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Author

Ho, Megan

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SOCIAL CURIOSITY: THE DRIVER OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

By

Megan Ho

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University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky

Department of Psychology

Dr. Begoña Echeverria, Howard H Hays, Jr. Chair

University Honors

ABSTRACT

Friendship is widely understood as a type of social relationship crucial to an individual's well-being and a beneficial evolutionary mechanism that enables cooperation. While behavioral and social explanations for cultivating close relationships have been thoroughly examined, sociocognitive processes focused on "how" have hardly been examined. I propose that social curiosity serves as a cognitive driver in both exploring new relationships and in deepening understanding of close friends and family. Although the well-being benefits of social interaction and curiosity are well explored, research is limited on how these two concepts interact in social relationships. To explore this question, I conducted a secondary analysis using data from a curiosity intervention aimed at improving well-being. Participants' journal entries were coded for socially curious behaviors and relationship strength to investigate how frequently participants were curious towards, with, and inspired by weak and strong ties. I hypothesized that people in relatively close relationships would exhibit less social curiosity than those in less familiar relationships. Furthermore, I anticipated that people would report higher levels of subjective well-being and relatedness if social curiosity was present in either type of relationship. Social curiosity was found to boost daily positive affect and weekly relatedness while decreasing daily negative affect. Codings illustrated that being socially curious may entail others' inspiring an individual's curiosity about a general topic or getting to know more about others' feelings and mental states.

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Social Curiosity: The Driver of Social Connections

What goes into making a friend? The process may seem automatic—individuals meet one another, share experiences together, talk about their lives, and go on to develop a friendship. Most of the time there is not a verbal agreement or written contract, just a mutual understanding. As outsiders not privy to others' friendships, we tend to infer that people who see one another as friends must like each other to some extent. Furthermore, we think they should know more about one another as opposed to a stranger— what else would differentiate them from others in the world? Much is happening when individuals decide whom to befriend: they must determine if the other person is trustworthy, who they have relations to, if they share interests, if the other person is worth investing in, and much more. Not all people we come across are suitable as friendship material. At any moment, the people seemingly trustworthy can turn their backs on us and betray us, an all-too-familiar trope in dramas. The very essence of survival and emotional well-being depends on the social world and the methods employed to navigate it.

Motivations for Social Connection

There are many established relational mechanisms and psychological theories that explain connections and friendships on a network level. Fehr (1996) established four broad factors that create situations that bring people together: proximity, individual factors (such as similarity or physical attractiveness), odds of interaction, and relationship dynamics. Rivera and colleagues (2010) proposed three avenues in which a person's social circles can change: assortative, relational, and proximal mechanisms. The first one focuses on how homophily (sameness) and heterophily (differentness) between individuals can change a relationship. The second avenue looks at how closely related people are and assumes they exchange trust, information, and opportunities for interaction, which may influence connections. The third

perspective looks at geographical proximity, shared activities, and cultural norms as a mechanism that brings people together, which all builds off of Fehr (1966). Another theory that explains the drive to make friends is the *belongingness hypothesis*, stating that people will act to fulfill a fundamental need to socially belong somewhere by expanding their network (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Apostolou and colleagues (2020) identify two broader occasionally overlapping domains that encourage friendship: social support and opportunism, where social support entails having an emotional support network while opportunism is about capitalizing on opportunities that others provide. There is no shortage of explanations describing the forces that drive people together, but these perspectives don't quite examine how the individual plays an active role in cultivating a friendship.

Biological motivators have also been explored as parts of the human brain evolved to specifically form and track active social relationships. Neocortex size is associated with larger social groups in primates as it allows them to track more complex social relationships (Dunbar, 1992). Neural response patterns have also been found to be more homophilic between individuals closer to each other in a social network (Parkinson et al., 2018). However, human neocortexes are only so big, implying that there is a “carrying capacity” for how many friendships humans can keep track of before they are replaced or forgotten. Dunthar (2017) outlines “The Circles of Friendship” that models “Dunbar's Number” from most to least intimate relationships where the upper limit for personal social networks tends to be 150 people, 500 for acquaintances, and 1500 for all the faces people can remember. This is evidenced by the fact that people can and do digitally rekindle dormant relationships that result from temporal and physical distance (Brody et al., 2024). If people could remain closely connected with an infinite number of people indefinitely, there would be no need to reconnect. Nevertheless, until this limit is

reached and their need to belong is fulfilled, people tend to remain open to and actively look for new friendships (Baumeister & Leary 1995).

One key paper that motivated the current study's exploration into the "how" of social connection was Tsang et al. (2024), where the authors applied Optimal Foraging Theory (OFT)—a theory on animal foraging—to social decisions. The theory stipulates that resources are densely clustered; foragers must spend time locating these clusters, exploiting them until resources taper off which then begins the searching process anew (Tsang et al., 2024; S. E. Cohen & Todd, 2018). OFT details the dynamics between exploring and exploiting, and in the case of social connection, explore means to find new people while exploit means to develop existing relationships. Traditionally posed as a dilemma (Cohen et al., 2007), Tsang and colleagues (2024) argue that socially, exploitation and exploration exists on a continuum. However, decisions must still be made to decide what is the most appropriate balance between cost and reward.

To better understand what social "foraging" behavior could entail, curiosity and its associated actions were investigated and applied as a potential driving cognitive mechanism. Curiosity is traditionally defined as either an epistemic emotion or an intrinsic drive to obtain information and reduce uncertainty (Noordewier & Gocłowska, 2024; Kidd & Hayden, 2015). It is a function that evolved to allow humans to gather information to make better decisions, make comparisons, and search more efficiently—even the most basic animals demonstrate some information seeking (curious) behaviors when foraging for food (Kidd & Hayden, 2015). Directing this curiosity at other individuals or groups is one possible way that humans obtain the information they need to decide between forming new relationships or expanding on existing ones.

Curiosity brings us to the next point: curiosity and the act of being social are often analyzed separately. Friendship is typically described broadly through different systems that interact with one another without focusing on the individual who initiates social interactions. The overlap between these two things do exist, but is rarely studied empirically or in naturalistic settings. Social psychology has illuminated many reasons why people seek friendship, but has yet to assess the individuals actively involved in the process of getting closer to one another. Our answer to this problem is looking at these two concepts together. Social curiosity has been argued to be a distinct construct of curiosity that represents a need and interest in acquiring social information and others' mental states (Renner, 2006). Another definition of social curiosity takes an evolutionary and behavioral approach, defining it as a way to resolve uncertainty about the social environment (Grossmann, 2025). However, most of these definitions revolve around a theoretical idea of social curiosity's function, not the specific actions involved in being socially curious.

What Does Social Curiosity Look Like?

Humans and animals update their estimate of rewards associated with specific actions and abandon doing things associated with diminishing returns to search for something else that would be more rewarding (Cohen et al., 2007). One example of a reward would be social information. Young children and chimpanzees were willing to give up rewards to obtain social information about who others were interacting with, showing how this type of information is intrinsically valuable (Lewis et al., 2025). Not only does this apply to children and chimpanzees, but adults also explore at the cost of rewards when they lack a satisfactory amount of social information (Plate et al., 2023). Research has also found that people are influenced to explore unknown options by social groups they identify with, and are more likely to explore after

learning about known options from others' experiences (Winet et al., 2022). To successfully assess the viability of a social connection, all necessary social information must first be collected.

In order to successfully acquire this knowledge, social curiosity plays a role in social interactions. One way that social curiosity can manifest itself is through conversation by prompting others to self-disclose. People conversate as a way to exchange social information, ranging anywhere from information about the self, others, or the world (Dunbar et al., 1997). In casual discussions, social topics (about others or the self) tend to dominate. Gossiping is a type of conversation in which social information about others can be obtained without direct contact. This allows people to make judgments about who is an ally— either the relayer or person being discussed—safely and open themselves up for further interaction (Basyouni & Parkinson, 2022). Conversation inherently involves information. A curious person would naturally play a part in inviting an individual to divulge information about themselves or others in a social network to reduce uncertainty.

Impacts of Relationship Strength

There was another key aspect of social relationships worth considering—relationship strength. To better understand who would be the targets of exploring or exploiting under OFT (Tsang et al., 2024), relationship strength (i.e., ties) was used to help differentiate between “existing resources” and “unknown resources.” “Strong ties” were classified as “existing resources” while “weak ties” were classified as “unknown resources.” Ties are determined by their frequency of interaction, emotional intimacy, and reciprocal services (Rademacher & Wang, 2014). Weak ties are people who haven't been “explored” yet to offer hangouts, intimacy, or mutual benefits. Strong ties would be people who have already been “exploited” for their

resources, intimacy, and time, possibly to an extent of over-exploitation where the aforementioned resources have been depleted or plateaued.

For strong ties, social curiosity may serve a purpose for maintaining active relationships. Dindia & Canary (1993) defined relational maintenance as keeping a relationship in existence, in a specified state, in a satisfactory condition, or to keep a relationship in repair. Curiosity in social relationships may help people continue feeling connected to one another by inducing feelings of novelty (learning new information) despite already being familiar with one another.

As for weak ties, social curiosity could be more about obtaining information. Plate and colleagues (2023) demonstrated that uncertainty caused by a lack of social information can prompt social exploration. If people are not familiar with the social landscape, they will be more likely to explore whereas if they have strong affiliations with others and satisfactory social knowledge, exploration decreases. However, positive affect is not just limited to strong ties, as interactions with weak ties were also linked with increased emotional and social well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). In conversations with strangers, people tend to underestimate how much they will enjoy and learn by chatting with an unfamiliar person (Atir et al., 2022). By enjoying the interaction, people can associate positive emotions to unknown individuals, encouraging future interactions.

The difference between the two is that the role of strong ties is for maintaining psychological well-being while weak ties are important for connecting people to resources and others across exclusive networks (Rademacher & Wang, 2014). People tend to know less about weak ties in their network, while strong ties are inherently familiar with the individual to a degree of providing social support. To that end, this existing research informs the prediction that

while social curiosity is present across all ties, social curiosity will be more common in weak ties than strong ties.

The Effects of Curiosity and Social Interaction on Well-Being

Research has shown that epistemic curiosity is associated with exploration, high coping potential, arousal, and approach behavior (Noordewier & Gocłowska, 2024). Additionally, overall curiosity has been found to positively correlate with greater life satisfaction, well-being, openness, growth, and pleasure. Another study conducted on curiosity over the COVID-19 pandemic shows that high trait curiosity and information-seeking for the self predicted higher well-being and reduced loneliness (Vermeer et al., 2022). The broaden-and-build theory also states that curiosity allows people to grow personal resources by repeatedly broadening thinking and action, driving exploration in an environment (Fredrickson, 2004). And finally, curiosity plays a role in happiness, distress tolerance, and creating both satisfying and engaging social relationships (Kashdan et al., 2009). This final piece of information allows us to bridge the gap between being social and being curious. What does curiosity look like in social relationships?

One possible feature of social curiosity can be seen in Zaine et al. (2019), where older adults were connected to family members and friends to deepen existing relationships. Curiosity about others appears to promote well-being in close relationships: participants felt more connected after being prompted to be emotionally vulnerable and valued responses more personally expressed. Being social, on its own, also has its benefits. Social interactions, and by extension relationships, have been shown to be critical for an individual's emotional well-being. People who spend more time with friends, family, and romantic partners experience more positive emotions (Hudson et al., 2020). On the contrary, a lack of enriching social relationships is detrimental to individuals and can cause depression in lonely people (Liu et al., 2023). The

same study differentiated social curiosity from social interaction and found that both are necessary to prevent depression symptoms in older adults (Liu et al., 2023). Social support networks are crucial to an individual's survival and well-being through mechanisms like enrichment and social support (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Apostolou, 2024). Additionally, adults and children who received emotional support and validation from other close adults saw an improvement in well-being (Zhao et al., 2025). Mortality risk also decreases with social relationships and social integration (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

All of these effects on well-being are important, as well-being is not just a key goal people seek to obtain, but is also a proxy for flourishing (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005a). People who have higher levels of well-being experience improved life outcomes such as physical health, better academic performance, and career success ((Lyubomirsky et al., 2005a). Happiness can also be induced to increase well-being despite most people having a baseline happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005b). Improving well-being is not just important as a buffer against disease and mental health problems, but also crucial to an individual's lifelong success.

Present Study

Taken together, both being social and being curious have substantial positive effects on well-being. I wanted to take a more novel approach by combining two constructs that are known to improve well-being separately. The idea was to investigate if these effects would compound, be different from their individual counterparts, or if effects would cancel out and be roughly the same. This project aims to illuminate the effects of social curiosity on well-being by using a pre-existing dataset that originated from a one-week curiosity intervention study. Since social curiosity is a mechanism that encourages people to interact with one another, I hypothesized that social curiosity will be present in both exploring new relationships (weak ties) and in deepening

understanding of close friends and family (strong ties). Drawing from Optimal Foraging Theory and relationship ties, I expected that people in relatively close relationships (exploit group) will exhibit less social curiosity than people in less familiar relationships (explore group). Finally, being curious and being social have been shown to improve well-being, so I anticipated people who were socially curious throughout the week will report higher levels of subjective well-being and connectedness regardless of relationship strength.

METHODS

Participants

In the original study, 308 undergraduates were recruited from University of California, Riverside between January and March of 2024. Participants received class credit for their participation. For the current study, participants in the curiosity condition were used for analyses. This study was preregistered at (<https://aspredicted.org/hkvg-hcdb.pdf>).

Procedure

Data was taken as a subset from “Exploring the Impacts of a Week-Long Curiosity Intervention on Well-Being” (Montemayor-Dominguez et al., in preparation). In the original study, participants in the curiosity condition were instructed to “act more curious” while those in the control condition were instructed to continue their daily routines for a week. Both conditions were instructed to report their respective behaviors and activities in a day through a daily log and fill out measures of positive affect and negative affect. Participants were also asked to indicate if their activities included other people (i.e., if it was social).

A subset of 637 entries out of 1,055 were taken from participants’ daily journals in the curiosity condition to code for socially curious behaviors by reviewing their curious activity. The original behavioral definitions only included “curious about others” and “curious with others,”

informed by aforementioned studies. It was not until the coding process that “curiosity triggered by others” was seen in participant responses, which was then added as a separate behavior. Two raters coded through the subset first, then inter-rater reliability tests were performed. Low agreements were redefined in the second round and included a third-party tie-breaker on codes with low agreement and disagreement.

Measures

Social Curiosity Codings. Curious and social behaviors were separated into three distinct categories: “Curious about others” was categorized as, “Did the participant write about wanting to learn information ABOUT the others they engaged with?” “Curious with others” was categorized as, “Did the participant write about doing their curious behavior with others?” And “Curiosity triggered by others,” was categorized as, “Did the participant write about doing their curious behavior in response to an interaction or something others were doing?” Each aforementioned category was coded as 1 if that type of social curiosity was present and 0 if it was not. “Curious about others” had moderate inter-rater reliability ($k = 0.878$) ; “Curious with others” had weak inter-rater reliability ($k = 0.514$); and “Curiosity triggered by others” had weak inter-rater reliability (1st round, $k = 0.148$; 2nd round, $k = 0.465$).

Social Curiosity through Social Ratings. Participants’ indications of their activities being social were additionally used to determine social curiosity. Each entry was rated every day throughout the study independently from other entries. This measure, “overall social,” was measured as a “yes” or “no” in response to the question, “Did your [curious/routine] behavior include other people?” Moreover, the percentage of days that participants reported a social activity throughout the one week intervention were calculated as a percent out of 100, named “daily social percent.”

Relationship with People Present. Relationship strength was coded for alongside curious behaviors. Weak ties were coded as, “People who were not comfortably familiar with the participant and vice versa” while strong ties were coded as, “People that the participant is familiar with and close to.” Examples of weak ties include coworkers, strangers, and classmates. Strong ties include family, friends, and significant others. “Relationship with people present” had good to moderate inter-rater reliability ($k = 1.00$ for curiosity condition; $k = 0.771$ for control). There were three possible codings for relationship strength: 1 = weak ties, 2 = strong ties, 3 = both. Codes for both ties present were infrequent (6 total entries) and were subsequently converted to strong tie entries due to a lack of power and the content being more about interacting with strong ties.

Subjective Well-being (SWB). Subjective well-being was measured with two scales. The first was the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), with measures taken on day 0 and 8. Participants rated responses on a scale from one (“Strongly Disagree”) to seven (“Strongly Agree”). Questions included, “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” and “The conditions of my life are excellent.” The other scale was the Affect-Adjective Scale (AAS; Diener & Emmons, 1985), with measures taken daily starting on day 0 until day 8. Participants were asked to rate 12 emotions on a scale from one (“Not at all”) to seven (“Extremely”). Positive emotions included: happy, pleased, joyful, enjoyment/fun, peaceful/serene, relaxed/calm; negative emotions included: worried/anxious, angry/hostile, frustrated, depressed/blue, unhappy, dull/bored. Positive and negative affect were aggregated over their respective emotions for affect scores.

Connectedness. Two scales were used to measure connectedness. The Shorter Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs (SBMPN; Sheldon et al., 2001), specifically the relatedness

subscale, was used in this analysis and was administered at day 0 and 8. Participants rated responses on a scale from one (“Strongly Disagree”) to five (“Strongly Agree”) with questions including, “I felt a sense of contact with people who care for me, and whom I care for” and “I was successfully completing projects and tasks.” The Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT; Su et al., 2014), specifically the Support and Belonging subscales, were also used for the analysis in this project. Measures were taken on day 0 and 8, and scores were rated on a scale of one (“Strongly Disagree”) to five (“Strongly Agree”). Questions include, “There are people I can depend on to help me” and “I feel a sense of belonging in my community” for each respective subscale.

RESULTS

Socially curious behaviors.

After coding for relationship strength, 298 out of 637 journal entries were excluded from analysis as participants did not explicitly state the presence of others in their activities despite marking their activities as social (e.g., “drove out” or “Learned how to make Naan!”). In turn, we were unable to determine tie strength and could not analyze these entries. Out of the remaining 339 coded entries, “curiosity triggered by others” was seen most frequently in all ties (64.3%), then “curiosity about others” (53.7%), followed by “curiosity with others” (32.4%) (Figure 1). “Curiosity triggered by others” occurred most frequently with weak ties (41.3% vs. 23%) as well as “curious about others” (34.2% vs. 19.5%). “Curious with others” occurred proportionally more often in strong ties (15% yes; 21.8% no in strong ties vs. 17.4% yes; 45.7% no in weak ties). In total, 214 entries (63.1%) were coded as weak ties while 125 entries (36.9%) were coded as strong ties (see Table 1).

Relationship between social curiosity and relationship strength.

Chi square tests were conducted in order to determine whether socially curious behaviors and tie strength were significantly related (see Table 2). “Curiosity about others,” $\chi^2(1, N = 339) = 0.01, p = .89$, and “curiosity triggered by others,” $\chi^2(1, N = 339) = 0.20, p = .35$, were found to be independent from relationship strength. “Curious with others,” however, was found to differ by tie strength, $\chi^2(1, N = 339) = 5.71, p = .02$.

Weekly life satisfaction and connectedness ratings.

Linear regression analyses were performed for pre and post-test life satisfaction, support, belongingness, and relatedness scores, controlling for day 0 (see Table 3). There was not a main effect of daily social percent on life satisfaction ratings, instead revealing a nonsignificant negative relationship ($b = -0.12, p = 0.60$). Daily social percent also did not have a significant main effect on support ratings ($b = 0.23, p = 0.19$). Moreover, daily social percent did not have a significant effect on belongingness scores either ($b = 0.23, p = 0.16$). The only measure that daily social percent was found to have a significant main effect on was relatedness scores ($b = 0.43, p = 0.03$). Participants who were social and curious saw a small effect on their relatedness ratings (Day 0 $M = 3.8, SD = 1.0$; Day 8 $M = 3.9, SD = 0.8$; Cohen’s $d = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.82] (see Table 4).

Daily affect ratings.

To analyze the effects of being social and curious on daily positive and daily negative affect, mixed effect models were utilized, controlling for day 0 scores (see Table 5). The first model predicted daily positive affect on each intervention day and if there was an effect of overall social for each day. For each day, a significant effect of overall social on positive affect was observed ($b = 0.34, p = 0.001$), however, there was no check-in day by overall social

interaction. The second model predicted daily negative affect for each intervention day and investigated if effects of overall social could be observed. Overall social was found to have a significant effect on daily negative affect as well ($b = 0.34, p = 0.001$), and had no check-in day by overall social interaction.

DISCUSSION

Definitions generally describe social curiosity broadly and often from a top-down approach (see Renner, 2006; Kashdan et al., 2009; Grossman 2025). Comparably, my definition of social curiosity is based on more observable features by combining theoretical approaches with bottom-up methods, looking at what participants did to be “socially curious.” Social curiosity more likely encompasses being “curious about others” and experiencing “curiosity triggered by others” rather than “curious with others.” The socially curious behaviors that were more often present than not were “curious about others” and “curiosity triggered by others” in both ties. “Curious with others” was the only behavioral construct that was more absent than it was present across both relationship strengths. Despite this finding, hypothesis 1 is still supported because social curiosity was seen in all types of relationships, as was hypothesized. The prevalence of “Curiosity triggered by others” in weak ties could have been due to how others framed (lacking) information in a way that was valuable or relevant, which induces curiosity (Dubey et al., 2019). “Curious about others,” although more balanced within-groups, also saw a larger frequency in weak ties compared to strong ties. This could be due to a possible function of social curiosity reducing social uncertainty (Grossmann, 2025). “Curiosity with others,” as the weakest behavioral construct, could have overlapped with the other two behaviors or that curiosity is less about action with others as an intrinsic drive (Kashdan et al., 2009).

Hypothesis 2, however, was not supported because not all of the curious behaviors were significantly related to relationship strength. Despite “curiosity with others” having a significant association with relationship strength, the significance was opposite of what I predicted. Participants were proportionally less often curious with weak ties and were proportionally more frequently curious with strong ties. This could be due to people not wanting to explore with others who are not familiar to them. The other two socially curious behaviors were found to have no relationship to tie strength, and this could be for a couple of reasons. There was definitely an issue with statistical power since over half of the entries that were coded were unable to be used. It is possible that significance could not be accurately detected in a small sample. Another possible reason is just that social curiosity just has to do with the acquisition of social information, regardless of who it comes from. It is not that one group is better for social information than the other, but it may be more about what type of information is being sought. Exploring and exploiting could manifest as social curiosity with different motives towards different groups of people. Individuals could want life updates from friends (i.e. getting closer) while also wanting to know about a coworker’s achievements when a company announces future raises (i.e. scoping out competition). Seeing as relationship strength does not affect how often people are “curious about others,” specific actions done while exploring or exploiting may not be exclusive to either mode under OFT. For “curiosity triggered by others,” it does not seem like one group would be better at saying or doing something that inspires curiosity about a general or worldly topic in other people. Weak and strong ties are incredibly varied as individuals with unique experiences, thoughts, and feelings; this could be why there was no association with relationship strength.

Hypothesis 3 was also only partially supported. Interestingly, daily positive affect, daily negative affect, and relatedness were the only measures found to be significant and related to social curiosity. This partially replicates the findings of Schmidt et al. (2019), where interactions between elementary school students improved relatedness and raised daily positive affect, but had no effect on negative affect. The socializing students did with other students was what boosted daily positive affect and weekly relatedness. This effect can also be seen in the participants in our study who were socially curious as the interactions they wrote about led to the same boosts in affect and relatedness. Daily positive affect increasing with social curiosity also supports existing findings that positive social interactions boost positive affect (McIntyre et al., 1991; White et al., 2022). On the contrary, the effect of social curiosity lowering daily negative affect contradicts existing findings where social interaction either has no effect on negative affect, or that it actually increases as a result of unpleasant feelings (McIntyre et al., 1991; White et al., 2022). It could be that as the individual asking questions about others, the focus of conversation was less on the participant so that negative affect could have decreased since they were not as actively perceiving it.

As for relatedness, the construct has been associated with prosocial behavior (Pavey et al., 2011). In this case, the presence of relatedness might be due to how emotional support can be seen as prosocial behavior, although this study cannot make a directional claim. Knowing what other people are going through allows us to empathize better with them, relate to them, and feel more connected as a result. Other weekly measures—belongingness, support, and satisfaction with life—were not significantly related to being socially curious. Even though relatedness has been defined with belongingness as a prerequisite (Ryan & Deci, 2000), I found them to occur separately in this study. As the curious actor, curiosity may not have to do with belongingness, as

the function of social curiosity is not necessarily to carve out a niche to belong to. Perhaps if social curiosity was directed towards an individual, feelings of belonging could be induced if people feel that others want to get to know them and remain in their presence. This may be more of a matter of topics discussed in conversation and self-disclosure between two people. Feelings of support may not be applicable here, as people are the ones going out of their way to emotionally support others by asking about them rather than being supported themselves. And finally, life satisfaction is difficult to increase in such a short period of time as it is typically more stable than the other two measures as a result of its big-picture focus (Lucas et al., 2018).

There are multiple plausible explanations for how social curiosity is the mechanism that drives connections. One way our relationships can be maintained or grow closer is through a constant push-and-pull as proposed by the Relational Dialects Theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). In order to make meaning out of interactions and appropriately decide reactions, thoughts, feelings, and emotions, social curiosity likely plays a conscious and cognitive role. By being curious about the other, individuals are able to form conceptualizations of themselves in relation to the other. The push-and-pull dynamic may not be exclusive to relationship strength, which is why no difference was observed in social curiosity by tie strength. Although it is likely that this helps weak ties grow into strong ties, it may be necessary as a function to maintain the tie. Individuals continuously gain information, acquire experiences, and undergo changes themselves. Engaging in this back-and-forth can allow individuals to determine if a relationship can continue by assessing if important dimensions to the friendship (Dindia & Canary, 1993) are intact. This mechanism may also be responsible for the increased relatedness seen by the socially curious individuals in this study. Finding out what individuals like, agree and disagree on, or share in common, allows people to relate to one another.

Limitations

This study comes with several limitations. As mentioned in the methods, several of the coded entries were dropped due to participants not indicating the presence of others in their activities despite marking their entries as social. This led to a significant loss in statistical power and may have affected our ability to detect significance in relationship strength and curious behaviors. Moreover, there was weak inter-rater reliability for “curious with others” and “curiosity triggered by others,” which weakens the validity of these behavioral codings. Participants were also limited to undergraduate students, which greatly reduces the generalizability of this study to a broader population. Since this study is a secondary analysis, I was unable to establish causation as conditions and measures were not manipulated.

I also could not establish temporal stability as this intervention was done over a relatively short amount of time (one week). Future research should attempt the intervention over a longer period of time to see if improved well-being holds over time. The measures that were analyzed also differed by daily averages or weekly averages. Only positive and negative affect were able to be analyzed by daily averages (but not weekly averages), while belongingness, support, relatedness, and satisfaction with life were only able to be analyzed with a weekly average. Affect was only generalizable to the extent of daily changes while the latter measures of connectedness do not capture daily changes and only highlight changes after the intervention (not during).

Future Directions

One idea for future research includes placing a greater emphasis on exploring state curiosity. Gross and colleagues (2020) find that most of the literature focuses on trait curiosity rather than investigating how it can be induced. Although I did not directly manipulate state

curiosity, “curiosity triggered by others” may illuminate a potential mechanism or prerequisite for momentarily feeling curious. External stimulus outside of the self may be important to inducing state curiosity, whereas trait curiosity is more intrinsically motivated by nature. Future work should attempt to replicate this study with manipulated curiosity behaviors to investigate this possibility and to reinforce or challenge the findings seen in our analysis.

Another direction for investigating social curiosity is examining how it changes when rejection and acceptance are factored into relationships between individuals. People tend to generalize unfamiliar others based on the opinions of close others (Zhang & Hackel, 2025). It may be possible that social curiosity can be amplified or dampened depending on perceptions of rejection or acceptance. If one feels rejected, they may reject the other person in return with no possibility of being open and curious. On the other hand, if one feels accepted, they may be more motivated to know the other person and will therefore feel more curious about others.

A concern that arises from studies on connection like this one is the definition and operationalization of “social connection.” Baek and colleagues (2025) note that definitions of social connection are not universal, which can lead to different findings depending on which facet of connection is being studied. They argue that there are four different categories of connection—subjective perception (how connected people feel), social networks (number of people in a network), interpersonal synchrony (temporary synchronization between individuals), and interpersonal behaviors (outwardly social behaviors). Under these conceptual definitions, this study would fall under interpersonal behaviors and would only generalize to that category of social connection. To obtain more cohesive findings on social behaviors and to aid generalizability, future studies should seek to better operationalize what aspect of social connection is being examined.

CONCLUSION

I found the presence of socially curious behaviors in both weak and strong ties, showing that curiosity is a crucial piece of social relationships. Although I did not find significant associations between relationship strength and socially curious behaviors, future research should attempt to experimentally manipulate these behaviors to increase statistical power. In this analysis, being socially curious was significantly associated with feelings of relatedness, daily positive affect, and lowered daily negative affect. Being curious about others and having one's general curiosity triggered as a result of interactions with others are mechanisms likely driving the improvements in well-being.

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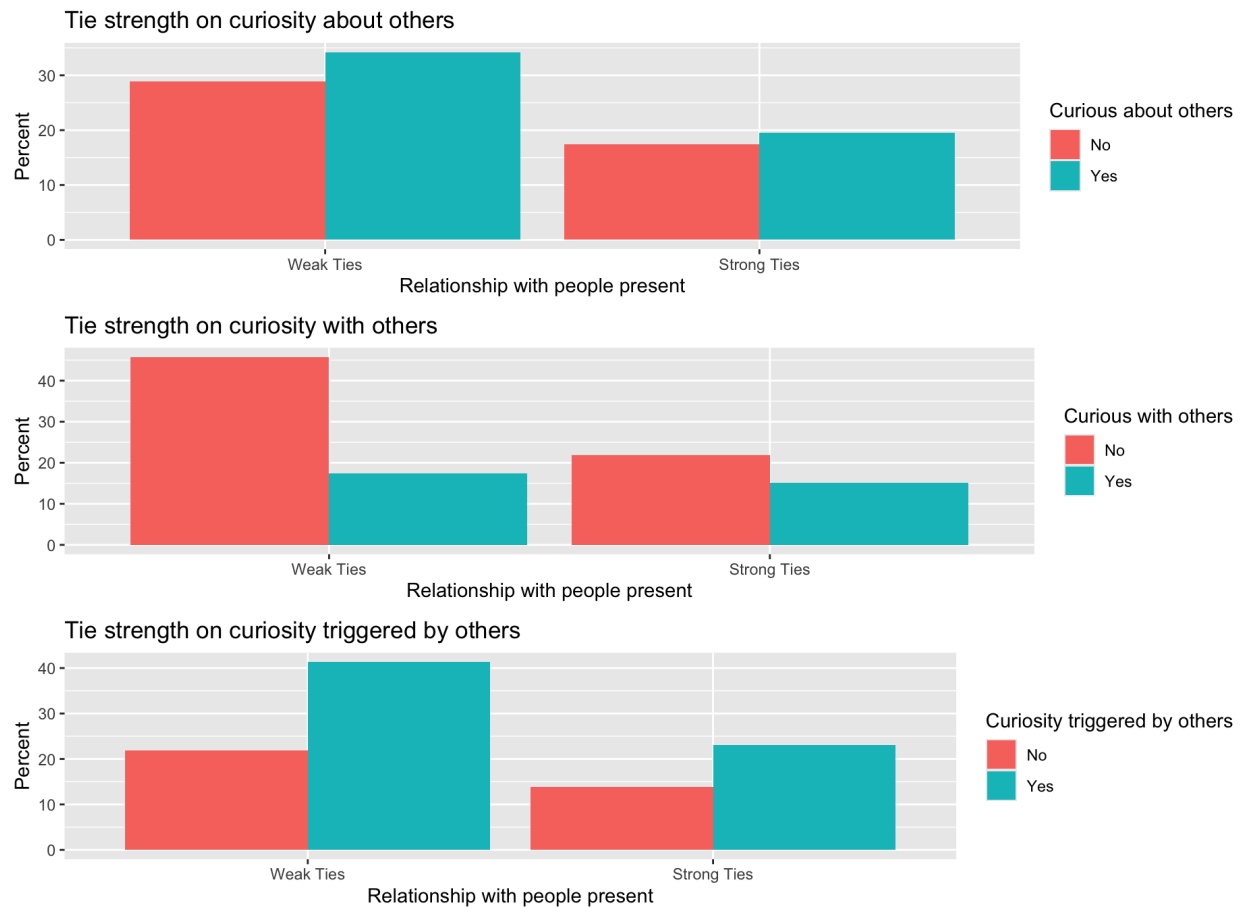
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APPENDIX

Frequency of Socially Curious Behaviors by Ties

Figure 1

Relationship Strength Across Different Socially Curious Behaviors



Note. All of the bars represent a total percentage out of 339 journal entries.

Table 1

Frequency table of relationship strength to curious behaviors

Relationship Strength		Curious about others		
		No	Yes	Total
Weak ties	Count	98 (28.9%)	116 (34.2%)	214 (63.1%)
	Mar. pct ⁽¹⁾	62.4% ; 45.8%	63.7% ; 54.2%	
Strong ties	Count	59 (17.4%)	66 (19.5%)	125 (36.9%)
	Mar. pct	37.6% ; 47.2%	36.3% ; 52.8%	
Total	Count	157 (46.3%)	182 (53.7%)	339 (100.0%)

⁽¹⁾ Columns and rows percentages

Relationship Strength		Curious with others		
		No	Yes	Total
Weak ties	Count	155 (45.7%)	59 (17.4%)	214 (63.1%)
	Mar. pct ⁽¹⁾	67.7% ; 72.4%	53.6% ; 27.6%	
Strong ties	Count	74 (21.8%)	51 (15.0%)	125 (36.9%)
	Mar. pct	32.3% ; 59.2%	46.4% ; 40.8%	
Total	Count	229 (67.6%)	110 (32.4%)	339 (100.0%)

⁽¹⁾ Columns and rows percentages

Relationship Strength		Curiosity triggered by others		
		No	Yes	Total
Weak ties	Count	74 (21.8%)	140 (41.3%)	214 (63.1%)
	Mar. pct ⁽¹⁾	61.2% ; 34.6%	64.2% ; 65.4%	
Strong ties	Count	47 (13.9%)	78 (23.0%)	125 (36.9%)
	Mar. pct	38.8% ; 37.6%	35.8% ; 62.4%	
Total	Count	121 (35.7%)	218 (64.3%)	339 (100.0%)

⁽¹⁾ Columns and rows percentages

Table 2

Chi square tests of significance between curious behaviors and relationship strength

Curious about others			
statistic	p.value	parameter	method
0.0	0.8906	1	Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction

Signif. codes: 0 <= '***' < 0.001 < '**' < 0.01 < '*' < 0.05

Curious with others			
statistic	p.value	parameter	method
5.7	0.0169 *	1	Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction

Signif. codes: 0 <= '***' < 0.001 < '**' < 0.01 < '*' < 0.05

Curiosity triggered by others			
statistic	p.value	parameter	method
0.2	0.6581	1	Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction

Signif. codes: 0 <= '***' < 0.001 < '**' < 0.01 < '*' < 0.05

Table 3

Linear regression models predicting weekly outcomes for day 8

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Day 8 Satisfaction with Life (1)	Day 8 Support (2)	Day 8 Belongingness (3)	Day 8 Relatedness (4)
Daily social percent	-0.117 (0.220)	0.232 (0.177)	0.233 (0.165)	0.425** (0.198)
Day 0 Satisfaction with Life	0.825*** (0.047)			
Day 0 Support		0.598*** (0.063)		
Day 0 Belongingness			0.625*** (0.052)	
Day 0 Relatedness				0.507*** (0.055)
Constant	1.055*** (0.229)	1.468*** (0.288)	1.249*** (0.210)	1.746*** (0.236)
Observations	153	152	152	152
R ²	0.675	0.383	0.495	0.383
Adjusted R ²	0.671	0.375	0.488	0.375
Residual Std. Error	0.728 (df = 150)	0.589 (df = 149)	0.551 (df = 149)	0.656 (df = 149)
F Statistic	155.796*** (df = 2; 150)	46.315*** (df = 2; 149)	72.930*** (df = 2; 149)	46.215*** (df = 2; 149)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4

Means and standard deviations for weekly outcome variables

Descriptives for weekly outcome variables								
Outcome	Day 0 Satisfaction with Life	Day 8 Satisfaction with Life	Day 0 Relatedness	Day 8 Relatedness	Day 0 Support	Day 8 Support	Day 0 Belongingness	Day 8 Belongingness
N	152	152	152	152	152	152	152	152
Mean	4.2	4.5	3.8	3.9	4.2	4.1	3.5	3.6
St. Dev.	1.3	1.3	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.8
Min	1.4	1.6	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Max	7.0	7.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0

Table 5

Mixed effect linear models predicting daily positive and negative affect

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Daily_PA (1)	Daily_NA (2)
CheckinDay_new	−0.047** (0.021)	−0.055*** (0.016)
overall_social	0.343*** (0.104)	−0.165** (0.081)
CheckinDay_new:overall_social	−0.014 (0.028)	0.034 (0.021)
Constant	4.134*** (0.101)	2.393*** (0.083)
Observations	1,055	1,055
Log Likelihood	−1,497.457	−1,232.692
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,010.915	2,477.383
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	3,050.605	2,507.151
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	