Medical Xpress

Mapping the uncharted territory of social cues

April 28 2017, by Angie Wiseman

Western Psychology professor Erin Heerey's research focuses on how we interact with each other face-to-face – from casual encounters with strangers on the street to speed dating. Through a number of studies, she is exploring how people use and exchange social cues and how those cues guide our behaviour. Credit: Angie Wiseman // Western News

A smile is a simple form of social interaction. Yet, there are absolutely no two the same, says Erin Heerey.

"If I give you a genuine smile, you'll give me a genuine smile back. If I give you a polite smile, you'll give me a polite smile back and we do this in real time which is really fascinating," said the Western Psychology professor. "But you have to make sense of what people are saying. You have to make sense of how they are saying it – what cues they are using. We learn what those cues look like and, over time, we learn how to interpret those statements."

Heerey's research focuses on how we interact with each other face-to-face – from casual encounters with strangers on the street to speed dating. Through a number of studies, she is exploring how people use and exchange social cues and how those cues guide our behaviour.

Every day, we are inundated with social interaction and a lot of information coming at us at the same time, in multiple domains. But, as we age, we become experts at it.

"If you look at kids who start music when they are 4 or 5, they are experts by the time they are 17 or 18. They have a lot of practice. The same thing happens in social interactions," she said.

Heerey says a developmental shift happens that's part of children's learning about social cues and social behaviours and how to tease and interpret these behaviours. "By the time we get to be in our 40s, we are pretty darn good at this stuff. But it's a skill that takes a really long time to wire up," she said.

All you have to do to see this shift taking place is take a trip to a movie theatre on a Friday night and observe young teenagers interacting and teasing each other. Interactions like these, Heerey said, are one of the

purest forms of social interaction.

"They will trash talk each other. From the perspective of an outsider, it looks really harsh – even though they are laughing and having a good time," she said.

Her future research will use data collected from speed dating to measure how individuals change their behaviour over many interactions. This work will begin to map the domain of social interaction space and look at how subtle behavioural changes communicate different social messages.

The study will focus on the development of romantic attractions. With the help of partners in Computer Science and Statistics, she will record participants' behaviour that will later be coded. This automation will allow for a better look at how cues change when people like someone.

Participants will be asked to fill in a confidential online dating profile and then attend a speed-dating event. "Often, we are looking for certain behaviours, but with the speed-dating study, we don't know what the landscape looks like. This study has never been done with video recordings," Heerey said.

While the coding of the footage is time consuming – taking approximately eight hours to code four minutes of video from one participant – it means a more accurate depiction of the behaviours, and one they can review in detail.

"We take the video and look at the first frame and we have a set of behaviours that could possibly happen and sometimes that set grows organically depending on what we see," she said.

The team then uses a computer program, based on the frame number and

who the partner is, linking Partner A's behaviour with Partner B's, so a pattern can be developed.

"We can actually develop a time series of behaviour over the course of an interaction that tells us quite a lot about the nature of these behaviours and how they happen," she said.

Heerey isn't anticipating a particular outcome for the study since there is still a lack of understanding around how social interactions unfold across multiple partners.

"In order to understand the landscape of social interaction, we need to know to what extent is my behaviour pulled by you, and vice versa, and to what extent is my behaviour consistent across my interactions and to what extent does the particular flavour of who I'm paired with randomly shape that interaction," she said.

Heerey likens the map of social interaction to the crudeness of a hand-drawn mariner's map from the 1400s. "Our knowledge is there. It isn't mapped yet. It doesn't mean that it can't be. It's a difficult thing to map because it's changing all the time – it's dynamic and depends on who you interact with," she said.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

Citation: Mapping the uncharted territory of social cues (2017, April 28) retrieved 6 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-04-uncharted-territory-social-cues.html