A team of researchers from Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and the University of Virginia has found that conversations between people usually do not end when either partner in the conversation wants them to end. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the group describes the results of surveys and experiments they conducted regarding conversations and what they learned from them.

Humans spend a lot of time speaking in conversation. But according to the researchers, very little is known about conversations. What are the rules, who chooses what to talk about, and how do they end? In this new effort, the researchers sought to learn more about conversations; specifically, do they end when either or both parties wish them to end?

To find out, the researchers used Amazon's Mechanical Turk system to query over 800 volunteers about their most recent conversation. In addition to asking the nature of the conversation and the relationship of the parties involved, they asked whether the conversation had ended when they wanted it to end. They found that approximately 67% of those queried wanted or expected their conversation to end before it did so. Half of them also reported that they wished the conversation had lasted longer or had been shorter.

Intrigued, the researchers set up an experiment in their lab. They invited 252 college student volunteers to sit alone with another volunteer and to chat about whatever they wished. Each of the chat pairs were asked to speak for at least one minute, but for less than 45. After their chats, the volunteers were queried about their conversations. The researchers found that just 2% of the conversations ended when both parties wanted them to end. Approximately 60% wished the conversation had ended before it did—very close to the number found with the volunteers participating in the survey.

After listening to the conversations in their lab and asking other questions of the volunteers, the researchers came to believe that the reason conversations go on longer (or are sometimes shorter) than people want is because neither partner knows what the other wants. Both tend to worry that prematurely ending a conversation will be perceived as being rude.

**More information:** Adam M. Mastroianni et al. Do conversations end when people want them to?, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). DOI: [10.1073/pnas.2011809118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2011809118)

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