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Cultivating Casual Conversations: How Inclusion Climate Drives Workplace Small Talk

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ABSTRACT

Small talk plays a powerful role in building interpersonal relationships and contributing to the overall performance and effectiveness of an organization. However, despite its importance, there is little research exploring the factors that facilitate small talk. To address this gap in the literature, this study examined the relationships between three dimensions of inclusion climate, namely (1) equitable employment practices, (2) integration of differences, and (3) inclusion in decision-making, and small talk engagement. Using a sample of 260 employees, I discovered that integration of differences is a strong driver of small talk, while equitable employment practices may potentially limit small talk participation. These findings highlight the importance of proactively establishing shared norms that encourage employees to be their authentic selves and respect others' unique perspectives and experiences. These results also suggest that impression management can potentially play a part in individuals' motivation to engage in small talk. This study reveals that certain dimensions of inclusion climate can be meaningful antecedents of small talk, emphasizing the need for organizations to cultivate environments where individual differences are integrated and valued.

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Chapter 1 : Introduction

Small talk has become increasingly popular in research and gained recognition for its significant role in facilitating communication and building relationships in the workplace. Small talk is defined as “short, superficial, or trivial communication that does not convey information core to task completion” (Methot et al., 2020: 3). Examples of small talk include greetings, chatting about weekend plans or the weather, and conversations about family and personal updates (Methot et al., 2020). It is important to recognize small talk’s distinction from related constructs. For example, small talk does not include gossip, which involves discussing controversial or personal information about others, sometimes in a negative manner. Furthermore, small talk is not comprised of work or task-related discussions, but rather, it serves as a casual means to foster social interactions. While small talk is typically perceived as awkward and inconsequential, it can help build rapport amongst employees and impact their feelings about work (Methot et al., 2020; Rosado-Solomon, 2019).

Collectively, previous research has consistently uncovered small talk’s numerous benefits on employees and demonstrated that small talk has value in the workplace. Engaging in small talk stimulates positive social emotions amongst employees, which, in turn, contributes to greater organizational citizenship behavior and well-being (Methot et al., 2021). Moreover, it enhances meeting effectiveness and overall productivity and has been linked to higher levels of job satisfaction and increased affective commitment to the organization (Allen et al., 2014; Koch et al., 2022; Moutoux & Porte, 1980). These findings highlight that small talk cultivates strong relationships and contributes to a more productive and positive organizational atmosphere.

Despite small talk’s relevance and recent popularity in research, the mechanisms that drive small talk remain unexplored. Because I understand small talk’s numerous benefits, identifying the factors that promote or hinder small talk is vital for optimizing its effectiveness. Small talk can be challenging

because it requires people to assess a situation and determine what is and is not appropriate to say.

Another notable challenge of small talk is diversity amongst employees. Due to varied communication styles, opinions, and ways of life, individuals from different cultural backgrounds may face challenges in interacting and building relationships with others. By understanding the barriers behind small talk, organizations can strategically overcome these obstacles and create environments where individuals feel comfortable initiating and participating in casual conversations.

Inclusion climate¹ may play a critical role in breaking down the barriers to small talk and cultivating conversations amongst employees. Thus, the present study will examine the relationship between inclusion climate and small talk. This study aims to contribute to the literature by shedding light on the ways in which an inclusive climate can enhance better communication through small talk. It is crucial to explore the impact of workplace climate because creating an inclusive atmosphere for employees is more likely to encourage open communication and create a foundation for trust amongst employees. If organizations find ways to create inclusive environments and build trust, people will chat more and develop better relationships with their coworkers, thus improving an organization's overall culture and decreasing turnover intentions. These findings will enrich the small talk literature by providing implications for organizations to cultivate more inclusive and collaborative environments.

¹ For this study, I will use the terms "diversity climate" and "inclusion climate" interchangeably.

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

Previous Small Talk Research

Prior research on small talk in the workplace provides key background information for the current study. Several definitions of small talk can be found in extant literature, revealing common themes. Moutoux et al. (1980) were one of the first to investigate small talk, and they defined it as friendly and pleasant communication used in social functions. Other research since then has expanded this definition by highlighting that it is non-task related (Allen et al., 2014; Koch et al., 2022; Lin and Kwantes, 2015; Methot et al., 2021; Rosado-Solomon, 2019). Several studies also identify that small talk is superficial or trivial (Methot et al., 2021; Rosado-Solomon, 2019). Furthermore, small talk can take several forms and happen in different settings; it can be a greeting or farewell, conversation in common areas, chit-chat before a meeting begins, or a transition to work topics. Many forms of small talk tend to be relatively scripted and formulaic in nature, such as responding to how one's day has been. However, small talk can also be more personal about one's life, helping to develop meaningful relationships. While many people may perceive small talk as distracting, pointless, and awkward, this phenomenon can significantly impact employees' feelings about work and the overall health and culture of an organization (Methot et al., 2021).

Based on previous research, small talk has been shown to have many workplace benefits in various contexts. Moutoux et al. (1980) was one of the first to investigate the effects of small talk in the workplace, specifically on the supervisor-subordinate relationship and employee attitudes. They defined small talk as friendly and pleasant communication used in social functions. Moutoux et al. (1980) recognized that small talk appears to have a positive effect in the workplace, such as on turnover and efficiency, yet they wanted to determine whether it would improve the climate for communication between supervisors and their subordinates. In this study, 47 supervisors responded to multiple choice questions about small talk in their organizations at a company-sponsored seminar. They found that small talk improves employees' attitudes, increases morale, and tends to increase production. Furthermore,

supervisors emphasized that small talk aids in opening lines of communication with their employees, which helps reveal their underlying feelings and issues. This study contributed to the small talk literature by showing that these seemingly trivial conversations can aid in creating a more open environment, allowing employees to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with their bosses.

Building on the findings of Moutoux et al. (1980), Allen et al. (2014) explored the impact of pre-meeting talk on meeting effectiveness at work, as well as extraversion as a potential moderator of this relationship. Pre-meeting talk was defined as the conversations that happen right before a meeting begins that impact the outcomes and processes of the meeting. Small talk was included as a component of pre-meeting talk and described as conversations that are non-work related. They believed that small talk would improve meeting effectiveness by setting the tone for the meeting and allowing employees to understand others' intentions and opinions about certain topics. They also hypothesized that the relationship between pre-meeting talk and meeting effectiveness would be stronger for those lower in extraversion. Allen et al. (2014) recruited an online sample through MTurk of 252 remote workers in various organizations throughout the United States to participate in their online survey. The results showed that small talk was significantly positively related to meeting effectiveness and provided the pre-meeting environment with positive spirits. Small talk allowed coworkers to engage in friendly conversations that helped reduce uncertainty and made individuals feel more comfortable with one another. Moreover, they found that pre-meeting talk for perceived meeting effectiveness was stronger for participants who were lower in extraversion. These findings highlight small talk's powerful ability to establish rapport amongst coworkers and enhance relationships, while also showing that it can benefit more introverted employees.

Another study by Lin and Kwantes (2015) investigated the effect of private interactions on an employee's workplace opportunities and performance evaluations. Additionally, they explored the extent to which personality and cultural factors played a role in the perceived importance of private interactions. Small talk was conceptualized as private workplace interactions, which was defined as conversations that

are pleasant, informal, meaningful, and non-task related. Because previous research on the effects of workplace interactions did not consider possible differences between task-related interactions and non-task-related interactions, Lin and Kwantes (2015) wanted to focus specifically on how these non-task-related interactions would influence employees' reputations and success in an organization. A sample of 134 participants, who were all either currently or recently employed in various occupations in Ontario, Canada, were used for this study. This study used a vignette to evoke participants' perceptions and attitudes about the given scenarios. The results showed that participants expect employees who engage more frequently in small talk to have more favorable work outcomes, such as being more well-liked, being recommended for future projects, receiving help from others, and having better performance evaluations. They also found no significant relationships between personality/cultural variables and social interactions. This study expands the small talk literature by being one of the first to introduce personality and cultural variables as moderators and by highlighting that these types of interactions can potentially lead to more job facilitation benefits.

Rosado-Solomon's (2019) doctoral dissertation has also been crucial to the study of small talk as she develops a multidimensional scale of workplace small talk and explores its effects on employee attitudes and behaviors. Based on her review of multiple studies, she defines small talk as superficial, non-task-related communication. She recognized that small talk's dimensionality had been under investigated and addressed the need for it to be more clearly differentiated from related constructs. Using Hinkin's (1995) recommendations for scale development, she identified three dimensions of small talk: salutations, polite talk, and news update talk. Furthermore, to explore its effects on employees, she recruited a sample of 70 employees from small businesses across the United States to take two surveys. Drawing on Interaction Ritual Theory (IRT; Collins, 2004), she found that frequent engagement in small talk is positively related to the performance of interpersonal citizenship behavior (ICB) yet can be negatively related to ego depletion. This study contributes to the literature by developing a small talk scale and recognizing that it has both positive and negative effects on employees.

Building on this study, Methot et al. (2021) further explored the effects of small talk on employee performance and well-being. They recruited a sample of 151 employed alumni from a large public university in the Northeastern US and used an experience sampling method (ESM) for this study. The results showed that small talk at work increases positive social emotions, which leads to greater organizational citizenship (OCB) and well-being. However, small talk was also shown to distract some employees and reduce their cognitive work engagement, which can affect how much time and energy individuals want to dedicate to OCB. This study further supports the idea that small talk elicits many positive feelings and outcomes but can also be distracting.

More recently, Koch et al. (2022) investigated the effects of informal communication on employees' feelings about their jobs. Small talk was conceptualized as informal communication, which was defined as non-work-related, casual conversations. Using an online panel, they recruited 841 German employees to complete a quantitative online survey. They found that informal communication increases employees' affective commitment and perceived level of being informed, which in turn increases their job satisfaction. This study also demonstrates that gender and seniority do not determine how much employees engage in informal communication. These findings highlight that informal communication can increase employees' emotional attachment to their organization, thus reducing their intent to turnover.

Most of the literature highlights the beneficial outcomes of small talk, but Plusczyk (2020) recognizes the importance of investigating employees' motives behind engaging in small talk. Plusczyk (2020) recruited 80 Polish participants from three business companies to take a questionnaire about why people may want to engage in small talk at work. Moreover, they explored whether gender plays a role in the perceived importance of small talk. They found that most respondents engage in small talk to maintain good relationships with their coworkers, while some engage in small talk to be polite. The results also showed that small talk is important for both males and females but seems more important for women than men. These findings further advance the small talk literature because understanding employees' motives

behind small talk is vital for better communication and fostering a positive workplace environment. It is also crucial to recognize that different people can be impacted by small talk in various ways.

Based on previous studies, little research has explored the types of work environments and climates that may facilitate small talk and the effect of small talk on constituent attachment for hospitality employees. It is crucial to explore the impact of workplace climate because creating an inclusive atmosphere for employees is more likely to encourage open communication and create a foundation for trust amongst employees. If organizations find ways to create inclusive environments and build trust, people will chat more and develop better relationships with their coworkers, thus improving an organization's overall culture and decreasing turnover intentions.

It is clear that conversations that may seem inconsequential can have meaningful impacts on individuals' work lives, yet some limitations exist from the previous studies. In studies by Koch et al. (2022) and Plusczyk (2020), they looked at small talk's impact on German and Polish populations. Their findings may not be generalizable to an American population. Moreover, none of these studies were applied to a hospitality context, and many were conducted before the pandemic. Since the workplace has shifted drastically since then, I question whether these results are still applicable.

Chapter 3 : The Present Study

A significant challenge of engaging in meaningful small talk is diversity amongst employees, including differences in values, communication styles, and opinions (Mak and Chui, 2013). These differences can hinder effective communication, especially as workplaces grow more diverse, demonstrating the importance of proactive efforts to promote inclusion and acceptance. A study by Mak and Chui (2013) found that when an employee from a diverse culture joins an organization, small talk can hinder workplace socialization and distance the newcomer from integral members due to a lack of cultural intelligence from both parties. However, they also found that when a newcomer appropriately engages with members and better aligns with cultural norms, small talk is a means to transition into being an integral member of the company. In this way, they established that small talk can be a “double-edged sword” (Mak and Chui, 2013: 129) for newcomers of different cultures, highlighting the need for organizations to create inclusive and welcoming environments.

Existing literature demonstrates small talk’s ability to foster positive outcomes in the workplace, yet research is needed to examine the factors that facilitate small talk. When people feel welcomed and valued for who they are, they naturally feel more comfortable to engage with others. Furthermore, if people feel their voices matter and their perspectives are respected and appreciated, they are more inclined to initiate conversations and share thoughts or stories without fear of judgment, exclusion, or punishment. In the context of a workplace, these shared expectations and norms to create a fair and welcoming environment where employees feel a sense of belonging is called inclusion climate. An inclusive workplace embraces diversity and cultivates an environment where employees feel appreciated and empowered, and thus is likely a strong driver of small talk.

Inclusion Climate

Inclusion climate is an important construct that was first looked at in the 1990s and continues to be studied today (Cox, 1994). Inclusion climates are environments in which all employees are treated fairly and feel a sense of belonging in their organization (Brimhall et al., 2018; Nishii, 2013). Moreover, it

relates to the extent to which individuals feel they are a valued part of an organization in both formal processes, such as decision-making, and informal processes, such as ‘water cooler’ conversations (Mor Barak et al., 2016). Diversity climate and inclusion climate are closely related constructs as they both refer to an equitable and fair organizational environment that accepts diversity. Many organizations face problems related to demographic diversity, including turnover and high levels of interpersonal conflict, because employees feel that they are treated unfairly for being part of a certain identity group. To reduce diversity-related issues and leverage the benefits associated with diversity, organizations must proactively create inclusive and safe environments for their employees.

A wide variety of studies have examined inclusion climate to demonstrate its positive outcomes in the workplace. In a meta-analysis of diversity management and climate for inclusion, Mor Barak et al. (2016) highlighted that managing diversity can lead to both positive and negative outcomes, but efforts that specifically create a climate for inclusion are consistently associated with beneficial outcomes. For instance, Giffords (2009) demonstrated that fostering an equitable work environment, allowing autonomy, and offering opportunities enhances organizational commitment. Another study by Brimhall et al. (2018) builds on previous research by further showing how inclusion climate leads to positive workplace outcomes. Using a sample of 231 participants in a diverse human service organization, researchers found that climate for inclusion is positively related to perceived quality of care, climate for innovation, and job satisfaction. Taken together, these results indicate that when employees feel valued and appreciated for being their authentic selves, they will be more committed to and satisfied with their organizations. Therefore, the construct of inclusion climate serves as a valuable basis for exploring small talk.

As research on inclusion climate advances, Dwertmann et al. (2016) identifies two separate but related dimensions of what makes up inclusion climate: (1) fairness and discrimination and (2) synergy. Fairness and discrimination diversity climate refers to the collective expectations within an organization to effectively promote fairness and eliminate discrimination through the adoption of equitable employment practices. Synergy diversity climate refers to employees’ shared perceptions about their

organization's efforts to promote self-expression and integrate unique perspectives to enrich collective learning and performance. Dwertmann et al. (2016) acknowledged that existing research was almost exclusively focused on the fairness and discrimination aspect of inclusion climate and neglected the synergy aspect. This paper was vital to the inclusion climate literature because it recognizes the need to address the major shortcomings in previous research by identifying the two critical components of inclusion climate. Future research that addresses both key components of inclusion climate would advance the field by leading to more logical and well-founded conclusions.

Because Dwertmann et al. (2016) demonstrates the importance of addressing both fairness & discrimination and synergy and understanding the intersection of the two in a workplace climate, this study will use Nishii's (2013) measures for inclusion climate that incorporate both. Nishii's (2013) conceptualization for inclusion climate consists of three dimensions. The first dimension, foundations of equitable employment practices, is when the human resource-related policies and distribution of resources are fair regardless of identity group membership. The second dimension, integration of differences, refers to the shared expectations and norms that all employees can express themselves openly. Moreover, employees' unique characteristics are appreciated, and their diverse backgrounds and perspectives are integrated within the workplace. The third dimension, inclusion in decision-making, is when employees are given opportunities to engage in interactions and give their input, regardless of their identity group. In addition, these diverse opinions are actively sought out and incorporated by the organization. By using Nishii's (2013) framework for inclusion climate, I aim to comprehend how each facet of inclusion climate influences small talk, thereby allowing us to present more meaningful conclusions.

Small Talk

In the present research, Rosado-Solomon's (2019) conceptualization of workplace small talk will be utilized. Rosado-Solomon recognized that small talk is not a homogenous construct, but rather, a multidimensional construct. She developed and validated a scale with three dimensions of small talk: salutations, polite talk, and news update talk. These dimensions are differentiated by their level of

scriptedness, such that salutations are very scripted while news update talk is idiosyncratic. Salutations, or greetings, are defined as surface-level exchanges that are intended to acknowledge an individual's presence. Polite talk is "superficial, socially appropriate conversation in which the subject of the conversation is of little or no importance" (Rosado-Solomon, 2019, p. 56). Examples of polite talk are conversations about sports or the weather. Finally, news updates are conversations about one's well-being and happenings in their life. She also differentiated small talk from related constructs, specifically gossip. Gossip requires some level of familiarity and preexisting trust between individuals, while small talk can happen between anyone. Examining multiple dimensions of small talk will help determine whether the impact of inclusion climate on small talk is generalizable or narrowly focused.

Approach-Avoidance Motivation Theory

Approach-avoidance motivation theory is an overarching theoretical lens for examining why inclusion climate should lead to better small talk in the workplace. This concept has been studied for over two thousand years, and many prominent scholars have used this idea regarding organisms' psychological thinking (Elliot, 2006). Approach motivation is the tendency to be directed towards positive stimuli (objects, events, and possibilities), whereas avoidance motivation is the tendency to be directed away from negative stimuli (objects, events, and possibilities). Approach motivation extends beyond gravitating towards positive stimuli, as it also refers to maintaining current positive situations. Similarly, avoidance motivation not only focuses on preventing new negative situations, but also escaping existing negative situations. In the context of an organization, an inclusive climate can be seen as a positive situation. Based on the premise of approach motivation, employees will be drawn to this positive stimulus, and therefore, be more inclined to engage in small talk. On the other hand, a non-inclusive climate where employees feel unsafe being their authentic selves can serve as a negative stimulus, which would make open communication much more challenging.

Hypotheses Development

An inclusive climate characterized by equitable policies and fair treatment may play a significant role in fostering small talk. When employees believe that resources are allocated fairly, regardless of memberships in certain identity groups, they are more likely to feel like equals in their organization. Aligning with the concept of approach motivation, employees' energization of behavior will gravitate towards this positive and fair environment, which may encourage them to participate in casual conversations with their coworkers. Moreover, employees may feel more willing to open up and share things because they will not be burdened by the thought of potentially losing resources or opportunities due to favoritism or unequal treatment. Ultimately, when individuals feel respected in their organization, they are more likely to contribute to conversations. Small talk then becomes a means of enhancing this environment of openness by helping build trust and strengthen relationships.

Volpone, Avery, and McKay's (2012) findings indicate that inclusion climates that primarily focus on fair employment policies and practices lead to higher employee engagement. Their study specifically focuses on performance appraisal ratings, which are used to make administrative decisions including promotions, raises, and dismissals. They found that appraisal reactions positively relate to employee engagement. Thus, if an employee feels that their work and contributions are fairly assessed and not based on racial or other biases, they will be more engaged at work. Furthermore, when employees perceive the performance appraisal process as positive, they will also view the organization as more inclusive and welcoming. Taken together, higher employee engagement and more positive perceptions of the workplace will likely lead to employees feeling more comfortable in their work environment. When employees perceive their work environment as a safe space, they will likely interact with their coworkers more.

Another study by Guerrero et al. (2013) found that organizational fairness regarding human resource decisions had a significant positive effect on perceived insider status. These human resource decisions refer to equitable policies, fair hiring and promotion processes, and other efforts by the

organization to treat all employees equally. Perceived insider status is an individual's perception of being accepted into and welcomed as a member of a certain group or organization. If an employee feels like an "insider" and views themselves as part of a group, they are more likely to feel comfortable conversing with others. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1a: Dimension 1, fairly implemented employment practices, will be positively related to small talk.

In addition to implementing fair human resources practices, inclusive climates require a shift in interaction patterns and attitudes of employees to treat others with respect and honor people's differences, which may also play a key role in facilitating small talk. Integration of differences refers to the shared expectations and norms that all employees can express themselves authentically and openly. When employees are comfortable being their true selves and feel like their diverse opinions and backgrounds are appreciated, it can lead to more conversations about people's personal lives and other updates. This not only strengthens relationships but also builds a sense of community within the workplace. Small talk then becomes a natural and common occurrence as employees continue to engage and appreciate each other's stories and insights.

A study by Groggins and Ryan (2013) focuses on the synergy aspect of inclusion climate, exploring how shared norms of respect and appreciation of diversity impact both an organization and its employees. In an inclusive climate, individuals recognize that respecting differences is essential in day-to-day interactions and to accomplish tasks. Through focus groups and interviews, Groggins and Ryan (2013) found that a positive diversity climate leads to several organizational benefits, such as openness to others and interpersonal competence. These enhanced interpersonal skills, communication abilities, and openness likely encourages increased engagement and interactions amongst employees. When employees seek to understand and appreciate each other's unique viewpoints and backgrounds, they are more inclined to interact and initiate small talk conversations. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1b: Dimension 2, integration of differences, will be positively related to small talk.

Finally, inclusion in decision-making, which is the idea that all employees are given opportunities to share their input, is likely another strong predictor of small talk. In inclusive climates, diverse opinions that challenge dominant perspectives are not seen as a threat, but rather a way for organizations to solve problems and break organizational silence. When employees can contribute their ideas without fear of judgment, it creates a safe environment where differences are valued and respected. By involving employees in decision-making, organizations can not only diminish stereotypes and biases but also encourage individuals to feel a sense of belonging in the company. Consequently, when employees feel their voice matters regarding work-related issues, they will likely also feel comfortable discussing personal updates or other topics with coworkers. This inclusive environment will cause a shift from employees participating in basic organizational decision-making to personal interactions.

Previously, Martins et al. (2013) investigated the moderating role of team psychological safety on the relationship between team cognitive diversity and team performance. Cognitive diversity consists of two factors: (1) expertise diversity, which is when team members have their own types of knowledge, skills, experience, and capabilities, and (2) expertness diversity, which means team members differ in their levels of expertise on certain tasks. Team psychological safety refers to the shared perceptions that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking, such as sharing unique perspectives and challenging each other's ideas. Findings indicated that when team psychological safety was lower, there was a negative relationship between expertise diversity and team performance but a positive relationship between expertness diversity and team performance. These results suggest that unless an individual views themselves as an expert on a certain topic or task, they may be hesitant to speak up and give their input when they do not feel a sense of team psychological safety. The concept of team psychological safety exists in an inclusive climate because individuals are encouraged to share their ideas and are not punished or judged for voicing their opinions. In this way, inclusion in decision-making shares many characteristics

with the perception of team psychological safety, and thus, I expect them to work the same way. If employees feel comfortable sharing their unique perspectives in decision-making scenarios, it may naturally lead to an environment with more open communication about anything, not just work-related topics. In other words, an inclusive climate that encourages and appreciates diverse opinions may empower employees to feel more at ease engaging in informal conversations as well. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1c: Dimension 3, inclusion in decision making, will be positively related to small talk.

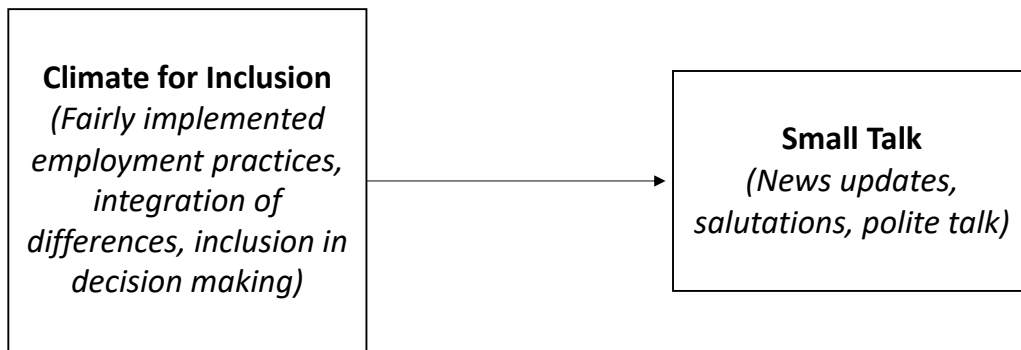


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Chapter 4 : Methodology

Sample and Procedure

The sample for this study included 260 individuals employed in the hospitality industry and recruited through *Prolific Academy*. Qualifications for participating in the study were that individuals had to be employed in the United States and in the hospitality industry, work either in-person or hybrid, and interact with others at work. Individuals were informed that they could receive \$2 for their participation in this study. 53.85% of the sample was employed in food processing and service, 33.46% was employed in hotel and food services, and 12.69% was employed in tourism and hospitality. The sample was 58% female, 68% White, and 34.87 years of age, on average. Data was collected at one point in time via an online *Qualtrics* survey.

Measures

Inclusion Climate

Nishii's (2013) framework was used to measure the three dimensions of inclusion climate: foundations of equitable employment practices, integration of differences, and inclusion in decision-making. A sample item for foundations of equitable employment practices is: "My employer is characterized by a non-threatening environment in which people can reveal their "true" selves" and "My employer has a fair promotion process." A sample item for integration of differences is: "My employer is characterized by a non-threatening environment in which people can reveal their "true" selves." A sample item for inclusion in decision-making is: "At my employer, employee input is actively sought." For each item, respondents indicated their level of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The internal consistency reliability estimates for the equitable employment practices scale, integration of differences scale, and inclusion in decision-making scale were 0.91, 0.91, and 0.95, respectively.

Small Talk

Rosado-Solomon's (2019) framework was used to measure the three dimensions of small talk: salutations, polite talk, and news updates. A sample item for salutations is: "My coworkers and I say hello to one another." A sample item for polite talk is: "My coworkers and I talk about non-controversial topics, such as the weather." A sample item for news updates is: "My coworkers and I ask about each other's families." Participants indicated their level of agreement for each item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The internal consistency reliability estimates for the salutations scale, polite talk scale, and news updates scale were 0.87, 0.85, and 0.94, respectively.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Inclusion in Decision-Making	3.307	1.222	—					
2. Integration of Differences	3.730	.964	.795**	—				
3. Equitable Employment Practices	3.501	1.102	.752**	.810**	—			
4. Salutations	4.598	.610	.271**	.345**	.257**	—		
5. News Updates	3.574	.952	.313**	.386**	.258**	.458**	—	
6. Polite Talk	4.183	.704	.253**	.300**	.172**	.633**	.608**	—

Note. $n = 260$. Significance levels reflect two-tailed tests. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Chapter 5 : Results & Analysis

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. I tested my hypotheses with ordinary least squares regression. The regression coefficients predicting the three different forms of small talk are presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4. The R^2 statistics predicting news updates, polite talk, and salutations are .16, .11, and .12, respectively.

Hypothesis 1a, which proposed that fairly implemented employment practices would be positively related to small talk, was not supported. With respect to news updates, the regression coefficient of -.16 was non-significant ($p = .08$). With respect to salutations, the regression coefficient of -.04 was also non-significant ($p = .51$). However, with respect to polite talk, the regression coefficient of -.16 was significant but negative ($p = .02$).

Hypothesis 1b, which proposed that integration of differences will be positively related to small talk, was supported. With respect to news updates, the regression coefficient of .47 was significant ($p < .001$). With respect to salutations, the regression coefficient of .25 was significant ($p < .001$). With respect to polite talk, the regression coefficient of .30 was significant ($p < .001$).

Hypothesis 1c, which proposed that inclusion in decision making will be positively related to small talk, was not supported. With respect to news updates, the regression coefficient of .05 was non-significant ($p = .49$). With respect to salutations, the regression coefficient of .01 was non-significant ($p = .92$). With respect to polite talk, the regression coefficient of .06 was non-significant ($p = .29$).

Table 2: Regression Results Predicting Salutations

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Constant	3.786**	.145	26.121
Equitable Employment Practices	-.038	.058	-.658
Integration of Differences	.249**	.072	3.453
Inclusion in Decision Making	.005	.051	.098
	R^2		.121

Note. $n = 260$. Significance levels reflect two-tailed tests. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$

Table 3: Regression Results Predicting Polite Talk

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Constant	3.401**	.168	20.222
Equitable Employment Practices	-.153*	.067	-2.270
Integration of Differences	.298**	.084	3.553
Inclusion in Decision Making	.063	.059	1.069
	R^2		.108

Note. $n = 260$. Significance levels reflect two-tailed tests. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$

Table 4: Regression Results Predicting News Updates

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Constant	2.183**	.221	9.882
Equitable Employment Practices	-.156	.089	-1.763
Integration of Differences	.472**	.110	4.288
Inclusion in Decision Making	.054	.077	.700
	R^2		.159

Note. $n = 260$. Significance levels reflect two-tailed tests. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Chapter 6 : Discussion

The fundamental gist of this paper was that the three components of inclusion climate, (1) equitable employment practices, (2) integration of differences, and (3) inclusion in decision-making, would be positively related to small talk. While previous studies have demonstrated the numerous benefits of small talk on organizational performance and workplace culture, more research was needed to determine the kinds of environments that promote small talk. My results indicate only one of the three hypotheses were supported. In keeping with expectations, integration of differences had a significant positive relationship to small talk. However, equitable employment practices and inclusion in decision-making were found to not be predictors of small talk. This study contributes to the small talk literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the facilitators behind small talk, which advances theoretical understanding, develops practical implications for companies, and guides future research.

Theoretical Implications

My results showed that integration of differences is the most crucial component of inclusion climate in facilitating small talk. Integration of differences was found to be positively and significantly related to each dimension of small talk: salutations, polite talk, and news updates. In an environment where differences are embraced, individuals will be more inclined to engage in salutations as a means of acknowledging and respecting each other's presence. Furthermore, this environment encourages polite talk due to the nature of the workplace being more open and friendly. Finally, in environments where unique ideas and perspectives are not only accepted but encouraged, employees will feel empowered to share their opinions and contribute to discussions. When diverse backgrounds and experiences are valued and appreciated, individuals will naturally share more personal updates or stories and interact authentically. Thus, the integration of differences aspect of an inclusive climate enhances all facets of

small talk, leading to increased sense of belonging in the organization and more meaningful relationships amongst coworkers.

Interestingly, the hypotheses involving the other two dimensions, equitable employment practices and inclusion in decision-making, were counter to my expectations. Specifically, I found that the relationship between equitable employment practices and small talk is negative and significant. In other words, equitable employment practices and fair treatment within an organization diminishes polite talk amongst employees. Perhaps since employees feel they receive opportunities based on merit and are already seen as equals in their organization, they may not be as inclined to engage with employees, specifically in superficial conversations. They may rather engage with colleagues primarily on important work-related matters. Conversely, if employees feel disadvantaged by their organization's processes and policies, they may tend to engage in more polite talk with others to try and "kiss up" to those with authority or put themselves out there. These behaviors are often driven by the desire to manage impressions within an organization, as individuals seek to build or maintain a strong image among their colleagues. According to Bolino et al., 2016, employees are often concerned with presenting the right image to their superiors and coworkers because the way individuals are viewed in an organization tends to influence their reputation and access to rewards and opportunities. When employees are concerned about maintaining the right image, it may impact their willingness to speak up and engage in certain behaviors, such as small talk. Consequently, this nuanced relationship between fairly implemented employment practices and small talk could serve as an interesting basis for future studies.

My results also indicate that there is no significant relationship between inclusion in decision-making and small talk, suggesting they are two unrelated constructs in the workplace. Although employees value when they are given opportunities to voice their opinions on work-related decisions, this study shows that it would not translate into increased small talk engagement. These findings may stem from the idea that work-related discussions and informal conversations are two separate domains. While individuals may have plenty to say about work-related matters, they may not want to participate in small

talk conversations concerning personal lives or other topics. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that inclusion in decision-making is still a vital component of inclusion climate that contributes to job satisfaction, reducing levels of conflict, and several other positive outcomes within organizations (Nishii, 2013).

Overall, while equitable employment practices and inclusion in decision-making are valued by employees and remain crucial elements of a healthy workplace, they do not necessarily predict how often people engage in small talk. This study contributes to my theoretical understanding by revealing that the different facets of inclusion climate may benefit an organization in various ways. Specifically, integration of differences plays a unique role in promoting small talk, while inclusion in decision-making and equitable employment practices may each directly drive other important behaviors or attitudes. While the goal of every organization is to incorporate all three dimensions of inclusion climate, understanding direct drivers behind behaviors like small talk can help organizations address problems and cultivate environments where employees feel safe, valued, and connected.

Practical Implications

Given the many benefits of small talk on relationship building and organizational success, the finding that integration of differences is a key driver of small talk should be of interest to companies and managers. Possible strategies to promote inclusion and belonging among team members include focusing on strong leadership that prioritizes diversity and inclusion, implementing team-building activities, and allowing coworkers to have fun at work. Utilizing such strategies may create or enhance inclusive climates, ultimately leading to stronger interpersonal relationships and an overall healthier organization.

Leadership can play a vital role in fostering inclusive climates that prioritize integration of differences. Leaders drive expectations of the organization by modeling expected behaviors, such as demonstrating genuine interest in their employees' diverse perspectives and experiences. By doing this, leaders set a precedent that diversity is not only accepted but should be actively embraced and appreciated. Moreover, leaders set the tone for how diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and initiatives

are implemented and perceived within the organization. When team members model the behaviors of leadership, inclusivity then becomes part of the culture.

Team-building activities and fun can also be useful tools in establishing integration of differences within an organization. Team-building activities refer to structured activities that focus on enhancing camaraderie and strengthening interpersonal relations within a team. Prior research has highlighted the significance of these activities in fostering positive affective outcomes, namely trust and team potency (Klein et al., 2009). As trust grows, individuals are more likely to feel comfortable with other team members, leading to a stronger sense of belonging in the organization. Furthermore, workplace fun, defined as enjoyable and playful activities, serves as a less structured way for employees to interact and build relationships with each other (Tews et al., 2014). Previous studies on workplace fun have demonstrated its role in enhancing job embeddedness, or feelings of being integrated into an organization, (Tews et al., 2015) and strengthening constituent attachment, or creating stronger connections among team members (Tews et al., 2014). These findings align closely with the characteristics of inclusion climates, which generate feelings of integration and connectedness with colleagues. Therefore, providing both structured and unstructured opportunities for employees to interact in more friendly, non-task-related settings and connect on a personal level can lead to stronger inclusive climates.

Limitations

Although this study provides useful theoretical and practical implications about small talk and its drivers, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, data was collected at one point in time, which limits my ability to establish that integration of differences directly causes small talk. Conducting an experimental study would have helped us better establish causality as I would have been able to control other variables. For example, I omitted variables, such as personality, that may influence the relationship between inclusion climate and small talk. Perhaps, personalities like extraversion would not necessarily need an inclusive climate to engage in small talk.

Another limitation about the nature of my research design is that it did not capture a real-world scenario. A field study within an actual company could have allowed us to gain a deeper understanding into how small talk happens in a natural, everyday context. It would also provide insight into various extraneous factors that may influence both the workplace climate and employee interactions. While this study provides valuable insights into the benefits of inclusion climate on small talk, researchers should be mindful of these limitations. Future research can utilize other research designs to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Future Research

By exploring the relationship between inclusion climate and small talk in the workplace, several areas for future research emerge. One direction would be to collect data at multiple points in time to better understand how the relationship between inclusion climate and small talk unfolds over time. It could reveal attitudes and behaviors such as possible fluctuations in small talk engagement and varying perceptions of inclusion climate over time. Ultimately, these studies would help determine whether small talk and inclusive climates are ongoing and if organizations need to develop strategies to keep employees engaged with one another.

Future research could also examine the potential spiral effect between inclusion climate and small talk. While this study specifically focuses on how an inclusive work environment facilitates small talk, future studies can investigate if frequent engagement in small talk amongst employees further enhances inclusive climates. This spiral effect can be exemplified with trust spirals, where repeated confirmations of positive expectations reinforce trust over time (Burgoon et al., 2021). In a similar way that trust spirals occur, an inclusive climate can promote small talk, and ongoing small talk can foster stronger feelings of inclusion and belonging, thus establishing a cycle. Understanding this potential spiral effect would provide organizations with valuable insights into creating and maintaining inclusive work environments.

Another important avenue for future research is understanding the impact of small talk on virtual employees compared to in-person employees. Despite the many benefits and favorability of remote work,

opportunities for connection are lost. Newman and Ford (2021) recognized that virtual employees lose the “informal hallway conversations” where updates and concerns are often expressed (Newman & Ford, 2021: 5). Similarly, Dhawan (2021) claimed that virtual workplaces lack “watercooler moments”, which are crucial in building trust and creating relationships. Employees in office settings can benefit from informal communication as it is often an opportunity for bonding and sharing information (Newman & Ford, 2021). With the increasing prevalence of working remotely since the pandemic, it is critical to examine whether organizations can still create inclusive climates that foster a sense of belonging for virtual employees and how these employees can still actively engage in small talk.

Conclusion

Small talk can be a powerful tool in building relationships amongst employees, increasing job satisfaction, and improving the overall performance of an organization (Koch et al. 2022; Methot et al., 2021, Moutoux et al., 1980). Especially as many companies are allowing employees to shift to remote work, small talk is of great relevance and importance today. My study found that integration of differences is a driver behind small talk, underscoring the need for organizations to proactively create shared norms that employees can be their authentic selves. In this way, organizations can promote employee interactions and engagement, contributing to a stronger workplace culture. Ultimately, this study reveals that certain dimensions of inclusion climate can be meaningful antecedents of small talk and paves the way for future research.

Appendix A

Survey Measures

- 1) **Inclusion Climate Scale** (Nishii, 2013) *To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your organization?* 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Somewhat disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Somewhat agree, 5-Strongly agree

Foundation of Equitable Employment Practices

- 1) My employer has a fair promotion process
- 2) The performance review process is fair at my employer
- 3) My employer invests in the development of all of its employees
- 4) Employees at my company receive “equal pay for equal work”
- 5) My employer provides safe ways for employees to voice their grievances

Integration of Differences

- 1) My employer is characterized by a non-threatening environment in which people can reveal their “true” selves
- 2) My employer values work-life balance
- 3) My employer commits resources to ensuring that employees are able to resolve conflicts effectively
- 4) Employees at my company are valued for who they are as people, not just for the jobs that they fill
- 5) At my employer, people often share and learn about one another as people
- 6) My employer has a culture in which employees appreciate the differences that people bring to the workplace.

Inclusion in Decision Making

- 1) At my employer, employee input is actively sought
- 2) At my employer, everyone’s ideas for how to do things better are given serious consideration
- 3) At my employer, employees’ insights are used to rethink or redefine work practices
- 4) Top management exercises the belief that problem-solving is improved when input from different roles, ranks, and functions is considered

- 2) **Small Talk Scale** (Rosado-Solomon, 2019) *How often do you engage in the following conversations with your coworkers?* 1-Never, 2-Rarely, 3-Sometimes, 4-Frequently, 5-All the time

News Updates

- 1) My coworkers and I talk about our weekend plans.
- 2) My coworkers and I ask about each other’s families.
- 3) My coworkers and I discuss our hobbies.
- 4) My coworkers and I discuss our vacations and leisure activities.
- 5) My coworkers and I update each other on our weekend activities.

Salutations

- 1) My coworkers and I exchange pleasantries.
- 2) My coworkers and I say hello to one another.
- 3) My coworkers and I say goodbye to one another.
- 4) My coworkers and I greet each other during personal encounters.

Polite Talk

- 1) My coworkers and I talk about non-controversial topics, such as the weather.
- 2) My coworkers and I talk about superficial things.
- 3) My coworkers and I respond to each other when talking about non-work matters, even if we don't care about the subject.
- 4) My coworkers and I chat with each other even if we don't have anything important to say.
- 5) My coworkers and I talk about trivial things.

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WORK EXPERIENCE

Marriott International Headquarters, Bethesda, MD June 2023 – Present
Finance Intern

- Assist in providing reports and analyses for the US/CAN MSB (Marriott Select Brands) portfolio
- Review and update 10-year CapEx budgets for 300+ hotels while communicating closely with General Managers
- Facilitate the process of validating hotel owners' priority returns and funding
- Led business challenge team in research and data to recommended new strategies for Marriott to improve their recruitment of culinary talent

HEI Hotels & Resorts, Weehawken, NJ May 2022 – August 2022
Front Office Intern

- Interacted with up to 100 customers daily at a dual-branded property (EnVue, Autograph Collection and Residence Inn by Marriott)
- Conducted check-ins and check-outs, addressed and resolved guest inquiries, and maintained a high level of customer satisfaction
- Utilized property management systems to facilitate reservations and room assignments
- Attended operational meetings to discuss the daily forecast such as in-house groups and special events

Pollock Dining Commons, University Park, PA August 2021 – December 2021
Rotational Intern

- Rotated through various roles within the dining commons including crew leading, assisting in the back of house, line serving, expediting orders, cashiering, and unloading dishes to serve 4000+ students daily
- Shadowed and observed managers in the handling of all aspects of their management responsibilities
- Executed my own pop-up event/themed dinner for roughly 500 students at the dining commons. Was responsible for creating a menu, forecasting, prepping food, decorating, and advertising

Hackensack Golf Club Inc., Oradell, NJ May 2021 – August 2021
Server and Bartender

- Served food and beverages to members at the clubhouse and club pool, set up the breakfast buffets, and assisted in the execution of member and guest events

Mathnasium, Glen Rock, NJ October 2018 - March 2020
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