Talking to Strangers: Why you don’t do it, and why you should

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Negative $\rightarrow$ Positive
Negative → Positive
Need to belong

• Fundamental need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)
  – Lack of belonging has negative impact on health, adjustment and well-being
    • Elevated blood pressure
    • Alienation
    • Aggression
Need to belong

• “First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people”
• “Second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare”
Daily weak tie interactions

• 6 daily measures
  – Counted all interactions with clickers
  – Reported # interactions, well-being (online survey)
Daily weak tie interactions

• Weak tie interactions matter
  – People with higher average # of weak tie interactions reported
    • Greater happiness
    • Greater belonging
  – On days when people interacted with more weak ties than usual
    • Greater happiness
    • Greater belonging
Talking to the barista

Efficient
Make your interaction with the cashier as efficient as possible – have your money ready, and avoid unnecessary conversation.

Social
Have a genuine interaction with the cashier – smile, make eye contact to establish a connection, and have a brief conversation.
Talking to the barista

Sandstrom & Dunn (2014), SPPS
Hello, Stranger

By ELIZABETH W. DUNN and MICHAEL NORTON  APRIL 25, 2014

If you’ve ever been on a subway or public bus, you know the rules. Don’t make eye contact, stay as far away from other people as the space allows, and for the love of God, don’t talk to anyone. But what if the rules are wrong?
Sat 16th July is Talk to me Day 2016!

Organise your own event on Talk to me Day

Read our new report It's Good to Talk
Fear categories

• Fears involving the self
  – Fears about how they will behave
  – Fears about how they will feel

• Fears involving the partner
  – Fears about how their partner will behave
  – Fears about how their partner will perceive them

• Fears involving the conversation
  – Fears about the mechanics of having a conversation
  – Fears about how the conversation will go
Fear categories

- How I will behave
- How I will feel
- How partner will behave
- How partner will perceive me
- Convo mechanics
- Convo flow

Workshop
N=38

Fears lab study
N=87

Dialogue, competence
N=56

Dialogue, similarity
N=50
Individual differences

- Interaction anxiety
- Neuroticism

- Social curiosity
- Openness
- Conscientiousness
- Extraversion
Top 5 Fears

1. Conversation will be awkward/mechanical/forced
2. They will feel awkward/embarrassed/nervous/self-conscious
3. They don’t know how to keep a conversation going
4. Their partner will talk too little
5. They will talk too little
Next steps

• Understand how common these fears are across different situations:
  – Talking to a similar stranger
  – Talking to a stranger who is a different ethnicity
  – Talking to a stranger who is a wheelchair user
  – Talking to a friend who has been diagnosed with cancer
  – Talking to a friend who has lost their spouse
Are their fears accurate?

How I will behave
How I will feel
How they will behave
How they will perceive me
Convo mechanics
Convo flow

Before

After

N=223
Do their fears decrease?

Before talking
Predicted

After talking
Actual

N=79
Do their fears decrease?

Before talking
Predicted

After talking
Actual

N=79

How I will behave
How I will feel
How they will behave
How they will perceive me
Convo mechanics
Convo flow
Do their fears decrease?

How I will behave
How I will feel
How they will behave
How they will perceive me
Convo mechanics
Convo flow

Before talking
Predicted

After talking
Actual

After talking
Predicted
N=79
Talking at an art exhibit
Talking at an art exhibit

Thea

Babs
Talking at an art exhibit

Positive affect
Negative affect
Connection: exhibit
Connection: Tate
Connection: others at the exhibit
Connection: people, in general

Talk
N=346
No talk
N=344
Talking at an art exhibit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Connection: exhibit</th>
<th>Connection: Tate</th>
<th>Connection: others at the exhibit</th>
<th>Connection: people, in general</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talk</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>+</strong></td>
<td><strong>+</strong></td>
<td><strong>+</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>n.s.</strong></td>
<td><strong>n.s.</strong></td>
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N=346
N=344
Talking at an art exhibit: Volunteers

• Time 1 survey: before training
  – Personality: social curiosity, interaction anxiety
  – Expectations about conversations

• Time 2 survey: after study ended
  – Personality: social curiosity, interaction anxiety
  – Reflections about conversations
Talking at an art exhibit: Volunteers

Social curiosity  Interaction anxiety  Competent/capable  Inadequate  Conversation interesting  Enjoy conversation

Pre-study  Post-study
N=10
Talking at an art exhibit: Volunteers

**Pre-study**

- Meta-perception: Conversation interesting
- Meta-perception: Enjoyed talking

**Post-study**

- Meta-perception: Conversation interesting
- Meta-perception: Enjoyed talking

* N=10
Next steps

• British Academy small research grant
• Use a scavenger hunt app to gamify talking to strangers
• Test whether people’s fears decrease over time (and remain lower)
Counteracting fears

• Field study asking people to talk to a stranger
• Before the interaction, do an intervention that targets fear
• Test whether the intervention:
  – Reduces worries before the interaction
  – Increases enjoyment of the interaction
Counteracting fears

Fears before

Fears after

Instructions
N=30

No instructions
N=30

**
Next steps

• Are people less worried before an interaction, and do they enjoy an interaction more, when:
  • They are asked to approach someone similar vs. dissimilar (undergrad project)
  • They are prompted to notice something distinctive about the person vs. not (Masters project)
  • They are provided with social support vs. not (Masters project)
Acts of Kindness
Acts of Kindness
Acts of Kindness

• Make someone feel welcome
• Put someone at ease
• Listen to someone
• Show someone that they matter
Next steps

• Provide a selfish or a prosocial motivation for talking to strangers
  – Test whether it reduces fears/improves expectations before talking to a stranger
  – Test whether it changes the experience of talking to a stranger (e.g., more enjoyable?)
  – Test whether it makes people more likely to talk to strangers
# Acknowledgements

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Awesome collaborators</th>
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| Starbucks                                  | Liz Dunn  
Too many research assistants to mention!                                         |
| How to Talk to Strangers workshops         | Talk to Me (Ann Don Bosco, Polly Ackhurst)  
ESRC Festival of Social Science                                                      |
| Tate                                       | Louise French, Frances Robinson, Annie Bedford                                         |
| Counteracting fears                        | Hajra Hussain                                                                         |
|                                            | Lots of fantastic undergraduate volunteers via the Research Experience Scheme           |
Thank you!

I’d love to talk about:
- ways to apply this research
- research that you’d like to see done
- collaboration ideas etc.