

SMALL TALK MATTERS: Experimental evidence that no conversation is trivial

New research highlights the importance of 'small talk', the most ubiquitous of all forms of communication. The experimental study by **Neha Bose** and **Daniel Sgroi** of the University of Warwick, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019, suggests that there is no form of communication that is irrelevant for strategic interaction. From career defining speeches to throwaway remarks made during a diplomatic negotiation, no talk is trivial.

The researchers examine whether small talk is an exercise in time-wasting or crucial in securing a favourable outcome by asking pairs of subjects to play a variety of strategic interactive games in a laboratory. Before being made aware that they would be playing the games, the pairs engaged in small talk.

Despite its apparent irrelevance, this pre-game communication played a vital role in allowing players to build a mental model (or *theory of mind*) of their partners. The small talk facilitated an improved ability to predict their partner's 'type' (particularly their level of extraversion) and subsequent behaviour.

Imagine meeting someone for the first time, perhaps a new colleague at work. An initial conversation is generally little more than small talk. Statements like 'very cold today isn't it?' or 'how was your weekend?' are commonly thrown around. The exchange might not seem to leave a lasting impression, but most likely you will have (perhaps subconsciously) started to form beliefs about the person you have just met. Intelligent or not? Fair or biased? Extrovert or introvert?

In doing so, you have started to develop a mental model or *theory of mind* about your colleague. Later, if you were to decide whether to work on a project with this colleague, would the initial small talk feature in your decision-making process? Perhaps, you would think that a seemingly trivial pleasant exchange with a new colleague is indicative of a positive working relationship. But an awkward exchange would suggest an incompatible working partnership.

Does this mean that small talk matters for outcomes after all? For example, once a diplomat taking part in a complex treaty negotiation was facing difficulty. During the negotiation, they mentioned in passing that they would need to return home on Friday afternoon for an evening at the opera. After a brief chat about the shared interest in opera, suddenly the pace of the negotiation picked up, and the diplomat went home as desired on Friday afternoon – with a signed agreement in hand. Was the small talk an exercise in time-wasting or was it crucial in securing a favourable outcome?

The new study attempts to answer this question, by asking pairs of subjects to play a variety of strategic interactive games in a laboratory. Before being made aware that they would be playing said games, the pairs engaged in 'small talk'.

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These perceived types played a crucial role in choices made in a variety of scenarios. Such as, in a game requiring iterative reasoning (similar to a game of chess perhaps, where the objective is to outwit your opponent), the perceived difference between own and opponent's type plays a major role in choices made.

Contrastingly, in a game involving cooperation (for example, the decision of individual countries to reduce emission levels to combat climate change), perceived extraversion of the opponent is believed to be indicative of pro-social behaviour, which in turn enhanced one's decision to cooperate.

Additional insight can be provided by analysing the language used during communication. For example, use of a greater number of words or more dominant sounding words are associated with being an extravert.

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