

Abstract

What is small talk, and why is it important for human relationships? Small talk is sometimes perceived as marginal to actual conversations: perfunctory, mundane, and inconsequential. Based on six weeks of observation at a local breakfast joint, this study reveals how “small talk” took on a much deeper importance to a group of elderly men who gathered for coffee each day. I found that small talk, though produced in brief, often chopped up segments, was the main focus in conversations. And while discussion around small talk seldom becomes intimate or reciprocated, discussions are unique in the fact that interruptions and group additions fail to hinder them from continuing in later discussion. Small talk exhibits a Start/Interrupt/Resume Structure which allows periodic interruption with little to no effect on the topic’s continuation. While groups met weekly, intimacy was rarely reached in discussion. I attributed this to two reasons: lack of reciprocation within the group, and desire to remain comfortable.

Methods

My fieldwork was carried out at the “local Sunshine Café,” a location visited frequently by many elderly community members. During my time of ethnography, which was Tuesday mornings from 7:30-9:30, I observed primarily one group of gentlemen, who called themselves, “The Regulars.” Most who I assumed to be in their 70s or 80s, these men met and converse at the “café” on a weekly basis. They had a unique trust-like-bond with the staff, and they sat in a way that showed a level of comfort. Members could grab their coffee and sit down without paying, knowing the cashier trusted them to pay later. The group of two, at the most seven, gentlemen who regularly met interacted within the confines of comfort, rarely entering into the realm of intimacy.

With the use of extended case method, I was able to relate my observations at the “café” to a variety of different sociological texts. This method is theory driven but allows me to reformulate existing theories with differences I’ve found in the field. The sociological texts I used were:

- Erving Goffman *Interaction Rituals*: Reciprocal Sustained Involvement
- Gary Alan Fine *Tiny Publics*: Predictability brings comfort
- Thomas Scheff *Goffman Unbound*: Attunement
- Suzanne M. Retzinger *Violent Emotions*: Fearing isolation

Start/Interrupt/Resume Structure

(See Figure 2)

As conversations extend, a chain-like structure forms, each link being a brief topic. And, if by chance a conversation does spark the interest of the group, it is found that small talk can easily be used as a “fallback” once the topic is exhausted, just as it was easy to begin with.

Start/Interrupt/Resume Example: One icy morning, the road conditions were the first topic to be discussed, which eventually lead into Murphy, confessing his concerns about driving to the Omaha airport. This then sparked a long and rare conversation about traffic, airport security, and flying. However, once conversation came to a lull, Russell calmly refrained and said, “Yeah, but the roads should be fine for you” (Fieldnotes, 2018).

Reciprocal Sustained Involvement

Goffman’s Reciprocal *Sustained* Involvement is that, “The individual must not only maintain proper involvement himself but also act so as to ensure that others will maintain theirs” (Goffman, 1967, pg. 116).

Reciprocal Intermittent Involvement

Topics in conversation are verbally intermittent, but small talk is subliminally sustained. What produces this intermittence is the lack of reciprocation.

- Russell**—“I wouldn’t even eat a fish from that river.”
Long pause
- Russell**—“You two fish?”
- Bob**—“No I never have the patience.”
- Murphy**—“Nope.”
Conversation stopped. (Fieldnotes, 2017)

Results

Attunement and Isolation

Retzinger quotes Scheff’s analysis (1990) of Durkheim, and points out that “Organic solidarity may be based on false consciousness, giving only an illusion of solidarity; a deeper look may reveal a form of alienation between persons” (Retzinger, 1991, pg. 38).

Murphy—“You notice I was crabby yesterday morning?”

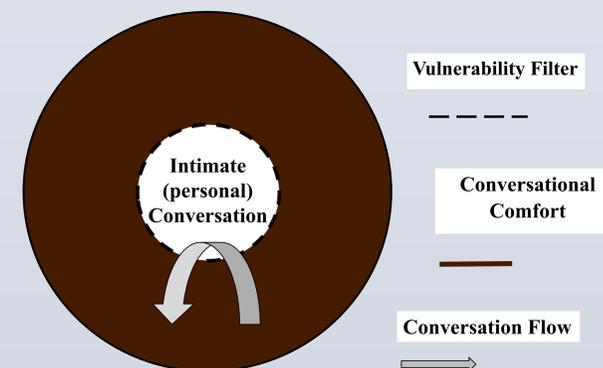
Russell—“Well if you were I couldn’t tell.”

Murphy—“Well Harris started talking about Planned Parenthood. I had to keep my mouth shut. You know you’ve gotta pick your battles.”

Conversation ended (Fieldnotes, 2017).

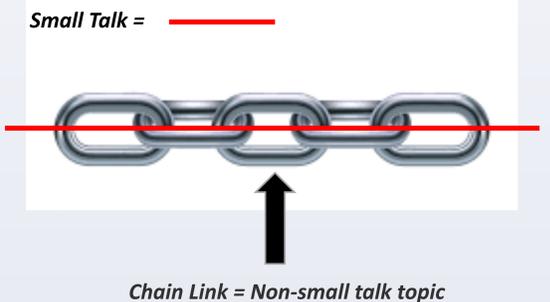
Donut Theory of Social Exchange

(Figure 1)



The Donut Theory of Social Exchange: Conversations often start and end within the confines of comfort. As time for conversing is extended, discussions tend to hedge inward toward intimacy. However, intimate conversations are often repelled by the fear of being vulnerable, quickly retreating back into the realm of what’s known, predictable, and comfortable. Intimacy can be reached, but only selectively. Thus, a vulnerability filter is established so that intimacy can be reached when felt as appropriate.

Start/Interrupt/Resume Structure (Figure 2)



Conclusions

My findings are limited to the time and place I observed: a four month period at a breakfast & coffee joint in the rural Midwest. Though the results do reflect past sociological research, I must take into account interpreter bias. While my Fieldnotes did strictly reflect what I heard/saw during my observations, it is fair to say that the conversations I heard and interactions I saw could have been only part of a larger more complex exchange that extends far past the six month observation. However, I can be confident in this:

Weather, and other forms of small talk are used for two primary purposes: to avoid silence, and to create a relatable conversation. Small talk was thus available throughout morning conversations as an intermittent support to conversations. Small talk then has incredible power. It brings groups together, keeps them comfortable, is easily relatable, and possibly most importantly, it saves the group from social exchange’s ominous silence.

References

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