

Conversation subjects matter less than confidantes in social support study

November 12 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

If the message went, "Hi, this is Rachael. I have an important question about my terminal brain cancer," would you expect to be asked for a loan?

Or a plea to couch-surf at your house from "Fred here, I'm really concerned KFC chicken is changing the color of their boxes, and I gotta talk about it?"

"That depends on the closeness of your relationship with Fred and Rachael – more so than the perceived importance or triviality of the discussion topic," says Cornell sociologist Matt Brashears.

The assistant professor of sociology in Cornell's College of Arts and Sciences started an online survey by asking hundreds of people whom they had contacted to talk about "important matters." Then he asked for examples of important matters – yes, at least one respondent is obsessed with chicken bucket colors, while another worries about brain cancer – and whom they count on for crucial [social support](#).

Reporting results Nov. 10 in the journal *Sociological Science*, Brashears concludes: "When it comes to social support, it isn't what you talk about that matters, but whom you talk to."

His research and analysis, Brashears said, "casts new light on what Americans regard as important, with whom they prefer to discuss those matters, and the types of social support they are willing to offer to their

core confidantes."

More than half the "important matters" named by survey respondents fell into four main categories: finances, family, health and medical care, and work.

Along the way, Brashears says he confirmed his intuition that social scientists should not be judgmental – even of the chicken bucket guy – writing: "While some topics are likely intrinsically important, many others are important simply because they are issues that concern those who are important to us."

In fact, the study participant with KFC colors on his mind sincerely believed he could obtain a loan of money and nonmonetary material assistance from his discussion partner.

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Tell all to TESS

Important social support for important people aside, who would take the trouble to help a lone sociologist in Ithaca?

Plenty of American women and men, as it turns out, obligingly reveal personal information to TESS (Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences), a collaboration between the National Science Foundation and Knowledge Networks to field experiments via the Internet to a representative sample of the national population.

TESS participants are recruited through random-digit dialing and

address-based sampling; the sample pool includes virtually everyone with a phone and a ZIP code.

The advantage of the computer-assisted self-interview (CASI) method – compared to face-to-face surveys – is that CASI respondents answer more frankly to potentially embarrassing questions, according to Matthew Brashears.

Anyone surveyed by the Cornell researcher – and everyone interested in the "important matters" of others – can find Brashears' data here.

More information: "'Trivial' Topics and Rich Ties: The Relationship Between Discussion Topic, Alter Role, and Resource Availability Using the 'Important Matters' Name Generator." *Sociological Science*, November 10, 2014 [DOI: 10.15195/v1.a27](https://doi.org/10.15195/v1.a27)

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