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Review

Talking to strangers: Intention, competence, and opportunity

Stav Atir¹, Xuan Zhao² and Margaret Echelbarger³**Abstract**

Despite having more opportunities than ever to connect with strangers, and much to gain from doing so, people often refrain from talking with, and listening to, strangers. We propose a framework that classifies obstacles to connecting with strangers into three categories concerning intention (underestimating the benefits of conversations), competence (misunderstanding how to appear likeable and competent in conversation), and opportunity (being constrained in access to a diverse set of strangers). To promote conversations among strangers, interventions have attempted to calibrate people's expectations, improve their communication, and create more opportunities for strangers to connect. We identify the need to better understand how miscalibrated beliefs emerge and are sustained, what contextual factors impact conversation likelihood, and how conversations evolve as relationships develop.

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“[S]trangers are friends that we some day may meet” - American Poet Edgar Guest (1881–1959), *Faith*.

People today are surrounded by more strangers than ever. Stepping outside one's door, strangers are everywhere: the street, the subway, the supermarket. Even at home, billions of strangers are a click away on social media. As poet Edgar Guest reminds us, each stranger is a potential friend we have not yet made. Talking and

listening to strangers reduces loneliness [1], engenders positive emotions [2–5], improves well-being [6–8], creates unexpected learning opportunities [9], and increases creativity [10]. Talking to strangers may even benefit society as a whole, as engaging with people outside one's usual circles offers opportunities to reduce social divides and build common ground [11,12].

Yet, many people rarely talk with strangers unless absolutely necessary. Meanwhile, the world is in the midst of a loneliness epidemic [13], with people feeling increasingly isolated and disconnected. For instance, a recent survey of 10,000 people in the United States found that 61% of respondents felt lonely [14]. Why, in an increasingly interconnected world, are people paradoxically failing to connect with others, particularly strangers, in a way that could improve their well-being?

We introduce a framework for understanding this paradox by identifying three categories of hindrances to talking with, and listening to, strangers: factors that hinder *intention*, *competence*, and *opportunity* to do so. Based on this framework, we also identify factors that promote conversations with strangers, and highlight directions for future research.

Intention

Despite the immense benefits of conversation, many people rarely strike one up with a stranger; some people are even emphatically opposed to doing so [2,15]. Research reveals one potential reason: People systematically underestimate the benefits and overestimate the costs of talking to strangers. To make a well-informed choice about whether to talk to strangers, people must hold accurate beliefs about both the costs and the benefits, but it appears they do not.

First, people hold inaccurate beliefs about the affective benefits of conversations with strangers [16]. In one study [2], experimenters asked train passengers in the U.S. to initiate a conversation with a stranger during their morning commute, trying to get to know this stranger and becoming known by them in turn. After the train ride, these passengers reported being happier and having a more enjoyable commute than other passengers who were asked to keep to themselves or do what they

normally did. Strikingly, a different group of passengers who were asked to forecast the outcomes expected the opposite: they thought having a conversation would make for the *worst* experience. These results, which were recently replicated among London commuters [17], suggest that talking and listening to strangers is not only enjoyable, but *more* enjoyable than people expect. People also miscalculate the hedonic trajectory of conversations with strangers, mistakenly expecting enjoyment to fall off after a few minutes [18]. And people expect to feel more awkward and anxious during conversations with strangers [9], and more tired after conversations, than they report actually feeling [2].

In addition to the affective aspects, people fail to anticipate how much learning happens in conversations with strangers. In a series of studies, Atir and colleagues [9] brought strangers together for 10-min conversations. Compared with how much participants expected to learn from a conversation prior to having it, they consistently reported learning more interesting, useful, and general information afterwards, and also listed more specific things they learned than they thought they would. This unexpected learning appears to hinge on the open-ended nature of casual conversations with strangers; when participants were instructed to instead constrain their conversation to a single topic, they were better at predicting how much they would learn.

These misperceptions are specific to conversations with strangers. People have a good sense that a conversation with a friend or close other will be enjoyable and informative, but it turns out that conversations with strangers are fun as well, sometimes to a similar extent [9]. When it comes to learning, strangers and weak ties are in fact an especially useful and fruitful source of information compared to people within one's close social circle, because their sphere of knowledge overlaps less with one's own. For example, they are likely to know of job opportunities that one doesn't already know about from one's usual sources of information [19]. And yet, people consistently expect to learn less than they actually do from strangers, but are well calibrated when talking to friends [9].

Finally, people misunderstand how strangers think and feel about them. Even before a conversation begins, people underestimate strangers' prosociality [20] and interest in conversing [2,17]. After the conversation, people underestimate how much their conversation partner learned from them [9], liked them [21], and continued to think of them later [22].

Failing to appreciate the benefits of connecting with strangers through conversation may lead people to forego opportunities to talk with and listen to unfamiliar others.

Competence

Even when people want to talk with and listen to strangers, some aspects of conversation can be challenging, including knowing what to say [23–25] and when to end a conversation [26]. When engaged in conversation, people are especially worried about being likable and appearing competent [27], but do not always understand how to create these impressions [28,29].

For example, people do not fully appreciate how much asking questions fosters liking, especially follow-up questions that demonstrate listening [30,31]. Similarly, they think that asking personal or sensitive questions makes a negative impression, but research finds little evidence for this [32,33]. Indeed, opening up and sharing personal information tends to be reciprocated, which promotes liking [34]. Finally, people underappreciate the benefits of asking for advice [35] and disclosing vulnerability [36], both of which can make a conversation more meaningful. Fears that doing so will create an impression of weakness or incompetence seem overblown [35].

Opportunity

Even when people want to engage with strangers and feel competent to do so, systemic and situational factors shape the likelihood that conversations take place, and can also make some strangers less likely to connect than others.

One factor that powerfully determines social interaction is physical space, with people creating more social connections when they routinely encounter more people [37]. A lack of shared physical space can therefore act as a barrier to speaking with others, especially strangers and weak ties. Building on this insight, Google's real estate team has structured the company's physical space to maximize what it calls "casual collisions": spontaneous social interactions amongst employees [38]. For example, Google's offices have multiple micro-kitchens, and the company provides private buses for its commuting employees to spend time together. On the other end of the spectrum, people who work from home – who do not share a physical space with colleagues – develop more siloed social networks [39] and report greater loneliness [40].

Physical space determines not only whether social interactions happen, but with whom. At baseline, people are drawn to those who are similar to themselves across a variety of dimension [41,42], making interactions with dissimilar others less likely. This tendency is reflected in people's residential choices, with people preferring homes near co-partisans [43], making interactions across political lines even less likely. This reduced opportunity to interact with people who think differently may exacerbate social divides. Indeed, this is already happening in online spaces, with people often siloing themselves in

“echo chambers” [44]. Neighborhoods and other physical spaces are also commonly racially and socioeconomically segregated (often reflecting a history of policies and practices that privilege White communities and disenfranchise communities of color [45]). As a result, strangers that differ across certain demographics like race and socioeconomic status may be even less likely to converse and connect than they otherwise would be, with potential downstream consequences for developing and maintaining stereotypes and prejudice.

Promoting conversations with strangers

In light of widespread loneliness and social divides on one side, and hindrances to conversing with strangers on the other, recent studies highlight interventions to encourage talking with and listening to strangers.

One avenue is to calibrate individuals’ beliefs on the costs and benefits of such interactions to increase intention to connect. Indeed, Sandstrom and colleagues [46] showed that people’s beliefs are malleable: In a week-long intervention, participants scored points for talking to strangers (e.g., “start a conversation with a stranger wearing interesting shoes”) or for control activities (e.g., “observe a stranger wearing interesting shoes”). At the end of the week, those in the conversation condition became more optimistic about future interactions, realizing how willing others are to converse and how well conversations go.

To address concerns of competence, research points to strategies that help people communicate more effectively. For example, engaging in active listening improves conversations with strangers, making conversation partners feel more understood [47]. Similarly, Zhao et al. demonstrated that expressing appreciation can facilitate conversations about differences and disagreements [48]. And, based on a computational algorithm, Yeomans et al. developed a broader “receptiveness recipe” that teaches people concrete ways to convey their willingness to engage thoughtfully with opposing views (e.g., using first-person singular, explicitly stating agreement) [49]. Results showed that following this recipe increased judgments of persuasiveness and interest in future collaboration.

A final avenue is to create more opportunities for conversations among strangers. For instance, physical spaces, such as well-maintained public parks and community gardens, can help develop social ties between local residents [50]. Technologists have also created tools to facilitate conversations between strangers both online and offline [51,52].

Future direction

Social connection is a basic human need, yet people commonly pass up opportunities to engage with

strangers. In light of this paradox, our framework organizes the current understanding of the factors that hinder talking with strangers as they pertain to intention, competence, and opportunity. We also highlight emerging research on effective interventions that target factors in each category. Finally, we propose three promising directions for future research.

First, research is needed to understand how people come to hold inaccurate beliefs about the costs and benefits of conversing with strangers and weak ties, and how such beliefs persist in the face of experience. A series of studies begins to shed light on this puzzle [53], finding that although people became more positive about connecting with strangers immediately after talking to a stranger, their updated expectations largely faded within two weeks. Although people remembered the specific conversation as positive, their generalization to future conversations was resistant to long-term change. Further research may also investigate beliefs about the two key activities that make up conversation: talking and listening. For example, do people over or underestimate their own and others’ listening skills in conversations with strangers? How do beliefs about listening compare to beliefs about talking?

Second, we call for additional research on factors that affect opportunity to engage with strangers. Though we have highlighted physical space, other contextual factors, such as social norms, likely also affect people’s propensity to talk to strangers [54]. In one promising study, students wore different-colored wristbands to signal their interest (green) or lack thereof (red) in conversing with others in the study session. Compared to sessions without wristbands, students in the signal condition reported spending longer talking to each other, possibly because the wristbands made talking to strangers a more norm-consistent behavior [55].

Finally, conversations do not stop once people are no longer strangers. It takes multiple conversations to turn strangers into friends [56]. As people grow closer, conversations may change in myriad ways (e.g., expectations, self-disclosure, listening). Future research should investigate how conversation evolve as people go from strangers, to acquaintances, to friends.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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