

Talking shop: An exploration of how talking about work affects our initial interactions[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the linguistic cues that distinguish conversations about work topics from conversations about non-work topics and how those differences affect conversation partners. Using an exploratory analysis of a field experiment in a large U.S. technology firm, we generate hypotheses that when the conversations topic is work, people use more words associated with achievement, which makes them seem less supportive and attentive to their conversation partners. Subsequently, conversation partners are less interested in future interactions. We then test and largely confirm our hypotheses by analyzing data from a laboratory experiment. This research illuminates one potential reason why some new connections persist while others do not and suggests how people might have interactions that endure beyond a first encounter.

1. Introduction

Organizations actively encourage new conversations and the forging of new connections among people. For example, the late Tony Hsieh, a former CEO of Zappos.com, spoke of increasing “collisions” among organizational members that could lead to new ideas or collaborations (McKinsey, 2017). Similarly, Google structured its workplace to “make it easy to talk,” as an engineering director there put it, and to “remove psychological barriers to interacting” (Stewart, 2013). Other organizations host mixers or parties for people to meet and chat with one another. In addition, one rationale for open office spaces is to encourage conversations among people who might not otherwise interact. However, evidence regarding the efficacy of these efforts is limited (Bernstein & Turban, 2018; Ingram & Morris, 2007). While some interactions fall flat, others lead to ongoing connections. Why do some people follow up, but others avoid future contact? One possible factor—which we investigate here—is the topic that people discuss in their initial conversations.

A conversation is “a cooperative interaction in which each person acts in coordination to contribute to a successful experience of shared

understanding. It is an ongoing, sequential unfolding of actions and responses (Reis & Patrick, 1996), organized as speaker turns (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973)” (Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson, & Gino, 2017: 431). Although conversations may be used to exchange information, they are also crucial for forming connections (Brown, Gillian, & Yule, 1983; Dunbar, 2004). Different conversation topics—and the insights they elicit—have the potential to influence the desire to sustain new connections (Davis & Perkowski, 1979). For example, people like interaction partners who disclose information about themselves and ask questions about others (Huang et al., 2017; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013). However, different conversation topics may elicit different disclosures, and it is not clear how the differences affect the willingness to chat again.

What to talk about is an ever-present concern in social life and, more specifically, within work organizations as people actively negotiate their work and non-work identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). There are nearly limitless topics for conversation. One thing people may talk about when meeting someone for the first time is work.

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Understandably, “What do you do for a living?” is a common conversation starter. Work is a big part of a person’s identity (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), and highlighting the skills or resources one possesses could show one’s value to a new contact. Recognizing each other’s instrumental value has been shown to increase closeness in ongoing relationships (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), although individuals who perceive they are being approached purely for their instrumental value can also feel objectified (Belmi & Schroeder, 2020). Alternatively, some people may talk about their life outside of work. These “non-work” conversations may not highlight their professional value but may be more affectively fulfilling, which is also important for forming relationships (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008).

In this investigation, we explore how conversing about work versus non-work topics when meeting new people can affect perceptions of one another and interest in following up on the conversation. People can have work conversations outside of work, or non-work conversations at the office. However, because all the conversations we describe occur at work, we use the term “non-work conversations” to refer to conversations about things outside of the workplace and “work conversations” to refer to conversations about work-related topics.

We begin with an introduction to research about conversation topics and relationship formation and explain how these findings guided our data exploration. We then explore data collected as part of a field experiment in a large organization that informs the development of several hypotheses. We next analyze data from a complementary lab experiment to confirm our emergent hypotheses. We conclude by discussing the contributions of this work to theory and practice.

2. Theoretical background

Forming bonds and experiencing enjoyment are essential goals that lead people to engage in conversations (Brown, Gillian, & Yule, 1983; Dunbar, 2004; Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Information exchanged during these encounters influences the attraction conversation partners have for one another (Davis & Perkowski, 1979). Furthermore, the topics people discuss may signal what they perceive the nature of their bonds to be. For example, people prefer to discuss “certain matters” within family contexts (Ruan, 1998), and are discerning in whom they seek for their “important” conversations (Bearman & Parigi, 2004). Thus, talking about work versus non-work topics with a new connection may signal how conversation partners view the nature of the relationship.

There are theoretical reasons to expect that work conversations, compared to non-work conversations, could lead conversation partners to view the interaction less positively. Many people see work as an instrumental, competitive context (Clark & Waddell, 1985) in which a primary consideration is their own achievement (Freeman, Parmar, & Martin, 2016). To wit, people cooperate less (Lieberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004), feel more competitive (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004), feel less obligated to reciprocate kind behavior (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2015), and are more likely to objectify others (Belmi & Schroeder, 2020) when they are in work versus non-work contexts. Given that “the words people use are diagnostic of their mental, social, and even physical state” (Pennebaker et al., 2003: 548), conversations about work may elicit verbal cues reflecting a competitive, self-interested orientation, and may negatively affect how conversation partners view each other. After all, the language people use may reflect their motivations and internal states and may affect their audience (Berger, Humphreys, Ludwig, Moe, Netzer, & Schweidel, 2020). Indeed, even if the words people use do not accurately reflect their intentions or internal drives, if conversation partners infer that they do, it can lead to misunderstandings and wrong assumptions.

The arguments above are built on the assumption that work compared to non-work conversations contain signals of a more competitive, self-oriented motivation, but it is not clear what those signals are nor how they affect one’s conversation partner. We thus

sought to develop a theory by probing for linguistic differences that distinguish work from non-work conversations and the extent to which those differences matter for keeping in touch. The data and code for the analyses in Studies 1 and 2 are available at the following link: https://osf.io/v892r/?view_only=3428b330862741d6bfe6114ec346f0a3.

3. Study 1: Exploration of a field experiment

To explore the potential presence and consequences of linguistic differences between work and non-work conversations, we analyzed an unpublished dataset collected by the first two authors in collaboration with a large technology firm experiencing significant growth over the prior decade. This firm’s headquarters is in the western United States. Most employees are in the United States, though many work remotely or at offices in different regions of the country. A few employees work in foreign countries, but they all speak English for work. Because of the company’s rapid growth, this division had become multifunctional, increasingly decentralized, and more reliant on employees working remotely. The organization was thus interested in exploring ways to encourage boundary spanning between disparate groups (i.e., establishing contacts with people beyond their proximal surroundings to gain knowledge and resources that could help teams achieve their goals; Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). The first two authors helped the organization address this issue by designing an intervention to test whether different kinds of contact and self-disclosure would lower perceived boundaries to subsequent boundary-spanning efforts. The intervention was guided by the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), which suggests that contact and self-disclosures between people from unfamiliar groups can reduce anxiety about future contact. The intervention tested whether disclosures about one’s identity at work versus outside of work could lead to differences in employees’ desire to engage in future boundary-spanning activities. Specifically, we put randomly chosen people into contact (or not) and had them disclose different information about themselves.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

The sample was 1,103 employees from one division of the company who volunteered to participate. These employees were from different departmental functions such as engineering, quality assurance, research and development, and others. We received completed surveys from 498 employees for a response rate of 45%. The average age of respondents was 40 years old. Male respondents represented 77% of the sample. Respondents’ average tenure with the company was 3.58 years.

3.1.2. Procedure

The procedure involved four steps. In Step 1, we obtained archival human resource information (e.g., age, tenure, title, position in the organizational hierarchy, gender, and domestic or international location) about our participants from the host organization, created five experimental conditions, and randomly assigned employees to one of the five conditions. The first condition, the No-Conversation condition, involved no contact or disclosures. This condition allowed us to compare the effect of having a conversation, regardless of what was discussed, to not having any contact on employees’ perceived anxiety about future boundary-spanning efforts. In all other conditions, the conditions of interest for our investigation, participants were randomly paired with a fellow employee from a department within their division and asked to have a conversation over the next two weeks.

In Step 2, employees completed a small task that varied depending on their condition assignment. Employees were either asked to envision contacting a member of another department within their division with whom they could plausibly collaborate at some point (No-Conversation condition) or shown the name, departmental affiliation, and contact

information for a randomly assigned conversation partner (other four conditions). We asked all employees to write down five ideas for ensuring effective collaboration between themselves and other departments should the need arise.

In the No-Conversation condition, employees never engaged with a conversation partner. In the Control-Conversation condition, we instructed employees to contact their assigned partner and schedule a phone call in which they would exchange their ideas for effective collaboration. In the other three conditions (Non-Work, Work, and Cross conditions), we asked employees to complete an additional task before their conversation. Specifically, employees were asked to write down answers to five questions meant to elicit the disclosure of personal information. These questions were drawn from Sets 1 and 2 of Aron and colleagues' list of questions for generating interpersonal closeness (Aron et al., 1997). This instrument has been validated as a method of disclosing personal information in a way that quickly can increase familiarity between conversation partners. We selected the questions based on their perceived applicability to both work and non-work contexts.

Participants in the Non-Work, Work, and Cross conditions were told that they would begin their phone call by sharing their answers to their work or non-work disclosure questions with their conversation partner. We adapted Aron and colleagues' questions to focus on aspects of employees' non-work lives in the Non-Work condition (e.g., "What would constitute a 'perfect' day for you?") or work lives in the Work condition (e.g., "What would constitute a 'perfect' day at work for you?"). In the Cross condition, one assigned employee was asked to prepare and share answers to the non-work questions, and their conversation partner was asked to prepare and share answers to the work questions. The instructions and scripts for each condition appear in Appendix 1. Once employees shared their answers, they were prompted to discuss their ideas for collaboration just like participants in the Control-Conversation condition did.

Step 3 involved participants talking with their randomly assigned partners and sharing the information they were tasked to generate. We asked all employees in the conversation conditions, if they felt comfortable, for consent to record their conversations. Both partners had to consent to allow us to capture the conversation. We contracted a private conference call service that provided the ability to record calls. We gave all participants a phone number, a unique conference call PIN to join the call with their conversation partner, and a code they could enter to record their call if they agreed to do so. In total, 195 people in our sample (18% of the sample), representing 104 conversations, consented to having their conversations recorded. We obtained survey responses from both partners in all but 13 calls. The average call lasted 26.91 min, with an average of 47.5 exchanges per person during the call (i.e., approximately 97 total exchanges). Each individual spoke an average of 1,818 words. We hired a transcription service to transcribe each call and the authors compared the transcripts to the recordings to

ensure accuracy.

Last, Step 4 occurred approximately two weeks after the assigned conversations. In this step, we emailed participants a link to a survey intended to gather exploratory dependent variables, including several ratings of their conversation partner.

3.2. Survey measures

We collected several measures in our post-contact survey either useful to the host organization (e.g., evaluations of the ideas that participants shared during the call) or specific to the research question for which these data were collected (measures of boundary-spanning activities: scouting, hoarding, and coordinating [Ancona & Caldwell, 1992], anxiety about future contact per the contact hypothesis,¹ potential for conflict between departments, and trust and empathy for members of other departments). Relevant to the present exploration, we collected two measures that enabled us to examine how the different conversations affected a participant's perceptions of their partner; specifically, whether they felt like their partner was an empathic and supportive conversation partner, and a measure of whether people attempted to keep in touch or not after their call.

We assessed perceptions that one is a *supportive conversation partner* using four items ($\alpha = 0.93$). We wrote these items to capture the theoretical dimensions of active listening, which include listening attentively, demonstrating empathic understanding, and offering positive support (Rodgers & Farson, 1955). Using a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) Likert scale, participants rated their level of agreement with the following statements: "I felt like my conversation partner listened well to the ideas I shared," "My conversation partner seemed genuinely interested in my ideas," "My conversation partner was supportive of the ideas I suggested," and "My conversation partner understood where I was coming from with my ideas."

To assess the extent to which participants had any *post-call contact* after their initial interaction, we asked participants to indicate whether they had any contact with their partner after their initial call. We presented participants with the following response options: "We've had no contact since the conversation," "We've connected by telephone since the conversation," "We've connected via social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.) since the conversation," "We've begun following each other on [internal corporate communication method]," and "Other" (with a subsequent text box to indicate how they have sustained contact).

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Response analysis

Because there was significant attrition in our sample, we tested for systematic differences between survey respondents and non-respondents. Participants in our sample of respondents were older (M

¹ In line with the contact hypothesis that guided this initial data collection effort, we analyzed participants' *anxiety* about potentially having to reach out to another member of another department in the future to examine whether any contact, regardless of what was discussed, could lower perceived barriers to reaching out in the future. To assess anxiety about seeking information from a member of another department, participants in the control condition were asked to envision reaching out to a person from the department of their conversation partner to obtain information or resources from them. Participants from the contact conditions were asked to envision reaching out to a member they did not know from their conversation partner's department in order to obtain some information or resource. They were all then presented with three emotional descriptors ($\alpha = 0.74$) from the negative affect dimension of the PANAS scale—Nervous, Jittery, and Distressed—and asked to rate how much of each emotion they would feel around reaching out to a stranger from that department (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *A great deal*). We use these data in additional analysis.

= 40.14, *s.d.* = 9.34) than those who did not complete the final survey ($M = 37.17$, *s.d.* = 9.10) $t(1089) = 5.30$, $p < .01$. There were no significant differences in gender, international status, position in the organizational hierarchy, or tenure ($ps = 0.12 - 0.41$). We also explored differences in the same variables listed above between those who allowed their conversation to be recorded and those who did not. There were no significant differences ($ps = 0.18 - 0.83$). We further probed differences in response rate by condition. We removed the control condition to compare only response rates from those assigned to a conversation pairing ($n = 908$) to those who provided a recorded conversation and survey response ($n = 195$). Percentages of people in each condition who consented to be audio recorded and provided survey responses were: 17% of people assigned to the Control-Conversation condition, 27% of those assigned to the Non-Work condition, 20% of those assigned to the Work condition, and 22% of those assigned to the Cross condition. The omnibus Wald statistic suggested no significant differences in attrition between conditions, $\chi^2(3) = 5.78$, $p = .12$. However, post hoc comparisons revealed a significant difference in attrition between the Control-Conversation and Non-Work conditions ($p = .02$). No other pairwise comparisons achieved statistical significance. We also observed significant gender differences among conversation conditions such that there were significantly more men in the Work condition (33%) than in the Non-Work condition (11%, $z = 2.65$, $p = .01$); we accounted for this difference in our subsequent analyses. No other condition differences were significant.

3.3.2. Word usage in conversations

We explored differences in word usage using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a natural language processing software that uses validated dictionaries to measure the presence of specific constructs in people's words (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). LIWC reports the percentage of total words used captured by each dictionary. Based on prior work positing that work contexts elicit instrumental, self-oriented motivations (e.g., Belmi & Pfeffer, 2015; Liberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004), our intuition was to explore the influence of words reflecting individuals' needs for achievement, power, and affiliation. These dictionaries are informed by McClelland's theory of needs (McClelland, 1988), which argues that people have fundamental needs they are motivated to satisfy. The need for achievement reflects the desire to get ahead and succeed. It is captured in the LIWC Achievement dictionary² by words such as "accomplish," "ambition," "succeed," "excel," "gain," "lead," and "master." The need for power reflects the desire to accumulate control or have authority over others. It is captured in the Power dictionary by words such as "ambition," "obey," "power," and "win." The need for affiliation reflects the desire for close relationships. It is measured in the Affiliation dictionary with words such as "associates," "friend," "confide," "help," and "together."

To be comprehensive in our analyses, we used an additional six dictionaries capturing cognitive processes (the Insight, Causation, Tentative, Certainty, Discrepancy, and Differentiation dictionaries), and two dictionaries assessing positive and negative affect differences that may manifest in language across our experimental conditions (see Pennebaker et al., 2015, for example words from each dictionary). We excluded dictionaries that measured grammatical elements like pronouns, verbs, filler words, and articles, and those we perceived as less directly relevant, such as dictionaries assessing motion, space, time, and biological processes. However, as a check to ascertain the extent to which the Work conversation condition did in fact focus more on the workplace than the Non-Work conversation condition, we analyzed differences among participants' use of words from the LIWC Work dictionary. The Work dictionary includes words such as "executive," "resources," "industry," "boss," "coworker," and "company."

² See <https://liwc.wpengine.com/compare-dictionaries/> to find all of the words in the dictionary.

We conducted ANOVA analyses with Tukey HSD comparisons to account for multiple comparisons in our analysis. We examined whether there were significant differences across conditions in the frequency with which words from each dictionary listed above were used. We paid particular attention to significant differences between the Work and Non-Work conditions. Means and standard deviations for word use by condition, *F*-statistics, Tukey HSD significance levels, and planned contrasts comparing the Work and Non-Work conditions (i.e., our conditions of interest), are presented in Table 1.

First, to check our manipulation effectiveness we assessed differences in using words from the Work dictionary. As expected, using work words significantly differed by condition $F(3, 191) = 20.26$, $p < .01$ such that the Work conversation condition ($M = 4.77$, *s.d.* = 1.17) elicited more work words than the Non-Work ($M = 3.15$, *s.d.* = 1.01), Control-Conversation ($M = 4.12$, *s.d.* = 1.22), or Cross conditions ($M = 3.88$, *s.d.* = 0.97) $ps = 0.00 - 0.03$. The Non-Work condition elicited fewer work words than did any other condition, $ps < 0.01$. The Control-Conversation and Cross conditions showed no difference in the number of work words elicited, $p < .72$.

Second, we analyzed differences in *need for achievement*, *need for affiliation*, and *need for power* words across conditions. We observed significant differences across conditions in the extent to which conversation partners used *need for achievement words*, $F(3, 191) = 18.33$, $p < .01$. Tukey HSD contrasts indicated that people in the Work condition ($M = 3.19$, *s.d.* = 0.79) used the most achievement words compared to people in the other conversation conditions (Non-Work condition $M = 2.07$, *s.d.* = 0.66, $p < .01$; Cross condition $M = 2.72$, *s.d.* = 0.80, $p = .02$; Control-Conversation condition $M = 2.81$, *s.d.* = 0.98, $p = .13$). People in the Non-Work condition used the fewest achievement words (compared to the Control-Conversation and Cross conditions, $ps < 0.01$). Furthermore, there was an overall effect of condition on *need for affiliation words*, $F(3, 191) = 8.58$, $p < .01$. Participants in the Control-Conversation condition ($M = 4.82$, *s.d.* = 1.68) used more affiliation words than did participants in the Non-Work ($p < .01$) and the Cross conditions ($p < .01$), but did not differ from participants in the Work condition ($p = .30$). The Work condition differed significantly from the Cross condition ($M = 3.56$, *s.d.* = 1.07, $p = .02$). The Work condition ($M = 4.34$, *s.d.* = 1.24) did not differ significantly from the Non-Work condition ($M = 3.84$, *s.d.* = 1.12, $p = .18$). There was no significant effect of condition on *need for power words* $F(3, 191) = 2.41$, $p = .09$ and no significant differences between conditions ($ps = 0.14 - 0.99$).

Third there were no significant differences between conditions in the cognitive processing dictionaries using insight, causation, differentiation, or certainty words, $F_s(3, 191) = 1.06 - 1.68$, $ps = 0.17 - 0.34$. The omnibus test indicated significant difference in using tentative words $F(1, 191) = 2.79$, $p = .04$, but Tukey HSD comparisons revealed that this was driven by the difference between the Control-Conversation condition ($M = 4.68$, *s.d.* = 1.27) and the Work condition ($M = 4.09$, *s.d.* = 0.94; $p = .05$).

Finally, we looked for differences in positive or negative affect words across conditions. Omnibus tests revealed no significant difference across conditions in using negative language ($F = 0.52$, $p = .67$). However, there was a significant difference in using positive language ($F = 4.78$, $p < .01$). The differences were driven by lower levels of positive affect appearing in conversations from the Control-Conversation condition compared to all other conditions ($M = 3.34$, *s.d.* = 1.11, $ps < 0.01$). There was no significant difference between the Work ($M = 3.99$, *s.d.* = 0.80) and Non-Work conversation conditions ($M = 3.97$, *s.d.* = 0.96, $p = 1.00$).

To assess structural differences across conditions we explored differences in call duration, measured in minutes. As expected, because they had fewer instructions and things to talk about, there were significant differences in call lengths among conditions $F(3, 191) = 10.33$, $p < .01$ such that the Control-Conversation condition ($M = 20.16$, *s.d.* = 6.71) was shorter than the Non-Work ($M = 28.01$, *s.d.* = 10.86, $p < .01$), the Work ($M = 25.77$, *s.d.* = 9.67, $p = .052$), and the Cross conditions (M

Table 1
Field experiment: Initial LIWC comparisons.

LIWC Dictionary	Condition	Mean (s.d.)	F	Tukey HSD level ^a & Planned contrast <i>t</i> -statistic ^b
Need for Achievement	Control (n = 38)	2.80 (0.98)	18.33**	HSD: <i>p</i> < .01 <i>t</i> = -7.18**
	Non-Work (n = 62)	2.07 (0.66)		
	Work (n = 46)	3.19 (0.79)		
	Cross (n = 49)	2.72 (0.80)		
Need for Power	Control (n = 38)	1.59 (0.58)	2.32	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -0.95
	Non-Work (n = 62)	1.52 (0.37)		
	Work (n = 46)	1.60 (0.43)		
	Cross (n = 49)	1.39 (0.39)		
Need for Affiliation	Control (n = 38)	4.83 (1.69)	8.58**	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -2.04
	Non-Work (n = 62)	3.84 (1.12)		
	Work (n = 46)	4.34 (1.24)		
	Cross (n = 49)	3.56 (1.07)		
Insight	Control (n = 38)	3.43 (1.07)	1.68	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = 0.48
	Non-Work (n = 62)	3.71 (1.15)		
	Work (n = 46)	3.61 (1.07)		
	Cross (n = 49)	3.94 (1.06)		
Causation	Control (n = 38)	2.14 (0.67)	1.31	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -1.15
	Non-Work (n = 62)	1.93 (0.47)		
	Work (n = 46)	2.05 (0.45)		
	Cross (n = 49)	2.00 (0.54)		
Discrepancy	Control (n = 38)	2.20 (0.75)	1.71	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -1.74
	Non-Work (n = 62)	1.95 (0.58)		
	Work (n = 46)	2.16 (0.63)		
	Cross (n = 49)	2.05 (0.50)		
Tentativeness	Control (n = 38)	4.68 (1.27)	2.79*	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = 2.37 [†]
	Non-Work (n = 62)	4.57 (0.95)		
	Work (n = 46)	4.09 (0.94)		
	Cross (n = 49)	4.37 (1.05)		
Certainty	Control (n = 38)	1.68 (0.61)	1.12	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = 0.72
	Non-Work (n = 62)	1.70 (0.53)		
	Work (n = 46)	1.63 (0.52)		
	Cross (n = 49)	1.82 (0.49)		
Differentiation	Control (n = 38)	4.07 (0.76)	1.27	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -0.15
	Non-Work (n = 62)	3.78 (0.81)		
	Work (n = 46)	3.80 (0.77)		
	Cross (n = 49)	3.93 (0.75)		

Table 1 (continued)

LIWC Dictionary	Condition	Mean (s.d.)	F	Tukey HSD level ^a & Planned contrast <i>t</i> -statistic ^b
Positive Affect	Control (n = 38)	3.34 (1.11)	4.78**	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -0.11
	Non-Work (n = 62)	3.97 (0.96)		
	Work (n = 46)	3.99 (0.80)		
	Cross (n = 49)	3.99 (0.89)		
Negative Affect	Control (n = 38)	0.45 (0.32)	0.52	HSD: n.s. <i>t</i> = -0.91
	Non-Work (n = 62)	0.48 (0.30)		
	Work (n = 46)	0.53 (0.30)		
	Cross (n = 49)	0.48 (0.24)		
Work	Control (n = 38)	4.12 (1.22)	20.26**	HSD: <i>p</i> < .01 <i>t</i> = -7.67**
	Non-Work (n = 62)	3.15 (1.01)		
	Work (n = 46)	4.77 (1.17)		
	Cross (n = 49)	3.88 (0.97)		

** *p* < .01.

* *p* < .05.

[†] *p* < .10.

^a Reported HSD level between Work and Non-Work Conversation Conditions.

^b *t*-statistic is a planned contrast comparing Work and Non-Work Conversation Conditions.

= 31.83, *s.d.* = 10.94, *p* < .01). The Cross condition was also significantly longer than the Work condition (*p* = .02). Importantly, there was no significant difference in length between the Work and Non-Work conditions (*p* = .65), and no other conditions differed from each other.

Overall, these results suggest that words from the Need for Achievement dictionary appear to differ significantly between the Work and Non-Work conversation conditions. In contrast, the words from the other dictionaries did not differ between these conditions. We therefore focus our subsequent analyses on words from the Need for Achievement dictionary as a possible difference accounting for downstream differences between work and non-work conversations. The manipulation also appeared effective in that words from the Work dictionary appeared with much greater frequency in the Work conversation condition than the Non-Work condition. There were no significant differences in call length between the Work and Non-Work conversation conditions.

3.3.3. Survey analyses: Achievement language, perceiving support, and post-call contact

We next turned to our survey measures to examine the extent to which the use of achievement words relates to outcome measures such as partners' perceptions of each other and whether they remained in contact. As reported earlier, we measured two constructs relevant to the current paper, the perception of being a supportive conversation partner and participants' post-call contact, which we re-coded as a binary variable reflecting No Post-Call Contact (coded 0), or Post-Call Contact (coded 1) to simplify the number of analyses. We first examined relationships between the conversation conditions, achievement language, perceiving one's partner as supportive, and post-call contact. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in Table 2. We include gender as a study variable because it significantly varied between the Work and Non-Work conditions.

Beyond the expected correlations between Work and Non-Work conditions in terms of using achievement words, a significant and negative relationship emerged between partners' use of achievement

Table 2
Field experiment: Descriptive statistics and correlations.

		<i>M</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Control-Conversation Condition	0.19	0.40							
2.	Non-Work Condition	0.32	0.47	-0.34**						
3.	Work Condition	0.24	0.43	-0.27**	-0.38**					
4.	Cross Condition	0.25	0.44	-0.29**	-0.40**	-0.32**				
5.	Achievement Words	2.64	0.90	0.09	-0.43**	0.34**	0.05			
6.	Perceived Partner Supportiveness	6.37	0.79	0.08	0.04	-0.05	-0.07	-0.19**		
7.	Post-Call Contact	0.22	0.42	0.02	0.04	-0.06	0.01	-0.12	0.16*	
8.	Gender (men = 1; women = 0)	0.79	0.41	0.03	0.16*	-0.17*	-0.03	-0.08	0.02	-0.04

** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.

words and perceiving one’s partner as supportive. A significant positive relationship also emerged between perceptions of partner supportiveness and whether contact was sustained beyond the initial phone call. Also as expected, gender was correlated with the Work and Non-Work conversation conditions, but it had no significant relationship with achievement words, perceptions of partner supportiveness, or post-call contact.

Given that participants were assigned to dyads, we next assessed the level of agreement between individuals, in terms of their tendencies to use achievement language and their perceptions of having a supportive conversation partner. We conducted this analysis to determine whether we should nest the data in dyads for subsequent analyses. For our measures of agreement, we used median average deviation (AD_{Md}) and r_{wg} . We began by assessing the normality of the distributions to determine the correct cutoff values for comparison (Smith-Crowe, Burke, Cohen, & Doveh, 2014). Both the need for achievement distribution (range = 1.06 to 6.42; Shapiro-Wilk’s $W = 0.95$, $p < .01$) and supportiveness distribution (range = 1 to 7; Shapiro-Wilk’s $W = 0.73$, $p < .01$) were heavily skewed. We thus compared our measures of agreement to recommended cutoffs for a heavy-skew distribution with a small number of raters. AD_{Md} was 0.29 for need for achievement language and 0.25 for perceived supportiveness. Smith-Crowe et al. (2014) recommend a cutoff of less than $AD_{Md} = 0.20$ for this distribution. r_{wg} values were 0.74 for achievement language and 0.79 for perceived supportiveness. Smith-Crowe et al. (2014) recommend a cutoff of 0.86 according to this distribution and number of raters. We therefore conclude that both measures exceed recommended levels of agreement and that it is justifiable to explore the data at the individual level of analysis. This observation further suggests that while the manipulation influenced the overall tendency to use need for achievement words and to perceive one’s conversation partner as supportive, a significant amount of the variance in these constructs is determined by individual differences in linguistic style and partner experience rather than a collective experience. As such, we conduct subsequent analyses at the individual level.

Next, we chose an analytic strategy that would explore all direct and indirect relationships and pathways among conversation types, using need for achievement language, perceptions of partner supportiveness, and subsequent efforts to keep in touch. Specifically, we utilized a three-step mediation approach (Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008). The

theoretical model we tested is shown in Fig. 1, and the model results are shown in Table 3. We first analyzed our data using a generalized multilevel model, nesting variables within a conversation dyad identifier. This approach revealed near-zero variance in the Level 2 identifier. We then compared the nested models to an unnested model and found that the differences were not significant. We also ran our models including gender as a covariate, but the effect of gender was not significant and did not affect the results. Given the lack of support for justification in the agreement statistics, the near-zero variance accounted for by the Level 2 identifier, and that gender did not meaningfully affect our analysis, we present the unnested models without including gender to provide the most parsimonious analysis. However, we took a conservative approach in our analyses and employed clustered standard errors to account for potential non-independence imposed by being part of a dyad.

As shown in Model 1 in Table 3, there was a significant negative relationship between the Non-Work condition and need for achievement words ($B = -0.73$, $s.e. = 0.22$, $t = -3.36$, $p < .01$). In Model 2, the

Table 3
Field experiment: Regression tables, observed models with clustered errors.

	DV = Partner Achievement Words		DV = Perceived Partner Supportiveness		DV = Post-Call Contact (1 = yes; 0 = no)	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Constant ^a	2.80**	0.19	7.03**	0.20	-4.75	1.83
Non-Work Condition	-0.73**	0.21	-0.22	0.15	-0.10	0.59
Work Condition	0.38	0.24	-0.12	0.14	-0.17	0.69
Cross Condition	-0.09	0.24	-0.24	0.19	-0.004	0.64
Partner Achievement Words			-0.19**	0.06	-0.25	0.27
Perceived Partner Supportiveness					0.65*	0.26
F	18.33**		2.42*		Residual deviance: 197.64	
R2	0.22		0.05			

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

^a Baseline comparison condition in the control-conversation condition.

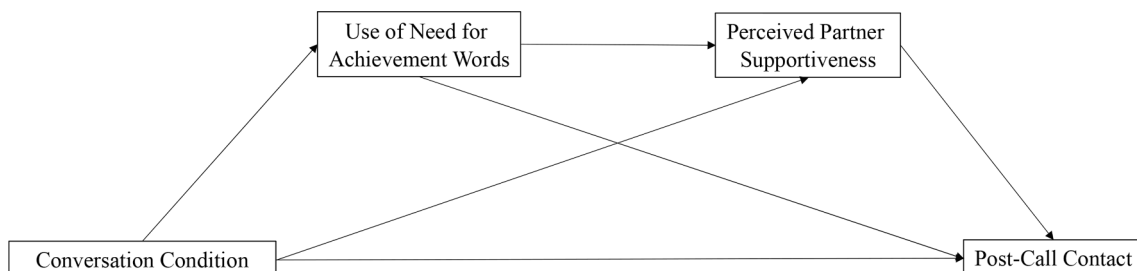


Fig. 1. Three-step model.

relationship between need for achievement words and perceived partner support was significant and negative ($B = -0.19, s.e. = 0.06, t = -3.17, p < .01$), and the effects of the Non-Work condition become non-significant. Finally, as shown in Model 3, which employs a logistic regression with a logit link function, the relationship between perceived partner support and post-call contact was significant and positive ($B = 0.65, s.e. = 0.24, z = 2.41, p = .02$). There were no other significant direct relationships in this model.

We next probed for indirect effects between conversation conditions and whether partners made follow-up contact via partners' use of need for achievement words and perceptions of partner supportiveness. We followed guidance by Taylor et al. (2008) for testing three-path serial mediation, which includes modeling multiple pathways from the independent to dependent variables and employing a bootstrap approach with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals around the indirect effects. We performed our analyses using 2,000 random samples with replacement. All indirect, direct, and total effects are provided in Table 4. The three-path indirect effect from the Non-Work condition to future contact via need for achievement language and perceived partner support was positive and significant as indicated by the 95% confidence interval around the effect excluding zero ($est. = 0.09, s.e. = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.02, 0.28]$). Conversely, the three-path indirect effect from the Work condition to future contact via need for achievement language and

perceived partner support was negative and statistically significant ($est. = -0.05, s.e. = 0.04, 95\% CI [-0.19, -0.004]$). The three-path indirect effect was not significant via the Cross condition. Other indirect pathways relating conversation conditions to future contact via either need for achievement language or perceived partner support were also not significant, and the direct effects of condition on future contact were not significant. This indirect-only pattern of results (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010) indicates there are likely other unmeasured, competing pathways through which conversation topics relate to staying in touch.

3.3.4. Additional analyses

To gain greater insight into how the use of achievement language relates to partners' perceptions of supportiveness, we sought to explore whether these words were any more or less impactful at different points during the conversation. To do so, we broke the conversation data into discrete lines spoken by each individual, with each line representing one conversation turn, and analyzed each turn using the LIWC Need for Achievement dictionary. We grouped individuals' conversation lines into groups of five to make them more directly comparable. For example, at the level of individual lines, some people say one or two words, whereas others speak dozens of words. Grouping the lines into slightly larger parts helps balance these disparities and provides a more stable basis for comparison. We then plotted the mean level of partners' need for achievement language by each set of five conversation turns (see Fig. 2). As expected, given the instructions participants received (Appendix 1), there were pronounced differences across conditions in how much achievement language was used early in the conversations. However, this difference appeared to lessen as the conversations continued.

We next regressed perceived partner supportiveness on need for achievement language at each set of five conversation turns controlling for condition assignment (see Table 5). We then followed with a relative importance analysis. The number of participants for this analysis is smaller ($n = 161$) than for the analyses above because some conversations in the sample did not reach 30 interaction turns. We did not analyze differences beyond 30 interaction turns due to the decline in sample size. The relative importance analysis employs bootstrap regression to produce a partitioned R^2 statistic (lmg) for each variable in a model and generates 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals around the difference between pairs of lmg values. All confidence intervals included zero, suggesting no significant differences. Overall, we did not find clear evidence that using achievement words early in a conversation is any more or less impactful on perceived partner supportiveness than using them at another point. But this could be due to the somewhat scripted nature of the interactions in this study or to the lag between the conversations and the post-conversation survey.

We also pursued the original question guiding this data collection by testing for significant differences across conditions regarding employees' anxiety about contacting someone from a different department. This analysis includes a baseline, no-contact condition and does not require the use of conversation transcript data; thus, the sample size is larger ($n = 498$). The omnibus test revealed significant differences across conditions $F(4, 493) = 4.45, p < .01$. The No-Conversation condition ($M = 1.71, s.d. = 0.67$) differed significantly from the Control-Conversation ($M = 1.39, s.d. = 0.56, p < .01$), Non-Work ($M = 1.41, s.d. = 0.57, p < .01$), and Cross ($M = 1.47, s.d. = 0.57, p = .04$) conditions, and was marginally different from the Work condition ($M = 1.47, s.d. = 0.68, p = .058$). The other conditions were not different from each other ($ps = 0.89 - 0.99$). This finding suggests that conversations, whether about work, ideas, or topics outside of work, may lower anxiety about future contact. So, while conversation topics may matter for how people experience the conversation, it still appears that some conversation is better than none for lowering anxiety about future contact, conceptually supporting the contact hypothesis.

Table 4

Field experiment: Bootstrapped indirect, direct, and total effects of conversation condition on post-call contact.

Indirect Effects	Estimate	s.e.	95% CIs
Serial pathways (Condition → Achievement Words → Perceived Supportiveness → Post-Call Contact)			
Non-Work condition	0.09	0.06	[0.02, 0.28]
Work condition	-0.05	0.04	[-0.19, -0.004]
Cross condition	0.01	0.03	[-0.04, 0.10]
Non-serial pathways 1 (Condition → Achievement Words → Post-Call Contact)			
Non-Work condition	0.18	0.21	[-0.14, 0.65]
Work condition	-0.10	0.12	[-0.45, 0.06]
Cross condition	0.02	0.08	[-0.06, 0.34]
Non-serial pathways 2 (Condition → Perceived Supportiveness → Post-Call Contact)			
Non-Work condition	-0.14	0.13	[-0.48, 0.03]
Work condition	-0.07	0.10	[-0.34, 0.08]
Cross condition	-0.16	0.15	[-0.63, 0.03]
Direct and Total Effects			
Non-work			
Direct	-0.10	0.53	[-1.13, 0.99]
Total	0.03	0.54	[-0.97, 1.12]
Work			
Direct	-0.17	0.61	[-1.36, 0.99]
Total	-0.39	0.63	[-1.53, 0.82]
Cross			
Direct	-0.00	0.57	[-1.16, 1.10]
Total	-0.12	0.61	[-1.38, 1.03]

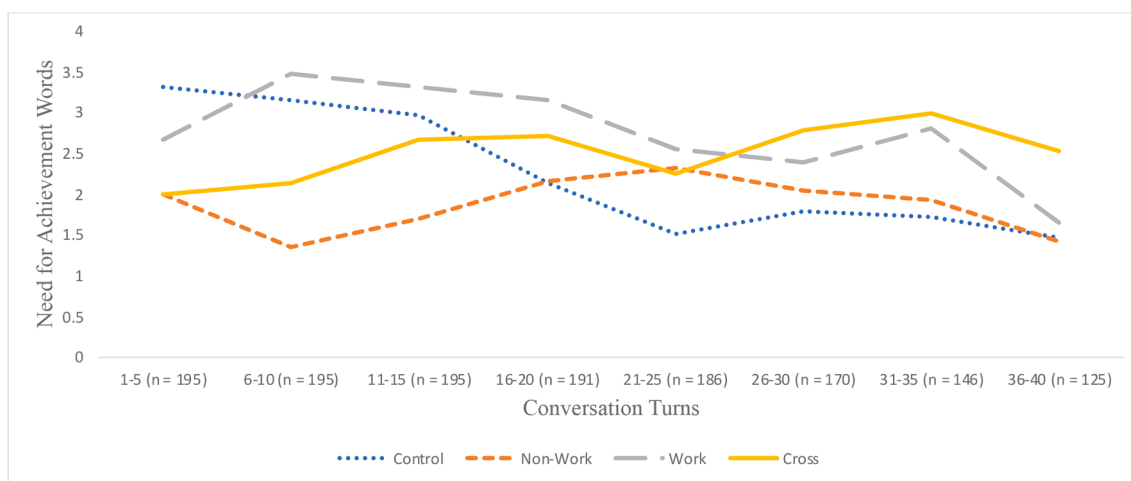


Fig. 2. Field experiment: Trends in need for achievement word use by conversation turn.

Table 5

Field experiment: Additional analysis regressions.

Partner achievement words by conversation turns	DV = Perceived Partner Supportiveness	
	B	s.e.
Intercept	6.95**	0.22
1-5	-0.02	0.03
6-10	0.04	0.04
11-15	-0.08**	0.03
16-20	-0.07*	0.03
21-25	0.03	0.03
26-30	-0.01	0.03
Non-Work Condition ^a	-0.22	0.18
Work Condition ^a	-0.22	0.19
Cross Condition ^a	-0.35 [†]	0.18
Adj. R2	0.08	
F(9,160)	2.70**	

** p < .01.

* p < .05.

^a Dummy variable for condition assignment.

3.4. Discussion and hypothesis generation

3.4.1. Conversation topics and achievement words

Exploring differences between this study’s conversation conditions indicated that, of the categories of words we analyzed, what most distinguished the work from non-work conversations were the words that partners used related to the need for achievement. The Work conversation condition elicited a greater proportion of achievement words than did the Non-Work conversation condition. This aligns with extant knowledge about the different mindsets that people carry into work compared to non-work situations, and evidence suggesting that the social norms of certain contexts can shape the use of language (Berger et al., 2020). It also extends scholarly understanding of how that mindset may be expressed to others during conversations—through the use of words connoting a need for achievement.

Building upon the work of Maslow (1943), the need for achievement was further articulated by McClelland (1988) and is defined as a desire for accomplishment and superior performance (Chun & Choi, 2014). A need for achievement is related to desirable work outcomes like having high performance goals (Bipp & van Dam, 2014; Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989) and higher objective performance (Amyx & Alford, 2005). The achievement motivation is likely to be salient at work. Work is generally seen as a competitive and transactional context compared to non-work settings (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2015; Clark & Waddell, 1985; Freeman, Parmar, & Martin, 2016; Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004;

Liberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004). It follows that people tend to self-enhance when meeting a new person (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995), because there are potential benefits to projecting one’s competence and achievements. Those perceived to be competent and high-achieving are often rewarded with higher-status positions within social hierarchies (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Brunell et al., 2008; Fisek, Berger, & Norman, 1991). Furthermore, being seen as having instrumental value can sometimes increase one’s appeal to people with active goals (Aron et al., 1997; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Many people further perceive that the objective of making new work contacts is to form strategic relationships (Casciaro et al., 2014). Therefore, projecting one’s achievements could help highlight one’s utility.

Our findings indicate that one pathway through which people might highlight their utility or demonstrate their value is through the words they use. This result fits with prior research showing that people express their motivations, values, and psychological states through linguistic cues (Pennebaker et al, 2015; Kahn, Tobin, Massey, & Anderson, 2007; Pennebaker et al., 2003), and that the words people employ shift depending upon the context (Chambers, 2007). For instance, when interacting with high-status partners, people use more polite language, like formal words and honorifics, more subjunctive words, and more past tense verbs. When people are trying to deceive others, they use fewer self and other references and more negative emotion words (Newman, Pennebaker, Berry, & Richards, 2003). Specific to achievement words, Shantz and Latham (2009) found that priming goals and performance led to the increased use of achievement words as measured by LIWC, as we did in our prior analyses. Therefore, given our exploratory findings and prior research suggesting that work is often viewed as a competitive context in which one’s achievements and instrumental value are rewarded, we hypothesize that people engaged in conversations about work (vs. non-work) will use more language related to achievement.

Hypothesis 1. Work conversations, compared to non-work conversations, elicit greater use of language related to achievement.

3.4.2. Need for achievement and perceived partner supportiveness

We further found novel evidence that specific linguistic cues affect supportiveness perceptions: Words related to achievement are negatively related to perceiving one’s conversation partner as supportive. We believe this finding makes sense, given prior research.

The information disclosed in conversations can materially influence interpersonal attraction (Davis & Perkowitz, 1979). Furthermore, the language that people use reflects not only things about the speaker but also affects the listener (Berger et al., 2020). For example, using concrete

rather than abstract language can lead to better customer service encounters (Packard et al., 2021), and the language used in online advertisements is related to the ads' virality (Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai, & Zhang, 2019). Specific to this analysis, perceived support in a relationship reflects individuals' perceptions that they are valued, heard, and esteemed by others (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1992). Numerous perspectives hold that feeling the support of a partner is the bedrock of a relationship. For example, perceiving that a partner has one's best interests at heart is a foundation of trust (Mayer & Davis, 1999). People actively seek others who are supportive (Kleinbaum, Jordan, & Audia, 2015). Salespeople who listen and show empathy to customers establish better, more trusting relationships (Drollinger & Comer, 2013).

There are theoretical reasons to expect that using achievement words could make one seem less supportive. First, a need for achievement is associated with a more transactional approach to relationship formation. People primed with achievement motivations activate sparse, instrumental network connections compared to those with affiliation motives who prefer smaller, denser networks (Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016). High need for achievement also leads people to prioritize expertise (an instrumental consideration) over relationship quality (an affective consideration) when seeking advice (Vancouver & Morrison, 1995). At the level of individual interactions, a need for achievement is associated with task conflict (Chun & Choi, 2014) and a confronting approach to resolving disagreements (Bell & Blakeney, 1977). These findings suggest that need for achievement may correspond to a transactional, instrumental approach to interactions more than an affective, expressive one.

Second, focusing on achievements during a conversation can be off-putting. People are generally reluctant to form connections that feel instrumental and transactional (Casciaro et al., 2014) in part because they feel uncomfortable with the idea that "the purpose of this conversation is about me" rather than "the purpose of this conversation is about us" (Kuwabara et al., 2018). Furthermore, people are generally turned off by those who self-promote (Sezer, Gino, & Norton, 2018), finding them less likeable and less sincere (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986). Conversely, downplaying accomplishments during a conversation can increase warmth perceptions (Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016). To the degree that the words people say reflect their internal motivations and states (Berger et al., 2020) – or even to the degree that conversation partner perceives that they do – achievement words during initial conversations could be off-putting and indicate that the person using those words prioritizes their own interests over the interests of their partner. This would then lead people to view a conversation partner who uses more achievement words as being less interested in and supportive of them.

Hypothesis 2. Need for achievement language is negatively related to partners' perceptions of supportiveness.

3.4.3. Partner supportiveness and future contact

We found that perceived partner supportiveness was positively related to attempts to sustain contact beyond an initial encounter. In line with prior research, feeling like one has an attentive and responsive partner relates to higher intentions to have future interaction (de Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). Even in brief contact, when a person can express their perspective and feel heard by their interaction partner, their perception of their partner and their partner's group becomes more positive (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). Conversely, people respond negatively to what they perceive as selfish intentions (Lin-Healy & Small, 2012). Further, communication quality is related to whether relationships endure beyond an initial encounter (Sprecher & Duck, 1994), and relationship imbalances such as perceiving one has an unsupportive conversation partner are related to overall relationship quality (Sprecher, 1986). In turn, relationship quality has long been associated with a relationship's tendency to persist over time (e.g., Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). After all, lasting connections include assumptions of mutual concern and

benevolence (Krackhardt, 1992). Thus, in terms of encouraging an ongoing relationship beyond an initial encounter, feeling supported, heard, and valued in the initial conversation is likely important.

Hypothesis 3. Perceived partner supportiveness is positively related to desire for future contact.

Finally, the previous arguments draw upon prior research to articulate a process model through which discussions about work—a context in which achievement is salient and valued—relates to using linguistic cues that lead those using the cues to be seen as less supportive interaction partners and thus less likely to be sought beyond an initial contact. Combining the hypotheses articulated in this process model and observing the results from our exploratory study leads us to further anticipate serial mediation such that work compared to non-work conversations are negatively related to future contact attempts via need for achievement language and perceived partner supportiveness. We thus additionally posit:

Hypothesis 4. Conversation topic is indirectly related to desire for future contact via the need for achievement language it evokes and subsequent partner perceptions of one's supportiveness, such that work conversations are negatively indirectly related to desire for contact whereas non-work conversations are positively indirectly related to desire for contact.

While our exploratory analyses help generate theory and illuminate one pathway through which work and non-work conversations differently affect conversation partners, the nature of the analysis combined with data limitations (e.g., attrition in the sample, a dominantly male sample, the potential for contamination across participants) suggest that these results must be interpreted with caution. We therefore sought to systematically combine our emerging theory with additional data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We searched for other datasets that would allow us to gain greater insight into the effects we observed and test our emergent theoretical model under different circumstances to provide greater confidence in their validity.

A colleague of the first author had been collaborating with another scholar on a project exploring how work contexts increase objectification (Belmi & Schroeder, 2020). As a part of this project, these authors conducted an unpublished laboratory experiment that put people into either work or non-work interactions. The authors videotaped the conversations between participants and asked them to complete a survey about their experiences afterwards. They agreed to let us test our model against their data.

4. Study 2: Exploration of a laboratory experiment

In this study, participants were asked to come to the laboratory to converse with another participant in a work or non-work context. With their permission, participants' conversations were videotaped. In both conditions, individuals interacted with a person they were meeting for the first time. This design offers several advantages that complement the limitations of the field experiment. First, it allows a more controlled setting for testing the hypotheses derived from our initial exploration by holding the length of participants' interactions constant. Also, a high percentage of participants consented to be videotaped and completed the final survey (80.5%), reducing concerns about attrition. Second, this experiment focuses on only two conditions—work versus non-work conversations—rather than the five conditions of the field experiment, which allows for more targeted analyses. Third, the interactions occur in a different context (lab versus the field) and format (face-to-face conversations rather than over the phone), allowing us to generalize our hypotheses to broader situations. Fourth, participants completed the dependent variable measures immediately following their interaction, precluding the possibility of contamination between conditions. Finally, the videotaped conversations and the subsequent survey enabled us to test our hypotheses using a set of different but highly aligned measures.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Participants in this study consisted of undergraduate students at a private midwestern university, and community members from the surrounding neighborhood. The researchers recruited 144 individuals (72 conversation pairs), who were randomly assigned to either the Work conversation condition ($N = 33$ pairs) or the Non-Work conversation condition ($N = 39$ pairs). Fifty-one percent of the sample was male, and the average participant age was 32.

4.1.2. Procedure

A few days before coming to the lab, participants completed a pre-survey. They reported their demographic information, completed a personality inventory, and received special instructions about their lab appointments. In the Work conversation condition (*Non-Work conversation condition*), participants received these instructions:

In this study, you will have a short conversation with your partner. Think of this situation as a professional networking event (*as a socializing event*). Think of yourself and the other person as professionals meeting for the first time (*as two people meeting for the first time*). Your goal will be to network with the other professional (*to socialize with the other person*). Please make sure to dress professionally (e.g., business casual clothes) (*to dress casually [e.g., clothes you might wear to a party]*) for this study.³ When you arrive in the lab, you should be prepared to network (*to socialize*).

When participants arrived at the laboratory, the experimenter greeted them, reiterated these instructions, and obtained their consent to videotape and transcribe the interaction. These transcriptions allowed us to analyze their language. Participants interacted for 10 min, then proceeded to separate rooms and completed the post-survey. Their conversations had an average of 48.83 conversation turns, and participants spoke an average of 664 words.

4.1.3. Measures

4.1.3.1. Pre-survey demographic questions. Before coming to the laboratory, participants answered a short survey in which they answered demographic questions for this study and other questions to explore other research questions intended for future work.

4.1.3.2. Need for achievement language. The video recordings of the conversations were transcribed by research assistants and, as with the field experiment, we analyzed the transcriptions using LIWC and leveraging the Need for Achievement dictionary.

4.1.3.3. Supportive conversation partner. Several items on the post-interaction survey asked participants to evaluate their conversation partner. Two of these items ($\alpha = 0.79$), rated on a scale of 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), related to perceiving their partner as supportive, emotionally responsive, and interpersonally warm. The items were, “My partner was emotional, responsive and warm,” and “My partner was warm and friendly.” We assessed the comparability of this measure of supportiveness to our measure from the field by conducting a short validation study involving 200 Amazon Mechanical Turk Master Workers. These participants were asked if they had conversed with someone they had just met for the first time within the last few months. If they responded that they had, we asked them to rate that conversation on the two items above and the four items assessing partner supportiveness from the field experiment (e.g., “My conversation partner was

³ Although the instruction to dress for a certain event was done to strengthen the manipulation and enhance ecological validity, it may also be a potential confounding contextual factor that could have influenced the use of language.

supportive of the ideas I suggested”). Then, we asked them to report what task they just completed as an attention check to ensure conscientious responding. After eliminating those who reported not having spoken to a new person recently and those who failed the attention check, we had a final sample of 139 people. An exploratory factor analysis of these six items revealed one factor explaining 63% of the variance. We also performed a confirmatory factor analysis specifying a one-factor structure and found it fit the data well ($\chi^2(9) = 25.67, p < .01$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.93). We further specified a two-factor structure ($\chi^2(8) = 22.86, p < .01$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.93) separating the field items from the lab items and found no significant difference in fit ($\chi^2_{diff} = 2.8, p = .09$). The two sets of items treated as independent constructs were strongly correlated ($r = 0.70, p < .01$). This suggests that our field measure of supportive conversation partner was reasonably well-aligned with the laboratory measure.

4.1.4. Desire for ongoing contact

To assess partners' interest in maintaining contact, the experimenters asked this question on the post-interaction survey: “Imagine you had to do another task in the study today. You could get paired with the same person or a different person. If you are paired with a different person, he or she will have a similar life experience as your partner (similar age, similar work/family history). For each of these tasks, please check the box to indicate whether you prefer your same partner, a different partner, or don't care.” Participants then rated on a 3-point scale (1 = *different partner*; 2 = *don't care*; 3 = *same partner*) how much they wanted to keep working with their partner on 1) a problem-solving task, and 2) building something together. Reliability was adequate ($\alpha = 0.72$).

4.1.5. Instrumental mindset

The original intent of this study was to assess whether work contexts increase objectification, and so the post-contact survey included Gruenfeld and colleagues' Objectification Scale (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). We used this measure in an exploratory analysis as a possible mechanism explaining why work conversations elicit more achievement language. Instrumentality, or viewing someone else as a tool for one's own purpose, is argued to be a defining aspect of objectification (Nussbaum, 1999). Thus, this measure allowed us to explore whether work conversations elicit more achievement language because people view their partner more instrumentally. For this analysis, we used 7 of the original 10 items, omitting reverse-scored items with weak factor loadings.⁴ Participants used a 7-point Likert scale (−3 = *Strongly disagree*; 3 = *Strongly agree*) and rated these seven items ($\alpha = 0.69$) about their partner: (1) “I would stop talking to him/her if I found out that he or she isn't really helpful to what I want to achieve”; (2) “I would think more about what that other person can do for me than what I can do for him/her”; (3) “I would focus our conversation on finding out how he/she can help me succeed”; (4) “I would focus more on how we can establish a beneficial, as opposed to an enjoyable, relationship”; (5) “I would stop talking to him/her in favor of other people who are more useful to what I want”; (6) “I would contact that person afterwards only when I need something from him/her”; (7) “I would think about how to build a relationship with that person in a way that can help me accomplish my goals.”

4.2. Results

The experimenters received consent to video record 61 of the 72 conversations ($N = 122$). Two participants' data were lost due to an error during transcription and four additional participants were removed for non-conscientious responding (i.e., only responding to a

⁴ We also tested these relationships with the full 10-item measure and found no significant differences.

small, random assortment of items on the post-conversation survey). This yielded a final sample of 116 participants: 54 in the Work conversation condition and 62 in the Non-Work condition. Attrition rate did not differ significantly by condition $\chi^2(1) = 0.13, p = .72$.

4.2.1. Data independence

Following the procedure from the field dataset, we first assessed whether there was sufficient support for considering the data at the level of the dyad. We therefore computed interrater agreement for need for achievement language and perceived partner supportiveness using median Average Deviance (AD_{Md}) and r_{wg} . AD_{Md} was 0.29 and 0.50, while the R_{wg} values were 0.72 and 0.57 for need for achievement language and supportiveness, respectively. We checked the distributions of the variables. Need for achievement language ranged from 0 to 4.17, and partner supportiveness ranged from 1 to 7, and both distributions were heavily skewed ($W = 0.95, p < .01$, and $W = 0.87, p < .01$, respectively). We compared these AD_{Md} and r_{wg} values to recommended cutoffs for this distribution (recommended level with small number of raters, heavy skew, and 7-point measurement scale is AD_{Md} = 0.20 and $r_{wg} = 0.86$; Smith-Crowe et al., 2014). As with the field data, the values fall outside recommended levels for aggregation. We therefore analyze our data at the individual level but employ clustered standard errors to account for potential non-independence of observations and provide a more conservative test of our hypotheses.

4.2.2. Hypothesis testing

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables used in these analyses appear in Table 6. Of note, experimental condition correlated with achievement language ($r = 0.27$), such that the work conversation condition elicited more achievement words than the non-work condition. Need for achievement words were significantly and negatively related to perceived partner supportiveness ($r = -0.21$). And finally, supportiveness was significantly and positively related to desire for ongoing contact ($r = 0.20$).

We followed the same analytical procedures from our field experiment, testing significant differences between conditions in achievement words, then using regression models with clustered standard errors and testing a three-step serial mediation model linking conversation condition to desired future contact via achievement language and perceived partner supportiveness. Regression model results appear in Table 7 and mediation path results appear in Table 8.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, participants in the Work conversation condition used more achievement language ($M = 1.70, s.d. = 0.82$) than did participants in the Non-Work conversation condition ($M = 1.26; s.d. = 0.77; t(114) = -2.96, p < .01$). Also, as shown in Model 1, Work conversations elicited more achievement language ($B = -0.44, s.e. = 0.17, t = -2.59, p < .01$) than did Non-Work conversations. In this sample, using more achievement language was only marginally and negatively related to perceptions that one's conversation partner was supportive (Model 2: $B = -0.40, s.e. = 0.23; t = -1.74, p = .08$), though the relationship was in the anticipated direction. Thus, while the

Table 6
Lab experiment: Descriptive statistics.

	M	s.d.	1	2	3	4
1. Condition	0.47	0.50				
2. Achievement Words	1.46	0.82	0.27**			
3. Supportive Partner	5.71	1.28	0.10	-0.21*		
4. Desired Future Contact	2.44	0.63	0.11	0.02	0.40**	
5. Instrumental Mindset ^a	3.74	1.05	0.26**	0.03	0.18	0.26**

** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.
^a Used in additional analysis.

Table 7
Lab experiment: Regression tables, observed effects.

	Model 1 DV = Partner Achievement Words		Model 2 DV = Perceived Supportiveness		Model 3 DV = Desire for Future Contact	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Constant	1.26**	0.12	6.10**	0.30	1.13**	0.31
Condition	0.44**	0.17	0.43	0.30	0.05	0.11
Partner Achievement Words			-0.40†	0.23	0.07	0.07
Perceived Supportiveness					0.21**	0.05
F	8.77**		4.34*		7.79**	
R ²	0.07		0.07		0.17	

** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.
† $p < .10$.

Table 8
Lab experiment: Bootstrapped indirect, direct, and total effects of conversation condition on desired future contact.

	est.	s.e.	95% CIs
Serial pathway (Condition → Achievement Words → Perceived Supportiveness → Desired Future Contact)	-0.04	0.02	[-0.10, -0.01]
Non-serial pathway 1 (Condition → Achievement Words → Desired Future Contact)	0.03	0.04	[-0.02, 0.12]
Non-serial pathway 2 (Condition → Perceived Supportiveness → Desired Future Contact)	0.09	0.06	[-0.001, 0.24]
Direct effect	0.05	0.12	[-0.17, 0.28]
Total effect	0.14	0.12	[-0.09, 36]

correlation and direction of the relationship between these variables was as anticipated, we conclude that Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Supporting Hypothesis 3, perceiving one's conversation partner as supportive was positively related to desiring a future interaction with them (Model 3: $B = 0.20, s.e. = 0.05; z = 4.29, p < .01$).

We then tested the direct and indirect relationships using bootstrap mediation methods with 2,000 random samples with replacement and bias-corrected confidence intervals. Supporting Hypothesis 4, we found a significant indirect effect of condition on the desire to be paired on a future task with the original conversation partner via achievement language and perceived partner supportiveness (estimate = -0.04, $s.e. = 0.02; 95\% CI[-0.10, -0.01]$). Our results also align with those from the field in that we observe no direct effect of condition on desire for future contact, suggesting there are likely other, unmeasured factors beyond the effects of language that offset the negative pathway we observe. We also do not observe alternate, significant indirect pathways. These findings largely mirror those from the field experiment despite the differences in design, context, communication medium, and measurement between datasets.

4.2.3. Additional analyses

In our analysis of Study 1 data, we did not find clear evidence that using achievement words had different effects on perceived partner supportiveness when used during different conversation points. However, those were more scripted interactions than the conversations in Study 2, and the survey assessing partner supportiveness was separated in time from the conversations. We therefore sought to explore the same possibility—that using achievement words during different points in the conversation may be more or less impactful in terms of perceived partner supportiveness—in this controlled experiment. We followed the procedure from Study 1; plotting achievement language by groups of five conversation turns (see Fig. 3). The differences between conditions

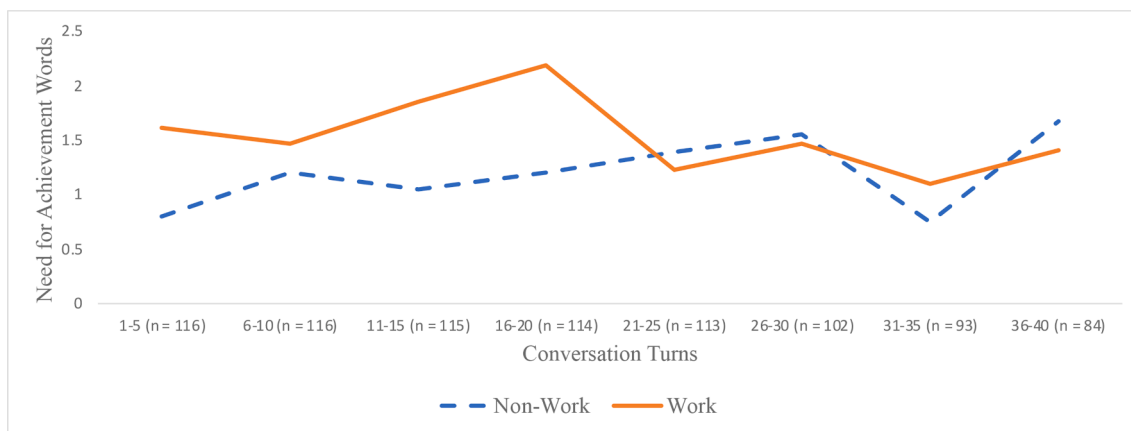


Fig. 3. Lab experiment: Trends in need for achievement word use by conversation turn.

are not as stark in this study as in Study 1. In addition, regressing the use of achievement language at different conversation points, along with condition assignment, on perceived supportiveness (see Table 9) and conducting a relative importance analysis revealed no significant differences in when achievement words are used. Similar to Study 1, we limited our analyses to the first 30 conversation turns due to sample size concerns.

To further expand upon our findings, we explored differences in instrumental mindsets between conditions—the original research question guiding the Study 2 data collection—to determine whether instrumental mindsets may account for the tendency to use more need for achievement words in work conversations. We tested a simple mediation model and found that while condition assignment was a significant predictor of the extent to which people view others instrumentally ($B = -0.56, s.e. = 0.19, z = -2.92, p < .01$), an instrumental orientation toward one’s partner did not mediate the relationship between conversation topic and achievement language (estimate = 0.02, $s.e. = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.05, 0.12]$). This indicates that using achievement words when discussing work topics is not tethered to an instrumental mindset. We return to this in the general discussion.

5. General discussion

In this investigation, we explored data from a field experiment, considered the resulting findings given existing theory, and generated hypotheses about how conversations about work differ from conversations not about work. We then tested those hypotheses by analyzing a second dataset from a controlled lab experiment and largely found support for our hypotheses. We find evidence that conversations about work elicit more words related to achievement. This leads one’s partner

Table 9
Lab experiment: Additional analysis regressions.

Achievement by conversation turns	DV = Perceived Partner Supportiveness	
	B	s.e.
Intercept	5.70**	0.24
1–5	–0.05	0.07
6–10	0.06	0.06
11–15	0.02	0.08
16–20	–0.05	0.07
21–25	–0.07	0.07
26–30	–0.07	0.06
Condition	0.36	0.29
Adj. R2	0.01	
F(7,97)	1.18	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

to feel less supported in the conversation and makes them less likely to instigate future contact beyond the initial encounter. We further explored when in a conversation the use of these words may have more or less influence and whether using achievement language reflects an instrumental mindset. We find that the effect of achievement language on partner evaluations of supportiveness does not meaningfully differ depending upon when that language was used in the conversation. Surprisingly, we also found that conversing about work may elicit need for achievement cues even when people are not in an instrumental mindset. This suggests that the psychological context of work may elicit greater use of achievement words even if the person using them does not report having instrumental intentions. This further suggests a possible way that misunderstandings or faulty assumptions can occur—when a person does not have instrumental motivations, but their language gives the impression they do.

5.1. Contributions and future directions

Our findings and theorizing make several theoretical and empirical contributions. Below we highlight several contributions: two primary and others secondary. The first theoretical contribution is the insight this work provides into why conversations about work, compared to non-work, may be relatively less likely to result in ongoing contact. Prior research suggests that the instrumental motives involved in making work-related connections can make people feel morally “dirty” (Caciaro et al., 2014; Ingram & Morris, 2007). Meanwhile, small talk and “chitchat” can be pleasant (Methot et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that talking about work compared to non-work topics elicits different linguistic cues that affect interaction partners. Two studies involving different designs, contexts, measures, and conversation mediums yielded evidence that conversations about work produce more language related to achievement; words like “accomplish,” “achieve,” “challenges,” and “ahead.” Further, these words relate to partners’ evaluations of each other and subsequent interest in maintaining contact. These findings draw together theoretical perspectives on the instrumentality of the work context and the interplay of linguistic styles and cognition. They suggest that greater use of specific words related to need for achievement may lower interaction quality and reduce the potential for ongoing connection.

Second, this work extends scholarly understanding of how people can make positive initial impressions that offer the potential for future interactions. For example, extant work has suggested questions for generating emotional closeness (Aron et al., 1997), discussed the power of listening (Bergeron & Laroche, 2009; Tucker & Turner, 2015) and asking questions (Huang et al., 2017), and noted the importance of balancing warmth and competence perceptions (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011; Holoien & Fiske, 2013). This work suggests that another

mechanism by which people influence others is through the verbal cues they use, specifically words suggesting a need for achievement. Our investigation finds that achievement language is associated with lower partner evaluations in terms of perceived listening, warmth, and supportiveness. These findings open the door to further theorizing about micro dynamics within interactions that predict emotional closeness, listening, and support perceptions. Additionally, we perceive that future research should continue to examine linguistic cues and conversational micro dynamics that might either strip away the instrumental veneer from work conversations or signal non-instrumental motives that catalyze more humane interpretations of workplace interactions.

In terms of secondary contributions, several findings could spur future research. First, we find it notable that the effects observed in both studies were indirect only (Zhao et al., 2010). This suggests that many things can affect the desire to keep in touch (which stands to reason since conversations are complicated social interactions), and that while the use of achievement language may be one negative pathway between conversations and sustaining contact, other pathways can offset the negative effects. It may be that in using achievement language, some people articulate accomplishments or desires that are truly notable so that, while a partner may not feel as heard or supported, they may want to keep in touch anyway. It is also possible that people use achievement words but balance them with words that signal their support and interest. We expect exploring different pathways from conversation topics to ongoing contact to be a fruitful area of research. However, while there may be many factors offsetting the indirect effects observed in this study, being mindful of the effects of achievement language is practically useful because it is a pathway that people can actively manage. By mitigating the negative pathway connecting achievement words to desirable outcomes, people can increase the chances that the positive pathways are comparatively more influential.

A related observation in both datasets was that despite the participants being in pairs, it was at the individual rather than the dyadic level where we observed significant variation in using achievement words and in perceptions of partner supportiveness and interest in maintaining contact. This finding suggests that two people can enter a conversation with different speaking styles and leave that conversation with very different interpretations of how it went. Thus, conversation partners may be more like players in an improvisational jazz jam—they agree on the basic structures that make a song, but they are playing different instruments and focusing on different aspects of the music. It follows that there is merit in understanding how individuals interpret conversations beyond focusing on dyadic aspects of interactions.

A final observation from our field dataset, but that was not central to our exploration of conversation topics, is that we found evidence supporting the contact hypothesis. We found that all forms of conversations in our field experiment reduced anxiety about reaching out compared to a control condition. Prior research suggests that self-disclosures are best suited to reducing anxiety about contact, and disclosures related to one's work identity and outside-of-work identity were equally effective at reducing anxiety about future contact. Therefore, while attempts to encourage contact may appear to yield mixed results (e.g., Bernstein & Turban, 2018; Ingram & Morris, 2007), our findings suggest it is probably still a good practice to encourage contact, since some seems preferable to none.

5.2. Limitations

While our findings are theoretically and practically useful, there are still notable limitations. First, these studies elicited only a few conversation topics. There are nearly limitless topics that people could discuss, and many conversations do not follow scripts or prompts of the kind we provided to employees and participants in our studies. This aspect makes generalizability to other forms of interaction challenging to gauge. Other topics may be more or less effective for stimulating interaction and encouraging connections than the forms we studied.

This research was also carried out in one organization (Study 1) and one laboratory (Study 2), both in the United States. We cannot rule out the possibility that there are unmeasured cultural factors affecting our results. For example, cultures vary in how much they are team-oriented, informal, or collaboration-focused (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). It is possible that in our field setting, conversations about non-work topics are more culturally welcomed in team-oriented and informal cultures. Likewise, non-work conversations might be less acceptable in instrumentally focused or impersonal settings. And in a more rigid organization, conversations not germane to the workplace might preclude future contact.

Next, while the experimental designs and randomization used in our two datasets help identify causality in assessing how conversation topics elicit linguistic cues of specific motives, relationships among the other factors we tracked are correlational. While correlational evidence cannot rule out reverse causality or potentially unmeasured effects, the triangulation of results from two independently-conducted studies provide some degree of assurance that the pathways are not spurious. Also, while not assuring causality at each step of our models, the field dataset specifically has the significant benefit of preserving ecological validity by occurring within participants' daily work context and focusing on topics related specifically to participants and their organizational lives.

While we observed a similar pattern of results analyzing phone calls (Study 1) and face-to-face conversations (Study 2), we cannot speak to whether our effects apply across other conversation mediums, like email or other communication platforms. Research suggests that interaction medium is a consequential factor in building trust (Schilke & Huang, 2018) and forming positive impressions (Schroeder & Epley, 2015). Many interactions in modern organizations occur via online chat, email, or other asynchronous media. While we find it encouraging that we observed effects in audio-only and face-to-face interactions, future research could explore the moderating role of different forms of communication.

Fifth, this research focused on the micro dynamics of interactions and how they relate to ongoing contact between individuals. While useful, that focus precluded continued analysis of how these interactions affect organizational departments or broader social groups. For example, prior research about contact theory suggests that negative evaluations of others can be reduced vicariously when one knows that someone else in one's in-group has contact with members of an out-group (Turner et al., 2007)—a phenomenon known as the extended contact hypothesis. Considered in the organizational context, this suggests that interactions of the types studied here would also be positive for group dynamics more broadly and increase members' willingness to make boundary-spanning contact. To the extent it does, this work provides evidence for how norms of effective boundary-management behavior may emerge in organizations.

Finally, our approach to this study could best be described as abductive: pursuing a hunch and utilizing a combination of exploratory and confirmatory tests in multiple datasets. Encouraging abductive strategies is crucial in an age where transparency is paramount because many scientific discoveries begin, as this one does, by the detection of puzzles and the extrapolation of nascent hypotheses (Dunne & Dougherty, 2016; Golden-Biddle, 2020). The essence of abductive reasoning is selecting the best explanation from several competing explanations drawn from empirical data (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Its goal is to generate new hypotheses, theorize more deeply about constructs and relationships of interest, and surface practically and theoretically important but underdeveloped ideas. It can thus provide strong inferences about what is accurate, particularly when tested against other explanations, as we did in the field experiment (Mueller, 2018). But the approach is still limited in what it can achieve and has been called the "least dependable mode of developing certainty" (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018: 325). Thus, while we derived useful hypotheses about differences between work and non-work conversations and tested them in a held out, controlled sample of participants, we note that further tests are

required to assure greater confidence and establish causality.

6. Conclusion

“So, what do you do?” The findings of this research, while tentative, suggests that this question, while inviting a conversation, might also impair it. Our emergent theory and findings provide insight into why talking about work compared to non-work topics can be unattractive for our conversation partners. Specifically, talking about work elicits achievement-oriented words that coincide with being seen as a less supportive conversation partner and lower subsequent inclinations to keep in touch. So, when making new connections, talking about what one does outside of work seems useful, as it lowers the use of words that suggest an achievement orientation and makes one seem more supportive. And that might lead to longer-lasting connections.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sean R. Martin: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Spencer Harrison:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Charlotte Hoopes:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Julianna Schroeder:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Peter R. Belmi:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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.

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Appendix A. Instructions for conversation conditions

Italics were not seen by participants.

In all Conversation conditions, participants received the following instructions.

Thank you for volunteering to be a part of this research! As we mentioned in our initial email, you will be asked to connect with another [COMPANY NAME] employee from another part of the company. The person you will be connecting with, and their contact information, is below:

Name: [Partner Name]

Department: [Partner Department]

Email: [Partner Email]

Please email this person to set up a time to connect. They have been given your information as well, and so you both can reach out and coordinate a time. Plan for the conversation to last about 20 min, though it could be a little longer or shorter.

When you choose a time to talk, both of you will call into this service using the number corresponding to the country where you are located, and enter your ACCESS CODE and PIN number. All numbers appear below:

Step 1. Please dial [CALL SERVICE NUMBER]

Step 2. Please enter the 7-digit access code, followed by the # sign. Your access code is [PIN NUMBER TO JOIN CALL]

Step 3. (Optional): If you and your partner so choose, you can agree to record the conversation you have so the researchers can analyze it. You are in control of recording. To record, you should enter *9 after both parties have joined the call & asked each for others' consent to record.

Participants were then presented different instructions depending upon whether they were assigned to share non-work versus work-related disclosures, or simply to share ideas for working together.

Participants in self-disclosure conditions (but not the ideas sharing condition) then saw the following instructions.

What we'd like you to discuss with your partner:

First, we'd like for you to take a few moments and answer the following questions about yourself. Be prepared to share your answers with your conversation partner.

- (1) Given the choice of anyone (in the world/you work with), who would you want as a dinner guest and why?
- (2) What would constitute a perfect day (at work) for you?
- (3) Is there something that you've dreamed of doing (at work) for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
- (4) What do your friendships (coworkers) mean to you?
- (5) What is the greatest accomplishment of your (life outside of work/work life)?

All participants in conversation conditions saw the following information.

Next, we'd like to you think of the department your partner works in, and make a list of five ideas for ways that your department and their department could work together well in the future. That is, what are five ideas for ensuring great integration between your departments should the need arise?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Participants in the control condition saw the following instructions.

We'd like to you think of a cross-functional or interdepartmental work group that you and your work group could potentially become involved with at some point in the future. Then, make a list of up to five ideas you might have for ways that your department and people from that other department could work together well in the future.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Appendix B. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.104104>.

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