

## OFFICE CHITCHAT AS A SOCIAL RITUAL: THE UPLIFTING YET DISTRACTING EFFECTS OF DAILY SMALL TALK AT WORK

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**Small talk—trivial communication not core to task completion—is normative and ubiquitous in organizations. Although small talk comprises up to one-third of adults’ speech, its effects in the workplace have been largely discounted. Yet, research has suggested that small talk may have important consequences for employees. Integrating theories of interaction rituals and microrole transitions, we explore how and why seemingly inconsequential workday conversations meaningfully impact employees’ experiences. In a sample of employed adults, we used an experience sampling method to capture within-individual variation in small talk over a three-week period. Given that we are the first to examine small talk as an episodic phenomenon, we also conducted a validation of our daily small talk measure with master’s students and two samples of employed adults. Using multilevel path analysis, results show that small talk enhanced employees’ daily positive social emotions at work, which heightened organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and enhanced well-being at the end of the workday; furthermore, small talk disrupted employees’ ability to cognitively engage in their work, which compromised their OCB. Additionally, higher levels of trait-level self-monitoring mitigated negative effects of small talk on work engagement. Combined, results suggest that the polite, ritualistic, and formulaic nature of small talk is uplifting yet also distracting.**

Organizations cannot exist without communication. Indeed, workplace communication—how employees use verbal and nonverbal messages to convey meaning (Keyton, 2017; Putnam & Mumby, 2014)—is a necessary component of the organizing process in that it generates, maintains, and dissolves social interactions, structures and coordinates action, and creates the day-to-day reality for employees

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(Keyton, 2011). From the perspective of organizational scholarship, “meaningful” communication is “talk that gets stuff done” (Coupland, 2000: 7), which has predominantly been examined through exchanges that promote sensemaking (Weick, 1995), garner legitimacy (Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012), and create value (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). These can be task-oriented, instrumental, or strategic exchanges, where employees share advice, information, and feedback about how to perform their job; they can also be expressive, intimate exchanges of trust and social support that help employees cope with work and nonwork stressors (Brass, 1984; Ibarra, 1992). Across research on workplace communication, the focus has been on how employees convey key

ideas to one another in order to coordinate and compel action to accomplish desired objectives (Lockwood, Giorgi, & Glynn, 2019).

Much less privileged, however, is communication whose substance is inconsequential. Indeed, *small talk*—short, superficial, or trivial communication that does not convey information core to task completion (Malinowski, 1972/1923)—is ubiquitous in daily organizational life. It manifests as greetings and farewells (Bullis & Bach, 1991), chitchat in common areas (Fayard & Weeks, 2007), socializing before a meeting (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005), or a transition to serious topics of discussion (Knutson & Ayers, 1986) such as business negotiations (Shaughnessy, Mislin, & Hentschel, 2015) or performance evaluations (Schrader, 1969). In a recent survey about conversations at work, 72% of employees reported discussing weekend plans or weather, 44% discussed sports, and 36% discussed prime time television (Vitukevich, 2016). Accordingly, small talk has been described as

a mere phrase of politeness [that] fulfills a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant. Inquiries about health, comments on the weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things—all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people to action, certainly not in order to express any thought. (Malinowski, 1972/1923: 151)

Thus, small talk, at its core, lacks substance. Yet, in considering daily work experiences, small talk is a normative ritual—a scripted interaction—that pervades the workplace. It is a means to build rapport and create a sense of connection by acknowledging the presence of others, and acts as a social lubricant by helping individuals transition between daily activities (Molinsky, 2013). Indeed, it is considered a breach of normative behavior to stand beside someone at the copier without greeting them, or to dive right into a meeting without “greasing the wheels” with small talk.

Although small talk comprises up to one-third of adults’ speech (Bullis & Bach, 1991; King, Spoeneman, Stuart, & Beukelman, 1995) and is a fundamental workplace norm (Holmes, 2000), its effects in organizations have been largely discounted. However, research in communications (Coupland, 2000, 2003; Pullin, 2010) and social psychology (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014) has suggested that small talk may yield important daily consequences for employees. Indeed, small talk softens controversial conversations, enhances mood, creates positive group climates, and facilitates a sense of

belonging (Bullis & Bach, 1991; Holmes, 2003; Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson, & Gino, 2017; Moutoux & Porte, 1980; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). At the same time, however, many people consider small talk to be pointless, draining, or distracting (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson, 1992), and therefore may self-impose isolation by purposefully arriving to meetings at the last minute to avoid chitchat about the prior night’s football game, or wear headphones in the office to discourage pleasantries with coworkers. Yet, research has suggested that individuals underestimate the positive impact of chatting with others for their positive affect and well-being, creating a social paradox whereby individuals routinely avoid small talk despite their inherent need for social connection (Boothby, Cooney, Sandstrom, & Clark, 2018; Epley & Schroeder, 2014).

Our research jump-starts the conversation on small talk at work by examining why fleeting and seemingly disposable conversations during the day can have a significant impact on employee outcomes. We jointly apply theories on interaction rituals (Collins, 2004) and microrole transitions (Ashforth, 2001) to ground our expectations that small talk has meaningful and largely positive effects on employees’ work experiences (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005; Pullin, 2010): specifically, well-being at the end of the workday—individuals’ subjective and emotional assessment of their work lives (Sonnentag, 2001)—and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB)—the extent to which individuals go beyond formal requirements of their job to help coworkers and support their organization (Organ, 1988). On one hand, we expect that small talk facilitates friendly interactions and helps employees transition between roles and activities throughout the workday (e.g., ease people into conversations, transition into or out of meetings), which generates positive social emotions at work that then enhance end-of-day well-being and OCB. On the other hand, we expect that small talk acts as a distraction that disturbs employees’ focus on and engagement in their work (Jett & George, 2003), which may subsequently aid well-being by allowing for restorative breaks yet compromise OCB due to a time deficiency. Finally, we theorize that individuals differ in the efficacy with which they engage in small talk during their workday, in that some may be more, or less, reactive to this social experience. We propose the personality trait self-monitoring will moderate these effects, such that high self-monitors will be better equipped to navigate small talk interactions and will experience heightened benefits.

Our research makes important theoretical and practical contributions to the literatures on employee communication, organizational design, and employee well-being. First, against the backdrop of well-established literatures on personal relationships (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2012), communication networks (e.g., Monge & Contractor, 2003), high-quality interactions (e.g., Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), and workplace gossip (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000), we focus explicitly on small talk at work, which is considered a “peripheral mode of talk” (Coupland, 2000: 1), to establish its validity and effects on daily employee outcomes. Second, our work speaks to how individuals can ease transitions between organizational roles and replenish their resources and reduce fatigue during the workday (Ashforth, 2001). Small talk occurs frequently and episodically throughout the workday in common spaces (Fayard & Weeks, 2007), between supervisors and subordinates (Moutoux & Porte, 1980), at business events (Cunha, Cabral-Cardoso, & Clegg, 2008), and during breaks (Roy, 1959; Trougakos, Hideg, Cheng, & Beal, 2014), and is a vital part of a workplace’s social environment (B. Schneider, 1987). Thus, small talk provides a respite that generates positive feelings and well-being (Kim, Park, & Headrick, 2018; Trougakos et al., 2014). Finally, our research speaks to why small talk at work may be a key condition for subsidizing positive and socially inclusive work environments. Trends toward distributed work arrangements, gig work, and flexible work schedules create physical distance between coworkers that can compromise the chitchat that defines the workplace social environment, creating a sense of isolation and loneliness that is harmful to employees’ health and well-being (O’Conner, 2017; Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). Our work informs how daily workplace communication may aid individuals’ opportunity to forge social connections (Molinsky, 2013).

## FOUNDATIONS AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SMALL TALK

### Key Features of Small Talk

In the communications literature, small talk has historically been referred to as phatic communication—the nonreferential use of language to establish contact and a mood of sociability, rather than to transmit precise content, ideas, or broader meaning (Casalegno & McWilliam, 2004; Malinowski, 1972/1923). Phatic communication, or small talk, is considered “free, aimless social discourse” (Malinowski, 1999/1926: 302), and research has revealed it to be theoretically

and empirically distinct from communication intended to accomplish work-related tasks. For example, Holmes (2000) and Bullis and Bach (1991) distinguished core business talk—which includes “on-topic” talk that is transactional and maximally informative in conveying task-related messages—from small talk—which is relatively atypical, nonintimate, minimally informative, and has a more sociable primary function. Further, whereas core business talk is idiosyncratic, substantive, and necessarily deviates from scripted interactions (Lockwood et al., 2019), small talk is relatively formulaic, where most dialogue involving small talk follows a conventional, normative script (K. Schneider, 1987). For example, as Hartley (2002: 174) explained, “when someone inquires ‘How are you?’ it would be a breach of manners to take the question as having content and actually to tell them what a bad day you’ve had.” Rather, the conventional, scripted response is some variation of, “I’m well, thanks.”

Importantly, though, these scripts contribute to the social fabric of organizations and can evolve into socially constructive rituals (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Garfinkel, 1964). Indeed, small talk has linguistic functions that generate meaningful psychological and relational outcomes. As Coupland and colleagues (1992) explained, the underlying functions of small talk are to *establish relationships* and *achieve transitions*. These two functions are closely linked in that small talk “meaningfully sequences social encounters” by serving as a “greeting and parting ritual and patterned routine” to acknowledge the presence of others (Coupland, 2000: 5). Along these lines, we integrate theories of interaction rituals and microrole transitions to explain why scripted and ritualistic interactions impact individuals’ daily attitudes and behaviors.

### Application of Theoretical Perspectives to Small Talk

Interaction ritual theory (IRT) (Collins, 1993) refers to the emotional input and feedback of individuals in face-to-face interactions. IRT is a theory of personal, ritualized interactions that involve “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in life” (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27). Rituals signal inclusion, unify individuals, and generate feelings of solidarity (Collins, 2010). There are several key ingredients of interaction rituals (Goffman, 1967). First, there is the condition of situational copresence—that individuals assembled in the same place have an effect on one another.

Second, this copresence requires a mutual focus of attention, where encounters create a shared reality and spontaneous involvement between individuals. Finally, there is pressure toward “social solidarity,” where individuals conform to normative expectations to demonstrate their membership in the encounter. As a result of these conditions, successful rituals produce feelings of belongingness, personal energy (i.e., confidence and enthusiasm in carrying out their repeated round of rituals), and targeted positive emotions (i.e., copresent individuals become caught up in an emotional rhythm) (Collins, 1993). This emotional energy produces “a renewed surge of socially-based enthusiasm” (Collins, 2004: 34), such that individuals direct their energy prosocially toward others.

This core idea of IRT—that ritualized interactions have meaningful emotion-based effects on individuals—is a critical view on small talk. Yet, it does not speak to individuals’ use of small talk to ease the cognitive challenges associated with transitioning between roles and activities throughout their workday. Therefore, we draw from the microrole transitions perspective to explain how small talk aids daily role transitions and facilitates disengagement from work. During their workdays, individuals manage microrole transitions—frequent and recurring psychological and physical movement between simultaneously held roles. These can include home-to-work transitions (e.g., parent-to-employee) and work-to-work transitions (e.g., peer-to-manager) that require disengagement from one role (i.e., role exit) and engagement in another (i.e., role entry) (Ashforth, 2001). These often-abrupt transitions may be difficult to accomplish, and people frequently complain about “having to ‘wear different hats’ and ‘shift gears’” (Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, & Johnson, 2001: 261) on a daily basis. Thus, individuals seek to minimize the difficulty of role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2001).

In addition to their unique contributions, there are several noteworthy complementarities between IRT and the microrole transitions lens that help synthesize and guide our theorizing about small talk. First, IRT and microrole transitions jointly emphasize ritualized and scripted aspects of the social environment. Specifically, they are both grounded in the concept of rites of passage—rituals that facilitate movement from one interaction or role to another (Van Gennep, 1960). Rites of passage, such as promotion or retirement celebrations, can involve interactions with other individuals and the use of scripted language and behavior; they create a shared social reality and evoke emotions in interacting parties (Goffman, 1955; Van

Gennep, 1960). If we think of social life in organizations as a string of interactions or encounters where individuals are copresent, then small talk—such as salutations and farewells—function within IRT as *transition rituals* that mark when an encounter is beginning and ending (Collins, 2004). In fact, a key linguistic function of small talk is to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication (Coupland et al., 1992). It can be used to fill silences during periods of conversational liminality (Jaworski, 2000), ease into controversial conversations (Knutson & Ayers, 1986), and punctuate conversations (Coupland, 2000; Mullany, 2006). Similarly, small talk functions within the microrole transitions perspective as a *transition script*—a cognitive structure that specifies the normative sequence of behaviors and events that allow individuals to disengage from core tasks to minimize the social-psychological disruption of role transitions (Ashforth et al., 2001a). For instance, small talk acts as a social lubricant to help transition into and out of meetings (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005) and buffer between competing roles (Ashforth et al., 2001a), and can be employed to disengage from an interaction, with phrases such as, “Have a good day” or “Talk to you later.”

Next, IRT and microrole transitions share a focus on the ephemeral nature of work roles and interactions. IRT is a theory of “momentary encounters” that produce rituals of interaction that contribute to the continuity and stability of social structures (Collins, 2004: 3); similarly, microrole transitions are short-lived, temporary states intended to satisfy social-psychological needs (Zurher, 1970). Microrole transitions can involve recreational activities, breaks, games, or interruptions that act as transition bridges allowing individuals a brief “time out” from their active or formal work roles to mentally disengage and conserve cognitive capacity (Ashforth & Fried, 1988). Not surprisingly, then, small talk is prevalent at the boundaries between activities (Holmes, 2000), where role entry and exit sequences are often routinized and ephemeral. For example, individuals may engage in small talk to psychologically disengage from a meeting and transition into their lunch break. The short-term enactment of transition scripts can stimulate positive emotions and facilitate well-being (Scheff, 1979; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989).

Finally, both IRT and microrole transitions evoke the notion that certain individuals—specifically those who are high on self-monitoring—are more effective than others in employing daily transition scripts. During social interactions, individuals, by and large, want to be received well, and actively



construct their image to claim positive social value. Goffman (1955) referred to this as “face-work”—when individuals try to control the impression they make on others in social encounters. Indeed, the dynamics of social encounters unfold based on whether an individual is successful in their ability to “maintain face” or whether they make a gaff that inadvertently disrupts the interaction. Similarly, individuals who are better equipped to construct their image during social interactions (i.e., individuals who are higher versus lower on self-monitoring) are more effective at navigating such microrole transitions. According to Ashforth and Fried (1988), individuals who are high in self-monitoring have a high sensitivity to interpersonal cues, are adaptive to dynamic situations, and have a diverse repertoire of appropriate responses to various transitions, meaning that their ability to navigate small-talk interactions should be higher.

### LINKING SMALL TALK TO EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

Drawing on IRT and microrole transitions, we propose that small talk functions through uplifting yet distracting mechanisms to impact well-being at the end of the workday, and OCB. Specifically, we theorize that small talk generates positive social emotions (an emotion-based mechanism) by fulfilling individuals’ daily intrinsic needs for social cohesiveness, mutual recognition, and belongingness (Coupland et al., 1992). At the same time, we posit that small talk helps employees cognitively disengage from work roles (a cognition-based mechanism) by navigating the boundaries of interactions and events (Ashforth et al., 2001a; Schein, 1971; Van Maanen, 1982). We adopt an episodic, within-person view of small talk, arguing that small talk varies on a daily basis in affecting employees’ positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement, which in turn affects feelings of well-being and OCB (Kim et al., 2018).

#### **Uplifting Emotional Effects of Small Talk**

Personal interactions are social events in which relational partners influence each other’s emotions (Hinde, 1979; Methot, Melwani, & Rothman, 2017). According to IRT, emotions are socially constructed through daily interactions (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Van Kleef, 2009), and social interactions generate positive emotions that are relatively brief (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Collins, 1993). Social emotions are part of everyday talk and

experience in organizational life (Cross, Baker, & Parker, 2003), and a person’s level of emotional arousal can change in response to each conversational event at work (Cross et al., 2003; Cross & Parker, 2004; Quinn & Dutton, 2005). Similarly, according to the microrole transitions lens, small talk as a scripted rite of passage includes the “presence and involvement of significant others... that evoke strong emotions” (Ashforth, 2001: 11). Importantly, then, we can understand little about daily small talk without discerning the emotions—short-term, valenced affective responses to specific targets or events (Frijda, 1993; Lazarus, 1991)—that partners feel in response to each other (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008). Therefore, we expect that engaging in small talk will be positively associated with employees’ experiences of positive social emotions. Social emotions are discrete emotions expressed through facial expressions, vocalization, and body language that act as observable cues in social interactions (Van Kleef, 2009), with positive social emotions reflecting friendly feelings, respect, sympathy, and pride (Kitayama et al., 2000).

There are at least two reasons why small talk generates positive social emotions. First, positive social emotions are constructed from a sense of belongingness and interpersonal engagement (Kitayama et al., 2000). Because engaging in small talk affirms that one is connected to and assimilated with another in an interaction (Kitayama et al., 2000), it is a form of dialogue that creates connections and, in turn, boosts social emotions such as friendly feelings (Coupland, 2000). As individuals interact with others in a ritualistic manner, everyday encounters turn into valuing acts where individuals care for and acknowledge one another (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2016; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Goffman, 1963). We expect small talk to induce positive social emotions because it helps individuals feel “in the loop” (Robinson, O’Reilly, & Wang, 2013) and because it is “the kind of chit-chat people engage in simply in order to show that they recognize each other’s presence” (Hudson, 1980: 109). Thus, small talk facilitates the mutual recognition, connection, and social cohesiveness that constitute positive social emotions (Beinstein, 1975; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Collins, 2004; Ferris et al., 2008).

Next, small talk helps ease the transition between daily work roles and activities. Small talk acts as a transition script that provides greater predictability, while alleviating challenges associated with navigating role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2001). Microrole transitions theory emphasizes that transition scripts such as small talk enhance positive

social emotions because the interaction involves a normative sequence of behavior that requires little effort or chance of self-disclosure (Beinstein, 1975). Individuals engaged in a brief, light-hearted conversation are likely to experience friendly feelings associated with connecting with others, without running the risk of embarrassment or burnout. Further, research has suggested that low-effort activities such as small talk during the workday act as a break that helps restore individuals' personal energy coffers and produce higher levels of positive social emotions (Ashforth, 2001; Collins, 1990; Coupland, 2000; Kim et al., 2018; Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016; Trougakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008). Thus, we expect that engaging in scripted, ritualized interactions such as small talk heightens positive social emotions (Quinn & Dutton, 2005).

*Hypothesis 1. Daily small talk at work is positively associated with daily positive social emotions.*

We also expect that small talk will be positively associated with end-of-day well-being via positive social emotions. End-of-day well-being is a person's affective state when leaving the workplace and returning home (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016), and captures how experiences during time away from work allow individuals to unwind (Kim et al., 2018; Sonnentag, 2001). Consistent with IRT, Heaphy and Dutton (2008) noted that brief social interactions play a critical role in well-being through heightened positive emotions and physiological resourcefulness. Specifically, they suggested that positive social interactions at work leave a lasting physiological imprint that helps improve employees' mood after work. We therefore expect that small talk will improve end-of-day well-being for at least two reasons.

First, to boost well-being at the end of the day, individuals need to mentally disengage from work to lower levels of mental activation (Bennett, Bakker, & Field, 2018; Sonnentag, 2001). Positive social emotions stemming from small talk should allow individuals to end the workday in a mental state that reduces mental preoccupation with work. Sonnentag (2001) proposed that social activities help facilitate well-being because they place little to no demand on individuals' personal resources, and found a positive link between daily voluntary social activities, such as chatting with others, and well-being prior to going to sleep after work. Because small talk eases movement in and out of task work, it enables individuals to punctuate different periods of their day and replenish personal resources spent completing work tasks

(Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Trougakos et al., 2014). Thus, the positive social emotions generated by small talk yield the potential to build energetic resources that contribute to well-being at the end of the day. Second, we expect that the positive social emotions generated by small talk will generalize to the mood that individuals carry home with them. Indeed, all individuals on a daily basis have an innate and fundamental need for belonging with others and maintaining positive social relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Along these lines, Ryan, Bernstein, and Brown (2010) found that social interactions promote daily well-being through increased positive affect because they fulfill individuals' need for social connection, suggesting that the general pleasantness of, and social emotions elicited by, small talk exchanges spill over into individuals' mood at home.

*Hypothesis 2a. Daily small talk has a positive indirect relationship with feelings of end-of-day well-being through increased daily positive social emotions.*

Further, we expect that small talk will be positively associated with employees' OCB through its effects on positive social emotions. Because actors cocreate social bonds and feelings of solidarity through small talk, their resulting behaviors should reflect a desire to contribute to the broader social structure of which they are a part. According to IRT, the positive social emotions generated by interaction rituals motivate prosocial encounters with relational partners (Collins, 2004). With respect to OCB, positive social emotions are a key ingredient in the successful maintenance of relationships; they "draw others closer" (Methot et al., 2017: 1795) by signaling cooperative and prosocial intentions (Rothman & Magee, 2016). Indeed, a significant body of research has demonstrated that positive emotions in general encourage helping behaviors (George, 1991; Isen & Baron, 1991). In part, this is because people are motivated to help others to whom they feel emotionally connected (Grant, 2007; Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001). Interactions that produce positive emotions seed a social exchange where individuals seek to reciprocate their elevated emotions by benefiting their coworkers (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2011, 2015). In this vein, OCB can be targeted toward specific coworkers whose interactions contributed to elevated positive emotions. OCB can also be targeted broadly toward the organization, given that positive emotions lead individuals to be more cooperative, prosocial, and emotionally committed to the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988; Ilies, Scott, & Judge, 2006). Indeed, positive emotions

have been posited to broaden individuals' behavior repertoire, allowing them to act more expansively instead of having a narrow focus (Fredrickson, 2001).

Further, higher levels of positive social emotions are associated with employees' willingness to exert discretionary energy for their coworkers and organizations (Eatough, Chang, Miloslavic, & Johnson, 2011; Quinn & Dutton, 2005). Given that OCB involves discretionary acts that go beyond what is required by the job, a prerequisite for OCB is that individuals possess a surplus of emotional energy that they are willing and able to expend to help their coworkers and the broader organization (Chang, Johnson, & Yang, 2007). Indeed, when emotional energy is low, employees are likely to refrain from OCB in order to preserve their energetic resources for other activities (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009; Bolino, Hsiung, Harvey, & LePine, 2015; Trougakos et al., 2014). The emotionally energizing and restorative nature of small talk and the reciprocity these social emotions spur should carry through to increased OCB on a daily basis.

*Hypothesis 2b. Daily small talk has a positive indirect relationship with daily OCB through increased daily positive social emotions.*

### **Distracting Cognitive Effects of Small Talk**

Although small talk is an important social lubricant, it can also interrupt employees' work by impeding or delaying their attempts to make progress on work tasks (Jett & George, 2003). Interruptions consume people's time, energy, and cognitive resources that could otherwise be spent on task accomplishment. From this viewpoint, small talk can hinder an individual's ability to reach a state of total involvement in a task being performed (Jett & George, 2003) as employees chat about nonessential aspects of their day (e.g., the weather, weekend plans). Specifically, we expect small talk to compromise cognitive work engagement—the cognitive investment of one's complete self (energy, attention) in their work (Kahn, 1990; Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010). Individuals express higher levels of engagement, in part, when they are psychologically available (i.e., have sufficient personal resources, such as time or focus, to employ and express themselves with respect to their work roles). However, as Kahn (1990: 716) described, interruptions can lead employees to become "too preoccupied ... to invest energies in role performances." Given that small talk involves the mutual awareness and

participation of both parties in the interaction (Goffman, 1967), it momentarily leads employees away from tasks and distracts from task pursuit.

Further, the microrole transitions perspective suggests that small talk should reduce cognitive engagement because its scripted, routinized nature facilitates role exit—cognitive disengagement from a role or activity (Ashforth, 2001). Small talk is a relatively automatic or mindless transition script, allowing individuals to "go on autopilot" and cognitively detach from their work (Ashforth & Fried, 1988; Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2001). Disengagement from a work activity, such as a meeting, may be eased by "winding down," where coworkers engage in small talk to cross the boundary from one activity to another (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2001). Given that cognitive engagement requires continued behavioral momentum and absorption (Lin, Kain, & Fritz, 2013; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), the nontask-related nature of small talk likely interrupts employees' focus. Indeed, Ashforth (2001) explained that acting with effortless involvement in a scripted transition ritual such as small talk requires shifting attention and removing awareness from core tasks.

*Hypothesis 3. Daily small talk at work is negatively associated with daily cognitive work engagement.*

We also expect that small talk will be positively associated with end-of-day well-being through its effects on cognitive work engagement. Drawing from the microrole transitions perspective, small talk prompts a temporary, and often predictable, break from cognitive engagement in one's work. These breaks have the potential to alleviate fatigue and distress, filter out irritating environmental stimuli, and highlight the need for a change of action, ultimately enhancing well-being (Jett & George, 2003). Indeed, research has highlighted the importance of idle time and periods of nontaxing work, such as chatting with coworkers about nonwork activities, in boosting emotional well-being throughout the day (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). For example, Roy (1959) observed that workers who integrated regular, frequent, and short interaction rituals such as casual banter with peers into their workdays felt greater enjoyment and well-being. Further, work demands can inhibit individuals' positive mood and well-being at the end of the workday (Bennett, Gabriel, Calderwood, Dahling, & Trougakos, 2016; Bennett et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2010), and prior work has found *negative* relationships between engagement and well-being (e.g., Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010). Thus, we expect that the opportunity to disengage from one's work



through small talk will be beneficial for personal well-being at the end of the day by aiding in personal resource and positive mood replenishment during the workday.

*Hypothesis 4a. Daily small talk has a positive indirect relationship with end-of-day well-being through decreased cognitive work engagement.*

Yet, with respect to OCB, small talk can also detract from resources individuals could otherwise dedicate to extra-role behaviors. Work disruptions stemming from small talk can shift individuals' focus to activities that are not instrumental for work they are currently performing. These interruptions can leave a person with insufficient time and cognitive resources to engage in OCB, which requires going beyond the scope of one's focal work requirements (Trougakos et al., 2014). Jett and George (2003: 496) explained that

when an intrusion occurs, the disturbance and the subsequent social interaction that may ensue can disrupt the focused attention of a person who is working intently, reinstating time consciousness and a sense of time famine when there are many other activities to perform.

Once psychological disengagement begins, it is difficult to fully reengage in workplace issues, even when still physically present at work (Jett & George, 2003). Therefore, individuals sense having more responsibilities than time to complete them, decreasing the likelihood they would overextend themselves by engaging in OCB that is beyond the scope of their work. Following the reasoning that small talk disrupts engagement in one's work, we posit that small talk will indirectly hinder OCB through lower cognitive work engagement.

*Hypothesis 4b. Daily small talk has a negative indirect relationship with daily OCB through decreased cognitive engagement.*

### **Self-Monitoring as a Boundary Condition of the Effects of Small Talk**

We also expect that these hypothesized associations have boundary conditions. Importantly, small talk is a means by which individuals negotiate personal interactions (Holmes, 2000). Given that small talk at work is a normative ritual that facilitates interactions and role transitions, individuals who are more adept at perceiving those norms and adapting their behavior to meet those norms should experience more positive outcomes. Both IRT and microrole transitions directly assert that self-monitoring plays a key role in the fluidness with which individuals navigate

daily small talk. Self-monitoring is an individual's sensitivity to situational cues as guides for behavior, concern for displaying appropriate behavior, and the effort to display such behavior (Snyder, 1987). High self-monitors are adept at recognizing, understanding, and conforming to situational cues and norms (Day & Schleicher, 2006; Sasovova, Mehra, Borgatti, & Schippers, 2010); actively constructing their public images (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Turnley & Bolino, 2001); crafting situations to fit their needs (Fang, Landis, Zhang, Anderson, Shaw, & Kilduff, 2015; Fuglestad & Snyder, 2010); and pacing conversations appropriately (Dabbs, Evans, Hopper, & Purvis, 1980). In contrast, low self-monitors display more consistency in their communication across situations, are less adept at tailoring their behavior to meet situational norms, and run a greater risk of violating the normative script of small talk (e.g., sharing too much information, responding to a rhetorical question, reciprocating with a nonscripted response). In short, high self-monitors are more likely to engage in effective small talk (i.e., more normative, and thus more fluid), than are lower self-monitors, suggesting differences in effects of small talk on both positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement on a day-to-day basis.

With respect to positive social emotions, we expect the association with small talk to be more positive for high than for low self-monitors. High self-monitors are more effective at elevating a shared sense of positive social emotions in interactions. IRT suggests that positive social emotions are transferred between parties as they receive cues about the efficacy of the interaction (Goffman, 1967). One of the hallmarks of high self-monitors is their tendency to "closely monitor the thoughts, actions, and feelings of those around them" (Sasovova et al., 2010: 641). By paying close attention to others and adapting their own behaviors in response, high self-monitors enhance the fluidity and efficacy of interactions to generate positive social emotions for interacting parties (Quinn & Dutton, 2005). Further, according to Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, and Johnson (2001b), high self-monitoring should facilitate role transitions by enabling individuals to better read cues from others and adapt in a way that buffers the transition between roles and activities. Similarly, high self-monitors are adept at interpreting motives driving social interactions, and when individuals have an explanation for the meaning and function of an interruption, they produce greater positive effects on mood (Jett & George, 2003). Thus, high self-monitors can maximize positive social emotions and energy generated through small talk.



In addition, we expect that high self-monitoring will mitigate the negative association between small talk and cognitive work engagement. Engagement theory (Kahn, 1990) explains that interactions with coworkers can elevate employees' perceived meaning—belief that the work they do is important to others in the organization—and psychological safety—the idea that they can invest themselves in tasks without fear of negative consequences (Rich et al., 2010). For example, Kahn (1990) suggested that individuals who stay within the boundaries of appropriate behavior will feel safer and more engaged at work. Given that high self-monitors are more likely to uphold interpersonal norms, they are more likely to avoid embarrassing interpersonal interactions, which prevent distractions from their work (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Further, high self-monitors place emphasis on using interactions to build relationships that might be valuable in the future (Day & Schleicher, 2006; Sasovova et al., 2010). So, they can use small talk as an opportunity to establish relationships that alleviate fatigue or reinvigorate attention toward tasks following the small talk episode. Finally, high self-monitors should be more effective at establishing the boundaries of interactions in a way that can punctuate a conversation so that they can return to their work without too much disruption. Thus, they effectively navigate competing expectations and are accustomed to moving between tasks and situations with ease. Because higher self-monitors move fluidly into and out of small talk, they should experience greater gains in meaningfulness and safety relative to low self-monitors, and should be less likely to have their cognitive engagement disrupted by small talk.

*Hypothesis 5. The relationship between small talk and (a) positive social emotions and (b) cognitive work engagement is moderated by self-monitoring. Specifically, higher (vs. lower) self-monitoring will (a) strengthen the positive association between small talk and positive social emotions, and (b) mitigate the negative association between small talk and cognitive work engagement.*

Combined, our theorizing suggests the presence of moderated mediation, such that the within-person indirect effects of daily small talk on both end-of-workday well-being and OCB via positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement will be contingent upon one's level of self-monitoring. More specifically, we posit that the indirect effect of daily small talk on each outcome via positive social emotions will be stronger when self-monitoring is higher (vs. lower); conversely, the indirect effect of daily small talk on

each outcome via cognitive work engagement will be weaker when self-monitoring is higher (vs. lower). In sum, we propose:

*Hypothesis 6. The positive indirect relationship of daily small talk with end of day well-being through increased daily (a) positive social emotions and (b) cognitive work engagement is stronger when self-monitoring is higher (vs. lower).*

*Hypothesis 7. The negative indirect relationship of daily small talk with OCB through increased daily (a) positive social emotions and (b) cognitive work engagement is weaker when self-monitoring is higher (vs. lower).*

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

We collected data in two phases. In the first phase, we sent a recruitment email to alumni of undergraduate and graduate degree programs in human resource management at a large public university in the Northeastern United States, and posted advertisements on LinkedIn. Potential participants were encouraged to forward the recruitment announcement to other qualified participants. The recruitment materials contained a description of the study and a link to an online sign-up survey. Qualifications for participating in the study were that individuals had to be employed full-time (at least 32 hours per week), work outside the home, and work a traditional schedule (e.g., arrive by 9 a.m.; leave by 5 p.m.) based on Eastern Standard Time. Employees were informed that they could receive up to \$70 for their participation in the study. The sign-up survey contained an informed consent form, the Level 2 moderator (i.e., self-monitoring), and demographics. In total, 151 qualified employees completed the sign-up survey.

Approximately two weeks later, the 151 employees began the second phase of the study, which included three daily email surveys administered for 15 consecutive workdays. Participants completed the morning survey at, on average, 9:41 a.m. This survey contained measures of small talk, positive social emotions, sleep quality, and cognitive engagement, which were control variables in our model (see "Analytic Approach"). Participants completed the afternoon survey at, on average, 1:43 p.m. This survey contained measures of small talk, which was modeled as the independent variable, as well as positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement, the mediators. Participants completed the evening survey at, on average, 7:42

p.m. This survey contained measures of end-of-day well-being and OCB, the dependent variables. Importantly, we temporally separated our variables across our surveys to better infer causality and align with experience sampling method (ESM) best practices (Gabriel, Podsakoff, Beal, Scott, Sonnentag, & Butts, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-six employees did not participate in the daily part of the study. Of the remaining 125 employees, 25 did not complete at least three days of surveys and were excluded from our analyses. Retaining employees who completed at least three days is necessary in order to capture employees' lived experience and to appropriately model within-person variability (Gabriel, Koopman, Rosen, & Johnson, 2018; Rosen, Koopman, Gabriel, & Johnson, 2016). The final sample had 978 Level 1 data points out of a possible 1,500 (65.2% response rate) from 100 employees (9.78 days per employees). Participants were mostly female (77.0%) and Caucasian (60.0%). The mean age was 33.6 years old ( $SD = 10.83$ ). On average, participants had worked 3.49 years in their current job ( $SD = 4.23$ ) and 5.06 years in their current organization ( $SD = 6.50$ ).

### Daily Within-Person Measures

With the exception of daily sleep quality, all measures were rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). All items for our daily constructs are included in Appendix A.

<sup>1</sup> We modeled afternoon small talk as our IV because it allowed us to capture a range of episodes respondents could have engaged in since arriving at work. Given that the morning survey was completed, on average, at 9:41 a.m., we would be capturing the timeframe (about an hour and a half) since employees arrived at work. The afternoon survey was completed, on average, at 1:43 p.m., which provided a longer timeframe (including lunch breaks) to capture small talk since the morning survey. Given that employees likely take some time to become engaged in their work, assessing the cocreated link between small talk and the mediators was theoretically and practically meaningful. In a supplemental analysis where we removed afternoon small talk to model morning small talk, results were not as supportive: morning small talk did not relate to either positive social emotions ( $\gamma = .01$ , n.s.) or cognitive work engagement ( $\gamma = -.01$ , n.s.) in the afternoon. Further, self-monitoring did not moderate the within-person relationship between morning small talk and afternoon positive social emotions ( $\gamma = -.02$ , n.s.), or morning small talk and afternoon cognitive work engagement ( $\gamma = -.01$ , n.s.). Full results of this alternative path model are available from the authors upon request.

**Small talk.** Although we identified one existing small talk scale (Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Landowski, 2014), it focuses narrowly on the content of small talk (e.g., “discussed the weather,” “discussed a movie”) and thus does not adequately capture the broader scope and global definition of small talk informed by the extant literature. Thus, we developed a scale to measure workplace small talk. We summarize the validation steps here, and provide greater detail in an online supplement to this article ([https://osf.io/tb7nd/?view\\_only=6075310acaed4a6aa848bcd7c09c7892](https://osf.io/tb7nd/?view_only=6075310acaed4a6aa848bcd7c09c7892)). In Stage 1, following Hinkin's (1995) and Hinkin and Tracey's (1999) recommendations, the authors independently generated 15 items based on a review of the literature to capture the definition of small talk: “short, superficial or trivial exchanges that do not involve task-focused exchange of information (e.g., conversations about weather, sports, weekend activities, or comments that are irrelevant or obvious).” We then solicited feedback from 10 subject-matter experts who assessed the content validity of the items, and we retained the six items they judged as best representing the small talk construct.

In Stages 2 and 3, following recent guidelines established by Colquitt, Sabey, Rodell, and Hill (2019), we collected data from three independent samples ( $n = 455$ ) to examine the scale's factor structure and discriminant validity. First, we conducted principal component factor analysis to identify items that could be removed. We retained four items that loaded highest onto the small talk factor. Next, we conducted principal component analysis and a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using Mplus version 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) to assess the factor structure of the small talk scale and distinguish it from similar constructs (e.g., coworker support, gossip, daily interruptions); the four small talk items loaded strongly onto one factor with no cross-loadings onto other factors. In a complementary procedure, we followed Schriesheim, Powers, Scandura, Gardiner, and Lankau's (1993) recommendations to distinguish the small talk items from related constructs (e.g., work-related communication). Participants were presented with the small talk definition and five construct definitions (one by one) related to communication episodes at work, with each definition followed by 34 randomized items. We conducted one-way analyses of variance and Duncan's multiple range test (Hinkin & Tracey, 1999) to assess each item's content validity by comparing their mean ratings across each of the six construct definitions to identify whether item means were significantly different across constructs and to determine which means were significantly different from one

another (see Djurdjevic et al., 2017). Results of these analyses (see the online supplement) jointly support the validity of our workplace small talk scale.

In the morning survey, participants reported their level of small talk since they arrived at work that morning; in the afternoon, participants reported the extent of their small talk with coworkers since completing the morning survey. The coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days was .94 for the morning survey and .93 for the afternoon survey.

**Positive and negative social emotions.** We measured positive social emotions in the morning and afternoon with seven items from Kitayama, Mesquita, and Karasawa's (2006) social emotion scale. Participants were given a list of social emotions and asked to report the degree to which they felt each of the emotions at the present moment. The coefficient  $\alpha$  value averaged across days was .87 in both the morning and afternoon surveys. Additionally, as a control, we measured negative social emotions with six items from Kitayama et al. (2006) in the morning (coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days = .89) and afternoon (coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days = .88).

**Cognitive work engagement.** Participants reported the extent to which they had experienced cognitive work engagement since arriving to work (morning survey) and since completing the morning survey (afternoon survey), with three items adapted from Rich et al.'s (2010) scale. Coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days was .97 for the morning and .95 for the afternoon.

**Ego depletion.** As a control, participants indicated the extent to which they felt depleted in the morning and afternoon surveys with five items from Lanaj, Johnson, and Barnes (2014). The coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days was .94 in the morning and .95 in the afternoon.

**End-of-day well-being.** When studying experiences such as well-being it is most appropriate to focus on specific moments, such as in the evening after work (Sonnentag, 2001). Participants were asked to reflect on their well-being at the end of each workday in the evening survey using Sonnentag's (2001) three items. The coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days was .77.

**OCB.** We assessed daily OCB at the end of each day with six items from Dalal, Lam, Weiss, Welch, and Hulin's (2009) scale. The coefficient  $\alpha$  averaged across days was .89.

## Between-Person Measure

**Self-monitoring.** We measured self-monitoring using the eight positively worded items from Snyder and Gangestad's (1986) scale (e.g., Scott, Barnes, &

Wagner, 2012). Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), including items such as, "In different situations and with different people, I often act like a very different person" and "I'm not always the person I appear to be." The coefficient  $\alpha$  was .78.<sup>2</sup>

## Analytic Approach

Because our data involve responses nested within individuals, we utilized multilevel path analysis in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). We first confirmed that there was sufficient within-person variability to support multilevel analyses (see Table 1). Results demonstrated that our Level 1 constructs had substantial within-person variability ranging from 33.26–72.90%, with 56.96% of the variability in afternoon small talk attributable to within-person variation. Prior to hypothesis testing, we performed a multilevel CFA. We modeled the items of the seven within-individual variables (small talk, positive social emotions, negative social emotions [control variable], cognitive work engagement, ego depletion [control variable], end-of-day well-being, and OCB) within-person centered at Level 1, and the items for our between-individual variable (self-monitoring) grand-mean centered at Level 2. Results indicated acceptable fit ( $\chi^2_{(526)} = 1777.25$ , CFI = .86, RMSEA = .05, SRMR<sub>within</sub> = .06, SRMR<sub>between</sub> = .10). Ofnote, the CFI value is slightly lower than conventional standards (e.g., Kline, 2016). We determined through a series of alternative models that the issue largely stems from the inclusion of negative social emotions; when we removed this construct, the fit indices improved:  $\chi^2_{(355)} = 1065.96$ , CFI = .91, RMSEA = .05, SRMR<sub>within</sub> = .05, SRMR<sub>between</sub> = .10). Thus, we feel confident that our hypothesized variables exhibit fit commensurate with other published work (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2018), and even our model with control variables still meets the majority of model fit conventions (that, notably, were established with models that were nonmultilevel in nature [e.g., Kline, 2016]). Moreover, as West, Taylor, and Wu (2012) noted, it is appropriate for scholars to consider model fit using a holistic assessment of all fit indices, versus relying on one (i.e., CFI).

<sup>2</sup> Importantly, we ran an alternative version of the model, detailed below, in which we used the full 18-item measure that included positively and negatively worded items from Snyder and Gangestad (1986). Results as reported in Figure 1 remained qualitatively unchanged, and are available from the authors upon request.

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage Of Within- and Between-Individual Variance in Daily Constructs**

	Within-individual variance ( $e^2$ )	Between-individual variance ( $r^2$ )	% of within-individual variance
Sleep quality (AM)	.67	.25	72.90
Small talk (AM)	.61	.32	65.41
Positive social emotions (AM)	.28	.54	34.35
Cognitive work engagement (AM)	.77	.50	60.35
Negative social emotions (AM)	.18	.27	40.31
Ego depletion (AM)	.47	.58	44.61
Small talk (PM)	.59	.45	56.96
Positive social emotions (PM)	.24	.63	27.29
Cognitive work engagement (PM)	.60	.36	62.80
Negative social emotions (PM)	.14	.29	33.26
Ego depletion (PM)	.41	.71	36.91
End-of-day well-being (EV)	.53	.38	58.22
OCB (EV)	.36	.59	37.62

Notes: The percentage of within-individuals variance was calculated as  $e^2 / (e^2 + r^2)$ . Small talk (AM), positive social emotions (AM), cognitive work engagement (AM), negative social emotions (PM), and ego depletion (PM) were used as control variables to model change in our focal constructs.

Following recommendations (Enders & Tofighi, 2007; Hofmann & Gavin, 1998; Ohly, Sonnentag, Niessen, & Zapf, 2010), we within-person-centered exogenous Level 1 variables. The main benefit of within-person centering is it empirically isolates situations where individuals are above or below their personal average level (e.g., on days an employee engages in more or in less small talk than their average level, what is the effect on positive social emotions?). Importantly, any unmodeled Level 2 constructs, such as personality or gender, are uncorrelated with such variations, eliminating confounds (Enders & Tofighi, 2007; Gabriel et al., 2019). Our Level 2 variable, self-monitoring, was grand-mean centered based on recommendations for modeling cross-level moderators (Enders & Tofighi, 2007). All hypothesized relationships at Level 1 were modeled as random effects; the direct effects of small talk on each outcome (i.e., end-of-day well-being, OCB) and control variables were modeled as fixed effects to reduce model complexity (Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011; Wang, Liu, Liao, Gong, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Shi, 2013). Residuals for our mediators (i.e., positive social emotions, cognitive work engagement, control variables of negative social emotions and ego depletion) and outcomes (i.e., end-of-day well-being, OCB) were allowed to covary (Kline, 2016; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

As noted above, we included several controls in our analyses. First, we included prior (i.e., morning) assessments of small talk, positive social emotions, and cognitive work engagement as predictors of end-

of-day well-being and OCB. We also modeled morning positive social emotions as a predictor of afternoon positive social emotions, and morning cognitive work engagement as a predictor of afternoon cognitive work engagement. This enabled us to exclude prior levels of these constructs as alternative explanations, and to interpret these constructs as a change in their level (e.g., Gabriel, Diefendorff, & Erickson, 2011; Lanaj, Johnson, & Lee, 2016; Scott & Barnes, 2011); it also provides additional evidence for our hypothesized causal direction (Beal, 2015). Second, because individuals can experience linear fluctuations in their daily states (Beal & Ghandour, 2011; Beal & Weiss, 2003), we controlled for effects of the day on which participants completed the survey (i.e., 1–15) on our mediators and endogenous variables; this variable was left uncentered in our analyses (all other controls were within-person centered).

For theoretical reasons, we also controlled for daily sleep quality on all mediating and endogenous variables, as sleep quality relates to within-person mood and well-being (e.g., Lanaj et al., 2014; Minkel et al., 2012) and has been controlled for in studies assessing factors that predict within-person OCB (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2018). We assessed sleep quality each morning with a single item, “How would you evaluate your sleep last night?” (1 = very poor to 5 = very good) (Buysse, Reynolds, Monk, Berman, & Kupfer, 1989). Similarly, we controlled for afternoon negative social emotions (Kitayama et al., 2006) and afternoon ego depletion (Lanaj et al., 2014) as alternative mediating pathways because small talk may

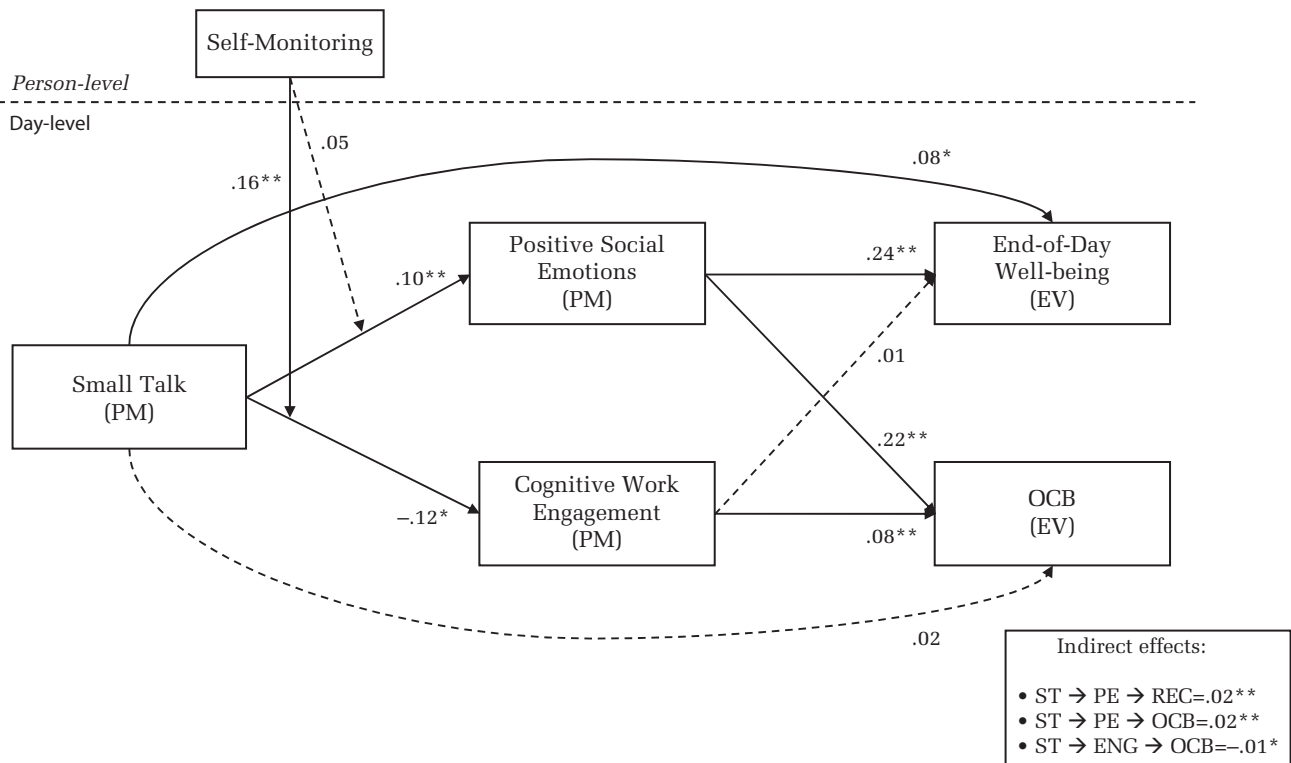


TABLE 2  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<b>Level 1</b>																	
1. Sleep quality	3.29	.96	-														
2. Day	-		.03	-													
3. Small talk (AM)	2.05	.97	.03	-.01	(.94)												
4. Positive social emotions (AM)	2.41	.92	.11**	-.16**	.32**	(.87)											
5. Cognitive work engagement (AM)	3.08	1.13	.01	-.10**	-.05	.15**	(.97)										
6. Negative social emotions (AM)	1.40	.69	-.13**	-.02	.01	-.06	-.03	(.89)									
7. Ego depletion (AM)	1.86	1.02	-.30**	-.05	-.03	-.15**	-.16**	.42**	(.94)								
8. Small talk (PM)	2.42	1.03	.05	.07*	.19**	.07*	-.03	-.04	-.02	(.93)							
9. Positive emotions (PM)	2.42	.91	.09**	-.06	.14**	.45**	.08*	-.08*	-.12**	.22**	(.87)						
10. Cognitive work engagement (PM)	3.40	.97	-.01	-.09**	-.01	.13**	.25**	-.02	-.06*	-.09**	.23**	(.95)					
11. Negative social emotions (PM)	1.39	.68	-.08*	-.04	-.05	-.13**	.04	.62**	.30**	-.09**	-.20**	-.06	(.88)				
12. Ego depletion (PM)	1.98	1.03	-.09**	.01	-.07*	-.19**	-.12**	.29**	.47**	-.07*	-.23**	-.22**	.38**	(.95)			
13. End-of-day well-being (EV)	3.58	.94	.12**	.02	.09**	.15**	.08*	-.19**	-.18**	.14**	.21**	.03	-.23**	-.19**	(.77)		
14. OCB (EV)	3.05	.99	-.01	-.06	.10**	.21**	.06*	-.02	-.02	.07*	.20**	.14**	-.05	-.10**	.17**	(.89)	
<b>Level 2</b>																	
15. Self-monitoring	2.70	.74	-.19	-.01	.05	-.05	-.34**	.32**	.32**	.09	.03	-.25*	.33**	.33**	-.26**	-.11	(.77)

Notes: Level 1 (day-level)  $n = 978$ ; Level 2 (person-level)  $n = 100$ . AM = morning survey measure; PM = afternoon survey measure; EV = evening survey measure. Correlations for within-individual (Level 1) variables reflect within person-centered associations. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

**FIGURE 1**  
**Multilevel Path Analysis Results**



Notes: Level 1 (day-level)  $n = 978$ ; Level 2 (person-level)  $n = 100$ . PM = afternoon survey measure; EV = evening survey measure. Using formulas provided by Snijders and Bosker (1999), our model accounted for 6% of the within-person variance in positive social emotions, 11% of the within-person variance in cognitive work engagement, 31% of the within-person variance in end-of-day well-being, and 28% of the within-person variance in OCB.

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

create discomfort (Collins, 2004); similar to our hypothesized effects of positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement, we also controlled for the morning assessments of negative social emotions and ego depletion on afternoon negative social emotions and ego depletion, and on end-of-day well-being and OCB. Importantly, our results hold with or without controls; we retained them as a more conservative examination (Spector & Brannick, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

In testing multilevel mediation and moderated mediation, we followed Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010) and Selig and Preacher (2008) and used a Monte Carlo bootstrap approach with 20,000 simulated bias-corrected parameter estimates to calculate 95% confidence intervals (CIs) around our indirect and

conditional indirect effects (e.g., Koopman et al., 2016). We specified a 1-1-1 mediation model (Preacher et al., 2010), testing the indirect effect of small talk on each outcome via positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement. Conditional indirect effects were modeled at high and low levels of self-monitoring (1 *SD* above and below the mean) for instances where self-monitoring emerged as a significant cross-level moderator.

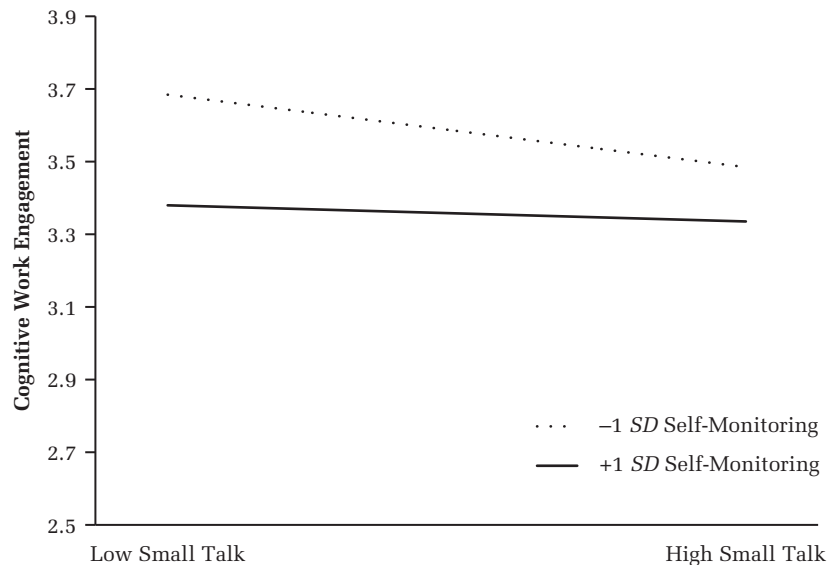
**RESULTS**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are displayed in Table 2. Results from our multilevel path analysis, which depicts direct and indirect effects, are shown in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that daily small talk would be positively related to positive social emotions. Results (see Figure 1) were supportive: controlling

<sup>3</sup> Results of the path model without controls are available from the authors upon request.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Cross-Level Moderating Effect of Self-Monitoring on the Relationship Between Daily Small Talk and Cognitive Work Engagement**



Notes: The relationship between daily small talk and daily cognitive work engagement is negative and significant at low levels of self-monitoring (simple slope =  $-.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and nonsignificant at high levels of self-monitoring (simple slope =  $-.01$ , n.s.).

for morning levels of our mediators, daily small talk positively related to positive social emotions ( $\gamma = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Hypotheses 2a and 2b considered the positive indirect effect of daily small talk on (a) end-of-day well-being and (b) daily OCB via positive social emotions. Hypothesis 2a was supported: positive social emotions positively related to end-of-day well-being ( $\gamma = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the indirect effect of daily small talk on well-being (estimate =  $.024$ , 95% CI =  $.0097$ ,  $.0453$ ) was significant via daily positive social emotions. Hypothesis 2b was also supported: positive social emotions positively related to OCB ( $\gamma = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the indirect effect of daily small talk on OCB (estimate =  $.022$ , 95% CI =  $.0103$ ,  $.0391$ ) was significant via positive social emotions.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that daily small talk would be negatively related to cognitive work engagement. Results were supportive: controlling for morning levels of our mediators, daily small talk was negatively related to cognitive work engagement ( $\gamma = -.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Hypothesis 4a, which considered the positive indirect effect of daily small talk on end-of-day well-being via cognitive work engagement, was not supported: cognitive work engagement did not relate to end-of-day well-being ( $\gamma = .00$ , n.s.), and the 95% CI for the indirect effect of small talk on well-being via

cognitive work engagement included 0 (estimate =  $.000$ , 95% CI =  $-.0109$ ,  $.0102$ ). However, Hypothesis 4b was supported, as cognitive work engagement positively related to OCB ( $\gamma = .08$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the indirect effect of small talk on OCB via cognitive work engagement was negative and significant (estimate =  $-.010$ , 95% CI =  $-.0221$ ,  $-.0031$ ).

Hypothesis 5 predicted that self-monitoring would moderate the relationship between daily small talk and both (a) positive social emotions and (b) cognitive work engagement. As shown in Figure 1, the moderating effects on the link between small talk and positive social emotions was not significant ( $\gamma = .05$ , n.s.); however, self-monitoring significantly moderated the relation between daily small talk and cognitive engagement ( $\gamma = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The interaction is illustrated in Figure 2: consistent with our theory, for high self-monitors the negative effect of small talk on cognitive work engagement is mitigated (simple slope =  $-.01$ , n.s.), but for low self-monitors, the relationship is more strongly negative (simple slope =  $-.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 5b, but not 5a, was supported. Given that Hypothesis 5a was not supported, we were precluded from examining the conditional indirect effects specified in Hypotheses 6a and 7a for the indirect effects of small talk on outcomes via positive social emotions. Moreover, given that cognitive

work engagement did not exhibit a significant relationship with end-of-workday well-being, we were also precluded from exploring Hypothesis 6b. However, we did examine and find support for Hypothesis 7b: the indirect effect of daily small talk on OCB via cognitive work engagement was not significant at higher self-monitoring (estimate =  $-.001$ , 95% CI =  $-.0090$ ,  $.0083$ ), and was significant and negative at lower self-monitoring (estimate =  $-.020$ , 95% CI =  $-.0406$ ,  $-.0064$ ).

### Supplemental Analyses

Although we temporally separated small talk and our mediating mechanisms from our outcomes of interest following best practices in ESM research (Gabriel et al., 2019), small talk, positive social emotions, and cognitive work engagement were measured at the same point in time, leading to possible concerns about reverse causality. This timing of measurement allowed us to examine the very proximal effects of small talk on these two transient states that, in some ways, are likely to be cocreated with small talk (e.g., Diefendorff, Gabriel, Nolan, & Yang, 2019). Nonetheless, to further explore our data we tested a reverse-causal model, with small talk mediating the effects of positive social emotions and cognitive work engagement on well-being and OCB. This analysis followed the analytic approach detailed above, including the same control variables and self-monitoring as a cross-level moderator. In this reverse-causal model, positive social emotions were positively related to small talk ( $\gamma = .35$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and cognitive work engagement was negatively related to small talk ( $\gamma = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Self-monitoring did not moderate the effect of positive social emotions on small talk ( $\gamma = .05$ , n.s.), though it did moderate the effect of cognitive work engagement on small talk ( $\gamma = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, small talk did not significantly relate to well-being ( $\gamma = .05$ , n.s.) or OCB ( $\gamma = .03$ , n.s.). This analysis lends support to our theorizing—namely, that small talk generates positive social emotions and hinders cognitive work engagement, with these processes in turn affecting employees' well-being and behaviors (i.e., OCB) versus individuals reaping direct benefits from small talk at work.

### DISCUSSION

Coupland (2000: 4) argued that “everyday language is the ‘best data’”—it is the norm from which other forms of discourse deviate. Yet, small talk has been marginalized in organizational scholarship because

it is considered inconsequential and purposeless. On the contrary, our study suggests that the formulaic, fluid nature of small talk serves as a socially constructive ritual in daily work life (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Coupland et al., 1992; Garfinkel, 1964). Indeed, our results show that, despite the reduction in cognitive engagement and, in turn, OCB, prompted by daily small talk, employees who engaged in more small talk during their workday reported increased positive social emotions, which translated into greater OCB and well-being at the end of the day.

### Theoretical Contributions

A core contribution of our research is that we introduce the construct of small talk into management discourse and discriminate it through validation procedures from complementary forms of communication, interactions, and relationships such as gossip, friendship, or task-related exchanges. In the organizational sciences, research has focused on communication directed toward achieving some desired purpose (Lockwood et al., 2019). Yet, decades of research in communications and social psychology have evidenced that small talk is distinct from these workplace interactions because it lacks task-based or intimate exchanges (e.g., Holmes, 2000). Though small talk may lead to trusting relationships (Methot et al., 2017), and may set the stage for task-related exchanges, it is not expressly intended to do so. Rather, small talk is divorced from meaning, intimacy, or purpose, and can occur between people who are not closely acquainted.

Our research builds upon this foundation by recognizing that seemingly inconsequential conversations can have meaningful effects on individuals' daily work experiences. Indeed, small talk is unique because it emphasizes how “ritual solidarity is generated in the little transient interactions of everyday life, at the level of the encounter” (Collins, 1990: 28). This is a departure from traditional research on workplace interactions, which has emphasized the idiosyncrasies and active maintenance of a relationship (Walsh, Halgin, & Huang, 2018). However, IRT and microrole transitions provide a strong theoretical basis for our argument that brief, impersonal encounters can “pump individuals with emotional energy” (Collins, 2004: 34) and act as a recreational activity that allows individuals to disengage from their work. On one hand, small talk can fulfill employees' need for belonging, boosting their positive emotional energy and smoothing transitions between roles and activities; this translates into greater well-being and energy



to direct toward OCB. On the other hand, small talk is inherently “off topic,” reducing cognitive work engagement and, in turn, the extent to which individuals have residual time and energy for OCB.

Further, this research broadens our understanding of how interaction rituals and role transitions unfold in the reality of organizations. Verbal exchanges that comprise the polite or friendly routine of interactions are a key type of ritual in everyday life (Firth, 1972; Goffman, 1981). More specifically, small talk is “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski, 1972/1923: 151) that provides a routinized and predetermined script to facilitate transitions into and out of daily roles. By theorizing about small talk as a transition script, we advance current conceptualizations of what behaviors constitute transitions and interaction rituals, and demonstrate that local conversational routines are the social fabric of organizations (Coupland, 2000). Moreover, our research theoretically advances our understanding of how energy is derived from, and invested in, our work experiences. We show that the emotional experience of receiving energy from small talk (in the form of positive social emotions) is different than the investment of energy directly into one’s role performance (in the form of cognitive work engagement)—in this way, small talk may operate as a distraction point for individuals, where a shift in mental focus breaks the connection employees have with their work activities. This is consistent with both IRT and microrole transitions, as small talk can generate a sense of intrapsychic energy, yet distract from engagement in one’s work tasks.

Our work also speaks to the manner in which daily interactions can aid in individual well-being. Research has suggested that social interactions can serve as work breaks (Kim et al., 2018; Jett & George, 2003), and that these breaks allow individuals to reenergize and alleviate work stress. Indeed, our results suggest that small talk can facilitate well-being by generating positive social emotions, which signal that employees’ day-to-day routines are successful, boosting their well-being after leaving work. That is, our findings highlight that small talk may help employees mentally disengage from their work—a key driver of well-being (Bennett et al., 2016, 2018)—inasmuch as this daily experience facilitates social emotions. Interestingly, no evidence emerged to suggest that small talk positively affects well-being via cognitive work engagement, suggesting that the interruptions created by small talk do not inhibit employees’ well-being at the end of the day.

Finally, our work also acknowledges the joint influences of social environments and individual characteristics in understanding individual outcomes (Mischel, 1977). Specifically, we suggest that small talk may have different effects for some individuals—namely, high self-monitors—than others. Both IRT and microrole transitions evoke the idea that high self-monitors are more effective at navigating scripted transitions and interactions because they are better able to display normatively appropriate emotional and behavioral responses (Ashforth, 2001). Our finding that self-monitoring moderated the effect of small talk on cognitive work engagement is consistent with the ideas of microrole transitions and IRT in that high self-monitors can move fluidly between situations with less disruption. For high self-monitors, it seems that small talk mitigates the distracting consequences while retaining the uplifting consequences of positive emotions, OCB, and well-being. Our research extends the growing literature integrating workplace interactions and individual differences (e.g., Fang et al., 2015; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001).

### Practical Implications

Our findings have useful practical implications for individuals and organizations. First, our research speaks to a growing body of literature on interactional features of job design spurred by the changing nature of work (e.g., adoption of virtual communication platforms, telecommuting, and the rise of the gig economy [Grant & Parker, 2009; Kilduff & Brass, 2010; Methot, Rosado-Solomon, & Allen, 2018]). Specifically, our research underscores the value of small talk in a face-to-face setting. To the extent that the shift to virtual or gig work prohibits the opportunity for small talk, it may result in lower well-being and OCB. Similarly, our research contributes to the literature on workday design, which advocates for overcoming the negative effects of workload pressure by allowing workers to have unstructured “free time” that can reduce urgency and encourage creativity (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006). Our findings also have implications for office design. On one hand, it is important that offices be designed so that employees have the space and opportunity to engage in spontaneous, informal interactions (Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). Because small talk often occurs in common areas at work (Fayard & Weeks, 2007), such spaces are crucial for promoting the positive effects derived from small talk. Similarly, organizations with remote workers are taking steps to engineer small talk between employees to combat

physical separation and foster rapport (Carino, 2019). On the other hand, we found that small talk can be distracting, and thus modern trends such as open office designs, in which employees work in a communal space, may inadvertently be distracting. Small talk may be a mechanism that underlies extant findings that open office designs have negative productivity effects for employees (e.g., Brennan, Chugh, & Kline, 2002; Evans & Johnson, 2000).

Our findings also tie into broader implications for workplace loneliness—employees' subjective affective evaluations of whether their affiliation needs are met by people they work with and the organization they work for (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). The former U.S. surgeon general recently described loneliness as a “modern epidemic” (Murthy, 2017), and a burgeoning stream of research has attended to organizational factors that alleviate or compensate for employee loneliness. In a recent *Financial Times* article, a former taxi driver who transitioned to work as an Uber driver expressed,

[At my old mini cab job], when the work was quiet, you'd go back into the office: all the drivers would be there, you'd mingle, you'd have a little chit-chat... [Now] it's very, very lonely—it's just you inside your box, driving with London traffic, with all this stress. The long-term effect, honestly: it's like a bomb waiting to explode. (O'Conner, 2017)

Given the negative implications of workplace loneliness for employees' well-being and job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018), our research offers simple recommendations for how to utilize small talk to build connections with coworkers in a way that boosts well-being.

Our findings are also relevant to organizational practices directed toward socializing new employees into the workplace. To the extent that small talk creates energy, gives rise to positive social emotions, and facilitates well-being, organizations might facilitate small talk to foster positive experiences for employees who are adjusting to a new work environment. Small talk between new and existing employees is likely to foster a sense of belonging and solidarity for the new employees, increasing their commitment to the organization and paving the way for improved trust and task-related cooperation between new hires and incumbents (Mak & Chui, 2013). Small talk also has the benefit of keeping interactions relatively superficial, which can curtail the complications associated with developing stronger friendships with coworkers (Methot, LePine, Podsakoff, & Christian, 2016). Relatedly, while many cultures have

communication patterns resembling small talk (Malinowski, 1972/1923), its content differs between cultures (Meyer, 2014). Because failure to effectively engage in small talk hinders rapport and trust (Molinsky, 2013), it has been cited as a major barrier for expatriates' integration in foreign companies (Mak & Chui, 2013) and cross-cultural negotiations (Ladegaard, 2011). Practices aimed at easing barriers in cross-cultural small talk would make a valuable contribution to expatriate management and international business, and have broader implications for diversity management.

Admittedly, one coauthor of this study has repeatedly expressed their aversion to small talk, describing it as awkward, draining, and inauthentic (e.g., as in cases of “networking”). A second coauthor reflected on how they frequently violate the normative expectations of small talk by providing more information than would be acceptable in a passing, nonintimate conversation (e.g., oversharing in response to “How are you today?”). In discussions with others about this research, these are not uncommon experiences. Whether rooted in fears of social rejection, social anxiety, or simply not desiring or not feeling equipped to feign interest in others, small talk can evoke a negative stigma. Interestingly, because our research adopts a within-individual design that controls for between-individual differences such as extraversion and anxiety, we demonstrate that increases in small talk above one's personal mean (i.e., engaging in more small talk than one normally would on average) produces largely positive interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes. This suggests that people may “mistakenly seek solitude” by avoiding small talk for the anticipated discomfort, possibly because they overestimate negative consequences and underestimate positive consequences, of small talk (Epley & Schroeder, 2014: 1981). Importantly, however, our research suggests that the scripted nature of small talk can alleviate some uncertainty around successful small talk rituals by helping to prepare individuals with content in which they can ground a conversation (e.g., “Know any good restaurants around here?”).

### Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of our study that highlight opportunities for future research on workplace small talk. First, while we empirically distinguished small talk from other forms of communication in our scale validation, we did not assess alternative daily communication (e.g., gossip, incivility, task-focused exchanges) in the primary study; thus, we are not

able to pinpoint how small talk fits within the context of other interpersonal work exchanges. However, existing research has employed conversation analysis to examining dialogue line by line and demonstrate that small talk is often interspersed within and punctuated by, but is empirically and qualitatively distinct from, informational exchanges (Bubel, 2006; Cheepen, 1988; Holmes, 2000).

Next, because of the limitations of ESM design, we asked a small number of questions about the degree to which employees engaged in global small talk at work; we did not do a deep dive into the qualitative nature of the small talk in which individuals engaged. However, research in the communications literature has suggested that there may be different forms of small talk (our favorite example is “drunken banter” [Coupland et al., 1992]) that could have varied effects on employees. Employees may be more energized by small talk about their weekend plans or personal hobbies than by small talk about the weather, and this energy might translate into greater well-being. Similarly, future research could examine various motivations for engaging in small talk, such as whether the intention is instrumental (e.g., networking [Casciaro, Gino, & Kouchaki, 2014]), affiliative (Hill, 1987), or simply to pass the time (Roy, 1959).

Although we temporally separated small talk and our mediating mechanisms from our outcomes, small talk, positive social emotions, and cognitive work engagement were measured at the same point in time. We wanted to assess the very proximal effects of small talk on these two transient states that, according to IRT (Collins, 2004) and recent empirical studies on felt affect (e.g., Diefendorff et al., 2019), are likely to be cocreated with small talk. However, we acknowledge that this leads to possible concerns about reverse causality. Our supplemental analysis addresses this concern to some degree, yet future research could explore whether morning small talk has differential effects than afternoon small talk on daily emotions and cognitions.

Similarly, all of the ratings were self-reported, which could raise concerns related to common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Importantly, ESM at its core is focused on the daily, lived experiences of employees (Beal, 2015), meaning that employees themselves are best-suited to report their daily experiences and enactment of specific behaviors (i.e., OCB). In a recent overview of best practices pertaining to ESM and secondary data, Gabriel and colleagues (2019: 991) stated, “the use of same-source data is perfectly acceptable when we are interested in the experiences of the focal

individuals or if the phenomena of interest are such that only the focal participants would be privy to changes in them.” When it comes to ratings of OCB in particular, Carpenter, Berry, and Houston (2014) showed minimal differences in the mean levels of self- and other-reported citizenship, significant correspondence between measures of self- and other-reported citizenship, and that other-reported citizenship contributes little incremental variance beyond self-reported citizenship. Further, given our repeated assessments over several workdays, there is less of a concern that individuals are using holistic responding tendencies, as would be the concern with between-person measures.

Further, we did not determine specific partners with whom respondents engaged in small talk. Presumably, the functions of small talk differ based on the nature of the relationship between interaction partners. For instance, small talk with close friends is used to maintain relationships and transition into serious subjects (Knutson & Ayers, 1986), whereas small talk with strangers increases positive affect (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). These effects may also depend on whether the focal actor is the small talk *initiator*—where the individual has carved out dedicated time for a social break then intends to return to work—or *receiver*—whereby an intrusion would be more disruptive to engagement because the recipient is not in control of the interaction. Teasing apart initiator from receiver could also clarify issues related to reverse causality. Although our supplemental analysis supported our hypothesized model, it is theoretically plausible that small talk—when initiated by the focal individual to take a break—may follow cognitive engagement causally. In other words, individuals who become cognitively disengaged from their work during the day may walk to a friend’s office and engage in small talk. Future research could adopt a dyad-level perspective to investigate partner-specific effects.

## CONCLUSION

Workplace small talk, despite its trivial foundations, can have vital implications for employees. We position small talk front and center as a form of organizational discourse by differentiating it from complementary organizational phenomena and evaluating its daily effects. Because small talk is a normative script that helps employees navigate daily social interactions, it can produce successful role transitions and interaction rituals that shape meaningful day-to-day work experiences. Taken together, our results suggest



that, while small talk can distract from work engagement to compromise OCB, it is also socially productive and restorative by boosting positive social emotions, which translates into greater well-being and OCB.

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## APPENDIX ADAILY MEASURES

### ***Daily Small Talk (developed for the current study)***

1. I had “water cooler” talk with my coworkers.
2. My coworkers and I had small talk.
3. I chatted with my coworkers about superficial topics.
4. I communicated with my coworkers about trivial matters.

### ***Positive Social Emotions (Kitayama et al., 2006)***

1. Friendly feelings
2. Close feelings
3. Respect
4. Sympathy
5. Pride
6. Superiority
7. Feelings of being on top of the world

### ***Negative Social Emotions (Kitayama et al., 2006)***

1. Guilt
2. Indebtedness
3. Shame
4. Sulky feelings
5. Frustration
6. Anger

### ***Cognitive Work Engagement (adapted from Rich et al., 2010)***

1. I gave my full attention to my job.
2. My mind was focused on my work.
3. I concentrated completely on my work.

### ***Ego Depletion (Lanaj et al., 2014)***

1. I feel drained
2. My mind feels unfocused
3. It would take a lot of effort for me to concentrate on something
4. My mental energy is running low
5. I feel like my willpower is gone

### ***End-of-Day Well-Being (Sonnentag, 2001)***

1. I was in a good mood when coming home from work.
2. I felt tense when coming home from work. (reverse-coded)
3. I was in a good mood at the end of the workday.

### ***OCB (Dalal et al., 2009)***

1. I went out of my way to be a good employee.
2. I was respectful of other people’s needs.
3. I displayed loyalty to my organization.
4. I praised or encouraged someone.
5. I volunteered to do something that was not required.
6. I showed genuine concern for others.

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