The perils of small talk

March 01, 2010

The Greek philosopher Socrates famously claimed that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” to which the 20th-century American philosopher Daniel Dennett replied: “The overly examined life is nothing to write home about either.”

Fair enough. Deep thoughts have their place, and we all like to exercise our intellectual chops time to time. But much of life is not profound, and many of our thoughts and conversations are taken up with the rather mundane business of daily life: Nice dress. What’s for dinner? Have you seen *Avatar*? How about them Redskins?

But is there a proper and healthy balance? Are there consequences to being too serious all the time—or too shallow? Well, maybe—depending on your personality and your goals in life. University of Arizona psychologist Matthias Mehl recently decided to eavesdrop on people’s daily conversations—small talk and deep reflections and everything in between—to see if the overheard chatter was linked in any way to happiness.

The eavesdropping was literal. Mehl and his colleagues equipped a large group of volunteers with a new and well-named micro-technology called the EAR, an unobtrusive recorder that sampled snippets of conversation over four days. The EAR “listens” for 30 seconds every 12 ½ minutes, so for this experiment alone it gathered more than 23,000 snippets of dialogue. The scientists then had trained coders analyze every bit of chatter, labeling it as either banal small talk or substantive discussion.

The researchers also gave each of the volunteers a standard personality test and an assessment of general life satisfaction. They wanted to examine the interplay of personality, conversational style and happiness. The findings were clear and intriguing: First, happy people spend significantly more time talking to others in general; dissatisfied people spend much more time alone. That’s not so surprising in itself, but happy people also engage in much less small talk—roughly a third as much—and have about twice as many meaty conversations.

The researchers wanted to make sure that these findings didn’t simply reflect personality differences. They didn’t. When they looked at people who were happier than you would expect, given their personality type, those were the ones with weighty thoughts and discussions. For example, introverts and disagreeable types might be expected to be less happy, but some were not; those who were not were the ones with more substantive social interactions. All of these findings held true regardless of whether it was a weekday or weekend, so it’s not like conscientious workaday folks become happy-go-lucky come Friday night.

Mehl concludes (and reports on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*) that the happy life is social rather than solitary—and meaningful rather than superficial. But he concedes that cause-and-effect is unclear with these findings. That is, happy people might simply attract others more readily, leading to

more and deeper conversations. Alternatively, maybe Socrates was right: Perhaps the “examined life” actually is actually richer and more joyful. This raises the intriguing possibility that profound conversation might actually be used to boost feelings of well-being.