

Bridging the 'liking-gap,' researchers discuss awkwardness of conversations

February 8 2019

Conversations are fundamental to relationships and wellbeing, but they often leave people feeling anxious, uncertain, and socially excluded. Social and personality psychologists will present their latest findings on how people engage in casual conversations, and what this means for our own performance anxiety.

"We're all fascinated by the fact that conversations are ubiquitous and important, but also widely feared," says Gus Cooney (Harvard University), a [social psychologist](#) and organizer of the session, [Why Conversations Go Better Than We Think](#), at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology 20th Annual Convention.

"We've all had to ease into new neighborhoods, or build new friendships, or try to impress new colleagues, and to do these things, we need to know what other people think of us," says Cooney.

Since people tend to rank themselves well in so many aspects of their lives, Cooney and colleagues want to understand why [conversation](#), especially with strangers and new acquaintances, seems to be everyone's weak spot.

The confidence gap

Given 20 everyday activities, people consistently rank their ability to have a conversation at the bottom of the list, according to research being

presented by Erica Boothby (Cornell University). The same people also rank others as being better than them at casual conversation.

Boothby and colleagues wanted to identify specific ways that people are under-confident, so they conducted a series of studies asking nearly 700 people about their reactions to possible and actual conversations.

"We not only find that people report feeling under confident in their ability to engage in casual conversations," says Boothby, "they also tend to attribute the worst moments of the conversations—awkward pauses, conversational missteps—to themselves as opposed to their conversation partner."

The reality, suggests Boothby, is that things are not as bad as they seem; people are very forgiving in conversations.

She plans to explore how people's perceptions of conversations change when they speak with people they know well, and hopes to one day find the sweet spot where people's conversation anxiety starts to go away.

Stranger danger?

Our fear of speaking to strangers is unfounded, according to Gillian Sandstrom (University of Essex). Her research shows that people actually enjoy conversations with strangers, even if they were initially worried about them.

Across a series of studies, before talking to a [stranger](#) people consistently endorse a wide range of fears, but after talking to a stranger they report that few of their fears came true.

"A huge part of our happiness comes from our social relationships," says Sandstrom, "It's important that we feel able to connect with new people

because today's strangers are tomorrow's friends."

Sandstrom developed a workshop and [web resources](#) for those working on being more comfortable conversing.

When it's time to move on

If you put a pair of strangers in a room for 45 minutes and gave them the opportunity to talk to each other, would someone leave when they wanted? This is the question asked by Adam Mastroianni (Harvard University).

In 132 conversations, only 15% of people ended a conversation when they were ready to stop. He also found that half the time people did not want the same thing; one person wanted to leave sooner while the partner did not want the conversation to end.

"The study confirms that our fears that we don't know when to end a conversation are well founded," says Mastroianni, "However, people think this is a catastrophe, when in reality it appears to be a normal part of two humans talking to each other, and neither person has any idea how uncoordinated they really are."

The bottom line from Mastroianni and the other researchers: don't worry so much about your conversation. Everyone is nervous, and things go better than one might expect.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Bridging the 'liking-gap,' researchers discuss awkwardness of conversations (2019, February 8) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-bridging-liking-gap-discuss-awkwardness-conversations.html>

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