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Pessimistic assessments of ability in informal conversation

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Abstract

Conversation is one of the most common ways of establishing social connection and satisfying the need to belong. But despite spending considerable time talking to others, many people report that engaging in informal conversation with anyone other than close friends and family makes them anxious. In this research, we explored people's assessments of their conversational ability. In Studies 1a–1c, we found that people are relatively pessimistic about their skills in conversation when compared to other common activities. We also provide support for the hypothesis that this pessimism is driven by a tendency to not engage in the usual pattern of self-serving attributions when it comes to the positive and negative moments of conversations. Instead, people attribute the low points of a conversation more to themselves than to the other person (Studies 2 and 3). We discuss the origins of this attributional pattern, as well as other potential mechanisms underlying conversational pessimism, in the General Discussion.

1 | INTRODUCTION

> We spend half of our lives struggling to start conversations and the other half struggling to exit them. Nathan Heller (2017)

As Heller's quip attests, conversing with others can be a challenge. When talking to others at a social event, people often "don't know where to begin," and so wise hosts, event planners, and human-resource directors help the effort along by introducing carefully choreographed "ice-breakers." Once the conversation is underway, people worry about awkward silences, how to transition from topic to topic, and the impressions they're making as they fail to be as quick and witty as the characters they see on film and television (think *The West Wing*). Then, when they've had enough (or, more often, become worried that their conversation partner has had enough), they might wish they had an "ice-maker" that would get them out of the conversation gracefully.

At one level, the idea that conversation might present such difficulties would not seem to make sense. It is often said that humans are "social animals" with a powerful need to belong to social groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dunbar & Shultz, 2007). Conversation is one of the quickest and most versatile ways of establishing social connection and a sense of belonging. Talking to others is one of the most social things we do, and of all the social things we do, it may be the most frequent. Adults typically do not need assistance with other basic needs, such as how to convert glucose to energy, how to chew food, or how to run when a predator is in pursuit. Why do they need tools like ice-breakers to help them satisfy the need to belong?

Maybe they don't. Despite the seemingly common worries we've outlined, maybe most people are perfectly confident in their ability to engage in unstructured "cocktail party" conversation. After all, people seem quite confident in so many areas of life, seeing themselves as better than average on many traits and abilities (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 1989). Surprisingly, given conversation's prominence in social interaction, and given the prominence of social interaction to our highly social species, there is little existing research that speaks to just how comfortable people are in informal conversation (but see work on "communication apprehension," e.g., McCroskey, 1977). Research by Sandstrom and Boothby (2020) has made some headway by investigating people's apprehensions about impending conversations with strangers, but more work is needed to test if these fears extend to other common social activities, or only apply to conversation. The lack of research in this area is a bit

puzzling given what we know about the importance of social connection for well-being, and the critical role that conversation plays in establishing and maintaining such connections. One goal of the present research, then, is to fill this gap in the literature and examine whether people are indeed relatively pessimistic about their ability to engage in conversation compared to a host of other common activities.

There are several reasons why people may approach conversations with some anxiety. Perhaps the most notable is the inherent complexity of informal conversation. Every conversation involves intricate, dynamic interactions between partners. If a conversation is to unfold smoothly, conversationalists must coordinate turn-taking (Templeton et al., 2022), their eye contact (Wohltjen & Wheatley, 2021), their anticipations of upcoming content (Garrod & Pickering, 2015; Pickering & Garrod, 2013), and their interpretations of everything going on around them—very much including all preceding utterances, the tone in which they were uttered, and any changes in tone (Brennan & Clark, 1996; Hawkins et al., 2020; Sievers et al., 2020). Conversations also vary enormously across occasions and contexts: They differ in the number of people involved (Cooney et al., 2020), the culture in which they take place (Bassetti & Liberman, 2021), and the goals people bring to the interaction (Yeomans et al., 2022). Having to fine-tune the depth of a conversation can also present a challenge. At a party, one may dread going on and on about the weather, but delving into personal topics too quickly can be awkward as well. Compounding this dilemma is the fact that our sense of how deep a conversation should go is not always accurate. Conversationalists tend to overestimate the awkwardness of deep interactions (Kardas et al., 2022) despite deeper conversations being correlated with greater psychological well-being (Mehl et al., 2010; Milek et al., 2018). The wide landscape of conversations and the dynamic coordination they require present a challenge to any conversationalist.

Beyond their complexity, conversations can also be challenging because of all the uncertainty they entail. Conversationalists rarely truly know where their partner will take the conversation next, or what their partner thinks of the conversation. Although synchrony has been shown to promote social connection (Wheatley et al., 2012), conversation also relies on *complimentary* action in which partners take individual initiative to push the interaction forward (Hasson & Frith, 2016). The uncertainty surrounding these steps must be resolved quickly so that partners can respond to each other and maintain the flow of the interaction (Templeton et al., 2022). Given that uncertainty is a common source of anxiety, it is hardly surprising that people approach many conversations with some trepidation (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013).

Perhaps the most consequential form of uncertainty involved in informal conversations is not knowing how one's partner sees the conversation. People have been shown to have difficulty accurately predicting another person's thoughts and feelings (Eyal et al., 2018). When it comes to conversation, difficulties with perspective taking can leave conversationalists wondering what their partner really thinks about their interaction. "Have I expressed myself clearly?" "Is the person I'm talking to having fun?" "Does my partner like me?" These sorts of evaluative concerns appear in many interactions beyond conversation, a striking example being public speaking. In public opinion polls, Americans rate public speaking as their single greatest fear (Ingraham, 2014) and most people approach the prospect of speaking to groups of strangers with considerable anxiety, even dread (Deiters et al., 2013; Savitsky & Gilovich, 2003; Stevens et al., 2011). Although public speaking differs from conversation in its one-to-many structure and the absence of turn-taking, some of the same skills are involved in both—such as choosing the right things to say and saying them well. Thus, the common fear of public speaking lends credence to the possibility that many people may find informal conversation quite stressful.

So too does research showing that, after one-on-one conversations with strangers, people tend to underestimate how much their conversation partner likes them (Boothby et al., 2018; Mastroianni et al., 2021; Wolf et al., 2021). It is unclear whether participants in those studies attributed their partner's (assumed) low opinion of them to their own deficiencies in conversation per se, but since their only interaction was to have a conversation, it is not unreasonable to suspect that their assessments of what they brought to the conversation may have played some role.

There are several reasons to believe, then, that people may not be as optimistic about their abilities at conversation as they are about so many other social activities. But what specific forms do their fears about conversation tend to take? One possibility that struck us from talking to people about conversation (an observation that inspired this line of research) was how often people expressed a fear of suffering through periods of "awkward silence"—episodes they seemed ready to attribute to themselves, not the person they imagine talking to. Indeed, in an exploratory survey, we asked 98 MTurk participants to describe the most difficult feature of informal conversation. Over half (53%) reported that they worry most about not knowing what to say. Another third (35%) said they worry about saying the wrong thing and causing offense or embarrassment. Only 9% reported being concerned about how well the other person would perform, and only 3% said they find nothing difficult about conversation. In casual conversation, people appear far more anxious about what they might say than what their conversation partner might (or might not) say.

What people cite as their greatest fears about conversation thus center around their own shortcomings. When faced with the complexity and uncertainty of informal conversation, people fear not knowing what to say or saying the wrong thing. Note that this runs counter to the pervasive tendency for people to make self-serving attributions for their successes and failures (Lau & Russell, 1980; MacCoun, 1993). Thus, one of the interesting things about conversation is that it may be one of those activities in which the usual self-serving attributional pattern does not hold and people make self-*denigrating* attributions instead. The second purpose of the present research, then, is to examine whether people do indeed fail to exhibit the usual self-serving attributions when it comes to the ups and downs of their everyday conversations.

Understanding whether people question their ability to engage in satisfying conversations is important given the role conversation

plays in establishing and maintaining social connection, and given the powerful effect social connection has on health and well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Y. Luo et al., 2012). One way to promote social connection is to promote conversation (Epley & Schroeder, 2014) and so anything that promotes conversational engagement should boost health and well-being (although conversing more may provide diminishing returns for frequent socializers; see Kushlev et al., 2018; M. Luo et al., 2022). And, as social psychologists have maintained since the time of Lewin (1951), often the best way to encourage a given behavior is to figure out what is preventing people from engaging in it and then work on breaking down those barriers (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). If many people fear the prospect of conversation, understanding the nature of that fear can be a useful first step in creating a channel that leads to more gratifying interactions.

Here we focus on people's pessimism when it comes to informal conversation. As Wittgenstein noted about the category of "games" (Wittgenstein, 1953), there are likely no necessary and sufficient conditions that make some conversations "informal." Prototypical informal conversations, however, are casual in nature and tend not to be aimed at making important decisions or resolving significant problems. They instead center on having a pleasant or even fun interaction, socially connecting, avoiding awkwardness, and sometimes simply filling time. They are also characterized as relatively high in relational motives and relatively low in informational motives (Yeomans et al., 2022). People can strike up an informal conversation in any setting: in an office, at a party or memorial service, when passing an acquaintance on the street, or on a plane, train, or automobile. And, of course, a single interaction can involve both informal conversation and more task-oriented dialog, as when initial chit-chat between faculty member and advisee gives way to discussing research.

In three studies, we examined whether people tend to lack confidence in their ability at informal conversation and why they might lack it. We asked participants how good of a conversationalist they believe they are compared to their peers and compared those beliefs to how they think they stack up on a host of other activities (Studies 1a–1c). We then examined whether people's relatively pessimistic assessments of their conversational abilities can be traced to a pattern of attributions for the positive and negative moments in conversations that runs counter to the usual self-serving pattern (Studies 2–3). For all studies, we report all conditions run and measures collected. All sample sizes were determined in advance and analyses were conducted only after data collection was complete.

2 | STUDY 1A: HOW DO PEOPLE RATE THEIR CONVERSATIONAL ABILITY COMPARED TO OTHERS'?

One way to test whether people see conversation as a stressful activity is to ask them how their conversational skills compare to those of their peers. We therefore compiled a list of 20 common everyday activities, taken from Killingsworth and Gilbert's (2010) experience sampling study of well-being. The list included such activities as working, commuting, and having a conversation at a dinner or cocktail party (see Table 1 for the full list). We asked participants to compare their ability at each of 20 activities to that of the average person. Given the extensive literature on the above-average effect (Alicke, 1985; Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 1989; Kruger, 1999), we predicted that participants would exhibit an above-average effect on most of the activities, with average ability assessments significantly greater than 50%. We also predicted that people would rate their ability at conversation less favorably compared to others than their ability to perform these other daily activities.

TABLE 1 Participants' percentile ratings of their ability to perform 20 common activities (from Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010. Study 1a. ["Compared to the average person your age and sex, how…?"])

Good of a reader are you	77.6***
Good are you at walking	73.4***
Good are you at performing your job	72.8***
Good are you at listening to the right amount and type of music and getting enjoyment from it	71.4***
Well groomed are you—how well do you take care of your physical hygiene	70.0***
Comfortable and knowledgeable are you when it comes to working on your computer	67.2***
Good are you at preparing food	67.2***
Much pleasure do you get from eating	66.3***
Good are you at shopping and running errands	66.1***
Good are you at looking after and taking care of kids	64.2***
Good are you at routine housework	63.9***
Good are you at arranging your commute so that it is most enjoyable and least stressful	63.2***
Good are you at relaxing	61.6***
Good are you at watching the right amount and type of television	61.1***
Good are you at talking	60.0***
Well do you sleep	58.8**
Good are you at listening to the right amount and type of radio and the news	56.7**
Good are you as a traveler	56.2*
Good are you at exercising	55.6*
Good are you at initiating and sustaining rewarding conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event	48.96

*Significantly different from 50 at .05 level.
**Significantly different from 50 at .01 level.
***Significantly different from 50 at .001 level.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

We recruited participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for modest compensation, aiming for a sample of 100. A power analysis (G-Power 3.1) indicated that a *t*-test with a sample of 100 would yield a 90% likelihood of detecting an effect size of $d \geq 0.33$ given the variability found in previous research on the above-average effect (Mattern et al., 2010; Williams & Gilovich, 2008). We ended up with 107 participants (57% were female; 82% White, 11% Black/African American, 5% Asian, 1% Latino/Hispanic, and 1% Other; $M_{age} = 36.5$).

2.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were presented with a randomized list of 20 activities and, using a slider, indicated how their ability at each activity compared to that of an average person their age and sex on a scale from 1 (I'm at the very bottom) to 100 (I'm at the very top).

In the source from which we derived our list of activities, talking and conversation were joined together as one activity (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). We separated the two—the general act of talking and having a conversation with a friend or acquaintance at a social gathering. We suspected that people would have relatively favorable views of their ability to "talk," which might be interpreted by some as their facility with language; but we predicted that participants would rank their ability at conversation as particularly low.

2.2 | Results

Following procedures from prior work on comparative judgments, we compared participants' comparative ability estimates to the scale midpoint (50) with one sample *t*-tests (two-tailed) to detect above and below average effects (Kruger, 1999). We found that conversation was the *only* activity that did not exhibit a significant above-average effect (Table 1). These data thus provide clear support for our contention that people think their ability to carry on a conversation is deficient in comparison with many everyday activities.

3 | STUDY 1B: HOW DO PEOPLE RATE THEIR CONVERSATIONAL ABILITY COMPARED TO OTHERS' WHEN ALL ACTIVITIES INVOLVE UNCERTAINTY?

One may wonder if this result is an artifact of the particular list of activities participants ranked. To examine this possibility, we reran Study 1a, but with a different set of 13 activities taken from the Daily Activities Questionnaire (Wollmerstedt et al., 2010). Furthermore, we controlled for the uncertainty inherent in informal conversations (i.e., not knowing who you may end up talking to or what you may talk about) by incorporating an element of the unknown into each activity. For example, we included activities like "finding your way around a new city or town" and "tackling new projects in your garden/yard."

We also reworded the conversation and talk items in the list of activities. It is possible that the task of "initiating and sustaining rewarding conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event" seems more challenging than the reality of most daily conversations. We therefore removed the stipulation that participants "initiate" the conversation and that the conversation be "rewarding." Instead, we asked participants to compare how good they are at "holding casual conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event" to that of an average person. In addition, we reworded the talk item to be explicitly social, "talking to people that you have not met before." Thus, unlike in the previous study, here both the conversation and talk items are explicitly related to conversational ability.

As in Study 1a, we predicted that participants would exhibit an above-average effect on most of the activities, but not with regard to carrying out a conversation.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

Following the methods from Study 1a, we aimed for a sample size of 100 participants. We ended with 104 participants (55% female; 65% White, 6% Black/African American, 11% Asian, 11% Latino/Hispanic, and 7% Other; $M_{age} = 31.0$).

3.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were asked to make comparative ability judgments for each of the 13 activities from the Daily Activities Questionnaire. Using a slider, participants indicated how their ability at each activity compared to that of an average person their age and sex on a scale from 1 (I'm at the very bottom) to 100 (I'm at the very top).

3.2 | Results

Table 2 reports participants' average (percentile) estimates of their relative standing on each of the 13 activities. As that table shows, there was a significant above-average effect for 9 of the 13 activities, but "holding casual conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event" and "talking to people that you have not met before" were not among them $t_{conversation}(103) = -0.85$, $p = .39$, $d = 0.08$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [42.4, 53.00] and $t_{talk}(101) = -0.73$, $p = .46$, $d = 0.07$, 95% CI [42.54, 53.43]. To examine these results more closely, we performed a series of two-tailed paired *t*-tests that compared the average percentile estimate for "holding casual conversation at a cocktail party,

TABLE 2 Participants' percentile ratings of their ability to perform 13 activities from the Daily Activities Questionnaire. Study 1b.

Enjoying new types of food	**72.38*** **
Doing new tasks/assignments at work	**70.56*** **
Enjoying new genres of entertainment	**68.09*** **
Doing new chores or projects around your house	**65.82*** **
Shopping for things when away from home	**65.25*** **
Competing at new board or card games	**64.42*** **
Enjoying the works of a new author	**62.29*** **
Finding your way around a new town or city	**57.95** *
Tackling new projects in your garden/yard	**55.00***
Doing new types of manual labor (e.g., shoveling, sawing)	53.64
Talking to people that you have not met before	47.99
Holding casual conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event	47.73
Playing new sports	**40.06*** **

Note: Bold signifies a significant difference from conversation at .05 level.

*Significantly different from 50 at .05 level.

**Significantly different from 50 at .01 level.

***Significantly different from 50 at .001 level.

dinner party, or similar social event" (47.73) and "talking to people that you have not met before" (47.99) to the average rating of each of the other activities. These tests revealed that participants saw their comparative ability at conversing at a social event as significantly weaker than 9 of the activities, at the $p = .05$ level. They saw their comparative ability at talking to people they had not met before as significantly weaker than 10 of the activities. The only activity to receive significantly lower ($p < .05$) comparative judgments than both "holding casual conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event" and "talking to people that you have not met before" was "playing new sports." Once again, in contrast to many other common daily activities, participants failed to report an above average effect for their conversational skill.

4 | STUDY 1C: HOW DO PEOPLE RATE THEIR CONVERSATIONAL ABILITY COMPARED TO OTHERS' WHEN ALL ACTIVITIES ARE SOCIAL?

To further examine the robustness of the findings from Studies 1a and 1b, we conducted another replication using all highly social activities. Maybe people are pessimistic about nearly everything they do that involves other people and the prospect of being judged. If so, then we should not expect any social activities to elicit above average effects. If participants are uniquely pessimistic about their conversational skills, then we should expect all activities except for those related to conversation to elicit above average effects.

Note that many of the social activities examined in this study are components of conversations (e.g., "Making eye contact," "Choosing appropriate things to talk about," "Listening to someone who is struggling," "Giving advice," etc.). If, as we suggest, the sheer complexity of informal conversation is a big part of why people may be pessimistic about their own conversational ability, we might expect respondents to believe that they can outperform others with respect to each of the individual components of a conversation while nonetheless thinking that they are not very good at conversation itself—at "Engaging in informal conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event" or "Talking with others." People may not be pessimistic about their abilities when considering the various components of a conversation, but their confidence may falter when facing the complexity of informal conversation itself.

4.1 | Method

To examine whether people are especially pessimistic about their conversational skill compared to other social activities, we first created a list of 26 fundamentally social activities. The items were generated by consulting the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Heimberg et al., 1999) and included such items as "giving advice" and "expressing disagreement or disapproval." We then had 100 Prolific Academic participants (56% female; 73% White, 6% Black/African American, 5% Asian, 3% Latino/Hispanic, and 13% Other; $M_{age} = 34.6$) indicate whether they performed each of these social activities "from time to time" or "never or very rarely." The 13 activities that participants said they performed most often comprised our set of common social activities. At least 80% of the participants chose "from time to time" for each of the final 13 activities.

We then asked a separate group of 100 Prolific Academic participants (47% female; 72% White, 8% Black/African American, 9% Asian, 5% Latino/Hispanic, 2% Native American and 4% Other; $M_{age} = 33.4$) to make comparative ability judgments for each of these 13 common social activities as well as the previous items, "talking with others" and "engaging in informal conversation…"

4.2 | Results

We found that engaging in informal conversation ($M = 45.12$) was the *only* activity that did not exhibit a significant above-average effect $t(99) = -1.97$, $p = .051$, $d = 0.20$, 95% CI [40.21, 50.03] (Table 3). In addition, "talking with others" yielded the second lowest comparative ability estimate ($M = 55.81$) which, despite falling significantly above 50 ($t(99) = 2.51$, $p = .01$, 95% CI = [51.21, 60.41], $d = 0.25$), was significantly lower than seven (a majority) of the other social activities (all p's < .05). These data support our contention that people think their ability to carry on a conversation is deficient even when compared to other social activities.

The results of the studies presented thus far indicate that people do not view their conversational skills as favorably as they do most

TABLE 3 Participants' percentile estimates of their ability to perform common social activities. Study 1c.

Listening to someone who is struggling	71.37***
Cooperating with others	69.12***
Expressing gratitude to others	67.32***
Teaching someone a skill or filling them in on a body of knowledge you have	65.28***
Sharing a meal with someone	63.64***
Being able to anticipate another person's needs and provide the right kind of assistance	63.24***
Expressing support to others who might need it	62.60***
Exchanging (sending and receiving) nonverbal signals (like smiles or frowns)	61.27***
Giving advice	60.12***
Articulating your opinions	59.16***
Making eye contact	58.99**
Choosing appropriate things to talk about	58.42***
Expressing disagreement or disapproval	56.27**
Talking with others	55.81*
Engaging in informal conversation at a cocktail party, dinner party, or similar social event	45.12

*Significantly different from 50 at .05 level.

**Significantly different from 50 at .01 level.

***Significantly different from 50 at .001 level.

other daily activities. Participants exhibited a significant above-average effect on a majority of the everyday activities examined, but not when it came to engaging in conversation. These results replicated across three separate lists of daily activities, one of which was comprised of entirely social activities.

These results raise the question of why people do not rate their ability at conversation as favorably as they do so many other traits and abilities. As noted above, we believe this is due to people not benefitting from the self-serving attributional bias observed in so many areas (Lau & Russell, 1980; MacCoun, 1993). In fact, we suspect that people tend to make self-*denigrating* attributions when it comes to the highs and lows of conversation. We test that hypothesis in the following 2 studies and then address other possible contributors in the General Discussion.

5 | STUDY 2: DO PEOPLE MAKE SELF-*DENIGRATING* ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF RECALLED CONVERSATIONS?

The results of Studies 1a–1c make it clear that people are not as optimistic about their conversational skills as they are about many of their other abilities. But why? Why do people tend to lack confidence in conversation when they tend to be quite confident in so many other areas of life (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 2004)? One approach to this question is to ask what helps people to think well of their talents generally, but might be absent when it comes to conversation. One candidate is the widespread tendency for people to attribute their successes to themselves but their shortcomings or failures to other people, difficult circumstances, or bad luck. This pattern has been documented over and over in many domains of human experience (Lau & Russell, 1980; MacCoun, 1993).

Do people give themselves the same benefit of attributional doubt when it comes to talking to others? Intuitively, it seems all too easy to think back to conversations one has had and imagine things one could have said, or could have said more adroitly, and therefore blame oneself for the rockier moments of a conversation. And, unlike a sporting event where it is easy to seize on a referee's bad call or an ill-timed injury to explain away a bad outcome, unless one is talking to an unusually stiff or clueless individual, it can be hard to find external sources to blame for an awkward silence, an embarrassing lack of "flow," or a creeping fear that the other person would rather be talking to anyone else.

We therefore examined whether people fail to make self-serving attributions—and even make self-*denigrating* attributions—when it comes to informal conversation. We assessed participants' attributions for the highs and lows of conversations they remembered having in the past. We predicted that they would attribute the low points of their conversations more to themselves than to their partners, and the high points of the conversations more to their partners than themselves. To determine whether such a pattern applies narrowly to informal conversation, we also examined people's attributions for positive and negative elements of another social activity, as a control.

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

We specified in advance a target sample size of 400 participants on the basis of our best estimate (a guess really) of the likely effect size. Three hundred ninety-four MTurk participants (48% female, 2 "other," $M_{age} = 37.92$) were recruited in exchange for modest payment. Our sample was 79.2% White, 7.9% Black or African American, 6.3% Asian, 4.1% Hispanic or Latino, 0.3% Alaskan Indian or Native American, and 1.8% indicated more than one race or ethnicity (two participants declined to answer).

5.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were assigned to one of two valence conditions (positive or negative) and one of two context conditions (conversation or general social activity). Participants in the positive and negative *conversation* condition were told, "Sometimes in life, things go [right/

wrong]. Think about something that went [well/poorly] during a conversation you had with someone recently. This does not have to be something extreme. It should just be something that went [right/wrong] in the conversation you had." Participants in the positive and negative *general social activity* condition were told, "Sometimes in life, things go [right/wrong]. Think of something you did recently that involved another person and went [well/poorly]. It doesn't have to be something extreme. It should just be something that went [right/wrong]." Participants were prompted to write about their experience in a text box. They were then asked to rate the extent to which they were responsible for what went [well/poorly] (*internal* attribution) and the extent to which "external circumstances, or something someone else did" were responsible for what went [well/poorly] (*external* attribution) on two 7-point Likert scales whose endpoints were labeled *not at all* and *to a large extent*.

5.2 | Results

Five participants failed to complete the task (i.e., they wrote "I don't know" or "good" instead of describing a conversational moment in the text box), and so their data were excluded from analyses. We fit a mixed linear model to the data with attribution dimension (internal, external), valence (positive, negative), and social context (conversation, general) as the independent variables, and responsibility rating as the dependent variable. Our model included our independent variables as fixed effects, and an intercept for each participant as a random effect.

This analysis yielded a significant 3-way interaction between attribution dimension, valence, and social context, $b = 1.18$, SE = 0.51, $t(778) = 2.33$, $p = .020$, 95% CI [0.18, 2.18] (Figure 1). To examine this interaction more closely, we ran separate mixed linear models for *negative* and *positive* events, with attributional dimension (internal, external) and social context (conversation, general) as our independent variables, and responsibility rating as our dependent variable.

5.2.1 | Negative events

Do people assign more responsibility to themselves than to external circumstances for moments that went poorly in a conversation compared to moments that went poorly in another social context? Our analysis indicates that they do, as we observed the predicted significant interaction between attributional dimension and social context, $b = -1.18$, SE = 0.40, $t(394) = -2.95$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [−1.97, −0.39]. For something that went badly in a general social context, participants exhibited the usual self-serving pattern of assigning more responsibility to external circumstances ($M = 4.60$, 95% CI [4.21, 4.98]) than to themselves ($M = 4.02$, 95% CI [3.64, 4.40]), $b = 0.55$, SE = 0.28, $t(394) = 1.96$, $p = .051$, 95% CI [−0.003, 1.11]. But when it came to something that went badly in a conversation, participants exhibited the opposite pattern, assigning more responsibility to themselves ($M = 4.65$, 95% CI [4.24, 5.05]) than to external circumstances ($M = 4.04$, 95% CI [3.64, 4.45]), $b = -0.63$, SE = 0.28, $t(394) = -2.21$, $p = .028$, 95% CI [−1.18, −0.08].

5.2.2 | Positive events

A parallel analysis of participants' attributions for things that went well in either a conversation or another social context did not yield significant effects. For something that went well in a general social context, participants assigned equal responsibility to external circumstances ($M = 5.05$, 95% CI [4.75, 5.35]) and to themselves ($M = 4.97$, 95% CI [4.67, 5.27]), $p = .71$, as they did for something that went well in a conversation ($M_{circumstances} = 4.81$, 95% CI [4.49, 5.12]; $M_{self} = 4.72$, 95% CI [4.41, 5.03]), $p = .70$.

5.2.3 | Manipulation check

Given that participants in the general social activity condition were not explicitly asked to recall a nonconversational activity, we wanted

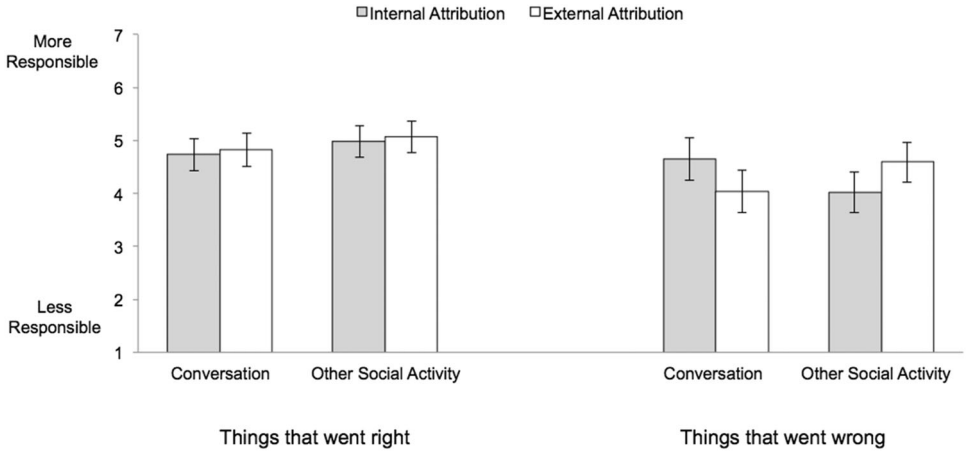


FIGURE 1 Participants' attributions for things that went right or wrong in a conversation or another social activity. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around each mean.

TABLE 4 Ratings of whether each event mentions a conversation split across experimental conditions (social activity/conversation)

	No mention of conversation	Split codes	Mentions conversation
General social activity	123	53	27
Conversation	7	31	149

Note: For this table, the data have been averaged across coders such that each event corresponds to one data point. If the coders did not agree about whether the event described conversation as the focal activity, the event was put in the "Split codes" category.

to be sure that participants recalled fundamentally different events in the two conditions. Two independent coders read each activity described by our participants and determined if conversation was mentioned as the *focal activity* of each recalled episode (percent agreement = 78.2%). As shown in Table 4, participants were much more likely to describe a conversation in the conversation condition (80%) than in the general social activity condition (13%). This difference was statistically significant in a mixed effects logistic regression model that included the ratings from each coder of whether the event described conversation as the focal activity as the dependent variable and the conversation/social activity condition assignment for each event as the independent variable ($b = 3.19$, SE = 0.21, $z = 15.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.79, 3.61]). To account for repeated measurements from our two coders, we included an intercept for each one as a random effect.

Because there was some modest crossover between conditions, we reran our analyses testing if participants attributed more responsibility to themselves for failed conversations than for other failed social activities, except we included the ratings of whether each moment described a conversation or not as an independent variable in place of the social context condition assignment (conversation/general social activity). We also included a random intercept for each coder to account for repeated measurements. All other variables remained the same. The interactions reported in the main results section and in the *Negative Events* section replicated, suggesting that the observed differences are indeed being driven by the unique effects of conversation (the three-way interaction between valence, conversation/no conversation ratings, and internal/external attributions on attribution strength: $b = 1.72$, SE = 0.34, $t(1165) = 5.03$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.05, 2.38]; negative events interaction between conversation/no conversation ratings and internal/external attributions on attribution strength: $b = -1.68$, SE = 0.28, $t(589) = 6.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−2.22, −1.14]).

In sum, participants blamed themselves more than external circumstances for something that went badly in a conversation, but did the opposite for things that went badly in other social contexts. Participants' attributions for things that went well did not differ between contexts. These results indicate that people do not benefit from the usual self-serving attributional pattern when it comes to conversation—at least not for *recalled* conversations. To investigate whether the same applies to conversations that just took place, and under controlled conditions, we ran the following study.

6 | STUDY 3: DO PEOPLE MAKE SELF-DENIGRATING ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF LABORATORY CONVERSATIONS?

To determine whether people tend to blame themselves for the troublesome moments of just-completed conversations, we had pairs of participants engage in a "get to know you" conversation and asked them to make attributions for the best and worst moments of the interaction. We predicted that participants would attribute the worst moments of the conversation to themselves more than their conversation partner, but would not do the same for the best moments. We also analyzed participants' descriptions of the best and worst moments of their conversations to determine: (a) what characterizes the most common best and worst elements of informal conversations, and (b) whether participants tend to agree on best and worst moments of their conversations.

6.1 | Method

6.1.1 | Participants

Given the within-subjects design of this study, we planned to collect data from at least 50 participants (25 dyads). Seventy students at a large university in the Northeast (50 female, $M_{age} = 19.36$ years) volunteered to participate in this preregistered study (AsPredicted.org, #6516) in exchange for course credit. Our sample was 60% White/Caucasian, 14.3% Asian American, 12.9% Hispanic/Latino, 8.6% African- or Caribbean-American, and 4.3% "other."

6.1.2 | Procedure

Upon arrival, pairs of unacquainted participants were greeted by an experimenter, escorted to the laboratory, and seated at a table. Participants were instructed to have a conversation for 10 minutes: "You'll have about ten minutes to talk, and you can talk about whatever you like. I'll keep time from the other room and then return when it's time to move on."

After 10 minutes, the experimenter returned, the conversation concluded, and participants were escorted to separate rooms where they completed a computer-based survey. They were first asked to describe in detail the three best and three worst moments in their conversation. They were then asked to rate the negativity or positivity (respectively) of each moment on a 7-point Likert scale with endpoints labeled *not very negative/positive* and *extremely negative/positive* and then to "indicate who (you or the other person)

was more responsible for each of the moments described" on a 7-point scale whose endpoints were labeled *I was primarily responsible* (1) and *the other person was primarily responsible* (7). A response of "4" thus indicates equal assigned responsibility to the participant and the participant's conversation partner.

Participants were also asked how much they liked and enjoyed talking to their conversation partners, and how much they thought their conversation partners liked and enjoyed talking to them (Boothby et al., 2018). Specifically, participants rated, on a 7-point scale from *not at all* to *very much*, (a) "How much do you like the other person?"; (b) "How much did you enjoy the conversation?"; (c) "How well did the conversation go?"; (d) "How much do you think the other person likes you?"; (e) "How much do you think the other person enjoyed the conversation?"; (f) "How well do you think the conversation went, from the other person's perspective?"

Finally, participants indicated what they talked about (free response), provided demographic information, and indicated whether they knew the other participant beforehand.

6.2 | Results

Participants in one dyad indicated that they knew each other before the study, and so their data were excluded from all analyses.[1] Four participants failed to respond to any questions about the worst moments of their conversation, so their data were excluded as well. Data from participants who responded to at least one worst and one best moment of the conversation are included in all analyses. Following our preregistration, participants' attributions for the three worst moments (α = .44) and the three best moments (α = .54) were averaged to create separate measures of responsibility for the best and worst moments of the conversation, our primary dependent variable.

6.2.1 | Characteristics of the worst and best moments of the conversations

To begin, we analyzed participants' descriptions of the best and worst moments in their conversations. What leads to conversational success and failure? We had two independent coders read participants' descriptions of the best and worst moments of their conversations and assign them to one of seven categories (see Figure 2a; interrater agreement = 69.8%). We then used the assigned category of each recalled moment to predict its valence (best/worst) in a mixed effect logistic regression model including category assignments from both coders as a predictor variable and the coder, dyad, order of recalled moment, and participant as random intercepts (Figure 2b). When the conversation involved shared content between the two partners, it was significantly more likely to have been reported as one of the best moments (b = 1.22, SE = 0.25, z = 4.84, p < .001, 95% CI [0.73, 1.72]). Conversely, participants' descriptions of the worst moments of their conversations were significantly more likely to involve self-related content (b = −2.04, SE = 0.37, z = −5.45, p < .001, 95% CI [−2.82, −1.34]), meta commentary (b = −1.93, SE = 0.27, z = −7.05, p < .001, 95% CI [−2.51, −1.41]), nonlinguistic cues (b = −2.33, SE = 0.37, z = −6.24, p < .001, 95% CI [−3.13, −1.64]), and uncategorized moments (b = −1.60, SE = 0.69, z = −2.30, p = .02, 95% CI [−3.15, −0.33]). Like Tolstoy's insight about happy and unhappy families, there appear to be many more ways to fall short in conversation than there are to make it mutually satisfying.

6.2.2 | Alignment of the worst and best moments of the conversations

Did the two participants in each conversation describe the same best and worst moments? To find out, we had the coders also indicate if each of the best and worst moments listed by one of the participants matched (or did not match) any of those listed by the other participant. Interestingly, participants recalled the same moments as their partner only 24.5% of the time (Figure 2c; agreement = 87.9%). To compare alignment across the best and worst moments, we built a mixed effects logistic regression model predicting alignment from the valence of the recalled moments. The model included random intercepts for the coder, dyad, order of recalled moment, and participant. Pairs of participants were significantly more likely to recall the same best moments of their conversations than the same worst moments (b = 1.03, SE = 0.17, z = 5.99, p < .001, 95% CI [0.70, 1.38]). It seems that the best moments of a conversation tend to be recognized as such (and recalled by) both participants, whereas the worst moments tend to be more idiosyncratic.

6.2.3 | Responsibility for the worst and best moments of the conversations

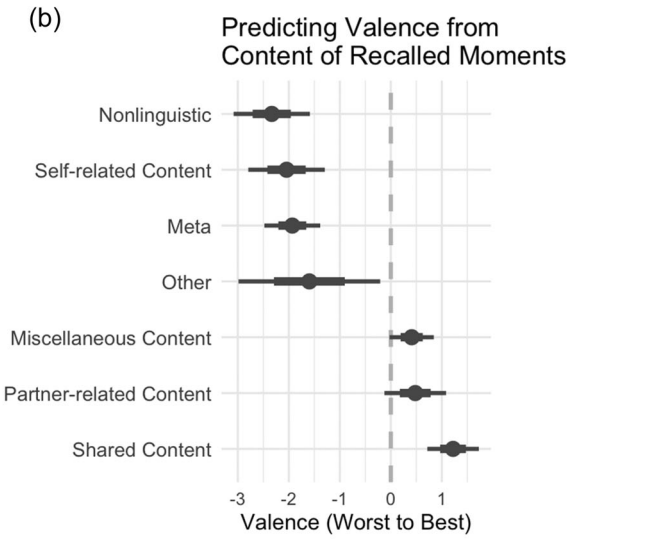
Because the two types of ratings (responsibility for the *best* and *worst* moments of the conversation) were nested within participants and participants were nested within dyads, we fit a mixed linear model to the data with valence (best or worst moments) as the independent variable and attributions of responsibility as the dependent variable. The model included valence as a fixed effect, and an intercept for each participant as well as an intercept for each dyad as random effects. The analysis revealed a significant effect of valence on perceived responsibility, b = 0.50, SE = 0.15, t(68.19) = 3.28, p = .002, 95% CI [0.20, 0.81], with participants assigning significantly more responsibility to themselves for the worst moments of the conversation (M_{worst} = 3.57, 95% CI [3.32, 3.82]) than for the best moments (M_{best} = 4.07, 95% CI [3.83, 4.32]).

To further explore this pattern, we conducted two one-sample t-tests comparing participants' mean responses to the scale midpoint, one for the worst moments and one for the best moments of the conversation. These tests indicated that participants thought they were significantly more responsible than their partner for the worst moments of the conversation, t(61) = −3.92, p = .001, 95% CI [3.30,

(a)

Categories of Moments in Conversation

Shared Content	Content discussed by both members of the conversation (e.g. "We talked about homework" or "discovering we are in the same class")
Self-related Content	Content discussed by the writer of the description (e.g. "I talked about my hometown")
Partner-related Content	Content discussed by the writer's partner (e.g. "They described their major")
Miscellaneous Content	Untargeted descriptions of what was said during the conversation (e.g. "talked about sports")
Nonlinguistic	Moments in the conversation which were not related to the content of the conversation (e.g. silences, laughter, eye contact, etc.)
Meta	Comments about the overall structure of the conversation/the fact that they are in an experiment (e.g. "the conversation lasted too long" or "it was awkward after the experimenter left")
Other	Anything not covered by the previous categories



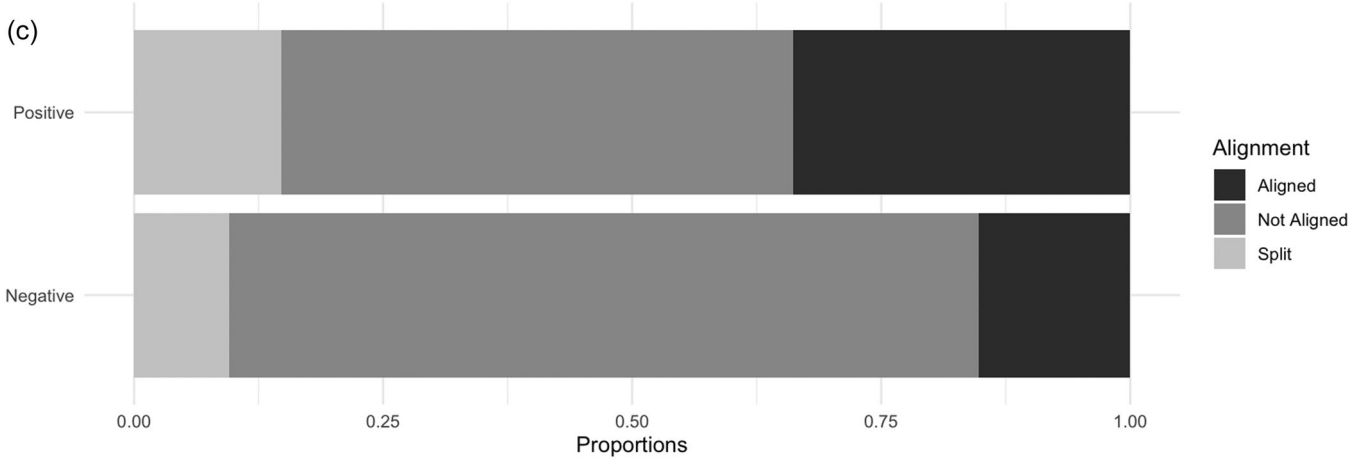


FIGURE 2 Summary of content and alignment of the best and worst moments of participants' conversations. (a) The seven categories to which the two independent coders assigned each best and worst moment described by participants. (b) Forest plot showing the log odds of each category being predictive of the best moments in the conversation. Positive betas (dots) represent increased odds of being associated with best moments, and negative betas represent increased odds of being associated with worst moments. Inner error bars depict one standard deviation from the estimate, outer error bars show two standard deviations from the estimate. If the outer error bars cross zero (gray vertical dashed line), the effect is not significant. (c) Stacked bar charts showing the distribution of alignment ratings (i.e., did the two participants cite the same moment?) for the positive and negative moments of the conversation. The "Split" category represents moments for which the coders gave opposing ratings.

3.77], but assigned equal responsibility to themselves and their partner for the best moments of the conversation, $t(65) = 0.54$, $p = .59$, 95% CI [3.84, 4.28].

6.2.4 | Conversation enjoyment

We fit three mixed linear models to the data with rating type (actual or perceived) as our independent variable, and the liking, enjoyment, and how-well-the-conversation-went ratings as our dependent variables. The models included rating type as a fixed effect, and an intercept for each participant and each dyad as random effects. The analyses revealed a significant effect of rating type on liking, $b = 0.73$, SE = 0.11, $t(70) = 6.49$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.51, 0.95], with participants liking their conversation partner ($M_{actual} = 5.44$, 95% CI [5.15, 5.73]) significantly more than they thought their partner liked them ($M_{perceived} = 4.71$, 95% CI [4.33, 5.00]); a significant effect of rating type on conversation enjoyment, $b = 0.54$, SE = 0.09, $t(70) = 5.77$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.73], with participants enjoying the conversation ($M_{actual} = 5.31$, 95% CI [5.02, 5.61]) significantly more than they thought their partner enjoyed it ($M_{perceived} = 4.77$, 95% CI [4.48, 5.06]); and a significant effect of rating type on how well people thought their conversations went, $b = 0.43$, SE = 0.08, $t(70) = 5.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.59], with participants believing it went significantly better ($M_{actual} = 5.61$, 95% CI [5.35, 5.88]) than they thought their partner would think it did ($M_{perceived} = 5.19$, 95% CI [4.92, 5.45]).

6.2.5 | Attributions and enjoyment

Did the attributions participants made for the highs and lows of their conversations predict whether or not they thought the other person did not enjoy the conversation as much as they did themselves? To find out, we first created a single measure of actual conversation enjoyment (measures A through C, $\alpha = .91$) and a single measure of perceived conversation enjoyment (measures D through F, $\alpha = .90$). We also created an overall attribution measure by subtracting each participant's attributions for the worst moments of the conversation from his or her attributions for the best moments. The higher this value, the more attributional weight they assigned to themselves for the worst moments and the more weight they assigned to their partner for the best moments. We also created a composite measure of the difference between their own evaluations of the conversation and their estimates of their partner's evaluations. To do so, we averaged the differences in how much they thought they and their partners enjoyed the conversation, how much they liked one another, and how well the conversation went. As predicted, the tendency for participants to assign more responsibility for the bad moments in the conversation to themselves and the good moments to their partners was a significant predictor of the composite measure of how much they thought they enjoyed the conversation more than their partner did, $b = 0.13$, SE = 0.04, $t(66) = 2.75$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.23].

In sum, replicating the results of Study 2, participants assigned significantly more responsibility to themselves than to their partners for the worst moments of their conversations, but they thought that they and their partner were equally responsible for the best moments. They did so in this case for a just-completed conversation rather than a recalled conversation as in Study 2.

In addition, we documented an "enjoyment gap" (consistent with the liking gap documented by Boothby et al., 2018) such that participants thought they enjoyed the conversation more than their partners did. Thus, not only do people doubt their conversational abilities, but they also doubt that their partners enjoy conversing with them as much as they enjoy the conversations themselves. We also found that the size of the enjoyment gap was significantly related to the degree to which participants made self-denigrating attributions for the highs and lows of the conversation; the more self-denigrating attributions people made, the bigger the enjoyment gap.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In three studies, we found that people are relatively pessimistic about their conversational skills and, in two others, obtained evidence for an important mechanism that gives rise to this phenomenon: people attribute the worst moments of conversations to themselves. In Studies 1a–1c, we found that participants thought their conversational skills were about on par with those of the average person, despite thinking most of their other abilities, including other social abilities, were above average. In addition, participants in Studies 2 and 3 blamed themselves more than their partners for the worst moments of their conversations, a marked departure from the frequently documented motivational bias in causal attribution (Lau & Russell, 1980; MacCoun, 1993). Together, these studies indicate that people approach the common activity of engaging in informal conversation with an unusual level of self-doubt. They tend to question their ability to engage in casual conversations and they blame themselves rather than their partners when the conversation sputters.

Given the frequency with which people engage in conversation, it is remarkable how anxiety-producing it can be. The common fear of public speaking is often chalked up to a lack of practice. But why, despite the very extensive experience nearly everyone has talking with others, do they remain underconfident in their ability to carry on conversations—even those that their conversation partners actually enjoy? And why are people underconfident when it comes to conversation, when they tend to be overconfident in so many other areas of life (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 2004)?

An important part of the answer appears to lie in an unusual pattern in how people explain their triumphs and tribulations in conversation. Although people tend to make self-serving attributions when it comes to how well they did on an exam, why their significant other finds them appealing, or why their start-up got off to a great start, they tend to make self-denigrating attributions for the highs and lows of their conversations. As we observed in Studies 2 and 3, they're as apt to credit the other person as much as themselves for shared laughter and fun moments, but they are more likely to blame themselves for banal exchanges and moments of awkward silence.

As important as this unusual attribution pattern is for understanding people's negative assessments of their abilities at informal conversation, it raises the question of *why* people do not make the same self-serving attributions in their conversations that they do in so many other areas of life. The answer, we suspect, lies largely in the fact that when it comes to whether or not a conversation was a success, it is the other person's opinion that is sovereign. Consider the following thought experiment: Imagine that you came away from a conversation pleased with how it went. But then you learn that the other person found it boring. What would you now say about the conversation? It is clear that however much *you* may have enjoyed it, the fact that your partner did not means it was not a success. In the end, it is generally the people we are talking to who are the ultimate arbiters of whether the conversation was successful. As David Hume put it, "…it may be affirmed in general, that all the merit a man may derive from his conversation…arises from nothing but the pleasure it conveys to those who are present" (Hume, 1739).

Other people's opinions are important determinants of the success or failure of many other everyday activities as well, but for most activities there is an objective component to the determination of success. We care, certainly, about what our co-workers think of our contributions to the discussion of what product to bring to market or how to revise company policy to prevent corruption, but that important social concern is balanced by whether our contributions were truly helpful in identifying the most promising product or the most effective policy changes. If you thought your contributions

to the group discussion were strong but you discovered that someone else did not think so, your colleague's negative assessment would certainly get your attention, but you would not treat the other person's opinion as *decisive*. But we do exactly that when it comes to informal conversation because that's so much of the point of engaging in conversation—to make sure all parties find it gratifying. Note the parallel with public speaking: It is what the audience thinks that matters, a troubling fact that makes many people terrified of the prospect of speaking in front of a group (Deiters et al., 2013; Savitsky & Gilovich, 2003; Stevens et al., 2011). Combined with the uncertainty of knowing whether your partner enjoyed the conversation, it is easy to see why so many people find informal conversation to be threatening.

There is a parallel here between informal conversation versus a great many other common human activities on the one hand, and contests that are determined subjectively by judges versus those determined by objective criteria on the other. Judges determine who gets a medal in gymnastics and figure skating, for example; the clock and the tape measure determine who medals in track and field. Because the fates of gymnasts and figure skaters are in the hands of judges, athletes who have performed in those competitions, as well as in more objectively determined contests like swimming or track and field, report being significantly more nervous before the former than the latter. When we asked a sample of 52 MTurk participants who had competed in both types of sports which type made them most nervous, 75% of them said they tended to get more nervous before the events that were decided by judges. People are more nervous before skating and gymnastics competitions because it is the judges who ultimately control the outcome, a result that aligns with research showing that the better-than-average effect is reduced for attributes that are not under one's own control (Alicke, 1985), and with our studies showing that people are anxious about their performance as conversationalists.

7.1 | Other possible influences

Although we've presented evidence that the tendency to make self-denigrating attributions for what happens in conversation is connected to people's tendency to downplay their talents as conversationalists, it is unlikely to be the only reason. Most complex and robust social phenomena are the product of several psychological processes working in tandem. Three other possible contributors stand out. The first, as we noted in the introduction, is the tremendous complexity involved in making a conversation go smoothly. It is noteworthy in this regard that participants in Study 1c thought they compared relatively well to their peers when it came to individual *components* of conversation (e.g., "making eye contact," "giving advice," "choosing appropriate things to talk about," etc.), and yet they thought they compared relatively poorly to others when managing all those components simultaneously to pull off a successful conversation. It is notable as well that in Study 3 there was only one significant predictor of the good moments in participants' conversations (finding common ground), but many significant predictors of the bad moments. Having to juggle so many elements of informal conversation and knowing that there are so many ways things can go awry (not knowing what to say, saying the wrong thing, disclosing too much or too little, asking too many questions or too few) can make informal conversation, for many people, an anxiety-provoking activity.

Second, as we noted in the introduction, when people reflect on their own conversational abilities, they are unlikely to compare themselves to the average conversationalist. Instead, the comparisons that are most likely to spring to mind are of exceptionally gifted conversationalists—the quick-witted, the raconteurs, the unusually well-read and well-informed. In the same way that the availability of extremely social exemplars leads people to think that their own social lives are relatively impoverished (Davidai et al., 2021; Deri et al., 2017), the top-of-the-head availability of gifted conversationalists can have an adverse effect on people's estimates of their own conversational ability. Any such tendency to compare oneself to those at the high end of the distribution of conversational talent is likely to be aided and abetted by the fact that we live in a media-saturated environment. Thus, many of the conversations people hear, and spend hours focused on, are those that take place not in real life and in real time, but on TV shows that have been scripted, staged, and rehearsed to command viewers' interest. Shows such as *The West Wing*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *The Newsroom* are chock full of glib conversations, witty banter, quick repartee, inspired speech, perfectly timed comments, and engrossing stories. A tendency to compare one's own conversational ability to readily accessible, but often unrealistic, exemplars of the deft conversationalists seen on TV is likely to be damaging to nearly anyone's sense of their own conversational aptitude.

As an initial examination of this idea, we had 95 participants from Prolific Academic compare their own conversational skills to those of the average person and then had them list the first three people they thought of when picturing that average person. Participants then rated the conversational skills of each of these three people. If unusually gifted conversationalists tend to spring to mind when people compare their conversational ability to that of others, their ratings of the conversational ability of those that sprang to mind first should fall in the upper portion of the rating scale (0–100). That is exactly what we found. The first peer that participants called to mind was rated highest in conversational ability ($M = 68.38$, $SD = 23.84$), the second peer the second highest ($M = 67.57$, $SD = 21.06$), and the third peer the third highest ($M = 60.71$, $SD = 20.46$). In stark contrast, participants rated themselves as rather mediocre conversationalists ($M = 47.89$, $SD = 23.79$). Critically, the participant's ratings of their own conversational ability were significantly negatively correlated with the rated conversational abilities of the individuals they called to mind ($r = -.317$, 95% CI = [−0.488, −0.124], $p = .002$). Thus, participants who thought of more talented conversationalists when comparing themselves to others thought less of their own conversational ability.

A final possible contributor to people's shaky feelings about their ability to engage in small talk is that people may think they express

more enthusiasm, support, and reassurance to their partner about the progress of the conversation than they actually do. Consequently, when they receive that very same level of enthusiasm and reassurance from their partner that they exhibited themselves, it does not seem so reassuring and self-doubt sets in. Just as bystanders to an emergency outwardly express less concern than they think they do—and therefore take others' very similar reactions as a telling sign that there is no emergency (Gilovich et al., 1998; Latane & Darley, 1968)—participants in a conversation can interpret behavior that's no different than their own as an indication that the other person is not enjoying the conversation as much as they are themselves. Indeed, we have found that participants tend to believe that they have expressed significantly more interest in their just-completed conversations than their partners have (Boothby, Walker, & Gilovich, in progress). Conversation, in other words, is an activity that is ripe for pluralistic ignorance (Miller & McFarland, 1987).

7.2 | Likely moderators

Of course, not all conversations are stressful and people do not question their ability to converse with everyone or in all contexts. People are unlikely to be anxious about talking to their mother or best friend, for example. We have focused in this paper on informal conversations with friends and acquaintances they encounter at cocktail and dinner parties, and with strangers in a laboratory setting. But more work is obviously needed with a wider range of partners to develop a comprehensive understanding of the specific relational elements of conversation that lead to the stress and concern we've documented here.

The same can be said about the situational context of conversation. Just as it is easier to talk to some people than others, it is easier to converse in some contexts than in others. For example, many people find it especially difficult to converse with others face-to-face when there is no other activity going on and it feels like "the pressure is on" and the conversation needs to go well. It is not uncommon to hear people say that their best conversations tend to happen when they're on a hike or during long car rides. One of the authors was struck by how often the experience of picking up his kids after school and asking, "how did school go today?" was met with stone silence or a request to change the subject. But if the same request was made when the kids were in the back seat, and all eyes (kids' and parent's) were facing forward, all sorts of details of what went on at school would emerge. The smallest shifts in the situational context can make a big difference in how willing people are to open up in conversation, and it is important for social psychologists interested in conversation to explore in detail what they are and why.

The specific goals people have when they enter into conversation can also influence how confident they feel when they do so. We characterized informal conversation as those high in relational goals and content, but low in informational goals and content. One can certainly imagine that people might be less concerned about how much their partner likes them in more informationally focused conversations, being more concerned instead with how much their partner likes their ideas or proposals. Conversational pessimism may extend to this domain as well—people may imagine that their proposed ideas are evaluated less positively than they truly are—but it is equally possible that, when it comes to ideas, people retain their self-serving attributional tendencies. Future work should therefore compare the level of conversational optimism and pessimism when it comes to relatively relational and relatively informational conversations.

7.3 | Conclusion

The findings we reported here are significant for a number of reasons, the most important being that they speak to an important barrier to reaping the benefits that come with socializing with others and establishing social connection (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; House et al., 1988; Myers & Diener, 1995). On an individual level, our findings should be reassuring to those who question their ability to talk to others with whom they are not particularly close—and, as our research shows, most people could use that reassurance. Our research provides direct reassurance because it is comforting to learn that other people tend to enjoy talking with us more than we think they do.

Our research also provides indirect reassurance. That is, if one has doubts about one's ability to talk to others in a way that they find satisfying, it can be comforting to know that others have the same doubts. That's especially true if one hears from popular treatments of contemporary psychological science that most people are prone to overconfidence and see the world through rose-colored glasses (which can make people worried about why they cannot summon the same confidence) and that social connection is so important to both psychological and physical well-being (which can make people worried about the downstream consequences of their perceived failure to connect conversationally). Knowing that anxiety about conversation is shared, and that these feelings are often overblown, may lessen that very anxiety (Werner et al., 2012).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Including this dyad's data does not change any of the reported significance levels.

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