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Overheard phone calls more memorable, rated more distracting than other background talking

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A one-sided cellphone conversation in the background is likely to be much more distracting than overhearing a conversation between two people, according to research published March 13 in the open access journal *PLOS ONE* by Veronica Galván and colleagues from the University of San Diego.

The authors studied the effects of overhearing either one side of a cell phone call or a chat between two people on the attention and memory of people who overheard these conversations. Participants in the study were asked to complete a task involving anagrams. As they performed the task, researchers carried out a short, scripted conversation in the background about shopping for furniture, a birthday party or meeting a date at the mall. Half the participants overheard one side of the conversation carried out on the phone, and the rest overheard the discussion as a conversation between two people in the room with them. Participants were unaware that the conversation was part of the study.

Galvan says, "This is the first study to use a realistic situation to show that overhearing a cell phone conversation is a uniquely intrusive and memorable event. We were interested in studying this topic since cell phone conversations are so pervasive and could impact bystanders to those conversations at work and in other settings of everyday life."

Participants who overheard the one-sided cell phone call thought the

background conversation was much more distracting than those who heard it as a chat between two people. Not only did participants rate the cell phone conversation as more distracting, they also remembered more words and content from the cell phone conversation, and made fewer errors when recognizing which words were a part of the phone call.

"Research suggests that unintentional eavesdropping on cell phone calls can be explained by the additional attentional resources needed to understand the unpredictable content of the conversation. Not knowing where the conversation is heading is what makes cell phone calls more distracting", explains Rosa Vessal, a co-author on the study.

More information: Galvan VV, Vessal RS, Golley MT (2013) The Effects of *Cell* Phone Conversations on the Attention and Memory of Bystanders. *PLoS ONE* 8(3): e58579. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0058579

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