *enjoyable practice*. The finding that the performers enjoyed dating skills deliberate practice diverges from the general theory of deliberate practice, arguing that where enjoyment is associated with deliberate practice, it arises from *extrinsic factors*. Proponents of this view contend that enjoyment derives from the *results* that stem from deliberate practice, not the *act* of the practice itself. Ericsson et al., (1993) provided the example of cleaning, stating: "it is possible to enjoy the result of having cleaned one's house without enjoying the activity of cleaning" (p. 373). Ericsson et al. argued that a violinist's enjoyment from deliberate practice (practicing alone) derives from the results (skill improvement) that arises from practicing alone.

While this view may be accurate for music and various domains of expertise, this was not consistent with the findings of this research. Elements of dating skills deliberate practice were reported as being intrinsically rewarding; which is unsurprising in light of the fact that humans are social animals and dating is a unique sub-domain of expertise directly linked to the primal evolutionarily drive "to belong" and form interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The interviews provided a detailed understanding of both intrinsic and extrinsic enjoyment that was derived from dating skills deliberate practice. As Gavin explained:

I wanted to do it [practice]. I loved doing it so it wasn't work for me. It's pleasurable and it was some of the happiest times for me, because I felt the improvement, and could see the goal and all of, of those elements so it was pleasurable.

It became more exciting to go out. In the beginning it was more intimidating but now it's more fun. It became genuinely fun to approach a hot, hot girl regardless of the outcome. Then it just fuels itself. There's also the process. I'm always working on specific things and honing specific things so that makes it interesting to go out--"Okay, let's try this new thing. Let's try tweaking this." That always keeps it stimulating.

Extrinsically, Gavin "loved doing it [practicing]" because he found enjoyment in the process of "tweaking" his practice and the goal orientated nature of the process. At the intrinsic level, dating initiation was also perceived to be "exciting" and "genuinely fun." As Gavin reminded himself, "You're talking to this beautiful girl. It's fun. Have fun and bring the good emotions to her." Similarly, Charles explicitly mentioned how intrinsically rewarding he found talking to attractive women:

It [dating initiation practice] was really exciting. It was a lot of fun. I mean, it's a big thrill, er, and intrinsically rewarding, even…if you're not, um, hooking up with these girls. Just to be able to see a beautiful girl in a bar, walk over and have a good conversation with her and have her like you and flirt with you was very rewarding for me and I really enjoyed it. And as soon as I started… and the other thing is the way that you get these girls interested in you is by having fun, right? It's by expressing this fun personality, it's by joking around; all this stuff. And, um, so I found myself, um, yeah, having a really great time and really enjoying it.

Being a creative, interesting and fun conversational partner was part of the attractive persona performers sought to develop. As a consequence, adopting the mindset of being friendly and amiable may have resulted in practice actually feeling more enjoyable.

The performers also derived enjoyment from the camaraderie of practicing in the Community; forming close bonds with other men who had the same aim of improving their dating skills and developing a sense of "belongingness." Brian described practicing with peers as "an adventure":

It [practice] became an adventure. I think the early days were what was exciting for me. Why I loved it was because it was an adventure. We were living what was in *The Game*. We were living it, you know? We went out in the Community and we met characters.

Brian further explained that peers would "swap tips and ideas and make it fun and not make it, 'work.' This reveals a sophisticated appreciation of "framing" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), and that the

manner in which activities are framed fundamentally affects enjoyment, as Hirt, McDonald, Levine, Melton and Martin (1999) highlight in their aptly named research article, *One person's enjoyment is another person's boredom.*

Being engrossed or even obsessed in a domain facilitates sustained practice, whereas those that are less absorbed may struggle to muster the required commitment. Stephen's fondness for socialising, interacting and sex, made practice particularly enjoyable. Stephen compared dating practice to playing the guitar, something he had practiced for many years:

> For it [dating practice] not to be an arduous task. I think other guys they maybe don't like socialising that much, they actually don't like women that much, and they don't like being with a woman that much, or they don't like sex that much…All of that will make it a lot harder whereas I genuinely love those things so it never felt like a massive task… All of that will make it a lot harder whereas I genuinely love those things so it never felt like a massive task…I've got other interests, I do like them but I don't have that same kind of love that would make all of the practice seem like fun. Seem rewarding…So like I play guitar, and I love playing guitar, but not in the same way. I think for me to sit down and practice my scales and practice slowly with a metronome it's, it's not something that has come to me. Whereas like going out and having a date, even if it doesn't go anywhere, it's fun. It's something I love doing.

However, it is important to emphasise that while training could be fun—ultimately, to become experts the performers adopted an instrumental approach to practice focused on improvement rather than enjoyment, as discussed in *gritty practice*. As Neil described: "As much as we tell guys to go out and have fun; like be there to have fun and make girls a by-product, it's like, 'Look, you're there to practice,' and that's going on in your head too."

6.4.5 Challenging practice: Summary and links to other themes

The third theme of dating skills deliberate practice, *challenging practice*, agreed with research that suggests that deliberate practice is physically and mentally arduous, requiring significant motivation and grit (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2011). As one participant described, "No one wants to go out [and practice]. It can be mentally and physically very taxing." More than challenging, practice was also found to be anxiety provoking with *distressing practice* capturing the fear and stress that dating initiation could entail. The thought of approaching a stranger who might dismiss their overtures could provoke significant anxiety. As one performer described, "'It's just rejection, rejection, rejection.' That hurts." Indeed, for this reason in therapeutic setting helping clients to overcome approach anxiety is one of the main challenges for dating skills therapists (Chorney & Morris, 2008). Nonetheless, because the performers were determined to improve they adopted an instrumental "feel the fear and do it anyway" mindset and made significant sacrifices such as using savings to buy dating material and attend training courses, as well as

spending money at bars and nightclubs where they would forgo socialising and drinking alcohol so they could concentrate on practice.

Yet, performers' sentiments towards practice were multifaceted. As one performer described, practice is "fun, but it's scary." Research on deliberate practice suggests practice can promote extrinsic pleasure from improvements in skills (Ericsson et al., 1993); yet dating is a unique sub-domain of expertise, and this research suggests that dating has intrinsically enjoyable elements. While social and romantic rejection are distressing, the reverse, *social acceptance,* can be highly satisfying (Leary, 2006). Theorists that are evolutionary inclined hypothesise our brains developed to enjoy social interaction with attractive people (e.g., Fisher, 1998). Dating initiation—interacting with someone we are physically attracted to—can be inherently enjoyable. A sense of attraction can increase confidence and self-esteem, with the release of dopamine and feel good endorphins vasopressin and oxytocin promoting a sense of wellbeing and happiness (Fisher et al., 2006).

In addition, research also suggests that framing fundamentally affects how pleasurable something is (e.g., Hirt et al., 1999). While Ericsson et al. (1993) appear to have discounted the significance of cognitive reframing, performers revealed a sophisticated appreciation of reframing, as one performer alluded to when he described how he would "make it [practice] fun and not make it, 'work.'" This view is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) concept of flow—in which people are so involved in an activity that the experience of performing challenging tasks can be intensely satisfying and pleasurable.

Regardless of how challenging the practice was, the final theme, *growth mindset,* emerged to reveal the importance of mindset and motivation. Without a compatible mindset that enabled performers to persevere, making the transition from dating novice to dating expert would arguably have been a challenge too far. The participants embraced their past failures and set out to transform themselves equipped with the understanding: "if other human can do it, another can, right?"

Given how challenging dating skills deliberate practice is, training was not done just as a test of resolve or character, and performers keenly sought out the most efficient training methods, which next theme, *goal orientated practice*, turns to analyse.

6.5 Thematic Analysis for Goal Orientated Practice

"Before I go out, I actually set specific goals—'You've got to do this tonight.' When I come back, I write down what I did, did I meet my goals."

6.5.1 Introduction and overview
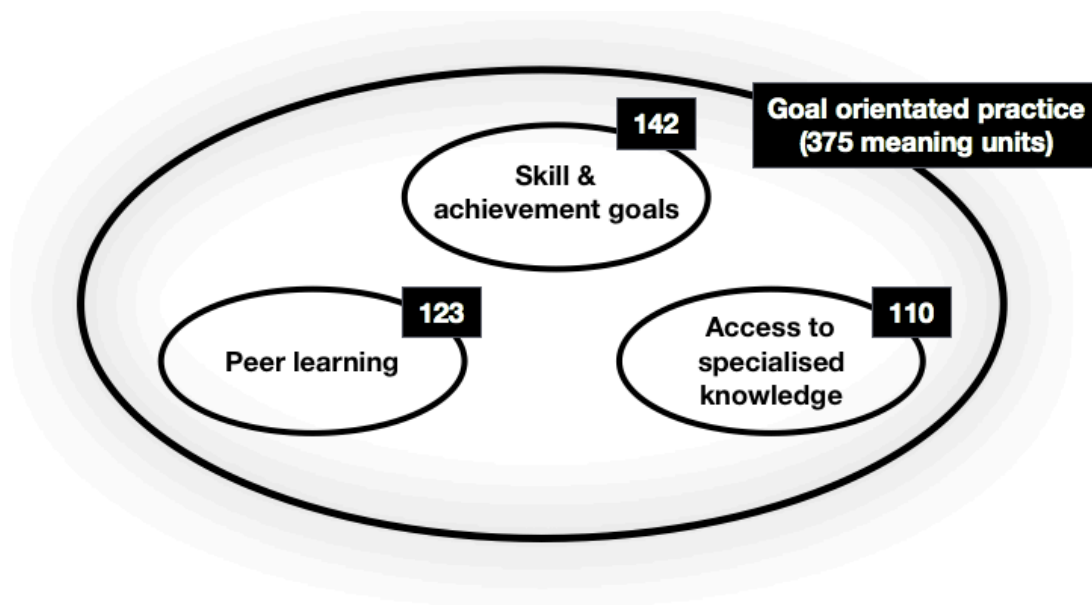
Figure 19. *Goal orientated practice and sub-themes.* Goal *orientated practice* is the fourth level-2 theme of *dating skills deliberate practice.*

So far the analysis has revealed that the dating experts' practice was repetitive, drew on feedback, and was challenging. These are all qualities of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). An additional component of deliberate practice is that it is "specifically designed to improve performance" (Ericsson et al., 1993). In other words, deliberate practice is *goal orientated.* The dating experts used peers, role models and Community resources to design their practice. *Goal orientated practice* recorded the second most meaning units with 375 (*repetitive practice* had the most with 445). Three level-3 themes emerged for *goal orientated practice*, which are all captured in Figure 19. *Goal orientated practice and sub-themes*, with 142 meaning units, and which revealed that the dating experts targeted goals relating to dating skill improvement and achievement. *Access to specialised knowledge* recorded 110 meaning units, revealing how the dating experts formed goals in light of Community based dating knowledge. *Peer learning* recorded 123 meaning units, illustrating the relationship between goal setting and learning from peers, coaches, and role models.

6.5.1.1 Indicative statements for goal orientated practice

Before the thematic analysis, Table 10 provides some indicative statements that illustrate how each of the sub-themes were supported.

Table 10

Indicative Statements for Goal Orientated Practice

Skill and achievement goals
We've got to do a minimum number of approaches… I go out and I give my wings money. I'm like, "Okay, I got to do this many approaches otherwise I don't get my money back."
I've passed every test I can think of practically that I've wanted to in this field
Before I go out, I actually set specific goals—"You've got to do this tonight." When I come back, I write down what I did, did I meet my goals. And I write down any light bulbs that I had, and the psychological processes that I went through.
I'm always looking to the guys who are doing the very best and I'm always trying to see, "Okay, what are these guys doing that I'm not doing? What can I learn? How can I get better?"
Access to specialised knowledge
I would sit there and take notes on everyone's [dating] seminar, no matter how many times I've heard it… Sometimes you've got to hear it three, four, five, six times before it goes, "That's what it means!"
I had all of these DVDs, ebooks and mp3s [on dating skills]. And, while I am eating my breakfast, I will be watching it. While I am walking in the street, I will be listening, and while I am in the bath, whatever I am doing, I would have it on and before I slept I would be reading.
I mainly got involved with the Community on the LSS forum. I would sometimes go on the search function, write a search term in and then open all of the threads that have a high relevance and just review what was there and integrate it.
But assuming you know how to pick your sources well, there is a wealth of good information.
Peer learning
In order to master this skill, I've needed mentors, I've needed knowledge and I needed experience.
When you see the guy do it [dating initiation] live and you see his eyes light up and you see the girl respond, there's something you can't teach.
Teaching is learning twice… I keep strengthening my own *game* by teaching.
I firmly believe I could not have read anymore or practised anymore, done anything more. I wouldn't have hit that level without the mentorship

6.5.2 Skill and achievement goals

"I always did it [goal setting] month-by-month because when you hammer down one skill at a time, it's all you're focused on."

Analysis revealed that the dating experts' practice was based around goals designed to improve their dating skills. Three main categories of goals were identified: *performance goals*, *process goals,* and *vocational goals*. Performance goals identified the standard to which a specific skill should be achieved (e.g., learn a five routine stack, master the stages of an initiation model, become an engaging story teller, improve voice projection). Process goals identified the strategy or process for improving particular skills (for instance the process goal "approach 10 people each training session," identifies approaching 10 people as the process that is intended to improve the skill of dating initiation). Vocational goals stemmed from performers dating-related career ambitions (e.g., "to become a dating coach," "to be recognised as a dating expert").

6.5.2.1 Performance goals

Research on microtraining suggests that engaging in practice that identifies component skills which are then practiced individually is an effective way to learn social skills (Hargie, 2006). Tennis players practice isolated skills such as volleys, lobs, and smashes; football players practice shooting, passing, and dribbling; dating skills trainers teach clients how to recognise cues, use opening lines and tell engaging stories. Similarly, the performers' training used microtraining, basing performance goals around the component skills they sought to develop.

This was often done by relating skills to the different phases of initiation models, such as Savoy's (2009) The Emotional Progression Model, with its six stages: Opening, Transitioning, Attraction, Qualification, Comfort, and Seduction. Neil, who kept extensive statistical records on the dates he initiated so he could analyse them, would design his goals around different stages of initiation models. As he explained:

> "My goal this month is to work on Comfort." I feel like I get the girls attracted but I lose them when it comes time to make the connection. "My goal for this month is…" I always did it month-by-month because when you hammer down one skill at a time, it's all you're focused on. Like, when you know how to Open and Transition and get into Attraction and build attraction, let's say, you can do all that stuff. Like, once it's in you, it's in you. So my focus would be on touching.

Neil systematically set goals to address specific phases each month. When he had improved

sufficiently at the Opening phase, he would work on Attraction. Once his Attraction game improved, he would concentrate on later stages such as Comfort, Seduction, and *number closing*. He discussed how he used field reports to reflect on progress and target a new goal on "touching" (or in pickup parlance "kino," derived from *kinology* the study of physical movement and touch):

> [When practicing] I always remembered to keep my thoughts in mind because I knew that was what was controlling it. Um, and I'd make [*kino*] the big focus, "Okay, then I touched her like this and when I put my hand on her waist, she pulled back just a little but she kept eye contact. So I know that by keeping that eye contact next time, if she still keeps eye contact, I'll pull her in really close to me and say 'You're bad news'". Okay?

> That I know is good but then I also have a [field] report, say, the next night – "I did it and she didn't keep eye contact and I pulled her in close and she went 'Aaah! What are you doing?'"… And then I'd compare that also too, whenever I learnt a new skill. I'd hop online and be like, "I want to know everything about touching a girl". I'd go to the message board, I'd go to my trusted blogs. I only trusted certain people, certain resources. I went to Love Systems, I went to David D'Angelo, I went to Brad P and I went to Vin Di Carlo. Those are my four guys.

Brian also described how he would target specific aspects of practice such as Opening:

> You just go, "Right, I really want to practice this." You know, kino, for example, or bouncing a girl to a corner of a club for a make-out or home or whatever it may be. You would, you know? And I definitely teach a student to do that, and also, to have goals, "Tonight, I'm just going to practice Opening," because then otherwise, you're putting too much stuff in. But, had a long time to do this whereas now, I can just teach the essence of it or you can do it all in, like, a week or whatever or a couple of months of practice, whereas then, it's not like I thought I was in a rush; I had all the time in the world because I was 19. I did have all the time in the world. So it didn't matter if I didn't follow my plan of just Opening or whatever it may be.

Brian's quote revealed that in his earlier years he was less goal orientated with practice. In part, this was because he began practicing when the Community was relatively new and there was less information on effective practice. It was also because, as a neophyte, he was more casual and carefree. This was very different to how he approached practice in later years. In the intervening years, his dating training became more formalised and focused. Later programs facilitated the learning of core dating skills —or what Brian described as "the essence"—in just months. This ties to the findings in *access to specialised knowledge* and *peer learning,* illustrating that, since its inception, the Community had accumulated a vast body of knowledge on the most effective training methods, increasing the proficiency with which dating skills can be taught. This is a key reason why the performers' practice meets the stringent criteria for

deliberate practice, which requires that performers engage in highly effective training activities.

John described goal setting as "huge from the get go" and provided a detailed list on his performance goals, including rudimentary goals in the early stages to more challenging and detailed goals with "measurable result[s]:"

> At first I set some basic goals like that. I would set approach five girls a night, approach ten girls a night. And then I started setting some more realistic and beneficial goals, because if you set yourself approach ten girls in a night approaching isn't really, that's just showing up for the race. That's not actually running the race. So if you say to yourself, "Okay my goal is to approach ten girls", if you just want to work on approaching then that's fine. Great goal. And I would do that. I would approach and say, "Okay, I approached ten girls." That's one. I asked a girl for the time. That's another… So towards the end my goal was any interaction that I'm in I'm going to go for the number regardless if it's gone well or if it's gone poorly I'm going to ask her for her number because that has a real outcome. Right? And it has a measurable result as well.

> Goal setting has been huge from the get go. I think it's important to have some goals, whether they're specific or whether they're quite fluffy, I don't think it really matters…

> A lot of my goals were very holistic. So goals were like having a conversation with a girl and getting her number. But in saying that it was more about if I was at a club and I saw a girl that I was actually attracted to one of my goals was to never let an opportunity go by. So when opportunity knocks you answer. Or always be closing. Things like that. They are actual goals that benefited me in the long run. So if you see a girl that you like you owe it to yourself to approach her. If you let her go then she could have changed your life. And you could have changed her life. But you would never know because you were in your head. So I do adopt a lot of, like the Mystery Method three second rule where you just go in, hold your breath and just go in. And I think those rules and goals are very, very beneficial. Beneficial because you owe it to yourself. Otherwise there's no point in actually going through this journey if you're not going to challenge yourself, you're not going to stretch your performance.

Damien would initiate sets with routines and the courtship stages written down, with the explicit goal of practicing until he had mastered each individual stage.

> I used to have a piece of A4 paper, and then we'd print it double-sided so then we had, we had A1, A2, A3… What was it? A, C and S, so Attraction, Comfort and Seduction…For all of the three stages [A, C & S] I would have a list of routines to use. And if I got stuck or the conversation stalled, then I would have my routines to refer to.

Gavin designed his practice goals around the advice of a trusted mentor and role model:

His advice was always, "Here's what you need to work on, this specific skill," and I would go and look it up, read on it and go out and practice, and I would experience a jump. So in the beginning, pretty much whenever I overcame plateau's it was due to him pointing out a specific skill that I needed work. I had no clue what the next step was.

While the influence of role models on goal setting is analysed in *peer learning* it is worthy to note here the central part they played in the dating experts' process of identifying which performance based goals to target. Gavin further explained that he used his mentor's advice to pinpoint that he needed to work on qualification, so as to reduce the amount of "flakey" telephone numbers (i.e., phone calls with a low likelihood of being returned); he explained:

I started going around with this guy. First night we went out, I was pumped but it was kind of the same thing. I went around, very good vibe and everything, got attraction from a number of women. I think got one or two make outs, got a bunch of numbers but those numbers would always be flaky. So then he taught me the next step, Qualification - "Here's what you've got to do." After he started giving me those tips I started getting dates and lays. That was probably a couple of months into hanging out with him. Then yeah, it just went from there. He would give me - I'd hone things and he'd say, "Now here's what you need to work on," give me the next piece to get better.

One trend the analysis revealed was that, with experience, performance goals tended to shift from individual component skills to *inner game*. In pickup parlance, inner game refers to the opinion people have of themselves, their self-esteem, attitudes and emotional states that underlie their ability to present themselves effectively. Gavin alluded to the importance of performance based goals targeting inner game when commenting on how he set goals each night:

Before I go out, I actually set specific goals—"You've got to do this tonight." When I come back, I write down what I did, did I meet my goals. And I write down any light bulbs that I had, and the psychological processes that I went through.On nights that don't go well, I write down maybe, "What were you thinking about? What were my psychological mindsets? Why were you in a rut?" It always comes down to internal dialogue. So by writing it down, it becomes real and you see that it doesn't make any sense and vice versa. I'll go out and I'll go, "Okay, here's what you're going to focus on. You're going to focus on having a good time, talking to everybody. You're the shit, everybody wants to meet you. Let's go, let's have fun." When I come back, things that work I'll write down—"This worked really well. You did this and it worked really well. You did that, it didn't work so well." But as I became better and better, it became much more about internal

dialogue than outward techniques because when the internal dialogue is right and when I feel right, I naturally do the right thing outwardly and vice versa. If I'm not feeling pumped, if I'm tired or out of it then nothing happens, but I know that I'm not pushing it.

6.5.2.2 Process goals

Process goals, which are classed as goals that relate to the strategy adopted to improve particular skills, influenced the amount and type of training the dating experts completed. Common process goals included the number of hours/days to practice and the number of sets to complete each session. *Repetitive practice* highlighted a number of the most common process goals, such as performers setting a minimum number of approaches to complete each session. Neil explained he was almost "embarrassed" by how detailed he was with his goal setting:

I mean, God, it's almost embarrassing, Morgan, but being a hockey player, I kept statistics of how far my progression was. You know, I had this magic number in my head. When I took my programme, I approached six girls each night and after that, that kind of became my standard. For me, that's low. Oh, sorry, sorry, for a pickup guy, that's [six approaches] low. A beginning student could run through 10 to 30 approaches in a night and some nights I do.

… Okay, so seeing the instructors, knowing that doing 2,000 approaches doesn't count. I calculated how many approaches I need to do. I got it down to a science. My first year, at about the six month mark or eight month mark, I figured out 1 in every 37 girls that I approached that would respond that I would go, "Hey, what's your name?" they'd say, "Hi, I'm Jill". For every 1 of the 37, I would end up—37.5 actually—I'd end up sleeping with them. That is a skewed number, though, nowadays… But I definitely took that kind of statistical approach. When it came to setting goals, again it was, "I need to do this many approaches this night."

Neil was so thorough with his dating analysis that he described getting practice "down to a science". Stephen shared that he was not quite as "religious" as some of his peers in terms of the number of approaches he would complete during each session, based on the logic that if he met a woman where mutual attraction was high, they might spend hours together. Nonetheless, he was still very committed to the process of setting aside specific goals in terms of setting aside time for practice:

And so it's, it's three nights a week and you go and try and do that…I mean some people say, "I'm going to do ten, twenty approaches every night and they do it almost religiously." I never took that approach, because I thought if one goes well I'm not going to just sack it off just to make up my other nineteen! That made no sense. But the promise I made to myself at the start is that I'd go out three nights a week and be proactive. Very proactive. I'd meet women and master, at least to some extent, how this works.

The performers used various approaches to motivate themselves to adhere to process goals. Gavin relied on an expensive tactic to incentivise himself:

Now when I'm in field, we have systems, me and my regular wings, where we push each other. We've got to do a minimum number of approaches, it's got to be the hottest girls, it's got to be the hardest situations… I go out and I give my wings money. I'm like, "Okay, I got to do this many approaches otherwise I don't get my money back."

Incentivising was necessary because, as revealed in *challenging practice*, training was arduous. While process goals provide motivating targets, they could also have disadvantages and were sometimes viewed as unhealthy. Performers could become "outcome orientated," focusing on the end-result rather than the process. For instance, goals relating to a specific number of sexual partners were effectively formed as process goals, because the performers tended to use such targets to drive them to practice particular skills. For instance, they would need to become highly proficient at the *seduction phase* of The Emotional Progression Model (Savoy, 2007) and would need to be effective at making an emotional connection and "closing." However, performers such as Gavin, described this type of process goal as an unhealthy one:

I've done all of those [goal setting] but now I know that some of those are healthy and some of those are not. I did have a year where I was like, "I'm going to sleep with these many women." I actually didn't meet it, I came very close, but it's not a healthy goal because you're focused on the outcome. It's not the best way to operate. It takes the fun away from it and it doesn't - you should be focusing on the process. Doing the right action will lead to the right outcome, so focusing on the right action is the way to learn any skill.

Gavin's statement "focusing on the right action is the way to learn any skill" shows a deep appreciation of the goal orientated approach seen in deliberate practice, where people learn by repeatedly practicing specific skills designed to facilitated the development of particular capabilities.

6.5.2.3 Vocational goals

Vocational goals refer to performers' dating-related career ambitions, such as to become a dating coach or a renowned figure in the Community. These ambitions proved highly motivating medium-to-long term goals, which could only be realised through committed practice and time spent in the Community. For instance, to be considered a "dating guru," performers would need a legion of followers who revered them, which would be unlikely unless they repetitively proved themselves as highly knowledgeable and skilled in the intricacies of dating.

Vocational goals could result in dating experts pitting themselves against one another. Dating is an inherently competitive and tactical process where men compete with women (*intersexual competition*) and

men (*intrasexual competition*) (Buss, 1988). Within the Community, there is a significant amount of competition. Brian described his drive to be the best:

> Obviously you want to be the best at what you're doing. You want to be the best PUA. So when out you try and find a hot girl first and go in, you know? To demonstrate just how good you really are.

Performers would reflect on more experienced peers' achievements to design and assess their own goals. Neil discussed how he designed the amount of training he should do, and based his aspirations around other dating instructors rather than less experienced friends. Discussing what motivated him, Neil replied that he was "trying to catch up to the very best guys in the world":

> [My motivation is] definitely internal because I'm already doing better than any of my friends in the dating department, although you could argue that now my standards are *Love Systems* instructors. That's who I compare myself to. There's always instructors that are not doing as well and instructors that are doing better, and I'm always trying to match; trying to catch up to the very best guys in the world. So yeah, I would say that's definitely part of it, is I'm always looking to the guys who are doing the very best and I'm always trying to see, "Okay, what are these guys doing that I'm not doing? What can I learn? How can I get better?" That's definitely part of it.

> What I'd use as a gauge was I'd look at the guys who were teaching this stuff and were considered experts at the time and I kind of saw what their timeline for success was and I backwards worked it; "Okay, to get at that level, this is what I need to do." And I pretty much hit it. I said three years is when I would be a *Master*. I wanted to be dating the girls earlier. My initial goal as a student was a year but I realised quickly that it would take more and I hit it perfectly, pretty much.

Comparison enabled performers to conceive "what was possible." For instance, if another performer could approach a large set of women, strike up a conversation with the most attractive women in the bar, and then leave with her on his arm, why should they not be able to? If they believed that dating initiation was a skill that could be developed through practice, then there was no reason to feel it was beyond their reality—a topic discussed further in the next theme *practice mindset*.

Gavin put himself under the spotlight by setting the goal of showing video footage to other dating instructors of his initiations in the field:

> This year, one of the things I did to challenge myself was I committed to showing in field footage at this big meeting we have annually. I know in a couple of months I'm going to have to stand up on a stage and show video of me talking to a girl with the audio and the subtitles to a

room of 200 guys and all the best instructors in the world, so that puts a lot of fire under my arse to really go out and really hone my skills because I can't be half-baked.

For Ruben, practice was *not* about becoming the "best" dating expert in the world but, nonetheless, knowing performers who were better than him made him more focused and driven to improve:

> I don't think, "I must be the best in the world," but it's just an internal thing of when I see somebody doing better in a certain field, if it's a field I'm interested in I just pay attention to what he's doing and try to see if I can learn different pieces from him. It's not so much to show them, I don't care about that. I don't really brag or anything. There's a lot of situations where I did things that were impressive but I didn't even tell anybody. I'm pretty humble when it comes to that. I don't really care about people thinking I'm amazing. It's very internally driven. I need to know that I'm doing well and I need to know that I'm pushing to be better. It's just interesting to me to see somebody who is doing better in a specific arena and pick up the skills and feel that improvement… So yeah, showing other guys is very low on the list. It's almost not on the list. I don't really care, to be honest, if other guys think I'm Mack Daddy or they think I'm a virgin. I don't really care.

Similarly, Stephen endeavoured not to consider himself in direct competition with other performers, explaining, "I just wanted to go on and achieve what I wanted. There is no 'best.' So it depends on what your goal is? I mean, it really depends on what your goal is."

Out of the 15 performers, 14 had been dating coaches and many had established financially lucrative careers. Recruitment in large dating companies was highly competitive and many of the performers explicitly targeted the goal of becoming a coach in a renowned company. To succeed in getting recruited, performers needed to stand out. Not only did they need an aptitude to teach, they needed to be able to come across as authorities in their field, highly skilled at the nuances of dating. Neil explained how he worked his "butt off to get named top instructor."

> So I went to our conference that fall and I worked my butt off to get named the top instructor, which a lot of the guys in my company were shocked by and they ended up making me what's called the leader, the master; you know, definitely one of the best in the world… With coaching, I did do that over the year that I was really working hard. I was like, "I want to make instructor this year. Here's what I'm going to do, I'm going to help out at all these—fly all over the world to help out," and I did that. I did accomplish that. In terms of long term, I don't really have long term goals. I just want to become better and better all the time and I know where I am and yeah, there's no really palpable long term goal other than just getting better every day.

Not all of the dating experts began their practice with a clear aspiration to become a dating coach. For instance, Connor "said no to coaching for a long time". Being an early member of the Melbourne Community, when he started practicing coaching others in dating skills was still novel. Due to his success initiating dates, people began asking him for lessons; as he explained:

> It got to the point where more and more guys were sort of saying, "Take me out. Take me out. Just help me. Just give me some tips." Basically at about the same time one of those guys said, "You really need to be charging for this."

So one day he logged onto the Melbourne pickup forum and wrote "'Hey. You guys are always asking. The next person that asks I'll take out someone for five hours for $100.' And I'd say probably within two weeks that filled up for the year. I was like, s**t. There goes my life for the next year!'"

In becoming dating coaches, the 14 participants became more goal orientated and committed to practice. A beneficial consequence of coaching other men was that it also facilitated improvement in the performers' own dating skills, a finding discussed in *peer learning*.

The three types of skill and achievement goals the participants designed were not constructed in a vacuum. Their goals were designed with references to the specialised knowledge within the Community. The two remaining sub-themes of *goal orientated practice* turn to examine these aspects of performers' practice.

6.5.3 Access to specialised knowledge

"I had all of these DVDs, ebooks and mp3s [on dating skills]. And, while I am eating my breakfast, I will be watching it. While I am walking in the street, I will be listening, and while I am in the bath, whatever I am doing, I would have it on."

In fields of expertise, accumulated knowledge facilitates the identification of training activities. As Ericsson et al. (1993) state:

> In all major domains there has been a steady accumulation of knowledge about the best methods to attain a high level of performance and the associated practice activities leading to this performance. Full-time teachers and coaches are available for hire and supervise the personalised training of individuals at different levels of performance starting with beginners. Throughout development toward expert performance, the teachers and coaches instruct the individuals to engage in practice activities that maximise improvement (p. 368)

The Community operates as a *community of practice*, which is a group of people who share a craft, share knowledge, and insights that facilitate wider skill development (Lave, 1991). Since the 1980's the

Community has accumulated a vast repository of dating related knowledge, providing performers with boundless opportunity to research and practice skills. The Community embodies a vast range of specialised resources in the form of dating material (DVD's, books etc.), Community networks (forums with millions of posts, coaches, peers, events, training seminars), and access to non pickup material related to dating (e.g., academic literature on dating psychology). The performers revelled in the spirit of shared knowledge and learning fostered by the Community; as Damien remarked:

> I loved that sense of it [practising dating skills] in the beginning; the Community, people coming together and practising and learning and sharing, sharing knowledge.

The performers consumed Community resources voraciously. As Ruben conveyed, when he explained the beginning of his journey:

> So I just started looking for information [on dating skills] and found these things—these books, these TV shows and stuff. It just never stopped.

Ruben submerged himself into the world of dating, consuming as much information as he feasibly could to educate himself on the nuances of dating; something that he had longed to improve from as early as his teenage years. Similarly, Neil explained how development involved "constant study":

> It was pretty fascinating. When I found the first [Community] book, the TV show and everything, it was just a big surprise that there were people being analytical about this kind of thing and describing and coming up with a system. It was a little overwhelming but fascinating. I dove deep. I was like, "I need to know all about this stuff."

> I bought one book. 2008, I took my program, read a few more books and then it was constant study. I'd read a book every couple weeks, I'd watch a DVD set that I found online; something like that. Fast forward to the end of the school year in 2009, so May 2009, after taking my programme obviously in 2008, I moved to a city specifically so I could do pickup.

That one purchase in 2008, a book called *The Game* by Neil Strauss (2005), prompted Neil to delve deeper into the intricacies of dating. Encouraged by the dating insights they discovered when immersing themselves in the Community, the performers sought out more information.

When the performers sought insights and specialised knowledge that were not addressed within the Community, they looked to alternative sources. This included the biographies of infamous seducers (e.g., Byron or Casanova) or academic research on evolutionary psychology and human sexuality. Stephen, a voracious consumer of dating material, described some resources that he relied on during his developmental journey:

I would say that a lot of the resources that I looked at after joining the Community weren't resources from the Community. They were resources that the Community had kind of sign posted me towards. So I read stuff like *The History of my Life* by Casanova and material that's not a Community resource, but it's probably something I wouldn't have considered if I hadn't been involved in the Community. A lot of the sex books, and a lot of psychology, evolutionary psychology, and confidence, self-help type books I read aren't community produced. They've be really valuable in terms of increasing my understanding about dating.

Not all sources were equally valued. Stephen, provided a caveat, explaining the need to "pick your sources well":

But assuming you know how to pick your sources well, there is a wealth of good information… and I drew on that in the early days to kind of get an understanding of what women find attractive and ways the man can behave in different dating situations. So the information side of it was very valuable.

As well as providing concrete knowledge on specific training techniques, Community knowledge also helped performers to appreciate "what was possible," in terms of dating skill development. *The Game* (2005), which nearly all the dating experts had read, was considered by many to be highly inspiring. As Ruben conveyed, when he discussed how the author, Neil Strauss, had gone from a self-proclaimed "loser" with women to being highly skilled:

The main thing is the knowledge. How do you find out that if it's even possible? So one of the things that it gave me was motivation and belief, because if I didn't know about losers like Neil Strauss who were able to get girls, why would I believe I would ever be able to? I was able to look at some of these guys and say, if they can do it, I think I can do it.

The dating experts' acquired knowledge informed their goal setting process, enabling them to set goals based on their diagnosis of what skills required improvement. Ruben explained how he went online to find methods for improving his skills:

I watched this one video on the internet from one of the guys who actually I work with now, and I just did everything, just a copy of what he did in the video, and it worked [clicks fingers]. It just worked so instantly and I was like "I have to do this". So, um, I'll just tell you the rest of the story.

I would seek out new tools for specific area where I had a weakness I would read books and or

watch things and write down a bunch of notes and then have those things to try next time I went out.

Appropriating the term cultural capital from Bourdieu (1986), it can be posited that the Community acted as a form of what I term in this thesis *dating capital;* where dating capital is defined as the accumulation of knowledge, behaviours, skills and social assets that performers can draw on to demonstrate their dating competence and status in the dating market. Without such dating capital, the analysis suggests performers would not have become experts, as they would have been unable to identify the most effective training methods. As the Community fosters a culture of practice, members were encouraged to share their insights on thousands of activities and routines, providing unparalleled access to dating skills advice from which to design training goals.

Stephen described how he would use the LSS forum, which can be viewed as part of the *dating capital apparatus*, to find solutions. As Stephen explained, when he had a dating related problem, there was no need to post a new question on the forum "because all the questions have been asked before." He would simply login to the forum and search for responses to past queries on the matter. John viewed forums and access to peer advice as an unparalleled resource that provided an "arsenal of knowledge":

> Having a collaborative platform such as a forum or a message board on the internet gives you access to information instantly, which is what you would never have 20 years ago. So nowadays you can just post a question and within seconds you'll get an answer. How should I ask a girl out for dinner? Or a girl said this to me, what does it mean? In the past you would have probably had to do it yourself and risk blowing it out whereas nowadays you can ask a question and you can get 10, 15 people's opinion on something and then go into that situation with an arsenal of knowledge. So it does give you a one up. It gives you a slight advantage.

As well as providing practice insights, access to information also motivated performers and enabled them to meet up and join forces with other men engaged in dating practice. When Charles first started practicing, the Community was in its infancy. Like him, very few of the members were dating experts; but, with time, some of his early peers went on to become some of the most renowned figures in the Community. As he described:

> The website that I found was an online message board and there's all these guys using sort of pseudonyms to describe, you know, what they were doing and what was working and stuff like that. And you could tell a lot of them were bullshit but some of the guys that I would read on these forums and pay attention to were guys who went by the nicknames of Mystery and Style and Tyler Durden and these were the fellas who wound up being written about in Neil Strauss' book The Game. And so I started reading these guys' posts online and then I wound up, because a lot of the stuff was centred in Toronto at the time, meeting Mystery and Tyler Durden were

living in the Toronto area. And so I met up with those guys and I started going out with them back in 2003.

Mystery and Tyler Durden went on to be recognised as "gurus" and contributed vast swathes of dating material (books, DVD's, training programs, audio courses etc.) which Community members consumed voraciously. The next section discusses in more detail the role that peers, role models and coaches such as Mystery and Tyler Durden, played in performers' goal orientated training.

6.5.4 Peer learning

"In order to master this skill, I've needed mentors, I've needed knowledge and I needed experience"

In domains where deliberate practice has been studied, advice from peers, mentors and coaches facilitates the learning process. As members of a community of practice, performers had unrivalled access to informed peers, coaches, and mentors, which facilitated goal orientated practice in three ways. First, it facilitated guided learning. Second, it provided the performers with role models and sophisticated dating mental representations. Third, it enabled the performers to develop their own dating skills through the process of teaching and instructing others. As one of the performers described, teaching supported development by enabling them to *learn twice*. This section analyses each of these types of goal orientated practice in turn.

6.5.4.1 Guided learning

Coaches, mentors and peers facilitated guided learning in a variety of ways. Coaching programs were available as group sessions, one-on-one training, intensive army style "bootcamps," and remote coaching over Skype. The most renowned coaches were revered, with Brian, himself an eminent figure in the Community, describing them as "demi-godlike." All performers described guided learning as having an important role in their development, as Damien explained:

So in order to master this skill, I've needed mentors, I've needed knowledge and I needed experience. So you can kind of go out and gain experience on your own and go and fumble around a lot. But sometimes you can't see the picture when you're in the frame so it's very difficult to go, "I'm f****ing up here, here, here and here". So having a mentor to go, "Look, dude, you're doing this, this, this and this wrong"; that again is a massive spike.

Having the benefit of coaching and/or acting as dating coaches led the performers' practice to be more efficient and goal orientated. Gavin explained how following the advice of his mentor *bumped his skill*:

He [the mentor] explained to me - I mean, I'm a pretty quick learner. All my life has been sitting in a classroom and learning so you only have to tell me something once. If it makes sense, I'll implement it right away. It was actually him who told me, "Okay, what you need to do is qualify. He'd give me a five minute rundown. He told me, "Choose five skills that you want in a woman and then screen her for that." I tried that and then I read something about Qualification, one post or something, and just started doing it right off the bat. Pretty much that night I had results. I had a girl hooked and I started doing Qualification and I now know it was pretty clunky back then but the difference was obvious. She was more interested, she was intrigued that I was doing that. The number was solid and we went out on a date and ended up sleeping together several times. Once somebody tells you exactly what it is that you need to work on, it's actually pretty fast. You bump the skill pretty fast.

Damien was a lauded coach for a leading dating company *Love Systems*. Clients paid $3,000 for his weekend dating training bootcamps, where he delivered classroom-based lessons and in-field training. Damien viewed bootcamps as an investment which provided clients with "a massive spike" in development.

The majority of the performers had, at some point, paid for coaching. John paid A$3,500 for a bootcamp:

I did do a boot camp in 2009 I believe, I believe late 2009. And that cost a few thousand dollars. It was $3,500 Australian dollars. And that taught me quite a lot. And that experience I'll always keep, I'll always use.

He further explained:

Prior to going to boot camp, I didn't have a really solid understanding of what I needed to do in order to meet girls and form relationships with these girls. I had say like a 50% idea of what was going on. The boot camp solidified a lot of things that I'd been questionable about. And the boot camp showed me a few things and a few other techniques that I hadn't really understood. And mostly around escalations and physical escalation and how to touch girls, not sexually touch but how and when to touch girls, the right way to put your arm around her, when to put your arm around her, how to put your arm around her without freaking her. So overt versus incidental escalation. And basic principles like isolation and escalation. So up to this point I knew that it was a good idea to isolate a girl from the group in order to have a better connection or a better quality connection with her. But the boot camp really drilled it in for me that isolation is actually a key component for any seduction because in order to really connect with someone, if you're doing that in front of her friends and peer groups she will feel not comfortable. She will feel very

uncomfortable unless she's a certain type of girl. So I always find that now that I've learned that, and just some very simple things that at the time you go, "Oh, of course. I should have known this." It just reiterated a lot of things.

Neil also gave a run down of his first bootcamp for which he paid $3,000:

I guess you want me to describe how bootcamp works? We come into this hotel and there's a conference room. We're all kind of looking around, nervous, what to expect. Instructor walks in, I was in a little bit of awe. We sit down. This is two in the afternoon. We do five hours of seminar. We went through everything from female psychology, evolutionary theory, you know, kind of like why men and women interact the way they do. So that was enlightening. Then we went through the mechanics – this is how you're going to go up to a girl, this is how you deliver it. We practised it. We practised it so when you go out to the bar that night, you're not scared or lost or whatever.

… The second day, you learn about deeper in the interaction, getting a phone number and then you go out again. The third day, you learn kind of like what happens after a phone number kind of thing. Um, so yeah, I mean, that was the process we were learning.

Neil reflected that while some questioned the value of bootcamps, he was a "devout believer":

Some guys have been practising this and they are psyched. They know it's going to work. Other guys are sceptical; "Really? I'm going to pay $3,000 and you're going to tell me how to pick up a girl? Seriously?" Um, so it depends where you come from. For me, I was a devout believer. I went to that programme almost more so just to validate what I was learning and that I was on the right path. And when I went everything…I'm not going to say everything, that's a big generalisation. The core stuff that I needed to know from that programme…what it did was it told me I was interpreting it the right way through reading the books; that it would work.

Despite the availability of paid coaching, the vast majority of practice and guidance the performers relied on was free or involved a relatively modest outlay. This included peer learning, learning via online forums, or purchasing books, training manuals, or DVD coaching programs (which could cost hundreds of pounds).

Except for Stephen, all performers had at one time been coaches. They spent years in the company of top dating coaches, attending other coaches' training sessions as a perk or for a reduced fee. In the process, performers picked up "pearls of wisdom" and learnt by "osmosis." As Neil described, listing a number of coaches who had helped to nurture him:

Um, so Damien helped nurture me along and I did that because I knew he would help me get evaluated and meanwhile, James, and this is the key part, he kept inviting me back on these programmes. So by virtue of hanging out with him, having weekly contact with David and Mr M, um, and those guys, it was an environment where I'd get…some pearls of wisdom from them directly but more so, hanging out with those guys raised me to another level and I knew that. I knew that. So definitely it was like an osmosis learning.

John described why *osmosis learning*, being submerged in an environment of learning with role models and peers, was "fundamental" to improvement:

And even being around people that are better than you at pickup or dating or whatever and naturally if you're surrounding yourself with people that are better than you then naturally you will step up. There's a saying in chess that says, "You will only ever get better by playing a better opponent." And if you surround yourself with people that are better than you then you will get better. If you do surround yourself with people that are less than you you won't be challenged or pushed and you can apply that same to anything you want to get better at, like playing guitar. If I practice guitar with someone that was less of a guitar player than I am chances are I wouldn't learn a lot. Surrounding yourself with people that are also on the same journey, it's fundamental. But also in saying that other things that were important in learning were, you know the internet for starters. A collaborative platform that people can trade information and knowledge constantly. And that's something that never had before, prior to the internet of course. And all this knowledge that's available at people's fingertips is paramount. You couldn't do it [develop dating skills] without having this knowledge.

For John, without the opportunity to learn from other experienced peers it would have been impossible to develop the requisite knowledge and skill to become a dating expert. Charles reflected on the importance of having access to peers and role models for someone like him, who, in his formative years "didn't hang out with the cool kids and the guys who were good with girls." When younger, he had *not* been a "jock," he did not play on the sports team. Like him, his male friends where shy and anxious around women:

And so maybe if you grow up in those environments then…you have those kinds of resources. But for a guy who doesn't have a father, um, who doesn't have a lot of good male friends and good male, you know, near role models to look up to, um, finding a bunch of guys who are ambitious and into self-improvement and were going out and having fun and doing stuff that was kind of cool, that was a resource that, um, wasn't available anywhere else.

Damien found that being around various top dating coaches had an important influence on his

developmental journey:

> I'd say in terms of, like, structure of seminars and professionalism; Sheriff. Hands down was probably the most professional, and it was a quality product. He knew his stuff, he was very structured. and then Mr M also was professional but he was really diving into the guy and finding out what's going on, you know what I mean? What is tripping this person up? Being able to do micro level fine tuning. So I learnt that from him.

Different coaches imparted unique insights into various aspects of dating. Neil conveyed just how valuable mentorship had been for him: "I really, firmly believe I could not have read anymore or practised anymore, done anything more. I wouldn't have hit that level without the mentorship.**"** Ruben, who was an advocate of coaching, provided a caveat:

> So the kind of caveat to this [dating skills development] is that you have to be very smart in picking your teachers and peers; On the teacher/peer side, the Community enabled me to find some people who I learned a lot from.

Brian, was also circumspect about coaches, but believed that by being diligent, people could find coaches with the experience to accelerate their development:

> That [the benefits of having a coach] for me goes without saying because you're just going to get all that worldly experience really quickly; but you need to pick your coach carefully, obviously, because anyone can call themselves a coach. But I suppose this is a really good way of doing it; if they've got over 10,000 hours, they have to be good. And also then you can look at reviews, I suppose, to see what they're like. But, coaching, but total immersion coaching, is really important.

6.5.4.2 *Role models and mental representations*

Since Bandura's seminal research on *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977), psychologists have been aware of how modelling and observing other people plays an important developmental role. Before joining the Community, all performers had struggled with dating initiation. As *challenging practice* revealed, dating initiation provoked tremendous anxiety and fear. However, through years of practice, all performers overcame the debilitating aspects of approaching; and the processes of watching and modelling experienced peers was crucial in this regard.

Watching role models demonstrating initiation helped performers to contextualise approach anxiety and to learn the subtleties of managing dating interactions. This finding is concordant with clinical social and dating skills training, where clinicians are advised to enable trainees to watch "socially competent peers" of a similar age and background interacting to provide "models of desirable target behaviours" (Spence, 2003, p.93). In this light, Ruben described why watching role models they could

"copy" was so important:

> Simply if you meet someone that has already gone through the process [of becoming proficient at dating] or never needed to go through the process and if you have the ability to kind of watch someone and see what they do and copy it, then your learning is going to greatly accelerated versus being in a peer group of people of, uh, um, at your level…So I am a big believer of putting yourself with people that are much better than you regardless of the field and kind of swallowing your pride. In the end you'll come out better and you'll achieve success a lot faster.

Practicing with more skilled peers accelerated the performers' learning and provided an invaluable insight into the overall process of skills development. Stephen found it advantageous to see other performers break through the "glass ceiling" and demonstrate how they could transform their skills:

> Then in terms of role models, I think a few of the people I met showed me what was possible beyond my current world view of what was possible. As I got involved in the Community and was studying, I met one or two people and I was like, "Oh, alright there's this or that could happen." It showed me a level of effectiveness with women I could reach. A level above the current glass ceiling I imagined. So that definitely influenced me…That's what comes to mind.

Damien explained how access to role models helped approach anxiety:

> Let's say for approach anxiety, for example. Knowing that some of my closest friends now but the guys who I really looked up to in this field, knowing that they had equal if not more anxiety than me is like, "Oh, so I'm not weird."

Neil "analysed" renowned instructors and used them as models for benchmarking his own progression. Because it had taken Cajun (an instructor at *Love Systems*) three years to become a *Master Instructor*, Neil set his own goal of becoming a *Master Instructor* within three years. In terms of the type of practice that was most important to dating skills development, Neil described modelling as second to dating initiation practice:

> Neil: Oh, modelling! Modelling would definitely be up there. I would put modelling as number two.
> Interviewer: And so you could model through the books, through DVDs and…?
> Neil: No, no; modelling in person! When you see the guy do it live and you see his eyes light up and you see the girl respond, there's something you can't teach.

While Neil and many of the performers were inspired by "famous" characters in the Community,

such as author of *The Game*, Neil Strauss, Neil's emphatic statement "No, no; modelling in person!," emphasises just how beneficial it was to be immersed in a community of practice where you could meet role models in the flesh and see their "eyes light up."

6.5.4.3 Coaching others

As well as obtaining guidance from peers and coaches, the analysis revealed that the act of coaching others appeared to contribute significantly to the development of the participants' *own* dating skills. All the performers had coached or trained others, 13 in paid capacity. While being an expert dating coach is very different to being an expert at dating initiation, the research suggests that by instructing others, performers significantly improved their own dating skills.

Research on expertise concerning declarative knowledge, the conscious knowledge that something is the case, and procedural knowledge, the conscious or unconscious knowledge of how to do something (Gobet, 2016) can be used to hypothesise why being a coach develops dating skills. With skills development, conscious declarative models get replaced by unconscious heuristics and intuitive schemas that facilitate procedural action. The analysis revealed that on becoming coaches, performers had to "re-learn" dating rules and systems that they once held declaratively but had become unconscious. This had the effect of "learning twice." When coaching, performers were constantly honing their dating initiation skills. They were under pressure to perform and had to continuously demonstrate their procedural expertise at dating initiation for onlooking students. The excerpts below reveal how this hypothesis is grounded in the data.

When asked whether coaching helped improve his dating initiation skills, Gavin's reply revealed a nuanced appreciation of why it was important for him to possess a declarative appreciation of his skill and how it influenced his own dating ability:

> Yes, absolutely. It's like both—coaching, you have to hone your *game* because sometimes if you don't coach at all, things are kind of loose. When you coach you have to really focus. You have to explain things very clearly so by doing that, you understand it better because you go through stuff that you're doing kind of naturally. You go, "Why does this work? It's because A, B, C and D." So I started to understand it even better, when you have to explain it to someone else.

> Also, by seeing the students' perspectives you understand stuff better and by seeing them go through things that you've gone through before, also teaches you - as they say, teaching is learning twice. You basically go through the same experience again. It becomes more and more solid and you're constantly reminded of the basics. Also, some students are really smart and some students are really naturally good at some things, so I just pick up specific skills or specific vibes that they already have developed. I keep strengthening my own Game by teaching.

> Neil also discussed how teaching helped his own progression:

When I started teaching, my learning was actually through helping students because it forced me again to kind of break down and really understand the principles through and through… I'd say, "You know, if you want to kiss a girl, do this, that and the other…" The student would write up, "I did this, this and that. Why isn't the kiss working?" And I'd have to explain that to them, and that forced me to dig a little deeper into mastery. It wasn't just recitation at that point.

The performers' ability to diagnose problems from students' descriptions is evocative of research on expertise which shows skilled medical doctors are able to rapidly review clinical data, assimilate the facts and pinpoint exact diagnosis. This ability to identify the solution for complex medical problems requires complex mental representations of past experience, the individual case and possible diagnosis (Patel, Kaufman & Kannampallil, 2013). Dating coaches ran through a similar process with hundreds of students, with the findings suggesting this could underlie the development of more sophisticated dating mental representations.

During one-on-one sessions, on forum advice channels, in bootcamps and seminars, coaches would reflect on students' issues, diagnose problems, and identify solutions. Damien explained that it was necessary to be "sharp" in such situations: "I was the one leading the seminars and so I had to be as sharp as possible on the [dating] concepts, on how to apply the concepts, on how to figure out where a guy is stuck and to move him forward from that point." Damien described that they had to "demo" and that teaching was about application; helping them to develop:

Because it [coaching] has to always be application. Because you can become an excellent teacher and you can't apply it, whereas we don't have that luxury in our business because we have to demo.

See, the thing about our industry is that it's so practical, it's so practical that if someone goes through it and they are dedicated, the growth is enormous because it's not just theories or some little exercises. You're out in the trenches, man. Like, you're out there in front of real women doing it in real time, you know what I mean? It's not theoretical, it's not just classroom exercises.

Coaching exerted significant responsibility and pressure on instructors. Students—some of whom were in a state of dejection with their lack of dating ability—had paid a sizeable amount for coaching. Instructors were keen to help and had reputations to preserve. During coaching, instructors felt they had to be on their "A-game," leading by example, and demonstrating how initiating dates "should" be done. As Gavin explained:

Finally, being a coach is a big responsibility so I can't slack off. I can't stop going out and approaching because then I'll suck. By saying yes to teaching and by asking guys to pay a large

amount of money for me to teach them, I have to deliver. I know that I have to be on my A-game otherwise I can't do this job.

Mirroring Gavin's view on the benefits of coaching, Neil explained how teaching others told "your brain that you know something," and also created pressure where their approaches "better work, most of the time!"

Teaching other guys always feels good because you're giving back but also, it tells your brain that you do know something. Um, and I have to prove it. When you're teaching, you have to go give these demonstrations and they better work, most of the time!

Performers also found coaching emotionally rewarding; identifying and assisting students with dating struggles they had once experienced. Neil described:

So yeah, the pain is very real because realise there's guys that [have struggled with dating]… This [learning how to initiate dates] changes their life that dramatically. I get guys who say, you know, "This is better than me going to Harvard." I get guys who say, "Thank you so much. I never thought [I could improve]." You get a guy in a wheelchair who gets a phone number and that guy thought his life was over. He thought he'd never be able to date a girl again, or a guy with one arm. We had an instructor with one arm…

6.5.5 Goal orientated practice: Summary

Deliberate practice targets specific skills required for improvement (Ericsson et al., 1993). Goal setting was an essential element of all of the performers' practice. This is reflected by the large amount of coding for *goal orientated practice*, with 375 meaning units. *Skill and achievement goals* consisted of three categories of goals. Performance goals targeted areas of improvement; process goals identified strategies for improvement; and vocational goals provided motivation. These three types of goals helped motivate performers and guide their development, focusing on carefully identified skills that needed improving. As one participant described: "I always did it [goal setting] month-by-month because when you hammer down one skill at a time, it's all you're focused on."

The performers' goals shifted significantly as they progressed. In their early years, the findings suggested they focused on building declarative knowledge, for instance by reading books and memorising particular routines and stacks. In later years, they shifted to procedural knowledge and developing the know-how to execute skills fluidly, rapidly and intuitively. As they developed, there was a general shift in the performers' practice, from quantity to quality. Whereas in their early to middle years, performers typically emphasised large amounts of approaching to build outer game, in later years they focused on quality interactions and the internal aspects of game, such as confidence.

Access to resources and specialist knowledge is a key constraint to expertise (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson et al., 1993). While inability to formulate new methods of learning has sometimes been constructed as evidence of cognitive and perceptual deficits, in reality, without access to suitable resources, people may struggle to find the most efficient methods of learning (Ericsson et al., 1993). In this regard, the Community served as a community of practice, providing performers with what was termed dating capital—providing a vast body of knowledge in the form of DVDs, ebooks, audiobooks, lectures, and forums which were easily accessed via the internet.

Peers, mentors, and coaches were central to how performers designed practice, as one described, "I wouldn't have hit that level [expert] without the mentorship." Peers helped performers to identify the most efficient forms of practice either through direct instruction or by indirectly providing models to learn by "osmosis." The importance of modelling is consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and interpersonal skills training (Segrin & Givertz, 2003) which both rely on modelling to help people to develop complex skills.

While the act of being coached is typically linked to skill improvement in deliberate practice research, an interesting finding revealed the act of coaching others also accelerated the instructors own development. This finding is consistent with the *protégé effect* (Chase, Chin, Oppezzo, & Swartz, 2009), the psychological phenomenon where teaching helps a person learn that very skill. The data suggests two ways coaching helped. First, it creates "positive" performance pressure, whereby performers had to repetitively demonstrate their procedural skills during each initiation. This incentivised them to focus on each set and give a performance worthy of a leading coach, all while managing the extra pressure of scrutiny from students who expected (and had paid) to see an expert in action. Second, teaching was described as "learning twice." Performers had to possess a sophisticated declarative understanding of dating so they could communicate with students. The process of coaching crystallised the performers' dating-related knowledge and improved their conceptualisations of dating; a process which arguably helps to embed new mental representations.

6.6 Thematic Analysis for Practice Mindset

"I believe I can control my destiny to a great extent. If you have something, a talent, are you just born into it? It's not the case! It's not the case."

6.6.1 Introduction and overview
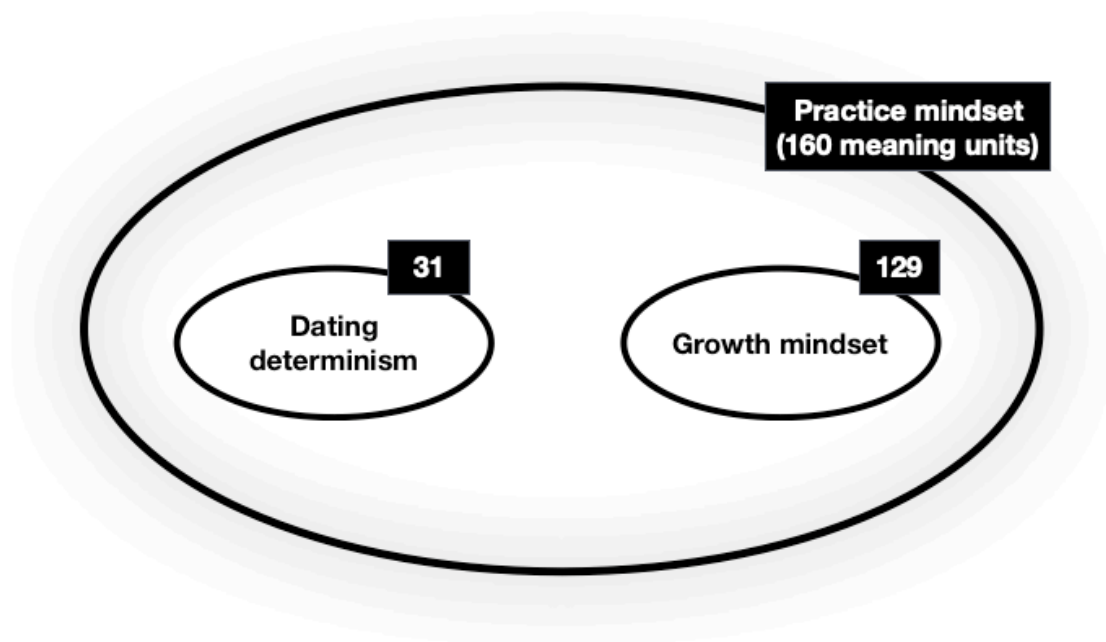
Figure 20. *Practice mindset and sub-themes.* The fifth level-2 theme, *practice mindset*, is described as a "satellite theme" as, unlike the other four level-2 themes, it does not capture data relating to a particular variety of practice; rather it captures data regarding how the performers' mindsets influenced their motivation to practice. *Dating determinism* recorded instances where the performers constructed dating skills—either now or when younger—as innate or immutable. *Growth mindset*, captured data which supported the view that dating is a skill that could be enhanced with practice.

Expertise has been said to result from a combination of inherited talent and environmental learning (Campitelli & Gobet, 2011; Gobet & Ereku, 2014; Hambrick et al., 2016). Recent research has examined how a person's beliefs about whether skilled performance is due to innate talent or environmental learning influences skill development (e.g., Kyla & Dweck, 2017). Research reveals that in certain circumstances, such as when faced with a challenging task, people with a growth mindset are more

motivated than those with a fixed mindset to practice diligently than (Dweck, 2012). This is because people with a growth mindset are more willing to practice due to having greater confidence in the power of practice than those with a fixed mindset—who are more likely to view performance as innate and genetically predetermined.

As revealed in Figure 20, the analysis resulted in two level-3 themes relating to the performers' practice mindset: *dating determinism* and *growth mindset*. The overwhelming number of meaning units were recorded for *growth mindset,* with 129 meaning units; which was significantly more than *dating determinism,* with 31 meaning units. *Dating determinism* highlighted instances where the performers constructed dating skills as innate or immutable—a view that supports the giftedness hypothesis of dating expertise. The analysis revealed, however, that *dating determinism* was generally associated with the performers' views in their formative years before completing years of concerted dating practice. *Growth mindset* captured instances which supported the view that dating is a skill that can be refined through practice.

6.6.1.1 Indicative statements for practice mindset

Below Table 11 sets out indicative statements for the two sub-themes that constitute *practice mindset*. The following findings provide a more detailed analysis.

Table 11

Indicative Statements for Practice Mindset

Dating determinism
At university, yeah, you know, I was kind of nerdy. I looked at things very analytically. Um, I wasn't naturally gifted socially.
[Lack of dating ability] helped reinforce my personal theory at the time that I was an average guy. I'd just fall into situations… It was almost to the point where I felt so hopeless that I wouldn't even bother trying.
Interviewer: If someone had looked at you early on, might they have said, "This guy is destined to be skilled at dating?" *Respondent:* Oh, no. God, no! No, no! Not even close.
I thought there were two types of people. There were those who are outgoing and social, and those who are not; and I thought that I just fell into the other category. And I didn't realise it was something that I could be if I really tried.
Growth mindset
There is no magic pill to take… Anything of value, or anything worth anything, is hard to achieve.
The first step is admitting that you've got something that you actually want to fix. So coming to that conclusion was quite tough and you've got to sit back and go, "You know what? I do suck at this. I do suck with girls. Now is the time to actually fix it."
You know, for me, the way I look at it is I want to meet a beautiful wife some day and this [practice] is like me going to the gym in order to meet her; building the muscle.
If one human can do it, another can, right?
It was kind of a paradox. I knew that I had everything inside me to do it [become skilled at dating] but I felt destined, like I couldn't unleash it, and then when I found the pickup stuff, I thought, "This is the key. This will unleash it."
As a guy you've got to strip away the layers and the limiting beliefs that are causing you to think that you're not attractive because everybody has attractive traits.

6.6.2 Dating determinism

"I thought there were two types of people. There were those who are outgoing and social and those who are not, and I thought that I just fell into the other category. And I didn't realise it was something that I could be if I really tried."

The concept that some men are "naturals," innately talented at attracting women, is regularly discussed in the Community. Being a "natural" is commonly construed as arising from being innately endowed with desirable traits such as being physically attractive, tall, charismatic, outgoing and confident. Naturals can be seen as men who would typically score highly on scales that measure attractiveness and desirability (such as mate value scales, which research suggests people can accurately assess (e.g., Back et al., 2011)).

The majority of the performers considered themselves to be below average in their formative years in terms of their attractiveness and desirability as mates. They previously believed they lacked the natural traits to be considered attractive. As Charles described, he "wasn't naturally gifted socially":

> Being a smart kid in a small town, I had a little bit of trouble relating a lot of the time to my peers. Um, and then at university, yeah, you know, I was kind of nerdy. I looked at things very analytically. Um, I wasn't naturally gifted socially.

John described himself as shy and introverted in adolescence, believing he was destined to remain that way as he had believed there were "two types of people":

> At that point, I thought there were two types of people. There were those who are outgoing and social and those who are not and I thought that I just fell into the other category. And I didn't realise it was something that I could be if I really tried.

In his teenage years, Damien had a circle of friends that included a number of naturals. He considered himself the introverted "shy one" of the group. In social situations with attractive females he felt inferior and would fade into the background, as he explained:

> Damien: I had natural friends… I remember I had a mate of mine, Jonathan. I remember we were going to Carnival and there's one girl going past who he catches eye contact with and he's just like, "What up?" What up? Simple as… [He] starts talking to her, gets her number. Now, to me, I was like, "Bro! How do you do that?!"
> Interviewer: Compared to these guys, how did you feel?
> Damien: I was whack, man! I was inferior.

Damien described further how he would watch in awe and try to make sense of friends' dating ability:

> I'd just try and watch natural friends and see what they're doing. But even then, I would sit… I'd sit and listen to him and be like, "Damn, he's an awesome storyteller!" I'd just listen to him, and say, "He just keeps their attention really well,"… or, "They just love him. They just love him." You wouldn't be able to break it down and say, "This is what he's doing. These are the threads that he's using" or "This is how he's stirring the emotions" or whatever. I had no references for that… I would hate not to have the tools and the knowledge.

Damien's account succinctly captures how, in his formative years, he perceived that some men appeared to have a natural ability with women. His friend was "awesome" and "women just love[d] him." As much as Damien would try to "break it down," to try to understand what made his friends so effective, dating appeared to have too many intricate variables to make sense of what to do. While research reveals that being physically attractive facilitates dating success, appearance alone is not enough. Neil, a 6"5' attractive male, found his desirable looks did not translate to success in his formative years:

> Here's a funny story about me. One thing I get as an instructor, I'm a 6"5' white guy, athletically built. People compliment my appearance often as far as facial looks…. I never, *ever* got those kind of compliments before I learned about body language, before I got a haircut, before I changed the clothes I wear; and I did that because of pickup. So if you look at me nowadays, you could definitely perceive it as an advantage; this guy who's got his style together. You look at him and you think…I like to think you see a successful young man. Um, back then, I was just kind of a shaggy kid. I mean, sure, I was tall but, um, you know, my hair was a mess. It was a college 'fro and just, you know, plain old t-shirts and stuff. I never cared about that. I never even realised how much it mattered. Um, so as far as perceived advantages, you could say that was, I guess, an advantage once I started harnessing it.

In adolescence, the belief that their dating ability was fixed had undermined the performers' self-esteem. The interviews provided numerous examples of how disempowering this deterministic mindset was. Damien described feeling "inferior;" Ruben "like there was no hope and I'd die alone." Neil described how his lack of dating ability became self-defeating, spiralling out of control:

> [Lack of dating ability] helped reinforce my personal theory at the time that I was an average guy. I'd just fall into situations. I didn't have any control, I felt no control over meeting these girls, and that frustrated the hell out of me because I'd go to the bars, say, the next weekend and just try to pick up what I'd consider an average girl and pick any girl in the bar and I didn't know how. It

just wouldn't work. She would not be interested, I'd get rejected or else I'd get really, really drunk and just not even [try]… It was almost to the point where I felt so hopeless that I wouldn't even bother trying.

Concurring with research that demonstrates that social skills are trainable, the Community encourages the view that dating skills can be learnt. Yet, prior to finding the Community, the performers had little optimism that they could improve their dating ability. Indeed, Neil's "personal theory" had been that he was an average guy with no control over meeting girls. Finding the Community facilitated the belief that there was scope for improvement. Neil described how the Community led him to question his negativity towards his ability to improve:

I'd go out and have fun but yeah, that just nagged at me because I'd see all these other guys around me, my peer group, that were able to do it. I knew that I had everything inside me as a person. Um, it was kind of a paradox. I knew that I had everything inside me to do it but I felt destined, like I couldn't unleash it, and then when I found the pickup stuff, I thought, "This is the key. This will unleash it [my dating ability]".

The research found that the performers' fixed mindset about dating efficacy related to their formative years. However, on discovering the Community, they started to develop the opposite belief that, with dedicated practice, they might transform their dating skills. As Neil described: "When I found the pickup stuff, I thought, 'This is the key. This will unleash it [my dating ability].'"

6.6.3 Growth mindset

"I felt like a missing piece had been put into my understanding of human relationships. I went from being this unconfident guy who was screwing up, because I didn't understand the mistakes that I was making and couldn't read the situation. To being a guy who, all of a sudden, every time I made a mistake, I understand why… And then I turned into a guy who doesn't make many mistakes."

On discovering the Community, the performers submerged themselves into a world of books, DVDs, forums, and stories which conveyed one resounding message: dating is a skill, a skill that can be improved. This provided the performers, who had felt resigned to being failures at dating, with a much needed confidence boost, as Ruben reflected: "[Discovering the Community] It was like, 'There's specific things and if I do those specific things I will have success.' There was a new level of confidence; not so much in myself but in this process."

For Damien, who had been unable to fathom why some of his friends were more effective at dating, discovering that he could become more skilled "blew" his mind:

[When younger] approaching didn't even come into my reality, it wasn't even an option. That's

why *The Game* blew my mind because suddenly, it went, "Oh, you can learn that! You can learn that stuff. Oh wow! So what Jonathan's been doing, what Oliver's been doing, that can be learnt? Wow! Hell yeah!

Damien read The Mystery Method, and saw it as a "blueprint" for improving his dating competence:

[Discovering the Community] for the first time, I went, "Okay, so there's [a process]"…I was drawn to Mystery Method because it broke it down [dating initiation] into a kind of linear process, even though it's not strictly linear. He had a system, a system for making it happen, you know what I mean? Opening, building Attraction, Qualifying, building connection and rapport. It had all these things in stages so you go, 'Oh, that's the process for… creating a new sexual relationship.' So it was there. There was a blueprint.

Via the Community, the performers were exposed to the experiences of their peers who had made the transition from *average frustrated chump* (Community jargon for a man who is frustrated with his inability at dating) to dating expert. As *goal orientated practice* revealed, role models provided performers with mental representations of expert dating skills, encouraging them to believe that they could also make the transition from novice to expert. Brian captured this, using the analogy of kicking down a door:

Whereas if I go, "I could never do that [attract women] and I'm not sure if this person ever did it in the first place"…the doors are locked already. To kick those doors down is going to be mighty hard. Whereas if I know it's possible then I can do it. If one human can do it, another can, right?

Brian's statement, "If one human can do it, another can, right?" is emblematic of the growth mindset that all the performers embodied towards practice and development. The belief that they could replicate others' development (and others could replicate theirs), facilitated an empowering growth mindset and the motivation to commit to the process. As well as instilling new empowered beliefs, growth could also mean *unlearning* disempowering beliefs that hindered development; as Stephen captured:

Getting hot girls is a matter of experience… Once you have enough experience to know that then you could, you could step to a women that you find really attractive and not have something mentally holding you back. Because your mind unlearns the rubbish that's prohibiting you from getting the success you want.

Becoming skilled seemed to involve cultivating a new mindset or a "paradigm" shift, whereby performers realised what was possible through practice. As Connor explained:

Wow! [With practice] I'm getting results. I can go out on a Friday night and approach five girls and I'll go on a date with one or two of those girls. So the biggest mindset change was just, "This can be a conscious thing that I can do." Like, "You put in, you get out." Whereas I was always under the belief that dating is something that just happens. Like I said to you before, you just finish school and then you go to Uni and you get a job, then you meet a girl, then you buy a house, and then you're married. It was just a thing that just happened. And I still think most of society is living in that paradigm whereas for me it's like it's bizarre for me that guys are like, "I don't meet many girls." I'm like, "Walk around the city for a half an hour. You will pass so many options and some that will look at you." … The biggest thing for me was just wow I can actually go out, approach girls, and get dates… I can get girlfriends. *Wow*! Where it just wasn't a possibility [before].

John described "knowledge as power," and believed it was important to embrace learning and to be truthful with oneself, acknowledging weaknesses:

One of my traits is that I'm always learning something, I'm always trying to understand things that I don't normally understand. And I think knowledge is power. And yeah I just started looking around and it was really the first steps of like a self-improvement journey. And the first step is admitting that you've got something that you actually want to fix. So coming to that conclusion was quite tough and you've got to sit back and go, "You know what? I do suck at this. I do suck with girls. Now is the time to actually fix it." And this flows into so many other things but if you can get into the right mindset of like a self-motivational type mindset then you can achieve anything that you put your mind to. And a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step and all that sort of stuff. And knowing that if I practiced and learned about it enough that I would eventually get good at it. And so I just jumped in the deep end and started reading, started applying basic skills to certain situations and over time I got some very good results.

The growth mindset performers embraced was liberating. The challenges they had overcome though hours of practice made improvement all the more valued. Their hard-earned skills would not "wash-off," they "earned them," developing "core confidence" in the process, as Damien explained:

If I work on this skill [dating] and I really work on myself, I own that. No one can take that from me. I own that," do you know what I mean? I own that. Because if I walk around and I'm confident, it's not a façade. It's because I've earned that shit through pain, man. I've been in that, you know what I mean? And so it's not a makeup that washes off. It's not high heels you take off. It is core confidence and so that's probably one of the biggest things I've got from this.

Ruben who, before joining the Community, had been a "No Man!" saying "No" to parties and

social events where he felt he would invariably display social incompetence, begun to feel excited that he could "conquer" his dating deficiency through practice.

> Once I had done it [started practicing] and I put myself in a situation that scared me and then I got the benefit from it. It started to have not just the scary feeling I associated with new things, but also a little bit of excitement knowing I can conquer something new and come out the other end stronger.

Being skilled at dating was transformed from something that only a select few were endowed with, to something all could achieve through practice. Neil used the metaphor of going to the gym to convey his view that dating skill as a "muscle," exclaiming: "You know, for me, the way I look at it is I want to meet a beautiful wife some day and this [practice] is like me going to the gym in order to meet her; building the muscle."

Experience led to greater skill, which in turn reaffirmed that the many thousands of hours of practice were not in vain, fostering even greater determination among the performers to improve, as alluded to by Gavin:

> You never look at yourself and say, "Now I'm good and yesterday I wasn't." In fact, if you ask me - you asked me in terms of average and I told you but I never think of myself as being good. I always - I don't even rate myself in those terms. I always think, "I know what I can do, I know how far I've come but I know also that I can do much better." I never think of it in terms of I'm good, I'm very good, I'm okay.

As *challenging practice* revealed, the path to dating expertise was arduous and required the performers to break out of their comfort zone. Adopting a mindset that embraced change was important for developing the staying power to practice; as Damien described: "You have to be willing to change. Anyone who I've met who's resistant to change doesn't grow. They don't learn the skill. They just don't master it. You've got to be willing to change."

In contrast to *self-disbelief*, which the dating experts possessed in their formative years, *self-belief*, the feeling that one can be successful, is an empowering mindset to foster. As Bandura (1997) captured, "self-belief does not necessarily ensure success, but *self-disbelief* assuredly spawns failure" (emphasis added, p.77). The performers had a keen appreciation of this, asserting that people had to believe in the process and stop making excuses. As Brian conveyed when he exclaimed, "Do you want to be a pickup artist, or do you want to be an excuse artist?"

> Giving yourself up to it [the developmental process] 100 percent, believing it 100 percent, yeah? If you're always questioning your teacher, you're really questioning yourself and you're trying to get out of it, you know? And I don't really use the term "pickup artist" anymore, just "seduction

and dating coach" and "social coach." But, you know, a thing to say to someone who's always questioning is, "Do you want to be a *pickup artist*, or do you want to be an *excuse artist*?"…. Because if you're always making excuses for everything then you're not going to get where you want to be.

Despite the challenges, participants persisted with training because they believed that it would eventually lead to improvement. As John exclaimed:

Failure is not falling down. Failure is not getting up when you've fallen down. So you can let pickup defeat you totally and that can be from flakes or getting shut down on approaching and all sorts of things. Or you can get back up, you can try it again, and if you do you will get better at it and you will get stronger and you will get better results.

Such determination is characteristic of the psychological construct of grit (Duckworth et al., 2011). The performers' ability to overcome the obstacles, maintain their practice, and to "keep getting up," appears to have been fuelled by the qualities of grit, which entail *passion* and *perseverance;* but, in this case, for the long term goal of developing dating skills. Development begot further development, and provided the performers with a shot of confidence and self belief. Damien who, as previous quotes revealed, felt inferior to his "natural" friends when younger, was now far more skilled at dating than them because he had mastered a wider range of skills:

Even my natural friends now, like, I'll kick arse at cold approaching. If there was two of us going out for cold approach, I would kick arse, do you know what I mean? Because it's a skill-set. It's a skill-set. When they are in already, when they're in, they've got good; their Comfort game's really good a little bit or they know when to do takeaways or they know how to not overreach emotionally, to leak their value; but in terms of the cold approach muscles [clicking fingers], yeah, that's a skill, man.

Charles reflected on how improving his skills, going from this "unconfident guy who was screwing up… to being a guy who doesn't make many mistakes" increased his confidence *immeasurably*:

I felt like a missing piece had been put into my understanding of human relationships. I went from being this unconfident guy who was screwing up, because I didn't understand the mistakes that I was making and couldn't read the situation. To being a guy who, all of a sudden, every time I made a mistake, I understand why… And then I turned into a guy who doesn't make many mistakes.

By actively transforming their dating skills, the performers also revealed that they became more

growth orientated in other areas of their lives, believing that they could control their "destiny":

> I believe I can control my destiny to a great extent and by knowing that, I believe that I can be good in business. I believe I can do things I set my mind to. I believe I can control my destiny to a great extent. If you have something, a talent, are you just born into it? It's not the case! It's not the case.

> Even though I was a really good athlete, it was the pickup stuff that told me, "Wait a minute. If you have something, a talent, are you just born into it? It's not the case! It's not the case." So it's made me more confident like that. And in the day-to-day stuff, I mean, I meet people, I'm not intimidated. I also am able to meet people on a personal level in a sense when I first run into them, I'm not, like, "Oh, this guy has a fancy car. He's better than me." It's, "Let me see how this guy interacts. Can he hold eye contact with me? How is he as a person?"

Gavin, provided a striking example of the satisfaction that came from improving his dating skills and embracing a growth mindset:

> I know that the vast majority of guys can't do what I do, I know that, but that's not really that important to me—to just be better than everybody else. My thermometer is internal. It doesn't give me that much satisfaction that I'm talking to a beautiful girl or taking her home and most guys in the bar can't approach [her]. That's not really that satisfying to me. What is satisfying is knowing that I couldn't do it [initiate effectively] before and now I can, that I've come this far. Also knowing that I'm continuously working on things.

More than being able to meet beautiful women, more than being more effective than other men, the greatest satisfaction came from overcoming their past limitations—by growing and improving in ways they did not conceive was possible. As Gavin said, "What is satisfying is knowing that I couldn't do it before [initiate dates effectively] and now I can, that I've come this far." John provided a compelling monologue capturing how practice and improvement made him more optimistic, both about his abilities and who *he* was as a person:

> Something I was fortunate enough to learn somewhat early into practice was *I am* enough to attract a beautiful girl. And what that actually ends up telling you is that you don't need to wear the funny hat or you don't need to dress in a certain way to attract girls. Everything that you have or everything that you need to be attractive to girls is already within you. But it's up to you to work out what that is and how to best display it. Sometimes some of your biggest flaws can actually become some of your most attractive traits. And the example I'll use was when I was younger I was a real introvert and when my friends were going out I was never invited to parties.

I was always a bit of a social outcast. So I'd stay home and I didn't have anything to do so I'd practice guitar on weekends. And I'd spend three or four hours a night practicing guitar. At the time I thought, what do you do? I've got nothing to do on a Saturday night except practice guitar. And once you learn, playing guitar is actually a really attractive quality and you meet a girl and you bring her home and you play guitar to her and she's absolutely blown away by something that you actually did as a result of not being social or being attractive in the first place.

So as a guy you've got to strip away the layers and the limiting beliefs that are causing you to think that you're not attractive because everybody has attractive traits. And the analogy I'll use will be like a person with fat on. And the fat is the bad traits, bad habits. Everybody has muscle underneath. You've just got to strip away that fat and you've got to show that. Everybody is different but you need to show that if you're an artistic person you need to show that side of you. Or if you've got a certain personality. Let's say you write poetry or you like to paint or you do something that a lot of people might look down on, you've got to strip away that self-denial and say, "You know what? These are my best qualities." And embrace them and show them. And that's actually when you become your most attractive, when you take on board and you just shine. And you believe in yourself and you believe that you are good enough to attract beautiful girls.

When asked what advice he would give to his younger self if he met him now, John described the importance of following the process and realising "there is no magic pill to take":

I would tell my younger self, hang in there. It's going to be okay. Everything will sort itself out in due time. You've got to go through the process to learn who you are and that process will make you who you are. "There is no magic pill to take." Anything of value or anything worth anything is hard to achieve… My younger self, I would tell him to do nothing different. I would tell him to enjoy the journey. There will be highs, there will be lows. There will be more highs than lows, *usually*. Enjoy them. Enjoy learning about yourself because it's a beautiful time when you learn about yourself and things click. The moment that you have that click moment where the lightbulb goes off above your head and you go, "Yes! Now I get it. Now I know why she said this" or "Now I know why she acted like that." That's a serious moment. And those are moments that you look forward too.

6.6.4 Practice mindset: Summary

The overwhelming number of meaning units recorded for *growth mindset* challenges the prevalent giftedness hypothesis view that emphasises that genetically inherited traits such a height and physical attractiveness, are the key determinant of dating expertise. The dating experts showed that the exclusivity of a skill, even a skill as complex and nuanced as dating, is not the preserve of the naturally talented. As

Brian stated, "If one human can do it, another can, right?" As the theme *challenging practice* revealed, the obstacle to becoming a dating expert is the same as in other domains: it takes significant dedication and motivation to accumulate the vast quantities of challenging practice that are required to attain expertise. As a performer captured: "A lot of guys, I'd say 90 percent if not more that start don't adhere to the practice. That's because it's damn hard."

One of the most injurious aspects of the giftedness hypothesis of expertise is that if someone believes they lack natural talent, research reveals that they are more likely to adopt a fatalistic mindset and withdraw from practice even though they could significantly improve their ability (Dweck, 2012). In this regard, Ruben described how his lack of dating ability had "reinforced my personal theory at the time I was an average guy…. I felt so hopeless that I wouldn't even bother trying." When Damien was asked, "If someone had looked at you early on [when younger], might they have said, 'This guy is destined to become skilled at dating,'" he replied emphatically, "Oh, no. God, no. No, no. Not even close." Yet Damien became a renowned dating expert, noted for his knowledge of the nuances of dating, his ability to pickup in the most challenging circumstances, and his capacity to teach and inspire other males who were struggling to form romantic relationships.

Full of passion, determination, and grit, Damien and the others mastered a skill that they had struggled with throughout adolescence; a skill that males are socialised to believe is necessary for an empowered masculine identity; a skill they are raised to believe is the preserve of those fortunate enough to be born gifted. Yet, as they practiced, the performers uncovered how misleading this view was and challenged the giftedness hypothesis that had once limited them. As a result, they became more confident about their ability to develop and grow—not just in dating—but in other aspects of their lives. As Neil captured, "I believe I can control my destiny to a great extent. If you have something, a talent, are you just born into it? It's not the case! It's not the case." The developmental journey from dating novice to dating expert was challenging, physically arduous, and emotional draining, but, ultimately, a journey that the participants conceived as being intensely rewarding. John conveyed this when he reflected what he might tell his younger self if he knew then what he had learnt from his tears of practice:

> "There is no magic pill to take." Anything of value or anything worth anything is hard to achieve… I would tell my younger self, hang in there. It's going to be okay… There will be highs, there will be lows. There will be more highs than lows, *usually*. Enjoy them. Enjoy learning about yourself, because it's a beautiful time when you learn about yourself.

6.7 Chapter 6 Summary

The thematic analysis was designed to facilitate the evaluation of Investigation 1 titled, "Is dating expertise a learnable skill?" Analysis of the 15 dating experts' interview transcripts generated a total of 1,162 points of data and comprised over 40,000 words, integrating research on expert performance and dating to evaluate the factors underlying their superior dating skills. Through analysis, the superordinate theme *dating skills deliberate practice* was developed, as it emerged that the performers had engaged in years of practice concordant with Ericsson's (2008) definition of deliberate practice. Their practice was: (1) highly repetitive, (2) feedback orientated, (3) challenging, and (4) goal orientated. In addition, the dating experts' development appears to have been aided by embracing a growth mindset, providing them with the motivation to adhere to challenging practice.

In the process, the thematic analysis provided an unparalleled insight into the intricacies of dating skills deliberate practice. For instance it revealed how:

- The dating experts completed years of physically and mentally taxing practice, often training for more than 20 hours a week amassing thousands of interactions each year.
- The dating experts paid avid attention to interactional partners' subtle micro-expressions and backchannel behaviour, using feedback as a "mirror" to identify where they needed to improve.
- The dating experts developed an analytical mindset, became their "own teachers" and designed practice around clearly defined skill and achievement goals.
- The dating experts were able to reframe anxiety-provoking dating practice to make it "fun, not work," and yet maintain an instrumental approach to training.
- A growth mindset enabled the dating experts to overcome limiting beliefs and motivated them to keep practicing and developing.

As well as providing a detailed insight into the nuances of the dating experts' practice, the findings improve our understanding of the developmental processes underlying dating expertise.

Chapter 7. Review of Investigation 1 Findings

7.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on Chapter 6's thematic analysis and the three conceptual arguments laid out in Chapter 5's review of dating and deliberate practice to provide the definitive statement on Investigation 1's five research questions and the proposition—*the dating experts developed their superior skills through extensive deliberate practice*. As the first study to reveal a relationship between dating expertise and deliberate practice, the findings challenge the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating and reveal how dating skills deliberate practice accounts for the development of superior dating ability.

7.2 Finding 1: The Dating Experts Engaged in Dating Skills Deliberate Practice

Research Question 1 set out to ascertain whether the dating experts' dating practice conformed to the tenets of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). Conceptual Argument 1 presented in Section 5.2 identified four components that such practice needed to satisfy to be considered deliberate practice. With over 1000 coded points of data from interviews with the 15 dating experts, the thematic analysis clearly established that their practice activities satisfied the definition of deliberate practice, being: (1) highly repetitive, (2) feedback orientated, (3) challenging, and (4) goal orientated (see Figure 21 for an illustration). This finding makes this the first study to associate deliberate practice with dating expertise. On this basis, we can propose dating skills deliberate practice—defined as "a challenging form of practice specially designed to improve dating performance"—as a new theory accounting for the development of superior dating skills.
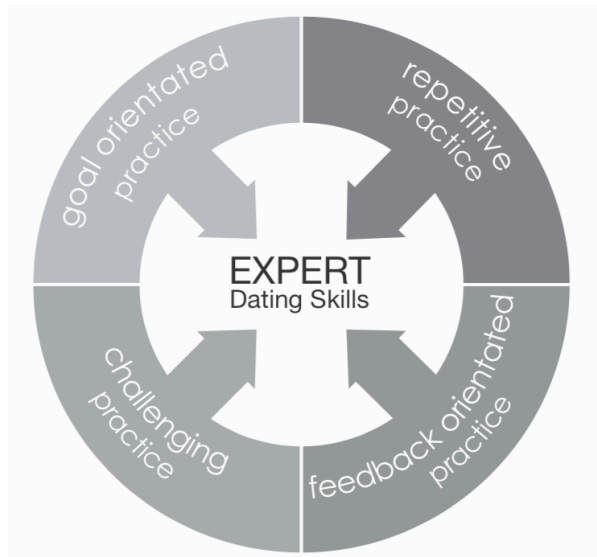
Figure 21. *The four components of dating skills deliberate practice.* The four components of dating skills deliberate practice that are concordant with the general theory of deliberate practice, hypothesised to underlie expert dating skills and leading us to challenge the giftedness view of expert performance.

However, Investigation 1 revealed that while dating skills deliberate practice shares numerous similarities with Ericsson et al's. (1993) general theory of deliberate practice, it also has some key distinguishing features, which may mean the theory in its original guise does not directly transfer to other domains (a point also made by Kennedy & Fairbrother, 2019). For this reason, dating skills deliberate practice is best construed as a sub-theory of the general theory. For example, the general theory rejects practice with others, public performance, and inherently enjoyable practice, as forms of deliberate practice (see Chapter 3, for a discussion). However, the findings suggest this does not hold true for dating. For instance, while the research revealed dating initiation—the most relevant form of practice for developing dating skills—was highly challenging and arduous, it also had elements which were intrinsically enjoyable

The concept of enjoyable deliberate practice may be unique to some domains of expertise. Not only can the cognitive influence of reframing fundamentally affect how pleasurable we find an act (e.g., Hirt et al., 1999), but it may be that dating related deliberate practice is enjoyable because, as social beings, we have evolved a drive for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). During social interactions, the release of neurochemicals dopamine and norepinephrine makes interacting with people we are attracted to biologically rewarding (Fisher, 1998). Separating the *result* ("intrinsic pleasure") from the *practice activity* ("initiation") fails to recognise the holistic phenomenological experience of dating initiation, where the very act of interacting with people we are attracted to, as well as the anticipation of a positive result, influences how enjoyable we find the process.

This suggests that analysis of initiation should distinguish between the various effortful elements of practice: some may be gritty, some distressing, some enjoyable, and some may involve a combination of all three. Indeed, other researchers have also argued that deliberate practice should acknowledge the enjoyable aspects of effective practice. Young and Salmela's (2002) study of 81 long distance runners

found that not only were some of the more challenging aspects of their practice enjoyable, but "the *most relevant* and the *most effortful* activities were also perceived as most enjoyable" (p. 167; emphasis added).

Another difference is that, unlike the general theory where public performance is not considered a form of deliberate practice, the findings reveal that public performance should be considered *the* crucial domain of dating initiation practice. By its very nature, dating initiation is a public act. Designing practice based on the general theory, which does not fully acknowledge the importance of public practice, would arguably produce daters who were, for instance, unable to manage the complexity of initiation in public environments that are constantly changing, uncertain, and time pressured; or unprepared for the pressures of approaching when there is distinct likelihood of being publicly rejected. Interestingly, dating skills deliberate practice suggests that purposefully increasing the pressure of public performance could facilitate skills development. For instance, dating experts reported that the coaching others increased the pressure on them to concentrate on skill execution when initiating in public, which in turn generated improvements in their performance.

7.3 Finding 2: Dating Skills Deliberate Practice Accounts for Dating Expertise

While Research Question 1 focused on whether the participants engaged in deliberate practice, Research Question 2 considered whether accumulated practice accounted for the development of their expertise. Indeed, as Figure 22 illustrates, analysis of the 15 dating experts' data suggested that, as proposed in Conceptual Argument 2 (Section 5.3), their superior skills were the result of accumulated dating skills deliberate practice.
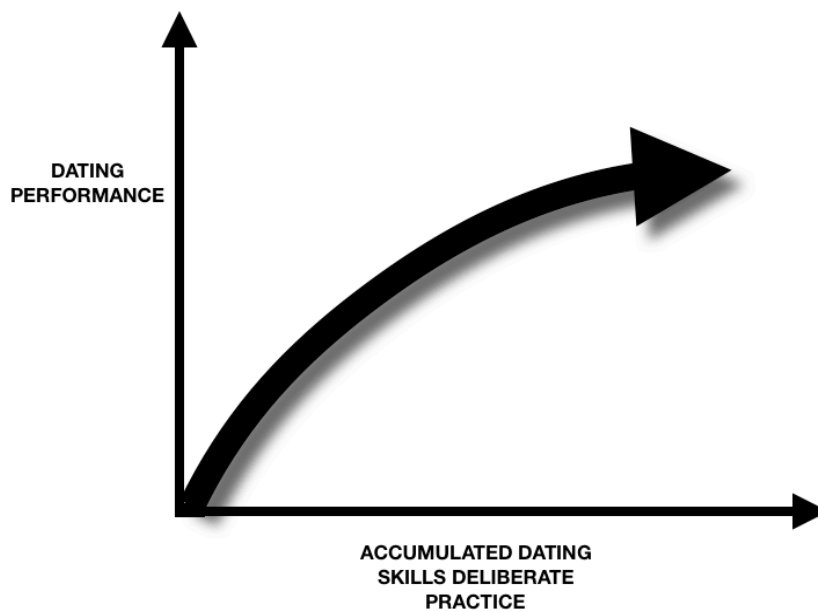
Figure 22. *Dating expertise as a function of accumulated deliberate practice.* Accumulated dating skills deliberate practice is the best explanation of how the 15 dating experts developed their superior dating skills. The evidence suggests that dating expertise is a function of dating skills deliberate practice plus experience.

The participants engaged in concerted practice for between 5 to 16 years, with detailed estimates for 5 participants revealing that they amassed between 7,000 and 13,000 hours of initiation practice (see Figure 16 in Section 6.2.2). Despite all 15 participants commencing their developmental journey as dating novices, over the process of accumulating large quantities of dating skills deliberate practice they all developed expert dating skills. This finding provides compelling evidence to reject the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating which asserts superior dating is the preserve of people born innately talented.

We know that deliberate practice is the common variable underlying superior performance in a wide variety of domains. This thesis reveals that deliberate practice also underlies expertise in the domain of dating. While research shows short periods of clinical dating skills training prompt improvements in skill, no previous research has demonstrated whether practice could raise a person's dating skills to the level of "expert." This thesis suggests the right practice can and does. While dating has features which make it unique to other domains of expertise, it is nonetheless a skill with identifiable components that can be targeted and systematically developed (e.g., Arkowitz et al., 1978; Tenhula & Bellack, 2008; Trower, Bryant & Argyle, 1978).

While dating skills deliberate practice explains how the 15 performers became experts, the research does not deny talent plays a role in development—this would be a claim too far. On methodological grounds, talent cannot be entirely discounted. While all the participants became experts, they did not develop at exactly the same rate. Such differences suggest that dating skill development is influenced by all or some combination/interaction of at least four factors: (a) prior environmental

experience, (b) quality of practice, (c) personality and motivation to practice, (d) heritable traits.

Unlike the participants in this study, not everyone could necessarily make the transition from dating novice to dating expert. Early environmental experience could hinder potential for growth. This is consistent with theory suggesting our ability to develop romantic relationships is profoundly shaped by our attachment style and relationships in our earliest years (Lieberman, 2013). Participants described how heritable traits such as height and physical attractiveness influenced how readily success came. This suggests that people who do not conform to particular societal standards for traits such as physical attractiveness or height may face additional challenges.[3]

However, the findings suggest a weaker relationship between superior dating and attributes related to talent than suggested by proponents of the giftedness hypothesis. Rather than being deterministic, desirable innate qualities are better viewed as providing, "a foot-in-the-door, but not a seat at the table." Traits such as physical attractiveness can ignite initial interest when, for instance, a man is a woman's "type," but looks alone do not produce dating success—after the initial "Hello," there are still many courtship stages to traverse to go from strangers to intimates. This is a major reason why dating experts downplayed the importance of talent. As represented in Figure 23 at the level of elite dating, innate talent and superior ability have an inverse relationship.

INFLUENCE OF
INNATE TALENT
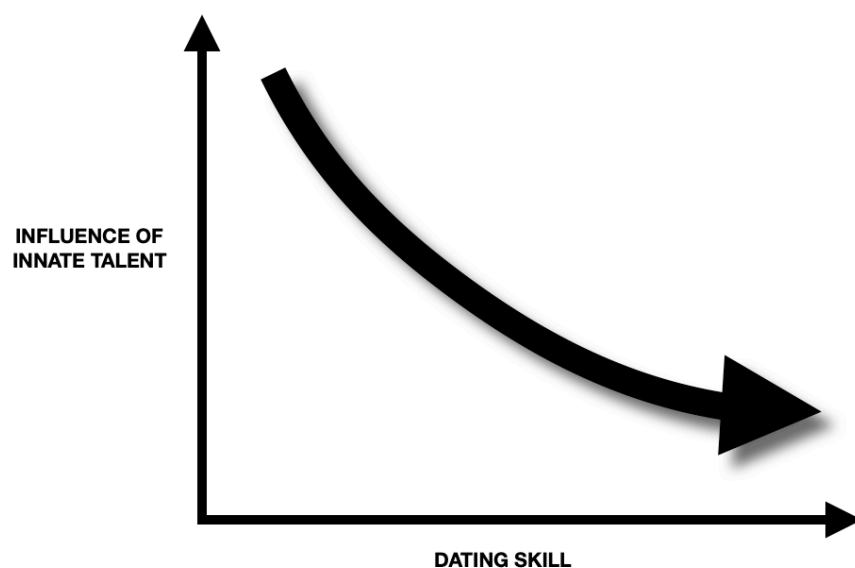
DATING SKILL

Figure 23. The inverse relationship between innate talent and dating expertise. Dating skills deliberate practice suggests that as dating expertise increases, successful performance relies less on relatively fixed traits such as physical attractiveness. This does not mean that the influence of such traits approaches zero. Some traits may have more bearing in certain environments.

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[3] People who fall into particular demographic profiles which are discriminated against or stigmatised may face obstacles making it more challenging to develop dating expertise. People with experience working in particular roles that emphasise social skills—e.g., salesmen, politicians—may have developed social skills which transfer to dating contexts and facilitate faster improvement.

While, to attract mates, males with relatively low dating skills depend heavily on relatively fixed traits such as physical looks; dating experts rely on a broad-based constellation of skills to reliably attract a wide range of mates. Thus as dating skills improve, being physically attractive or possessing traits indicative of status and wealth, become less important determinants of success. In short—dating experts allow the skills they've developed to do the "heavy lifting," not their physical looks, height, or innate characteristics. Reflecting on whether everyone can become a dating expert; this suggests that people who develop a reliance around specific traits to attract mates may struggle later to make the transition to expertise, unless they are able to counter this dependence.

Another point to address on the topic of whether everyone can become an expert is motivation. Participants described themselves as being "obsessed" with practice, which is supported by the finding that they accumulated thousands of hours of practice. While Ericsson et al. (1993) dismiss the general view that superior performance is due to talent, they do acknowledge that some peoples' personalities may predispose them to engage in particular forms of practice. While participants' obsession developed during years of practice and engagement in the Community, the qualitative research design means we are unable to determine whether they were uniquely predisposed to practice. For instance, one of the participants John reported a general passion for learning that could have an innate component which facilitated his motivation to practice. As he described:

> One of my traits is that I'm always learning something, I'm always trying to understand things that I don't normally understand. And I think knowledge is power… You've got to sit back and go, "You know what? I do suck at this. I do suck with girls. Now is the time to actually fix it…" And so I just jumped in the deep end and started reading, started applying basic skills to certain situations and over time I got some very good results.

While research on growth mindset has led to increased recognition of how motivation can be actively influenced through a change of mindset (discussed further in Finding 4, Section 7.5), the interaction between environment and innate disposition may mean some people are more likely to put in the vast amounts of dating skills deliberate practice necessary to become an expert.

7.4 Finding 3: Dating Skills Deliberate Practice Facilitates Continued Improvement

Conceptual Argument 3 in Section 5.4 drew on theories of skill acquisition (Ericsson, 2006b; Fitts & Posner, 1967) and dating, to conceptualise why deliberate practice was so important for the development of expertise. The analysis supported the view that the challenging nature of dating skills deliberate practice appears to facilitate continued improvement, enabling performers to (1) overcome arrested development by maintaining practice in the cognitive-associative phase, and (2) develop increasingly sophisticated mental representations, dating scripts, and routines to meet the demands of the

complex dating situations they may encounter.

Figure 24 suggests the everyday "typical" dating skills participants possessed in their formative years (the lowest arrow) were developed by continuously seeking out more challenging initiation practice, thus keeping them in the cognitive-associative phase (the top arrow), facilitating the development of dating expertise. The theme *challenging practice* provided numerous examples of performers seeking out difficult practice to ensure they kept developing, as one explained, "We've got to do a minimum number of approaches… it's got to be the hardest situations."
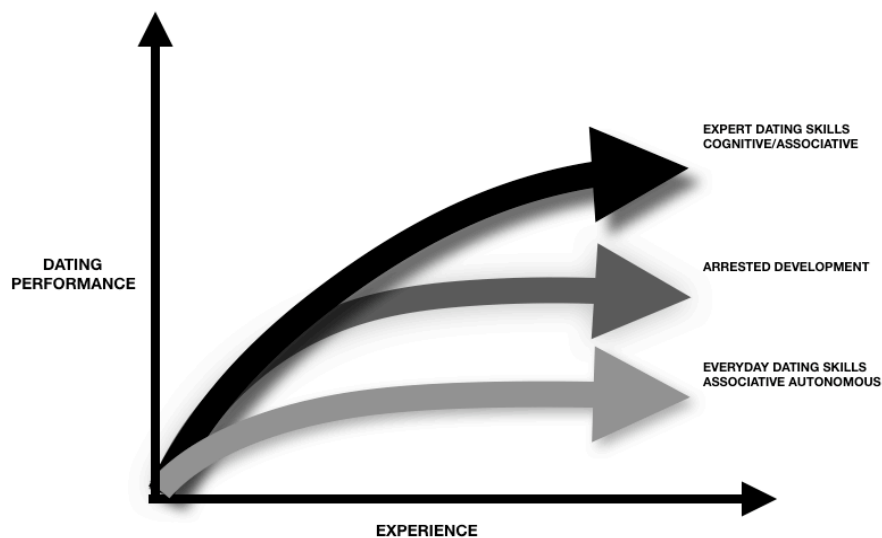
Figure 24 *Dating expertise and practice in the cognitive-associative phase.* The research suggests dating expertise extends from dating skills deliberate practice, which is hypothesised to keep performers in the cognitive-associative phase.

We can also use the findings and discussion of the literature in Chapters 3 and 4, to hypothesise that, as participants maintained challenging practice in the cognitive-associative phase, they developed increasingly sophisticated dating scripts, schemas, and mental representations for navigating dating interactions. We can adapt Ericsson's (1998) model of mental representations in chess to propose a model for how what this thesis entitles *dating mental representations* operate.
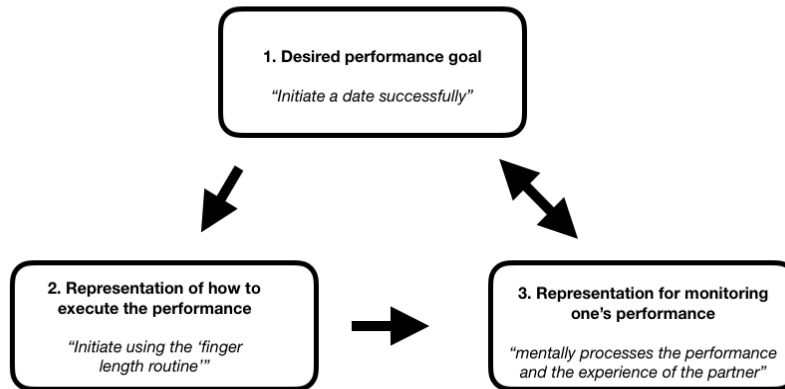
Figure 25. *Three types of mental representations hypothesised to mediate expert dating initiation performance.* An adaption of a model applied to chess from Ericsson (1998), p. 92.

Figure 25 captures three mental representations that hypothetically underlie dating experts' skilled performance. The findings provided numerous examples of dating mental representations used to monitor, reason, and gain greater control over performance. This was particularly evident in the theme *feedback orientated practice,* which revealed how visualisation and journaling were used to recall unsuccessful dating initiation episodes and then "correct" them in-line with desired performance. As one participant illustrated when he described the phenomenological process of redefining his dating mental representations: "I'll mentally visualise that [an approach], redo it… and correct the conversation." With reference to the three boxes in Figure 25, the following provides an example of how mental representations operate in dating:

1. A dating expert has the desired performance goal of initiating a date successfully (which is a form of complex mental representation linking various forms of schematic knowledge to action).

2. He uses the *Finger Length Routine* (a routine in Love Systems, 2007, p. 45-46), which is a routine he has used successfully in the past and holds a clear representation of how to execute. (Note: the routine involves examining a partner's fingers to see whether the forefinger is longer than ring finger. It draws on findings on "digit finger" research which suggests the ratio between the index and ring finger are affected by exposure to testosterone in the uterus (e.g., Manning, Scutt, Wilson, & Lewis-Jones, 1998).

3. As the expert executes the routine, he processes his *actual* performance in light of his *desired* performance. The dual arrow indicates the expert monitoring his own and his partner's behaviour, altering his performance in light of how the interaction progresses.

Such dating mental representations enable performers to gain more control over their performance, and plan and reason about the best methods for problem solving.

7.5 Finding 4: A Growth Mindset Appears to Facilitate Dating Expertise

Research on expertise illustrates that in numerous domains such as, sports, music, and the sciences, becoming an expert is challenging. One of the most undesirable aspects of the giftedness hypothesis is that it acts as yet another obstacle because, if someone believes they lack natural talent, research reveals that they are more likely to become fatalistic and withdraw from practice even though they have the potential to improve if they adopted a different mindset (Dweck, 2012). Indeed, the evidence revealed that in their formative years participants were held back by a fixed, highly deterministic, mindset. As one performer captured when he described how his lack of dating success had "reinforced my personal theory at the time I was an average guy…. I felt so hopeless that I wouldn't even bother trying [to initiate dates]."

An important factor facilitating participants' development was the ability to overcome limiting beliefs and foster the right mindset. The data revealed how all the performers approached practice with what Dweck (2012) has labelled a "growth mindset." As performers practiced and improved they came to reject the talent centric views they had once held, replacing them with more empowering ones. As one described: "I believe I can control my destiny to a great extent. If you have something, a talent, are you just born into it? It's not the case! It's not the case."

The realisation that ability was not rigidly determined by innate talent was highly motivating. The personality trait *grit* has also been associated with superior performance and deliberate practice (Duckworth et al., 2011). Investigation 1's findings also suggest an interaction between growth mindset and grit, with growth mindset facilitating the passion and perseverance required to engage in years of challenging dating skills deliberate practice necessary to become a dating expert. Indeed a persons unwillingness or lack of motivation to engage in arduous and anxiety provoking initiation practice is ostensibly the reason why many people find initiation so challenging. As one of the performers described: "Approaching is one of the things that separate the men that go on and improve and those who don't. The one's who are able to say, 'It's nerve wracking but I'll do it. I'll approach.' That's how they build the skill-set."

7.6 Finding 5: Community Postulates are Grounded in Empirical Research

Research Question 5 identified six Community "postulates" which were evaluated to assess whether they were grounded in empirical research. Two categories of postulates were identified. The first were Community theories, defined as "overarching philosophies or theories which are said to underlie male-to-female attraction." The second were Community skills, or "specific routines, techniques, or procedures that—if practiced—are claimed to increase efficacy at dating initiation." For postulates as wide ranging as Postulate 1, *Adopt dating initiation models as an attraction blueprint*, to Postulate 4, *Rehearsed routines can spark attraction*, significant support was found in empirical research. The idea that specific

techniques that people can actively learn and replicate are grounded in research, challenges trait based giftedness arguments. When we consider the amount of dating skills deliberate practice completed by the performers embodying these—and other—postulates, it provides additional insight on how dating skills can be developed to expert levels, further undermining the giftedness view of expert dating.

7.7 Chapter 7 Summary

The thematic analysis captured in fine detail how 15 men transformed themselves from dating novices to dating experts. While broader claims must be tempered by the qualitative research design, the analysis overwhelmingly indicates that the performers' dating expertise was the result of years of highly challenging dating skills deliberate practice. Without this practice the findings do not support the notion that the participants would have developed elite dating skills. This leads us to reject the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. Even those once deemed untalented can become dating experts through dating skills deliberate practice.

As a sub-theory, with many similarities but marked deviations to the general theory, a key contribution of dating skills deliberate practice is that it improves our ability to generate testable hypothesis about dating expertise; helping us to identify why, for instance, some people struggle with the basics of forging romantic relationships and what practice would best promote their development.

PART 3

INVESTIGATION 2: IS DATING EXPERTISE A FORM OF EXPERT INTUITION?

Introduction to Part 3

This thesis is concerned with investigating superior performance at dating initiation. Investigation 1 sought to understand *how* people become dating experts. It revealed that, rather than being a rare "gift," dating expertise is the result of years of dating skills deliberate practice. Investigation 2 builds on the previous investigation to understand *what* specific characteristics enable dating experts to initiate dates so fluidly, efficiently, and *intuitively*.

While the psychological credibility of intuition was once doubted, evidence in numerous domains now confirms its validity (Gobet, 2016). Despite this, no research has drawn on the cognitive study of expert intuition to develop a theoretical framework conceptualising dating as a form of intuitive expertise. To do so, Investigation 2 addresses gaps in our understanding by merging decades of literature on expert intuition and dating to develop a proposition asserting, *the dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuition*. To assess this proposition, four research questions were developed and interview data from the same sample of 15 dating experts was analysed. The findings resulted in:

- Expert dating being established as a domain of intuitive expertise.
- An original theory delineating four major characteristics of expert dating intuition.
- Challenges to major theories of intuition that glamorise the enigmatic power of fast, unconscious, System 1 intuition, over slower System 2 deliberation.

By conceptualising dating as a form of expert intuition, Part 3 of this thesis has significant implications for researchers of intuition and dating, as well as people seeking to develop romantic relationships. It comprises four chapters. Chapter 8 is a conceptual literature review synthesising research on expert intuition and dating. Chapter 9 presents the overarching conceptual framework, the proposition, and research questions. Chapter 10 presents a thematic analysis of the 15 dating experts' transcripts. Chapter 11 systemically reviews and discusses Investigation 2's findings.

Chapter 8. Expert Intuition & Dating: Conceptual Literature Review

8.1 Introduction

Investigation 2 aims to evaluate whether dating experts possess highly refined powers of dating intuition. Due to the lack of research linking the cognitive study of expert intuition to dating, this chapter is structured as a conceptual review. Adopting an integrated deductive-inductive approach to theory building (Ali & Birley, 1999), it identifies, synthesises, and critically discusses core themes from research on expert intuition and dating to conceptualise dating as a form of expert intuition.

Before the conceptual review, the next section provides a fictional "tale" of two men attempting to solve the problem of successfully initiating a date. The narrative serves as an analogy, highlighting key characteristics that facilitate dating experts' fast, fluid, and intuitive problem solving skills.

8.2 A Tale of Two Dating Initiators

James and Max are two heterosexual males in their mid-twenties each attempting to initiate a date in a smart downtown bar.

8.2.1 James' dating initiation trial

Walking through the busy bar, James spots an attractive woman. He begins to mentally rehearse what to say, how to hold eye contact, and checks that he is walking with his head held high and chest erect as he "knows" a confident male is "supposed to."

When he entered the bar a short while ago, he had the distinct impression the attractive female was smiling in his direction and now he's finally mustered the courage to introduce himself. As he walks towards her, he notices how perfect her silky, long, flame red hair is; her matching bright red lipstick accentuating that irresistible smile that first sparked his interest. Yet, with each step he grows more uncertain and overwhelmed: "What if this all goes wrong," he *feels* himself thinking.

Nonetheless, he arrives at her shoulder somewhat incongruously and stutters, "Hello!" As she turns to face him, they almost collide, and James flinches cursing himself for infringing on her personal space. He apologises, takes a step back, and feels the lines he had mentally prepared dissipating. It's not a good start. Hastily, he mentally runs through his options, "Should I introduce myself with a hand shake, or is that too formal? Should I say something funny? Or maybe, maybe I could act like I mistook her for a friend and make my escape?!"

As his anxiety bubbles up into consciousness, he feels the sweat trickling down his collar and wonders if his ineptitude is as obvious to her—to everyone in the bar—as it is to himself.

He starts to re-initiate the conversation and she smiles. "Is that encouragingly, or apprehensively?" It's so hard to tell. He agonises, "How can I make this more playful, more fun?"

At that moment, a female strides towards them, simpers gingerly at James, and exclaims, "Beth, your glass is almost empty; fancy a drink at the bar?"

James knows that if the bar is more appealing than he is, the moment will be lost forever. He desperately blurts out, "Before you go, what's your name?" He can't help but feel stupid, given her name had just been mentioned. Nonetheless, as she turns to follow her friend, she stammers, "It's Beth." Before James knows it, Beth is walking away, the crowd parting as she moves towards the bar.

As Beth gets further, she looks around and raises her eyebrows dramatically, "Is that a 'come-on expression,' or one of sympathy, or even pity?" James doesn't know and right now is too exasperated to care. The initiation or, more accurately, the ordeal, is over.

8.2.2 Max's dating initiation trial

Moving through the bar, Max's eyes are drawn instinctively to an attractive female who flashed him a smile when he first entered. She appears to be in a fine mood, enjoying the evening with three friends. As her friends frolic with nearby patrons, he senses a slight lull in the conversation. Taking that as his cue, he strides up and a familiar line he has used many times naturally bubbles into consciousness. "I noticed you from the corner of my eye and just thought I'd say 'Hi' before it gets crazy in here. So, Hi I'm Max! Who might you be?" It's not a "fancy" line, but it's worked well enough in the past.

His new conversational partner offers her hand and a coquettish smile as a greeting. Her name's Mia. As Max takes her hand he comments, "That's a deceptively firm handshake. I hope this isn't one of those never ending Trump-Macron handshakes. That could get awkward!" It's an ad-lib of a handshake routine he's used exhaustively to (mostly) good effect. Mia rolls back her head, laughs, and assures Max that while she enjoys politics she wouldn't want the weight of expectation that comes with being a world leader. She's far too fun loving after all.

As Max withdraws from the handshake, he softly, imperceptibly, glides his middle finger over Mia's, and transitions into conversation. He can't help but notice how he enjoys the feel of her deep jade green eyes dancing on his face. He smiles, happily oblivious to the "love hormones," dopamine and oxytocin pumping though his veins, boosting his flirtatious confidence. From the corner of his eye he notices a waitress approaching who, addressing Mia, chimes, "Here's the cocktail menu you asked for."

"Ohhh great, thanks." Mia smiles. Turning to Max she asks, "Fan of cocktails? I'm a gin lover!"

Without losing a beat Max responds, "This bar is renowned for its' whisky and gin cocktails. Hmmm, must get back to my friends, but if you're after gin, something classic; I can recommend the French 75. If you're feeling daring, try their signature gin cocktail, a Corpse Reviver. I warn you, it's aptly named. Be careful if you're operating machinery, or driving a forklift truck in the next few hours!"

Mia laughs, "No chance, the week is finally over. I'm letting my hair down for the weekend… Hmmmm decisions, decisions." She muses as she leafs through the carefully curated menu. With the waitress patiently hovering over her shoulder, she decides to go for Max's second suggestion observing, "Everything looks so tempting… I might just go with the Corpse Reviver. I deserve it."

Max gave a knowing smile and replies, "Temptation, temptation. The paradox of choice. Sometimes more is less, but I'm not sure that applies to cocktails." Noting her generous laughter, he ponders for a split-second if *now* is a good time. He decides it is ("Why else would she be so magnanimous with her laughter?") and adds, "If the cocktail's not to your taste, I'll happily be held to account. In fact, I'll go one better and treat you to the cocktail of your fancy. Maybe later, if you join me and my friends, we're just by the bar over there (pointing), or maybe even on *our* first date? On the other hand, if the cocktail delights your tastebuds; you can treat me to one of *my* fancy?"

"Sounds like a deal!" Mia replies with a wide smile; her deep jade eyes dancing more wildly than ever.

8.2.3 Reflections on the two dating initiations

While these hypothetical interactions are simplified, they provide models of two attempts to "solve the problem" of initiating a date. In the process of initiating, James and Max each searched for tell-tale cues from their partners, such as non-verbal body language and micro-expressions indicating the best way to proceed. However, of the two, Max was vastly more skilled. This chapter contends, intuition lies at the core of such disparities in dating performance—with experts having "high" levels of dating intuition relative to novices. James was deliberate and highly conscious of his behaviour, whereas Max, was fluid and intuitive. The variance was not trivial. In academic parlance, James and Max's performances reflect significant differences in their use of two types of cognition referred to as *dual processing*. Max's performance embodied key characteristics of intuitive, rapid, high capacity cognition, known as *System 1 processing*; and James' performance exemplified key characteristics of slow, deliberate, low capacity cognition, known as *System 2 processing*.

This chapter integrates research on intuition and dating that supports the notion that expert dating depends on effective dual processing which relies heavily on System 1 type cognition, with System 2 particularly necessary in novel situations. As Chapter 4's review of dating research discussed, dating outcomes are determined by how potential mates assess our courtship displays. Throughout the interactions Beth and Mia, were monitoring their potential partners' performances and unconsciously assigning a value to them. The difference in these values led to profoundly contrasting outcomes. Max and Mia experienced a feeling of something joyous, a connection bursting with romantic possibilities. The sensation did not stem from rational analysis, but rather it was a dynamic, holistic, intuitive appraisal; shaped by cultural scripts, personal idiosyncrasies, evolved mental mechanisms, and the ability to attune to one anothers emotions.

While Max's performance relied on sophisticated non-conscious System 1 problem solving, such

intuitive cognition does not arise in a vacuum. To this end, the chapter argues that, as well as dual processing, expert dating ability relies on three other characteristics or "pillars" of intuition. These being the ability of *expert perception*, or sophisticated powers of search and pattern recognition; *autonomous adaptability,* the ability to make quick, autonomous decisions, and adapt to different challenges; and, *emotional attunement*, the ability to attune to the situation, one's partner, and one's "self." The identification of these core characteristics results in a new theory accounting for the main facets of intuition entitled *the four pillars of expert dating intuition*. The next section lays the foundation for the theory by conceptualising dating intuition as a form of problem solving. Section 8.4 describes seminal research laying out foundational principles for the cognitive study of expert intuition. Sections 8.5 to 8.8 draws on research on expert intuition and dating to systematically discuss each of the four pillars of expert dating intuition.

8.3 Experts as Problem Solvers

8.3.1 Expert intuition: From deliberate practice to expert intuition

Despite a lack of consensus regarding the definition of an "expert," Investigation 1 proposed a relative definition of experts as "superior performers." This definition had the benefit of being quantifiable, emphasising level of performance as the key differential distinguishing experts from non-experts. Thus, expert chess players would be expected to select the best chess moves more quickly than novices; virtuoso concert pianists to recreate complex scores more accurately than their less competent peers; and expert physicians to be more skilled at diagnosis than juniors. Similarly, dating experts should be superior at initiation than non-experts. While this definition was sufficient for conceptualising expertise in Investigation 1, the shift in focus for Investigation 2, which seeks to ascertain the characteristics that facilitate dating expertise, requires a definition that highlights the cognitive processes underlying experts' problem solving abilities.

8.3.2 Intuition and problem solving as the defining feature of expertise

Intuition is often proposed as a defining characteristic of expertise (Gobet & Chassy, 2008); from chess players who rapidly select the best move, to firefighters who instinctively deal with a blaze, to nurses who supply accurate prognoses using their gut feelings. What impresses onlookers is the rapidity and seemingly "supernatural" nature of such expert performances. While this mystical element has led critics to doubt the psychological validity of intuition (Gobet & Chassy, 2008), there is a large amount of evidence supporting it in a wide range of domains including chess (de Groot, 1978; Gobet, 2011), the sciences (Simon, 1995), the emergency services (Klein, 2008), the army and navy (Klein, 2001), nursing (Benner, Tanner & Chesla, 1992), business (Hensman & Sadler Smith, 2011), sports (Raab & Laborde, 2011) and even criminal domains such as burglary (Nee & Meenaghan, 2006).

Despite growing recognition of the role intuition plays in expertise, there are numerous

approaches to conceptualising the term. Sprenkle (2005) identified over 40 different versions of the construct as used by different theorists, while Shirley and Langan-Fox (1996) conducted an extensive literature review of intuition concluding that, when it comes to a definition, "there is no consensus" (p. 565). Despite the elusiveness of the term, most characterisations from research on the cognitive study of expert intuition include rapid perception, a lack of awareness of how solutions were derived, holistic understanding of situations, and a heightened emotional sensitivity to the context.

The Oxford Dictionary adopts a two-part conceptualisation of intuition, defining it as "The ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning" ("Intuition," 2019). Using more technical language, Richman et al. (1996) also adopt a two-part conceptualisation of intuition, namely: (a) an ability to recognise key features and patterns in situations while accessing relevant information, and (b) an ability to solve problems by searching in relevant spaces. The first ability concerns experts' speed and efficiency at cue recognition, and the second, their ability to draw on information and knowledge in their long-term memory to solve problems. An example of this would be a chess player intuitively recalling the best move from long-term memory in response to an opening gambit they have encountered numerous times. However, Richman et al's. definition allows for a crucial difference from the dictionary's definition—highlighting that expert decision making may include conscious deliberation as well as unconscious intuition. This is important to note as, not only does this different emphasis highlight some of the most contested areas of research on expert intuition, but it also provides a conceptual bridge for constructing dating expertise as a form of intuitive problem solving.

8.3.3 Dating initiation as problem solving

Dating research conceptualises relationship initiation in numerous ways, such as, a social exchange (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), a neuro-chemically inspired process (e.g., Fisher, 1998), or a quest to attract high-value mates to maximise reproductive fitness (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993). However, drawing on Richman et al. (1996), this thesis proposes a definition of expert dating intuition that draws on the language of expert intuition and constructs dating initiation as a problem to be solved:

> *Expert dating intuition is the ability to efficiently recognise and respond to key features to solve the problem of initiating a date.*

This definition suggests that key features (e.g., nonverbal solicitation cues such as preening) provide vital clues to the skilled dater. Significantly, the word "efficient" emphasises the requirement for both speed and accuracy and, while research on expert intuition focuses on non-conscious processing, the above definition does not exclude the reality that even the most intuitive dating experts may sometimes rely on conscious deliberation to optimise decision making. Sections 8.4 to 8.8 further develop how this definition applies to intuitive problem solving in dating, however the next section turns to discuss seminal research which laid the foundation for the cognitive study of expertise as a form of intuitive

performance.

8.3.4 Seminal research on expert intuition

8.3.4.1 Chess: the test-bed of expert intuition

Until the mid-to-late 1900's, intuition—considered too enigmatic and elusive to measure scientifically—was consigned to the realms of philosophy (Gobet, 2016). Seminal research by de Groot (1946/1978) and Simon (1969) made strides establishing the scientific study of expert intuition. With chess serving as the "test-bed" of expert intuition, players' skills were subjected to rigorous empirical research revealing that experts' fast, intuitive, performance relied on the ability to recognise patterns and home in on solutions quickly using selective search.

In his research, De Groot (1978) instructed world class chess players to "think aloud" while selecting moves. De Groot discovered that chess masters were no better than weaker players at selecting moves from unfamiliar positions. However, in familiar positions they far outperformed weaker players, using selective search to quickly home in on the best moves. The research revealed that chess masters had a better appreciation of a position after 5 seconds than a strong amateur after 15 seconds. Those first few seconds were crucial, with experts using chess pieces to concentrate their search on the most pertinent areas of the board; while less-expert chess players were over burdened by the options, focusing more time on less relevant cues. This was later corroborated by experimental data from de Groot and Gobet (1996) showing the most skilled players presented with a chess position spent more time focused on the most important squares than their less expert counterparts. De Groot argued this suggested chess experts skill relied on a holistic appreciation of key conceptual positions and deep schematic knowledge linked to perception, which meant they perceived different positions in "large complexes, each of which hangs together as a genetic, functional and or/dynamic nature" (de Groot, 1978, pp.329-30).

Experts' superior pattern recognition has been supported in recent research in other domains of expertise. For instance, in the high-stakes decision making process of medical diagnosis, expert radiologists are far more proficient at detecting abnormalities compared to novices (Reingold & Sheridan, 2011). Even with very brief exposure, expert radiologists are able to identify a large proportion of abnormalities, for instance detecting 70 per cent of abnormalities when images are presented for only 2000ms (Kundle & Nodine, 1975). Given the brief exposure time, which means radiologists have little time to make large eye movements, it suggests their proficiency depends heavily on peripheral vision.

Chase and Simon (1973) extended de Groot's (1978) research using a recall task to infer the perceptual and memory structures that accounted for chess players' ability to rapidly select the right move in familiar positions. They estimated that through years of practice, chess masters amassed a repertoire of 50,000 to 100,000 almost instantaneously recognisable *chunks*—a form of perceptual knowledge tied to actions which are stored in long-term memory and activated in response to particular cues or patterns. It was from this research that the "10 year rule of expertise" (discussed in Chapter 3) came into the

vernacular; with Ericsson et al. (1993) citing Chase and Simon's (1973) research to suggest it would take approximately a decade of serious play and practice to amass the vast repertoire of chunks necessary to become an expert chess player. It is these chunks that enable chess masters to rapidly home in on the best move without having to spend extensive time deliberating on feasible, but inferior, moves.

Chase and Simon's research aptly identified how experts' superior intuition relied on perceptual skill. However, their research had two key weaknesses, later addressed by Gobet and Simon (2000) and Chassy and Gobet (2011). First, Gobet and Simon (2000) recognised that chess players are likely to hold significantly more chunks in memory than previously suggested (300,000 instead of 100,000). Second, greater recognition was given to the holistic nature of intuition and the crucial role emotions play during the encoding of chunks. Together, the sheer magnitude of chunks and the holistic nature of perception, serve to explain why intuition takes so long to develop and leads to such significant increases in performance (Chassy & Gobet, 2011).

8.3.4.2 Five stages to intuitive expertise

In their influential work, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) who stressed the embodied, situated, and experiential nature of intuitive expertise, critiqued Simon (1989) and other "mechanistic" explanations of intuition that focused on cognitive processes. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980, 1988), identified five stages of expertise, spanning across novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and finally expert. At the level of a novice, performers are uncontrolled, deliberate, conscious, and inefficient. By the time they become experts, their perception and decision making is highly efficient, fluid, automated, holistic and unconscious. This view was embodied in Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1988) words "experts don't solve problems and don't make decisions; they do what normally works" (p. 30-31). While their conceptualisation helped to establish expertise as an incremental process that results in fluid, holistic, intuitive action; Dreyfus and Dreyfus' view had notable weaknesses.

Besides glaring critiques—such as the lack of empirical evidence and the lack of ecological validity of a model of expertise that attempts to neatly sort expertise in a five-stage model (Gobet & Chassy, 2009)—there are two key criticisms to discuss here. First, Dreyfus and Dreyfus failed to acknowledge the importance of emotions in guiding intuitive expert decision making which is crucial to expertise (this is discussed further in Section 8.8). Second, they were too ardent in stressing the rapid, fluid, and unconscious aspects of expert decision making—thereby failing to account for the analytical aspects of expert decision making such as deliberation and planning (Gobet & Chassy, 2009). As Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1988) wrote, experts "are characterized by a rapid, fluid, involved kind of behaviour that bears no apparent similarity to the slow, detached reasoning of the problem-solving process" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1988, p. 27). This focus on the automatic nature of expert cognition, fails to acknowledge just how often experts engage in deliberate thinking to enhance performance (e.g., Gobet, 2011; Sutton, et al., 2011), which has significant implications for how we understand expert dating intuition and decision making.

8.4 Synthesising Expert Intuition and Dating: The Four "Pillars" of Expert Dating Intuition

In Section 8.2's *A Tale of Two Dating Initiators,* the two hypothetical performers' dating initiation skills varied significantly. James—indecisive, unsure, and ineffectual—exemplifies a novice. Max—fluid, assured, polished—exemplifies an expert. While the tale served as an analogy, the remainder of this chapter reviews literature that suggests the difference between their performances, and between dating novices and experts more generally, relies on four main characteristics, or "pillars," of intuition. Sections 8.5 to 8.8 systematically synthesise research on expert intuition dating to develop a number of conceptual models to advance that these pillars embody the main determinants of highly skilled intuitive dating performance.

8.5 Pillar 1: Dual Processing

8.5.1 Introduction

In *A Tale of Two Initiators,* a crucial difference between James and Max was their contrasting ability to draw on two styles of cognitive processing studied by researchers of *dual processing.* Max's performance embodied key characteristics of the first style of cognition known as *System 1* processing, which is rapid, holistic, high capacity, unconscious, and intuitive. James' performance embodied key characteristics of the second style of cognition referred to as *System 2*, which is slow, low capacity, and relies on conscious deliberation. This section integrates research on expert intuition and dating to suggest that peak dating performance relies on dual processing—theorised to be the first pillar of expert dating intuition (see Figure 26).
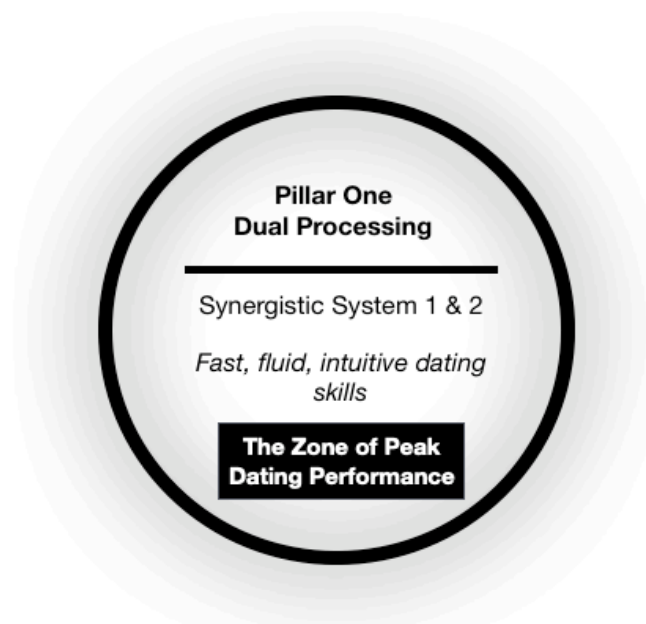
Figure 26. *Pillar one - dual processing.* Dual processing is the first pillar of expert dating intuition. Highly skilled dating experts rely on System 1 cognition to initiate dates fast, fluidly, and reliably. However, System 1 and System 2 operate synergistically and, in particular circumstances, even the most skilled daters' decision making is improved by using System 2 cognition.

Research in numerous domains of expertise emphasises that experts' fast, rapid, intuitive problem solving is a result of sophisticated System 1 processing (Evans, 2010; Järvilehto, 2015). This section supports this view in dating—suggesting archetypal skilled dating performance relies heavily on System 1 cognition as, like other domains of expertise, dating initiation calls for smooth, rapid, flowing performance (Burleson, 1995). However, while some theorists downplay the role of System 2 style cognition in expert performance, as suggested by Figure 26, the first pillar of expert dating intuition forwards that the two forms of cognition are best construed as synergistic; with even the most intuitive dating experts drawing on slower, deliberative, System 2 processing when required for expert decision

making.

8.5.2 The rise of dual process theories

In recent years *dual process theory* (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Kahneman & Klein, 2009) has been perhaps the most debated theory of expert intuition. The theories influence spans numerous fields including cognitive psychology, social psychology, philosophy and decision making (Järvilehto, 2015). The theory posits that decision making is guided by two cognitive "systems" (sometimes referred to as "types"). Different researchers emphasise different aspects of the systems, although the dichotomy was perhaps most notably captured in the title of Kahneman's *New York Times* best seller, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011); with "thinking fast" being System 1, and "thinking slow" being System 2. System 1 is often argued to be rapid, intuitive, automatic, unconscious, and high capacity—being able to process large amounts of information. System 2 is typically presented as being slow, conscious, deliberate, and low capacity—able to process small amounts of information. Disagreements abound regarding the nature of the two systems (Järvilehto, 2015), with disputes embody in such questions as: do the two systems operate independently? Does System 1 cognition produce accurate problem solving, or is it fallible? If it is flawed, what environments does it fair worst in? The intersection of these disputes provides the opportunity to reflect on how dating experts use System 1 or System 2 to solve the problem of initiating dates successfully.

8.5.3 Cognitively demanding situations as the domain of intuitive System 1 performance

Consider an elite American football player in the *Super Bowl* championship game. Ball wedged underarm, five-seconds on the clock, five points behind, he's running at the limits of his potential towards the end zone. However, instead of running instinctively, he attempts to consciously plot his way through a mass of sprawling legs and arms to score the winning touchdown. Similarly, call to mind a pianist on centre stage in London's *Royal Albert Hall*. Playing the score, they attempt to block out the audience and "think" about the precise placement of each finger movement. Research suggests in such cognitively demanding situations as both of these, deliberative System 2 processing would be highly problematic and impair performance. In internationally competitive domains of expertise, superlative demonstrations demand that performers possess complex mental representations to facilitate rapid, unconscious, intuitive problem solving (Ericsson, 1998)—the sort of problem solving that System 1 excels at.

Researchers of *naturalistic decision making* (Klein, 2008) who—in the tradition of de Groot (1978) emphasise the superior perceptual powers of intuitive experts—have amassed a large body of research on real-world situations such as in firefighting, the army and navy, aviation, and medicine, where such System 1 intuitive expertise is demanded (Klein, 2001; 1986). These domains share a number of similarities, such as: high complexity, significant uncertainty, vaguely defined goals, significant time pressure, and shifting

conditions. In such complex, fast moving, high risk environments, decision makers have little time for conscious deliberation or speculation about the solution: they need to act.

Indeed, in such situations, performance is optimised by operating in the flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). In flow, performers feel totally engaged in the activity, actions feel effortless, solutions arise rapidly and performers are free from self-consciousness and inefficient deliberation (Doyle, 2017). Flow is what the American footballer and the concert pianist described above drew on to reach the highest level of performance. In *A Tale of Two Initiators,* Max's performance embodied a flow state, whereas James lacked it. In flow, System 1 processing utilises gut-instinct to facilitate effective, rapid, affectively charged, non-conscious decision making (Dane, Rockmann & Pratt, 2012). That is why expert dating—which the next section compares to domains of expertise studied by researchers of naturalistic decision making—is arguably greatly dependent on System 1.

8.5.4 Dating as cognitively demanding

In cognitively demanding domains studied by researchers of naturalistic decision making, System 1 intuition is vital, facilitating problem solving that is "good enough" in the given context. As illustrated in Table 12, when we examine expert dating initiation, it shares many conditions found in other demanding domains of expertise.

Table 12

Naturalistic decision making: Example variables that influence firefighting and dating

Conditions	Firefighting	Dating
High complexity	Multiple cues, firefighters, Ambulance, public, children, flames, smoke, buildings, rooms	Multiple cues, numerous people and observers, competition, situational exigencies
Significant uncertainty	Unpredictable fire/smoke, location of people in building, buildings capacity to resist fire, amount of support	The target's relationship status (single, looking?), the target's personal preferences, current mood and the influence of their friends
Time pressured	Threat to life, rapid speed of fire and smoke	Limited time to make a positive impression and convey attractive values
Vaguely defined and/or multiple/ shifting goals	Multiple goals e.g., to save lives, to control smoke and fire, to keep people inside until additional support arrives, to facilitate evacuation, to ensure colleagues survive, to conform to health and safety regulations	Multiple goals e.g., short-term or long-term relationship, to demonstrate your attractive qualities and make a good impression, to screen partner for their attractive qualities, to have an enjoyable evening, to go to a bar and "see what happens," to meet someone new to "get over" a previous lover
Predictable elements	Fire/smoke operates in specific ways, weather influences fire/smoke can be anticipated, particular building materials/ structures react to fire in anticipated ways, human behaviour in fires has foreseeable characteristics	Dating interactions involve various phases found in dating initiation models, people use specific verbal and non-verbal cues which communicate their attractiveness or lack of desire, they use stereotypical dating scripts
Shifting environment	Flames, explosions, weather, people on the scene, number of firefighters, fires at alternative buildings which command resources	Changing mood/goals, interruptions by friends, observers, bar staff etc

For instance, as Chapter 4 revealed, dating (like firefighting) is highly complex and requires great skill and tactical awareness (Greer & Buss, 1994). However, people have limited cognitive resources, and just the act of holding a conversation with someone of the opposite sex we are attracted to can be a cognitively demanding task (Geher & Kaufman, 2013; Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). Dating involves significant uncertainty; the initiator must make rapid judgments and execute numerous skills in response to a vast range of interpersonal and environmental cues. While evolutionary theorists stress the *ultimate goal* is to secure mates that maximise fitness, as interdependence theory underscores, people's *proximate goals* are complex, multifaceted, and emerge moment by moment in an interaction. Despite facing the complex task of discovering a potential partner's desires, an initiator has limited time to make a positive impression before the environment shifts and they have to part company. Despite the complexity of figuring out what might attract a potential partner, an initiator has limited time to make a positive impression before the environment changes and they have to part company. However dating also embodies many predictable elements. This is why, for instance, researchers use courtship models (see Chapter 4) to illuminate underlying interactional patterns. It is also why, as this chapter will discuss, dating experts' use of stereotypical responses and embedded routines can be so successful. In such cognitively demanding environments—as with firefighting, sports, and the military—skilled daters need to respond quickly and intuitively.

8.5.5 Dating experts as highly skilled System 1 performers

Despite the complex skills required to be proficient at dating, an extensive body of research reveals that people are attracted to partners who exhibit fluid, smooth, graceful performances. Burleson (1995) described the characteristics required for successful dating initiation:

> Early in the acquaintance process a major task facing partners is establishing and maintaining smooth, flowing, non-problematic interactions. Thus, skill in initiating conversations, finding a common topic, extending conversation to new topics, displaying interest in the other, etc. will be particularly important determinants of satisfying interactions. (p. 577-578)

In contrast, dating performances that are clumsy and inept with decisions made "too slowly or not all," are common social failings little desired in an interactional partner (Nyatanga, 1989, p. 60). With respect to skilled, System 1 style performance, bountiful research suggests some males possess sophisticated intuitive powers relevant to dating. For instance, research suggests relationship initiation depends on men being able to recognise a diverse range of "come-on" solicitation cues provided by females (Moore, 1985, Perper & Weis, 1987). They perceive subtle cues (clothing, dress, makeup, dancing style) that suggest women are open to short-term mating (Moore, 2010). Research also suggests some males' intuitive ability to respond to cues is surprisingly acute—even able to detect cues to female

menstruation that predict willingness to mate. When women are ovulating they are more open to short-term sexual encounters and illicit affairs (Fiske, et al., 2010), with males' cue reading ability supported by research that shows men give larger tips to female strippers who are ovulating—finding them more physically attractive and their scent more enticing (Geher & Kaufman, 2013).

Lenton and Francesconi (2010) provide convincing evidence for the view that as the dating environment becomes more complex, people rely more on System 1 intuition to make decisions. Their results from 84 speed-dating events revealed that when daters were in environments with abundant choice in partners they gave more priority to easily assessed characteristics in a partner such as height and weight, rather than characteristics such as personality, which are harder to discern and require greater cognitive attention.

8.5.6 Domains of System 2 deliberation: Gut instinct and intuition as a "false friend"

While fast, fluid, intuitive, System 1 processing in dating is advantageous—just as Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1988) view is criticised for over emphasising experts' intuitive ability—it is important not to oversimplify the role of intuitive System 1 processing in dating. As Evans (2010) points out, "intuitive thinkers will do better in some fields of activity and analytic thinkers in others" (p. 315). System 1 processing is not equally suited to all domains and, even in domains which call on fast paced decision making, when we scrutinise experts' performances we find that System 2 deliberation often features highly (Gobet, 2011).

Researchers who identify with the *heuristics and biases approach* (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), have amassed significant research demonstrating the circumstances in which System 1 cognition can lead to inferior decision making, while slow, low capacity, System 2, can improve decision making (Kahaneman & Klein, 2009). For instance, while System 1 processing and rapid gut instinct can be effective when adapted to the situation, in certain circumstances it can be highly inefficient and even a "false friend," offering quick instinctive solutions that feel right, but in fact are not (Evans, 2010).

In this regard, a major strength of System 2 is that it facilitates "logical," deliberative reasoning which can be used to improve decision making (Järvilehto, 2015). Such deliberation is especially useful in situations where hypothetical thinking can facilitate problem solving (Gobet, 2011); for instance, in novel situations where performers do not possess the requisite experience or mental representations to facilitate intuitive problem solving.

8.5.7 Default-interventionist cognition: System 1 and System 2 as synergistic

As research suggests some domains are more suited to System 1, and some System 2, there are grounds for classifying them as distinct cognitive systems. But are they? Magnus Carlsen, the prodigious Norwegian grandmaster, is the current FIDE World Chess Champion and World Blitz Champion. As suggested by the name, blitz chess is played at significantly faster pace than classic chess, with only seconds allowed for each move. When Carlsen plays for the blitz title, he is therefore required to make crucial decisions faster and more intuitively than for the World Chess Championship. Notwithstanding the time pressure, while some moves may not be optimal, research shows that the first moves the best chess players generate are usually good enough (Gobet, 2011). For the World Chess Championship there is vastly more time to deliberate, with chess players taking an average of a few minutes per move. In such a situation, performance can be improved by using the time available to use System 2 deliberation to "check" System 1's intuitive response . In this way, it can be argued that elite chess players such as Carlsen use their Systems 1 and 2 synergistically to make decisions in a manner described by researchers of expert intuition as *default-interventionist* (Evans, 2010).

Default-interventionist cognition can be construed as decision by "committee," whereby System 1 proposes intuitive answers and, where these are unsatisfactory or insufficient, System 2 cognition interjects providing more reasoned responses. This has two important implications. First, it suggests the two Systems *are not* separate, rather, as Järvilehto (2015) writes, "There are, in fact, not two separate systems that would function as independent modules, but rather the two systems are intertwined" (p. 28). Second, that default-interventionist responding provides experts with an effective cognitive workaround to address the limitations of rapid intuition. Researchers provide numerous examples of how interaction between System 1 and System 2 improves decision making. For instance, Brown and Daus (2015) argue that when police are faced by high stake decisions (ie. discharge of weapons) default-interventionist responding can facilitate better decision making, allowing emotions such as fear and anger to be controlled in favour of composed and deliberative System 2 decisions.

8.5.8 A conceptual model of default-interventionist responding in dating

If experts cannot always rely on intuitive System 1 problem solving, what might default-interventionist responding look like in dating; and how might it improve decision making? Drawing on the previous arguments, the thesis has developed a conceptual model of default-interventionist responding in dating, where System 1 proposes intuitive answers and System 2, when appropriate, interjects.

The conceptual model in Figure 27, illustrates how such a system might work, enabling dating experts to draw on their System 1 and System 2 to solve problems efficiently and synergistically.
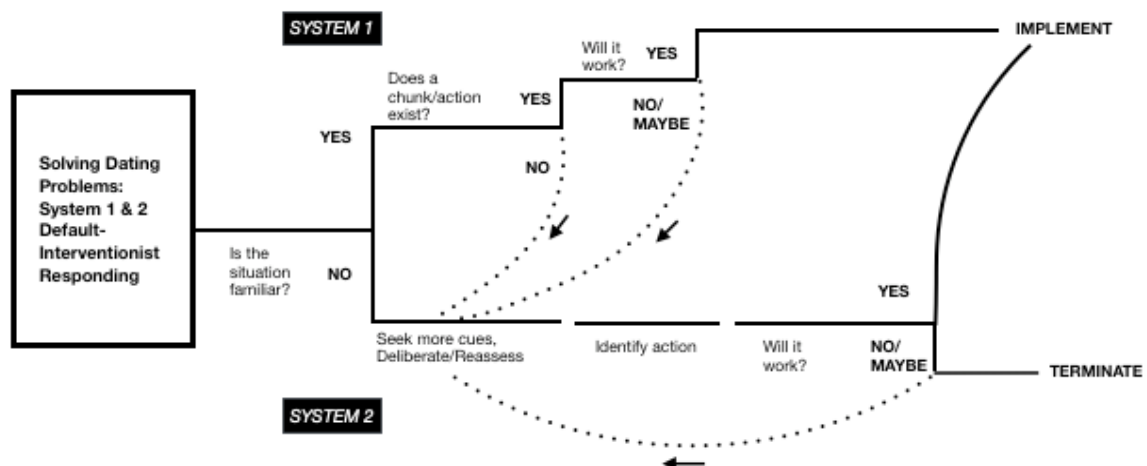
Figure 27. *Proposed model for default-interventionist responding in dating.*

The model proposes that in a dating initiation situation which is familiar and a satisfactory chunk with associated action exists, System 1 processing proposes a solution which the dating expert implements. In unfamiliar circumstances where no chunk is associated with the situation System 2 deliberation takes over, facilitating conscious reasoning about what actions offer the optimal solution. In situations which are familiar but the chunk proposed is not satisfactory, like a committee, both System 1 and 2 will be engaged in a default-interventionist decision. The conceptual model can be illustrated using a hypothetical example of a male attempting to initiate a date.

8.5.8.1 A hypothetical example of default-interventionist cognition in dating

On entering a bar, a male notices an attractive female. She's waiting to order a drink, and the bar tender is occupied serving other patrons. The following occurs.

1. From the corner of his peripheral vision, the male notices the female using solicitation behaviours. She is attempting to catch his eye with "short darting glances" while "preening her hair," both cues research reveals are come-on cues (Moore, 1985). His intuition suggests, "She may be attracted."
2. However, surrounded by people, the initiation presents uncertainties and challenges. He consciously reflects, "How much is she *really* attracted?" He is aware that a characteristic of the male mind is to overestimate one's attractiveness (a phenomenon supported in research, see for instance Sim, Saperia, Brown & Bernieri, 2015), and consciously decides to wait for additional cues before making his move.
3. Although the target is now facing the bar, she subtly adjusts her body and looks directly into his eyes using a "gaze fixate" of three seconds; flashing a smile directly at him, before turning back to face the bar.

4. Instinctively, he is compelled to approach. He starts to make his way past those standing between them. As he walks, opening lines form in his "mind's eye." The first is a direct opener: "You're hot, you should talk to me." But he reasons it feels flippant and lacks context. A more contextual opener associated with being in a bar comes to mind: "Are you a cocktail or wine lover?" But it feels telegraphed, uninspired and lacks subtlety. Instead, an opening line he used successfully two weeks ago bubbles into consciousness, and he decides it's a good fit.

5. As he reaches her, he gently, almost imperceptibly, slides shoulder to shoulder, announcing, "I noticed you at the bar, and the competitive side of me couldn't resist a conundrum: if a handsome guy and an attractive girl are at the bar, who gets served first?" [Note: this line is an adaption of an opening line in *Love Systems*, 2007, p. 25).]

6. His introduction goes down well, and the initiator moves into a simple playful transition associated with the opener.

Though a simplified version of two people meeting, it serves to highlight how the initiators' System 1 proposed intuitive solutions and System 2 style deliberation ratified them. Such System 1 and System 2 default-interventionist processing likely takes place in milliseconds, and in a solitary dating initiation System 1 and System 2 might result in numerous joint decisions.

8.6 Pillar 2: Expert Perception

8.6.1 Introduction

Why are some people are able to walk into a bar and rapidly orientate themselves to a person open for a romantic liaison? Like Max in *A Tale of Two Initiators*, they seem to possess an intuitive, almost supernatural, understanding of who is most open to a new romantic liaison, and how best to delight, intrigue and attract.

Figure 28. *Pillar two - expert perception.* Expert perception is the second pillar of expert dating intuition. In familiar situations, dating experts' sophisticated powers of pattern recognition enable them to recognise cues and use stereotypical responses and production rules to solve the problem of initiating a date, rapidly, fluidly, and intuitively.

This section integrates research on expertise and dating that suggests superior performers' ability to solve problems is due their powers of perception—the second pillar of expert dating intuition (see, Figure 28). Dating experts' sophisticated search and pattern recognition enables them to home in on familiar dating related cues and use stereotypical responses to execute embedded action programs that optimise their chances of success.

8.6.2 Expert perception and cue recognition

8.6.2.1 Cues and expert performance

Traced back to the seminal research of de Groot (1978), research shows that chessmasters' ability to immediately "know" the correct solution to a problem lies in experts' highly refined cue recognition. For instance, when shown a chess board, while less-expert players spend significant time examining a wide range of potential moves, experts' selective search leads them to focus on the most relevant cues, enabling them to quickly arrive at the best solution (de Groot, 1978; de Groot & Gobet, 1996). Research

in numerous domains confirms experts' superior perception and cue acuity. For instance research using eye fixation shows a half-second glimpse often being sufficient for skilled radiologists to detect normal from abnormal mammograms and identify breast cancer (Reingold & Sheridan, 2011).

8.6.2.2 Two varieties of dating initiation cues

Research reveals cues are also decisive in courtship and dating (Moore, 2010). Chapter 4's review of the dating literature highlighted a range of verbal and non-verbal cues used by daters to make inferences; revealing that experienced communicators are significantly better at reading and acting on cues. There are two types of cues that are particularly relevant for a discussion of dating experts' superior perception.

First, are *cues of indicative interest*—such as the "come-on" solicitation cues—used by females to attract a male's attention (Moore, 1985). Qualitative research reveals the females have some 52 nonverbal cues to encourage males to approach, such as eye gazing, smiling, licking lips, head tossing, and primping (Moore, 1985). Being able to spot such cues is an important skill for any dating expert, with research revealing that in about two-thirds of cases of pickups in bars, females provided come-on solicitation cues to males before they approached (Moore, 2010).

Once an interaction has commenced there is still much to accomplish, with the second type of cue—*cues indicating how to proceed*—provided throughout the interaction, serving to guide the outcome of the dating interaction. Through the courtship males need to be highly skilled at responding to these female cues of *proceptivity* (Perper & Weis, 1987)—where behaviours such as smiling, eye-gazing, moving closer and touching, are used by females to indicate that they wish the interaction to continue.

While dating cues can be highly subtle, they are certainly recognisable. Some men are particularly expert at correctly interpreting such cues, and evidence from skills training also shows clinicians set out to improve clients' ability to recognise them (Tenhula & Bellack, 2008). Across the various phases of a dating interaction both members of the dyad contribute to the successful escalation of the courtship, interpreting cues to assign a value to one another and working out how to respond. As Geher and Kaufman (2013) write:

> Each piece of new information we learn about a potential mate helps guide our decision to continue chatting with (or dating) that person, and people differ from one another in terms of what level of each cue is good enough for them. (p. 81)

Given the subtlety of cues, they are easily misinterpreted. A misinterpreted come-on cue, could provoke an inappropriate opening line, which research suggests undermines attraction (Bale et al., 2006; Kleinke, 1986). Additionally, failing to respond to cues indicating how to proceed might result in the male escalating the intimacy of the interaction too quickly, or conversely not quickly enough (Perper & Weis's, 1987).

8.6.3 Experts' reliance on the familiar: Using cues and stereotypical responses

Dating cues do not operate in isolation. Indeed, an important contribution of de Groot's (1978) research was to link cue perception to vast networks of schematic knowledge that facilitates skilled problem solving using embedded routines and stereotypical responses (Gobet, 2016). While Chapter 9 develops a model conceptualising dating experts' knowledge structures, spanning cue recognition, to chunks and mental representations; this section focuses on establishing how experts use *automatisms, scripts,* and *production rules* to rapidly and reliably solve stereotypical problems. While it may appear that expert intuition is instinctive and highly improvised, as Gobet (2016) explains drawing on the example of chess, non-experts may be surprised just how regularly experts use the same approach to solve predictable problems:

> Rather than being innovative and discovering new methods, playing chess appears to be more about being able to apply well-known methods in the right situation efficiently. The importance and number of stereotypical and reproductive methods may come as a surprise to the uninitiated. (p. 71).

Given how complex dating is, it may be similarly surprising that social interactions in fact follow predictable lines and that domain-specific scripts, automatisms, and production rules can be used repeatedly within different interactions (Hargie, 2006). This is supported in dating by research which reveals that people who hold a large number of previously used scripts declaratively, in the form of stories and anecdotes, are more successful at navigating dating interactions (Metts & Mikucki, 2008).

8.6.3.1 If-Then rules

If-Then rules are a common form of production rule used by experts and skilled communicators that improve the predictability of problem solving (Gobet, 2016). If-Then rules are used in social interactions and dating. Greene (2003, p. 60) provides an example of a simple If-Then rule used in a greeting:

> *If:* One wishes to address another and the other is of higher status,
> *Then:* Use his/her title plus name.

In their qualitative research, Perper and Weis (1987) described the If-Then rules used by females when "recalcitrant males" do not "get the hint" (i.e., respond to their cues of romantic encouragement). Females strategies to "seduce" recalcitrant males are abundant and sometimes explicit. For instance, one participant described, "If he takes me home without mentioning the idea of having sex at all and I feel I really want to I'd say something like, 'I'd love to stay with you tonight'" (p. 463).

Another described, how she would respond to cues by, "'Being very gentle and careful would be the way I would try to have sex with him'" (p. 464). Perper and Weis described the daters' If-Then decision making as, "strikingly logical and analytical… like a flowchart or a decision tree" (p. 463); which is highly reminiscent of theory that suggests chess masters use *decision trees* or *search trees* along with production rules to improve the probability of success (see, Gobet, 2004).

Applied to dating, there are infinite combinations of If-Then rules. For instance, *If* a person is wearing a ring on their wedding finger, *then* assume they are married. *If* an interactional partner touches me on the shoulder, *then* it is appropriate to reciprocate and touch them on the shoulder. Further support of automatisms and If-then rules were provided in the findings. For instance, the dating experts' repetitive use of Community routines and gambits were supported in Finding 5, *academic research supports the effectiveness of Community techniques*, and Chapter 6's thematic analysis revealed how a dating expert used *The Expressive Routine*—a highly automatised routine with numerous decisions branches, If-Then rules and stereotypical responses—in over 200 interactions.

8.6.3.2 Caveat regarding the effectiveness of stereotypical responding

As Simon (1957) captured in his work on *satisficing,* it is important to note that stereotypical responses need not be optimal, but rather they must be "good enough." This idea of *good enough* also applies to dating (Geher & Kaufman, 2013). The use of behavioural routines and stereotypical responses need not be "perfect"; rather they must generate *sufficient attraction*—with no requirement for any more than this. However, embedded routines and stereotypical responses can cause problems for the aspiring dater. If dating scripts and routines come across as pre-prepared or "canned," they are typically poorly received (Bale et al.,2006; Geher & Kaufman, 2013). Thus the most skilled performers will be highly adaptable and tailor their scripts to the cues provided by the situation and interactional partner. Such is the importance of being flexible to the situation, that it is discussed extensively in the next pillar— *autonomy and adaptability*.

8.7 Pillar 3: Autonomy and Adaptability

8.7.1 Introduction

Pillar two, expert perception, revealed that experts' ability to solve problems with little thought, quickly and autonomously, relies on their ability to recognise cues and perform associated routines. In familiar environments, they have little need to "think" about "the rules" of what to do; after-all, there are few problems they have not successfully solved many times before. However this provides—at least on the surface—a paradox. In complex domains of expertise, while many situations are structurally similar, they also have dynamic and elements which require adaptive problem solving (Klein, 2008). This has been described by Sternberg (1996) as presenting an "experts paradox," which he captures with the following explanation: "There are costs as well as benefits to expertise. One such cost is increasing rigidity: the expert can become so entrenched in a point of view or way doing things that it becomes hard to see things differently." (p. 347).
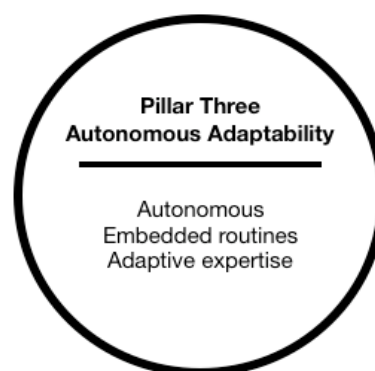
Figure 29. *Pillar three - autonomous adaptability.* Autonomous adaptability is the third pillar of expert dating intuition. Dating experts are able to operate in a wide range of environments. With a large repertoire of embedded routines they are highly autonomous, with little need to think of "the rules." In novel situations they are able to adapt and improvise, producing "natural" performances

Our understanding of this paradox can be illuminated by drawing on *A Tale of Two Dating Initiators.* While James, as a novice, struggled to access any helpful problem solving routines using his System 1 or System 2, Max revealed he was able to overcome this predicament. His sophisticated perceptual skills enabled him to recognise cues and draw on a vast network of embedded routines to perform fluidly, rapidly, and autonomously. However, Max was not limited by experience and his performance reached the liberating performance state of flow. He still adapted to situational exigencies; creatively using novelty and humour to tailor his performance to Mia. His ability to be *both* autonomous and adaptable, is a crucial characteristic of the expert performer and therefore constitutes the third pillar of expert dating intuition, *autonomous adaptability* (see Figure 29). The remainder of Section 8.7 draws on

research from expert intuition and dating to illuminate why dating expertise embodies the third pillar of autonomous adaptability.

8.7.2 Experts as autonomous and free from "rules"

In dating and traditional domains of expertise, the most skilled performers intuitively execute routinised skills that are good enough for most situations they encounter. This view is consistent with Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1988) archetypal intuitive expert, who was liberated from the burden of System 2 deliberation, with little need to consciously call to mind the rules or think about the best course of action. To recall Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1998) earlier quote, "experts don't solve problems and don't make decisions; they do what normally works" (p. 30-31).

Similarly, Fitts and Posner's (1967) characterisation of development suggested that by the third autonomous phase of skill acquisition, experts' skills become highly integrated, automatic, fluid, and routinised; they require little attention to execute. Having compiled mental representations from years of practice, experts have the know-how to execute skills with little effort (Ericsson, 1998). No wonder people desire to be efficacious; it brings a liberating sense of freedom and autonomy that beginners are yet to experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Such liberated, autonomous, interactional partners are also highly attractive in dating. Laboured conversation—where a partner struggles to think of what to say, feels wooden, artificial, and makes us self-conscious—is unattractive (Hargie, 2006). For this reason, a key aim in skills training is to help clients overcome "training dips," a reference to how, when people are taught new interactional scripts, their performance temporarily declines as they become overly mindful and conscious of their actions, producing somewhat stilted and unnatural interactions. Once scripts have been sufficiently practiced and embedded, performers overcome this dip, achieving unconscious competence. At this stage performers no longer need to "think" of the rules they have been taught, and can produce the free flowing, natural, holistic exchanges expected in social interaction (Hargie, 2006).

8.7.3 Adaptability and dating expertise

Given the fast, uncertain, complex nature of dating, experts rely on routinised behaviour; yet also need to be able to adapt to unique situations. Research on expert performance and dating suggests two ways in which experts achieve this adaptability.

8.7.3.1 Experts have a wide range of embedded routines and automatisms

First, research reveals that experts have many more automatisms than non-experts (Gobet 2016), which facilitates the ability to rapidly respond to a wide range of problems. Similarly, skilled communicators have many more embedded routines and scripts than novices (Hargie, 2006). As Segrin and Givertz (2003) observe, skilled communicators' ability depends upon "possess[ing] a repertoire of

sufficient breadth and flexibility" (p.194).

When we conceive of "problems," it should be recognised that many problems experts face are not single problems, but rather multiple problems stitched together (Gobet, 2016). In this regard having a wide range of automatisms provides a related benefit: it frees up precious working memory. This is done by enabling routine components of problems to be solved with rapid System 1 intuition, while using slower conscious System 2 deliberation to solve novel or less familiar components of the problem. Research on school teachers managing unruly classrooms provides an example of how this works in practice. Expert teachers were found to use automated scripts to manage the routine facets of teaching, freeing their working memory to tackle other less predictable exigencies such as discipline management (Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986). Described as a form of "relational multitasking," this ability is also essential in dating, with Segrin and Givertz (2003) describing it as the "indubitable mark of the skilful communicator" (p. 194).

8.7.3.2 Experts use routines adaptably and improvise: Humour as an exemplar

Another way in which skilled performers manage to solve less predictable problems is by being flexible and making adjustments to situational factors (Ericsson, 1998). In this regard, Hatano and Inagaki (1984) distinguish *adaptive expertise* from *routine expertise* to emphasise how experts could counter excessive routinisation and respond to the unique nuances of a problem. With experience and practice, the most skilled operators become highly adaptive, developing dynamic repertoires; as Sutton (2011) describes:

> Experts have opened their 'reflexes' up into acquired adaptive patterns, and constructed over time not a set array of clever moves, but dynamic repertoires of potential action sequences which can be accessed, redeployed, and transformed appropriately. (p. 96)

Such dynamism is required in complex dating situations. While dating has highly structured elements, it occurs in dynamic spaces with many environmental factors; even the most straightforward dating interactions will require some level of variation. As Wilson and Sabee (2003) note, even "scripted" initial interactions between two people contain sufficient variation that participants must make ongoing decisions about which action programs to enact throughout the interaction.

A characteristic that readily comes to mind when considering the ability to be adaptive in dating initiation, is the use of wit and humour. Indeed, a significant amount of research suggests dating success relies on humour, such as using chat up lines that appear witty and improvised as opposed to those that appear canned (Kleinke et al., 1986). Bale et al's (2006) study suggested that males can use *wit*—defined as, "spontaneous jokes that fit the context exactly, are genuinely funny, and require intelligence" (p. 661) —to increase attraction. However, poorly adapted attempts at humour such as "pre-planned jokes and one-liners" that are telegraphed, do not demonstrate intelligence and are unattractive. While the latter indicates the ability to memorise material, the former is perceived as a genuine cue of adaptability, intelligence, and genuine interest.

8.7.4 Summary

The third pillar of intuitive dating expertise consists of autonomy and adaptability. Dating presents both routine and novel problems. Overly "automatised daters" are perceived as robotic and unnatural. But dating expertise is best construed as existing on a continuum. The most skilled performers have the benefit of being able to execute embedded System 1 action programs to familiar problems. This, in turn, saves precious working memory for System 2 deliberation when novel situations arise, allowing experts to solve dating problems autonomously and adaptively.

8.8 Pillar 4: Emotional Attunement

8.8.1 Introduction

Why can saying a word as simple as "Hello" to an attractive stranger be so anxiety provoking? Flooded with adrenaline, we focus on hypothetical thoughts of being painfully rejected. When fear takes grip, and our emotions and gut are screaming "No! Don't approach!" it feels natural to find excuses not to initiate. This section focuses on *emotional attunement*, the final pillar of expert dating intuition. Essentially, this fourth pillar reveals how dating experts' emotions help them to initiate dates, while dating novices' emotions hinder them.

In *A Tale of Two Dating Initiators,* many of us may identify with James. Overwhelmed by the situation, his gut instincts, so often a reliable guide, let him down. His emotional guidance system focused on "negative" cues, creating intense social pressure and debilitating over-arousal. Struggling with self-doubt, James' System 2 became overly analytical, and he failed to conjure up an appropriate dating line, or to even access the most primitive domain-general scripts for something as common as meeting a stranger.

Figure 30. Pillar four - emotional attunement. Emotional attunement is the fourth pillar of expert dating intuition. Dating experts' emotions act as an *emotional guidance system*, influencing the cues they attend to and their ability to create a highly attuned "two-person experience of connectedness and romantic attraction."

Although faced with the same initiation problem, Max had a very different experience. Being emotionally attuned to the situation, he homed in on "positive" cues, and navigated the interaction, drawing on his large repertoire of routines to successfully interact with Mia. They experienced a reciprocal two-way emotional connection that produced the desire to meet again. This section draws on research on expert intuition to better understand how emotions likely influence dating success which—as illustrated in figure 30—considers three varieties of emotional attunement.

8.8.2 Recognition of emotions in intuitive problem solving

Theories on expert intuition need to explain how *emotion* is linked to perception, action, and a holistic understanding of a situation (Gobet & Chassy, 2009). While early research revealed the importance of holistic responding (e.g., Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1988), and pattern recognition (e.g., de Groot, 1978); they failed to explain how intuition is "colored by emotions" (Gobet, 2016).

Emotions are relatively short-lived evaluative states with a cognitive and neurological basis (Lawyler & Thye, 1999). Typically outside of conscious control (Chassy & Gobet, 2011), emotions are now recognised as a powerful part of the cognitive apparatus for guiding and shaping intuitive System 1 problem solving (Chassy & Gobet, 2011; Jarvilheto, 2015).

8.8.2.1 Emotions as a guidance system

Emotions are hypothesised to have evolved as an adaptive cognitive system to guide behavioural responses, facilitating rapid instinctual and intuitive decisions in response to uncertainty (Luo & Yu, 2015). They work as a *heuristic,* a "mental shortcut" that provides a holistic, accessible summary of experience, producing a gut feeling that triggers patterned responding (Fenton-O-Creevy et al., 2010).

Emotions can be conceptualised in terms of how they act as an emotional guidance system—influencing cognition, the cues we attend to and the chunks we access for solving problems (Chassy & Gobet, 2011). Firefighters' actions are directed by cues relating to the severity of the flames (Klein, 2001); nurses by the distress of patients (Benner, et al., 1992); and the keen dater by the solicitation cues (e.g., a three second gaze) of his potential mate (Moore & Butler, 1989). Drawing on this, we can construct a simple relationship expressing how emotions influence attention to cues and problem solving:

> Emotions influence the cues people attend to, which influences the accessibility of chunks, which influences problem solving capacity.

This definition illustrates how emotions can guide or undermine efficient System 1 problem solving. At their best, emotions facilitate intuitive problem solving (Brown & Daus, 2015; Chassy & Gobet, 2011); at their worst, they are detrimental, producing systemic errors with significant consequences (Sinclair & Ashkanasy, 2005). Indeed, large amounts of research reveal the biasing effect of emotions. For instance, Lo, Repin and Steenbarger (2002) showed emotional arousal due to short-term market fluctuation leads financial traders—especially the least experienced—to make poor trade decisions; while emotional arousal can undermine even the most experienced traders. In their study, more experienced traders were less likely to make snap decisions, basing their reasoning on long-term positions.

8.8.3 Emotional attunement

Given the biasing nature of emotions, this would suggest that intuitive decision making is optimised when emotions are "attuned"—i.e., the negative effects of biasing are avoided. Literature on dating and relationships discusses this in terms of *emotional attunement*. Gottman (2013) defines emotional attunement as, "the desire and the ability to understand and respect your partner's inner world" (p. 31). Erskine (1998) provides a more expansive definition, describing it as:

A kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others, knowing their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feeling connectedness by providing a reciprocal affect and/or resonating response. (p. 238)

Erskine's definition highlights the holistic, synergistic, nature of emotional attunement. It serves as a foundation for conceptualising emotional attunement in terms of skilled dating initiation, where we can identify three key categories of attunement the thesis forwards expert daters are particularly skilled at: attunement to-self, attunement to-environment and attunement to-partner. Synthesising this with the earlier definition in Section 8.8.2.1 illustrating how emotions influence problem solving we can derive the expression:

Emotional attunement influences the cues people attend to, which influences the accessibility of chunks, which influences problem solving capability.

Drawing on the language of expert intuition, we further define emotional attunement in dating initiation as:

Emotional attunement in dating initiation refers to the holistic sensing of emotions relating to ones-self, the situation, and the interactional partner that facilitates the creation of a harmonious two-person experience of connectedness and romantic attraction. Attunement-to-self, attunement to-partner, and attunement to-environment, influence cue acuity and the accessibility of chunks for solving the problem of initiating a date.

An appreciation of the three varieties of emotional attunement has significant implications for understanding how the most skilled performers operate when initiating dates. The following sections outline how such attunement is hypothesised to work.

8.8.3.1 Attunement-to-self: The Goldilocks brain, hitting the emotional "sweet spot"

The ability to be attuned-to-self—to be attuned to one's internal, emotional and

phenomenological experience—is an important skill. In dating, this can be interpreted in many ways; for instance, whether a person is cognisant of their preferences, their short-term or long-term relationship desires, or their dating skills and deficits. One of the key discussions regarding attunement-to-self and dating, relates to a person's ability to regulate approach anxiety and fear of rejection so that their performance is not unduly undermined.

Indeed, our ability to regulate our emotions—to respond to cues while our emotions are maintained in a manner consistent with our goals (Gross, 2002)—underlies performance in numerous domains of expertise. The concept of the "Goldilocks brain" has been used to suggest that optimal performance requires people find the emotional "sweet spot" where there is "just enough" emotional arousal to perform at peak state. Too much fear or anxiety, too little passion or attentiveness, and performance suffers. The ability to regulate negative emotions and initiate in the right emotional state underlies dating competency (Curran, 1977). One way in which too much anxiety undermines dating ability is by biasing cue perception. For instance, overly anxious initiators are more likely to attend to cues that highlight the challenges and "costs" of rejection (McClure et al., 2010). They are also more likely to misinterpret cues, for instance reading neutral facial expressions as expressions of disapproval (Tenhula & Bellack, 2008).

Researchers of intuition refer to this kind of biasing, where the emotional significance of an action is amplified, as *emotional exaggeration (*Luo & Yu, 2015). Emotional exaggeration can significantly impair chunk retrieval, undermining even experienced performers' ability to execute relatively simple skills. Emotional exaggeration's ability to impair chunk retrieval and performance appears as relevant to dating as to other forms of expertise. As with other domains of expertise, we can hypothesise a dating initiator who experiences emotional exaggeration, would also suffer from *cognitive reduction* (Luo & Yu, 2015), a second form of impairment that undermines our ability to access working memory—a vital resource in a domain as cognitively demanding as dating (Geher & Kaufman, 2013).

We can also look to research in traditional domains of expertise, such as chess or the emergency services, to appreciate how attunement-to-self influences dating performance. Theory suggests performers can enhance problem solving ability by staying *dispassionate* (e.g., Gobet, 2016, for chess; Brown & Daus, 2015, for the police). However, while being dispassionate might be a useful emotional state in some social situations, in dating, the concept of being *composed* is more appropriate; with the term dispassionate conveying a level of detachment somewhat incongruent with dating and courtship. In this regard, we would expect the dater who is highly attuned-to-self to be composed, with their poise facilitating efficient cue acuity and access to the relevant decision architecture.

8.8.3.2 Attunement-to-environment

People do not meet others in a vacuum. Rather, they tend to meet in dynamic environments rich in cues. The second challenge for the would-be initiator is to execute behavioural routines aligned to their environment. Attunement-to-environment suggests the skilled dater needs to be responsive to contextual cues, unconsciously adjusting their behaviour in light of their environment and the people around them.

The example of initiation on the *London Underground* provides the opportunity to illustrate attunement-to-self. Anyone who has been on the underground may appreciate, talking to strangers—or even holding eye contact—is at odds with underground etiquette. Initiating a relationship in such a confined space with many people in easy earshot presents emotional challenges, being an example of a situation where people experience *the spotlight effect* (Gavinovich & Savitsky, 2000)—the phenomenon where people feel pressure due to overestimating the degree to which nearby observers are interested in them. If not attuned-to-the environment, the unskilled initiator may use action programs that are too loquacious and overt for the underground. For example, on the underground *direct openers* that telegraph romantic attraction provide greater opportunity for social discomfort and would be better suited to the throng of a nightclub, than say an *indirect opening line* that is relatively discreet. Of course, initiation on the underground, or in any setting, takes place in a broader macro-environment; and the skilled dater is able to holistically adapt their performance to the local mores and customs, all while relating to their partner.

An additional example of how attunement-to-environment unconsciously influences initiation behaviour stems from research on the *field of eligibles,* which shows how the availability of romantic options significantly influences dating behaviour. For instance, research on speed dating by Houser, Horan and Furler (2008) reveals that in environments where women far outweigh men, males are considered "rarer," and their value increases leading females to become "less choosy," and males to become "more choosy." Again, the skilled dater who is highly attuned-to-environment would be expected to "read the room" and adapt their performance proportionately to their value in that mating market.

8.8.3.3 Attunement-to-partner

For the dating initiator keen to attract a mate, attunement-to-self and attunement-to-environment can perhaps best be conceived as a "means to an end"—with that "end" being attunement-to-partner. However, creating the feeling of "two person connectedness" described by Erksine (1998) is no easy task. Emotionally relating and connecting with a stranger in the short time afforded in dating interactions is a challenge few are able to master. Burleson (2003), views dating initiation as a, "complex skill… only a relatively small percentage of individuals appear to develop" (p. 555). To create the necessary emotional rapport, Burleson emphasises the need for flexibility, adaptability, and sophisticated communication skills. Similarly, Hargie (2006) emphasises the need for sophisticated perceptual-relating skills, explaining, "To perform skilfully, the individual must be able to identify the emotions or intent expressed by the other person and make sophisticated judgments about the form and timing of the appropriate response" (p. 9).

Research reveals numerous ways in which people skilfully attune themselves to their partners. Figure 31 below sets out four examples of how skilled performers attune themselves to partners.

Figure 31. Attunement-to-other

Research suggests verbal and non-verbal skills can be used skilfully to promote attunement-to-other.

- **Mirroring and matching:** experimental research on the "chameleon effect" (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999) reveals some people are particularly effective at inducing increased rapport and emotional relating using forms of *behavioural mimicry*—such as mirroring and matching a partner's mannerisms and body movements.
- **Eye gazing:** connecting with someone by looking into their eyes can be highly effective skill for creating emotional intimacy and connection. Kellerman et al.'s (1989) eye gazing experiment revealed that couples who looked into each other's eyes felt greater affection, passionate love, dispositional love.
- **Self-disclosure and shared experiences:** a significant body of research on self-disclosure reveals how it can be used to increase intimacy and liking. For instance, Aron's (1997) research showed people who spend 45 minutes asking increasingly personal questions that divulge intimate details feel much closer to their partner than people who spend 45 minutes small-talking.
- S**torytelling**: Donahue & Green (2016) revealed that females are more attracted to males who are particularly skilled at storytelling. Storytelling ability appears to be interpreted as a cue for status. Related to this, directly describing your positive traits to a partner—which can be perceived as boasting—is less effective for forming an emotional connection than telling a personal story that subtly integrates details about your character, values, beliefs and status.

Using the language of expert intuition, both the initiator and target's emotions can be construed as a holistic, fluid, unconscious, System 1 heuristic that guides behaviour and attraction. Relating this to dating research, social exchange theorists suggest that attraction experienced as *positive emotions* is associated with cues that suggest high exchange value, while a lack of attraction experienced as *negative emotions* is associated with cues indicative of low exchange value (Vangelisti, 2012). For social exchange theorists, skills such as empathy and relating are important for creating a sense of emotional relatedness and attraction. For instance, people feel a synergy with people who project cues indicating that they are empathetic, that they understand and share feelings, and "see the world through their eyes" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2008); while skills such as listening and sharing personal information can lead to a cycle of increasingly intimate disclosure that builds rapport between partners. Even skills as seemingly straightforward as asking open-ended questions like, "How did that make you feel?" or, "What do you think about that?" can be highly effective—enabling two people to explore each other's thoughts and feelings and better understand each other's "world"(Hendrick & Hendrick, 2008).

8.8.3.4 Summary

While past research on intuition failed to fully account for the role emotions play in expert performance, this oversight has been addressed in recent in years. Emotions act as a guidance system influencing cue acuity, chunk retrieval, and problem solving ability. Research suggests emotions are particularly influential in complex domains of expertise (such as dating) where decisions need to be made rapidly in face of significant uncertainty. For this reason, emotional attunement was categorised as the fourth pillar of expert dating intuition, with experts hypothesised to be particularly proficient in three forms of attunement: to-self, to-partner, and to-environment. By integrating theory on intuition with dating and emotions, Section 8.8 led to an original definition for emotional attunement in dating initiation:

> Emotional attunement in dating initiation refers to the holistic sensing of emotions relating to ones-self, the situation, and the interactional partner that facilitates the creation of a harmonious two-person experience of connectedness and romantic attraction. Attunement-to-self, attunement to-partner, and attunement to-environment, influence cue acuity and the accessibility of chunks for solving the problem of initiating a date.

Rather than being distinct, the three varieties of emotional attunement are tightly interwoven; each influencing the other in an ongoing interaction. Chapter 9 builds on Chapter 8, providing numerous conceptual models on expert dating intuition, including one on emotional attunement which further demonstrates how emotions influence dating performance.

8.9 Chapter 8 Summary

To the novice looking on, the ease and intuitiveness of an expert's performance may seem mystifying and incomprehensible. In such situations, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that such superior skills stem from an innate gift or talent. However, this chapter provided a conceptual review of research on expert intuition and dating to identify key characteristics that demystify fast, fluid, intuitive, dating ability.

The chapter defined dating intuition as "the ability to efficiently recognise and respond to key features to solve the problem of initiating a date." It identified four key characteristics, or pillars, proposed to facilitate expert dating intuition, and systematically reviewed the evidence to support each of the pillars: dual processing, expert perception, autonomous adaptability, and emotional attunement. In the process, it revealed parallels between dating and traditional domains of expert intuition, while also challenging influential theories such as Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1988) view of the expert as non-reflective which glamorises the enigmatic power of System 1 intuition while downplaying the significance of slower System 2 conscious deliberation.

Chapter 9. Dating Intuition: Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

9.1 Introduction: Conceptualising Dating as a Form of Intuitive Expertise

This chapter builds on Chapter 8's conceptual literature review to present the main conceptual arguments underlying the thesis' view of expert dating intuition in one concise section. By doing so, it: (1) presents four conceptual arguments including a model for an original theory titled the four pillars of expert dating intuition, hypothesised to embody the main characteristics that mediate expert dating performance, and (2) provides the conceptual reasoning behind Investigation 2's proposition and research questions.

9.2 Conceptual Argument 4: The Four Pillars of Expert Dating Intuition Captures the Four Main Characteristics of Expert Dating Intuitive Performance

Chapter 8 distilled large amounts of research on expert intuition and dating to identify four main pillars proposed to underlie the fast, fluid, intuitive, skills possessed by dating experts. Uniting these pillars together into one model provides Investigation 2's overarching original theory for conceptualising intuitive dating performance titled the four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model (see Figure 32 below).

Figure 32. *The four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model.* Research on dating and expert intuition has been distilled to develop an original model identifying the four main characteristics that facilitate fast, fluid, intuitive dating performance.

Key components of the four pillars were described in detail in Chapter 8, and additional arguments presented in this chapter feed into the model. It is important to note why the first pillar, *dual processing,* is positioned as the central pillar. The DEEPA model has been developed to enhance our ability to reason, predict, and understand the nature of skilled dating. Dual processing—which refers to dating experts' System 1 and System 2 processing ability—is conceived as the uniting pillar as it facilitates an appreciation of the phenomenological experience of how they process and embody their performance. For example, how their System 1 actions result from their rapid ability to recognise "come-on" solicitation cues (a form of pillar two's *expert perception*).

Similarly, the DEEPA model illuminates how skilled daters' *emotional attunement* (pillar four), such as sensitivity to emotions relating to fear of rejection, operate as a powerful and unconscious heuristic, triggering a System 1 response. It also contributes to our understanding of how even dating experts need to revert to slower System 2 processing to deliberate and reason about the best course of action, for instance in novel situations where no suitable chunks are proposed by their System 1. The ability to synergistically draw on System 1 and System 2 processing enables the most skilled daters to rapidly solve

rare problems that confound the vast majority of would-be initiators, all while (likely) maintaining the appearance of being a purely intuitive performer.

This discussion should convey that, while each pillar has distinct features, each pillar influences the others and there is significant overlap between the features. Later conceptual models capture this in more detail.

9.3 Conceptual Argument 5: Dating Initiation is a Cognitively Demanding Problem like Traditional Domains of Expertise

9.3.1 Dating as a problem

Researchers conceptualise dating in numerous ways, for instance as the desire to increase reproductive fitness, or to find a mate of equal social value. Drawing on the view that expertise can be conceptualised as the ability to solve problems (e.g., Richman et al,. 1996), it was argued in Chapter 8 that dating intuition can be defined as: the ability to rapidly recognise and respond to key features to solve the problem of initiating a date.

In this regard, this thesis conceptualised dating as a dual problem whereby initiators: (1) solve the problem of successfully initiating a date by recognising key features, and (2) access relevant information though selective search.

Constructing dating as a form of expert intuition, where problems have to be solved, enables us to use the language of expert performance to improve our understanding of dating, and suggests numerous theoretical and applied implications for how we understand skilled performance in actual dating scenarios. For example, while a major fear in dating initiation relates to romantic rejection due to sub-optimal performance, in reality this anxiety is misconceived. As Simons (1957) research on satisficing reveals, solutions need *not* be perfect but rather need to be "good enough." Initiators do not need the "perfect line;" rather their opening needs to being engaging enough to maintain a target's initial attention so that they can transition to building attraction.

9.3.2 Dating as cognitively demanding and similar to other domains of expertise

Related to the view of dating experts as sophisticated problem solvers, the thesis argued that such problem solving happens in a highly complex environment. In this regard, it proposed that dating shares numerous similarities with domains of expertise studied by researchers of naturalistic decision-making. As captured in Table 12 in Section 8.5.4, dating initiation is highly complex, features significant uncertainty, time pressure, shifting goals, as well as predictable elements. Such parallels leads us to suggest intuition in traditional domains of expertise and dating may have similarities.

For instance, in complex situations such as firefighting and dating, experts would be expected to rely heavily on their System 1's intuitive, fast, high capacity processing, as there are simply too many cues

to process for the slower, more deliberate, System 2. Hence, we theorise that, like skilled firefighters, intuitive dating experts would be high System 1 responders. However, System 1 is not infallible and, in certain environments, such as novel situations, System 2 deliberation can improve decision making. This is discussed in the next conceptual argument.

9.4 Conceptual Argument 6: Default-interventionist Responding and Emotional Attunement

9.4.1 Default interventionist responding in dating

To fully appreciate dating experts' cognitive skills, a theory about fast, fluid, intuitive dating also needs to appreciate the role of deliberation and conscious reasoning. This is because skilled problem solving often calls on System 2 processing. To this end, Chapter 8 proposed a model conceptualising how System 1 and System 2 might engage in default-interventionist responding to help dating experts improve their dating initiation skills (the model has been recreated in Figure 33 below for ease of reference).
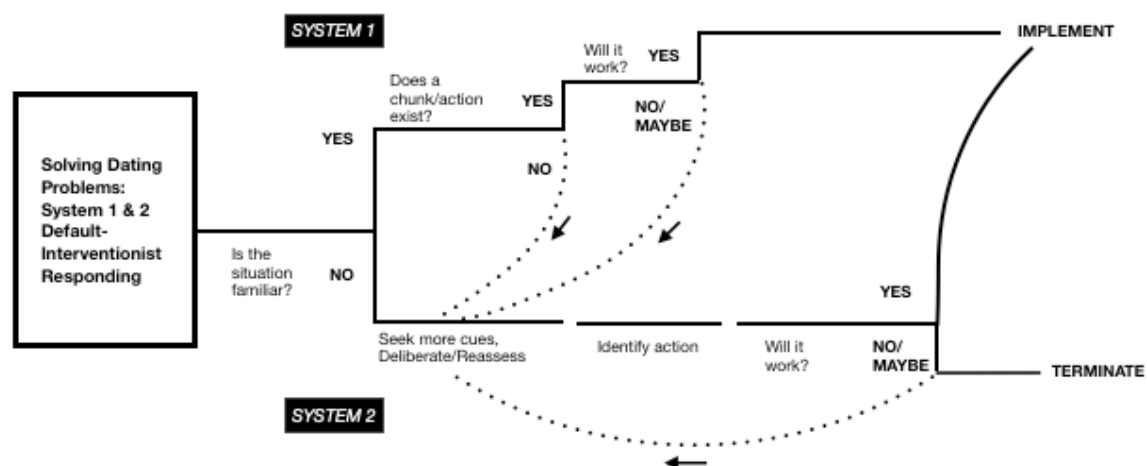
Figure 33. *Proposed model for default-interventionist responding in dating.*

A hypothetical example was provided in Section 8.5.8, describing how the system might work. For instance, it proposed that skilled dating experts' System 1 and System 2 work like a "committee." In novel dating situations where no chunk is associated with the situation, System 2 "takes-over" from System 1, to facilitate conscious reasoning about what action offers the optimal solution. Default-interventionist responding can also be integrated into a model to illuminate aspects of emotional attunement, the fourth pillar of the DEEPA model, which the next section addresses.

9.4.2 Emotional attunement in dating

As discussed in the previous chapter, emotions have a powerful influence on intuition (Chassy & Gobet, 2011). Working as a guidance system, emotions can lead us astray or they can help us solve problems quickly and holistically. A simple statement expressing how emotions influence attention to cues and problem-solving was provided in Chapter 8:

> Emotions influence the cues people attend to, influencing the chunks accessible, influencing problem-solving capacity.

As one of the pillars of expert dating intuition, three sorts of emotional attunement were argued to underly dating experts' ability to make rapid decisions. The following definition was provided:

> Emotional attunement in dating initiation refers to the holistic sensing of emotions relating to one's-self, the situation, and the interactional partner, that facilitates the creation of a two-person experience of connectedness and romantic attraction. Attunement to-self, attunement to-partner, and attunement to-environment, influence cue acuity and the chunks used for efficiently solving the problem of initiating a date.

Figure 34 below is an original model proposed to illustrate how emotional attunement influences decision making.
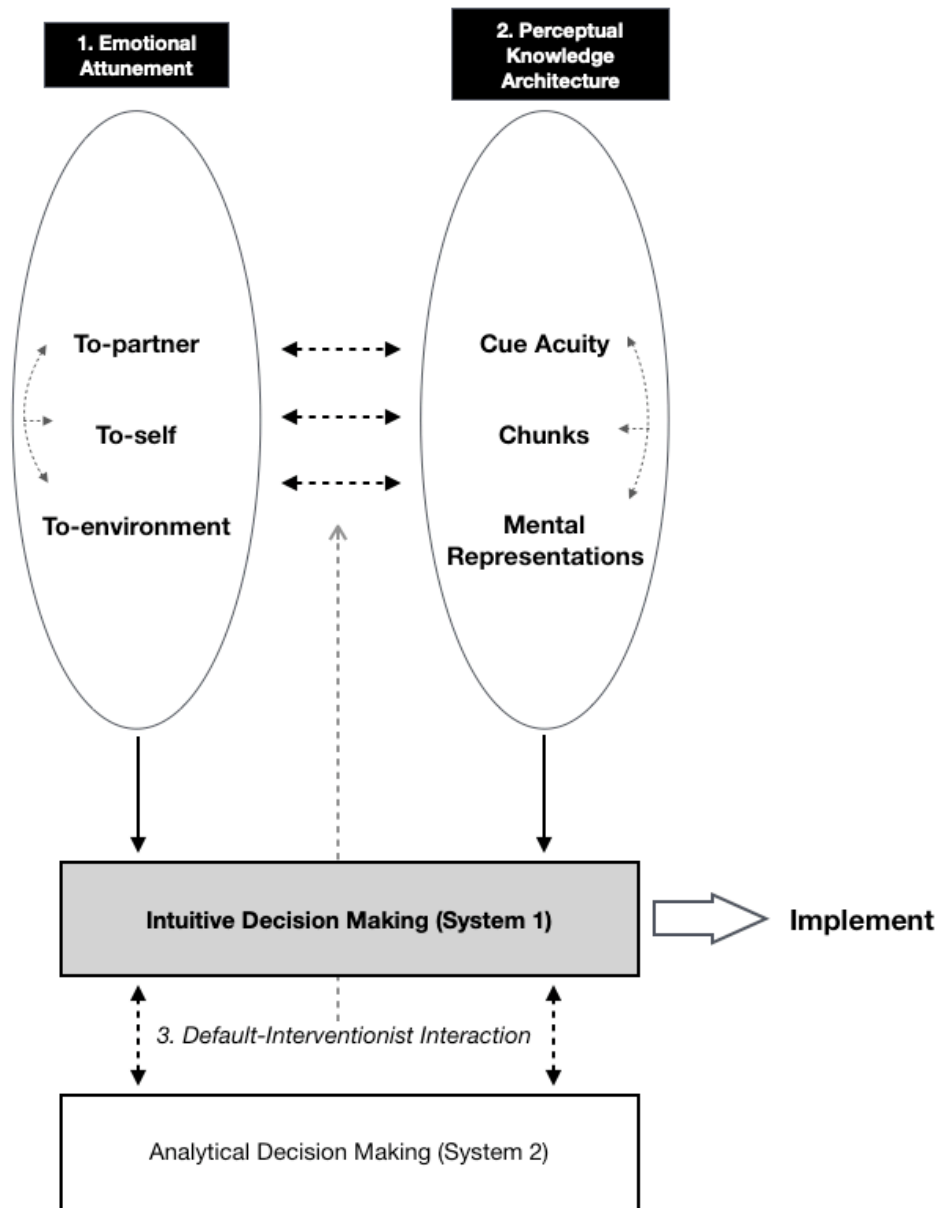
Figure 34. *Emotional attunement and decision making in dating initiation.* Effective responding is an outcome of the interaction between (1) emotional attunement, (2) perceptual cognitive architecture, and (3) default-interventionist processing. The three are interdependent: each influences and is influenced by the other. The arrow from default-interventionist to 1 and 2, illustrates how the interaction of System 1 and System 2, also influences emotional attunement and access to perceptual knowledge architecture.

While simplified, the model captures how intuitive decision making and the action to "implement" is influenced by three key factors. Emotional attunement (1) interacts with the knowledge architecture (2) directing problem-solving and the decision to implement. As emotions strongly influence System 1 and System 2 cognition, the model highlights a role for dual processing and default-

interventionist responding (3) for those situations—such as where no adequate chunks exist—where System 2 deliberation is used to improve decision making.

This model can be used to illuminate and hypothesise how dating experts act. For instance an expert dater "high" in attunement-to-self is in part a result of attunement-to-environment and their partner's emotional state. Given the interaction between emotional attunement and knowledge architecture, the emotionally attuned expert would be predicted to be able to access a vast reservoir of chunks and metal representations for guiding their dating behaviour. This perceptual architecture is also part of the reason why the expert "is" attuned—their synchronicity initiating dates is because the situation is in fact highly familiar and embedded in their knowledge architecture (e.g., there are few solicitation cues they have not stored in their long-term memory and have a related chunk ready to action). However, in those situations a chunk does not suffice they may resort to System 2 deliberation to solve the problem. This deliberation may in turn influence access to the knowledge architecture and/or emotional attunement to-self, to-partner, or to-environment. For example, faced with a relatively rare situation a skilled operator may feel more perturbed than they otherwise might. This suggests the ability to find emotional equilibrium—the ability to compose themselves—may therefore be essential to effective problem solving; and would indeed be the mark of the expert who meets the fourth pillar of emotional attunement and the third pillar of being autonomous and adaptable.

9.5 Conceptual Argument 7: Intuitive Dating as a Function of Dating Skills Deliberate Practice

The sophistication, complexity and subtlety of fast, intuitive performance, makes it difficult for observers to comprehend, let alone deconstruct. This partly explains why some people adopt a simplified view of intuition, assuming it is the result of natural inborn talent or even a mystical ability. As more research has been compiled, the preponderance of evidence suggests the opposite view. For instance, through years of practice, performers accumulate chunks and mental representations that facilitate superior performance (Ericsson, 1998). In this regard, Conceptual Argument 7 draws on the theory and findings that have come from Investigation 1 on dating skills deliberate practice. By seeking out challenging practice and staying in the cognitive-associative phase, performers were argued to overcome arrested development and keep improving their skills. By extension we can posit that: *Intuitive dating performance is a function of dating skills deliberate practice.* Figure 35 can be proposed to illustrate this relationship.
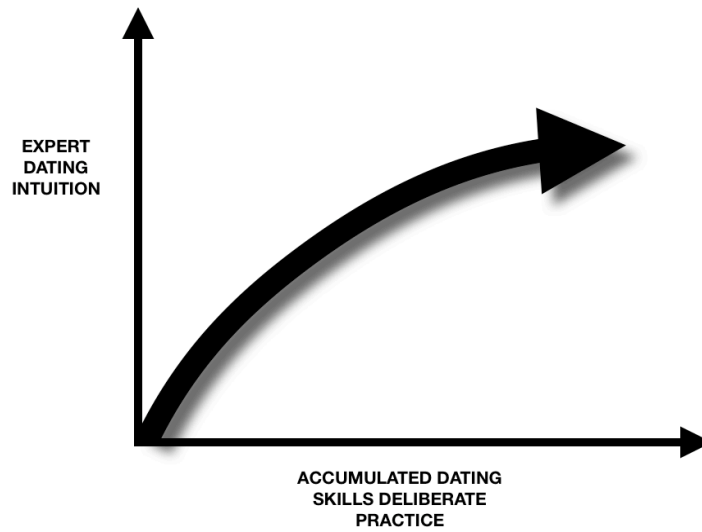
Figure 35. *Expert dating intuition as a function of accumulated dating skills deliberate practice.* We can theorise that, as with other domains of expertise, performers become faster, fluid, and intuitive at dating initiation with the accumulation of dating skills deliberate practice.

As a performer practices, they develop sophisticated chunks which sit in large schematic knowledge structures and facilitate rapid cue perception (see Section 8.3.4.1, for the full discussion). We can hypothesise that the accumulation of these structures over years of practice lead to the development of expert dating intuition. Following Investigation 2's findings and analysis, this idea is developed further using an illustrative conceptual model of dating knowledge hierarchy (see Section 11.5, *Review of Investigation 2 Findings*).

9.6 The Proposition and Research Questions

Synthesising research on expert intuition and dating led to a gap in the literature being identified and the conceptualisation of dating as a domain of intuitive expertise. In turn, this facilitated the following proposition and research questions for Investigation 2. [Note: the proposition and research questions numbering continues from Investigation 1].

Proposition 2: *The dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuition.*

Investigation 2 had the following four research questions all relating to the proposition:

6. What are the main characteristics of the dating experts' skilled performance?
7. Do these characteristics underlie skilled dating?
8. Does dating intuition share characteristics with intuition in traditional domains of expertise?
9. Does deliberate practice play a role in the development of intuitive dating skills?

9.7 Chapter 9 Summary

This chapter built on Chapter 8's conceptual literature review, synthesising research on dating an expert intuition to present four conceptual arguments and describe the four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model; an overarching theory proposed to capture the four main pillars of fast, fluid, intuitive dating performance. The following chapter presents thematic analysis from the 15 dating experts, providing empirical support for the theory.

Chapter 10. Thematic Analysis for Investigation 2: The Four Pillars of Expert Dating Intuition

10.1 Introduction and Overview

This chapter presents thematic analysis from the interviews with the 15 dating experts. The thematic analysis was designed to facilitate assessment of Investigation 2's four research questions and proposition, *the dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuition*. If the findings support the proposition and help identify the characteristics underlying superior dating skills, they would provide a research-based account of expert dating intuition and help to demystify why some males are so fast, fluid and intuitive at dating.

10.1.1 Overview of the themes
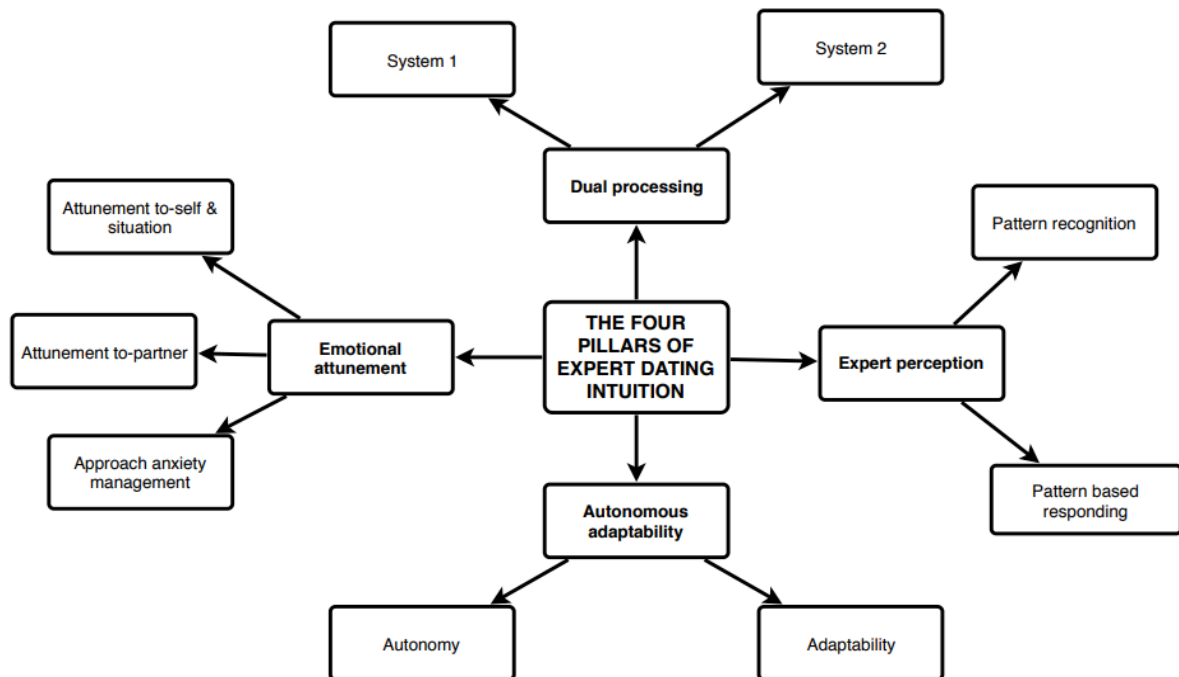
Figure 36. *Themes for Investigation 2.* Thematic analysis resulted in the superordinate theme *the four pillars of expert dating intuition*, which had four main level-2 themes and nine level-3 themes.

The thematic analysis resulted in data from the 15 dating experts' transcripts being organised into distinct themes capturing four main characteristics that mediate fluid, efficient and intuitive dating initiation performance. The themes were organised into a hierarchy consisting of one superordinate (or level-1) theme, four level-2 themes, and nine level-3 themes. As illustrated in Figure 36 the superordinate theme was *the four pillars of expert dating intuition*, and the four level-2 sub-themes were *dual processing, expert perception, autonomous adaptability*, and *emotional attunement*.

While the superordinate theme and the four level-2 themes mirror the four pillars of expert dating intuition, the thematic analysis was completed *before* a systemic review of the literature. Indeed, it was because of how vividly the participants reported these four characteristics, that the intuition literature was reviewed to see whether they were supported in existing theory (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 12 for further discussion on the process of how the DEEPA model emerged through data analysis and theory building).

10.1.2 Summary of the quantitative counts

Quantitive counts were produced for all of the themes. A total 469 meaning units (the level-3 themes) were coded for *expert dating intuition*. Table 13 provides a full breakdown of the coding for each theme.

Table 13

Complete Level-2 and Level 3 Themes for Investigation 2

Level-2 Themes	Level-3 Themes	Sources	Meaning Units
Dual processing		15	97
	System 1	14	71
	System 2	12	26
Expert perception		15	125
	Pattern recognition	15	78
	Pattern based responding	15	47
Autonomous adaptability		15	95
	Autonomy	15	62
	Adaptability	14	33
Emotional attunement		15	152
	Attunement-to-self and situation	15	48
	Attunement-to-partner	14	63
	Approach anxiety management	14	41
Total			**469**

Of the level-2 themes, *emotional attunement,* with 152 coding instances, and *expert perception,* with 125, had the highest number of meaning units, followed by *dual processing* and *autonomous adaptability*, with 97 and 95, respectively. The significant amount of coding registered for all themes provides veracity to expert dating intuition, demonstrating the themes were grounded in the data. This is further supported by the rich, vivid, thick, qualitative excerpts presented in the thematic analysis.
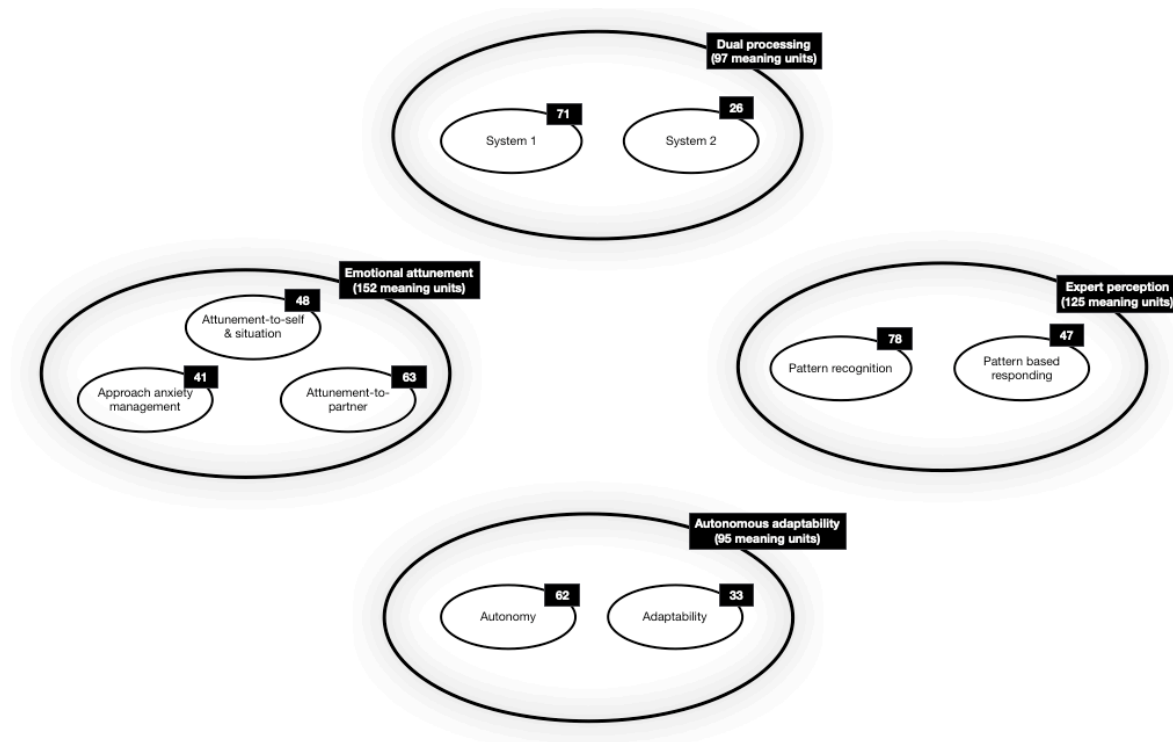
Figure 37. *Expert dating intuition themes with counts.* Visual representation of the level-2 and level-3 themes for Investigation 2. The thematic analysis revealed that four main characteristics accounted for the dating experts' rapid, efficient and intuitive skills.

10.1.3 The presentation of thematic analysis

The remainder of this chapter presents the findings for the thematic analysis. Similar to Investigation 1, each of the level-2 themes are presented sequentially, using excerpts illustrating how each of the four pillars—dual processing, emotional attunement, expert perception, and autonomous adaptability—are supported in the data. Each section starts with an introduction and a sample of indicative statements, and then proceeds to the main body of analysis. Where relevant, excerpts are presented and research is cited, providing opportunity for critical discussion about each pillar.

10.2 Thematic Analysis for Dual Processing

"There are very few [dating] situations I haven't seen before. Every so often, I might check in with my process, you know ask, 'What is the best play here? Should I role play? Should I go more playful.' But it's rare, because it [the solution] just comes" (quote from one of the participants).

10.2.1 Introduction and overview
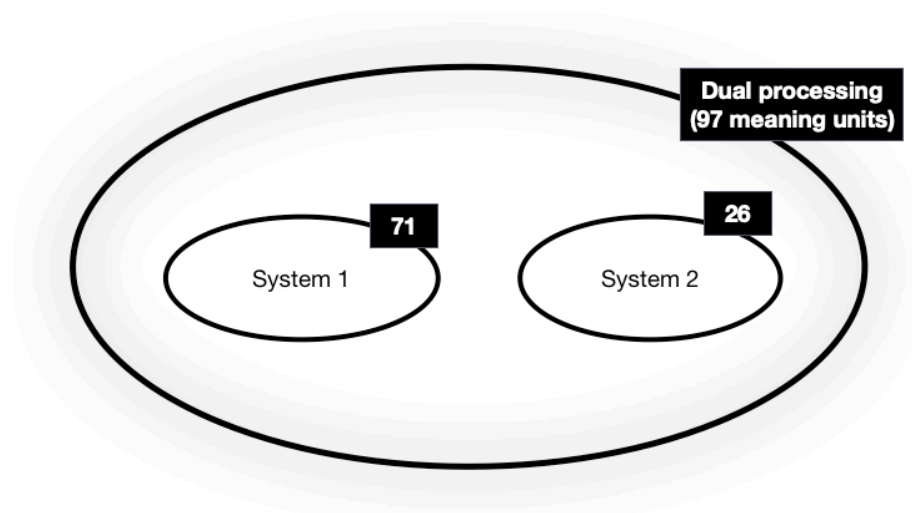
Figure 38. *Dual processing and sub-themes.* The first theme dual processing coded for "examples illustrating System 1 and System 2 style processing and performance." System 1 coded for "examples of thinking or performance that is fast, fluid, holistic or intuitive." System 2, coded for "examples where conscious reasoning or deliberation influenced performance." The thematic analysis suggested that System 1 and System 2 processing facilitated fluid, efficient and intuitive, dating initiation.

For the thesis, dating intuition is defined as, "the ability to rapidly recognise and respond to key features to solve the problem of initiating a date." With 97 meaning units, the thesis reveals that *dual processing* is central to intuitive dating performance. As captured by Figure 38 *dual processing* consists of two sub-themes, *System 1* and *System 2* processing. System 1 coded for "examples of thinking or performance that is fast, fluid, holistic or intuitive." System 2, coded for, "examples where conscious reasoning or deliberation influenced performance."

Dual processing as a key theme is consistent with research presented in Chapter 8, which suggested that it is essential to experts' problem solving ability. As with research in other cognitively demanding domains of expertise, the research suggested that the most skilled daters rely heavily on the fast, high capacity and unconscious, System 1. This is supported by the finding that *System 1* was coded for 71 times—almost three times the amount for *System 2*. However, while some theorists (e.g., Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1998) play down the role of slower and conscious System 2 style deliberation in expert decision making, the thematic analysis revealed that the dividing line between intuitive and deliberative decision

making is not as clear as often presented. The analysis also discusses many other aspects of intuition reviewed in Chapter 8's conceptual review such as:

- The cognitively demanding nature of domains of expertise such as dating; and
- System 1 and System 2 committee style default-interventionist responding.

10.2.1.1 Indicative statements

Before engaging in detailed analysis, Table 14 provides indicative statements capturing the essence of how the interview data supports *dual processing*.

Table 14

Indicative Statements for Dual Processing Sub-Themes: System 1 and System 2

System 1
With practice you can go in with very little or no conscious thought.
It has a structure because I've done it [initiation] many times, but it's more coming from a position of, innate knowledge. It's not thinking, "Okay, what should I do, shall I try this or this?" It's flowing.
It felt like I could literally see *The Matrix*, as people would say. When I'm interacting with a woman it feels like I can read the future… You're getting so good at reading micro-expressions, body language, and predicting how people respond to certain things you say.
Actually, the best game is when the student doesn't know what you've even done. You have to break it down to them because it's either too quick or too fluid.

System 2
There are very few situations I haven't seen before. Every so often, I might check in with my process, you know ask, "What is the best play here? Should I role play? Should I go more playful." But it's rare, because it [the solution] just comes.
I still often think in terms of, like, "Okay, I need… more Comfort to get this girl to answer the phone, call when I call," and stuff like that. I'm thinking about a lot of this stuff.
You'd internally think, "Well, maybe I'll do it a bit softer and not look where I'm touching," you know? Or do it with the back of my hand because it's less sexual, until she gets used to me and then I'll make it sexual with the palm of my hand, you know?

10.2.2 System 1: Fast, fluid, intuitive, initiation skills

"You need to be flowing like water, as Bruce Lee says, you know? 'Be like water.'"

10.2.2.1 Rapid, fluid, effective dating skills

A defining feature of intuitive expertise is the ability to use high capacity System 1 processing to solve problems quickly, efficiently and with little deliberation. One of the participants, Brian, described doing highly intuitive pickups where there was no need even for words.

> After a while, you get so in tune that you… you don't even have to speak to a girl. You can make eye contact. She's coming along, and [you] do a make-out (i.e., kissing), and… and sort of maybe take her home in 10 minutes. You develop skills of perception and judgement that just raise your game to another level.

Brian further described characteristics that facilitated such intuitive performance and, in doing so, conveyed many features of System 1 performance mentioned in Chapter 8, such as rapid, fluid and holistic initiation skills, where he did "a million things" in such a short space of time.

> Actually, the best *game* [initiation] is when the student doesn't know what you've even done. You have to break it down to them because it's either too quick or too fluid. They're like, "But you only said hello and said," you know, some random stuff about a hobby or so on. "Yeah, but did you miss the millions of things I did. The specific touch in the right way? When I looked at her lips, did I draw her in? Did I step back and make her lead? Did I make her match?" You know, a million things I did, you know? "Did I touch her on the small of the back where you couldn't see it?" You know, a million things. How I held my hand for a second longer and pulled away slowly, you know, tickled the underneath of her finger. What did I do? Did I comment on her shoes? It wasn't just a comment on her shoes. I was telling her she's fashionable and I'm someone who has standards, and dates fashionable women. There could be a million things. But it's all done in a minute.

To the postulant, the intuitive expert's skills can seem mystical or even paranormal. Brian's exclamation that the "best game" is "too quick or too fluid" for students to appreciate, is concordant with academic literature that suggests experts' performances are often puzzling and inexplicable to the postulant. As Gobet (2016) describes, "Intuition characterises the speed with which experts find solutions, with an ease that baffles the non-expert" (p. 97). Brian provided a further example of the speed, ease, and fluidity with which he initiated a dating interaction while in Las Vegas, leaving with seven or eight women on each arm:

I just went up to a massive group of girls. It was huge and they were all, glam—short skirts, heels, done up to the nines. I just went, "Hey, girls, who's got the best shoes on tonight?" So they all started *qualifying*, which is a really important part of game. So I spin a few of them. "Yeah, so what's better—good shoes or good sex?" Point to myself, anchor the sex part. They're laughing, I'm in the Vegas vibe now! I say, "Look, anyway, girls, you've got to meet my friends, they're so cool. You lot seem fun. Are you fun?" "Yeah!" They went "Yeah!" They qualified again. You know, got seven this side, eight that side, on each arm and walked them straight into all the instructors. There you go. That's how you do it!

Both quotes provide an insight into Brian's deep and holistic understanding of dating initiation, which meant his performances had an ease and fluidity that—on the surface—belied the complexity of his devices. For instance, the subtlety of his body language (slowly pulling his hand away, spinning a woman by the hand); his use of words to convey an appreciation of fashion and status ("who's got the best shoes"); and his ability to entertain a large group by integrating provocative questions ("what's better —good shoes or good sex?"), were all performed with a holistic appreciation of his audience and dating theories that supported his goals (e.g., as discussed in Section 8.8.3.3, "matching" is a rapport building technique supported in empirical research; and "Qualification," discussed in Section 4.7.1, is a device used to convey social awareness and high standards).

System 1 comes to the fore in complex environments where there is little time to deliberate (Evans, 2010), such as in dating. Robert described how time was of the essence: "There's a reason why there's a 'three second rule.' When you're in a club, there's no time to stop and think." John provided an example of how even a few minutes or less were sufficient to successfully "communicate and connect" in challenging dating scenarios, such as a hen party in a heaving bar or nightclub.

If you do meet a girl on a hens night it can be quite a joy… The thing to do is to engineer the environment so you can communicate and connect one-on-one. Even if it's just for a 20-30 seconds, or maybe a few minutes, you can actually have a quick chat with her long enough to get her number, then return her to her friends.

John further elaborated on the importance of awareness and speed in time constrained environments.

You could be talking to a girl at a bar and her friend may be in the toilet. So you know you've got two-and-a-half minutes to talk to the girl, build up enough connection, get her number, and then go before her friend comes back because they're going to go dancing at another venue. Or you might be talking to a girl and her favourite DJ just came on the speakers and she's going running away to dance. You need to know how to deal with these situations.

But being such a skilled, intuitive, and polished performer, also comes with a warning—intuitive dating experts can find interactional partners asking "What's the catch?". As Neil explained:

Let's say I go back to my home town now and I talk to a girl. She's actually quite intimidated by my skills, and I want to just talk to her and make a connection. I really do like this girl. The last girl I went on a date with, she asked me, "What's the catch?" Like, "You're too good to be true. What's the catch?"… So, you know, you go through this then at an advanced stage... You just want to be yourself and yourself is pretty polished because you've done this more than any other guy she meets.

Indeed, a significant challenge for dating experts with such high "unconscious competence," is realising if, when, and how their skills need to be adjusted and downplayed in-line with their target's expectations. The following analysis further explores the concept of the dating experts' intuition being "unconscious."

10.2.2.2 Unconscious, intuitive, "no-thought" initiation

The archetypal intuitive expert presented by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) were System 1 performers whose embedded routines, and honed instincts, enabled them to execute skills with little-to-no thought. The data reveals that dating experts' "unconscious" competence was among the most vividly reported characteristics. Most emblematic of this was their transition from conscious reliance on dating initiation models and routines (to the point of writing them down so they could refer to them during interactions), to becoming "natural," "instinctive" performers, with no need to plan or prepare what they were going to say. As Brian exclaimed, "I know what I'm doing. I don't even have to think of it consciously."

Ruben expanded on this point, conveying how over the course of his developmental journey from novice to expert, routines had become embedded, which contributed to more natural interactions predicated on "innate knowledge."

In the beginning, I was very structured and somewhat unnatural, and then in the middle it was 50-50 and now it's unstructured. Well it, it has a structure because I have done it many times but it's more coming from a position of innate knowledge. It's not thinking, "Okay, what should I do, shall I'll try this or this?" It's flowing.

He further described how unconscious his decision making was in dating interactions by adding, "now there's, there's really no conscious attempt to practice or analyse or anything really." His skills had progressed from being "structured and somewhat unnatural" to becoming "flowing" in nature.

Many of the dating experts' performances accorded with this theme of being flow-like in nature, with little need to deliberate about their actions. Brian used an analogy of a martial artist to convey his

flow-like performances, explaining: "You need to be flowing like water, as Bruce Lee says, you know? Be like water." He further explained how he no longer has to think consciously in set, he just knows what to say and do. Brian drew on Bruce Lee again to provide an analogy eliciting how unconscious and instinctive he was in set.

> You know, I know what I'm doing. I don't even have to think of it consciously. Again, to reference Bruce Lee, he just hits, you know? He doesn't think about hitting. He just blocks. He doesn't think about blocking. It's the natural response because my neurology has done it so much that I got to a point where I literally felt I could see the future. So I could play out like chess, 20 moves ahead and by the end of them 20 minutes, I was exactly where I thought I would be.

This quote alludes to a number of other facets typically seen in intuitive System 1 thinking, such as immediate apprehension in the absence of reasoning (Evans, 2010); the ability to predict or at least anticipate other people's moves (e.g., discussed by de Groot, 1978, with anticipatory schemata; discussed further in the thematic analysis for *expert perception*). In addition, Brian's opening statement "I know what I'm doing," is a view that experts operating in System 1 typically have; which is associated with feelings of confidence (Evans 2010); a confidence that seemingly arises from the self-efficacy that comes from repeated success and no longer needing to "think" through what to do, which is also discussed in the thematic analysis for *autonomy and adaptability*.

The experts found it liberating to no longer need to retain elaborate planned routines in short-term working memory. Neil described how this made him "uninhibited" and facilitated a "flow" state:

> I know now what to say, because I have the principles of everything from body language to lead an interaction and be uninhibited…Through me being uninhibited in a state of flow, that all comes out and to top it all, of course I know what buttons to push very well because I've talked to, you know, probably 10,000 girls.

While, as a novice, conscious plans and devices supported his performance, as an expert, Neil explained such conscious plans and devices would undermine proficiency. He had the essential skills drilled into him from the accumulation of 10,000 dating interactions and "knew what buttons to push." In another part of the quote which is included in the thematic analysis for *emotional attunement* (Section 10.5.3), Neil posited his "emotional state" was integral to his flow-like effectiveness. This view accords with researchers of expertise who posit emotions play an important mediating role in the retrieval of chunks and embedded skills (e.g., Gobet, 2012).

Damien described how he had accumulated so much practice that "thinking" became unnecessary:

> So in the beginning, asking for a [telephone] number was awkward for me. It was awkward, very

awkward, so I had to consciously do it, [clicking fingers] do it, do it, do it, do it, do it, then I got so good at it that now, I don't even think about.

While the dating experts often operated intuitively, they appeared to be able to sense if, how, and when they needed to change their behaviour. Stephen used the analogy of a basketball player to convey the subtlety with which he unconsciously adjusted his behaviour during dating interactions:

You do it [change your behaviour] subconsciously. You know like, it's like a guy, a guy standing on a fixed point and trying to shoot basketball hoops. He doesn't miss it and then go, "Yeah definitely just need one degree further to my right and with force 8/10 as opposed to force 7/10 on my next throw." He doesn't think that. He just resets and goes again in the knowledge that he needs to improve and refine what he's doing.

Damien's earlier description of becoming intuitive through repetitive practice relates to research that suggests practice enables experts to build sophisticated knowledge structures in the form of scripts, chunks, and mental representations (e.g., Gobet, 2016). As there is significant overlap between the various pillars of intuition, such knowledge structures were also central to many of the experts' skills. For instance, Damien is cited again in the thematic analysis for *autonomous adaptability* to reflect how embedded scripts appear to have freed precious working memory and facilitated adaptive problem-solving in novel dating situations.

Brian's analogy from the science-fiction movie *The Matrix* (1999), provides a deep insight into the phenomenological experience of being a dating expert, conveying how System 1 integrated the other pillars, such as *expert perception,* with the experts' ability to perceive cues, predict the outcome and respond fluidly, such that "all those thousands of hours [of practice] pay off."

It felt like I could literally see *The Matrix*, as people would say. When I'm interacting with a woman it feels like I can read the future; like literally, you go, "Oh my God! I knew she was going to say those exact words"… Obviously you're not but you're getting so good at reading micro-expressions, body language, and predicting how people respond to certain things you say. And you're picking up smaller signals that you don't realise it, because our unconscious mind is reading it all. It picks up hundreds of cues, but our conscious brain can only manage a few things at once… Hence all those thousands of hours [of practice] pay off.

10.2.3 System 2: Deliberation in novel situations

"There are very few situations I haven't seen before. Every so often, I might check in with my process, you know ask, 'What is the best play here? Should I role play? Should I go more playful.' But it's rare, because it just comes."

By accumulating vast quantities of practice, experts become adept System 1 performers, highly skilled at performing fluidly and intuitively. Yet, while this view of the unconscious expert has dominated literature on expert problem solving, more recent research reveals that experts regularly deliberate and reason about the best move—even if it is just momentary in nature (E.g., Gobet & Chassy, 2009). Damien illustrated this when he explained that, "every so often, I might check in with my process":

> With practice you can go in with very little or no conscious thought. Straight forward sets, complex sets. There are very few situations I haven't seen before. Every so often, I might check in with my process, you know ask, "What is the best play here? Should I role play? Should I go more playful." But it's rare, because it [the solution] just comes.

Experts' ability to become more deliberate in their reasoning, to ask "what is the best play here," is evocative of Conceptual Argument 6 (Section 9.4)—that dating experts use what Evans (2010) termed *default-interventionist* decision making, whereby System 1 and System 2 operate synergistically like a committee to improve decision making. When System 1's rapid default (intuitive) solutions do not provide an adequate option, they can be intervened by deliberate System 2 reasoning.

With experience, the dating experts became more autonomous and automatic in their performances, though Charles explained that he would still consciously use dating models to inform his decision making:

> Well, I still do [use stereotypical routines], uh, partly because I'm teaching this stuff so I'm trying to teach the guys a model. I always tell them, you know…the map is not the territory. A lot of times the model is usually a good way to learn things and sort of a good general guide but, you know, it very rarely follows any kind of strict pattern. Um, but I still often think in terms of, like, "Okay, I need…more Comfort to get this girl to answer the phone call when I call" and stuff like that. I'm thinking about a lot of this stuff.

While Charles asserted "the map is not the territory," meaning dating models were a valuable if imperfect guide, he still construed initiation in terms of the different courtship phases such as "Comfort" to inform his decision making. Deconstructing the complex at of initiation into its smaller constituents, illustrates findings from expert performance which emphasise how experts are able to "decompose problems into subproblems where specific solving techniques can be applied" (Gobet, 2016, p.73).

While the experts were no longer dependent on dating models, practice appeared to lead to sophisticated dating chunks and mental representations organised in terms of the various stages of

courtship (Sections 6.2.3 to 6.2.3.4 provide extensive analysis of the dating experts' use of initiation models and chunking).

While the majority of Ruben's thoughts appeared to follow intuitive System 1 style cognition, ideas which we reflected on would still occasionally "pop" into his head, stating, "And now there's, there's really no conscious attempt to practice or analyse or anything really. Sometimes something just pops into my head and I'm like 'Cool,' you know and I think about it for a minute." Ben described how "things become instinctive. In my mind I'm not thinking, 'Okay, do this or this.' I'm not nervous [any longer], but I'm still alert. And there's often something in interactions that you have to be [consciously] aware of."

Stephen shared that whilst he was natural and fluid in interactions, he would, "on occasion*,"* specifically think about which skills to use. "It's not like I don't on occasion think that a specific skill was cool or it would be cool to do a particular thing in a certain scenario. I'm not one of those that really prepares things. It's not really my approach."

Gavin shared an interesting insight that captures the strengths and weakness of System 2 processing, where he described a conscious, analytical, mindset as a "two-edged knife."

> The analytical mindset definitely helps. [But] It's a two-edged knife. It's a skill that helps to have but you want to be able to control it at the same time. There are times to be analytical and there are times to switch off the analysis. In field, talking to a woman, if you don't learn to switch off the analysis part of your brain, you're in trouble. Things are going to happen. That's something I had to go through. I had to learn to switch that off, not be thinking of strategies or theories, in the moment, just be thinking of, "You're talking to this beautiful girl. It's fun. Have fun and bring the good emotions to her."

There is a fine distinction between intuitive and deliberate responding, which is arguably why some researchers, such as Dreyfus and Dreyfus, fail to fully acknowledge the importance of deliberation. When Leon was asked how he might initiate in relatively complex situations where the target was surrounded by five friends, he described how he would be a "little more strategic," conveying how reason and reflection could improve his decision making:

> It changes my approach a little. I have to be a little more strategic because I can't just go in because, first of all, even if you're just reasonably experienced, you know that the people in that group are going to be protective. If you're an intermediate you're going to think, "Okay now I've got to win over the friends a little before I approach her." If you're more advanced, [I'd reflect] "Do I have a better shot of going direct to her, making a powerful impact, or winning her friends over first? Or doing both at the same time?" What I do depends on the situation. I see how close she is with the group, and then I go boom, direct. And I turn around and I say, [to the rest of the group] "Excuse me guys, I didn't see all of you, because this one is breathtaking. And all of you are good looking but I saw her first"… You make her laugh, you make them laugh. You make

your intentions clear.

Leon's statement neatly captures the differences in rapid deliberation that separate an intermediate from the expert dater, with experts' deliberation being more nuanced and adapted to the situation. Julian described how one's level of intuitiveness could be influenced by mood, an interactional partner's state, and the environment. In cases where he felt less fluid, he would stick "to the basics."

> I think it's [intuition and reasoning] a bit of a mix. I think there are times that because of how you feel you're in a very, sort of intuitive mood; but it's also to do with the other person. If you feel comfortable with them, or for whatever reason the environment is comfortable, then things just feel like they flow. There are other times when you don't feel like you're in the mood and you've got to be more like, "Alright now I'm going to stick to structure. I'm going to be like alright, I'll just do the basics… I'm like I can't think of anything highly intuitive to say. I'm going to stick to structure and see if anything develops. It may be I'll get more intuitive later on." Sometimes someone throws something at you [a concept] and that makes you a little bit uncomfortable and you're like "How do I process this?"

Brian provided a nuanced illustration of System 1 and System 2 default-interventionist responding, explaining how "internally" he would reflect before deciding what to do:

> You would just know that you need to do more kino, so you just start doing it more and if it messed up, you'd internally think, "Well, maybe I'll do it a bit softer and not look where I'm touching," you know? Or do it [kino] with the back of my hand because it's less sexual, until she gets used to me and then I'll make it sexual with the palm of my hand, you know? So most things are unconscious. It's just, like, you have to go… but I had to reverse engineer my stuff because a lot of it has been subconsciously learnt. So you think like a natural would have to… if you go to a natural, "How did you pull that girl?" he'd respond "I don't know!" [claps]… He might say, "I made her laugh." But he did a lot of other stuff on the way [claps].

A defining feature of experts' intuitive action is a lack of introspection in decision making (Gobet, 2012, 2016). Brian's description of "naturals," struggling to comprehend or recall what led to their success, conveys a subtle appreciation of this. However, the 15 participants appeared to possess a rare introspection about their dating decisions—and I would hypothesise more introspective than a typical male would be about their dating decisions; being able to describe their decisions in rich detail, arguably because they had spent years consciously scrutinising their behaviour and practicing rule-based dating. This is reminiscent of theory on chess which reveals circumstances where chess experts can explain and rationalise their intuitive action (e.g., I saw the *Queen's Gambit Opening* and so I instantly did the *Slav Defence*), and that even the most skilled experts' intuitive actions involve a degree of awareness of

information processing (Gobet, 2012).

10.3 Thematic Analysis for Expert Perception

"You develop skills of perception and judgement that just raise your game to another level."

10.3.1 Introduction and overview
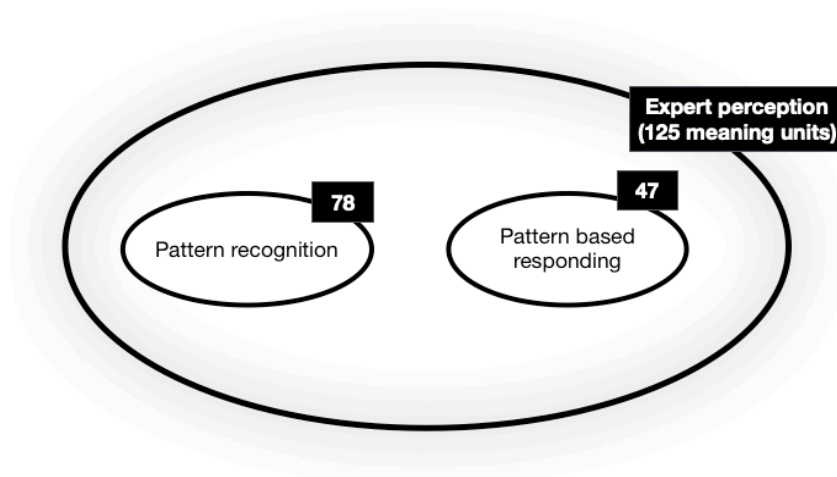
Figure 39. *Expert perception and sub-themes.* The second theme *expert perception* coded for, "ability to recognise and respond to key features and patterns." Thematic analysis suggested performers' intuitive dating initiation skills relied on sophisticated powers of perception. In particular, the findings emphasised the dating experts' (a) ability to recognise patterns and rapidly home in on cues, and (b) pattern based responding using scripts and embedded routines in familiar and predictable situations.

As far back as seminal research by de Groot (1978), research reveals that chess experts depend on their superior skill of perception; enabling them to recognise patterns, focus on key cues and home in on the best move. This section draws on interview extracts that support the view that dating experts similarly depend on superior powers of perception. Titled *expert perception,* the second pillar of expert dating intuition was coded for 125 times. As Figure 39 illustrates, the analysis revealed that the dating experts' skills rely on, first, sophisticated cue-based *pattern recognition* (78 meaning units); and second, the ability to use *pattern based responding* (47 meaning units) in familiar situations. Due to the integrated nature of expert cognitive capacities (Gobet, 2016), the analysis also features numerous related concepts discussed in Chapter 8, such as:

- Chunks and mental representations in long-term-memory.
- Stereotypical responding, automaticities, production rules, and heuristics.
- Search trees, anticipatory schemata, and prediction.
- Progressive deepening.

10.3.1.1 Indicative statements

Before the thematic analysis, Table 15 highlights indicative statements that capture the essence of *expert perception.*

Table 15

Indicative Statements for Expert Perception Sub-Themes

Pattern recognition

I can't turn it off [scanning for cues]. I can walk into a bar and go there's like two [women] over there, there's three there, one over there that's got a boyfriend. Girls just go, "How the hell can you see that?"

You develop skills of perception and judgement that just raise your game to another level.

I have a better understanding of the social interaction as a whole. I can read things a bit better. I look at fingers to see if there's wedding rings. I look to see how many coffee cups are on the table.

The other thing that significantly improved my dating skills was learning how to *not* follow completely cold leads. Learning how to *not* waste time and get caught up with someone that's going nowhere.

Pattern based responding

A chess master would usually think two or three moves ahead… And you'd be surprised. There's a very small number of ways for people to take interactions.

It's a hard lesson to learn but you need to be stung a few times before you realise, "Oh, now I see a pattern forming. Now I know to do this before this happens."

Knowing a few moves ahead is crucial because you can set yourself up, you can allow, or give yourself, an advantage.

See every conversation it starts like a tree. So you start out with one conversation part and that conversation can launch off into many different conversation topics. And as long as you've got control over each of those conversation topics you know how to steer it back to the conversation that you want, which is ultimately about you and her flirting in some way.

10.3.2 Pattern recognition

"I have a better understanding of the social interaction as a whole… I look at fingers to see if there's wedding rings. I look to see how many coffee cups are on the table."

Simon (1992) provides definition of intuition as "recognition" stating:

The situation has provided a cue; this cue has given the expert access to information stored in memory, and the information provides the answer. Intuition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition. (p. 155).

The interview provided significant support for this concise definition, with the dating experts providing numerous examples of drawing on cue recognition, to access embedded responses, and solve the problem initiating a date.

10.3.2.1 Scanning for cues

Brian used the analogy of the character Jason Bourne from the film *Bourne Identity* (2002) to illustrate how, like a spy, he would scan for cues in the environment to inform his behaviour.

Like, an MI5 agent—allegedly—they're told to spot five things in a second about someone. So you'd look, one-second, look away. What are the five things I've spotted? Well, has she got a piercing in her nose? Is she wearing heels or trainers? So has she been on a jog or is she out to pull, you know? How short's her skirt is also an indication that she shaves her legs, you know? All these things are signs that a woman's out to get a mate and, you know, these are all things we can make statements, or observations, or situational comments on; within our game to help us move forward or build rapport or sexuality.

Connor used the analogy of "Kalahari Bushman" to illustrate the role of cue perception:

It's [initiation] like being a Kalahari Bushman, but operating in a modern environment. You're dialled-into the situation. Sensing what's going on. You know, an animalistic, almost instinctive ability to read, feel, and know, what's going on…

Ruben compared his perceptual skills to those of a *Jedi*:

It's Jedi level [laughs]. I did some really crazy things like when I can tell from the corner of my eye that a girl likes me… Or some girl sitting
90 degrees to my right or in a conversation I know she has got a boyfriend but she likes me, or

you know… [long pause] I often know what's going on.

Scanning for cues and patterns became an intuitive action which performers were unable to turn off, as Connor explained:

I can't turn it off [scanning for cues]. I can walk into a bar and go there's like two [women] over there, there's three there, one over there that's got a boyfriend. Girls just go, "How the hell can you see that?"

10.3.2.2 Learning to spot cold leads

Analysis suggested that a crucial facet of expert dating intuition is being able to detect the two types of cues discussed in Section 8.6.2.2; *cues of indicative interest* (e.g., solicitation cues, Moore, 1985), and *cues indicating how to proceed*. A common example related to recognising whether someone found them genuinely attractive or not.

Connor used cues to quickly gauge interest, stating: "[It] helps a lot [recognising cues] as well when you approach a girl because I can tell if the girl wants to talk to me or not in 10 seconds. If she doesn't, I'm out; and if she does, it's on."

John described how, as a novice, he was oblivious to obvious cues projecting disinterest, but had markedly improved.

Back in the day I was oblivious to a lot of those things [cues indicative of interest]. Nowadays I know. You'll be talking to a girl and, back in the day, she might say, "I'm going to the bar but I'll be back in one minute." And me as a young fool I'd be like, "Oh okay." And I'd be waiting there for her and she wouldn't come back because she's at a bar and it's Friday night. Whereas now if she's going, "I'm going to the bar. I'll be back in a minute." I'll take that as her saying, "Not really into it." And I'll just go out. I'll just exit. That's fine. That's my farewell.

Stephen described being able to spot "cold leads" as a invaluable skill:

The other thing that significantly improved my dating skills was learning how to *not* follow completely cold leads. Learning how to *not* waste time and get caught up with someone that's going anywhere. Learning when to not even, not even bother. That was a huge skill for me to learn to discern—what's a valuable use for my time.

John described how getting "stung" [i.e. rejected] was a necessary lesson in pattern recognition: "It's a hard lesson to learn but you need to be stung a few times before you realise, 'Oh, now I see a pattern forming. Now I know to do this before this happens.'"

Being able to read the situation and predict behaviour was not only invaluable for skill

development, but also for confidence, as Connor explained:

> I felt like a missing piece had been put into my understanding of human relationships. I went from being this unconfident guy who was screwing up, because I didn't understand the mistakes that I was making. To being a guy who, all of a sudden, every time I made a mistake, I understand why… And then I turned into a guy who doesn't make many mistakes.

10.3.3 Pattern based responding

"A chess master would usually think two or three moves ahead… And you'd be surprised. There's a very small number of ways for girls to take interactions."

A key contribution from de Groot's (1978) research was that cues *are not* an end in themselves, rather they facilitate sophisticated pattern based responding—enabling experts to select the best move based on their deep conceptual awareness of key positions tied to complexes of schematic knowledge. John provided an example that is supportive of de Groot's view on needing to hold a deep conceptual awareness, stating "you cannot do pickup without having social awareness."

> The chances are if you're in that set and the friends are around in that situation her friends, the "alpha female" of the group, may be trying to steer you away from her friend or they'll be blocking you, or they'll be trying to drag the friend away. Even if the friend is totally into you and says, "Hang on. I want to be here." … Having social awareness is key. It's crucial. You cannot do pickup without having social awareness. Otherwise you're driving through red lights hoping that you don't hit any traffic. You need to be able to understand what the green lights are and when to isolate, when to escalate.

As with experts in other domains whose search is highly selective (Gobet & Simon, 2000), the dating experts used selective search to home in on key cues (the green and red lights) to facilitate recognition and pattern based responding. John provided another example of an initiation in a coffee shop illustrating how cue recognition provided access to stores of knowledge for interpreting and responding.

> I have a better understanding of the social interaction as a whole. I can read things a bit better. I look at fingers to see if there's wedding rings. I look to see how many coffee cups are on the table. So if I've approached a girl at a coffee shop I'll know that there's a spare cup on the table, which could imply that her friend, or boyfriend, is in the bathroom, or little things like that, which I never really thought about in the past. So skill comes with experience and experience comes with skill.

Cue recognition facilitates the use of highly routinised and stereotypical responses that are embedded in the long-term-memory and which can be accessed quickly and reliably. Brian's quote in Section 10.2.3.2, where he described seeing *"The Matrix,"* illustrates how a deep holistic appreciation of familiar dating scenarios enabled him to "predict" what was going to happen next.

As with the other dating experts, Neil had an extensive repertoire of routines to call upon. His use of the *Expressive Face Routine,* first introduced in Section 6.2.3.2, provides an elaborate insight into how cues and production rules are used to negotiate an interaction and predict the eventual outcome.

> So when I found this routine, let's say the *Expressive Face* one, like, why don't I talk to the girl like normal and I'll go, "Hey, my name's Neil". "Hi, I'm Jenna." "Hey, Jenna. Let me guess. You seem really friendly; you must be an English major" and she'd go, "Oh yeah, I love to read" and I'd go "Oh, you're such a nerd" and, you know, then she'd hit me in the arm playfully. That's the same thing as doing the *Expressive Face Routine*; "Oh, you've got an expressive face." It's getting the emotional reaction. And I'm like, you know, just teasing and stuff like that, very harmless…

> So if I do this properly, she's attracted and she'll play along, right? She's following my lead in all this, whereas a typical guy might just walk up with a standard opening line, he might tease her, and he might get a laugh but this is more intriguing… So this is the thing; if I did good, she'd try to raise the eyebrow. If I did bad, she wouldn't try. If it was somewhere in the middle sometimes she'd ask me to raise my eyebrow!

The value in the *Expressive Face Routine* was not just novelty or fun, but it facilitated cue recognition and pattern based responding, enabling Neil to assess his efficacy and manage the interaction in a predicable way. Chess masters literally "see" the next move ahead, making plans before even carrying out any search (Gobet, 2004). John drew on the analogy of chess to convey a deep conceptual awareness of the various positions that might arise during an initiation, and how knowledge of these patterns enabled him to plan and respond effectively.

> A chess master would usually think two or three moves ahead. So if I move my pawn forward I'd know that my rook could take the pawn. I can know my bishop can take the pawn. That provides a rough idea of where this match is going. Mostly because of where my pieces are. And that's so important in set, or when meeting a girl. Knowing where she's coming from, and the angle she's taking, lets you align *your* pieces so you're ready for a response; or you're ready for her to say, or do something.

> And that's really important. And you'd be surprised. There's a very small number of ways for people to take interactions. People can think that there's a thousand ways for them to respond or

act, but there's usually probably a handful of options in the interaction—or points where you frame choices and they can make their decisions based off that. So knowing a few moves ahead is crucial because you can set yourself up, you can allow, or give yourself, an advantage, a competitive advantage to the situation. Always try to be smarter than the situation.

The strategic nature of dating mean that, like a grandmaster, dating experts are able to "frame choices," making their next move vastly more predictable which, in dating, may come as more of a surprise than in, say, chess—as John stated "you'd be surprised. There's a very small number of ways for girls to take interactions." This illustrates a key argument as to why this research considers dating to be a domain of expertise: in familiar situations, stereotypical scripts and routines can be used systematically. Indeed, the thematic analysis for Investigation 1 provided numerous examples of how the dating experts used dating models and routines organised into stacks to structure their decisions and responses in a highly effective way in dating interactions (see Section 6.2.3.2).

John further described: "There are questions I know what the likely two or three answers are, and I've got automatic responses to *all* the possible answers. You start being able to anticipate people's thoughts or actions before they've even formed in people's mind."

Chapter 8's conceptual review, discussed *If-Then production rules*. Neil provided a simple example of an If-Then rule in a hypothetical interaction with "Sarah."

[The use of initiation models] also taught me… unconscious competence, in attracting girls because they were training wheels. So now when I go out, I don't use routines. I mean, if I meet a girl named *Sarah*, every Sarah I meet, of course I'm going to say to her, "How is your name spelt? With an 'h' or without?" She'll go, "It's with an 'h.'" "Oh! that's how I like my Sarah's!" I'll do that with any girl with a name that's spelt in different ways; but that's no different than, you know, a salesman or a shop owner or whatever.

Charles provided an example of a high-order If-Then rule that illustrates how he became aware that he needed to do more "Comfort" to build an emotional/physical connection with his target. (In this context, using Comfort could mean using a routine that builds trust or an emotional connection to a person's past).

Well, I still do [use courtship models and routines]. Partly because I'm teaching this stuff so I'm trying to teach the guys a model. I always tell them, you know, the map is not the territory. A lot of times a model is usually a good way to learn things and a good general guide but, you know, it very rarely follows a very strict pattern. But I still often think in terms of, like, "Okay, I need, more Comfort to get this girl to answer the phone call when I call" and stuff like that. I'm thinking about a lot of this stuff.

John provided a fascinating example that compared dating conversations to a search tree, with branches representing different topics and paths to be navigated.

> See every conversation it starts like a tree. So you start out with one conversation part and that conversation can launch off into many different conversation topics. And as long as you've got control over each of those conversation topics, you know how to steer it back to the conversation that you want; which is ultimately about you and her flirting in some way. So if I opened a set with a pre-defined conversational opener, let's say I'll take generic Mystery Method thing. I'd say, "Quick question for you…" I don't know, just [a] random Mystery Method [routine]… And then you can go on to, "Okay. So my friend is doing that at the moment." and you start to talk about that. And you basically do DHV spikes, which are demonstrations of higher value. But each of the topics, you're constantly steering the topic back to the thread that you initially wanted to talk about which is you and her. So there's techniques and ways. You had your routine stack. And each of the routines end up at the same finish point. So it's like a race to the finish line, but the race has multiple paths, and you've got to be prepared to go down each of those paths.

John's conceptualisation of an interaction as a search tree is reminiscent of the discussion in Chapter 8, which reviewed research that suggests grandmasters' decision making relies on search trees, enabling them to anticipate moves and solve problems quickly and predictably (Gobet, 2016). This skill—of perceiving patterns and being able to respond automatically—appears to be an essential characteristic of expert dating intuition.

10.4 Thematic Analysis for Autonomous Adaptability

"You learn to evolve techniques that work specifically for you."

10.4.1 Introduction and overview
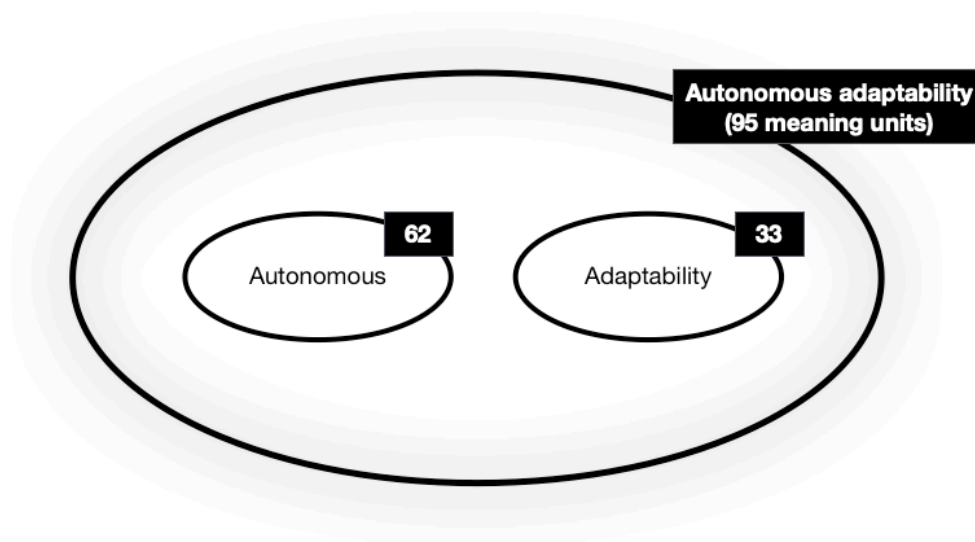
Figure 40. *Autonomous adaptability and sub-themes.* The third theme *autonomous adaptability* coded for "autonomous behaviour and decision making" and "examples of adapting to environmental exigencies." The thematic analysis suggested these characteristics facilitate intuitive problem solving in complex and dynamic dating situations.

As discussed in Chapter 8, research on expertise reveals an apparent paradox. On the one hand, experts' sophisticated pattern recognition makes them highly adept at executing routinised skills; yet, on the other hand, domains such as dating present unique situations and require dynamic and flexible problem solving capability.

The thematic analysis convincingly demonstrated that the dating experts overcame this potential paradox, being skilled in both routine and less routine situations. The analysis revealed that *autonomous adaptability*—the third pillar of expert dating intuition—was a key characteristic underlying superior dating performance, with 62 meaning units recorded for *autonomous* and 33 meaning units for *adaptability* (as illustrated in Figure 40). The thematic analysis that follows reveals how this manifested in the dating experts performances', while illustrating many concepts discussed in Chapter 8, such as:

- Dating experts' use of routinised scripts and behaviours.
- The liberating nature of unconscious competence that frees experts from needing to "think" about the "rules."
- Experts' wide repertoire of skills which are "good enough" for the vast majority of situations.

- Adaptive expertise, and creatively using skills to suit the dynamics of the interaction.
- Dating experts' ability to deconstruct problems into sub-problems, so that precious working memory can be preserved to deliberate about novel aspects of the interaction.

10.4.1.1 Indicative statements

Before each theme is analysed, Table 16 provides indicative statements capturing the essence of how the interview data supported the third pillar *autonomous adaptability*.

Table 16

Indicative Statements for Autonomous Adaptability Sub-Themes

Autonomous

I was terrible and clueless before I started and I know what I'm doing now.

It was two things at the same time. On one hand, I felt like I didn't need those routines anymore and it was almost weird to use them... At the same time, I was more confident. I gradually would abandon routines.

So I've got so many ways of gaming now that I can just [clicks fingers] turn on something. I can be [clicks fingers] high energy, low energy. I can, you know, do stuff that makes them bring out, you know, the emotions in their body.

Now I have my own, my own ways of conceptualising attraction.

Adaptability

I like to improv [improvise] and just say what's on my mind, right?... But before you do that and play improv jazz, you've got to learn how to play a Bob Dylan song and you've got to learn how to play a blues progression.

With experience you become more reactive. Once you've really learnt the skills you go off a lot of feedback that's provided by the girl, moment by moment.

So be creative. Be flexible. You know, if you're creative, you're going to be coming out with new stuff that is interesting for women because you'll be more passionate about saying something that you've come up with than something you've read in a book.

Nowadays when I go out, I have no way of knowing who I'll meet, and to be honest with you, if I go out with that kind of idea of, "Okay, I'm going to say this tonight," it screws me up.

10.4.2 Autonomous

"I ignored everything I'd ever learned or taught."

When familiarising themselves with a new domain, novices typically find rules helpful for monitoring their performance (Ericsson, 2006b). In the early years of practice, memorising courtship models and routines fulfilled this role for the dating experts. Indeed, the thematic analysis in Chapter 6 captured in detail the numerous routines they practiced and used. For Investigation 2, the analysis revealed two key aspects of the participants' autonomy as experts. First, they appeared to have a vast range of embedded routines that they used instinctively in the appropriate situation. Second, through practice, the performers internalised interactional "rules," liberating them from the need to consciously "think" about what to do.

10.4.2.1 Intuitive routinised responding

In an excerpt used for the theme *dual processing*, Ruben described how his dating skills had gone from "structured and somewhat unnatural," to "fifty-fifty" (meaning fifty percent structured/routinised, and fifty percent unstructured), to "structured" but coming from "a position of, innate knowledge." This illustrates how, through dating skills deliberate practice, he had embedded a multitude of routines as part of his unconscious repertoire to become far more autonomous.

As documented in Chapter 6's thematic analysis, all the dating experts reported going through a similar developmental process. As Stephen described:

> Back in the day I practiced specific openers. Like some I'd made up myself. Some were just around in the Community. I wouldn't have that presence and self-belief [to initiate dating interactions]. The lines were there just to help me through basic conversation that gets you through to the next phase [of Attraction]… I take a different approach now… I'd go with whatever I've got in the situation.

Brian estimated that his dating performances incorporated about eighty percent of his natural and improvisational self; and twenty percent of his practiced and routinised self:

> [During an initiation] I use basically now use 80 percent my natural self, with 20 percent my pickup stuff that I throw in. A woman might talk about shoes, and I've got a million routines for shoes so I can go, "Oh, yeah. What about *this*?" Throw that [routine] in, or make a statement about it that I know works, and then it's put in naturally so it's not forced upon them. See, [some] pickup artists tend to force a line on someone; and maybe that conversation within that routine deviates to something else, but they'll be rigid and want to finish what they're talking about [even if their partner has steered the conversation elsewhere]. Well, that's not going to work.

He described it was important not to "force routines" and become overly "rigid"—revealing an intuitive understanding that agrees with Sternberg's (1996) view that a common cost of expertise is "rigidity: the expert can become so entrenched in a point of view or way doing things that it becomes hard to see things differently" (p.347). Gavin explained that the process of become more intuitive involved gradually reducing his reliance on canned routines, while developing the confidence to be more adaptable.

> [Becoming more autonomous] was two things at the same time. On one hand, I felt like I didn't need those routines anymore and it was almost weird to use them… At the same time, I was more confident. I gradually would abandon routines. In the beginning I would still use some canned lines that I knew worked, but in between those I would just freestyle, and I started to notice that was actually fine. I did just as well when I was freestyling. So I gradually started abandoning all the routines. It was just a gradual process, from one day to the other. It wasn't like —I didn't quit cold turkey.

10.4.2.2 The liberation of breaking the mould and relinquishing the "rules"

The dating experts became more autonomous as they improved their powers of perception, developed repertoires and gained a holistic appreciation of dating. An important step in achieving their autonomy was learning to "go-beyond" the "rules" they had been taught. Neil described a pickup where he "ignored everything I'd [he'd] ever learned or taught." Stephen explained that he had developed own paradigms and was no longer dependent on the material he had learnt as a novice and intermediate.

> I was reading about the paradigms others in the Community had. Almost experimenting with them. And now I have my own, my own ways of conceptualising attraction. I developed them through my own experiences… Like I said, your mind unlearns things that undermined your ability; making you more easy going, a "natural" conversationalist.

John described how he moved from being highly conscious of the stages of courtship models, and began to "evolve" his own techniques that breached some of the traditional Community "guidelines."

> In the day [as a novice/intermediate], yes, I was always conscious of those stages and everything else [i.e., Community courtship models]. Back to what I was saying before, you learn to evolve techniques that work specifically for you.

> And that was when I started saying, "Well I don't have to stick directly to these guidelines. I can step outside of this guideline and still get a similar result"… Stepping out of the guidelines wasn't the important part. Stepping outside of the guidelines, and being more *real* to myself, and

exhibiting more real traits was the key point there. So feeling comfortable to talk about your own stories in life opposed to *Mystery's* stories, or feeling the confidence to walk up to a girl, saying, "Hey, I thought you were really cute. I wanted to come say hello."

Julian described how "little rules" (which are analogous to heuristics), were helpful as training wheels, but with experience "you toss them aside."

Sorry, one thing I say is sometimes little rules and I think this came up on your sheet. Little rules, or mantras, or whatever, sometimes those help. So for example the "three second rule." But often they're there as kind of training wheels or whatever and then once you're, because sometimes you break the rule. Ultimately you want to toss them aside and just go with what's right though. They're useful on the way.

However, while the dating experts innovated approaches to initiation, they acknowledged that deploying new techniques was part of an evolution rather than a revolution of their performance. There were techniques and methods that needed to be adhered to and, even if they developed their own routines, had to be implemented "in the right way"—As Brian explained:

And there is a way of doing it [using new dating techniques]. You can't just go, "Oh, I'm going to use a line here and there." You've got to do it in the right way. So there's still a science to it, which I've managed to crack… Any time I come up with something that's foolproof, I break the mould and start something new.

10.4.3 Adaptability

"I like to improv and just say what's on my mind, right?... But before you do that and play improv jazz, you've got to learn how to play a Bob Dylan song and you've got to learn how to play a blues progression"

Sections 8.7.3 to 8.7.3.2 proposed two ways that experts overcome the potential paradox of being both highly routinised and yet also flexible and dynamic. First, the experts develop a sufficiently broad and flexible repertoire; second, they harness creativity and adaptive expertise (Hatano & Inagaki, 1984). This is particularly important in a domain as complex as dating, as even the most straightforward scripted interactions between two people contain sufficient variation to require that participants make ongoing decisions about which action programs to execute (Wilson & Sabee, 2003).

10.4.3.1 Benefits of an extensive repertoire

Over the course of accumulating thousands of hours of practice, the dating experts familiarised themselves with a wide range of dating scenarios. As a result, they developed vast repertories for most

stereotypical situations, affording them the skills and freedom to interact with targets in a broad range of environments. Brian described having "so many ways of gaming now."

> So I've got so many ways of gaming now that I can just [clicks fingers] turn on something. I can be [clicks fingers] high energy, low energy. I can, you know, do stuff that makes them bring out, you know, the emotions in their body, or I can do stuff that just makes them feel sexy.

A benefit associated with having a wide dating repertoire relates to two concepts discussed previously. First, the idea that "single" problems are in reality better conceived as multiple "smaller" problems stitched together (Gobet, 2016); and second, how System 1 and System 2 facilitate "relational multitasking," enabling skilled operators to take advantage of the large processing power of the former and the reasoning ability of the latter.

In this regard, Damien conceptualised dating initiation in a way that is remarkably consistent with Leinhardt and Greeno's (1986) research suggesting skilled teachers use embedded scripts to solve routine problems, preserving precious working memory for the more challenging and novel facets of classroom management. Damien used an analogy of driving a car to illustrate why years of practice and the "hardwiring" of routines meant that, when faced with more challenging dating scenarios, he could focus his attentional resources on the more novel aspects.

> If you're focusing on something new to you, other skills that you may have been working on can suffer if they haven't been hardwired. I'm not the neuroscience guy, but I know that there are studies where, when you're working on a certain skill, the pre-frontal cortex is firing off. Then once you've mastered it, it no longer fires off; it's all hardwired. So that part, it gives you freedom to focus on other things simultaneously…. Like, say, driving a car; if they were scanning your brain when you were driving a car when you're first learning, all that stuff is firing off and your brain's going, "Oh shit! I've now got to consciously change clutch and change gear," all that kind of stuff, and then now you can talk on the phone, you can eat your burger while you're driving. None of that's firing off.

The ability to use System 1 and System 2 processing in such a sophisticated manner appears to be an important way in which the dating experts distinguish themselves from the less adept. Whereas, as novices, the participants were overloaded by the dynamics of dating interactions, having to small chunk dating interactions into individual components of initiation models that they deliberately solved (i.e., by consciously "changing gear," using Damien's analogy), once they had succeeded in routinising the more formulaic aspects of initiation, the experts were able to take advantage of spare attentional resources in more challenging situations.

Similarly, Ben used an analogy of plate spinning to convey how he could better manage numerous aspects of an initiation as his relational multitasking skills had developed:

A great analogy for how much you improve [at relational multitasking] is spinning plates on a stick. As a beginner you're just trying to get that plate to just stand on the stick before it just crashes down. And it's painful to watch your plates just keep crashing down. It hurts. When you're a beginner you're just trying to keep that one spinning… But then what starts happening is you get better, and you can start putting more plates on sticks; and then you just keep adding more and more plates.

As you become experienced, after thousands of conversations, you figure out what works and what doesn't… It's not just that, things become instinctive. In my mind I'm not thinking, "Okay, do this or this." I'm not nervous [any longer], but I'm still alert. And there's often something in interactions that you have to be [consciously] aware of… [But] You just start dealing with more complex variables in ways that most guys can't even fathom. But you're still working on [practicing] skills, being [which are] another plate. And at the same time just keeping your other plates spinning as well.

10.4.3.2 Being adaptable and flexible

Each of the dating experts provided examples of how they became more adaptable with practice. Brian emphasised how being adaptable and creative makes you more "passionate."

So be creative. Be flexible. You know, if you're creative, you're going to be coming out with new stuff that is interesting for women because you'll be more passionate about saying something that you've come up with than something you've read in a book.

As discussed in Chapter 4's review of the dating literature (Section 4.4.3), while proponents of Gestaltism argue that microtraining (which deconstructs social skills into subcomponents) results in unnatural robotic behaviour, the analysis suggested the reverse. As with a tennis player learning to serve, hit a forehand, backhand, or a drop shot—microtraining actually accelerated the dating experts' learning and, with practice, they became more natural, organic, and adaptable. Charles used the analogy of playing the guitar to illustrate how routinised training acted as "training wheels" his performance became "free flowing."

I like to improv and just say what's on my mind, right? And that's the way that I view… like, when we're talking about these structures and systems and these lines that I give to guys, you know, they're training wheels. They're a way to get to a point where you're having free flowing conversation. But for a guy who doesn't have experience doing that, he doesn't really know how to do it.

It's like, you know, playing guitar; you can noodle around on the guitar and just play, you can solo in any key you want and you can play jazz, but before you do that and play improv jazz, you've got to learn how to play a Bob Dylan song, and you've got to learn how to play a blues progression, you've got to learn how to play some rock music, and then learn how to play some classic jazz stuff, and then once you have all that kind of stuff, then you start playing freestyle jazz, once you have that basics down… And so the stuff that I teach isn't necessarily exactly what I do. It's what the students need to get up to a certain level where they can throw away the guidelines that I've given them.

Ronnie described the benefit of not overly relying on scripts and routinised behaviour, which enables you to "react to what you're thrown." He elaborated, "With experience you become more reactive. Once you've really learnt the skills you go off a lot of feedback that's provided by the girl moment by moment." Heightened adaptability and understanding of attraction also had a related benefit — it facilitated more authentic, enjoyable, interactions, enabling performers to convey their "true" personalities. As John described, using an example of *The Beatles*.

I'm far more relaxed. And so far less outcome dependent. I'm less outcome dependent. I am far happier with the choices I make. So if I speak to a girl and in the past I might have said something like, let's say she's says, "I like the band *The Beatles*." In the past I might have said, "Oh, I like *The Beatles* too." To try and be more aligned with her. Whereas now I see my own interests separately. So I'd be like, "I don't like *The Beatles*, but I do like this band" or something like that. I'm no longer trying to impress them. I just trying to show them that I have my own interests and my own personality.

10.5 Thematic Analysis for Emotional Attunement

"Well, there's a balance… You don't want to be on a little boat in the middle of a stormy ocean; being tossed around by every single reaction, your emotions all at sea."

10.5.1 Introduction and overview
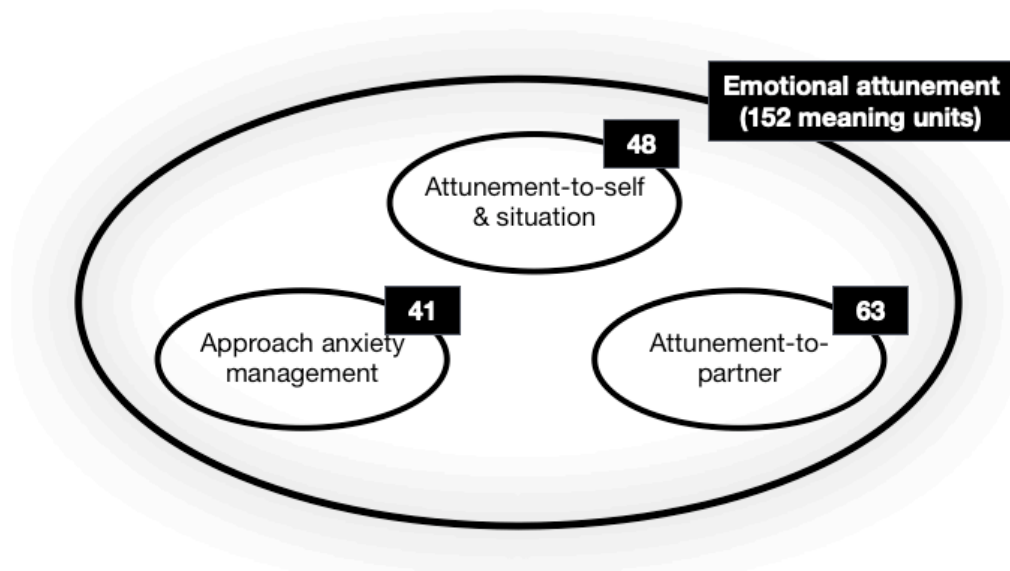
Figure 41. Emotional attunement and sub-themes. The fourth theme *emotional attunement* coded for "initiation behaviour influenced by emotional acuity to interactional partners, the environment, or self." The thematic analysis suggests that emotional attunement is an essential characteristic of expert dating intuition, operating as an "emotional guidance system" influencing cue acuity and problem solving.

Research reveals that emotions are an influential part of the cognitive apparatus, guiding and shaping intuitive problem solving (Benner et al. 1996; Chassy & Gobet, 2011). Similarly, in dating, our emotions—how attuned we are to them and others—influences and guides our ability to establish a romantic connection (Gottman, 2013). Chapter 8 synthesised research on expert intuition and dating to derive the expression:

> Emotional attunement influences the dating cues people attend to, which influences the dating chunks accessible, which influences dating initiation problem solving capability.

The thematic analysis revealed that emotions were central to dating initiation ability. Indeed, *emotional attunement*—the fourth pillar of expert dating intuition—which coded for, "initiation behaviour influenced by emotional acuity to interactional partners, the environment, or self," recorded the most meaning units for all themes (152). *Emotional attunement*, revealed how emotions exerted a powerful unconscious influence on the cues dating experts attended to, the scripts they used, and their ability to attract partners. As illustrated in Figure 41, three level-3 themes emerged: *attunement-to-self and situation*

with 48 meaning units; *attunement-to-partner* with 63 meaning units; and *approach anxiety management* with 41 meaning units. By uncovering how emotional attunement plays out in the cut-and-thrust of dating initiation, the thematic analysis features many concepts discussed in Chapter 8 and 9, such as:

- How skilled daters create a resonating emotional connection with interactional partners.
- How emotions and gut feelings act as a heuristic, facilitating holistic and rapid System 1 decision making.
- How complex situations overload daters' cognitive apparatus leading to poor decision making.
- The benefit of operating in the emotional "sweet spot" between over and under-arousal.
- How elite daters get themselves in a positive state, aiding composure, emotional regulation, and anxiety management.

10.5.1.1 Indicative statements

Before presenting the detailed analysis, Table 17 includes some indicative statements capturing the essence of how the interview data supported the fourth pillar, *emotional attunement.*

Table 17

Indicative Statements for Emotional Attunement Sub-Themes

Attunement-to-partner
You have to be aware about the connection you have with a woman, and understand the emotions behind their actions.
It takes work because there's a lot of knowing: knowing how to sexualise things; knowing how to time-it [a behaviour]; knowing how to keep her emotionally engaged; knowing how to stop the logical mind taking over.
I'm looking at the [her] pupils and I'm seeing them dilate, but I'm not consciously doing it…
That one line is what the dynamic, the dance that should be going on throughout the whole interaction.
Attunement-to-self/ situation
[As a novice] You're so emotionally involved, you're blind.
I think I am able to separate myself away from the emotions in situations and say, "Look these are really the relevant facts. This is what really matters and this is what the situation is really about."
Now I know exactly where I am in an interaction based on… the woman's behaviour, how she feels and how she behaves.
If I was in a good emotional state… I would stand out in a very good way. It made an emotional impact and that would allow her to get attracted to me.
Approach anxiety management
You keep having these positive experiences, that anxiety gets chipped away.
So it's having the tools and the devices. Not meaning anxiety doesn't come. It still comes; it's knowing how to deal with it.
[The first approach is] like jumping into a cold pool… Then you warm up and then suddenly the water's the same temperature.

10.5.2 Attunement-to-partner

"You have to be aware about the connection you have with a woman, and understand the emotions behind their actions."

Research suggests that attraction is not a "choice." People do not logically and rationally decide who they are attracted to. Rather, like many decisions, attraction is mediated by our emotions, which are typically outside of our conscious control (Chassy & Gobet, 2011). Through years of practice, the dating experts developed a deep appreciation of emotional attunement and how, "seeing the world through partners eyes," distinguished successful from unsuccessful interactions. The thematic analysis for *attunement-to-partner,* focuses on two areas. First, the importance of creating positive emotional connections; and, second, how acuity to emotional cues guides decision making.

10.5.2.1 Appreciation of the role of emotions

Stephen described the importance of understanding that emotions are the driver of attraction, describing how people have to "feel a certain way, to act a certain way."

> You have to be aware about the connection you have with a women, and understand the emotions behind their actions. That was a huge learning point… Whereas someone who's learnt what I've learnt, would realise that that people have to feel a certain way to act a certain way… You can lead how she feels. Most people have no clue how to do that.

Ben had read psychologist Paul Ekman's influential work on reading emotions from facial expressions, and found applying its insights invaluable—especially as he spent significant time practicing as a foreigner in Asia.

> Being able to read people's faces and emotions has been crucial… I have to be able to use body language and facial expressions to read—not just to read the person I'm talking to—but also to express certain things as well, because they can't understand me either.

> … That's helped me in two ways. One, it helps you convey certain feelings to the girl through your facial expressions. And then secondly, it helps you read her emotions, to where [due to practice] you can fine tune it even more. It might be that you can read subtle things that are happening in a story she's telling you; you can listen and relate to her emotions to build rapport and get into Comfort.

Leon described how following his gut helped the process of building a connection, explaining:

> Using gut emotions is important, it's part of good game… so you can resonate with her. If you

tell she's feeling down, you bring her back up. That helps you towards *endgame*, of closing, or going on a date, or whatever—because the last thing you want is to leave on a bad note. She's going to associate all those bad feelings with you.

Stephen also stressed the importance of seeking to understand a partner's emotions, which could be done by the skilled use of words and steering "the conversation and elicit[ing] feelings by what you bring up." While attraction can be constructed as linear step-by-step transaction, in reality it as a dynamic and emotionally charged process. Damien used the analogy of a dance to emphasise that experts understand the emotional journey of dating interactions—using language and behaviour to create tension, rhythm, and ultimately, attraction:

More importantly [than the line you say], you understand the dynamic of push/pull; you understand the dynamic of flirting. So I can say something like, "You're a pain in the arse, why am I so attracted to you?" That has, "You're a pain in the arse"—push; "Why am I so attracted to you?"—pull. Do you know what I mean? That one line is the dynamic, the dance that should be going on throughout the whole interaction. When you grow in confidence, there's less of that but you still want that dance. You want that motion, the movement, because that's what keeps the emotions varied.

Indeed, skilled daters understand that attraction relies on emotionally charged interactions, and seek to avoid "cold," detached, logical interaction—which is something that can be guided with a rich appreciation and understanding of skills like *framing* (a technique used to shape or "frame" another's perceptions) and *reward* (i.e., in the sense of Skinner's, 1953, classical conditioning). As Daniel explained:

It takes work because there's a lot of knowing: knowing how to sexualise things; knowing how to time-it [a behaviour]; knowing how to keep her emotionally engaged; knowing how to stop the logical mind taking over. For instance, knowing how to frame—which is setting the underlying meaning of the interaction—or knowing how to reward certain behaviours.

10.5.2.2 Using emotional cues

Numerous examples in the thematic analysis for *expert perception* (Section 10.3) and *feedback orientated practice* (Section 6.3) demonstrated how performers' finely tuned appreciation of verbal and non-verbal cues facilitated accurate responding. Ruben exclaimed, "You're watching everything—'Is she responding to that [action]? Did that hit? Did that land?'" Damien emphasised the importance of, "being able to read people, being able to listen to a woman and not just what she says: her body language."

Brian's *Matrix* passage from Section 10.3.3 illustrates that experts are so attuned to their partners that they dial in to cues as subtle as pupil dilation.

I'm looking at the pupils and I'm seeing them dilate, but I'm not consciously doing it. Or the lips are getting redder, or the cheeks are getting more flushed, or she's playing with her hair because she's turned-on, or leaning forward into me—mirroring me.

And we do it unconsciously. It's only that we put it conscious sometimes to teach it, you know? And that's only a rapport thing. We're mirroring because we have rapport. We're getting to know each other better so it means, like, "I can be more free with this woman. I can mention sex now," and turn it sexual. So anything; you know, she's playing with her button. Is she undoing her blouse unconsciously? What's she doing? Is she stroking her hair provocatively?

This statement reveals dating experts sophisticated perceptual awareness and the extent to which they process symbolic meaning behind cues to create sexual tension. Gavin captured the importance of being aware of a partners perceptual cues when he explained:

I think in the end it's [dating initiation] about understanding people better and communicating your message better. I think that's the bottom line and that's what I think I've learned. That's what I would take from my whole experience that I think most guys are pretty bad at. They don't understand what women are trying to communicate. They don't understand what women really need. They try to give women shit that they don't need and don't give them things that they do need.

Having the intuitiveness to act on feedback and cues was essential to emotional attunement, enabling experts to "lead her [their interactional partners] emotions to a good place," as Stephen described.

It's just going to be a different experience for the both of you depending on whether you are going to be intuitive and just see what happens, or if you've got things prepared. With experience you become more reactive. Once you've really learnt the skills you go off a lot of feedback that's provided by the girl moment by moment.

You can say things and react to them in a charming way without ever getting offended. Just to play off communication and take it from there. To listen to a girl's input and lead her emotions to a good place. You need to listen to her and what you are doing. And that's the stuff and that was not available to me before. That's a matter of experience. There is no substitute for experience.

10.5.3 Attunement-to-self and situation

"I didn't know that at the time. [As a novice] You're so emotionally involved, you're blind."

10.5.3.1 Getting in the right emotional state

Attunement-to-self and situation captured how performers' emotions and internal cues acted as a heuristic and emotional guidance system, influencing their attention and decision making. In their formative years, the dating experts described prioritising having the right opening line or routine. However, as their skills developed, their priorities became more holistic, such as being in the right "emotional state." Neil captured this succinctly:

> Let's put it this way; I don't go out with this big 10-step game plan anymore. I go out making sure I'm in the right emotional state so I can access all these skills I have drilled into me.

His statement reveals a sophisticated understanding of research that suggests benefits are derived from being in the emotional state of arousal. Peak performance requires "just enough" arousal for the highly attuned *Goldilocks brain*, partly because when people are in the right state of arousal, it becomes easier to access skills embedded during practice. Neil described that, in a peak emotional state, he would act very differently to a typical male attempting a pickup, using bland concrete statements such as "Where are you from?"

> If I was in a good emotional state, if I was in a proper place... I would break her typical psychological pattern of a guy coming up to her. It wasn't, you know, "Where are you from? What do you do? What's your name? What're you guys celebrating?" Instead of doing that, this just was something totally different. And when it worked, I would stand out in a very good way. It made an emotional impact and that would allow her to get attracted to me and I could go on to my usual stuff.

The environment fundamentally influences our emotional state. Damien shared how his emotional state and how sociable he felt was shaped by the activity he was doing *before* initiation.

> Let's say I've been working on the computer all day. I'm not in a social mode so I'm going to get anxiety the minute I go and try to talk to someone because I've been on my own sat working on the computer and so now going from this state to sociable state is going to create a bit of anxiety as well. So it's just knowing how to do that, learn how to navigate.

As a result of their awareness of environmental influences on their emotional state, the dating experts would develop work-arounds to ensure this did not undermine their dating efficacy. Drawing

again on Gavin's excerpt from Section 10.2.4 on the costs and benefits of deliberative System 2 thinking, we see the importance of not allowing emotional attunement to be undermined by overanalysis.

> In field, talking to a woman, if you don't learn to switch off the analysis part of your brain, you're in trouble… That's something I had to go through. I had to learn to switch that off, not be thinking of strategies or theories, in the moment, just be thinking of, "You're talking to this beautiful girl. It's fun. Have fun and bring the good emotions to her."

10.5.3.2 Emotions and responding to cues

Attunement-to-self and situation required being in what Damien described as "two places at once." You had to be sensitive to a partner's emotions, and yet not over-react to cues. Damien used a metaphor of a boat in a storm to illustrate the importance of responding to cues appropriately, and simultaneously captured how attunement to self, situation and partner, all subtly influence one another.

> Well, there's a balance [to how you should react to a person's emotional cues], and the balance comes through experience. It's calibration, because you've got to kind of be in two places at once. One place is that you don't want to be is overly reactive. You don't want to be on a little boat in the middle of a stormy ocean; being tossed around by every single reactions, your emotions all at sea, like, "Oh, fuck! Oh, God, she's upset. Now I'm going to." If you're that reactive, you're not going to be attractive. But then you can't be so disconnected that you're not connecting with her and responding, do you know what I mean? So it's responding versus reacting. If you're emotionally *reactive,* then that's a bad thing. But being able to respond, and take what she gives and respond, that's a different thing. It's about being in control of your emotions.

Indeed, the dating experts provided numerous examples of how tightly integrated the three forms of attunement are—explaining how cues from a partner or situation influenced their own behaviour. Ruben described, **"I was sensitive to the feedback and I really used it as a mirror to see myself."** Neil reflected, "I didn't know that at the time. [As a novice] You're so emotionally involved, you're blind."

Gavin provided an example in support of the theory developed in Section 8.8.2.1 that emotions work as a heuristic and emotional guidance system, directing skilled responding.

> The difference is before, the words were everything. I didn't know what to feel or I didn't know what to telegraph and I was just, "Okay, now is the time to say that thing." The words were the conducting thread before. Now I know exactly where I am in an interaction based on how I feel and how—the woman's behaviour—how she feels, and how she behaves.

Given how strong emotions can be, they can hijack our decision making architecture. Research

reveals that in certain fields decision making relies on being able manage the emotions and be relatively "dispassionate" (Gobet, 2016). As argued in Section 8.8.3.1, in dating we can use the term "composure" to capture how emotions can be usefully managed. During an initiation in a bar, faced with numerous observers, obstacles, and possible rejection, the complexity, uncertainty, and emotionally charged nature of the situation can quickly become overwhelming. Stephen described how he was able to maintain his composure, stating:

> I think I am able to separate myself away from the emotions in situations and say, "Look these are really the relevant facts. This is what really matters and this is what the situation is really about."

One of the most concrete ways the experts conveyed just how important it was to maintain a deep attunement-to-self and the cues our bodies and emotions provide, was through their opinion of drinking alcohol while initiating. Many of the experts described completely abstaining from alcohol, as they found it dulled their emotional sensitivity and decision making. As Damien described:

> Another good thing is when you're training properly, you stop drinking so you spend less… Because you want the skill. Because you can get over your anxiety by drinking but that doesn't mean you've got the skill. You have to have control over your emotions so you have control over the situation and so when you stop drinking, you go, "I know this. I'm teasing her. This is a part of me, not this alcohol that's loosening me up or taking down my inhibitions."

This need to control or manage—not deny—their emotions, appears to be central to developing dating expertise, and was particularly important in light of the next theme, *approach anxiety management*.

10.5.4 Approach anxiety management

"It's having the tools and the devices. Not meaning anxiety doesn't come. It still comes; it's knowing how to deal with it."

Approach anxiety management can be considered a special case of *attunement-to-self*. The concept warrants its own category because of the frequency and vividness of reporting by participants. Given the inherent uncertainty of dating initiation and the extreme anxiety and fear it can provoke (Symons, 2005), the theme *approach anxiety management* reveals how the dating experts maintained their composure so that their emotions could "do their job" and operate as an effective emotional guidance system.

10.5.4.1 Feeling the fear and doing it anyway

Given the anxiety provoking nature of dating initiation, in their early years the experts developed what Brian described as a "face the fear and do it anyway mentality." Stephen challenged his negative self-

talk by exclaiming "what's the worst that can happen?" He soon found that "once you get use to that [possible rejection] the anxiety just fades away." Damien's used the analogy of jumping into a cold pool to reveal how he built resilience to fear of rejection.

"First one hurts" [approach/rejection]. "Let's just do it [approach]," you know what I mean? That's what it's like [the first approach in a session]; jumping into the cold pool again. It's like jumping into a cold pool… Then you warm up and then suddenly the water's the same temperature. Your body's getting kind of acclimatised… You're used to that now and it seems like it's warm.

John faced the fear of anxiety head on and also used the analogy of jumping into a cold pool to convey how he managed it. He reframed emotional anxiety as a sign that he was genuinely attracted and was serious about a successful outcome.

That's built in [approach anxiety]. It's programmed in. I cannot change that. Anyone who says they don't have it [approach anxiety] probably doesn't have the intention of picking up the girl. And for me I know it's a necessary evil. It's like jumping into a swimming pool. You can walk in slowly and let the cold water affect your skin and send shivers down your spine, or you can just jump in head first and absorb the rush and then in two or three seconds everything is fine. So I always approach knowing that hell if I just do it and jump in whatever happens will happen. And you've done your 50 percent. Let's see what the girl has to offer. And let's see how the girl responds.

Stephen provided a detailed explanation of how a person's internal voice and frame influenced their anxiety, comparing a novice to a skilled performer:

It's really, really hard for somebody who's completely new [to dating initiation] to do a really awesome approach. Because what's going on their mind is, "I feel anxious, I haven't done this before, what if she thinks this." For someone more experienced those things aren't a consideration because A, they've got past insights through practice. B, because they know it's safe because they've done it before. They are no longer anxious. C, because they don't care because they know it's all of no consequence because they have that hammered into them through experience and because they've had success with beautiful women in the past…You know they think "I'm good at this. She may like me. My past experience has been positive." And if you've had good relationships it's just "in there." In your mind. You're relaxed with women because you spend time with them and it's in there that you would be good for her… And that comes after a long time.

10.5.4.2 Techniques for taming anxiety and fostering positivity

The confidence and experience that comes from "feeling the fear and doing it anyway" helps people become more comfortable and attuned to initiation. But optimal performance is the result of more than just repetitive action. To overcome anxiety it was also important to foster the right emotional state. As the analysis for Investigation 1 revealed, many of the experts practiced techniques to facilitate a mental shift into a peak performance state (see, Section 6.2.4.2). To manage his anxiety, Neil practiced visualisation techniques used by elite athletes—which research reveals can focus attention, improve confidence, reduce anxiety, and enhance performance (Jeffrey, 2012). As he explained:

> What it [visualisation] would do is it would get me that feeling… of harnessing that [peak performance] state. One thing I remember is—this one bar I went to all the time in Calgary—I remember I walked in one night and I just uncontrollably started snapping my fingers and bobbing my head like I'm ready to have a good time. And it hit me; like, this [confidence/dating skill] is drilled into me. That's a trigger.

For Neil, visualisation acted as a trigger for confidence, composure, and his hard-earned dating skills. Similarly, Damien described accessing a "peak performance state" and "champion mode" during initiation. He explained that managing anxiety was *not* just a result of practice. You needed to have learnt specific techniques, or, in his words, have the "tools and devices."

> Another one is understanding that it's [success at dating] a state. So let's say there are peak performances. Let's say for example I've just come off the stage and I've kicked arse. I've had a standing ovation and I feel on top of the world. I could talk [initiate] to anyone because I'm in a "champion mode." So knowing how to get myself back into that champion mode helps to bypass anxiety as well.

> … So it's [managing anxiety] having the tools and the devices. Not meaning anxiety doesn't come. It still comes; it's knowing how to deal with it and then knowing that I've been through it a number of times that, "Okay, this is just...I'm in a certain state."

10.5.4.3 An emotionally resilient identity

With practice and new techniques, the dating experts developed a more confident and emotionally attuned identity where anxiety no longer impeded their performance. As Stephen described, with positive dating experiences the "anxiety gets chipped away" and speaking to new people is no longer something to cause alarm or horror.

> As you keep having these positive experiences, that anxiety gets chipped away. It just eventually

gets broken. So you get enough real-world experience to realise that these kind of horror scenarios never actually happen. The worst thing that really happens is that you get rejected. Quickly. But then that's actually a blessing in disguise because she hasn't wasted your time.

Damien described that now he "enjoy[s] the danger" of approaching, and finds it "fun" to meet someone new.

What I'm more comfortable doing now is to go in and see what happens [when I initiate]. I enjoy that more, or going, "I don't know where this is going but let's go and have fun," do you know what I mean? And being able to enjoy that danger, enjoy that danger and say, "I don't know where this is going but it's fun. Let's see who she is."

A large part of reconciling the emotions and learning to enjoy the danger lies in not being outcome dependent: Gavin described "It became more exciting to go out. In the beginning it was more intimidating but now it's more fun. It became genuinely fun to approach a hot, hot girl regardless of the outcome." John mentioned *Cupid,* the ancient Roman god of love from classical mythology, to convey how he had developed a more resilient identity that was less outcome dependent and more comfortable with rejection:

There is no *Cupid's* arrow. You can't fire an arrow and just win everybody over. It's impossible.... There's going to be people that warm to you and there's going to be people that hate you. And the real key is dealing with that and understanding it's not rejection. It's just incompatibility.... And it really comes down to being comfortable in doing that and putting yourself on the line and being outcome independent.

This mindset facilitated composure as he was less attached to the outcome. Similarly, John described "I'm far more relaxed. And so far less outcome dependent. I'm less outcome dependent. I am far happier with the choices I make." With skill and efficacy, the dating experts embody a psychologically "mature" interpretation of rejection. As Stephen captured:

When all of this [the skill] becomes ingrained in you and becomes normal, it's no more, it's no more of a painful emotional rejection than me calling you up and saying, "Hey, hey Morgan, do you want go for a drink on Thursday? I'm around on Thursday?" And you say "No, you know I can't." You know when that happens—it's become normal to you.

Being an expert is a distinctly different identity to being a novice or intermediate. Being highly adept in all four pillars of expert dating intuition—dual processing, expert perception, autonomous adaptability, emotional attunement—meant they had the know-how to actually "Be" an expert. As Nick

described "You need those 10,000 approaches and getting rejected to meet that one dream girl and not screw it up because you can tell yourself, 'It's okay. I got this. I've seen this before. I am this guy,' not 'I want to be this guy; *I am*!'

10.6 Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10 used extensive interview excerpts to provide a rich, detailed account illuminating the characteristics underlying the dating experts' fast, fluid and intuitive skills. The evidence provides compelling empirical support for the DEEPA model, demonstrating how the dating experts performances embodied each of the pillars—dual processing, expert perception, autonomous adaptability, and emotional attunement. The next chapter discusses the thematic analysis findings in light of Investigation 2's proposition and research questions.

Chapter 11. Review of Investigation 2 Findings

11.1 Introduction

This findings chapter draws on Chapter 10's thematic analysis and the four conceptual arguments laid out in Chapter 9's conceptual framework to provide the definitive statement on Investigation 2's four research questions and proposition, *the dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuition.* The findings provide a research-based account of expert dating intuition demystifying the nature of fast, fluid, intuitive dating ability, and provides empirical support for the four pillars of expert dating intuition—the thesis' original theory capturing four main characteristics proposed to facilitate expert dating intuition.

11.2 Finding 6: The Four Pillars of Expert Dating Intuition

Research Question 6 set out to identify the main characteristics of dating experts' skilled performance. Conceptual Argument 4 (Section 9.2) proposed the four pillars of expert dating intuition as an original theory capturing the main characteristics of dating experts' intuitive performance (see, Figure 42).

Figure 42. *The four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model.* Analysis of interviews with 15 dating experts provides empirical support for the DEEPA model, which proposes dating experts rely on four main pillars of intuition: (1) dual processing, (2) expert perception, (3) autonomous adaptability, and (4) emotional attunement.

With over 450 coded points of interview data and a 15,000 word thematic analysis, the research revealed in fine detail how each of the four pillars manifested in the experts' dating experiences. For instance, the analysis for the theme *dual processing* suggested the dating experts' fast, fluid, intuitive dating skills relied heavily on System 1 cognition. Dual processing was positioned as the uniting pillar, as it was argued that the System 1 and System 2 analogy facilitates a conceptual appreciation of how people

process the phenomenological experience of dating initiation. The analysis for *expert perception*, captured in detail the role of pillar two and how the dating experts' sophisticated search and pattern recognition enabled them identify and respond to dating cues. The analysis for *autonomous adaptability*, illustrated how they embodied pillar three, being highly autonomous in familiar situations they encountered and yet having the flexibility to adapt to pillar four, relying on three varieties of emotional attunement to guide their behaviour and establish attraction.

11.3 Finding 7: Experts are Highly Intuitive

Research Question 7 was designed to evaluate whether the main characteristics identified in Research Question 6 (i.e., the four pillars) underlie skilled dating. The findings strongly supported the view that the four pillars underpin the 15 dating experts' superior dating intuition. Indeed, we can build on this view to develop a model illustrating how each of the pillars can be thought of as existing on a spectrum running from high too low (see, Figure 43). From this position, ranking "high" across the four pillars is the mark of a highly skilled and intuitive dating expert, while ranking "low" is associated with being a novice.
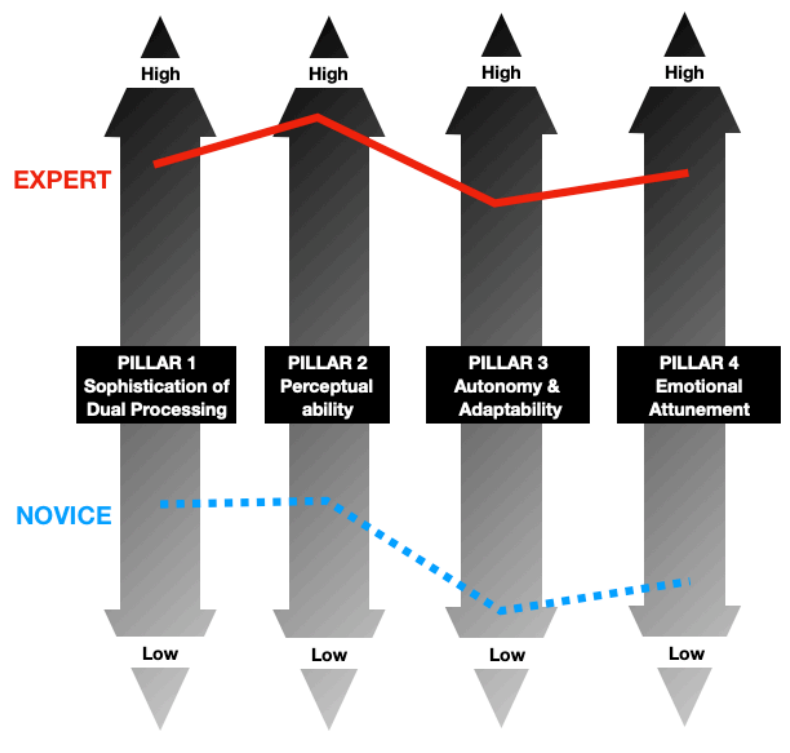
Figure 43. *The four characteristics distinguishing dating experts from novices.* Experts are represented by the red (continuous) line, and novices by the blue (dashed) line.

As represented by charge across the red line—dating experts vary in terms of their ability to embody each pillar. Indeed, the interviews revealed dating experts emphasised some aspects of the DEEPA model more than others. This is not surprising given that in domains of traditional expertise there are marked differences in individuals' intuitiveness and how they approach problem solving. For instance, some chess players are more strategic, some are more deliberative, while others rely more on rapid unconscious processing (Gobet, 2004). That said, the findings suggest the experts are "high" on all four pillars and leads us to hypothesise that experts would be higher than novices (the blue/dashed line) across all the pillars.

11.3.1 Fast problem solving relies on default-interventionist responding and emotional attunement

Chapters 8 and 9 proposed arguments regarding the four pillars which were supported in the thematic analysis. One argument concerned dual processing and a model of default-interventionist responding in dating (Conceptual Argument 6, model provided in Section 9.4.1), which linked to a second model (recreated below in Figure 44) proposed to capture the relationship between emotional attunement, knowledge architecture, and intuitive/analytical decision.
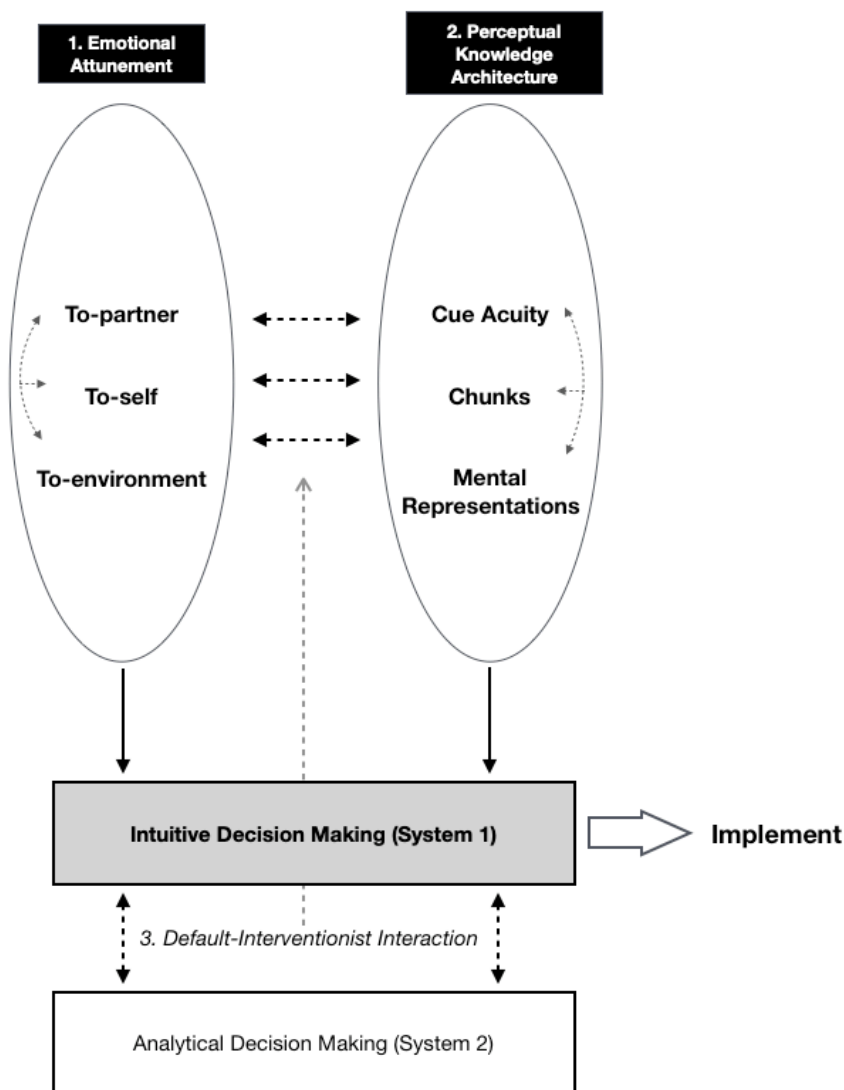
Figure 44. *Emotional attunement and decision making in dating initiation.* Effective responding is an outcome of the interaction between (1) emotional attunement, (2) perceptual cognitive architecture, and (3) default-interventionist processing. The three are interdependent: Each influences and is influenced by the other. The arrow from default-interventionist to 1 and 2, illustrates how the interaction of System 1 and System 2, also influences emotional attunement and access to perceptual knowledge architecture.

Analysis of the transcripts provided significant support for both models. In terms of the first model, the reports suggested the experts are largely System 1 responders, but in less familiar situations where System 1 fails to propose satisfactory solutions, like a committee, System 2 deliberation interjects, facilitating conscious reasoning about the best course of action.

As proposed, the three sorts of emotional attunement, appeared to both influence perception of dating cues, access to chunks, and serve as a heuristic guiding behaviour. As one participant in part conveyed when he discussed the importance of following his and his partners feelings:

> [As a novice] I didn't know what to feel or I didn't know what to telegraph and I was just, "Okay, now is the time to say that thing"…. Now I know exactly where I am in an interaction based on how I feel and how—the woman's behaviour—how she feels, and how she behaves.

It also has a key role in dual processing; most obviously in terms of managing emotions such as approach anxiety, which were reported to undermine the functioning of System 1 and System 2 decision making—for instance, causing fear and anxiety (System 1) to overwhelm any ability to think logically about the best course of action (System 2). With an expert, such skilled dual processing only requires a few moments. So quickly in fact, observers probably perceive any resultant action as pure "instinct," with the performer themselves often unaware they engaged in the dual cognitive process. Thus, while highly intuitive, the most skilled performers are not necessarily "unconscious" as presented by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1978)—rather it is not uncommon for elite daters to draw on deliberation to improve decision making. It should be emphasised that, so integrated is dual processing, the distinction can be easily misconstrued. Indeed, even where System 2 deliberation is "in command," System 1 style emotions and intuitions will be shaping the potential reasoned choices available to select from.

11.4 Finding 8: Dating Intuition Mirrors Other Domains

Research Question 8 and Conceptual Argument 5 considered whether dating intuition is similar to intuition in traditional domains of expertise. The analysis provided compelling evidence supporting this view, highlighting numerous parallels for each of the four pillars between dating and other domains of expertise. For instance, just as chess grandmasters' sophisticated perceptual awareness enables them to recognise cues and rapidly home in on solutions, the analysis revealed how the dating experts relied on highly refined perceptual acuity to solve the problem of successfully initiating a date. Given the number of parallels revealed, there are grounds to believe that the four pillars underlie not just dating but many domains of intuition.

We can use the findings to build another model conceptualising a dating expert's perceptual knowledge architecture (see, Figure 45). As described in Chapter 8's review of intuition research, experts depend on their schematic knowledge and the thousands of chunks they have amassed in long-term memory, with each chunk containing potentially dozens of moves, linking cues to actions and subsequent

moves. Chunks sit inside knowledge hierarchies that include groups of chunks, or templates, which are in turn housed within complex high-order mental representations or schemas, which can be thought of as "*large complexes*, each of which hangs together as a genetic, functional and/or dynamic nature" (de Groot, 1978, pp.329-30).
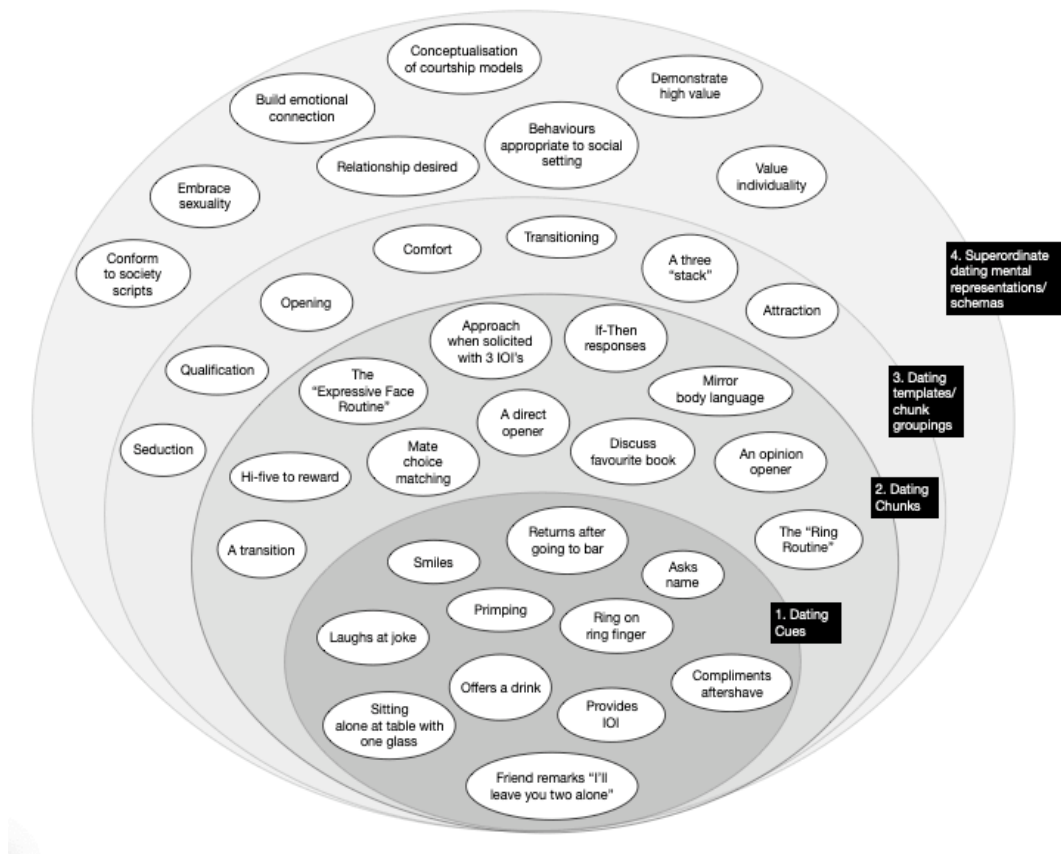
Figure 45. *Conceptual model of dating knowledge architecture*. Example dating cues, chunks, templates, and mental representations used by dating experts to navigate dating interactions.

The analysis provided numerous examples of a dating expert's knowledge architecture for navigating dating interactions. For instance, dating experts appear to hold chunks relating to non-verbal behaviours such touch, smiling, and body language. These in-turn occupy chunk groupings, or templates, relating to a particular phase of courtship. Using this model, we would predict that during Opening, a skilled dater would access very different chunks to those later in the courtship process where, for instance, they may use chunks relating to increased intimacy and bonding, such as asking for a phone number, dancing, or holding hands. Indeed, it was evident from the thematic analysis that the experts possessed highly structured knowledge about which routines to use in particular circumstances.

To further illustrate the model, we can draw on the specific example of the *Expressive Face Routine*

which featured in the thematic analysis (both in Section 6.3.2 and Section 10.3.3). The routine was used as an *opener* in nightclubs and bars, and played on the notion that how a person moves their our eyebrows predicts whether they have a comedic or dramatic persona. The example is provided below (note: references to the "level" relate to the hierarchal position in Figure 45).

> On receiving two cues (1st level), hair primping and a smile, the performer initiates a conversation using the *Expressive Face Routine*. The routine is selected as it is seen as a low-risk indirect conversational gambit, is relatively unique compared to a "typical" opening line, provides numerous opportunities to insert humour, and has predictable responses with planed rejoinders. Using our conceptual model, the routine can be conceived as a chunk (2nd level), which sits inside the template "opening" (3rd level). The routine is well suited to the situation and facilitates smooth transition to another phase of courtship, which is also a template "transitioning." In turn, the routine and template reside within superordinate dating mental representations, such as "conceptualisation of courtship models," and use "behaviours appropriate to social setting" (4th level).

It was apparent from the thematic analysis that performers held a vast number of dating chunks in their knowledge architecture. In light of this, we might pose the question: do dating experts have 100,000 chunks like Chase and Simon (1973) estimated for chess masters?

11.4.1 Differences between dating and other domains of expertise

Given the similarities in how intuition operates in domains of expertise that have been researched to date, it would be surprising if dating intuition was diametrically opposed. That does not mean there is no variation, or that dating intuition does not share more characteristics with some domains than others. For instance, Conceptual Argument 5 (Section 9.3) argues that there are particularly strong parallels between dating and domains studied in naturalistic decision-making such as firefighting and policing. All three domains involve high complexity, significant uncertainty, shifting environments, and are time pressured. In these conditions, optimal decision making relies on fast, holistic, intuitive cognitive processing. This is supported by analysis revealing participants becoming highly adept at rapidly initiating dates in busy environments so that fleeting opportunities to build an emotional connection are not missed.

Another difference relates to the anxiety that experts have to manage during performance. Approach anxiety has parallels with performance anxiety experienced in fields such as stage acting or concert performance where the public nature of performance produces significant pressure. However, compared to these fields, dating presents some unique pressures. An important aspect of dating expertise is the apparent *fitness* costs of "failed performance" (i.e., romantic rejection), with failure representing exclusion from a relationship which could have included everything from a brief sexual dalliance to a

lifetime mateship (Symons, 2005). These potential costs are arguably why the mere thought of rejection provokes such anxiety, and threatens our self-esteem and self-conception (Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luersssen, 2009). This helps us appreciate the unique aspects of performance anxiety in dating and why it is such a crucial determinant of success (see Section 3.5.2.3.2 for further discussion of performance pressure in other domains).

If initiation "success" requires two people have a resonating emotional connection, then pillar four, emotional attunement, may be a particularly important characteristic of dating intuition. This line of reasoning is bolstered when we consider dating is an emotion-laden domain which—drawing on Roiser and Sahakian's (2013) term—relies heavily on "hot cognition," which is where a person's decision making is guided strongly by their emotions. This contrasts with domains such as chess where the emphasis is on "cold cognition," and remaining logical and cool-headed to negate the clouding effect of emotions (Gobet, 2015).

11.5 Finding 9: Deliberate Practice Underlies Expert Dating Intuition

The final research question, Question 9, "Does deliberate practice play a role in the development of intuitive dating skills?" served as a bridge between Investigation 1 and Investigation 2. Just as Investigation 1 found that dating skills deliberate practice is the best explanation of the 15 performers' *dating expertise*, Investigation 2 concluded that the best explanation of the 15 performers' *expert dating intuition* is also dating skills deliberate practice.

Investigation 2's findings are represented in Figure 46, illustrating that as the performers practiced, they became more skilled and intuitive at responding to the complex dating situations they encountered.
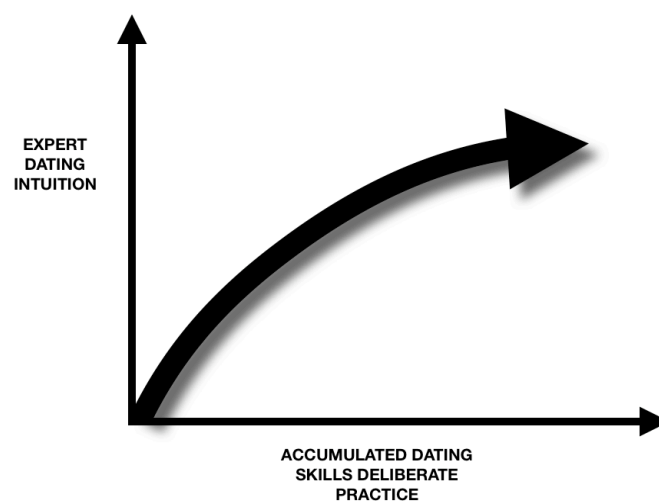
Figure 46. *Expert dating intuition as a function of accumulated dating skills deliberate practice.* The interviews with 15 dating experts suggests that their sophisticated powers of intuition was the result of years of specially designed dating skills deliberate practice.

Investigation 1 suggests that dating skills deliberate practice promotes development by keeping performers in the cognitive-associative learning phase, which facilitates increasingly complex dating mental representations. Counter to Gestaltists, who argue that micro-training, which breaks complex skills into component parts, is detrimental to development and produces robotic performances, Investigation 2 actually suggests the reverse: targeting specific skill components with dating skills deliberate practice accelerates the development of fluid, "natural," dating skills, by facilitating the development of sophisticated mental representations required for expert intuition.

11.5.1 Expertise + intuition

While the aim of deliberate practice is "expert performance," the DEEPA model suggests that the goal of dating skills deliberate practice is not just expertise but rather *expertise + intuition*. This is a more specific goal than identified under the general theory of deliberate practice which targets superior ability: intuitive or not.

For dating and social skills this distinction is especially important to make. While we may admire the elite performer who executes a golf swing with robotic excellence, such overtly mechanistic execution is undesirable in dating. Although a "natural" stroke in golf, cue action in snooker or running style in sprinting, may gain some plaudits—ultimately the unit of analysis in expertise is wins and trophies, which are distinctly separate assessments to intuitive ability. However, in contrast to other fields, intuitiveness is embedded in the very evaluation and achievement of dating expertise. When we socialise and interact, intuition is highly prized whether we are experts or not. Superior daters are just particularly skilled at embodying both expertise and intuition.

11.5.2 Intuition as a skill: Crossing the divide between novice and intuitive expert

Finding 9, that dating skills deliberate practice facilitates expert dating intuition, supports Investigation 1, refuting the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. Our new appreciation of the relationship between dating skills deliberate practice and dating intuition can be further illustrated using a final conceptual model (see Figure 47) integrating the central pillar dual processing from the DEEPA model with our understanding of the relationship between practice and dating skills deliberate practice.
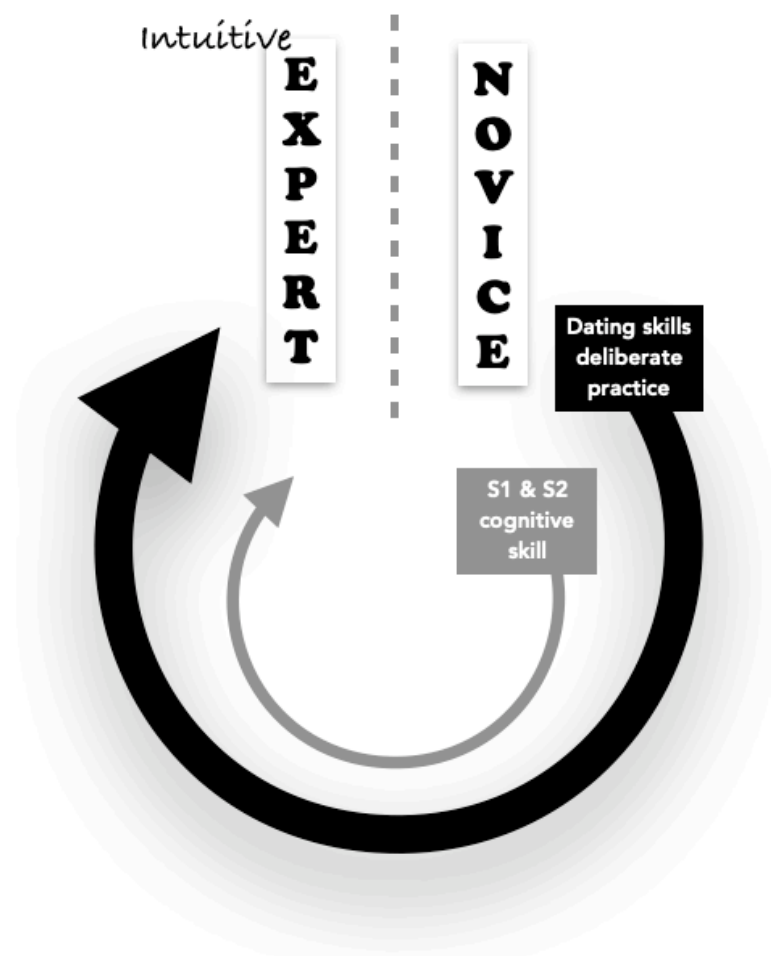
Figure 47. Becoming a highly intuitive dating expert through dating skills deliberate practice. Dating experts superior dating skills are the product of synergistic System 1 intuition and System 2 reasoning, trained, developed, and honed through years of dating skills deliberate practice.

As performers accumulate dating skills deliberate practice their System 1 and 2 dual processing becomes more refined, integrated, and synergistic. As argued when discussing default-interventionist responding, skilled dating experts are largely System 1 performers, with System 2 emphasised in less familiar situations. The rapid, holistic, unconscious nature of System 1 processing illuminates why dating

experts' intuitiveness has been construed as a talent that is too mysterious or innate to truly deconstruct or develop. Indeed, the data often captured how this misconception manifested itself, for instance with one of the experts explaining, "the best *game* [initiation] is when the student doesn't know what you've even done. You have to break it down to them because it's either too quick, or too fluid."

Rather than expert intuition defying comprehension, the model can be used to conceptualise intuition *itself* as a skill. From this position both novices and dating experts possess the capacity for dating intuition. Indeed, both can and do take intuitive action. However, it is the *quality* of dating experts' intuition that sets them apart from novices. The dating experts' intuition was highly refined, developed, and nurtured over many years of dating skills deliberate practice. Unhelpful gut responses such as approach anxiety which overwhelm novices, are minimised by experts, enabling them to reliably embody the four components of the DEEPA model. As people continue to engage in dating skills deliberate practice their ability to make decisions—their ability to dual process—become more synergistic, rapid, reliable, and effective.

11.6 Chapter 11 Summary

Chapter 11 provided a definitive statement for each of Investigation 2's four findings and proposition, *the dating experts have highly refined powers of dating intuitio*n. Thematic analysis provided strong empirical support for the view that superior daters do indeed rely on expert intuition. It argued such intuition is rooted in the four pillars of expert dating intuition, which have numerous parallels with intuition in other domains of expertise. An appreciation of the pivotal role of intuition in dating suggests the goal of dating skills deliberate practice is *expertise + intuition.* The most skilled daters are those who embody both expertise and intuition.

PART 4

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 12. Discussion & Implications

12.1 Overview

In their seminal paper on deliberate practice, Ericsson et al. (1993) make a bold assertion with respect to the giftedness hypothesis of expert performance:

> We deny that these differences [between expert performers and normal adults] are immutable, that is, due to innate talent… Instead, we argue that the differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain. (p. 400).

Encouraged by recent challenges to overly talent centric views of superior performance, this thesis set out to examine the giftedness hypothesis in the context of dating initiation; to be the first research to study whether the superior fast, fluid, intuitive skills of dating experts also stemmed from deliberate practice. To this end, two investigations were developed aimed at addressing the following problem statement:

> How do dating experts become so skilled and intuitive at dating initiation? Is it a "gift," or does deliberate practice (Ericsson et al.,1993) facilitate the development of dating expertise?

The outcome—after carrying out empirical research evaluating evidence from interviews with 15 of arguably the most skilled dating experts to have been studied, the research generated nine main findings, numerous conceptual models, and two theories demystifying the development of dating expertise. Despite all 15 participants starting out as dating novices, after accumulating large quantities of dating skills deliberate practice—"a challenging form of practice specially designed to improve dating performance"—they all developed into dating experts. The statement below echoes Ericsson and colleagues' above quote critiquing overly talent centric views of expertise—but here with respect to the thesis' findings on dating:

> As the first study to reveal an association between deliberate practice and dating expertise, the weight of evidence leads us to reject the giftedness hypothesis of expert dating. Dating expertise is not the preserve of uniquely gifted individuals whose natural talents mark them out as special. Rather—like skill acquisition in chess, sports, music, and other traditional domains of expertise —even people branded as untalented can, as result of accumulating dating skills deliberate practice, develop superior dating skills.

> The findings also reveal that fast, fluid, intuitive dating skills are far from a mystical ability that

defies analysis. Rather, dating intuition is rooted in the same principles of intuition found in firefighting, business, chess, and widely studied domains of expertise. Furthermore, such intuitive abilities can be honed through years of specially designed dating skills deliberate practice.

This final chapter reflects on the research findings, concentrating on the implications of the two theories—how they challenge our current understanding of dating expertise, and how they might inspire future research—as well as discussing points of reflexivity and the strengths and limitations of the research.[4]

12.2 Reimagining Max and James' Dating Challenges

One approach to discussing the theories developed in this thesis is revisiting *A Tale of Two Dating Initiators,* the hypothetical story of two would-be initiators first introduced in Section 8.2. If a proponent of the giftedness hypothesis had a chance encounter with James and Max—without acquiring a history of their dating experiences—reason suggests they would attribute James' lack of dating ability and Max's superior skills to disparities in innate talent. Given the chasm between them, proponents would consider the skill gap insurmountable. However, the theories developed in this thesis suggest a radically different view.

Max—a dating decision engine comparable to Google's deep learning program *AlphaGo*—possesses a hard-won repository of dating know-how and intuition honed over countless dating interactions. The theory of dating skills deliberate practice suggests that James could also develop superior dating skills. As a "typical" male socialised into everyday society, James' social skills suffice for navigating everyday non-dating interactions. However, to his chagrin, such domain general skills do not translate to dating. Like a classical pianist attempting to transition to jazz, James needs to learn new rules for dating initiation—how to open, transition to natural conversation, and build deep emotional connections. He could improve his domain specific skills by engaging in practice that meets four criteria of dating skills deliberate practice, being: repetitive, feedback orientated, challenging, and designed around specific goals. Given James' similar developmental requirements to the 15 dating experts—none of whom were considered remotely talented before they engaged in deliberate practice—it is likely dedicated training would generate a significant uplift in his ability.

Research shows that accumulating thousands of hours of deliberate practice—the dating variety or any other—is no easy feat. James would need to overcome numerous constraints such as: opportunity and motivation to practice; access to coaches, peers, and resources to learn from; as well as the financial costs associated with socialising and dating. While the demands of dating practice call for grit and determination, contrary to Ericsson et al's. (1993) general theory of deliberate practice, dating skills deliberate practice argues that highly effective practice can be extrinsically and intrinsically rewarding. Not only does cognitive reframing fundamentally influence how pleasurable we find an activity (Hirt et al.,

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[4] For ease of reference, a concise summary of all nine findings is included in Appendix 14.

1999); but performing complex skills at the limits of our ability can be enjoyable and produce the highly gratifying state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The claim that deliberate practice is unenjoyable is further challenged in the context of dating given the act of flirting facilitates the release of neuro-biologically rewarding hormones dopamine and norepinephrine, making the formation of new romantic connections highly pleasurable (Fisher, 1998; as discussed in *enjoyable practice*, Section 6.4.4).

James may reap greater success if he fosters a growth mindset, believing in the power of practice (see analysis for *practice mindset*, Section 6.6), and becomes what Gobet (2016) describes as an expert learner—viewing any rejections that follow initiation as valuable feedback, or a "mirror" (see *feedback orientated practice,* Section 6.3), for evaluating which skills to target next (see *goal orientated practice*, Section 6.5). In this regard, the findings suggest James could benefit from practice that includes: memorising opening lines and courtship models, visualisation, reflective journaling, and coaching others. The last of these is seen to be productive because it facilitates "learning twice," helping to cement declarative and procedural knowledge, and develop sophisticated dating mental representations required for planning, evaluating, and monitoring performance (see Section 7.4's conceptual model, *Three types of dating mental representations*).

James could also increase his dating capital by reading popular science books about mating, such as Buss' *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (2003), and Geher and Kaufman's *Mating Intelligence Unleashed: The Role of the Mind in Sex and Dating* (2013). As his knowledge grows, he would develop a richer appreciation of dating concepts supported in empirical research—such as those analysed in Research Question 5 on Community dating postulates (Sections 4.7 and 4.8). For instance, discovering why men accompanied by attractive women are perceived by onlookers as more desirable (due to mate choice copying and the disability enhancement effect, discussed in Postulate 5: *Demonstrate pre-selection*, Section 4.8.2); or learning about specific characteristics that increase our appeal as a partner (Postulate 3: *Strategic presentation of cues results in attraction*, Section 4.7.3).

Seeking out challenging practice in the cognitive-associative phase would help James to avoid arrested development and keep on developing (see the model *Dating expertise and practice in the cognitive-associative phase* in Section 5.4). However, superior dating skills take years to develop. The dating experts averaged 8 years of practice, with 5 years being the minimum duration; and calculations revealed that many of them broke through the 10,000 hour barrier. If James engages in dating skills deliberate practice, breaking dating initiation into individual components and practicing them repetitively, he may initially feel "robotic" and experience a performance dip (even from his low-base). But, counter to claims made by proponents of Gestaltism, the evidence suggests that such microtraining is the most effective approach to developing dating skills, and, before long, James should experience a significant uplift in his ability. Maintaining practice, his skills should become integrated and holistic; imbued with his own brand of creativity and spontaneity. His fast, fluid, intuitive dating skills would appear so "natural" that many observers would readily assume he is "one of the *talented.*"

The theory of the four pillars of expert dating intuition (see the figure, *The four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model,* in Section 11.2 and the discussion in Section 11.6.1), suggests that the

most effective dating practice targets the development of *expertise + intuition*. To meet the standards of an intuitive dating expert, James would need to develop all four of the characteristics in the DEEPA model: dual processing, emotional attunement, expert perception, and autonomous adaptability. As he builds his dating knowledge architecture, linking cues to chunks, templates, and mental representations (see, *Conceptual model of dating knowledge architecture* in Section 11.4), James' perceptual ability and powers of pattern recognition should grow (pillar two), enhancing his ability to *satisfice* and make rapid "good enough" decisions reliably and repetitively.

With practice, James should experience an uplift in pillar four's three varieties of emotional attunement (to-partner, to-situation, to-self). The dating anxiety that once crippled him, provoking emotional exaggeration and cognitive reduction which overwhelmed his working memory and biased his ability to respond effectively to cues, should reduce as he develops *composure* and improves his ability to regulate his emotions. As illustrated by the model *Emotional attunement and decision making in dating initiation* (Section 9.4), emotional attunement and a well developed dating knowledge architecture helps initiators build rapport with interactional partners, and create a deep resonating feeling of "two person connectedness."

To enhance his ability to connect, James would benefit from developing pillar three, autonomous adaptability, facilitating the liberating experience of being highly autonomous; being able to execute routinised behaviour in stereotypical situations, and yet also being adaptable, able to improvise and navigate the most complex dating scenarios.

Ultimately, as argued in Conceptual Argument 5 (Section 9.3), due to the similarity of dating to cognitively demanding domains such as firefighting—where people are faced with uncertainty, time pressure, and rapidly changing elements—James needs an efficient System 1. In *A Tale of Two Dating Initiators,* James' excessive conscious analysis overwhelmed his low-capacity System 2, and he struggled to do the relational multitasking required to handle the innumerable variables involved in dating initiation.

Despite the limitations of conscious deliberation, as conveyed by the *Proposed model of default-interventionist responding in dating* (Section 9.4), James should not hold idealised notions of the intuitive powers possessed by skilled daters like Max. The findings suggest that the non-reflective intuitive expert presented by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1988) is an unrealistic depiction of true expert decision making. Experts' System 1 and System 2 cognition is tightly integrated and synergistic and, even for superior performers, there are times when System 2 deliberation drives decision making. James should also embrace the reality that his progress may not be as rapid as those with different developmental requirements. In contrast to Ericsson et al's. (1993) monotonic argument which assumes expertise is proportional to deliberate practice, this thesis does not argue deliberate practice is the only piece in the puzzle. Dating is a complex domain and many factors contribute to ability. Heritable characteristics such as physical attractiveness influence romantic appeal. Early environmental experiences, personality traits, attachment style, interests and abilities all affect our disposition for learning and growth. Yet, as suggested in *The inverse relationship between innate talent and dating expertise* (Section 7.3), the more skilled a person is the less they rely on relatively fixed traits to attract mates. Given all of the findings above on expert dating

and intuition, if James remains committed to dating skills deliberate practice, as captured in Figure 47. *Becoming a highly intuitive dating expert through dating skills deliberate practice* (Section 11.5.2), he could cross the divide between novice and expert—developing the fast, fluid, synergistic, System 1 and System 2 skills of a superior performer.

12.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Conceptualising dating as a domain of intuitive expertise presents numerous opportunities for research, not least because there are decades worth of research on domains such as music, sports, and medicine that could be readily adapted to dating. In this regard, the two theories developed in this thesis provide a logical starting point for generating testable hypotheses.

12.3.1 Expert intuition recommendations

One of the main claims of the four pillars of expert dating intuition is that expert daters develop sophisticated powers of perception (pillar two). To verify whether this is true, a sample of dating experts and non-experts could be posed representative dating initiation situations that test cue perception. This could be measured by using a classic memory recall task. Participants (dating experts and non-experts) could be presented with still images of mixed-sex scenes (or video recordings) and be evaluated on their ability to locate, recall, and describe women. Dating experts would be expected to perform better at the task. [*Proposed hypothesis*: dating experts have superior cue perception relative to non-experts]. An alternative experiment could use an eye fixation method similar to de Groot, Gobet, and Jongman (1996), to track participants' eye moments and evaluate whether dating experts focus on different aspects of the scene and literally *see* dating problems differently to non-experts.

The four pillars suggests dating experts' decision making is rapid and accurate because they have amassed numerous dating routines and scripts in the form of chunks and mental representations in their dating knowledge architecture. This could be tested by asking participants to imagine representative situations (such as having to initiate in a nightclub) and then asked what opening lines, scripts, routines, and gambits they would use. The quantity and quality of their responses would be indicative of the development of their dating knowledge architecture. [*Proposed hypothesis*: dating experts possess more dating scripts and routines than non-experts]. Further, the four pillars also suggest that dating experts rarely see dating problems as static, or separate; rather they see them in large complexes, with perceptual aspects intertwined with dynamic possibilities. This could be tested using a classic "think aloud" protocol, to ascertain how experts approach decision making (e.g., see Ericsson, 2006c). Reminiscent of de Groot's 1946 thesis utilising a think aloud protocol with chess experts, dating experts and non-experts could be presented with representative situations to obtain—using de Groot's definition—"[as] full and explicit a rendering of the subject's thoughts as possible, to include his plans, calculations, and other considerations leading to the move decision" (1946/1978, p. v). Dating experts would be expected to provide a

significantly deeper, richer, more integrated analysis of the problem than their less skilled peers.

For an experiment that combines expert perception (pillar two) with emotional attunement (pillar four), participants' ability to decipher emotions could be evaluated using an emotional recognition test, such as Baron-Cohen et al's. (2001) *reading the eyes in the mind test* (REM), or Schlegel, Grandjean, and Scherer's (2013) *Geneva emotion recognition test* (GERT). [*Proposed hypothesis*: dating experts outperform non-experts at interpreting women's emotions]. Another experiment that combines expert perception with emotional attunement involves evaluating participants' ability to notice and interpret cues and make rapid "thin-slice judgements" regarding women's openness for initiation, or attraction to a person. For instance, the experiment could replicate Muehlenhard, Koralewski, Andrews and Burdick's (1986) study, which involved videotaping males and females in initiation situations and then asking male observers to rate the likelihood the women accepted the male for a date. [*Proposed hypothesis:* dating experts outperform non-experts at reading females' cues indicative of openness and attraction]. A modification could involve showing dating experts (and non-experts) various scenes that include women presenting cues indicative of their openness to being approached (e.g., non-verbal cues such as whether they are wearing a wedding ring, sitting at table alone but with two full wine glasses, or have closed body language). Again, dating experts would be expected to be more efficient at noticing relevant cues.

For a test on emotional attunement (pillar four), dating experts are predicted to be more effective at managing negative emotional arousal in dating situations. Dating experts and non-experts could be situated in dating situations and their level of arousal evaluated. This could be assessed by recording observers' judgments on participants' emotional state, or by using an instrument to estimate arousal by measuring sweat gland activity or galvanic skin response. [*Proposed hypothesis*: dating experts are less negatively aroused than non-experts in dating situations].

12.3.2 Dating skills deliberate practice recommendations

After amassing years of dating skills deliberate practice, just how *skilled* are dating experts? While this thesis used self-report, peer review, and questionnaires to assess dating expertise, "real world" experiments could be designed to evaluate the experts' abilities. The controlled conditions of speed-dating are a proven research paradigm for studying dating (Finkel, Estwick & Matthews, 2007), which could be readily used to assess expertise. In a specially designed speed-dating scenario including dating experts, non-experts, and women; women partaking in the event could serve as the arbiters of dating ability by rating the desirability of all the male participants. [*Proposed hypothesis*: dating experts are rated as more desirable than non-experts].

This thesis predicts peoples' dating skills improve with dating skills deliberate practice, but further work could be done to quantify the precise amount of practice that translates to varying levels of dating skill (i.e., expert, intermediate, beginner). This could be done by completing a study that effectively adapts Ericsson et al's (1993) study of musicians to dating. Related questions could investigate whether—once experts—people need to actively maintain practice to preserve their expertise and to keep abreast of

the constantly evolving dating landscape? If expertise does retard, then at what rate; and is it faster for people who were once experts to regain expertise a second time around?

An additional idea draws on Chassy and Gobet's (2011) argument that emotionally salient events mediate the encoding of chunks and mental representations. A study could be designed whereby people are taught specific dating skills (or chunks) while their emotions are modulated. For example, as learners practice, in one condition they could be "rewarded," in another "punished," and in the control unaffected. This would enable the study to ascertain whether certain conditions promote or discourage more efficient encoding/learning. [*Proposed hypothesis:* dating chunks are more efficiently encoded/learnt during emotionally salient events].

Dating expertise is a rich and complex phenomenon. Despite confirming the relationship between dating expertise and dating skills deliberate practice, this thesis supports the position that other factors also influence dating ability. Our understanding of dating expertise would be improved by research using other methodological approaches identifying all of the causal factors—environmental and genetic—that influence development. Relevant questions include: To what extent do heritable/personality traits account for variance in performance? Does deliberate practice account for more variance in dating than in other domains of expertise? How do other variables interact with dating skills deliberate practice? For instance, in adolescence, does parenting style or access to mixed sex peer circles influence later development and motivation to engage in dating skills deliberate practice?

Being able to access a sample of dating experts provides a unique opportunity to test evolutionary psychology theory. For instance, are dating experts' superior performances in part derived from their ability to project high mate value—such as wit, confidence, high status, kindness—in a manner consistent with evolutionary theories? While the phenomenon of mate choice copying (Dugatkin, 1992; Hill & Buss, 2008) is supported in empirical research, to what extent can skilled daters reliably integrate such techniques into their performances? This could be measured using field experiments evaluating whether being with an attractive woman actually results in greater initiation success for men. A novel experiment could be conducted by adapting Clark and Hatfield's (1989) classic study on receptivity to sexual offers, evaluating whether dating experts are more successful than typical males at making intimate requests to females using lines as straightforward as "Would you go out with me tonight?" or "Would you go to bed with me tonight?" If they are, it would suggest that they have honed their delivery and in just a few words are able to connect with women in a way typical males do not.

While many people would like to be more effective at dating initiation, not everyone has the will or desire to practice hundreds of initiations—and, potentially they do not need to. Having identified the building blocks of superior dating ability, dating skills deliberate practice has the potential of being generalised to people who have more modest dating ambitions of being "good" or "average" rather than "expert." Dating skills deliberate practice could support clinicians, therapists, and trainers in helping their clients develop the skills to establish romantic relationships which are crucial for wellbeing and happiness. Further research could be done to identify the forms of practice that are most applicable to the skills training context. Areas of practice include: teaching dating initiation models to develop chunks and

mental representations, the role of pre-rehearsed routines as training wheels, visualisation and journalling for motivation and awareness of performance strengths and limitations, using feedback cues from partners as a mirror to modify behaviour. Much of this practice need not take place in public. For instance, visualisation and journalling appear to be highly effective methods for promoting the development of dating mental representations, and yet can be done easily in the privacy of home or under the guidance of a teacher. The science of expert performance and dating skills deliberate practice can uncover the most effective and appropriate ways for people to improve their dating skills.

Such training could also be applied for helping women improve their dating skills. There is a long history of clinically led training for women and, as noted in Section 2.2.1, in recent years there has been a growth in dating coaching for women. While there are differences in the skills required for female led initiation, there are likely to be numerous parallels in terms of the importance of the four components of dating skills deliberate practice; with practice that integrates repetition, feedback, goals, and challenges, likely to accelerate development. [*Proposed hypothesis*: women can improve their dating skills though dating skills deliberate practice].

12.4 Strengths and Limitations

Given the assertions made in this thesis, it is important to ask questions relating to the success of the research, such as did it achieve its aims? Did it enhance our understanding of dating skills development and dating intuition? Can we be confident in the findings as they apply to the 15 dating experts, and potentially other people? In this respect, a useful starting point, is to discuss the sample of the 15 dating experts.

12.4.1 Using outliers for evaluating expertise

The quality of any research relies on its sample. Anchor (2010) argues that conventional psychology's focus on general patterns—seeking representative samples and disregarding outliers that fall above the trend line—is misguided and preoccupied with "the cult of the average" (p. 10). Rather than discounting outliers, this thesis did the reverse—purposively recruiting a unique sample of 15 dating experts satisfying Patton's (1999) definition of an *extreme case*. The sample proved essential to the research. I know no other population of males besides those associated with the Community who have consciously dedicated themselves to thousands of hours of purposeful dating skills dating practice. More than just being extreme cases, the dating experts met Yin's (2009) definition of being *revelatory cases*, enabling the research to challenge the giftedness hypothesis of dating expertise and develop original theory on expert dating intuition.

One possible criticism relating to the sample is that the participants were not "bonafide" experts. Two reasons this might be levied centre on the lack of agreed criteria for determining dating expertise, and the participants' ability to accurately self-report expertise. One of the key strengths of the thesis is

that to mitigate such criticism it drew heavily on rigorous methods developed by researchers of expert performance. Sosniak's (2006) approach for designing criterion measures for selecting experts was replicated and resulted in the development of the Test of Dating Expertise with stringent three pronged criteria for determining dating ability. The test ensured participants' self-reported expertise was substantiated using detailed descriptions of their abilities, test scores from questionnaires assessing dating ability, as well as peer review. The multi-pronged approach can be considered especially robust when compared to other standards used by some researchers of expertise—such as selecting experts based on peer review alone—which Meig (2006) describes as "the minimum criterion of expertise" (p. 746).

12.4.2 Generalisation from thematic analysis

However justified the sampling approach, a small outlier sample of 15 dating experts comes with limitations and means quantitative standards of generalisability are not achievable. It cannot be claimed, for instance, that dating skills deliberate practice would lead to a similar result for the population at large. However, the research does support qualitative standards of theoretical or analytic generalisability (Firestone, 1993), facilitating the development of numerous conceptual models and new theories. It also provides evidence substantiating deliberate practice and expert intuition in dating. This can be considered a key contribution in light of McAdam and Pals' (2006) argument that it is important for quantitative findings to be corroborated by qualitative research that provide new insights and rich understanding of phenomenon as they are constructed in life narratives and human experience.

In addition to theoretical generalisation, the research satisfies Lincoln and Gulba's (1985) definition of transferability, meaning the findings can be used to make inferences to specific populations. This could prove especially valuable for researchers of expert intuition, deliberate practice, dating, and clinicians and therapists involved in the delivery of dating skills training—where they can assess whether the findings can be generalised to relevant populations.

A key reason why the findings support theoretical generalisation and transferability is attributable to the quality of the thematic analysis which used detailed excerpts from the dating experts and integrated empirical research to highlight key points; achieving "thick" descriptions and evocative story-telling capturing the phenomenon under study—important criteria for credibility in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). In addition, the consistency of reporting across the participants, as well as the large number of meaning units—over 1600 coded in total, 1162 for Investigation 1 and 469 for Investigation 2—demonstrate that the findings were grounded in the data.

If this thesis had instead been designed as a quantitive study seeking statistical generalisability, it would not have delivered the depth of insight that proved so crucial to breaking new ground and developing new theories. As such, the decision to design the research with a focus on qualitative standards of theoretical generalisability and transferability was a worthy trade-off; and, as alluded to in Section 12.3's recommendations, further research can take advantage of this thesis' conceptual work on deliberate practice and intuition as a basis for designing quantitative studies offering broader generalisability.

12.4.3 Following the evidence

12.4.3.1 Saturation and researching intuition

Achieving the level of detailed reporting from the 15 dating experts was instrumental to the success of the research. The interviews with the 15 participants averaged 90 minutes in length (range 55 minutes to 150 minutes), producing over 500 pages of interview transcriptions and 160 pages of thematic analysis (some 55,000 words). In the early stages of planning the research, the intention was to interview some 30 participants. However, as the rich and detailed interviews were carried out, depth, not breadth, was identified as the key asset. Sufficient time needed to be allocated to interviews, to connect with the participants, probe statements, and enable elaboration relating to particular events and theoretical constructs. While it was difficult to judge at what point saturation—the qualitative criterion for discontinuing data collection—was "reached," analysis suggested the two components of saturation operationalised for the thesis in Section 2.2.4.3 (*theoretical saturation/consensus,* and *volume and richness of reporting*) had been satisfied. The material collected was considerable, and, given the exhaustive nature of the analysis, data collection requirements were considered satisfied.

As acknowledged in the *Methods* chapter, retrospective interviews present problems; such as interviewees' inability to recall past events and ability to reflect meaningfully on their behaviour and cognitions. Yet, the dating experts proved remarkably effective communicators and their recall of past events appeared reliable. This was tested during the interviews by using probing questions, and is supported by the richness and consistency of their reports. The participants proved adept at providing deeply introspective insights into their experiences, facilitating a detailed appreciation of the developmental and cognitive processes underlying their expertise. That said, comparing Investigation 1 on deliberate practice and Investigation 2 on intuition, interviewees were arguably more equipped at describing the developmental activities they engaged in rather than their "intuitiveness" at dating. This is partly why Chapter 6's deliberate practice thematic analysis ran far longer than Chapter 10's intuition analysis (some 40,000 words versus 15,000 words). The difference in length also stemmed from the reality that at the outset of the research, the plans for intuition were much more modest; and a complete investigation only emerged in the later stages of analysis. The intuition analysis was also shorter for the practical reason that after completing the analysis for deliberate practice, it was necessary to shorten it to keep the word count down.

In hindsight, if I had originally intended to make such inroads into intuition, I would have leaned more heavily on research methods developed specifically for studying intuition—such as the critical incident technique (Akinci, 2014), designed for use in retrospective interviews exploring intuitive processes, personal experiences, emotions, and psychological constructs. That said, the interviews achieved many of the goals of the critical incident technique, such as ensuring participants' reflection on their cognitive processes were grounded in personal experiences and events. This is in part due to rigour of the expert performance approach to interviewing, as well as my predilection for detailed interviews

which tease out the nuances in people's reports; which is aided by my previous experience doing highly idiographic interviews using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

12.4.3.2 Deduction and induction

The use of interviews raises a discussion relating to use of deductive and inductive reasoning, which led to various benefits and trade-offs. Deductively driven aspects of the research meant it benefited from drawing on existing theory on expert performance and intuition, while, inductively driven aspects facilitated the search for novel ideas synthesising expert performance, intuition, and dating.

In tandem, the deductive-inductive approach generated a vast range of ideas and concepts. Of the two, inductive reasoning proved particularly valuable for enhancing and broadening the scope of the research. Not only did it prompt the unplanned investigation into dating intuition, but fostering an inductive mindset helped to counter the all-to-human tendency to look for patterns that confirm pre-existing beliefs and theories, and limit our potential for challenging entrenched positions.

Induction is particularly useful during exploratory research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The inductive nature of the second investigation was significantly more time consuming (see discussion in Section 2.3.4.2) and, given the progress made during this thesis, if I was to do similar study, to save time and further refine the theories already developed, I would make it more deductive.

12.4.3.3 Finding balance and limiting the themes

Given the disparity in the fields of research synthesised, I was genuinely surprised by the value of deductive theory building and how much research on the cognitive study of expertise was directly applicable to dating. Executing a study with such breadth and depth proved challenging. Not only did it require the grasp of an extensive range of research, but it also impacted on what could be reported in the findings.

For instance, for Investigation 1, I initially intended to include thematic analysis illustrating the participants' developmental journey from novices to experts, covering three phases: the early years, middle years, and later years. This would have provided a detailed account of how the constraints faced by the participants (e.g., motivation and opportunity to practice) fluctuated across their practice years, which would have been useful for readers and dating skills trainers interested in changes in the participants' practice across the developmental cycle. However, due to the limitations of what could be reasonably addressed in a PhD thesis, inevitably some ideas had to be reined in.

Despite these limitations, the breadth/depth balance achieved is arguably an overarching strength; providing a holistic appreciation of dating skill development that links deliberate practice, to dating expertise, to dating intuition.

12.4.3.4 Would the same themes have emerged with a different researcher?

Reflecting on the themes that emerged from this research, a question to consider is whether

another researcher who had access to the raw interview data and was unfamiliar with the theory of deliberate practice would have identified the same themes? Arguably there would be marked variation—researchers embody different forms of knowledge, biases, views, and express ideas couched in terms and concepts that resonate with their own angles of looking. Of the four components of deliberate practice, *repetitive practice*, *challenging practice*, and *goal orientated* practice, are perhaps the most obvious themes that would have resonated with a researcher unfamiliar with the field. This inference is supported by the large number of meaning units recorded for these themes (the three themes recorded 1,033 meaning units).

However—despite *feedback oriented practice* receiving 182 meaning units—would feedback have been so readily apparent to most researchers, especially in a domain like dating? Also, would they have necessarily identified *enjoyable practice*, which was coded the least of all Investigation 1's themes with 47 meaning units? Such reflections emphasise the subjective nature of qualitative research and the importance of reflecting on how one impacts on the findings, as well as emphasising why validity in qualitative research relies on evidence that is rich, persuasive, grounded in the data, and supported by triangulation.

12.4.3.5 Would the same themes have emerged with non-experts or "slow improvers"?

12.4.3.5.1 Dating skills deliberate practice

Given the findings stem directly from analysis of a sample of 15 Community dating experts, it is interesting to ask whether analysis of a sample of intermediates who had spent a similar amount of time in the Community as the participants but had not progressed to experts would have led to similar themes emerging? Such hypothetical questions are hard to answer definitively, but serve as a useful reflexivity exercise. Given all the 15 participants made the journey from novice to expert and answered questions related to their experiences as intermediates, there is some data to base the answers on.

In terms of deliberate practice, the thematic analysis would arguably have produced marked differences. In terms of quality of practice—or just how "deliberate" their dating skills deliberate practice was, *slow improvers* (intermediates who did not develop into experts despite a similar length of time in the Community) would have likely accumulated significantly less of the challenging initiation practice which resulted in the themes *gritty practice* and *distressing practice*. As one of the experts described: "Approaching is one of the things that separate the men that go on and improve and those who don't. The one's who are able to say, 'It's nerve wracking but I'll do it. I'll approach.' That's how they build the skill-set." The slow improvers lack of challenging practice would account for why their development stalled. If this reasoning is correct, unlike the experts, slow improvers would have accumulated significantly less than 10,000 hours of dating skills deliberate practice.

Drawing on the general theory of deliberate practice, a theme slow improvers would have arguably reported more extensively is *enjoyable practice*. However, the research showed that the dating experts also found elements of dating skills deliberate practice intensely satisfying and enjoyable. Men who join the Community and find initiation lacks any intrinsic or extrinsic enjoyment and find it provokes

excessive anxiety are likely to: (a) stop practicing and leave, (b) or become the "keyboard jockeys" participants described, who defer satisfaction from engaging in the Community, but do little serious practice. Slow improvers, would likely spend a higher proportion of time doing relatively "comfortable" practice, avoiding the stress of initiation in favour of consuming dating material and practicing other *associated skills*.

Perhaps one of the more significant differences in reporting would have related to *coaching others*, with the slow improvers doing considerably less coaching than experts. The vast majority of the participants had worked as paid coaches; and those who had not had actively advised and taught others in an unpaid capacity. Coaching appeared to be consistent with the protégé effect (Chase et al., 2009), the phenomenon where teaching helps a person's own development. Coaching created positive performance pressure which appeared to help embed declarative and procedural knowledge, and facilitate the development of mental representations required for expert dating performance.

12.4.3.5.2 The four pillars of expert dating intuition

The difference in themes between a sample of slower improvers and experts would likely be more pronounced for intuition than deliberate. The first point to acknowledge is without a sample of experts it is unlikely Investigation 2 or the four pillars of expert dating intuition would have emerged. Superior intuition was associated with expertise, so it is unlikely a study of intermediates would have generated 469 meaning units for intuition.

Reflecting on the various intuition themes, arguably intermediates would report significantly less meaning unit for *autonomy* than experts; being more dependent on Community teachings and models, while finding it difficult to relinquish the rules they had been taught. The expert paradox (Sternberg, 1996) may have an equivalent "intermediate paradox," with intermediates who fail to progress over many years becoming increasingly entrenched and rigid. Similarly, intermediates would likely report less *adaptability*, having less extensive and flexible repertoires to facilitate rapid decision making in the dating situations they encounter.

The findings revealed approach anxiety was particularly common in participants earlier years of practice. Without developing the composure that comes from successful (and unsuccessful) initiation attempts it is unlikely intermediates' would have accumulated enough practice for their emotions to have developed into highly effective guidance systems, meaning they would register significantly less meaning units for *emotional attunement* than experts. All four components of the DEEPA model are tightly interrelated. Without developing sophisticated emotionally attunement and developing autonomous adaptability, it would be difficult to develop the refined cue acuity necessary for *expert perception* and *System 1* to be so widely reported. Rather, based on the experts' reports of their performance in their earlier years, a theme that would have received more meaning units for slow improvers is *System 2*; as intermediates would rely proportionally more on deliberation to guide their decision making.

12.5 Closing Thoughts: "What the Hell is *Dating Intuition*?"

In some ways, explicating dating as a novel domain of expert performance and expert intuition is bizarre. After-all, courtship and mating has been a constant challenge throughout Homo sapiens' evolutionary past; whereas domains construed as "traditional"—such as chess, classical music, and advanced physics—were not adaptive problems faced by our hunter-gatherer hominid ancestors.

As enjoyable as it may be to conjure-up images of our forebears in the Pleistocene attempting to solve the dilemma of checkmating an opponent, grappling with all 88 keys of a piano, or solving complex math; in reality they were not confronted with these problems. Despite this, the great body of work on expert intuition has been carried out precisely on such fields which are recent innovations in our evolutionary history.

Even though today's environment differs significantly to the Pleistocene, our cognitive architecture evolved over millennia of natural and sexual selection to aid decision making relating to mate choice (Miller & Todd, 1988); making us the progeny of a long line of ancestors whose success producing offspring suggests they possessed significant "skill" at wooing. As such, it is of little surprise that skilled dating today depends on a host of cognitive mechanisms such as search and pattern recognition. Indeed, it is arguable that our cognitive architecture is more adapted for decision making in dating than traditional domains of intuition. The notion that we have the same innate capacity for swinging a golf club or solving complex algebra, would seem misguided. Such a gap calls to mind the parable of the three fish:

> There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" (Wallace, 2009, p. 5)

Although dating intuition can be construed as water—the illusive obvious, somewhat overlooked because of its very ubiquity; researching a domain as complex as dating intuition was made inordinately more achievable because of work undertaken by the "wise fish" of expert intuition—Adriaan de Groot, Herbert Simon, and Fernand Gobet—who used chess, the *Drosophila* of cognitive science (McCarthy, 1990), as a test-bed for scientific experiments on intuition in chess' "natural" environment: the playing halls where chess masters do battle. Without this pioneering research, meaningful study of dating intuition would have presented a Herculean task. A similar homage can also be paid to the researchers of expert performance, whose studies reveal the fallibility of the giftedness hypothesis and provide a more equitable—and accurate—view of human potential.

This thesis represents a small step towards increasing our understanding of dating as a domain of intuitive expertise. While my gut-feelings suggest this will be a long, ongoing process, the new theories promise to increase our understanding of how people can continue to evolve and adapt to the modern challenges of developing rewarding romantic relationships.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Test of Dating Expertise—The Inclusion Criteria

Criterion 1: Dating initiation expert

Potential participants self-rate their skill using the *Dating Initiation Expertise Scale* was developed specifically for this research. The scale was designed to enable dating expertise to be assessed in terms of key four key determinants of dating initiation skill:

(1) Confidence and anxiety initiating

(2) Standard initiating

(3) Autonomy when initiating

(4) Coping with complexity when initiating.

Each quality can be ranked in terms of five skill levels, ranging from "novice" to "expert." To satisfy the inclusion criteria participants must be ranked as "expert" for at least three out of four criteria, including expert at "standard initiating."

Criterion 2: Achievements indicative of dating expertise

Using the *Achievements and Reputation Questionnaire*, developed specifically for the study, participants must self-assess themselves as 'significantly above average' in terms of proficiency at cold approach dating initiation. Using the six question *Expertise Scale* (Reysen, 2008) adapted for dating participants must be assessed by an experienced peer as "an expert."

Criterion 3: Satisfy standards of dating expertise

Participants must satisfy three criteria related to dating competence assessed using three existing questionnaires:

(1) High dating competence—assessed using the *Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire* (Buhrmester et al., 1998). Participants must score 36 or above out of a possible 40).

(2) High dating success—assessed using the *Self-Perceived Mating Success Scale*, (Landolt et al., 1995). Participants must score 45 or above out of a possible 56.

(3) High mating intelligence—assessed using the *Mating Intelligence Scale* (Geher et al. 2009). A study revealed males score an average of 12.3 out of 24 (O'Brien et al., 2010), whereas to be included in the study participants must achieve a minimum score of 20.

Appendix 2: Dating Initiation Expert

Criterion 1— Assessed using the Dating Initiation Expertise Scale developed specifically for this thesis.

Potential participants were presented with the Dating Initiation Expertise Scale and asked to rate/score themselves in terms of four determinants of dating initiation skill: (1) confidence and anxiety initiating, (2) standard initiating, (3) autonomy when initiating, (4) coping with complexity when initiating.

Each determinant could be scored in terms of five skill levels ranging from *novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient,* to *expert*.

Instructions

Rate your dating initiation ability using the following scale for each items listed along the top. The scale runs from I to V, with I indicating "novice" and the V indicating "expert."

	Confidence and anxiety initiating	Standard in-set	Autonomy when initiating	Coping with complexity when initiating
I	Unlikely to be satisfactory; suffers moderate to extreme anxiety; avoids initiating, even when greatly desires to. Initiating feels "unnatural"	Rarely able to build rapport in dating situations. Successfully initiating and getting a telephone number is the exception to the rule. Low calibration when in dating initiation interactions.	Unsure of what to do, what works or what is possible. Instruction and practice required.	Little conception of dealing with complexity or negative feedback..
II	Has approached and experienced positive dating interactions; suffers moderate to high anxiety, often avoids initiating even when greatly desires to do so.	Able to build rapport and demonstrates common flirting ability. Experience of initiating interactions and exchanging numbers. Often unclear if they have built sufficient rapport and attraction in the interaction to progress the relationship. Low-medium calibration.	Achieves some success using own judgement and knowledge, but further training required to comprehend overall task	Appreciates complexity although finds it intimidating and lacks the skills to deal with it
III	Fit for purpose; will cold approach in a wide range of social situations, although beginning of performance lacks refinement. Significantly reduced anxiety being able to emotional state in most situations. Confident approaching sets with multiple people in them. Initiating varies - sometimes feels natural, but at others times forced.	Regularly builds rapport during interactions. Able to display sense of humour and be a valued social partner in most interactions. Feels confident in scenarios where more than one person in the set. Number closing is now a regular occurrence. Sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues and able to quickly read whether the set is likely to end successfully. Medium calibration.	Able to reflect on performance using own judgement; standardised and routinised procedures, with theories of "what works" for them. Still draws heavily on material, and/or peers for guidance, regularly thinks about what they "should do."	Generally able to deal with complex situations they have encountered many times before. Aware of limitations and sees possibility to improve.
IV	Able to manage anxiety and initiate more or less "on demand." Thinks about "failures" in ways that limit dysfunctional self blame. Confident in day and night situations. Will routinely approach targets perceived as very attractive, even in "tough" situations. Initiating feels "natural" the vast majority of the time.	An accomplished performer, a high standard achieved routinely. Builds rapport quickly and able to engage in flirtatious interactions with a wide variety of women in a wide variety of contexts. Achieves an exceptionally high standard of number closing. Highly calibrated.	Confident in ability to act appropriately and make a suitable impression; uses maxims for guidance which are implemented in accordance to the situation.	Deals with complex situations holistically; perceives deviations from the normal pattern, able to adapt and improvise to most "difficult" situations fluidly.
V	A superior performer, willing and confident in the vast majority of situations. Anxiety does not hinder dating initiation. Initiating feels "natural."	Initiation performance displays consummate skill, with excellence achieved reliably. Flirtatious interactions are the norm, and can be turned "on and off" effortlessly. Once a dating interaction has been initiated, an exceptionally high number of women become attracted and are keen for the relationship to progress beyond the initial encounter. Highly calibrated, fluid, and accomplished performer.	No longer consciously relies on maxims or rules for guidelines; takes responsibility for going beyond existing standards and creating own interpretations.	Holistic grasp of complex situations; with very few situations they have never encountered before. Confident in ability to overcome potential obstacles, such as interruptions or "competition" from other males.

Appendix 3: Achievements & Reputation Questionnaire

Part of Criterion 2—Achievements indicative of dating expertise develop specifically for this thesis.

   The questionnaire:

I have seven questions to ask about your dating ability and your reputation in the community. I will ask you questions and write down the answers as we go along.

1. For how many years have you *actively practiced* dating initiation skills?

2. Compared to heterosexual males *who have not practiced as pickup artists*, how would you rate yourself in terms of your proficiency at cold approach dating initiation:

   Significantly above average
   above average
   average
   below average
   significantly below average

3. Compared to pickup artists, would you rate yourself in terms of your proficiency at cold approach dating initiation:

   Significantly above average
   Above average
   Average
   Below average
   Significantly below average

4. What role, skill, domain or expertise, are/were you recognized for by community members?

5. Which peers, with high standing in the community and who are considered an authority on dating or the Pickup Community would endorse your standing as an expert?

6. Which peer *can we contact* to complete a short questionnaire reporting on your level of dating skills expertise? The scale has 6 questions relating to level of knowledge, skill

and expertise in the domain of dating initiation.

7.   Please provide some achievements that are demonstrative of your reputation? (E.g., books written, training given, rank/standing in pickup organization, talks/lectures, lecturing….).

Appendix 4: Peer Ranking for Perceived Expertise at Dating Initiation

Part of Criterion 2—Achievements indicative of dating expertise. Expertise Scale (Reysen, 2008).

> *The questionnaire:*

This questionnaire is designed to ascertain your opinion on the person you have agreed to evaluate, relating to their level of cold approach dating initiation competency.

- Note that "cold approach" here simply refers to "initiating dating interactions with strangers."
- Here dating initiation is not just the ability to start (or open) and interaction, rather it is "the ability to initiate *and* negotiate the full first encounter(s)." This would include various episodes interacting with a person and stranger on the same day (e.g., it would include speaking to someone at a party, where the conversation broke off and was reinitiated over the course of an evening).

Pease read through the following statements and circle how strongly you agree with each statement.

1. This person is intelligent.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

2. This person is not experienced.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

3. I would seek this person's advice.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

4. This person is knowledgeable.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

5. This person is an expert.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

6. This person is not well qualified to speak.

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree

Appendix 5: High Dating Competence

Part of Criterion 3—Satisfy standards of dating expertise. Assessed using the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al., 1998).

The questionnaire:

Instructions: Using a 5-point scale indicate your level of competence and comfort handling each

type of situation mentioned below with an opposite sex partner.

5 point scale

1 = I'm poor at this; I'd feel so uncomfortable and unable to handle this situation, I'd avoid it if possible
2 = I'm only fair at this; I'd feel uncomfortable and would have lots of difficulty handling this situation
3 = I'm OK at this; I'd feel somewhat uncomfortable and have some difficulty handling this situation
4 = I'm good at this; I'd feel quite comfortable and able to handle this situation
5 = I'm EXTREMELY good at this; I'd feel very comfortable and could handle this situation very well

Situations

1. Asking or suggesting to someone new that you get together and do something, e.g., go out together.
2. Finding and suggesting things to do with new people whom you find interesting and attractive.
3. Carrying on conversations with someone new whom you think you might like to get to know.
4. Being an interesting and enjoyable person to be with when first getting to know people
5. Introducing yourself to someone you might like to get to know (or date).
6. Calling (on the phone) a new date/acquaintance to setup a time to get together and do something.
7. Presenting good first impressions to people you might like to become friends with (or date).

8. Going to parties or gatherings where you don't know people well in order to start up new relationships.

Appendix 6: High Mating Success

Part of Criterion 3—Satisfy standards of dating expertise. Assessed using the Self-Perceived Mating Success Scale (Landolt et al., 1995). Subjects responded on a scale of 1 to 7 indicating how much they agreed with each item (1 = disagree, 7 = agree). Questions 4 and 8 were reverse scored.

The questionnaire:

1. Members of the opposite sex that I like, tend to like me back.

2. Members of the opposite sex notice me.

3. I receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex.

4. Members of the opposite sex are not very attracted to me.

5. I receive sexual invitations from members of the opposite sex.

6. Members of the opposite sex are attracted to me.

7. I can have as many sexual partners as I choose.

8. I do not receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex

Appendix 7: High Mating Intelligence

Part of Criterion 3—Satisfy standards of dating expertise. Assessed using the *Mating Intelligence Scale* (Geher et al. 2009).

The questionnaire: Please answer the following questions indicating whether the statement is true (T) of false (F).

1. I think most women just like me as a friend.
2. I have slept with many beautiful women.
3. I'm pretty good at knowing if a woman is attracted to me.
4. I'm definitely not the best at taking care of kids.
5. I'm good at saying the right things to women I flirt with.
6. I haven't had as many sexual partners compared with other guys I know (who are my age).
7. I have a difficult time expressing complex ideas to others.
8. I am good at picking up signals of interest from women.
9. I'm definitely near the top of the status totem pole in my social circles.
10. I doubt that I'll ever be a huge financial success.
11. If I wanted to, I could convince a woman that I'm really a prince from some little-known European country.
12. Honestly, I don't get women at all!
13. Women tend to flirt with me pretty regularly.
14. If a woman doesn't seem interested in me, I figure she doesn't know what she's missing!
15. At parties, I tend to tell stories that catch the attention of
16. Women definitely find me attractive.
17. I've dated many intelligent women.
18. People tell me that I have a great sense of humor.
19. When I lie to women, I always get caught!
20. I am usually wrong about who is interested in me romantically.
21. It's hard for me to get women to see my virtues.
22. I'm not very talented in the arts.
23. I can attract women, but they rarely end up interested in me sexually.
24. When a woman smiles at me, I assume she's just being friendly.

Scoring guide:

One point for every T answer to questions 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 21. One point for every F answer to items 1, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, and 24.

Appendix 8: The Dating Skills Developmental Interview Guide

Measures and descriptions of current and past level of dating skills

1. Looking back, what led you to join the Pickup Community?

2. Did your dating experiences prior to joining the community influence your decision to join it?

3. Early on, did you have any special physical, intellectual, or other characteristics that perhaps supported or undermined "success" at dating initiation?

4. What accomplishments, standards or benchmarks have you achieved which demonstrate your proficiency at dating initiation?

   Prompts: e.g., published books and training material, coaching, PUA rankings, forum activity, success and ability at dating initiation, practice benchmarks, pickup circles, comparison to other pickup artists and non pickup artists.

Part 2 of Measures and descriptions of current and past level of dating skills *(questions to be asked when appropriate, likely in the latter stages of the interview).*

1. When did you cement yourself as a dating expert in the community?

   Prompts: Did peers/women agree to your status as superior performer? How did you know you were improving your dating skills? The role of feedback from women, pickup artists, friends, parents etc?

2. Comparing before you joined the community with now, are there differences in your *effectiveness* at dating? Can you reflect on your performance over the years and how it may have changed?

   Prompts: If someone saw you in the early years, and now. Self-presentation (communication and appearance), effectiveness initiating in various environments, intuition, building rapport, calibration, autonomy, dealing with complexity.

3. Again, compared with the past, are there any major differences, in terms of how you *act* and *think* in dating initiation scenarios?

   Prompts: thinking of what to say, direct and indirect game, natural and structured game, verbal and non-verbal communication, inner game, outgoing,

friendly, flirtatious, confident, anxious etc.

4. If someone had looked at you early on, would they have said, "This is someone who destined to master dating"?

Access to training resources

1. What was it like when you very first discovered the Pickup Community and read your first books?

2. Can you tell me about the type of community resources (and opportunities) you drew on that helped you to improve your dating skills?

   Prompts: books, dvd's, other material, role models, coaches, training partners, forums.

3. How does this compare to the resources (and opportunities) available to you to improve your dating skills before joining the community?

   Prompts: more or less access, books, dvd's, television, peers, role models.

4. Did your environment when growing up support or undermine success with girls?

   Prompts: peer circles, male role models, women in environment.

5. In your peer circle did you actively mix with girls and initiate dates when you were younger?

   Prompts: activity compared to most teenagers.

6. Without access to community resources for instance books, the dating models/theories, (the opportunity to sarge with others) would it be significantly more difficult to develop dating skills to the level you have?

7. What sort of financial expenditure has engaging in community activities and practice entailed?

8. Has engaging in community activities entailed significant social costs or involved a significant change in how you allocate your time?

   Prompts: time with friends, family, romantic relationships, work or other areas, loss or growth

Effort and concentration

1. Can you tell me about the amount (type and quality) of dating skills practice you've done?

   Prompts: early years, middle years, later years. "typical" practice, hours spent,

repetitive training, goal setting, self-reflection. The DP cycle (test, feedback, adjust, test). The importance of finding solutions *themselves* (rather than directly from pickup material or peers).

2. Can you tell me about how you went about learning about dating and putting what you learnt into practice?

    Prompts: learning about the stages (opener, transition, qualification, comfort), terms like DHV, IOI.

3. Has committing yourself to practice required much effort and concentration? If so, how did you manage to adhere to it? Was it always fun?

    Prompts: enjoyment through stages of development, grit, monotony, goals and desires, reward through achieving vs reward of doing.

4. What practice did you do to address approach anxiety? How has the level of anxiety changed over the years, and what caused you to continue training despite the anxiety of approaching?

    Prompts: grit, benefit of, motivation.

5. Were there periods where improvements in your dating skills stalled or didn't progress as fast as you wanted them to? If so, how did you overcome this?

    Prompts: developmental curve (uniform or bursts), early years, middle years, later years, pinpointing specific practice to overcome plateau's, specific episodes/examples. The role of training, coaches and being coached.

6. Are your dating skills still improving?

7. What three activities or practices most improved your dating skills?

Motivation

1. Looking back what motivated you to do dating skills practice? What motivated you to complete the quantity of training you did?

    Prompts: internal and external motivation, approaching for the fun of the skillset versus for the reward of attractive women, past and future desires and goals, prestige, romantic relationship desires and experiences, family, peers

2. How has your motivation for improving your dating skills and pickup practice changed over the years?

    Prompts: increase or decrease, early, middle and later years.

3. Has practice and improvement impacted on the way you view yourself?

    Prompts: value, confidence, optimism/pessimism, early years, middle years, later

years

4. How has practice and improvement impacted on the way you view women and relationships?

> *Prompts:* attitude and how they value women, casual sex, long-term relationships, early years, middle years, later years

Appendix 9: Dating and Sexual History Questionnaire

The questionnaire:

General Questions

1. What is your age?   What is your occupation?

2. What is your current relationship status (circle one):

    Single, Dating, Married, in multiple relationships, Other (please specify)……….

3. While being an active member of the community what is the longest relationship you have had?

    Under 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1 to 3 years, 3 to 6 years, over 6 years

4. Did you practice monogamy while in the relationship?
    Yes
    No

5. What is your sexual orientation:

    Heterosexual, Homosexual, Bi-sexual. Other …………….

6. What is your ethnicity?

Pickup and Current History

7. When did you first hear about the Pickup Community?

8. When did you start actively participating in Pickup Community activities (age/date)?

9. Are you still active in Pickup Community activities? If not, when did you stop participating actively and why?

10. Are you still actively practicing dating initiation (within or outside of the community)?

11. How many women have you had sexual intercourse with in the last 12 months?

    0, 1-4, 5-9, 10-19, 20-39, 40-69, 70-99, over 100

12. How many women have you had sexual intercourse with since joining the community?

    0, 1-4, 5-9, 10-19, 20-39, 40-69, 70-99, over 100

13. How many one-night stands have you had as a pickup artist?

    0, 1-4, 5-9, 10-19, 20-39, 40-69, 70-99, over 100

14. Would you say the anxiety you experience cold approaching women in dating scenarios is generally:

    None or extremely low

    very low

    Low

    Medium or average

    high

    very high

    extremely high

15. What is a *typical* amount of time (in hours) you would spend initiating a week?

    Under 2

    3-6

    7-12

    13-20

    21-39

    over 40

16. How many years did you keep maintain this rate of practice for?

17. What year was your dating initiation practice at its peak?

18. For the year your practice was at its peak, what is a *typical* number of hours you would spend sarging in a week?

Under 2

3-6

7-12

13-20

21-39

over 40

19. For the year your practice was at its peak, what would you estimate is the *most* number of hours you completed in one week?

Under 2

3-6

7-12

13-20

21-39

over 40

20. During this peak period, how common would it have been to have practiced for the hours stated in question 19?

- *Very common:* at my peak I sarged this many hours for more than 26 weeks of the year

- *Common:* at my peak I sarged this many hours for approximately quarter of the weeks in a year e.g. in the region of 13 weeks

- *Quite Uncommon:* at my peak I sarged this many hours for approximately 7 weeks in a year)

- *Very Uncommon:* at my peak I sarged this many hours for no more than 3 weeks

in the year.

21. What would you estimate is the most number of hours you have spent doing *pickup related activities* in one week (e.g. reading, sarging, forums, DVD's etc.)

Under 2

3-6

7-12

13-20

21-39

over 40

22. For the year where you were most active what would you estimate is a typical number of hours you would spend in one week doing *pickup related activities*?

Under 2

3-6

7-12

13-20

21-39

over 40

23. How many posts would you estimate you have written on forums?

Under 50, 51-200, 201-500, 501-1000, 1001-2000, 2001-3000, over 3000

24. Have you ever taken paid pickup training? If so when, and how much did it cost?

25. Do you coach students? If so when did you start coaching?

26. How many students have you personally coached

0, 1-5, 6-15, 16-30, 30-50, 50-100, over 100

Before Joining the Pickup Community

27. At what age did you first have full sexual intercourse?

    Under 15, 16-18, 19-21, 22-24, 25-30, over 30, never

28. Before joining the community how many one-night stands had you?

    0, 1, 2-4, 5-9, 10-19, 20-49, 50-99, over 100

29. Before joining the community how many women had you had full sexual intercourse with?

    0, 1, 2-4, 5-9, 10-19, 20-49, 50-99, over 100

30. Before joining the community how many romantic relationships over 6 months had you had?

    0, 1, 2-4, 5-9, over 10

31. Before joining the community what was your longest romantic relationship?

    Under 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1 to 3 years, 3 to 6 years, over 6 years

32. Before joining the community would you describe the number of sexual partners you had as:

    Significantly below average, below average, average, above average, significantly above average

    31. Before joining the community would you say your proficiency with women in dating initiation scenarios was: Significantly below average, below average, average, above average, significantly above average

33. Before joining the community would you say your anxiety cold approaching women in dating scenarios was generally:

    None or extremely low, very low, medium, high, very high, extremely high

Appendix 10: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT SHEET:
How Dating Skills Influence Dating Success

The Department of Psychology at Brunel University requires that all persons who participate in psychology studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project currently titled "How dating skills influence dating success" to be conducted at Brunel University, with Morgan Ereku as principal investigator. The broad goal of this research program is to explore the development of social and dating skills in a sample of skilled daters associated with the Pickup Community. Specifically, I have been told that I will be asked to partake in an interview and survey study regarding my dating skills.

I have been informed that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I also understand that if at any time during the session I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave without negative consequences. That is, my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from this study at any time. My withdrawal would not result in any penalty, academic or otherwise. My name will not be linked with the research materials. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the procedure, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been informed that if I have any general questions about this project, or ethical issues relating to the project, I should feel free to contact Morgan Ereku at morgan.ereku@brunel.ac.uk. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way in which the research is or has been conducted I may contact Professor Taeko Wydell, Chair of the Psychology Research Ethics Committee, at taeko.wydell@brunel.ac.uk.

I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

_____   _____   _____

Participant's Signature   Please Print   Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the above-named has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent form for my records.

_____   _____   _____

Principal Investigator Signature   Please Print   Date

Appendix 11: Debriefing Form

Dating as a Skill

This study focused on collecting data from skilled daters to examine the relationship between practice and dating skills. The research will focus on the developmental path taken by members of the Pickup Community and changes in their dating initiation skills.

The following books and articles have informed the research and might be of interest to you:

- Bouchey, H. (2007). Perceived Romantic Competence, Importance of Romantic Domains, and Psychosocial Adjustment. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 36, 503–514
- Grazian, D. (2008). *On the make: The hustle of urban nightlife.* Chicago: Chicago Press.
- McClure, J., Lyndon, J., Baccus, J., & Baldwin, M. (2010). Signal Detection Analysis of Chronic Attachment Anxiety at Speed Dating: Being Unpopular Is Only the First Part of the Problem. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 36, 1034-1036

Once again, I thank you for taking part in the present study.
Please feel free to contact Morgan Ereku on morgan.ereku@brunel.ac.uk if you have any questions or comments regarding this study.

Appendix 12: Varieties of Dating Practice

13 Activities Completed by the Dating Experts Related to Improving Social and Dating Skills
1. Approaching, in-field Approaching women in cold approach dating situations in public.
2. Practice, *not in field* This is active practice that is carefully selected to improve specific dating related skills. Examples include: practicing routines/gambits, practicing non-verbal or verbal skills, improvisation, acting, voice training, memorizing theory or "chat-up" lines to use specifically during in-field training. [Note: do not include mental rehearsal/visualization here]
3. Taking paid dating skill training/coaching Training that is delivered by dating coaches. Include training that consists of actively practicing specific skills (e.g., approaching, body language) in one-to-one or group setting, and class based learning. Training delivered over the phone or via Skype can be included.
4. Taking unpaid dating skill training/coaching (unpaid) As above, but unpaid.
5. Coaching others (paid) Include coaching/training activities where you were paid that consist of active practice or giving seminars/talks. When scoring this item consider whether the process of preparing material, actively teaching others and providing demonstrations influenced your understanding of dating and your own dating skill development.
6. Coaching others (unpaid) As above, but unpaid.
7. Regular socializing Non-dating socializing with friends, colleagues or associates where women are present but there is no deliberate intention, desire or inclination to pickup women or work on improving dating skills
8. Advice, discussions regarding dating skills Advice/discussions with other pickup artists or people who are actively practicing their dating skills. The conversations must relate to improving your understanding or decision-making in dating scenario's. This can include advice or discussion that are face-to-face, over the telephone, or online including on forums.

9. Self-analysis and reflecting on past and future performance

This includes goal setting, journaling and writing about your dating initiation experiences. Goal setting includes defining dating related goals, setting targets for future practice, and monitoring progress. Journaling refers to writing about your experiences so that you can actively reflect on your performance and/or progress. This also includes posts and exchanges on forums where you engaged in them to actively reflect on experiences and improve future performance.

10. *Passively* consuming material related to dating skills

Reading, watching, listening to material related to dating in a passive, relaxed, non-focused fashion. The activity is significantly more passive than active learning in 2. It may be done for entertainment, to pass the time, or to "submerge oneself" in dating related material.

11. Mental rehearsal and visualization techniques

Mentally rehearsing dating initiation scenarios, visualizing behavior from past initiation attempts and future dating situations.

12. Non-dating social skills training

Specifically partaking in social/dating skills training or anxiety provoking activities in non-dating situations with the aim of also improving your general confidence with women which may transfer to dating initiation scenarios. An example of this could be putting yourself forward to give presentations at college or work, doing stand-up comedy, or doing anxiety provoking activities in public to desensitize yourself.

13. Working on physical attractiveness and health

Working on physical attractiveness and health to improve your dating success. Examples include fitness training, diet, clothing attire, cosmetic treatments, hair styling.

Appendix 13: Quantity of Dating Initiation Practice

[This appendix includes an adaption of the questionnaire used to calculate the amount of dating initiation completed by five participants].

Instructions

This exercise has been designed to quantify the amount of *cold approach dating initiation practice* (or just dating initiation) you have completed.

- "Cold approach" here simply refers to "initiating dating interactions with opposite sex *strangers*." Whether the stranger signalled an interest prior to initiation *is not* relevant.
- Hours of practice refers to the number of hours you were actively in the field. For instance, it does not include travel to the practice location (e.g., travel to the night club).

1. Dating practice timeline

Procedure

1. Look at the figure below and divide the years you have been doing dating practice into three periods (the early years, the middle years, and the later years), indicating a date for when each period started/finished. The early years should represent a period when you were familiarising yourself with dating initiation; the middle years when you had been practicing for some time and it had become markedly more familiar; the later years, when you had become fully acquainted with dating initiation and felt a sense of competence near to your peak level of ability.

2. Indicate where your quantity of practice was at its peak.

3. Indicate where your dating initiation skill was at its peak.

Beginning		*Now*
Early Years	Middle Years	Later Years
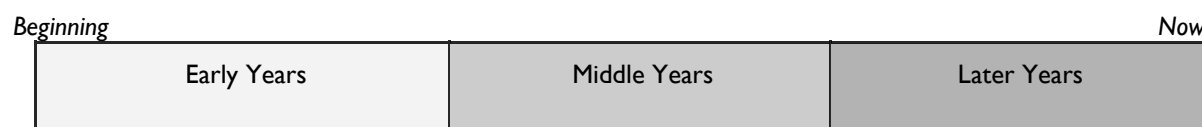
2. Dating practice by each year

For each year you have been practicing cold approach dating initiation, using the table below take your time to estimate: (a) your hours of weekly practice in a typical week, (b) the average number of approaches/initiations per week, (c) Number of weeks training in that year.

[A table was provided for the participants to complete. Below is the completed table for Damien and a summary table for 5 participants—it does not include the number of approaches as this figure was not collected from all the participants].

Damien's completed practice hours

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	
a. Hours of wkly practice in a typical wk	28	30	30	28	25	25	20	-
b. Average no of approaches per wk	35	55	60	50	50	35	30	-
c. No wks training in year	46	48	47	46	46	46	44	-
d. Sum of training hours in a year (a x c)	1288	1440	1410	1288	1150	1150	880	8606
e. Sum of cold approaches per year (b x c)	1610	2640	2820	2300	2300	1610	1320	14600

Five performers practice: Practice across a 10 year period,

Performer	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Total
Performer 1	1,440	1,380	1,344	1,344	1,500	1,610	1,350	1,260	1,056	1,008	13,292
Performer 2	1,360	1,288	1,536	1,440	1,288	1,150	920	1,012	968	-	10,962
Performer 3	1,288	1,440	1,410	1,288	1,150	1,150	880	-	-	-	8,606
Performer 4	1288	1680	1600	1344	1175	1150	880	704	-	-	9,821
Performer 5	1,316	1,568	1,440	1,056	920	736	-	-	-	-	7,036
Total	6,692	7,356	7,330	6,472	6,033	5,796	4,030	2,976	2,024	1,008	49,717
Average	1,338	1,471	1,466	1,294	1,207	1,159	1,008	992	1,012	1,008	11,955
Average hrs, per performer, per week	26	28	28	25	23	22	19	19	19	19	

Note: another four performers were estimated to have competed over 10,000 hours of dating initiation practice. They have not been included in this table as the estimate was based off their responses in the *Dating & Sexual History Questionnaire* and the interviews.

Appendix 14: Investigation 1 and 2's Nine Findings

A summary of the findings for all Investigation 1's and Investigation 2's research questions are presented below, providing additional context to the two headline findings.

Research Question 1: Did the dating experts engage in deliberate practice? **Finding 1:** Yes, the analysis revealed in great detail how the dating experts practice satisfied all the four criteria for the general theory of deliberate practice.

Research Question 2: Is deliberate practice the best explanation of how the performers became dating experts? **Finding 2:** Yes, dating expertise = time spent X dating skills deliberate practice; the accumulation of (dating skills) deliberate practice over many years is the best explanation of how the 15 participants made the developmental journey from novices to dating experts.

Research Question 3: How does deliberate practice facilitate development from dating novice to dating expert? **Finding 3:** The evidence suggests the challenging nature of dating skills deliberate practice facilitates continued improvement. Drawing on arguments from years of research on expert development, it is likely the practice enables performers to (a) overcome arrested development by keeping performers in the cognitive-associative developmental phase, and (b) develop increasingly sophisticated mental representations to meet the demands of the complex dating situations they encounter.

Research Question 4: Does a particular "mindset" or set of attitudes facilitate the development of dating expertise? **Findings 4:** Yes, a fifth theme titled *Practice Mindset* emerged from the analysis, suggesting that a growth mindset appeared to play a key role in the performers' development. The view that dating skills could be actively developed appeared to motivate the participants and help them to sustain the determination and grit required to complete the challenging practice required to become a dating expert. This makes it the first research to indicate a relationship between having a growth mindset and dating skill improvement.

Research Question 5: Does academic research support the effectiveness of

Community dating techniques? **Finding 5:** Yes, academic research from evolutionary and social psychology supports the view that specific Community dating techniques are grounded in empirical research. In total, six Community postulates, or theories and techniques regarding dating and attraction, were identified, evaluated, and supported. This suggests that skilled integration of Community theories and techniques may improve a persons ability to attract mates.

Research Question 6: What are the main characteristics of the dating experts' skilled performance? **Finding 6:** Expert dating performance embodies four main characteristics. These are captured in the four pillars of expert dating intuition, or the DEEPA model.

Research Question 7: Do these characteristics underlie skilled dating? **Finding 7:** Yes, the analysis suggested that the four pillars or expert dating intuition facilitated the performers' fast, fluid, intuitive dating ability.

Research Question 8: Does dating intuition share characteristics with intuition in traditional domains of expertise? **Finding 8:** Yes, dating intuition appears to have numerous parallels with intuition in other domains of expertise such as chess, sports, and fire fighting. Like these traditional domains, dating intuition appears to rely on superior pattern recognition, the ability to access a vast repository of embedded routines, and the ability to use System 1 and System 2 synergistically. Indeed, all four pillars that underlie dating expertise appear to be core characteristics of intuition in traditional domains of expertise.

Research Question 9: Does deliberate practice play a role in the development of intuitive dating skills? **Finding 9:** Yes, time spent accumulating deliberate practice is the best explanation of how the performers developed expert intuition. Deliberate practice appears to facilitate the development of sophisticated dating knowledge architecture that runs from cue perception, to dating chunks, to dating templates, to superordinate dating mental representations.