

UA Psychologist 'Eavesdrops' on Happiness

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UA psychologist Matthias Mehl

(PhysOrg.com) -- Research shows a correlation between happiness and deeper rather than superficial conversations. UA psychologist Matthias Mehl and his team recorded thousands of conversations and other ambient sounds to get a picture of what makes people happy.

Since the age of Socrates, trying to figure out just what makes people happy has thwarted more than a few researchers in various scientific disciplines.

A group of researchers led by University of Arizona psychologist Matthias Mehl is pursuing answers to [happiness](#) through what people talk about. Mehl is interested in learning about whether people are happiest

while bantering in day-to-day chatter or engaged in more substantive conversations.

The long-term implications of happiness have been studied extensively; little is known, though, about the daily [social behavior](#) of happy people, due primarily to the difficulty of objectively measuring that behavior.

Mehl, an assistant professor in the UA's psychology department and his colleague, Simine Vazire from Washington University in St. Louis, and their students have observed and reported what they found about happiness from people and their conversations.

The results of their investigation - "Eavesdropping on Happiness: Well-being is Related to Having Less Small Talk and More Substantive Conversations" - are published in the current issue of [Psychological Science](#).

The researchers recorded 79 people and thousands of their conversations over a four-day period.

Participants were equipped with a digital recording device called Electronically Activated Recorder, or EAR, that sampled 30-second snippets every 12.5 minutes. The EAR captured not only conversations but also other ambient sounds as participants went about their daily lives and thereby provided the researchers essentially with an acoustic log of their days.

Each recording was codified as to whether a participant was alone, talking with others and whether those conversations were superficial or more complex. Participants' well-being was assessed with self and friend reports of life satisfaction and happiness.

What Mehl and his team found was that, consistent with prior research,

higher well-being was associated with spending less time alone and more time talking to others.

Furthermore, and maybe more surprisingly, they found that higher well-being was robustly related to having less small talk and more substantive conversations.

Compared with the unhappiest participants in the study, the happiest participants had roughly one-third as much small talk and twice as many substantive conversations.

The initial indication, Mehl said, is that the happy life is social rather than solitary and conversationally deep rather than superficial.

Although the current study cannot answer the question of what causes what, it raises the possibility that happiness can be increased by facilitating substantive conversation, a hypothesis he would like to see explored in future research.

Provided by University of Arizona

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