JUST SAY, "UM . . . I'M SORRY. I REALLY DON'T HAVE TIME!" THE EFFECTS OF POWER DIFFERENTIALS ON REFUSALS

Róisín Hartnett and Daniel Fiedler

In their article "Just Say No?", Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith highlight how refusals are rarely a simple assertive 'no' and usually consist of some combination of delays, prefaces, palliatives and accounts (1999). They explain that this is because refusals in themselves are socially awkward situations and linguistically dispreferred actions. Marion Johnson, in her paper "Canadian eh," argues that Canadians are especially careful to soften dispreferred actions, and so they include the word "eh" when they feel they do not have the authority to perform the speech act in question (1976). Shân Wareing extends this concept of perceived interpersonal authority and its effect on language use when he writes about how men and women speak differently in mixed-sex contexts (2004). He explains this difference using two theories, dominance theory, which cites the imbalance of power between men and women as the cause of their discourse variation, and difference theory, which argues that women and men belong to two separate subcultures, each with their own speech patterns, which come into conflict when women and men speak in mixed-sex situations.

We posited that refusals would be an excellent context in which to study the impact of difference and power relationships on speech because refusals are dispreferred speech acts, and therefore vary greatly in length and manner depending on the authority the refuser feels he or she has to perform the speech act. Thus, in this paper we examine what conversational components people at Queen's University in Canada use when they are confronted with unwelcome solicitation, and how their refusals differ according to varying power dynamics.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to investigate the difference in the number of people at Queen's university who refuse solicitation, and what features of refusal they use, when the solicitor is a Caucasian male versus a blind, Caucasian female. We hypothesise that refusals will be both fewer and longer when the power difference between solicitor and respondent is highly unequal than when the balance of power between the two is relatively equal.

Methodology

Our study took a sample of 80 people at Queen's University in Kingston, who varied in age from 17 to approximately 55. Each solicitor solicited 40 people. At the time they were solicited, respondents were in a variety of social situations, including walking in a group, walking alone, sitting in a group and sitting alone. As a controlled variable, each solicitor solicited 10 people who were sitting down and 30 people who were walking. Róisín, a blind, Caucasian woman solicited first, and due to her blindness, when she was selecting respondents she did not take race or sex into account. This removed significant amounts of bias from the respondent selection, although, amusingly, it introduced a bias toward respondents with louder footwear, as it was more obvious to Róisín that they were passing. When Daniel, a Caucasian male, selected respondents he aimed to solicit roughly the same numbers of Caucasian males, visible minority males, Caucasian females and visible minority females as Róisín had. (Daniel had surreptitiously observed Róisín's encounters to record race and sex.)

We then stratified the respondents according to sex and visible minority status because these are two elements of difference that we believe affect power dynamics. We identified a respondent as a visible minority if his or her physical features did not appear to be Caucasian. Our sample comprised a larger proportion of females than males, and a larger proportion of visible majority respondents than visible minority respondents because our sampling method produced a sample that roughly reflects the population of people who work at and attend Queen's (see **Figure 1**).

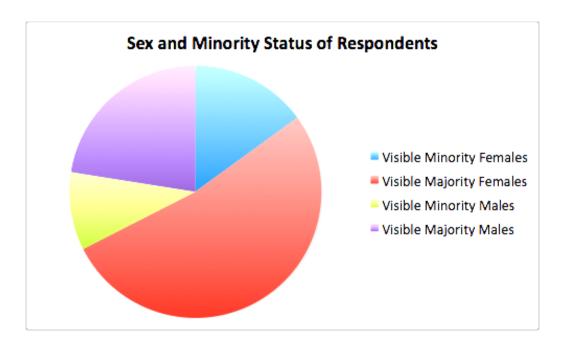


Figure 1 showing the percentage of respondents by sex and minority status

In order to collect data on how people actually deliver refusals, rather than on how people believe they deliver refusals, we mimicked William Labov's study on the class stratification of 'r' in New York City, in that we created a study that evoked people's natural speech patterns (Labov, 1966). We each approached 40 people and asked them if they would like to fill out a brief survey. The survey itself was real and concerned a campus volunteer service; however, the exact nature is irrelevant to this study because we were only examining the way each respondent dealt with our solicitation. We considered a person to be a respondent if he or she clearly understood what was being asked of them and communicated his or her acceptance or refusal verbally. Thus, we did not count people who continued walking after the solicitor said "Excuse me." After soliciting each respondent, we categorized his or her response as either an acceptance to fill out the survey, or as a refusal. Acceptances were coded as '0's in our data.

If the respondent refused the solicitation, we coded and recorded which components of a refusal the respondent used according to Kitzinger and Frith's four-part model (1 - delay, 2 - preface, 3 - palliative, 4 - account). We determined that the respondent used a **delay**, if he or she paused for 0.4 seconds or more before responding; a **preface** if he or she said "well" or "um" or another word to hedge his or her refusal; a **palliative** if he or she said "sorry" or included any appreciations, apologies, token agreements or delayed acceptances; and an **account** if the respondent said "I can't" or offered an explanation for why he or she was unable to accept. We also recorded when a respondent used an assertive 'no' to refuse our solicitation, which we coded as 5. (We added this component to Kitzinger and Frith's model.)

To illustrate our analytic model, here is an example of how we interpreted responses: we recorded a response such as "(0.4) uh (.) .hh I'm really sorry, but I actually have to go to class," as a sequence of delay, preface, palliative and account, and we recorded responses such as "no, sorry," as an assertive 'no' with a palliative. For further explanation of the components of refusals, see Kitzinger & Frith's simplified conversation analysis symbols (1999, p. 312). During the actual data collection and solicitation time, however, we did not record the content of the responses or notate them using the above conversation analysis symbols. Instead, we immediately coded the responses from 0-5 (i.e., a response containing a delay, a preface, and a palliative would be coded '1 2 3' and an acceptance would be coded as '0') and sent then via text message to our partner who was covertly observing. Therefore, the data were recorded in real-time, maintaining the fidelity of our interpretation and the privacy of respondents, whose actual answers were never recorded.

When soliciting, both Róisín and Daniel approached people either sitting down or walking by and asked the same question: "Excuse me. Would you like to fill out a brief survey for the Queen's Peer Support Centre?" Our study did not control the tone of voice of the solicitor, meaning that each solicitor used his or her natural soliciting tone. Therefore, it is likely that the responses were affected by the tone of the question as well as the sex and race of the solicitor; however, we *wanted* to account for the

possibility that women and men speak with different tones naturally, and attempting to control the tone of the speaker would render the results artificial and meaningless.

We also based most of our analysis on the assumption that most respondents, whether consciously or subconsciously, would perceive Róisín as less powerful than Dan, because she is both disabled and female. This assumption was based on an abundance of literature that suggests that women and disabled people systematically possess less power than men and people who are not disabled. It was necessary to make this assumption in order to draw possible conclusions about the ways refusals vary based on differing power relationships. For the purposes of examining the data, we assumed that Daniel, as Caucasian male, would generally be accorded the highest level of social power in the local context and that Róisín, a disabled, Causasian female, would be accorded the lowest level level of social power.

Results and Discussion

Out of the 80 people at Queen's University who were solicited, 42 refused to fill out the survey. Interestingly, 45% of the people Róisín solicited refused her solicitation, whereas 60% of the people Daniel solicited refused. Moreover, 8 of the 18 people who refused Róisín used more than two components of refusal in their response, whereas only 1 out of the 24 people who refused Daniel used more than two components of refusals (see **Figure 2**). In addition, only two people refused Róisín using an assertive

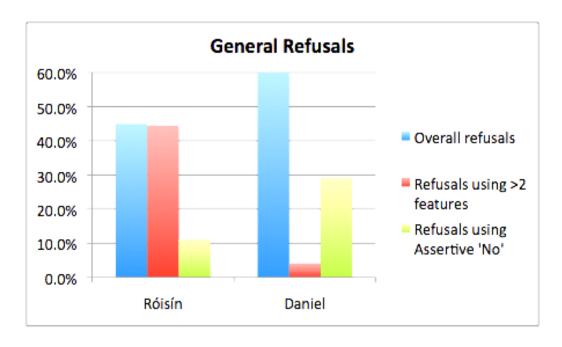


Figure 2 showing proportions of especially soft or blunt refusals

'no,' versus seven people who refused Daniel with an assertive 'no.' These numbers suggest that people in general at Queen's University are less inclined to refuse a person who is less powerful, and more likely to use several components in their refusal to soften the dispreferred speech act.

Intriguingly, regardless of sex and visible minority or majority status, the most common components of refusal that respondents used were palliatives and accounts (see **Figure 3**). Respondents rarely included delays and prefaces in their refusals, unless they were trying to lengthen their refusal. A note: although we tried very hard to be cognizant of delays in responses, it is possible that we slightly underreported delays as we listened for the vocal part of the refusal that succeeds the delay. In any case, respondents most often used delays and palliatives when there was a significant imbalance of power between the solicitor and the respondent. This demonstrates that, by and large, both men and women, visible minorities and visible majorities, use the components of refusal for similar purposes and in similar circumstances. Kitzinger and Frith suggest that we all consciously or unconsciously know and use the social codes that govern polite refusal (1999).

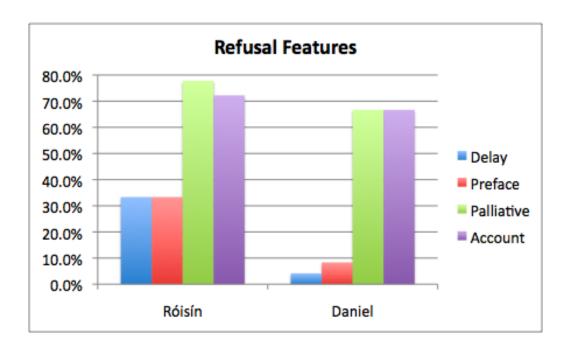


Figure 3 showing the proportions of Kitzinger and Frith's four refusal features in our data

Stratifying the data according to sex proved useful for investigating the effect of differing power relationships on responses. Although the percentage of women who refused Róisín was nearly the same as the percentage of women who refused Daniel,

only 41.7% of the men Róisín solicited refused her solicitation, whereas 71.4% of the men Daniel solicited refused (see **Figure 4**). Furthermore, four out of the five men who refused Róisín used more than two components of refusal, whereas none of the ten men who refused Daniel used more than two components of refusal (see **Figure 4**).

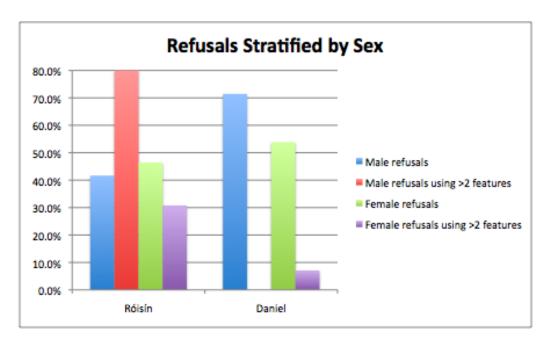


Figure 4 showing the refusals and long refusals (>2 features) stratified by sex of respondent

This evidence suggests that men, if not women, support our hypothesis in that they are less likely to refuse, and more likely to use more components of refusal, when there is an imbalanced power relationship between them and the solicitor than when there is a relatively balanced power relationship. However, this difference can be viewed through the lens of difference theory as well as dominance theory. The reason why men had more difficulty refusing a disabled woman than a man who is not disabled may not necessarily be because men consider themselves to be more powerful than women, but may simply be because it is a part of male culture to help women, but compete with other men.

It is also intriguing to note that there is a much more significant difference in the language women and men use to refuse a blind woman than there is in the language women and men use to refuse a man. Only 30.8% of women refused Róisín's solicitation using more than two components of refusals, versus 80.0% of men (see **Figure 4** above), demonstrating a sizeable difference in the language women and men used to refuse Róisín. The language that people used to refuse Daniel on the other hand did not vary much according to sex, with only 7.1% of women employing more than one component of refusal, and 0% of men (see **Figure 4** above). A possible

explanation for this difference is that both men and women consider themselves to be equally powerful to men, but only women consider themselves to be equally powerful to other women, while men feel, consciously or subconsciously, that they are more powerful than women.

Although in general, there seemed to be little difference in the language visible majority respondents and visible minority respondents used when addressing Róisín versus Daniel, the differences become strikingly distinct when the respondents are stratified by both sex and status as a visible minority or majority. While there is a noticeable difference in the proportions of visible majority women who refused Róisín and refused Daniel, (40.9% who refused Róisín and 65.0% who refused Daniel), the difference is much larger and follows the opposite trend for visible minority women (see **Figure 5**). Every other group in our study, majority women, minority males and majority males, refused Róisín less often than they refused Dan. However, 66.7% of visible minority women refused Róisín, while only 16.7% refused Dan (see **Figure 5**), a very significant difference. This would seem to indicate that either visible minority women believe they have much less power than Daniel, a Caucasian man, and roughly equal power to Róisín, a disabled, Caucasian woman, or visible minority women are raised to respond to men very differently than they respond to women. Unfortunately, because only one visible minority woman refused Dan, we cannot compare the language that visible minority women used to refuse Róisín and Daniel; this may be an interesting starting point for a future study.

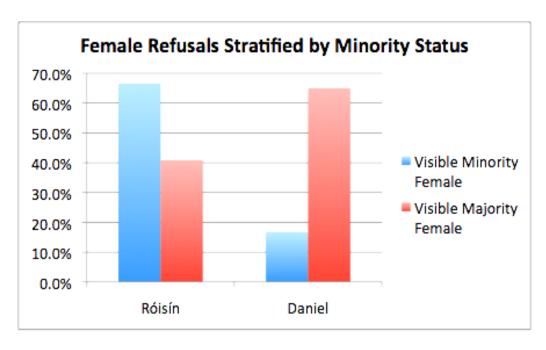


Figure 5 showing female refusals stratified by sex and status

While visible minority men seem to follow the same trend as visible majority men in the way they responded to Róisín and Daniel, the trend was much more pronounced in visible minority men: 44.4% of the visible majority men that Róisín solicited refused and 55.6% refused Daniel, as compared to 33.3% of visible minority men who refused Róisín and 100% who refused Daniel (see **Figure 6**). While this comparison may have become less drastic if we were able to include more male, visible minority respondents, it is still significant that all five out of the five visible minority men that Daniel solicited refused the solicitation. Moreover, none of these five used more than two components in their refusal, and two used an assertive 'no.' In contrast, the one visible minority man who refused Róisín's solicitation used a delay, palliative and account in his response.

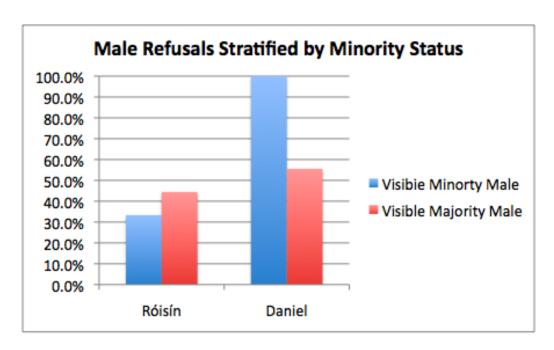


Figure 6 showing refusals stratified by sex and status

The refusal pattern—elaborate for Roisin versus curt for Daniel—is consistent with, if more drastic than, the trend in visible majority men; 75% of the visible majority men who refused Róisín used more than 2 components of refusal, as compared to 0% of the men who refused Dan. However, unlike the visible minority men, there were not any visible majority men who refused either Róisín or Daniel with an assertive 'no.'

The difference between visible minority men's responses and visible majority men's responses is difficult to explain. It may be that minority men consciously or subconsciously resist the dominant order of Caucasian men, but still consider themselves to be more powerful than women, and this is reflected in their drastically different responses to Daniel and Róisín. Their responses may also have been influenced by a cultural perception of men as strong and able to handle rejection, and

of disabled women as gentle and fragile. Whatever the explanation, such a pronounced difference in language use is worth investigating further.

Conclusion

This paper was unable to conclusively support the hypothesis that refusals are both fewer and longer when there is a power imbalance between the solicitor and the person being solicited. While the data from visible minority women and visible majority men seem to support our analysis, the cases of visible majority women and visible minority men seem to be complicated by other factors. We can conclude, however, that people in general, and especially men, use fewer and lengthier refusals when solicited by a blind, Caucasian woman, than when they are solicited by a Caucasian man who is not disabled. Further research could be done to discover what proportion of this difference is due to sex and what portion is due to disability.

It is also important to note that in situations in which the acceptance rates of a respondent's race and sex indicated that the respondent was more likely to accept, and yet the respondent chose to refuse, the respondent's refusal was likely to contain more than two components of refusal. In other words, each group of respondents' percentage of acceptances and percentage of refusals that include two or more components are positively associated. This supports Johnson's argument (about the use of the word *eh*) that people add words when they do not feel they have the authority to perform the speech act: the more dispreferred the speech act (i.e., the more a person hates to perform it, be it giving an order or refusing a request), the more words they use to soften their speech act.

If we were to repeat this study, we would aim to include a larger sample of visible minority respondents. In this way we could gain a more complete picture of the impact of difference and power dynamics on the speech of visible minorities. We would also stratify the respondents by approximate age, so that we could investigate how refusals differ based on the ages of the solicitor and the person solicited. In this way we could further explore different forms of power and how they affect, or become evident through, language use. Finally, further research is necessary to examine the trends that go beyond the University campus to see whether our findings hold up outside of this environment. Whatever the case may be, our results imply that there are significant power differentials in everyday situations between members of the Queen's community.

Appendix: Raw data

General Refusals	Count	%
Respondents who Refused	42	52.5%
Female Respondents who Refused	27	50.0%
Male Respondents who Refused	15	57.7%
Visible Minority Respondents who Refused	11	55.0%
Visible Majority Respondents who Refused	31	51.7%
Female Visible Minority Respondents who Refused	5	41.7%
Male Visible Minority Respondents who Refused	6	75.0%
Female Visible Majority Respondents who Refused	22	52.4%
Male Visible Majority Respondents who Refused	9	50.0%
Refusers who used a Delay	7	16.7%
Refusers who used a Preface	8	19.0%
Refusers who used a Palliative	30	71.4%
Refusers who used an Account	29	69.0%
Refusers who used more than 2 features	9	21.4%
Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	9	21.4%
Female Refusers who used a Delay	3	11.1%
Female Refusers who used a Preface	6	22.2%
Female Refusers who used a Palliative	17	63.0%
Female Refusers who used an Account	18	66.7%
Female Refusers who used more than 2 features	5	18.5%
Female Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	7	25.9%
Male Refusers who used a Delay	4	26.7%
Male Refusers who used a Preface	2	13.3%
Male Refusers who used a Palliative	13	86.7%
Male Refusers who used an Account	11	73.3%
Male Refusers who used more than 2 features	4	26.7%
Male Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	2	13.3%
Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	2	18.2%
Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	2	18.2%
Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	8	72.7%
Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	7	63.6%
Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	2	18.2%
Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	3	27.3%
Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	5	16.1%
Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	6	19.4%
Visible Majority Refusers who used a Palliative	22	71.0%
Visible Majority Refusers who used an Account	22	71.0%
Visible Majority Refusers who used more than 2 features	7	22.6%
Visible Majority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	6	19.4%

Female Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	1	20.0%
Female Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	2	40.0%
Female Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	3	60.0%
Female Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	3	60.0%
Female Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	1	20.0%
Female Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	1	20.0%
Male Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	1	16.7%
Male Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	0	0.0%
Male Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	5	83.3%
Male Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	4	66.7%
Male Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	1	16.7%
Male Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	2	33.3%
Female Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	2	9.1%
Female Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	4	18.2%
Female Visible Majority Refusers who used a Palliative	14	63.6%
Female Visible Majority Refusers who used an Account	15	68.2%
Female Visible Majority Refusers who used more than 2 features	4	18.2%
Female Visible Majority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	6	27.3%
Male Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	3	33.3%
Male Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	2	22.2%
Male Visible Majority Refusers who used a Palliative	8	88.9%
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Róisín's Female Refusers who used a Preface	4	30.8%
Róisín's Female Refusers who used a Palliative	9	69.2%
Róisín's Female Refusers who used an Account	9	69.2%
Róisín's Female Refusers who used more than 2 features	4	30.8%
Róisín's Female Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	2	15.4%
Róisín's Male Refusers who used a Delay	4	80.0%
Róisín's Male Refusers who used a Preface	2	40.0%
Róisín's Male Refusers who used a Palliative	5	100.0%
Róisín's Male Refusers who used an Account	4	80.0%
Róisín's Male Refusers who used more than 2 features	4	80.0%
Róisín's Male Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	0	0.0%
Róisín's Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	2	40.0%
Róisín's Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	1	20.0%
Róisín's Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	4	80.0%
Róisín's Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	3	60.0%
Róisín's Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	2	40.0%
Róisín's Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	1	20.0%
Róisín's Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	4	30.8%
Róisín's Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	5	38.5%
Róisín's Visible Majority Refusers who used a Palliative	10	76.9%
Róisín's Visible Majority Refusers who used an Account	10	76.9%
Róisín's Visible Majority Refusers who used more than 2 features	6	46.2%
Róisín's Visible Majority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	1	7.7%
Róisín's Female Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	1	25.0%
Róisín's Female Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	1	25.0%
Róisín's Female Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	3	75.0%
Róisín's Female Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	2	50.0%
Róisín's Female Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	1	25.0%
Róisín's Female Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	1	25.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	1	100.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	0	0.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	1	100.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	1	100.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	1	100.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	0	0.0%
Róisín's Female Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	1	11.1%
Róisín's Female Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	3	33.3%
Róisín's Female Visible Majority Refusers who used a Palliative	6	66.7%
Róisín's Female Visible Majority Refusers who used an Account	7	77.8%
Róisín's Female Visible Majority Refusers who used more than 2 features	3	33.3%
Róisín's Female Visible Majority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	1	11.1%
Róisín's Male Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	3	75.0%
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Róisín's Male Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	2	50.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Majority Refusers who used a Palliative	4	100.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Majority Refusers who used an Account	3	75.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Majority Refusers who used more than 2 features	3	75.0%
Róisín's Male Visible Majority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	0	0.0%
Daniel's Refusals	Count	%
Daniel's Respondents who Refused	24	60.0%
Daniel's Female Respondents who Refused	14	53.8%
Daniel's Male Respondents who Refused	10	71.4%
Daniel's Visible Minority Respondents who Refused	6	54.5%
Daniel's Visible Majority Respondents who Refused	18	62.1%
Daniel's Female Visible Minority Respondents who Refused	1	16.7%
Daniel's Male Visible Minority Respondents who Refused	5	100.0%
Daniel's Female Visible Majority Respondents who Refused	13	65.0%
Daniel's Male Visible Majority Respondents who Refused	5	55.6%
Daniel's Refusers who used a Delay	1	4.2%
Daniel's Refusers who used a Preface	2	8.3%
Daniel's Refusers who used a Palliative	16	66.7%
Daniel's Refusers who used an Account	16	66.7%
Daniel's Refusers who used more than 2 features	1	4.2%
Daniel's Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	7	29.2%
Daniel's Female Refusers who used a Delay	1	7.1%
Daniel's Female Refusers who used a Preface	2	14.3%
Daniel's Female Refusers who used a Palliative	8	57.1%
Daniel's Female Refusers who used an Account	9	64.3%
Daniel's Female Refusers who used more than 2 features	1	7.1%
Daniel's Female Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	5	35.7%
Daniel's Male Refusers who used a Delay	0	0.0%
Daniel's Male Refusers who used a Preface	0	0.0%
Daniel's Male Refusers who used a Palliative	8	80.0%
Daniel's Male Refusers who used an Account	7	70.0%
Daniel's Male Refusers who used more than 2 features	0	0.0%
Daniel's Male Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	2	20.0%
Daniel's Visible Minority Refusers who used a Delay	0	0.0%
Daniel's Visible Minority Refusers who used a Preface	1	16.7%
Daniel's Visible Minority Refusers who used a Palliative	4	66.7%
Daniel's Visible Minority Refusers who used an Account	4	66.7%
Daniel's Visible Minority Refusers who used more than 2 features	0	0.0%
Daniel's Visible Minority Refusers who used an Assertive 'No'	2	33.3%
Daniel's Visible Majority Refusers who used a Delay	1	5.6%
Daniel's Visible Majority Refusers who used a Preface	1	5.6%

12	66.7%
12	66.7%
1	5.6%
5	27.8%
0	0.0%
1	100.0%
0	0.0%
1	100.0%
0	0.0%
0	0.0%
0	0.0%
0	0.0%
4	80.0%
3	60.0%
0	0.0%
2	40.0%
1	7.7%
1	7.7%
8	61.5%
8	61.5%
1	7.7%
5	38.5%
0	0.0%
0	0.0%
4	80.0%
4	80.0%
0	0.0%
0	0.0%
	12 1 5 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 4 3 0 2 1 1 8 8 1 5 0 0 0 4 4 0 0

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