# Social Curiosity and Its Functions

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Freda-Marie Hartung

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*"People are lifelong, inveterate information-seekers"*

(Baumeister, 2005: *The Cultural Animal*)

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**Zusammenfassung**

Wir leben in einer hoch komplexen sozialen Welt. Das Wissen über die soziale Umwelt, unsere Beziehungen mit anderen Menschen, und die Fähigkeit, die soziale Umwelt zu gestalten, sind von zentraler Bedeutung für unser psychisches und physisches Wohlbefinden (e.g., Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Ein starkes Interesse an Informationen über die Gedanken, Gefühle und Handlungen anderer Personen ist daher charakteristisch für das menschliche Sozialleben (Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 1996, 2004). Das Bedürfnis nach neuen Informationen über andere Personen und die daraus folgende Exploration der sozialen Umwelt wird als ‚soziale Neugier' bezeichnet (Renner, 2006). Der sozialen Neugier werden verschiedene soziale Funktionen zugeschrieben: Die Aneignung von Informationen und Wissen über die soziale Umwelt, der Aufbau und Erhalt von Beziehungen und sozialen Netzwerken und die Kontrollierbarkeit der sozialen Umwelt (Renner, 2006). In der vorliegenden Arbeit werden Studien vorgestellt, in denen soziale Neugier sowie deren Funktionen untersucht wurden.

In der ersten Studie wurde der Zusammenhang von sozialer Neugier und ‚Gossip' betrachtet (*Kapitel 2*). Dabei beschreibt ‚Gossip' das Reden über abwesende Personen (Foster, 2004). Traditionell werden soziale Neugier und Gossip in separaten Forschungsbereichen untersucht. Bei näherer Betrachtung zeigt sich jedoch, dass für soziale Neugier und Gossip ähnliche soziale Funktionen diskutiert werden (z.B. Foster, 2004; Renner, 2006). Die Ergebnisse der vorliegenden Studie zeigten, dass es sich bei sozialer Neugier und Gossip zwar um verwandte Konzepte handelt, die jedoch unterschiedliche Zusammenhänge mit den untersuchten sozialen Funktionen aufweisen. Soziale Neugier dient in erster Linie der Informationsgewinnung und dem Aufbau sowie der Stärkung sozialer Bindungen. Gossip hingegen dient eher der Unterhaltung. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie konnten damit zeigen,

dass es sich bei sozialer Neugier und Gossip um zwei distinkte Aspekte sozialen Lebens handelt.

In der zweiten Studie wurde untersucht, inwieweit soziale Neugier der Informations-gewinnung und Wissensaneignung über die soziale Umwelt dient (*Kapitel 3*). Da Persönlichkeitseinschätzungen ein unausweichlicher und bedeutsamer Bestandteil von ersten Begegnungen sind, wurde dies anhand von Persönlichkeitseinschätzungen im Kontext von Kennenlern-Interaktionen untersucht (e.g., Funder, 1999). Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass sozial neugierige Urteiler die Extraversion und Offenheit ihres Interaktionspartners genauer einschätzten. Betrachtet man den Prozess der Persönlichkeitseinschätzungen zeigt sich, dass die höhere Genauigkeit auf einer besseren Nutzung relevanter Informationen (verbales und nonverbales Verhalten, physische Merkmale) basierte. Folglich scheint soziale Neugier die Einschätzungen von solchen Eigenschaften zu beeinflussen, die in Interaktionen zwischen unbekannten Personen sichtbar sind. Damit ergab diese Studie wichtige Belege dafür, dass sozial Neugierige sich Wissen darüber angeeignet haben, wie sich Eigenschaften, die besonders in ersten Begegnungen eine zentrale Rolle spielen, im Verhalten zeigen.

In der dritten Studie wurde untersucht, inwieweit soziale Neugier den Aufbau sozialer Beziehungen erleichtert (*Kapitel 4*). Dabei wurde der Einfluss sozialer Neugier auf die Qualität von Interaktionen im Kontext erster Begegnungen untersucht. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass die Qualität von Interaktionen umso positiver bewertet wurde, je neugieriger der Interaktionspartner eingeschätzt wurde. Dieser positive Zusammenhang zwischen erlebter Interaktionsqualität und sozialer Neugier konnte durch das Verhalten der sozial neugierigen Person erklärt werden. Dabei zeigten sozial neugierige Personen nicht nur mehr explorative (z.B. stellte mehr Fragen), sondern auch mehr responsive Verhaltensweisen (z.B. ging auf das ein, was Gesprächspartner sagte). Damit ergab diese Studie wichtige Belege dafür, dass soziale Neugier im Kontext von ersten Begegnungen soziale Interaktionen begünstigt und somit den Aufbau sozialer Beziehungen erleichtert.

Die vorliegende Arbeit konnte somit bestätigen, dass das Bedürfnis nach neuen Informationen über andere Personen und die daraus folgende Exploration der sozialen Umwelt verschiedenen Funktionen dient. Die Aneignung von Informationen und Wissen über unsere soziale Umwelt, der Aufbau von sozialen Beziehungen und Netzwerken sowie die Kontrollierbarkeit der sozialen Umwelt stellen wichtige Teilbereiche des menschlichen Soziallebens dar und sind Voraussetzungen, um in einer hoch komplexen sozialen Welt erfolgreich zu bestehen. Damit erscheint soziale Neugier entscheidend für unser soziales Leben zu sein.

# Summary

We live in a highly complex social world. To understand our social environment, to be socially embedded, and to be able to handle our social environment is of crucial importance for our psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Therefore, an eagerness for information about the thoughts, feelings and behavior is a characteristic part of human social life (Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 1996, 2004). The desire to acquire new information about other people and the resulting exploration of the social environment is referred to as 'social curiosity' (Renner, 2006). It has been proposed that social curiosity serves multiple functions: The acquisition of social information and knowledge, the formation of interpersonal relationships and networks, and the controllability of the social world (Renner, 2006). The overarching aim of the present thesis was to extent the knowledge about the concept of social curiosity. Therefore, studies are presented that investigated social curiosity and its proposed functions.

In the first study, the relationship of social curiosity and gossip was examined (*Chapter 2*). Gossip refers to talk in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties (Foster, 2004). Traditionally, social curiosity and gossip are studied in distinct research fields. However, upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that highly similar functions are discussed for social curiosity and gossip (e.g., Foster, 2004; Renner, 2006). Results of the present study showed that social curiosity and gossip are related constructs but with a different pattern of social functions. Social curiosity appears to serve primarily purposes of social information acquisition and social bonding whereas gossip appears to serve predominantly entertainment purposes. Thus, social curiosity and gossip represent related but distinct aspects of social participation.

In the second study, it was examined whether social curiosity facilitates the acquisition of information and knowledge about the social environment (*Chapter 3*). As personality

judgments are an inescapable and relevant aspect of first encounters, this assumption was tested by examining the impact of social curiosity on the accuracy of personality judgments in a becoming acquainted situation. Results showed that high socially curious perceivers were more accurate when judging the Extraversion and Openness of their interaction partners. Examining the process of personality judgments indicated that the higher accuracy was grounded in a more comprehensive utilization of relevant information (verbal and nonverbal behavior, physical attributes). Social curiosity appears to impact the accuracy and the process of judgments for those traits that are prevalent and observable in initial interactions. Thus, the study provided important evidence that socially curious individuals had acquired knowledge how traits that play an important role in initial interactions are reflected in behavior.

In the third study, it was examined whether social curiosity facilitates the building of social relationships (*Chapter 4*). To test this assumption the impact of social curiosity on interaction quality in a becoming acquainted situation was investigated. Results showed that the quality of interaction with socially curious interaction partners was experienced as being more positive. Further analysis showed that this relation was due to the behavior of socially curious individuals. Socially curious interaction partners displayed not only more exploratory behaviors (e.g., asked more questions) but also more responsive behaviors (e.g., engaged in eye contact, responded to what interaction partner said). Thus, the study provided evidence that social curiosity facilitates first encounters, and consequently, may foster the building of social relationships.

Taking together, the findings of the present thesis support the notion that the desire to acquire new information about other people and the resulting exploration of the social environment serve multiple functions. The acquisition of information and knowledge about the social world, the building of social relationships and networks, and the controllability of the social world are important aspects of social participation and prerequisites to function

efficiently in a highly complex social world. Thus, social curiosity seems to be an important ingredient of social life.

# *Chapter 1*

**General Introduction**

## Curiosity

Research on curiosity has a long tradition. Already William James and William McDougall were concerned with the nature, antecedents, and consequences of curiosity (James, 1890; McDougall, 1908/1963). Researchers agree that curiosity reflects a desire for new information and experiences that leads to approach and exploratory behavior (e.g., Berlyne, 1966, 1978; James, 1890; Kang, Hsu, Krajbich, et al., 2009; Litman & Spielberger, 2003; Loewenstein, 1994; McDougall, 1908/1963).

Curiosity has been considered as a driving force in human development and learning (e.g., Baumeister, 2005; Berg & Sternberg, 1985; Schneider & Schmalt, 2000). This notion has been supported by empirical research on children, providing evidence that curiosity is associated with cognitive performance. For instance, curious children showed a better problem-solving behavior (Trudewind, 2000; Trudewind, Mackowiak, & Schneider, 1999), scored higher on scholastic achievement tests (Alberti & Witryol, 1994; Raine, Reynolds, Venables, & Mednick, 2002), and on measures of intelligence (Berg & Sternberg, 1985; Harter & Zigler, 1974; Raine et al., 2002). Similarly, research dealing with the effect of curiosity on learning in adults suggested that curiosity is associated with learning of facts (e.g., Litman, Hutchins, & Russon, 2005; Kang et al., 2009) and cognitive abilities (Daffner, Chong, Riis, et al., 2007). Thus, exploring new aspects of and stimuli in the environment provide individuals with potentially useful information and give them the opportunity to learn about their surrounding (e.g., Baumeister, 2005; James, 1890; Lorenz, 1959; Schneider & Schmalt, 2000).

The concept of curiosity has been refined by considering the stimuli that elicit curiosity (e.g., Berlyne, 1954, 1966, 1978). Accordingly, Berlyne (1954, 1966, 1978) drew a distinction between *perceptual* and *epistemic* curiosity. *Perceptual* curiosity refers to a desire for new perceptual experience evoked by new, complex, or ambiguous patterns of sensory stimulation (e.g., a line drawing depicting a lion with an elephants head). In contrast,

*epistemic* curiosity refers to a desire to acquire new knowledge elicited by new and complex ideas or conceptual ambiguities (e.g., unanswered questions, stories with a surprising end; Berlyne, 1954, 1966; Berlyne & Frommer, 1966).

The distinction between perceptual and epistemic curiosity is still apparent in current research (Collins, Litman, & Spielberger, 2004; Daffner, Scinto, Weintraub, Guinessey, & Mesulam, 1994; Kang et al., 2009; Litman & Jimerson, 2004; Litman & Spielberger, 2003; Loewenstein, 1994; Silvia, 2006; Zuckerman, 1994). Loewenstein (1994; Kang et al., 2009), for instance, has focused on epistemic curiosity evoked by a gap in one's knowledge. Daffner and colleagues (e.g., Daffner et al., 1994), in contrast, have investigated exploratory behavior as a response to unusual line drawings and pictures, thus, focusing on perceptual curiosity. Moreover, Litman and colleagues developed measures to assess interindividual differences in epistemic (Litman & Jimerson, 2004; Litman & Spielberger, 2003) and perceptual curiosity (Collins et al., 2004). Interestingly, it has been consistently shown that the correlation of perceptual and epistemic curiosity is moderate to high, supporting the notion of distinct dimensions of curiosity both rooted in an underlying curiosity construct (e.g., Collins et al., 2004; Litman & Spielberger, 2003). Thus, empirical findings suggest that curiosity is a multifaceted rather than a monolithic construct.

Taking together, research has mainly focused on curiosity that is elicited by stimuli of the *physical world*, thus, the world comprising inanimate objects and their spatial, temporal, and causal relations (Hermann, Call, Hernández-Lloreda, Hare, & Tomasello, 2009; Tomasello & Call, 1997). Curiosity, evoked by and directed at the inanimate environment, appears to foster knowledge acquisition that enables individuals to master their physical world. However, we are not only surrounded by inanimate objects but rather by a *social world* comprising other humans and complex social interrelations (Hermann et al., 2009; Tomasello & Call, 1997). Recently, it has been stressed that particularly other humans surrounding us are powerful and ubiquitous stimuli eliciting curiosity directed at the social world (Renner, 2006).

*Curiosity in the Social World*

Social curiosity has been defined as the desire to acquire new information about other people that leads to exploratory behavior and was conceptualized as a motive-behavior system (Renner, 2006). We live in a complex cultural society in which knowledge is stored and shared collectively, labor is divided, and individuals rely for learning much more on others than on their own experiences (Baumeister, 2005). Consequently, to function efficiently people need to understand their social environment, be socially embedded and able to handle their social environment (Baumeister, 2005; see also: Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2001; Dunbar, 2004; Dunbar & Shultz, 2007). An eagerness to gain new social information may help to fulfill these needs (Baumeister, 2005). Therefore, it has been proposed that social curiosity serves different functions: Social curiosity may facilitate the acquisition of social information and knowledge, the formation of interpersonal relationships and networks, and the predictability and controllability of the social world (Renner, 2006). Thus, social curiosity is assumed to have multiple functions helping individuals to successfully adapt to their social environment.

Social curiosity appears to be a distinct facet of the multifaceted curiosity construct as suggested by a moderate correlation with epistemic curiosity (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner 2006). However, so far research has largely neglected this facet of curiosity, and hence, up to now understanding of social curiosity and its functions is scarce. Accordingly, the over-arching aim of the present thesis is to extent the knowledge about the concept of social curiosity.

## Social Curiosity and Gossip

One aim of the present thesis is to determine the relationship of social curiosity and gossip. Most authors agree that gossip refers to talk in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties (Foster, 2004). Observational studies of human

conversation suggest that gossip is a widely spread social practice (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997; Emler, 1994; Levin & Arlucke, 1985). Therefore, not astonishing, gossip has attracted attention in psychological, philosophical, and anthropological literature (Ayim, 1994; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Gilmore, 1978; Haviland, 1977; Taylor, 1994). From an anthropological perspective, Robin Dunbar argues in his *'social gossip theory of language'* that human language evolved primarily to exchange social information and solve social related problems (Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2001; Dunbar, 1996). Accordingly, Foster (2004) summarized four social functions of gossip that are repeatedly mentioned in the literature (e.g., Ben Ze'ev, 1994): Information, friendship/intimacy, influence, and entertainment. In particular, the "information" function refers to gossip as an effective mechanism of information exchange that promotes social learning. It has been put forward that gossip is a particular efficient way of gaining knowledge as it allows learning from other people without direct observation (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister et al., 2004; De Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, & McAndrew, 2007). Moreover, it has been suggested that gossiping works as a social bonding mechanism (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Dunbar, 2004). Through the sharing of trusted information, the intimate manner of conveying this information as well as through the sharing of norms and the exclusion of outsiders, gossip may lead to bonding and group cohesion (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). The "influence" function refers to gossiping as an effective policing device for controlling free riders and social cheats (Dunbar, 2004; Piazza & Bering, 2008; Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2000). Gossip conveys information about norm breakers and penalties for breaking norms, thereby, influencing and guiding people's behavior. That gossip has a high entertainment and recreational value becomes immediately apparent when observing people engaged in a casual conversation. Accordingly, people often explain their involvement in gossip with immediacy of entertainment and

pleasure (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Litman & Pezzo, 2005). Thus, it appears that gossip serves multiple functions.

Considering both gossip and social curiosity it becomes apparent that highly similar functions are discussed (e.g., Foster, 2004; Renner, 2006). Moreover, the gossip literature mentions the desire for social information as one motivation of gossip (e.g., Ayim, 1994; Ben Ze'ev, 1994; Haviland, 1977; Taylor, 1994). Despite these similarities research dealing with gossip and research dealing with social curiosity are traditionally distinct fields of investigation. However, the conceptual overlap between gossip and social curiosity provides a sound possibility to better understand the concept of social curiosity. Therefore, *Chapter 2* focuses on the relationship of gossip and social curiosity.

To further understand social curiosity and the relation to its proposed functions, in a second and third step this thesis focuses on two functions of social curiosity, namely social information and knowledge acquisition as well as building of interpersonal relationships and networks, respectively.

## Social Curiosity and
## the Acquisition of Social Information and Knowledge

Information and knowledge about the social environment are of major importance to function efficiently in a social world (e.g., Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 2004). It has been suggested that the acquisition of social information and knowledge is facilitated by social curiosity (Renner, 2006).

As socially curious individuals seek out social situations (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006), and actively search for new social information within a given situation (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992; Litman & Pezzo, 2005; Reeve, 1993; Reeve & Nix, 1997) they obtain more social information and may consequently acquire more knowledge about the social environment. According to research on epistemic curiosity,

socially curious individuals might have a higher ability to deal with social information more competently (Berg & Sternberg, 1985; Schiefele, 1999; Silvia, 2006; Trudewind, 2000; Trudewind et al., 1999). Thus, socially curious individuals may attend more to new social information, deal with it more competently, and have a more profound knowledge about the social world.

One instance to test this assumption is to examine how social curiosity affects the perception of the social environment, specifically, the perception of an interaction partner. As social curiosity is evoked by new social stimuli it should be especially pronounced in an *interpersonal context* that contains *unfamiliar social stimuli*. These features are inherent aspects of encounters between previously unknown persons. Therefore, the effects of social curiosity should be especially apparent when forming a first impression about the personality of a previously unknown person.
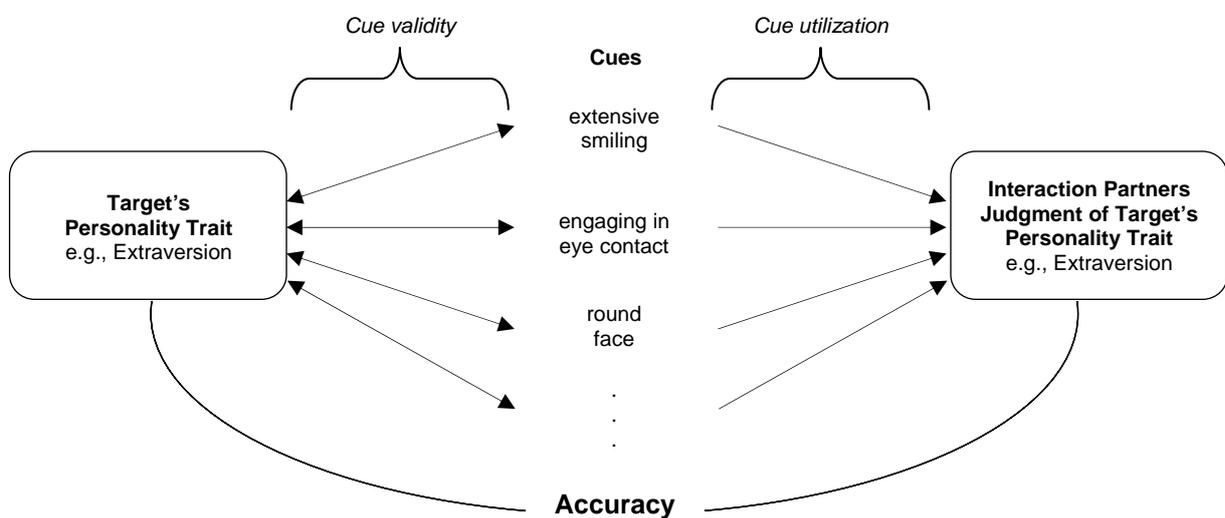


*Figure 1.* Lens Model of Brunswik (1952, 1955)

To investigate how social curiosity impacts interpersonal perception the Lens Model of Brunswik (1952, 1955; Figure 1) provides a useful template. According to this model,

personality traits of a target person need to be inferred through observable cues (i.e., physical attributes and behaviors, such as extensive smiling). The strength of relationship between a cue (e.g., extensive smile) and the targets actual standing on a respective trait (e.g., extraversion) reflects the validity of the cue ('cue validity'). The stronger the relation between a cue and a trait (e.g., extraversion), the more indicative is this cue for the trait. Accordingly, to form an accurate impression about the personality of an interaction partner, it is essential that a socially curious perceiver attends to those cues that are valid indicators of the respective trait, and moreover, appropriately interpret these cues ('cue utilization'). Hence, according to the Lens Model an accurate personality judgment occurs if the perceiver uses valid cues to infer the trait. Thus, the advantage of the Lens Model is that it provides a framework to investigate whether social curiosity influences the accuracy of personality judgments and provides insight into the process of personality judgments by illustrating which information socially curious perceivers use to form a personality impression.

Taking together, assuming that socially curious individuals attend more to social information, deal with it more competently, and know more about the social world, social curiosity should exert influence on the detection and utilization of cues, and consequently, on the accuracy of personality judgments.

## Social Curiosity and

## the Formation of Interpersonal Relationships

In addition to the influence that social curiosity might exert on the perception of an interaction partner, one might also expect that social curiosity impacts the social environment by affecting social interactions. Accordingly, it has been suggested that social curiosity facilitates the formation of social relationships (Renner, 2006).

Seeking out social situations may provide socially curious individuals with opportunities to contact new people and initiate friendships (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner,

2006), and moreover, to accumulate more interpersonal experience and competence (Renner, 2006). Above that, actively searching for new information (Fichten et al., 1992; Litman & Pezzo, 2005; Reeve, 1993; Reeve & Nix, 1997) may influence the course of an interaction and how it is experienced by interaction partners (e.g., Hess, Fannin, & Pollom, 2007; Kashdan & Roberts, 2004, 2006). Therefore, socially curious individuals may more successfully steer social interactions, mold them more positively, and build more easily social relationships.
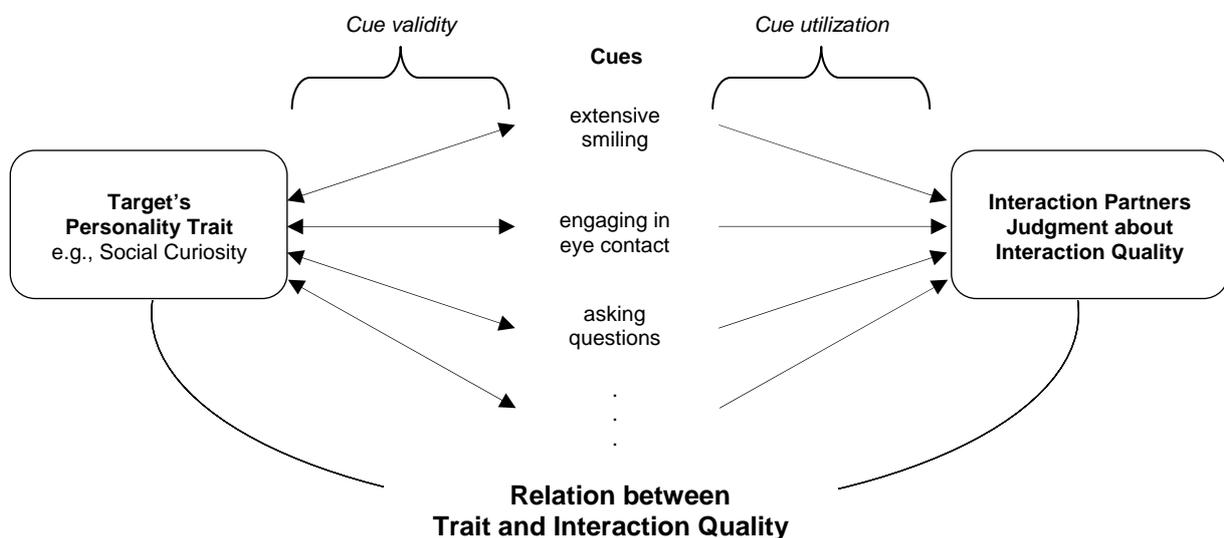


*Figure 2.* Modified Version of the Lens Model of Brunswik (Berry & Hansen, 2000)

One instance to test this assumption is to examine how previously unknown persons experience an initial interaction with a socially curious interaction partner. Once more the Lens Model of Brunswik (1952, 1955) was used as a framework. Instead of judging each others' personality traits, interaction partners evaluated the quality of interaction. Therefore, the model illustrates how personality traits and their behavioral reflection influence the experienced quality of initial interaction (see Figure 2; Berry & Hansen, 2000). Accordingly,

the *cue validity* refers to the relationship between observable behavior (e.g., asking questions) and the individuals standing on the respective trait (e.g., Social Curiosity). The *cue utilization* refers to the relationship between observable behavior (e.g., asking questions) and the experienced quality of interaction and reflects which behaviors are associated with the judgment of interaction quality. Thus, in this case the Lens Model provides a framework to investigate whether social curiosity is associated with the experienced quality of interaction and provides insight into the process by illustrating which behavior of socially curious interaction partners are related to the evaluated interaction quality.

Taking together, assuming that socially curious individuals more successfully steer social interactions and mold interactions more positively, social curious individuals should act differently in initial social interactions, and consequently, interaction with them should be experienced as more positive.

## The Present Dissertation

Social curiosity is a distinct dimension of the multifaceted curiosity construct and appears to serve multiple functions. It has been suggested that social curiosity facilitates the acquisition of social information and knowledge, the formation of interpersonal relationships and social networks, and the controllability of the social world (Renner, 2006). So far, only few studies examined social curiosity not to mention the relation to its proposed functions. Therefore, the overarching aim of the present thesis is to extent the knowledge about the concept of social curiosity.

The first study of the present thesis investigates the relationship between social curiosity and the closely connected concept of gossip in order to better understand conceptual similarities and differences' (*Chapter 2*).

The second study focuses on the function of social information and knowledge acquisition within the domain of personality judgments. In particular, the study examines the impact of social curiosity on personality judgments. More specifically, the study investigates whether and how the accuracy of personality judgments as well as the detection and utilization of cues vary as a function of the perceiver's social curiosity (*Chapter 3*).

The third study focuses on the function of facilitating the building of social relationships. In particular, the study addresses the question whether individual differences in social curiosity influence the quality of interaction between two unacquainted individuals. More specifically, the study examines whether initial interactions with curious interaction partners are perceived as more positive and whether this effect is due to their exploratory behavior (*Chapter 4*).

# Chapter 2

**Social Curiosity and Gossip:
Related but Different Drives of Social Functioning***

Britta Renner & Freda-Marie Hartung

## Abstract

The present study examined two fundamental social behaviours, social curiosity and gossip, and their interrelations in an English ($n = 218$) and a German sample ($n = 152$). Analyses showed that both samples believed that they are less gossipy but more curious than their peers. Multidimensional SEM of self and trait conceptions indicated that social curiosity and gossip are related constructs but with a different pattern of social functions. Gossip appears to serve predominantly entertainment purposes whereas social curiosity appears to be more driven by a general interest in gathering information about how other people feel, think and behave and the need to belong. Relationships to other personality traits (N, E, O) provided additional evidence for divergent validity. The needs for gathering and disseminating social information might represent two interlinked but different drives of cultural learning.


Keywords: Social Curiosity, Gossip, Personality, Openness

**Social Curiosity and Gossip:**

**Related but Different Drives of Social Functioning**

Humans live in a complex social world, and building and using networks of relationships represent a central task (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). In order to function efficiently in a changing and complex social environment, humans require information about those around them (Foster, 2004). Therefore, both social curiosity and the tendency to gossip are at the heart of social and cultural life (Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002).

Gossip has been broadly defined as conversation about social and personal topics and it has been argued that it is the central player in the evolutionary story of human intelligence and social life (Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Similarly, curiosity has been defined as the basic drive to learn, which sets the stage for development and learning (Berg & Sternberg, 1985; Trudewind, 2000). Thus, both social curiosity and the tendency to gossip might facilitate and direct learning and understanding of social information. Besides the apparent conceptual overlap between the two concepts, however, they may also tap into different aspects of social life and may have different social functions.

The present study is the first to assess individual differences in social curiosity as well as in the tendency to gossip and to determine the structural relationship between both constructs and their relation to other trait concepts of curiosity and personality measures. In order to corroborate the structural assumptions, the study was conducted with two samples from English- and German-speaking countries.

*Conceptions of Curiosity*

Curiosity has been conceptualized as desire for new information and knowledge (Berlyne, 1954; Kashdan & Silvia, 2009; Litman, 2008; Litman & Spielberger, 2003; Loewenstein, 1994). Social curiosity as a facet of curiosity has been conceptualized as the

general interest in gaining new social information motivating exploratory behaviours (Renner, 2006; Hartung & Renner, 2010). Accordingly, social curiosity is a motive-behaviour system entailing two different aspects: A general interest in the acquisition of new information about how other people behave, act and feel (motive) and an interest in interpersonal information that is obtained through exploratory behaviours (behaviour). Turning to public conceptions shows that social curiosity is appraised as a rather desirable trait. Older as well as younger adults rated themselves on average as being more curious than an average peer. These self-ratings of curiosity were positively related to measures of trait social curiosity indicating that public and scientific conceptions overlap substantially (Renner, 2006).

*Conceptions of Gossip*

For the most part, authors agree that gossip refers to talk in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties (Foster, 2004). Other suggested definitions of the phenomenon revolve around this summary, for example by including also conversations when the gossipee is present (Dunbar, 2004), or by adding that the talk must be negative or malicious (Wert, 2004). In general, gossip appears to be a widely spread phenomenon, almost inevitable when two or more people meet. Observational studies assessing the content of conversations in public setting showed that about 60% of adult conversations involved gossip (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Levin and Arlucke (1985), for example, observed that about 68% of all conversations at a university cafeteria were about absent persons. In a similar vein, Dunbar, Marriott, and Duncan (1997) found that for two thirds of the time, and for both genders, conversations were centred on social topics. Conversely, when asking people to report directly about how much they gossiped in a conversation, men as well as women reported that they did so in less then 30% of the time (Sharpsteen, 1987, as cited in Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994). The discrepancy between observational and self-report studies on gossip may stem from underreporting due to respondents' awareness that gossip is

an undesirable mode of behaviour (Nevo et al., 1994). Supporting this notion, Litman and Pezzo (2005) found a negative correlation between gossip and social desirability. However, another possible explanation might be that the everyday understanding of the term gossip is different from the construct as used by researchers (Foster, 2004).

*Social Curiosity and Gossip: Related but Different Social Functions*

Curiosity has been recognized as a driving force in human development and learning built in the course of evolution (cf., Gibson, 1988; Loewenstein, 1994). The interest in novelty appears to be a core determinant of individual differences in intelligence and development over the life span (Berg & Sternberg, 1985; Trudewind, 2000). Thus, a core function of curiosity is acquiring information to foster learning and development.

Another function of social curiosity might be to form interpersonal attachments and to facilitate feelings of belonging. Consistent with this notion, social curiosity is positively related to social functioning, such as extraversion and social competence. In particular, people scoring high on interpersonal curiosity are more likely to be socially competent, sociable, and able to build networks of relationships that provide support in the face of stressful life events (Renner, 2006). A third function of social curiosity may be a reflection of the need to live in a predictable and controllable social world. For instance, Swann, Stephenson, and Pittman (1981) showed that individuals who had recently been deprived of control demanded more diagnostic information about a person they were due to interview than individuals who had not been deprived of control. Thus, social curiosity might serve three different motives related to social functioning: acquiring information, building and establishing relationships, and control of the social environment.

Similar functions have been postulated for gossip. Foster (2004) summarized four social functions of gossip: Information, friendship/intimacy, influence, and entertainment. Specifically, the "information" function refers to gossiping as a mechanism of information

exchange fostering cultural learning (Baumeister, 2005). "Friendship/intimacy" represents gossiping as a bonding mechanism in dyadic interchanges. Sharing gossip is a way to socialize and to build relationships through the sharing of norms, the disclosure of trusted information and the exclusion of outsiders. Moreover, it has been proposed that gossip serves as an effective policing device for controlling free riders and social cheats (Dunbar, 2004; Piazza & Bering, 2008; Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2000). That gossip has a high entertainment and recreational value becomes immediately apparent when observing people engaged in a casual conversation. People often explain their involvement in gossip with immediacy of entertainment and pleasure (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Litman & Pezzo, 2005).

Thus, social curiosity and gossip appear to highly overlap in terms of social functions. However, from a theoretical perspective two differences emerge. Firstly, gossip is a behaviour, whereas social curiosity describes a motive-behaviour system. The "drive to know" as Kagan (1972) characterized curiosity, motivates exploratory behaviour in order to satisfy this desire. However, various exploratory strategies might serve to satisfy social curiosity. For instance, people may take active steps to acquire information about other persons, e.g., asking them probing questions in the hope of unearthing hidden secrets. At other times, people might also use covert, even privacy-violating strategies, such as eavesdropping on conversations or observing people surreptitiously. Socially anxious people, for example, tend to use more often visual inspection or eavesdropping as an exploratory strategy (Renner, 2006; see also Trudewind, 2000). Gossiping represents a third type of exploratory strategy to gain social information which is less intrusive than directly inquiring the target person and more open than observation or eavesdropping. Thus, social curiosity could represent the motive and gossip one strategy to satisfy the respective need. Secondly, entertainment appears to be more a social function of gossip than of social curiosity. Many people pass time gossiping simply for the sake of fun and amusement. Conversely, entertainment might be a

by-product of exploratory behaviours and learning in the realm of social curiosity but presumably not a core function.

*The Present Study*

The aim of the present study was to examine the structural relationships between social curiosity and gossip from two perspectives. First, previous studies suggest that lay and scientific conceptions of curiosity and gossip differ. Therefore, the present study determined (a) the relationship between lay conceptions of curiosity and gossip and (b) their relation with scientific trait conceptions of curiosity and gossip in order to identify differences and similarities in lay and scientific conceptions of gossip and curiosity.

Second, current theoretical conceptions allow two interpretations of gossip: Gossip might be conceptualized as an exploratory behaviour, thus representing one facet of social curiosity. Conversely, social curiosity and gossip may represent two distinct concepts which overlap in terms of social functions such as learning, relationship building, and social control but diverge in terms of entertainment. In order to determine whether (a) gossip represents one facet of social curiosity or (b), gossip and social curiosity represent two distinguishable domains of interest, the structural relationship between both constructs was determined using structural equation modelling (SEM). Additionally, their relation to other trait curiosity and personality measures was determined, in order to examine the convergent and divergent validity of the found structural pattern.

**Method**

*Participants*

In total, 370 participants between the ages of 16 and 77 (69% women) were recruited. 218 participants came from English speaking countries (USA, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand); 78% women; mean age 25 years ($SD = 9.6$). 152

participants came from German speaking countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland); 57%
female; mean age 30 years (*SD* = 9.7). Ten participants had 5% or less missing values. For
these cases, missing items were imputed prior to forming scales by averaging the items that
remained (cf., Schafer & Graham, 2002).

*Instruments and Procedure*

Each participant filled in an online-questionnaire including seven scales (cf., Table 1).
Participants were instructed to rate how they "generally perceive themselves" on a 4-point
Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Approximately 25 to 35
minutes were required to fill in the questionnaire.

*Social Curiosity Scale.* The Social Curiosity Scale (SCS, Renner, 2006) contains 10
items assessing a broad interest in the acquisition of new information about how other people
behave, think and feel which then motivates exploratory behaviours. The subscale *"General
Social Curiosity"* describes curiosity in other people's habits, feelings, and thinking (e.g.,
"When I meet a new person, I am interested in learning more about him/her."). The subscale,
*"Covert Social Curiosity"*, includes items such as eavesdropping on conversations or
observing people surreptitiously (e.g., "When on the train, I like listening to other people's
conversations."). For the present study, the German Social Curiosity Scale was translated into
the English language by two bilingual and bicultural individuals and the authors using the
parallel blind technique (Behling & Law, 2000). The English version of the SCS exhibited
satisfactory reliability in this study with α = .80 (English sample) and α = .72 (German
sample), which is comparable to previous research using the German version of the SCS scale
with α = .81 (Renner, 2006; Hartung & Renner, 2010).

*Table 1:* Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients, and Effect Sizes for Sample Differences (Pearson's r) for the English Sample (n = 218) and German Sample (n = 152).

| | | Total Sample (*N* = 370) | | English Sample (*n* = 218) | | German Sample (*n* = 152) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean (*SD*) | α | Mean (*SD*) | α | Mean (*SD*) | α | *d* |
| Social | SCS | 27.91 (4.22) | .77 | 27.95 (4.46) | .80 | 27.84 (3.88) | .72 | .03 |
| Curiosity | SCS-G | 15.36 (2.36) | .75 | 15.26 (2.44) | .77 | 15.51 (2.23) | .72 | .11 |
| | SCS-C | 12.54 (2.77) | .70 | 12.69 (2.84) | .72 | 12.32 (2.67) | .68 | .13 |
| Trait | EC | 30.09 (4.80) | .87 | 29.42 (5.14) | .89 | 31.06 (4.08) | .82 | .35*** |
| Curiosity | CEI | 19.71 (2.97) | .73 | 19.61 (3.18) | .75 | 19.85 (2.64) | .68 | .08 |
| Gossip | GFQ | 60.62 (8.28) | .85 | 60.56 (8.76) | .86 | 60.71 (7.56) | .83 | .02 |
| | GFQ-I | 16.84 (2.57) | .62 | 16.80 (2.62) | .63 | 16.91 (2.51) | .62 | .04 |
| | GFQ-F | 15.30 (2.65) | .67 | 15.37 (2.76) | .69 | 15.19 (2.51) | .66 | .07 |
| | GFQ-If | 14.16 (2.42) | .63 | 14.21 (2.55) | .63 | 14.09 (2.23) | .63 | .05 |
| | GFQ-E | 14.32 (2.84) | .68 | 14.18 (2.88) | .68 | 14.52 (2.77) | .70 | .12 |
| NEO | E | 32.33 (5.42) | .83 | 32.52 (5.86) | .84 | 32.06 (4.70) | .79 | .08 |
| | O | 35.31 (4.66) | .75 | 34.50 (5.01) | .77 | 36.47 (3.83) | .65 | .43*** |
| | N | 29.85 (6.22) | .87 | 29.82 (6.29) | .86 | 27.28 (5.70) | .86 | .42*** |

*Notes*: SCS = Social Curiosity Scale; SCS-G = Subscale Social Curiosity-General; SCS-C = Subscale Social Curiosity-Covert; EC = Epistemic Curiosity Scale; CEI = Curiosity and Exploration Inventory – Trait Form; GFQ = Gossip Function Questionnaire; GFQ-I = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Information Subscale; GFQ-F = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Friendship Subscale; GFQ-If = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Influence Subscale; GFQ-E = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Entertainment Subscale; N = Neuroticism; E = Extraversion; O = Openness. *** *t's* > 3; *p* < .001

*Epistemic Curiosity Inventory.* The Epistemic Curiosity Inventory (EC; Litman & Spielberger, 2003) consists of 10 items asking about one's interest in exploring new ideas and figuring out how things work (e.g., "When I see a complicated piece of machinery, I like to

ask someone how it works."). The EC scale exhibited good reliability in this study with α = .89 (English sample) and α = .82 (German sample), which is comparable to previous research using the EC scale that ranged between α = .81 and α = .85 (Litman, 2008; Litman & Spielberger, 2003).

*Curiosity and Exploration Inventory.* The 7-item trait version of the Curiosity and Exploration Inventory (CEI; Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004; Gallagher & Lopez, 2007) assesses two dimensions of trait curiosity: (a) exploration, which refers to appetitive strivings for novelty and challenge (e.g., "I would describe myself as someone who actively seeks as much information as I can in a new situation."), and (b) absorption, which refers to flow-like activity engagement ("When I am actively interested in something, it takes a great deal to interrupt me."). The CEI scale alpha coefficients were at an acceptable level for both the English (α = .75) and German samples (α = .68), and comparable to the previous studies, with alpha coefficients ranging from .72 to .80 (Kashdan et al., 2004).

*Gossip.* The 24-item Gossip Functions Questionnaire (GFQ; Foster, 2004) consists of four six-item subscales assessing social functions of conversations: (a) "GFQ-Information", which describes social conversations as means of gathering or disseminating information (e.g., "Generally, I try to figure out what is going on in the lives of people around me."), (b) "GFQ-Friendship" subscale refers both to dyadic interchanges and to the way in which social conversations bring people together via sharing information (e.g., "Talking about the personal lives of other people makes me feel in touch with my social circle."), (c) "GFQ-Influence" describes social exchange as an informal social mechanism for controlling free riders and social cheats (e.g., "When someone does something inappropriate, I think others should know so the person will be less likely to do it again."), and (d) "GFQ-Entertainment" refers to the pleasure and amusement people derive from conversations (e.g., "I don't have to know whether talk about people is true or not to enjoy the activity."). The GFQ scale had a good reliability in this study with α = .86 (English sample) and α = .83 (German sample). The four

subscales however, yielded lower alpha coefficients with GFQ-Information α = .63 and α =.62; GFQ-Friendship α = .69 and α = .66; GFQ-Influence α = .63; and GFQ-Entertainment α = .68 and α =.70 for the English and German sample, respectively. In previous studies, internal consistency varied between .81 and .64 (Foster, 2004; Taylor, 2005).

*Personality Traits.* Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness were assessed using the 12-item scales from the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1989). Coefficient alphas for the three traits obtained in the current study were as follows: Neuroticism (α = .86 for the English and German sample), Extraversion (α = .84 for the English sample and .79 for the German sample), and Openness (α = .77 for the English sample and .65 for the German sample). All alphas were comparable to those reported by McCrae and Costa (2004; Neuroticism α = .86; Extraversion α = .80; and Openness α = .75). Data sets of 63 participants on the Neuroticism scale are missing due to technical problems during the assessment.

*Self-ratings of Curiosity and Gossip.* Participants were asked to rate themselves on the personality traits curiosity and gossiping (e.g., "I see myself as someone who is curious."). Answers for absolute ratings were given on a 4-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" [1] to "strongly agree" [4]. In addition, participants were asked to judge themselves on the two personality traits compared to an average peer of the same sex. Answers for comparative ratings were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from "much below average" [1], "average" [4] to "much above average" [7]. Comparative ratings were recoded into "much below average" [-3], "average" [0] to "much above average" [+3].

## Results

### *Lay Conceptions of Social Curiosity and Gossip*

Participants rated themselves as being more curious, $M = .90$, $SD = 1.20$, $t (369) = 14.40$, $p < .001$, $d = .75$, but as being less gossipy than an average peer, $M = -.73$, $SD = 1.41$, $t (369) = -10.01$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$. As Figure 1 depicts, 60% of the participants rated their

curiosity as being above average whereas more than 50% rated their tendency to gossip as below average. For both traits, being curious and being gossipy, no significant differences between the English and German sample emerged, $t$'s (369) < 1. Hence, participants appraised curiosity as a rather desirable trait whereas gossiping appeared to be viewed in a less positive way by the participants irrespective of whether they came from English speaking or German speaking countries.

In a next step the relation between lay conceptions of curiosity and gossip and their relation with scientific trait conceptions of both concepts was examined. The nonsignificant correlations between self-rated curiosity and self-rated gossip, (comparative self-ratings: English sample: $r = .10$, German sample: $r = .14$, $p$'s > .09; absolute self-ratings: English sample: $r = .09$, German sample: $r = .10$, $p$'s > .17) suggest that the participants viewed the two concepts as two distinct personality attributes. To examine the discriminant validity of social curiosity and gossip lay conceptions, multiple regression analyses were computed with self-rated curiosity and self-rated gossip as dependent variable respectively, and the trait measures for social curiosity (SCS-general, SCS-covert) and for gossip (GFQ-Information, GFQ-Friendship, GFQ-Entertainment, GFQ-Control) as independent variables. Since separate regression analyses of the two samples and for the two types of self-ratings (comparative and absolute) yielded highly similar results, only data for the total sample and the comparative self-ratings are subsequently reported. Self-rated comparative curiosity was only significantly related to the two trait social curiosity subscales, with adjusted $R^2 = .18$, $F(6,363) = 14.15$, $p < .001$. Participants who scored higher on the SCS-General ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and the SCS-Covert subscale ($\beta = .18$, $p = .001$) viewed themselves as being more curious than their peers.
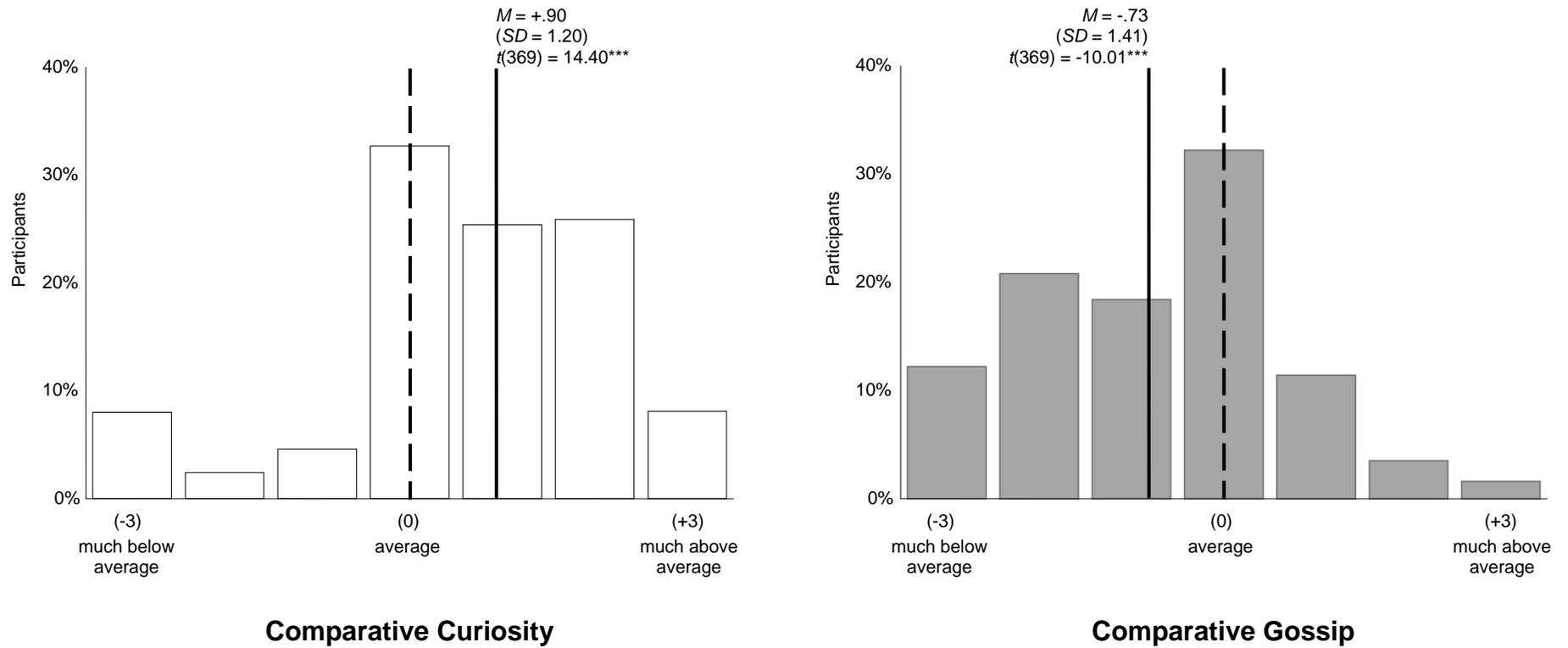
*Figure 1*. Self-ratings of Social Curiosity and Gossip (*N* = 370).

The four GFQ subscales did not contribute significantly to regression (all β's < .10, *ns.*). A similar picture emerged for self-rated comparative gossip: Participants' view of their own tendency to gossip was significantly related to the four GFQ-subscales, with adjusted $R^2$ = .43, $F(6,363) = 47.50$, $p < .001$. The statistically most important predictor for self-rated comparative gossip was the GFQ-Entertainment subscale, β = .39, $p = .001$, followed by the GFQ-Friendship subscale, β = .18, $p < .01$, and the GFQ-Information subscale, β = .13, $p = .02$. The GFQ-Influence subscale was only marginally significant, β = .09, $p = .07$. Both social curiosity subscales did not contribute to the regression, β's < .06, *ns.*

*Structural Relationship between Measures of Social Curiosity and Gossip*

In order to examine the structural relationship between social curiosity and gossip, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation were calculated using AMOS 17.0 (Arbuckle, 2008). Three different equivalent models were tested in order to examine the relationship between social curiosity and gossip. The first model represents the most parsimonious structural model consisting of a single-factor with paths to all 8 subscales (SCS-General, SCS-Covert, self-perceived Curiosity, GFQ-Information, GFQ-Friendship, GFQ-Entertainment, GFQ-Influence, self-perceived Gossip). Thus, Model 1 tested whether gossip represents one facet of a general social curiosity factor. The second model tested the hypothesized hierarchical CFA model with social curiosity and gossip as correlated second-order factors which were presumed to have direct effects on the respective subscales representing three first-order factors for social curiosity (SCS-general, SCS-covert, self-perceived Curiosity) and five first-order factors for gossip (GFQ-Entertainment, GFQ-Friendship, GFQ-Information, GFQ-Influence, self-perceived Gossip). Model 2 therefore tested the assumption whether social curiosity and gossip represent two distinct but related domains of interest. The third model features replacement of the correlation between the social curiosity and gossip factors with the specification that the five indicators for gossip are

multidimensional (cf., Figure 2). Similar to the two-factorial model, the multidimensional model assumes that social curiosity and gossip are related but distinct phenomena. Extending the two-factorial model, however, it tested the structural relationship on the level of specific types of social functions (information gathering, facilitating social relationships, social control, and entertainment). In addition, all three structural models were compared to a null model assuming that there are no factors present in the data (cf., Kline, 2005; Thompson, 2004).

For all GFQ-scales, parcels were used to create indicators for latent variables within a structural equation approach. Parcels are sums or averages of two or more items of a construct. They have a lower error variance and are, thus, more reliable than single indicators (Bandalos & Finney, 2001). For parcelling, random assignment method suggested by Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002) was used. The model fit was assessed by multiple goodness-of-fit (GOF) indices based on recommendations by Kline (2005) and by Hu and Bentler (1999). The chi-squares and other GOF indices for each model are reported in Table 2. In a first step, all models were tested for the total sample and in a second step, invariance across groups was tested.

The chi-square statistics for the three models were significant ($p < .01$). The difference between the chi-squares for these models indicated that the multidimensional model had the smallest chi-square, $\chi^2(286) = 757.75$, $p < .001$, followed by the two-factor model with $\chi^2(290) = 777.13$, $p < .001$ and with the one-factor-model yielding the highest chi-square with $\chi^2(293) = 832.40$, $p < .001$. The CFI, SRMR, and the RMSEA indices were within the acceptable range for the three models for the total sample as well as for the two subsamples (cf., Table 2). However, the GOF were better for the two-factorial model and the multidimensional model than for the one-factor model. As expected, the standardized factor loadings for both the two-factorial model and the multidimensional model were relatively high, ranging in magnitude from .43 to .97. All factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$).

The two-factorial model yielded an inter-factor correlation of moderate in size *(r* = .51), which suggests discriminate validity. The multidimensional model moreover suggests that the interrelationships between social curiosity and the different facets of gossip varied in their strengths. The standardized factor loadings for the multidimensional model are presented in Figure 2. Social curiosity and gossip show both comparable high factor loadings on the subscales GFQ-Information and GFQ-Friendship (.62-.67). The factor loadings for the remaining gossip subscales (GFQ-Entertainment, GFQ-Influence, and self-perceived Gossip), show again significant factor loadings for both gossip and social curiosity. However, all three gossip subscales yielded higher loadings on gossip (.55-.87) than on social curiosity (.43-.49).

In a next step, for the multidimensional model it was tested whether the factor loadings of gossip and social curiosity replicate across the two samples. Specifically, the initial two-group model in which no equality constraints were imposed was compared with a two-group model in which factorial loadings and measurement weights were constrained to be equal across both samples (cf., Thompson, 2004). The GOF of the model for the two groups in combination and with no equality constraints imposed were satisfactory (CFI = .84; RMSEA = .05; SRMR= .08). The $\chi^2$ value, with 572 degrees of freedom, is 1150.92, *p* < .001. The model with the factor loading constrained to be equal across groups yielded a $\chi^2$(601) of 1184.56, *p* < .001. The two models did not differ significantly, $\chi^2$(33) = 33.64, *ns*, indicating that the factor loadings related to the multidimensional model were invariant. From the perspective of cross-validation, this illustrated equality serves as support for the multidimensional model.
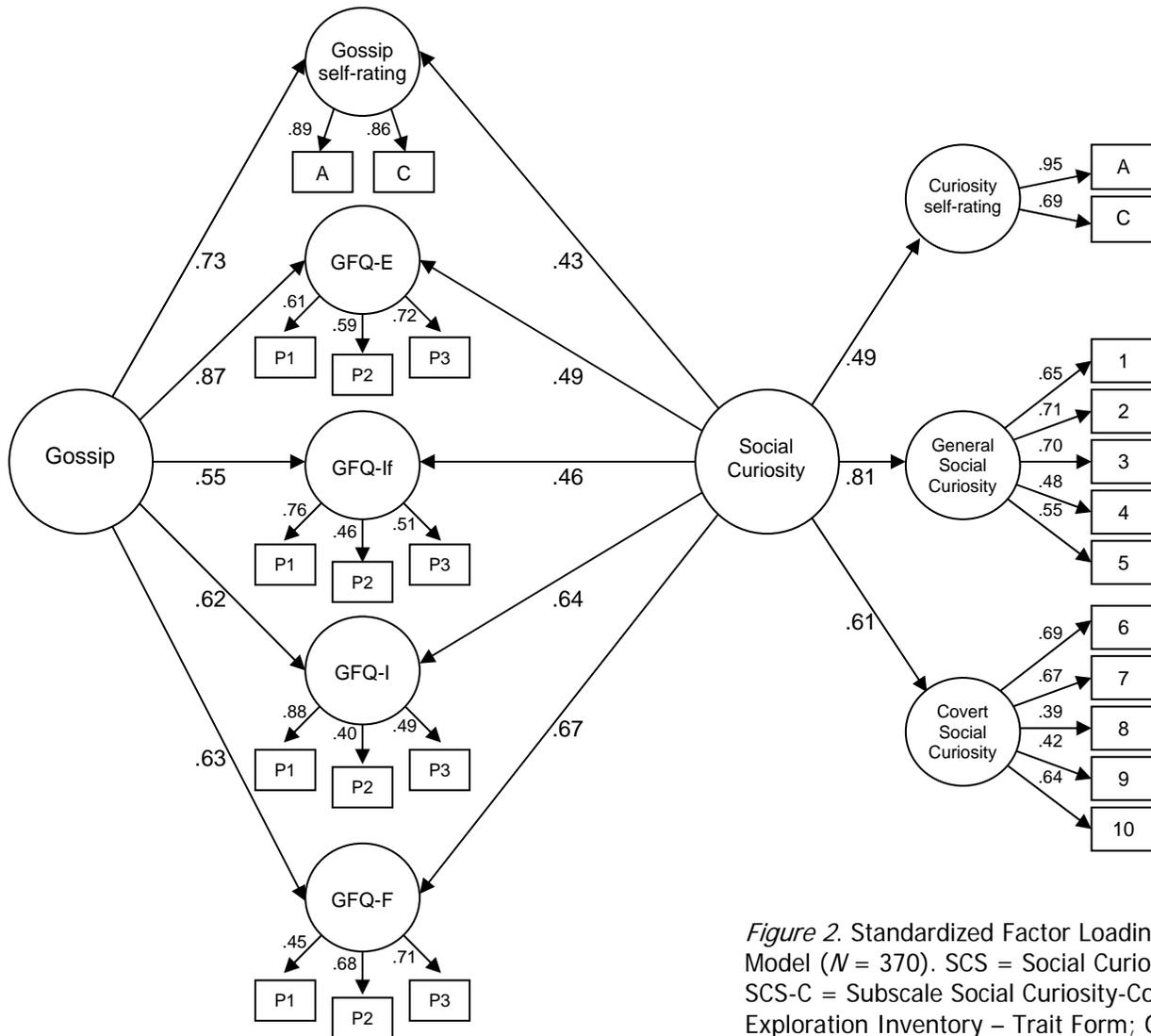
*Figure 2*. Standardized Factor Loadings and Inter-Factor Correlation for the Multidimensional Model (*N* = 370). SCS = Social Curiosity Scale; SCS-G = Subscale Social Curiosity-General; SCS-C = Subscale Social Curiosity-Covert; EC = Epistemic Curiosity Scale; CEI = Curiosity and Exploration Inventory – Trait Form; GFQ = Gossip Function Questionnaire; GFQ-I = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Information Subscale; GFQ-F = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Friendship Subscale; GFQ-If = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Influence Subscale; GFQ-E = Gossip Function Questionnaire-Entertainment Subscale; A = absolute self-rating; C = comparative self-rating.

*Table 2*: Goodness-of-Fit Indicators for Models of Social Curiosity and Gossip.

| Model | $\chi^2$ | *df* | $\chi^2$ *diff* | *CFI* | *SRMR* | *RMSEA* | *90% CI* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Total Sample (N = 370)* | | | | | | | |
| Null Model | 3563.82 | 325 | - | - | - | - | |
| 1-Factor SC Model | 832.40 | 293 | 2731.42 | .83 | .09 | .071 | .065 - .076 |
| 2-Factor SC Model | 777.13 | 290 | 55.27 | .85 | .08 | .067 | .062 - .073 |
| Multidimensional Model | 757.75 | 286 | 19.38 | .85 | .08 | .067 | .061 - .073 |
| *English Sample (n = 218)* | | | | | | | |
| Null Model | 2520.24 | 325 | - | - | - | - | |
| 1-Factor Model | 745.44 | 293 | 1774.80 | .79 | .11 | .084 | .077 - .092 |
| 2-Factor Model | 688.97 | 290 | 65.47 | .82 | .08 | .080 | .072 - .087 |
| Multidimensional Model | 666.10 | 286 | 22.87 | .83 | .09 | .078 | .071 - .086 |
| *German Sample (n = 152)* | | | | | | | |
| Null Model | 1502.01 | 325 | - | - | - | - | |
| 1-Factor Model | 503.92 | 293 | 998.09 | .82 | .10 | .069 | .059 - .079 |
| 2-Factor Model | 489.64 | 290 | 25.72 | .84 | .09 | .068 | .057 - .078 |
| Multidimensional Model | 484.79 | 286 | 4.85 | .83 | .09 | .068 | .057 - .078 |

*Note.* All $\chi^2$ and all $\chi^2$ *diff* are significant at *p* < .001.

In order to further explore the convergent and divergent validity of the found pattern, the relation of social curiosity (SCS) and gossip (GFQ) with trait curiosity (EC, CEI) and personality measures (N, E, O) was examined. Comparing the German and the English sample with respect to these measures yielded only three significant differences (cf., Table 1): The German sample scored significantly higher than the English sample on the EC and on Openness but lower on Neuroticism, all $t$'s > 3, $p$ < .001, $d$'s > .35. Since separate analyses of the two samples yielded highly similar results, only data for the total sample are subsequently reported.

*Table 3*: Correlations between Curiosity, Gossip, and Personality Measures for the Total Sample ($N$ = 370).

| | Social Curiosity Scale (SCS) | Gossip Function Questionnaire (GFQ) |
|---|---|---|
| Trait Curiosity | | |
| Epistemic Curiosity (EC) | .28*** | -.07 |
| Curiosity and Exploration Inventory (CEI) | .30*** | .04 |
| NEO | | |
| Neuroticism | .09 | .20*** |
| Extraversion | .28*** | .25*** |
| Openness | .24*** | .01 |

*Notes*: \*\*\*$p$ < .001; \*\*$p$ < .01; \*$p$ < .05:

Social curiosity as measured by the SCS correlated significantly with both trait curiosity scales (EC, CEI) and with the Openness scale providing evidence for convergent validity (cf., Table 3). Thus, participants high in social curiosity scored also higher on epistemic curiosity, on appetitive strivings for novelty and challenge, and they demonstrated a higher openness to experience. Conversely, gossip as measured by the GFQ showed no

significant correlation with these trait curiosity measures or openness indicating divergent validity of social curiosity and gossip.

Turning to Extraversion yielded significant positive correlations with the SCS, consistent with the notion that social curiosity and extraversion overlap to some extent. A similar pattern of results emerged for the GFQ, suggesting that the various means of gossiping are associated with higher levels of extraversion and negative affectivity.

## Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to examine the relationship between social curiosity and gossip. Lay conceptions of social curiosity and gossip indicate that both constructs represent differently evaluated and independent aspects of social behaviour. Examining the relationship between trait conceptions of social curiosity and gossip also indicates that they represent distinct, yet, related domains of interest. In particular, social curiosity and gossip overlap in terms of social functions such as learning and relationship building.

### *Lay-conceptions of Social Curiosity and Gossip*

This study is the first to investigate lay conceptions and trait conceptions of social curiosity and gossip. Participants from the German as well as from the English sample uniformly perceived themselves as being more curious but less gossipy than their average peer. Thus, participants showed biased perceptions in both cases, since the average can not be above or below average by definition. This pattern might indicate a social desirability bias for positive qualities like curiosity and negative qualities like gossiping (Nevo et al., 1994; Silvia, 2006).

Lay conceptions of social curiosity and gossip were significantly related to respective trait conceptions as used in previous research. Self-rated social curiosity was significantly related to both facets of trait social curiosity (cf., Renner, 2006). Conversely, self-rated gossip

showed the strongest relationship with the trait subscale "GFQ-Entertainment", indicating that participants predominantly conceptualize conversations as gossip when they serve the purpose of pleasure and amusement (cf., also Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006). Social exchange in order to foster social relationships or gather information appears to represent also a substantial, however, less pronounced facet of lay conceptions of gossip. Social exchange as an informal social mechanism for controlling free riders and social cheats, the fourth facet of trait conceptions of gossip, was not significantly related to lay conceptions of gossip. This pattern indicates that the everyday understanding of the term gossip is more narrow and different from the construct as used by researchers (Foster, 2004). Accordingly, the discrepancy between observational and self-report studies on the frequency of gossip may partly be due to differences in the understanding of the term gossip.

*Trait and Self-conceptions of Social Curiosity and Gossip*

Analyzing trait and lay conceptions of gossip and social curiosity conjointly showed a more complex picture. Specifically, gossip and social curiosity appear to be two substantially related concepts, indicated by an intercorrelation of .51 between both factors. Thus, the interest in social conversations is a strong interlink between both aspects of a social behaviour. Moreover, both constructs were substantially and similarly related to extraversion, indicating that curiosity and gossiping are both rooted in sociability to some extent. However, the multidimensional model suggests that curiosity and gossip steer social conversation on the basis of different motive patterns. Gossip behaviour appears to be more strongly driven by the desire for entertainment whereas social curiosity appears to be more strongly driven by a general interest in gathering information about how other people feel, think and behave and the need to belong. This suggests that gossip represents more than an exploratory behaviour in the harness of social curiosity and that social curiosity is more than a motivational ingredient of gossip. Divergent validity was also demonstrated in relation to other curiosity and

personality measures. Only social curiosity was related to measures assessing curiosity in the realms of general knowledge and information acquisition (EC, CEI) and to openness to experience. Thus, social curiosity and gossip represent two related but distinct aspects of social behaviour suggesting that social conversations about other people may serve various needs. The pattern of results was equivalent across the two samples, providing additional support for divergent validity of social curiosity and gossip.

*Social Curiosity and Gossip: Related but Different Aspects of the Cultural Animal*

Recent theoretical conceptions of human functioning such as the "cultural animal" conception by Baumeister (2005; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004), stress the idea that humans are designed by nature to participate in and belong to a community and culture. Specifically, Baumeister argues that humans are adapted to live in a cultural society which enables individuals to store and share knowledge collectively, divide labour, and rely for learning much more on others than on their own experiences. In order to function in a constantly changing social world, cultural animals need to learn the culture's knowledge and the rules for behaviour in the society. Thus, negotiating our way through a complicated social and cultural environment is one of the major human tasks which require a high plasticity for learning and adaptation throughout the lifespan. Social curiosity and gossip may represent major tools for promoting such a lifelong learning process. First results support the notion that the willingness to learn remains high across the lifespan. Results from a longitudinal study showed that social and epistemic curiosity was not affected by aging (Giambra, Camp, & Grodsky, 1992). Similarly, Renner (2006) found high levels of social curiosity in younger and older adults, whereby younger adults reported a somewhat higher level of social curiosity. Presumably, the tendency to gossip also remains high across the lifespan, however, age graded results are still awaiting research.

Considering the present results, one may further speculate that social curiosity and gossip represent two different core drives of cultural learning. Information about other people and their behaviour gives us the possibility to learn where pitfalls and opportunities lie without the need to learn from our own trials and errors (cf., social learning theory; Bandura, 1977; Baumeister, 2005). Social curiosity represents the basic motivational-behaviour system which drives the general interest in the social world. The gathering and processing of information on other people enables individual to accommodate effectively to their social environment. However, in order to form a cultural system which stores and transmits knowledge between individuals and generations, they need to disseminate this information within their social environment. The need for gathering social information and the need for disseminating social information might represent the two sides of the cultural learning medal (cf., Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 2004; Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006). Thus, the interest in those around us and the pleasure we derive from gossiping and transmitting information might ensure a continuing learning and adaptation process across the lifespan. In line with this notion, recent research from lifespan psychology suggests that high social activity promotes better cognitive functioning in older age (Lövdén, Ghisletta, & Lindenberger, 2005). This underscores that social participation is a fundamental prerequisite for human functioning (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Gibson, 1988). Hence, people may be designed as cultural animals as suggested by Baumeister (2005) with social curiosity and gossiping representing innate drives facilitating socialization and cultural fitness.

# Chapter 3

**Social Curiosity and Interpersonal Perception:
A Judge x Trait Interaction***

Freda-Marie Hartung & Britta Renner

## Abstract

The present study examined the impact of social curiosity on the utilization of social information and the accuracy of personality judgments. In total, 182 individuals who never met each other before were asked to interact for 10 minutes and afterwards to evaluate the personality (Big Five) of their interaction partner. High socially curious judges were more accurate in evaluating the degree of Extraversion and Openness of their interaction partners. Interestingly, high and low curious judges differed significantly in the utilization of verbal and non-verbal cues displayed by their interaction partner. Specifically, high socially curious judges used more often valid cues for inferring Extraversion and Openness. No differences in interpersonal accuracy and cue utilization were found for Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. The results suggest that high socially curious individuals are more accurate in judging visible traits and that this higher accuracy is grounded in a more comprehensive utilization of valid cues.

Keywords: Social Curiosity, Personality Judgments, Accuracy, Cue Utilization

## Social Curiosity and Interpersonal Perception:

## A Judge x Trait Interaction

Recent theoretical conceptions of human functioning such as the "cultural animal" conception by Baumeister (2005; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004) emphasize that humans are designed by nature to participate in and belong to a community and culture. Accordingly, building and maintaining social relationships represent a central human task (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dunbar, 2004; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004).

However, our social world is highly complex and constantly changing. In order to function efficiently in such a challenging environment, humans need to learn the culture's knowledge and rules for behavior. To acquire the necessary social knowledge there has to be some innate eagerness for new information and willingness to learn about what other people in their community think, how they behave and what they are likely to do next. Thus, the interest in gaining new information and knowledge about the social and cultural world appears to be a basic requirement for survival and adaptation. Accordingly, 'social curiosity' or the desire to acquire new information about how other people behave, think and feel which motivates exploratory behaviors, represents a basic motivational-behavior system (Renner, 2006).

People might use various strategies to satisfy their social curiosity (Renner, 2006). For instance, they may take active steps to acquire information about other persons, for example by asking them probing questions in the hope of unearthing hidden secrets. People can also use less intrusive methods for acquiring information about a person they are curious about, such as talking to their acquaintances or becoming especially attentive when others describe them (Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981). People might also use covert, even privacy-violating, strategies such as eavesdropping on conversations or observing people surreptitiously.

The attention to, and the active seeking for, new information facilitates and directs learning and understanding of new information (Berg & Sternberg, 1985; Raine, Reynolds, Venables, & Mednick, 2002; Schneider & Schmalt, 2000; Trudewind, 2000). Accordingly, one could assume that greater social curiosity facilitates a more accurate detection and utilization of available social information and as a consequence leads to more accurate perceptions of the social environment such as a more accurate perception of personality characteristics of one's social interaction partners.

*Social Curiosity and Interpersonal Perception: Detection and Utilization of Valid Social Information*

Personality traits cannot be perceived through our senses – we cannot touch, smell, see or feel them. Therefore, they need to be inferred through observable 'cues' such as physical attributes and behaviors visibly or verbally displayed by the observed person. For forming an accurate impression about the personality of social interaction partners, it is essential that the perceiver attends to and utilizes cues that are valid indicators of the respective trait (Funder, 1995, 1999). In Brunswik's Lens Model, the actual relationship between observable cues on the one hand (e.g., smiling) and a personality trait (e.g., Extraversion) on the other hand is called *cue validity,* while the relationship between cues (e.g., smiling) and the personality trait judgment given by the perceiver (e.g., 'I have the impression, she is an outgoing person.') is named '*cue utilization'.* The greater the match between cue validity and cue utilization, the greater is the accuracy of the personality judgment (Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Funder & Sneed, 1993; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002; Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006; Neyer, 2006). However, 'cue utilization' is a necessary but not a sufficient process for accurate interpersonal judgments. As Funder (1995, 1999) detailed in his Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM), accurate interpersonal perceptions depend on four different premises, (a) the target in general needs to display relevant cues for the respective personality trait (e.g.,

smiling for Extraversion), (b) the cues must be potentially available for the judge (e.g., displayed either visibly or audibly), (c) the judge must detect the relevant cues and, (d) the judge must accurately use ('utilize') the previously detected, available and relevant information (Funder, 1995, 1999; Neyer, 2006).

Theoretically, individual differences in social curiosity may impact interpersonal perception through different pathways. First, socially curious people are more likely to actively seek out social situations in order to satisfy their interest in new social information (Renner, 2006; see also Litman & Pezzo, 2005). Being more often in social situations increases the opportunity to learn about the relationship between observable cues and personality characteristics. Supporting this notion, it has been found that social experience facilitates the making and refining of social judgments (e.g., Akert & Panter, 1988; Funder, 1999; Lester, 1991; Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995; Vogt & Colvin, 2003). Second, within a social situation, socially curious individuals are more likely to actively seek for new social information. Specifically, individuals interested in others tend to ask more questions (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992) and to use gossip more extensively in order to obtain new social information (Litman & Pezzo, 2005, 2007; Renner & Hartung, 2010). A more active information seeking style in turn, might also increase the detection rate of new social information. And third, socially curious individuals might also utilize the available information more accurately. Berg and Sternberg (1985) argue that the process of dealing with novelty comprises both the preference for new stimuli and the ability to deal with it competently. Curious children do not only have a stronger preference for new stimuli, but they also develop more strategies of information extraction, focus their attention unerringly on informative aspects of situations and attempt to explore these situations (Berg & Sternberg, 1985). Similarly, Trudewind and colleagues showed that curious children concentrated more often on problem relevant information and demonstrated a more appropriate problem-solving behavior (Trudewind, 2000; Trudewind, Mackowiak, & Schneider, 1999). In a similar vein,

adults with a higher trait interest show a more pronounced deep-level learning (Schiefele, 1999; Silvia, 2006). Accordingly, high socially curious individuals might detect more social information when they are in social situations and they might utilize the new social information more accurately.

*The Present Study*

The central aim of the present study was to investigate the impact of individual differences in social curiosity on the process and accuracy of interpersonal perceptions. In a first step, we examined the accuracy of interpersonal perceptions for personality characteristics (Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness). Specifically, we tested whether socially curious participants evaluate basic personality characteristics of their interaction partner more accurately than less socially curious participants. In a second step, we examined the judgment process and tested whether individual differences in social curiosity impact the cue detection rate and cue utilization. In particular, we tested whether socially curious participants used more cues (cue detection rate) and whether they used more often valid cues (cue utilization). Differences in social curiosity should be most pronounced in new social situations such as when meeting for the first time an unacquainted person. Therefore, in the present study, participants were asked about their impression of a person they just meet for the first time and with whom they had previously briefly interacted in order to form an impression.

**Method**

*Participants*

Two hundred and two citizens of the city of Bremen (Germany) were recruited for the study. Out of the total of 202 participants, the data sets of 10 participants and their respective interaction partners were excluded from further data analysis because they completed less than 70% of the questionnaire. For the remaining 182 participants, missing values were

imputed prior to forming scales using EM method in SPSS 14 (cf., Schafer & Graham, 2002). The 182 participants (74% women) were on average 55 years old ($SD = 12$, range: 18-85 years). More than half of the participants (54%) had a vocational training, 35% had a university degree, 5% had a high school degree and 5% had no vocational training. Two participants did not indicate the kind of vocational training they had. In total, 39 mixed sex dyads, 48 female dyads and 4 male dyads took part in the study.

*Procedure*

All participants were recruited via a local newspaper. They responded to a short newspaper article promoting a study about „Social Relationships and Personality". The study was conducted at the Jacobs University Bremen. All participants were volunteers and were paid 5 EUR as compensation for their participation. The arriving participants were led into two separate rooms in order to ensure that they do not met by occasion before the interaction took place. Each participant was given a questionnaire including self-report trait personality measures. After completing the pre-interaction questionnaire, participants were led to another room where they met each other for the first time. Participants were told that they have the possibility to get to know each other in the next 10 minutes before the study will continue. After about ten minutes of interaction, they were led back to two separate rooms, where they filled in a second questionnaire. In the post-interaction questionnaire, they were asked to evaluate the personality traits of their interaction partner and to rate them on a list of cues.

*Measures*

Each participant provided self-ratings ('How would you describe yourself?'; pre-interaction questionnaire) and rating for her/his interaction partner ('How would you describe your interaction partner?'; post-interaction questionnaire) on selected personality traits. All personality ratings were provided on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (definitely not true) to 4 (definitely true).

*Big Five.* Personality traits for the self and for the interaction partner were measured by using the German version of the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993). Neuroticism ($\alpha$ = .84 and .85, for self- and other-rating, respectively), Extraversion ($\alpha$ = .81 and $\alpha$ = .80), Openness ($\alpha$ = .69 and $\alpha$ = .77), Conscientiousness ($\alpha$ = .77 and $\alpha$ = .80), and Agreeableness ($\alpha$ = .71 and $\alpha$ = .78) yielded comparable Cronbach's Alphas to those reported by Borkenau and Ostendorf (1993; Neuroticism $\alpha$ = .85, Extraversion $\alpha$ = .80, Openness $\alpha$ = .71, Conscientiousness $\alpha$ =.85 and Agreeableness $\alpha$ = .71).

*Social curiosity* was measured with the Social Curiosity Scale (SCS; Renner, 2006) which contains 10 items assessing a broad interest in the acquisition of new information about how other people behave, think and feel which motivates exploratory behaviors. Each judge rated her or his interaction partner on the SCS. The internal consistency was good with $\alpha$ = .81 and comparable to previous results ($\alpha$ = .83; Renner, 2006). In accordance with Bernieri, Zuckerman, Koestner, and Rosenthal (1994; see also Funder, 1999), the sample was divided into high and low rated socially curious individuals on the basis of a median split of the SCS (97 high and 85 low trait social curiosity participants).

*Cue ratings.* In order to examine the process of personality judgments, all participants rated their interaction partner in respect to 63 physical attributes and behaviors after the interaction took place. The 63 cues were extracted from previous studies on interpersonal perception and personality judgments (Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 2000; Gifford & Hine, 1994; Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005). Specifically, the cue list included acoustic (e.g., deep - high voice), visual (e.g., dark - light hair) and dynamic cues (e.g., infrequent - frequent head movements). Moreover, verbal cues (e.g., mumbles - articulates) and conversational flow cues (e.g., failed to respond - responded to conversational advances) were assessed. All cue ratings were provided on 7-point rating scales, whereby the item poles were labeled with the respective opposite terms (e.g., dark hair vs. light hair).

*Emotional Expressivity.* Since targets can systematically differ in their expressivity which impacts the display of relevant cues for the respective personality trait (e.g., smiling for Extraversion), emotional expressivity was measured with the 15-item Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES) selected from the Social Skill Inventory (German version: Muck, 2003; original version: Riggio, 1986). Emotional expressivity reflects the ability to express, spontaneously and accurately, felt emotional states as well as the ability to nonverbally express attitudes and cues of interpersonal orientation (Riggio, 1986). The coefficient alpha for the EES scale was with $\alpha = .70$ comparable to the internal consistency reported by Muck (2003) with $\alpha = .73$.

## Results

### Accuracy of Interpersonal Perceptions

Each participant rated his or her interaction partner on Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. In accordance with previous research (e.g., Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000) these other-rated personality characteristics (other-ratings) were correlated with the self-rated personality characteristics by the respective interaction partner (self-ratings) in order to determine the accuracy of interpersonal perceptions. In order to control for differences in the emotional expressivity of interaction partners (targets), emotional expressivity was partialed out from the correlations between self-ratings and other-ratings provided by the interaction partners.

Across all participants, a substantial correlation between self-ratings and other-ratings emerged for Extraversion ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), Openness ($r = .30$, $p < .001$), Neuroticism ($r = .24$, $p < .001$) and Conscientiousness ($r = .20$, $p < .01$). For Agreeableness, no significant relationship was found ($r = .05$, $p = .48$). Thus, for Extraversion, similar to previous studies, the highest interpersonal accuracy was observed, while for Neuroticism a substantial lower accuracy was found (cf., Borkenau & Liebler, 1992).

Importantly, accuracy of interpersonal perception differed as a function of social curiosity (see Figure 1). When evaluating their interaction partner in terms of Extraversion, high socially curious judges demonstrated a significant and high accuracy in their judgments ($r$ = .45, $p$ < .001). In contrast, low socially curious judges demonstrated a low, albeit significant, accuracy ($r$ = .24, $p$ < .05). Testing the statistical difference between these two correlations according to Preacher (2002) yielded a (marginal) significant difference with $z$ = 1.59, $p$ = .056 (one-tailed), $\varepsilon$ = .24.
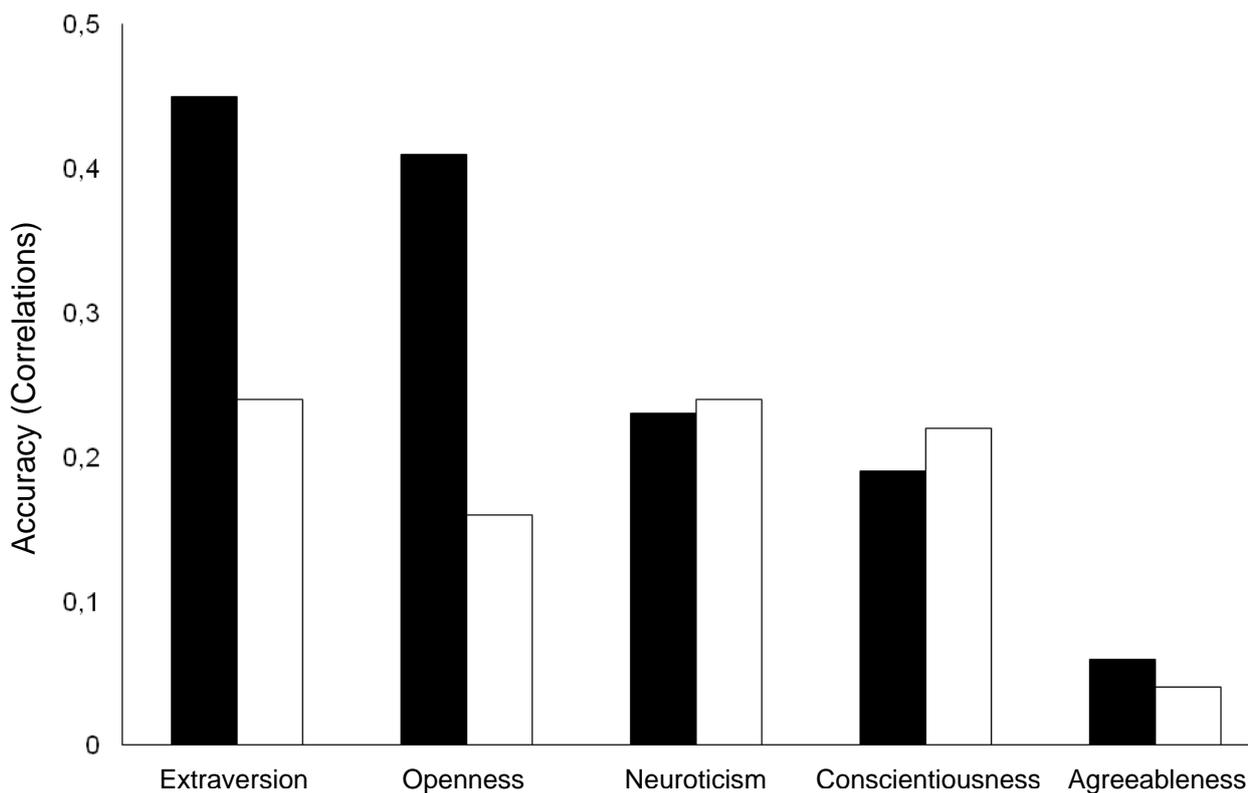


*Figure 1.* Accuracy of personality judgments within the sample of high socially curious judges ($n$ = 97) and low socially curious judges ($n$ = 85) controlled for the emotional expressivity of targets.

When evaluating Openness of their interaction partner, high socially curious judges demonstrated again a significant and high accuracy in their judgments ($r = .41$, $p < .001$). Low socially curious judges demonstrated again only a low and non-significant accuracy ($r = .16$, $p = .15$). The two correlations for Openness differed significantly, $z = 1.82$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed), $\varepsilon = .28$. Conversely, high and low socially curious judges showed both a low or negligible accuracy when judging less visible traits such as Neuroticism (high: $r = .23$ vs. low: $r = .24$, both $p < .05$; $z = -0.07$, $p = .47$, one-tailed), Conscientiousness (high: $r = .19$, $p = .06$ vs. low: $r = .22$, $p < .05$; $z = -0.21$, $p = .42$, one-tailed), and Agreeableness (high: $r = .06$, $p = .58$ vs. low: $r = .04$, $p = .72$; $z = 0.13$, $p = .44$, one-tailed). Thus, substantial differences in judgmental accuracy between high and low socially curious judges were found for Extraversion and Openness but not for Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness.

*Process of Interpersonal Perception: Cue Detection Rate and Validity of Cue Utilization*

In a second step, the process of interpersonal perception was examined. Specifically, the cue detection rate and the validity of cue utilization in dependence of interindividual differences in social curiosity were tested. Because the coding of the cues is arbitrary, a Principle Component Analysis was conducted and all cues were coded afterwards as such that they loaded positively on the first factor. All correlations between the 63 cues and the personality ratings given by the judge and by the self were transformed using Fisher's r-to-z formula. Emotional expressivity of interaction partners (targets) was controlled through partial correlation.

*Cue Detection Rate.* We hypothesized that high socially curious judges might be more accurate when judging personality traits of their interaction partner than low socially curious judges because they detect more cues for inferring the respective personality traits. Accordingly, socially curious judges should detect more cues when judging Extraversion and

Openness, and consequently, they should had based their judgment on more information. To determine the cue detection rate, the 63 assessed cues were correlated with the personality judgments provided by the judge. Cues which correlated significantly with the personality judgments provided by the judge represent 'detected' cues. Supporting the cue detection hypothesis, the results show that high socially curious judges used 46% of the 63 cues for inferring Extraversion (29 out of 63 cues). In contrast, low socially curious judges used only 27% of the 63 cues for inferring Extraversion (17 out of 63 cues). Thus, high socially curious judges based their personality judgment on significantly more cues than low socially curious judges, $\chi^2(1) = 3.14$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed). A similar picture emerged for Openness. High socially curious judges used 51% of the cues for inferring Openness (32 out of 63 cues), whereas low socially curious judges used only 25% (16 out of 63 cues) of the cues, $\chi^2(1) = 5.34$, $p < .01$ (one-tailed). High socially curious judges also used more cues when inferring Neuroticism (25 vs. 8 out of 63 cues) or Conscientiousness (20 vs. 9 cues out of 63 cues), $\chi^2(1) > 4.17$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed). High and low socially curious judges showed no difference in the cue detection rate when inferring Agreeableness (16 vs. 17 cues out of 63 cues, $\chi^2(1) = .03$, $p = .43$, one-tailed).

*Validity of Cue Utilization.* In a second step, we tested whether the detected cues were actually valid, i.e., predictive for the respective personality trait. Thus, the match between cue utilization and cue validity was assessed (cf., Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). Cue utilization was determined by the correlation between the cues and the personality ratings provided by the judge. Cue validity was measured by the correlation between cues and the self-ratings provided by the interaction partner. For assessing the validity of the cue utilization, vector correlations were calculated (see Figure 2 for an illustration of a vector correlation). Vector correlations reflect the extent to which judges infer the traits appropriately from the available cues (see Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Funder & Sneed, 1993; Gosling et al., 2002). The present vector correlations are based on the

63 cue validity (Fisher z-transformed) correlations coefficients (representing the relationship between cues and the self-ratings given by the interaction partner) which were correlated with the 63 cue utilization (Fisher z-transformed) correlation coefficients (representing the relationship between the cues and the personality ratings given by the judge). Taken together, for each personality trait 126 correlations were calculated, whereby 63 correlations represent the cue utilization side and 63 correlations represent the cue validity side.

Correlating the vectors of correlations

Correlations of other-rated personality trait and other-rated cues

| unrefined - refined appearance | .40 |
| not made-up - made-up face | .19 |
| thin – full lips | .28 |
| …. | …. |
| no smiling – extensive smiling | .33 |
| infrequent – frequent head movements | .38 |

Correlations of self-rated personality trait and other-rated cues

| 6. | unrefined - refined appearance | .24 |
| 7. | not made-up - made-up face | .10 |
| 8. | thin – full lips | .03 |
| …. | | …. |
| 62. | no smiling – extensive smiling | .23 |
| 63. | infrequent – frequent head movements | .18 |

*Figure 2*. Illustration of a vector correlation.

Across all participants, a substantial vector correlation between cue utilization and cue validity emerged for Extraversion ($r = .57$, $p < .001$), Openness ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), Neuroticism ($r = .53$, $p < .001$) and Conscientiousness ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). For Agreeableness, no significant relationship was found ($r = .19$, $p = .14$). Thus, similar to previous studies, the highest vector correlation was observed for Extraversion (cf., Borkenau & Liebler, 1992).

To assess the validity of cue utilization as a function of social curiosity, cue utilization was determined within the sample of high and low socially curious judges, respectively. Importantly, the results show that the validity of cue utilization varied as a function of social curiosity (see Figure 3).
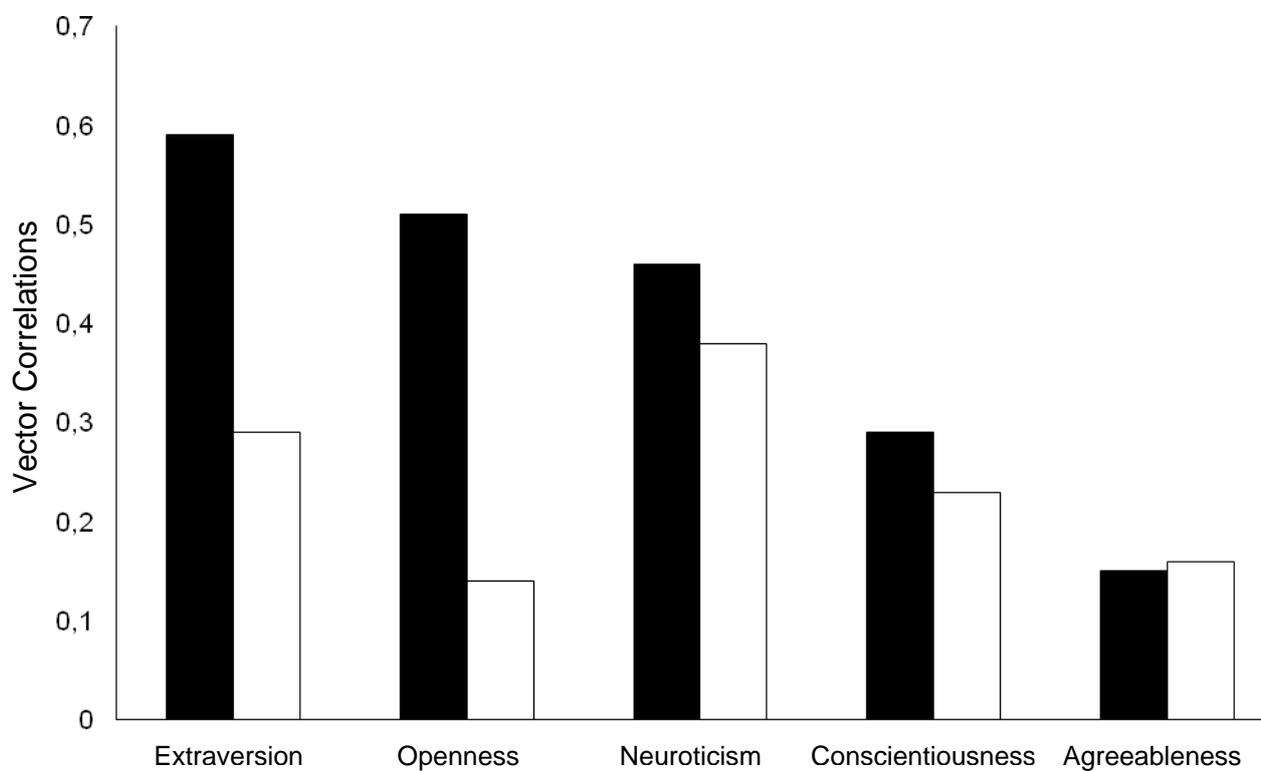


*Figure 3.* Vector correlations ($N = 63$) as a function of social curiosity. The present vector correlations are calculated by correlating the 63 cue validity (Fisher z-transformed) correlations coefficients with the 63 cue utilization (Fisher z-transformed) correlation coefficients.

High socially curious judges demonstrated a high validity of cue utilization for Extraversion (vector correlation $r = .59$, $p < .001$). Thus, their cue utilization corresponded highly with the actual cue validity. Conversely, low socially curious judges demonstrated a

comparable lower validity of cue utilization for Extraversion (vector correlation $r = .29$, $p < .05$). Thus, high socially curious judges demonstrated a significantly better match between cue utilization and cue validity than low socially curious judges, $z = 2.04$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed), $\varepsilon = .36$. A similar, albeit more pronounced pattern was found for Openness. High socially curious judges (vector correlation $r = .51$, $p < .001$) were more able to use the available cues in a more valid way than low socially curious judges (vector correlation $r = .14$, $p = .26$; $z = 2.31$, $p < .01$, one-tailed, $\varepsilon = .40$). High and low socially curious judges demonstrated an equal validity of cue utilization in the context of Neuroticism ($r = .46$ vs. $r = .38$, $p$'s $< .001$; $z = 0.57$, $p = .29$, one-tailed), Conscientiousness ($r = .29$, $p < .05$ vs. $r = .23$, $p = .07$; $z = 0.38$, $p = .35$), and Agreeableness ($r = .15$, $p = .25$ vs. $r = .16$, $p = .20$; $z = -0.08$, $p = .47$). Thus, high and low socially curious judges differed substantially in terms of their validity of cue utilization in the case of Extraversion and Openness, but not for the other three personality traits mirroring the results found for judgmental accuracy.

## Discussion

The present results show differential judgmental accuracy across the Big Five. For Extraversion the highest self-other agreement emerged whereas for Agreeableness accuracy was negligible. This pattern of differential accuracy has also been reported in previous studies (cf., Ames & Bianchi, 2008; Beer & Watson, 2008; Borkenau, Brecke, Möttig, & Paelecke, 2009; Connolly, Kavanagh, & Viswesvaran, 2007; Hall, Andrzejewski, Murphy, Schmid Mast, & Feinstein, 2008; Kenny, 1994; Watson, 1989). While replicating previous results, the present findings also extend previous research by showing that accuracy varied as a function of social curiosity of the judge.

Interestingly, high socially curious judges were clearly in advantage when judging the degree of Extraversion and Openness of a person with which they interacted only briefly and for the first time before forming their judgment. However, no differences in judgmental

accuracy were found between high and low socially curious judges when they evaluated the degree of Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, or Agreeableness of their interaction partner. Thus, socially curious judges do not seem to exhibit a general better judgmental accuracy when judging the personality of their interaction partners, but appear to show evidence for a greater trait-specific judgmental accuracy. Formally, this equates to a judge x trait interaction (Funder, 1999) and indicates that socially curious judges are not 'generalists' or 'good judges' but rather 'specialists'. This leads to the question, why are socially curious judges better in judging Extraversion and Openness in first impressions of others? To disentangle this judge x trait interaction, we will first focus on the mechanisms underlying differential trait accuracy (trait effect) and then proceed to the question why socially curious judges may judge Extraversion and Openness with higher accuracy (judge x trait interaction).

*Differential Trait Accuracy*

Using a broad range of person-based stimulus material ranging from photographs, videos to interactions, it was consistently found that Extraversion is the most easily and accurately judged Big Five dimension, whereas Agreeableness is generally found to be judged with negligible accuracy (e.g., Ames & Bianchi, 2008; Beer & Watson, 2008; Borkenau et al., 2009; Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004; Connolly et al., 2007; Hall et al., 2008; Kenny, 1994; Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009; Paulhus & Bruce, 1992; Watson, 1989). In the present study it was also found that initial judgments of Extraversion had the highest accuracy, whereas judgments of Agreeableness had the lowest validity. From the perspective of the Realistic Accuracy Model, the differential trait accuracy may derive from a differential 'visibility' of traits (Funder, 1999). Traits which are rated as easier to observe tend to elicit more accurate judgments (Funder & Dobroth, 1987; Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998; John & Robins, 1993). However, 'felt' visibility and 'actual' visibility might diverge considerably. A visible trait should theoretically be associated with

relevant and available cues for inferring the trait (actual visibility). Extraversion, the trait with the highest judgmental accuracy, is typically rated as being highly visible (high felt visibility) and is associated with an array of visible and audible cues (high actual visibility; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992). Conversely, Agreeableness is also rated as being important and visible, but appears to be more often associated with 'pseudo-diagnostic' cues leading to poor judgmental accuracy (Ames & Bianchi, 2008). Thus, Extraversion and Agreeableness diverge in their 'actual' but not in their 'felt' visibility, possibly leading to the observed differential judgmental accuracy within and across studies.

Conversely, cues and behaviors associated with Openness are often rated as poorly visible (Funder & Dobroth, 1987; Gosling et al., 1998; John & Robins, 1993). Consequently, judging Openness in first impressions of others should be a challenging task for judges. In line with this notion, various studies report only a negligible accuracy for Openness (e.g., Connolly et al., 2007; Hall et al., 2008; Kenny, 1994). In contrast, other studies report a substantial accuracy (Borkenau et al., 2004) as found in the present study, and some studies even report a very high judgmental accuracy (Gosling et al., 2002). One possible explanation for the inconsistent empirical results might be systematic differences in the experimental framework impacting the quality of available information for inferring Openness. Interestingly, studies using a zero-acquaintance framework, with no actual interaction between judge and target (e.g., proving only a photograph or video of the target), consistently found only a low judgmental accuracy for Openness (Beer & Watson, 2008, 2009; Borkenau et al., 2009). Studies based on actual, although very brief interactions found a substantial accuracy for Openness comparable to the present study (Borkenau et al., 2004; Paulhus & Bruce, 1992). And finally, environment-based studies using behavior signatures (bedrooms, offices) for impression formation report the highest judgmental accuracy for Openness (Gosling et al., 2002). Thus, one might hypothesize that the type of experimental framework (zero-acquaintance, social interaction, environment-based) encompasses qualitatively

different information, impacting the visibility of the trait Openness in the respective judgment situation. Thus, posters and pictures displayed in one's office might be more informative for inferring Openness (environment-based studies) than watching a video of the person while she or he is reading the weather forecast (zero-acquaintance studies). The interaction-paradigm of the present study might represent a 'middle ground' in terms of context which affords more information about targets than zero-acquaintance studies but less information than environment-based studies. Thus, only observing a person might not be enough to get an impression of her or his Openness, but a brief opportunity to talk to the person and in particular asking questions appears to make a remarkable difference. Supporting this notion, findings from information sequencing in relationship development show that already at the very beginning of a conversation between unacquainted individuals topics occur that are relevant for the judgment of Openness (e.g., opinions, interests, attitudes, goals, and intentions; Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck, & Schulman, 1976; Kellerman & Lim, 1990). Thus, even short social interactions may disclose informative cues turning Openness from a relatively invisible trait into a more visible trait.

*Why were socially curious judges more accurate when judging Extraversion and Openness?*

A bright smile and a broad interest in different topics might certainly facilitate social interactions, particularly when meeting unacquainted people or strangers. In view of that, Extraversion and Openness are probably a primary focus in any new social encounter since they facilitate social interactions. Thus, one possible explanation for the greater judgmental accuracy displayed by socially curious judges for Extraversion and Openness might be that they have a greater opportunity to accumulate knowledge about valid cues particularly for Extraversion and Openness since they seek out more often new social situations (Renner, 2006). Their greater exposure to new social situations and to a greater array of different

people might provide them with more learning opportunities and experience. Accordingly, they should be specialists for traits which are visible in social interactions with unacquainted people or strangers.

Alternatively, one could propose that high socially curious judges are in general more attentive to their social environment and therefore tend to use a wider range of cues for inferring personality traits of other people. Since for visible traits, per definition, more valid cues are available for all judges, high socially curious judges should be more likely to detect and use valid cues. Phrased differently, high socially curious judges show a higher base rate of (any) detected cues and in case of visible traits, when in general more valid cues are available, they are more likely to arrive at more accurate judgments. According to this line of reasoning, high socially curious judges are no more sophisticated judges for Openness and Extraversion, but rather show a trait unspecific judgment strategy which leads in case of visible traits to a greater accuracy. Supporting this notion, high socially curious judges showed a higher cue detection rate for Extraversion and Openness but also for Neuroticism and Conscientiousness, although for the later, no advantage in accuracy was found. Only for Agreeableness, the trait with the poorest accuracy, no differential cue detection rate for low and high socially curious judges was found. Thus, high socially curious judges appear to generally use more information when judging other people's personality.

However, the greater use of available information does not necessarily imply that high socially curious judges use a 'shot gun' strategy. Comparing the utilization of the cues through the judges with the validity of the cues shows that high and low socially curious judges differed in the extent to which they accurately inferred traits from the given cues. High socially curious judges inferred Extraversion and Openness more appropriately from the available cues than low socially curious judges as indicated by the higher vector correlations between cue utilization and cue validity. Thus, they detected not only more cues but rather they detected more often valid cues when evaluating Extraversion and Openness. When

evaluating Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, however, high and low socially curious judges showed comparable vector correlations. Taken together, high socially curious judges detected and utilized more valid cues of Extraversion and Openness than low socially curious judges. This greater sensitivity to and utilization of valid cues facilitated better judgments of these two visible personality traits. In the case of less visible traits, Neuroticism and Conscientiousness, high socially curious judges still detected more cues than low curious judges, but they did not turn this greater array of detected information into more accurate judgments.

Taking together, the higher accuracy of socially curious judges when judging Extraversion and Openness but not when judging Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, indicates a higher expertise for traits that are prevalent and observable in initial interactions. Moreover, this higher accuracy appears to be grounded in a more comprehensive utilization of cues, thus a more effective use of social information. Considered from a broader theoretical perspective the higher accuracy of social curious individuals may help socially curious people to successfully steer initial social interactions. Perceiving others accurately may smooth the progress of interaction and might therefore facilitate relationship building. On the long run, socially curious individuals may therefore be more likely to reduce the risk of social exclusion and rejection.

*Chapter 4*

**Social Curiosity in Motion:
How Social Curiosity Facilitates Positive Interactions**

Freda-Marie Hartung & Britta Renner

## Abstract

The present study examined how interactions with socially curious people were experienced by their interaction partner in the context of a non-acquaintance interaction ($N =$ 182). The results show that interactions with socially curious individuals were experienced as being more positive. Interestingly, this relation was not due to a higher social competence but was rather due to the behavior of socially curious interaction partners. Socially curious interaction partners displayed not only more exploratory behaviors (e.g., asked more questions) but also more responsive behaviors (e.g., engaged in eye contact, responded to what interaction partner said). The findings suggest that the desire for new information about other people and the resulting "exploration" and "responsiveness" towards the interaction partner positively influence the interaction quality, and consequently, facilitates the building of social relationships.

Keywords: Social Curiosity, Social Interaction, Social Competence

**Social Curiosity in Motion:**

**How Social Curiosity Facilitates Positive Interactions**

Social relationships and social networks are of crucial importance for human beings (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Seligman, 2002; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Williams, 2007). In an extensive review Baumeister and Leary (1995) could show that humans have an innate need to belong to other people, are eager to form new social bonds and reluctant to break off existing relationships. Accordingly, loneliness and social isolation are associated with a decrease in psychological and physical well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002; House et al., 1988; Myers & Diener, 1995). The importance of being part of our social environment was underlined by recent findings that even the experience of short periods of social exclusion led to more aggressive behavior as well as reduced the capacity for intelligent thoughts and prosocial behavior (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Thus, social participation is a fundamental prerequisite for human functioning.

Therefore, building and maintaining social relationships, and using social networks represent central human tasks (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dunbar, 2004; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). One pre-condition to build and maintain social relationships and networks is an innate eagerness for new information and willingness to learn about what other people in the social environment think, how they behave, and what they are likely to do next. Thus, the interest in people of one's environment seems to be a basic requirement for survival and adaptation. Accordingly, 'social curiosity' or the desire to acquire new information about how other people behave, think, and feel that motivates exploratory behaviors represents a basic motive-behavior system (Renner, 2006). Renner (2006) conceptualized two different aspects of social curiosity: A general interest in the

acquisition of new information about how other people behave, think, and feel and an interest in interpersonal information that is obtained primarily by unobtrusive exploratory behaviors.

People might use different exploration strategies to satisfy their social related curiosity (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006; Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981; Trudewind, Mackowiak, & Schneider, 1999). For instance, people may take active steps to acquire information about other people by approaching new people or asking questions (Berger & Kellermann, 1994; Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992; Swann et al., 1981), listening carefully (Fichten et al., 1992), and observing them closely during social interactions (Fichten et al., 1992; Leary, Rogers, Canfield, & Coe, 1986; Reeve, 1993; Reeve & Nix, 1997; Renner, 2006). People can also use less obvious methods for acquiring information about the person they are curious about, such as talking to their acquaintances or becoming especially attentive when others describe them (Swann et al., 1981). People might also use covert, even privacy-violating, strategies such as eavesdropping on conversations or observing people surreptitiously (Berger & Kellermann, 1994; Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006).

The attention to, and the active seeking for new social information might affect the social environment of social curious individuals. Specifically, one could assume that social curiosity influences social interaction.

## Social Curiosity: Influence on Social Interactions

Theoretically, individual differences in social curiosity may impact social interactions through different pathways. Seeking out social situations provide socially curious individuals with possibilities to contact new people and initiate friendships (Renner, 2006; see also Litman & Pezzo, 2007). Repeated experience in dealing with other people in turn may lead to more socially competent behavior, and consequently, to more favorable and successful interactions. Consistent with this notion, it has been found that social curiosity was positively

related to social functioning, such as extraversion and social competence (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006). In particular, people scoring high on social curiosity were more likely to evaluate themselves as skilled to initiate social interactions, as confident in social encounters and as able to build networks of relationships that provide support in the face of stressful life events (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006). Thus, given that socially curious individuals are indeed more competent in social interactions they should be perceived as more socially competent and the interaction with them might be experienced as more pleasant.

Above that, socially curious people may actually behave differently in social encounters. In order to carefully and exhaustively explore their immediate social environment, socially curious individuals may show more exploratory (e.g., asking questions) and responsive (e.g., responding to what the interaction partner says) behaviors. It has been argued that individuals might feel valued and liked when perceiving their interaction partner as being attentive and responsive. This in turn might lead to a more positive evaluation of the interaction and the interaction partner (Davis, 1982; Kashdan & Roberts, 2004). In line with this notion, findings from research on the expression of interest showed that interested people tend to ask more questions and to gaze at their interaction partner (Fichten et al., 1992; Mason, Tatkow, & McCrae, 2005; Reeve, 1993, Reeve & Nix, 1997). Those behaviors in turn were associated with liking on the side of an interaction partner (Gold, Ryckman, & Mosley, 1984; Mason et al., 2005). Above that, being inattentive, failing to respond or giving irrelevant responses might have deleterious effects on the conversational flow (Davis, 1982), and consequently, may influence how interactions are experienced. Thus, the desire to learn about other people and the resulting exploration of the immediate social environment should facilitate the experience of positive interactions.

*The Present Study*

The central aim of the present study was to investigate whether social curiosity affects social interactions. Therefore, it was tested whether participants experienced interactions with socially curious individuals as being more positive. A related aim was to examine whether social curiosity impacts social interaction through the behavior socially curious individuals exhibited during interaction. Specifically, it was tested whether exploratory and responsive behaviors of socially curious individuals were associated with a more positive experienced interaction quality by the interaction partner. To assure that the effect of social curiosity on interaction quality is not merely due to a more pronounced social competence of socially curious individuals, social competence of interaction partners was furthermore considered.

Influence of social curiosity on social interactions should be most pronounced in new social situations such as when meeting an unacquainted person for the first time. Therefore, in the present study, participants were asked about their impression of a person they just met for the first time and with whom they had previously briefly interacted in order to form an impression.

**Method**

*Participants*

Two hundred and two citizens of the city of Bremen (Germany) were recruited for the study. Out of the total of 202 participants, the data sets of 10 participants and their respective interaction partners were excluded from further data analysis because they completed less than 82% of the questionnaire. For the remaining 182 participants, missing values were imputed prior to forming scales using EM method in SPSS 14 (cf., Schafer & Graham, 2002). The 182 participants (74% women) were on average 55 years old ($SD = 12$, range: 18-85 years). More than half of the participants (54%) had a vocational training, 35% had a university degree, 5% had a high school degree and 5% had no vocational training. Two

participants did not indicate the kind of vocational training they had. In total, 39 mixed sex dyads, 48 female dyads and 4 male dyads took part in the study.

*Procedure*

All participants were recruited via a local newspaper. They responded to a short newspaper article promoting a study about „Social Relationships and Personality". The study was conducted at the Jacobs University Bremen. All participants were volunteers and were paid 5 EUR as compensation for their participation. The arriving participants were led into two separate rooms in order to ensure that they do not meet by occasion before the interaction took place. Each participant was given a questionnaire including self-report trait personality measures. After completing the pre-interaction questionnaire, participants were led to another room where they met each other for the first time. Participants were told that they have the possibility to get to know each other in the next 10 minutes before the study will continue. After about ten minutes of interaction, they were led back to two separate rooms, where they filled in a second questionnaire. In the post-interaction questionnaire, they were asked to evaluate the personality traits of their interaction partner, to rate them on several behaviors, and to evaluate interaction quality.

*Measures*

Each participant provided self-ratings ('How would you describe yourself?'; pre-interaction questionnaire) and rating for her/his interaction partner ('How would you describe your interaction partner?'; post-interaction questionnaire) on selected personality traits. All personality ratings were provided on 4-point scale ranging from 1 (definitely not true) to 4 (definitely true). Descriptives, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and bivariate correlations for measurement scales are reported in Table 1.

*Social Curiosity* was measured by using the subscale General Social Curiosity of the Social Curiosity Scale (SCS-G, Renner, 2006). The SCS-G contains 5 items assessing a broad

interest in the acquisition of new information about how other people behave, think and feel which motivates exploratory behaviors. On the pre-interaction questionnaire participants provided self-ratings on the SCS-G (e.g., "When I meet a new person, I am interested in learning more about him/her"). In the post-interaction questionnaire participants were asked to rate their interaction partner on SCS-G (e.g., "I guess, when she/he meets a new person, she/he is interested in learning more about that person."). Whereas internal consistency for the self-rating was satisfactory with $\alpha$=.70 and lower than in previous research ($\alpha$ = .83; Renner, 2006) internal consistency for other-rating was good ($\alpha$=.87) and comparable to those reported by Renner (2006).

*Social Competence* was measured using the 15-item Social Expressivity Scale (SES) selected from the Social Skill Inventory (German version: Muck, 2003; original version: Riggio, 1986, 1989). Social Expressivity reflects the ability in verbal expression and to engage others in social interactions. Socially expressive persons appear outgoing and gregarious and are skilled in initiating and guiding conversations on any topic (Riggio, 1986, 1989). In the pre-interaction questionnaire participants rated themselves on the SES (e.g., "I am usually the one to initiate conversations.") and in the post-interaction questionnaire participants provided other-ratings on the SES (e.g., "I guess, she/he is usually the one to initiate conversations."). Self- and other-ratings of the SES ($\alpha$ = .82 and $\alpha$ =.88, respectively) yielded comparable Cronbach Alpha's to those reported by Muck (2003; $\alpha$ = .87).

*Quality of Interaction.* Following the interaction participants rated how they experienced the interaction. Specifically, they indicated the extent to which they experienced interaction as pleasant, easy, and uncomplicated. All ratings were provided on 6-point bipolar rating scales. The two poles of each scale were labeled with opposite terms (e.g., unpleasant - pleasant). All ratings were recoded that higher values indicated more positive evaluation of the interaction ($\alpha$ = .90).

*Table 1:* Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and correlations of personality measures and interaction quality (*N* = 182).

|  | Other-rating SCS-G | Other-rating SES | Self-rating SCS-G | Self-rating SES | Quality of Inter-action |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Perception of interaction partner** | | | | | |
| Other-rating SCS-G | - | .41*** | .22** | .15* | .38*** |
| Other-rating SES | | - | .02 | .20** | .13 |
| **Self-rating of the interaction partner** | | | | | |
| Self-rating SCS-G | | | - | .30*** | .03 |
| Self-rating SES | | | | - | .14 |
| *M* | 3.10 | 2.46 | 3.35 | 2.45 | 5.52 |
| *SD* | 0.52 | 0.46 | 0.42 | 0.43 | 0.74 |
| α | .87 | .88 | .70 | .82 | .90 |

*Notes*: SCS-G = General Social Curiosity Scale; SES = Social Expressivity Scale;
***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

*Exploratory and Responsive Behaviors.* Five items were used to assess the extent to which participants perceived their interaction partner as being explorative and responsive during interaction. Specifically, they rated the extent to which their interaction partner 'talked at rather than with them', 'responded to what they said', 'engaged in eye contact', 'asked questions' and 'asked back-channel question'. The items were extracted from studies on interpersonal perception (Funder, Furr & Colvin, 2000; Gifford & Hine, 1994; Hall, Coats & Smith LeBeau, 2005) and were chosen on the basis of their relevance for the expression of interest (Fichten et al, 1992; Leary et al., 1986; Mason et al., 2005; Reeve & Nix, 1997). All ratings were provided on 7-point bipolar rating scales. The two poles of each scale were labeled with opposite terms (e.g., talked rather at me - talked rather with me). All ratings were recoded that higher values indicated more exploration and responsiveness. Means, standard deviation, and bivariate correlations for exploratory and responsive behaviors are reported in Table 2.

*Table 2*: Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of behaviors, social curiosity, and interaction quality (*N* = 182).

|  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Talked rather with me | .44*** | .15* | .17* | .23** | .23** | .38*** |
| 2. Responded to what I had to say | | .28*** | .20** | .24*** | .27*** | .40*** |
| 3. Engaged in eye contact | | | .08 | .15* | .15* | .34*** |
| 4. Asked many questions | | | | .56*** | .28*** | .25*** |
| 5. Had a lot of back channel questions | | | | | .22** | .15* |
| 6. Other-rating of SCS-G | | | | | | .38*** |
| 7. Quality of interaction | | | | | | - |
| *M* | 4.96 | 6.22 | 6.22 | 3.97 | 3.46 | - |
| *SD* | 1.84 | 0.92 | 1.15 | 1.61 | 1.73 | - |

*Notes*: SCS-G = General Social Curiosity Scale; ***$p$ < .001; **$p$ < .01; *$p$ < .05

## Results

Because of the dyadic structure of the data, it was tested whether interaction partners' scores on the outcome variable, namely the quality of interaction, are nonindependent. Due to the indistinguishable dyads in our study the pairwise correlational method to test nonindependence was applied (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Kenny et al. (2006) recommend to treat dyadic data as nonindependent when the *p*-value is below .20. As a pairwise correlation cannot be tested in the usual way (Griffin & Gonzalez, 1995; Kenny et al., 2006) we tested significance with the test for intraclass correlations provided by Griffin and Gonzalez (1995). Correlating participants' evaluation of the interaction with their interaction partners' evaluation yielded a *p*-value exceeding .20 ($r_p$ = .09; $z$ = 0.86, $p$ = .28). Consequently, all further analyses were conducted at the individual level.

*Social Curiosity and Interaction Quality*

To test whether social curiosity influences the quality of interaction structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation were computed (AMOS 17.0; Arbuckle, 2008). The model fit was assessed by multiple goodness-of-fit (GOF) indices based on recommendations by Kline (2005) and by Hu and Bentler (1999).

The structural equation model was specified with interaction quality as endogenous latent variable (see Figure 1). Social curiosity and social competence were specified as exogenous variables in the self- and other-perspective. In order to have a concise measure for self- and other-rated social competence parcels were used as indicators for latent variables. Each of these parcels is an average of three items of the Social Expressivity Scale. For parceling, the random assignment method suggested by Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002) was applied. On the right side of the model, participants' perceptions of their interaction partners' social curiosity and social competence, and their evaluation of the interaction quality is specified. The left side of the model describes how their respective interaction partners rated themselves on social curiosity and social competence.

The specified model fit the data well. The chi-square statistic for the model was significant ($\chi^2 = 359.59$***; df = 222). The CFI, SRMR, and the RMSEA indices were within the acceptable range (CFI = .93; SRMR = .073; RMSEA = .059, 90% CI = .047, .069). Moreover, the standardized factor loadings were all significant ($p < .001$), and ranging in magnitude from .42 to .94.

The right side of the model shows that participants who rated their interaction partner as socially curious also experienced the interaction as being significantly more positive ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$). Moreover, interaction partners who were rated as high socially curious were also rated as high socially competent ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$). However, participants who rated their interaction partner as socially competent did not experience the interaction as being more positive ($\beta = -.05$, *ns.*).
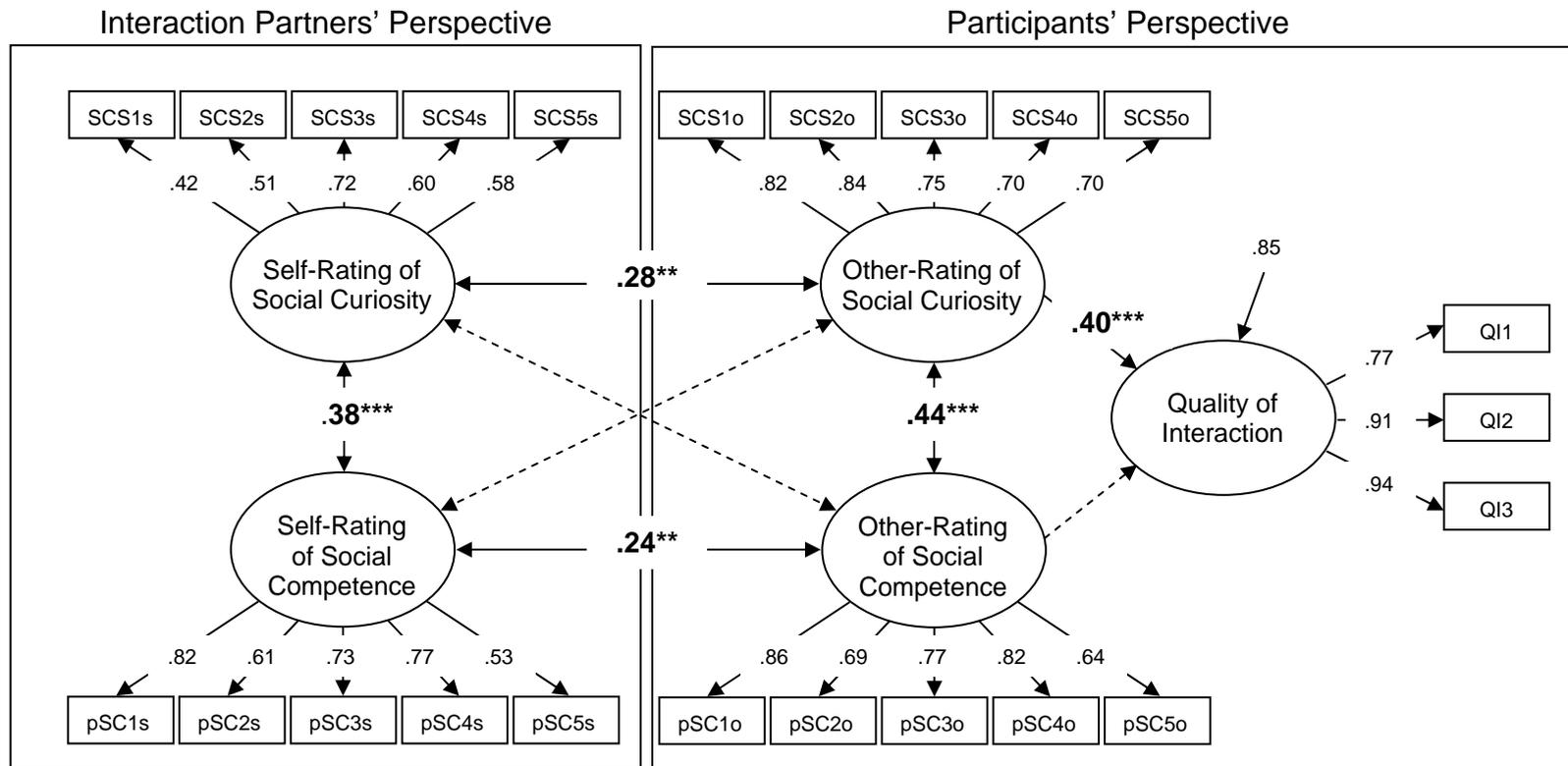
*Figure 1.* Structural relationship between social curiosity, social competence and quality of interaction (*N* = 182). All factor loadings were significant (*p* < .001). Dashed paths within the model indicate a not significant relation between factors.

Considering additionally the left side of the model shows that the perspective of the participants was mirrored in the self-ratings of the respective interaction partners. Specifically, interaction partners who rated themselves high on social curiosity also rated themselves high on social competence ($\beta$ = .38, $p$ < .001). Moreover, crossing the perspectives shows that those individuals rated as high socially curious by their interaction partner also rated themselves as more socially curious ($\beta$ = .28, $p$ < .01). The same picture emerged for social competence: Those individuals rated as high in social competence by their interaction partner are those that rated themselves as more socially competent ($\beta$ =. 24, $p$ <.01). Thus, relating the participants view with the perspective of their interaction partners' view indicates that both perspectives converge.

*Social Curiosity and Quality of Interaction: Mediating Mechanisms*

A second aim of this study was to examine whether the more positively experienced interaction with socially curious individuals was due to exploratory and responsive behaviors exhibited by socially curious interaction partners. Therefore, in a next step it was tested whether exploratory and responsive behaviors that were related to social curiosity also relate to interaction quality.

As all five exploratory and responsive behaviors were significantly correlated with social curiosity and quality of interaction (Table 2), their effect on the relationship between other-rated social curiosity and quality of interaction were simultaneously tested (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Accordingly, a multiple mediation model was specified (AMOS 17.0; Arbuckle, 2008) with other-rated social curiosity as exogenous variable, quality of interaction as endogenous variable and the five behaviors as intermediate variables (see Figure 2). All residuals associated with the 5 behavioral variables were permitted to correlate (correlations ranging from $r$ =.11 to $r$ = .53; cf., Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

The model fit the data well. The chi-square statistic for the model was significant ($\chi^2$ = 112.56; df = 49). All fit indices were in the acceptable range (CFI = .94; SRMR = .044; RMSEA = .085, 90% CI = .064, .105). The standardized factor loadings were all significant ($p < .001$), ranging in magnitude from .69 to .93.

Overall, other-rated social curiosity and the five behaviors accounted for 35% of the variance in the experienced interaction quality. The total effect ($\beta$ = .38, 95% CI = 0.22, 0.51) from other-rated social curiosity on quality of interaction was composed of the direct effect with $\beta$ = .22 (95% CI = 0.06, 0.36) and the indirect effect with $\beta$ = .16 (95% CI = 0.08, 0.26), indicating that the effect from other-rated social curiosity on quality of interaction was partially explained by exploratory and responsive behaviors. Examination of the path coefficients revealed four indirect paths from other-rated social curiosity on quality of interaction. Socially curious individuals talked rather with their interaction partners, responded more to what the interaction partner said, engaged more in eye contact and asked more questions. These behaviors in turn were positively associated with the quality of interaction. Whereas asking back-channel questions was positively related to perception of social curiosity it was not significantly associated with quality of interaction. Thus, overall, exploratory and responsive behaviors partially explained the association of other-rated social curiosity with quality of interaction.
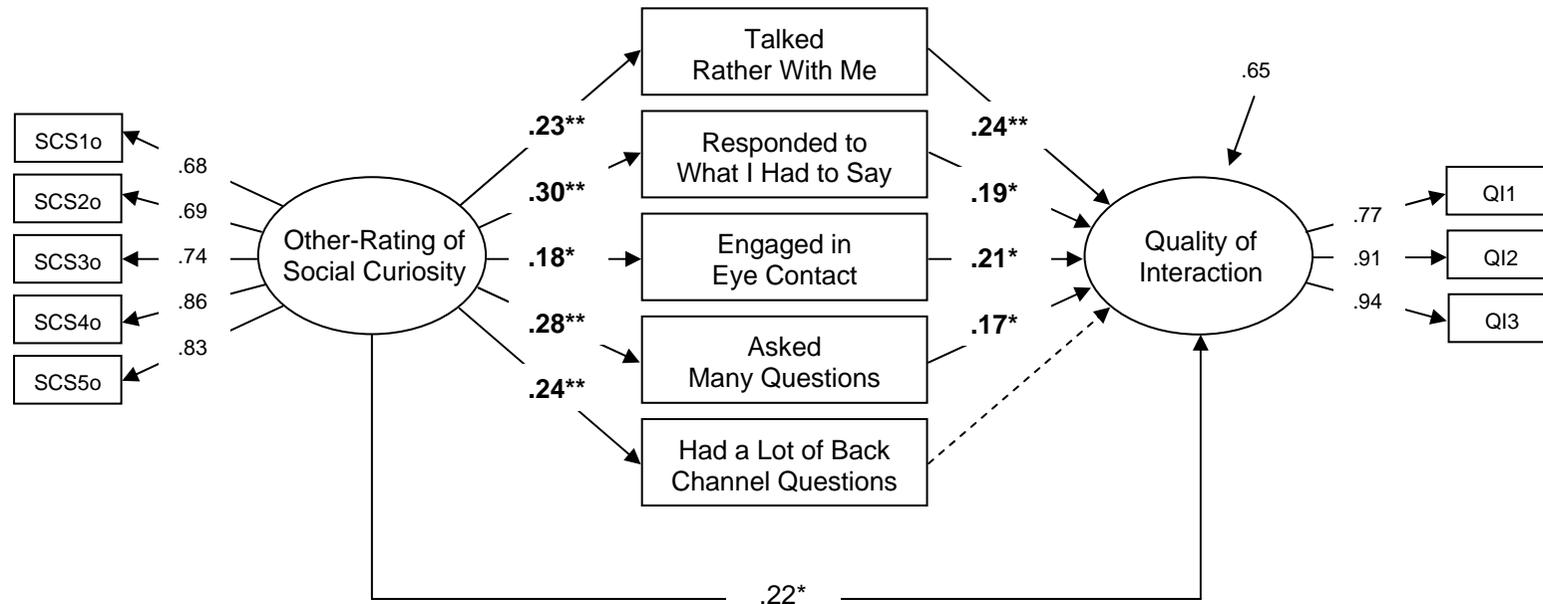
*Figure 2.* Relationship between social curiosity, interaction quality and behaviors. All factor loadings were significant (*p* < .001; *N* = 182). Dashed paths within the model indicate a not significant relation between factors.

## Discussion

The central aim of the present study was to examine how interactions with socially curious individuals are experienced by their interaction partner. The results showed that participants experienced interactions with socially curious interaction partners as being more positive. To understand how this relationship arises, it was furthermore examined whether it could be explained by the exploratory and responsive behaviors of socially curious individuals. The results showed that socially curious interaction partners displayed not only more exploratory behaviors (e.g., asked more questions) but also more responsive behaviors (e.g., responded to what interaction partner said). In addition, these behaviors were also associated with experienced interaction quality. These findings suggest that the desire for new information about other people and the resulting "exploration" and "responsiveness" towards the interaction partner positively influence first encounters, and consequently, facilitates the building of social relationships.

Moreover, the findings showed that social curiosity and social competence were highly related. Interaction partners perceived as socially curious were also perceived as socially competent. This finding closely replicated earlier results by Renner (2006), showing that socially curious individuals rated themselves as skilled to initiate social interactions, as confident in social encounters and as able to build networks of relationships that provide support in the face of stressful life events (Renner, 2006; Litman & Pezzo, 2007). Thus, the general interest in other people seems to be consistently linked to social competence across different domains of social competence, different perspectives, and different samples (Renner, 2006). Interestingly, the perception of social competence did not impact participants' evaluation of interaction quality. Perceiving an interaction partner as competent in initiating and guiding conversations seems to have no influence on the interaction quality whereas perceiving the interaction partner as somebody who is fascinated to get to know new people,

likes to learn the habits of others and to find out how others 'work' seems to be important for a positive social interaction. Thus, the effect of social curiosity on the quality of interaction cannot be explained by a greater social competence of socially curious individuals. One might speculate that the pure competence to initiate and steer social interactions is not sufficient to create a pleasant interaction. Rather, it appears that people enjoy to interact with people that are motivated to learn about their feeling, thoughts and behaviors.

The results furthermore showed that the relationship between social curiosity and social competence did not only exist in the head of the participants. Rather, the relationship between social curiosity and social competence was mirrored in the self-perspective of the interaction partners: Interaction partners that rated themselves high on social curiosity also rated themselves high on social competence. Moreover, in a cross-judge perspective, relating self- and other-ratings yielded low to moderate correlations for general social curiosity and social competence: Interaction partners perceived as socially curious were more likely those that rated themselves more socially curious. The same picture emerged for social competence: Interaction partners perceived as socially competent were those that rated themselves as socially competent. Hence, participants' other-perspective converged with their interaction partners' self-perspective. These results are underlined by findings showing that curiosity as well as social competence can be accurately perceived by unacquainted others (Gifford, Ng & Wilkinson, 1985; Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004). Thus, it appears that social curiosity and social competence can be perceived by unacquainted others suggesting that participant's perception of their interaction partner was grounded in reality.

Although social curiosity should unfold the main impact at the initiation and formation phase of social interactions when everything about the other person is new, the general interest in other peoples' behaviors, feelings and thoughts may also influence ongoing relationships (friendship, couples etc.). Theories about the determinants of curiosity postulate that curiosity is positively related to one's knowledge in a particular domain. Thus, the more

knowledge one has about a particular topic or domain the more likely one's attention is drawn to the gap in one's knowledge (Loewenstein, 1994). Applying this consideration at the realm of social relationships one might assume that ongoing relationships are an inexhaustible reservoirs of new social information for socially curious individuals. The better they know their relationship partner the more their attention is drawn to aspects of their partners' personality, feelings, and behaviors that are unknown for them. Exploring these unknown aspects, thus, being attentive and responsive towards their partner may in turn facilitate and foster interaction quality and closeness within an ongoing relationship. In line with that notion, research in the realm of ongoing personal relationships could show that behaviors signaling attention, openness and involvement are positively associated with indicators of relationship quality (closeness, commitment, satisfaction, liking etc.; Hess, 2003; Hess, Fannin, & Pollom, 2007). Particularly interesting is that the authors suggest that these behaviors are used by people as 'closeness-enhancing strategies' in relationships (Hess et al., 2007). Moreover, it has been shown that the perception of responsiveness to be associated with relationship quality (Gore, Cross, & Morris, 2006; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Thus, there is good reason to assume that personal relationships with socially curious individuals might be characterized by attention and responsiveness and are therefore experienced as being more positive.

Taking together, the results of our study suggest that social curiosity impacts initial social interactions. Individuals perceiving their interaction partner as being interested in other people experienced more positive interactions with them. It appears that this was not simply due to a higher perceived social competence to initiate and guide social interaction but was rather due to perceiving the interaction partner as somebody who is motivated to learn about others and behaves attentive and respondent. Considered from a broader theoretical perspective, being eager to learn about other persons' feelings, thoughts and behaviors and

'exploring the social interaction partner' seems to be an ingredient of a successful social interaction and might facilitate relationship building. On the long run, socially curious individuals may therefore be more likely to reduce the risk of social exclusion and rejection.

*Chapter 5*

**General Discussion**

## Summary

To function efficiently in a complex social world we need information about the people surrounding us and the culture we live in (Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2001; Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar & Shultz, 2007). Accordingly, social curiosity defined as the desire for new social information leading to exploratory behavior is of crucial importance (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006). It has been proposed that social curiosity serves multiple functions (Renner, 2006). According to this notion, social curiosity facilitates the acquisition of social information and knowledge, the building and maintaining of social relationships, and the predictability and controllability of the social world (Renner, 2006). Thus, social curiosity is assumed to foster successful social functioning (Baumeister, 2005).

However, most research has focused on curiosity regarding the physical world whereas interest in curiosity regarding the social world is arising only recently (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006). Therefore, the overarching aim of the present thesis is to extent the knowledge about the concept of social curiosity and its relation to the proposed functions.

In a first step, it was focused on the interrelation of social curiosity and gossip, in an English speaking and a German speaking sample (*Chapter 2*). Results showed that both samples believed that they are less gossipy but more curious than their peers. Multidimensional SEM of self and trait conceptions indicated that social curiosity and gossip are related constructs but with a different pattern of social functions. Gossip was predominantly related to entertainment purposes whereas social curiosity was related to the acquisition of social information and social bonding. Relationships to other personality traits provided additional evidence for divergent validity. The tendency to gather and disseminate social information might represent two interlinked but different drives of cultural learning.

To extent the knowledge about the functions of social curiosity it was focused on the acquisition of social information and knowledge within the realm of person perception

(*Chapter 3*). To this end, it was examined whether social curious individuals come to more accurate personality judgments when judging a person they have only recently become acquainted with. Results showed that socially curious judges were indeed more accurate when judging the Openness and Extraversion of their interaction partner. Examining the process of personality judgments demonstrated that these accurate judgments appear to be based on a higher detection and more comprehensive utilization of relevant information. In contrast, judges' social curiosity neither affected the process nor the accuracy of judging Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. It appears that socially curious individuals have an advantage when judging traits that are prevalent and observable in initial interactions. Thus, it might be suggested that socially curious individuals had acquired diagnostic knowledge how to identify these traits in initial interactions.

In a third step, it was investigated in more detail the facilitation of social bonding within a becoming acquainted situation (*Chapter 4*). In particular, it was examined whether and how social curiosity exerts influence on an initial interaction between two unacquainted persons. Results revealed that interacting with socially curious individuals was experienced as more pleasant, and that exploratory and responsive behaviors of socially curious interaction partners contributed to the enhanced interaction quality. Socially curious interaction partners were also perceived as more socially competent. The perceived social competence, however, did not contribute to the experienced quality of interaction. The effect of social curiosity on initial encounters suggests that social curiosity may facilitate the building of social relationships.

## Concept of Curiosity

Curiosity research has a long tradition (James, 1890; McDougall, 1908/1963). However, so far research has fcused on curiosity elicited by stimuli of the physical world (Berlyne, 1954, 1966; Collins, Litman, & Spielberger, 2004; Daffner, Scinto, Weintraub, Guinessey, & Mesulam, 1994; Kang, Hsu, Krajbich et al., 2009; Litman & Jimerson, 2004; Litman & Spielberger, 2003; Loewenstein, 1994; Silvia, 2006; Zuckerman, 1994). Only recently it has been stressed that our human fellows are particularly powerful and ubiquitous stimuli eliciting curiosity directed at the social world (Renner, 2006). Accordingly, measures have been developed to assess interindividual differences in social curiosity, and first empirical evidence had suggested that social curiosity can be distinguished from epistemic curiosity (Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006). The findings of the present thesis support precious research by demonstrating that the Social Curiosity Scale (Renner, 2006) was moderately associated with measures of epistemic curiosity. Thus, the present thesis corroborates that social curiosity reflects a substantially related, but distinct aspect of an underlying curiosity construct.

To better understand the concept of social curiosity, one aim of the present thesis was to examine the relationship of social curiosity with gossip. The following section of the discussion will focus explicitly on that relationship. In order to further underline that social curiosity is a distinct concept the relationships of social curiosity with other personality traits are discussed subsequently.
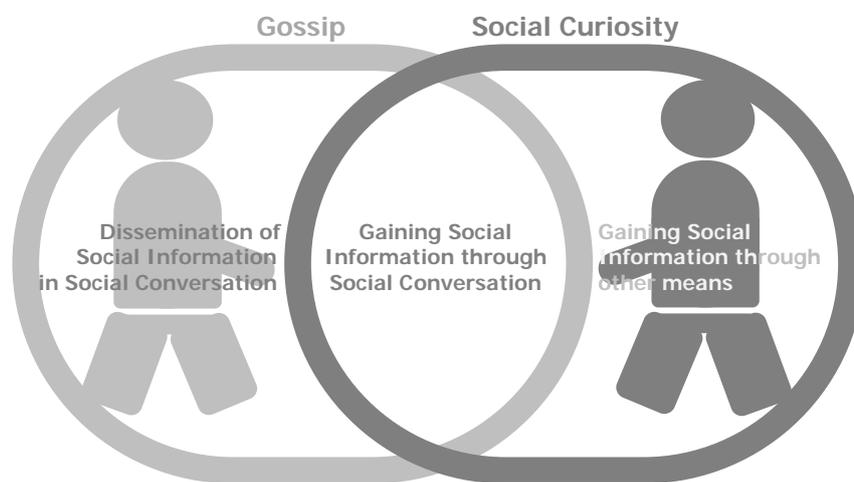
### *Social Curiosity and Gossip*

Gossip is a ubiquitous social phenomenon (e.g., Dunbar, Mariott & Duncan, 1997) that attracted attention in psychology, anthropology, and philosophy (e.g., Ayim, 1994; Baumeister, 2005; Ben Ze'ev, 1994; Dunbar et al., 1997; Haviland, 1977; Taylor, 1994). When simultaneously considering gossip and social curiosity, it becomes apparent that for

both concepts highly similar functions are discussed (e.g., Ben'Zev, 1994; Foster, 2004; Renner, 2006) and the gossip literature frequently mentioned the desire for social information (e.g., Ayim, 1994; Ben Ze'ev, 1994; Haviland, 1977; Taylor, 1994). Therefore, the present thesis aimed to empirically investigate the relationship of gossip and social curiosity.

Results suggested that social curiosity and gossip represent two distinct but nonetheless related aspects of social conversation (*Chapter 2*). Specifically, the multidimensional model demonstrated that social curiosity and gossip overlap with regard to social functions: Both concepts appear to serve the acquisition of information, social bonding, influence on the social surrounding and entertainment purposes. However, there were also marked differences. Gossip appears to serve predominantly entertainment purposes. Underlining this finding, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) showed that gossip is evaluated as more entertaining than common news, and according to Litman and Pezzo (2005), people use gossip as a fun way to share information (also see: Ben Ze'ev, 1994). In contrast, social curiosity appears to serve primarily purposes of social information acquisition and of social bonding. Thus, gossip and social curiosity are related constructs but with a different pattern of social functions.

The multidimensional model revealed that gossip is in part driven by social curiosity suggesting that gossip is an exploratory behavior of social curiosity. Similarly, Litman and Pezzo (2005, 2007) showed that socially curious individuals have a higher tendency to gossip. Ayim (1994) even described an 'investigative gossip' solely directed at gaining social information and Taylor (1994) stated that curiosity is a feature shared by all gossipers. However, the multidimensional model also demonstrated that gossip is not only driven by social curiosity and that social curiosity entails more than gossip. Thus, gossip appears to be more than an exploratory behavior in the service of social curiosity and social curiosity is more than the motivational prerequisite of gossip.

One might speculate about the "more" in gossip and social curiosity. Apparently, to gossip does not only entail to gain but also to share social information. Baumeister and colleagues, for instance, demonstrated that about half of the gossip people hear is passed on (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Thus, gossip might also be driven by an urge to communicate and let other know what one self knows about other people and social topics (Ayim, 1994; Baumeister et al., 2004; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; Litman & Pezzo, 2005).



**Gossip**          **Social Curiosity**

Dissemination of Social Information in Social Conversation

Gaining Social Information through Social Conversation

Gaining Social Information through other means

*Figure 1*: Conceptual Relationship of Gossip and Social Curiosity

Likewise, beside the possibility to obtain new information about others through gossip social curiosity entails various other means to explore the social environment (see Figure 1 for an illustration). For instance, observing other people closely might be an alternative way to gain information (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992; Leary, Rogers, Canfield, & Coe, 1986; Reeve, 1993; Reeve & Nix, 1997; Renner, 2006).

Thus, gossip reflects the tendency to exchange information within conversations. In contrast, social curiosity entails the tendency to gather social information within a much greater "catchment area". Thus, even though social information gathering is a strong interlink

between both concepts they are two distinct aspects of social participation. Therefore, research on social curiosity and gossip are not interchangeable.

*Social Curiosity and Personality*

To further understand the concept of social curiosity, relationships to other personality traits were inspected within a German and an English speaking sample. The picture that emerged is consistent with previous findings and additionally provides new evidence for the validity of the Social Curiosity Scale.

Convergent validity was provided by the relations of social curiosity with measures of social participation and functioning (Renner, 2006). With regard to extraversion the present thesis closely replicated previous findings. The moderate relationship of the Social Curiosity Scale with extraversion presumably reflects the proclivity and the enjoyment of social interactions (*Chapter 2*). However, as a higher order personality trait, extraversion comprises other aspects that are not related to the social curiosity construct (e.g., assertiveness, warmth). Likewise, the urge for new social information is not a defining feature of extraversion. This might explain the only moderate relationship between the Social Curiosity Scale and extraversion. Thus, results suggested that socially curious individuals seek out and enjoy social situations because being surrounded by others provides opportunities to obtain new social information (see also Litman & Pezzo, 2007).

Considering theoretical notions, openness to experience and social curiosity should overlap to some extent. McCrae and Costa (1997) asserted that the active pursuit of new and varied experience is an aspect of all facets of openness and the process of exploration appeals to open people. However, as openness for experiences is a higher order personality dimension it comprises other aspects which are not entailed in the social curiosity concept (e.g., imagination, receptiveness for arts; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Kashdan, 2004). Moreover, people scoring high on openness to experience are rather described as 'intellectually curious'

than socially curious (Funder & Sneed, 1993). In line with that reasoning, in the present thesis the Social Curiosity Scale and openness to experience are moderately related (*Chapter 2*). Thus, extending previous research the present findings revealed that social curiosity and openness to experience might commonly refer to high interest in new aspects of the environment.

Consistent with the notion that social curiosity adds to the development of social competence, the Social Expressivity Scale had a moderate to high relation with the Social Curiosity Scale (*Chapter 4*). Considering that social competence is a multifaceted construct and other aspects influence social competence (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988; Riggio, 1986) no higher relationship between the Social Curiosity Scale and Social Expressivity Scale were expected. The positive interrelation of social curiosity and social competence were found within the self- and the other-perspective as well as in previous research (Renner, 2006) supporting the pervasiveness of the findings. However, if social curiosity is indeed a prerequisite of social competence it should have high predictive validity for social competence in longitudinal studies. Thus, social curiosity and social competence overlap indicating that social curiosity adds to the development of social competence.

In contrast, discriminant validity was provided by the not existing relationship of the Social Curiosity Scale with the Neuroticism scale. This result corroborates previous findings and indicates that social curiosity and negative affectivity are independent aspects of personality.

By now a picture of social curiosity emerged which is consistent across different studies. The Social Curiosity Scale (Renner, 2006) has proven to be a psychometrically sound instrument. Importantly, evidence of convergent and discriminant validity were amplified by replicating and extending previous research. Accordingly, social curiosity seems to be a distinguishable facet of the broader curiosity construct. Moreover, social curiosity is closely connected to personality traits related to social participation and functioning, but is

independent from negative affectivity. Thus, one might speculate that socially curious people are sociable and well adjusted individuals.

## Functions of Curiosity

To successfully maneuver in the social world people need information about other people. Accordingly, it has been suggested that social curiosity serves different functions related to social functioning, namely the acquisition of social information and knowledge, formation of social relationships and networks, and the controllability of the social world.

*Social Curiosity and the Acquisition of Social Information and Knowledge*

In line with this assumption the present thesis provided empirical evidence that social curiosity indeed facilitates the acquisition of social information and knowledge. In particular, socially curious individuals were more likely to state that gossip serves them as one way to gain information about others and to learn about social rules (*Chapter 2*). The notion was tested more specifically in *Chapter 3*. Behavioral data showed that socially curious perceivers came to more accurate personality judgments when judging Extraversion and Openness. Lens Model analysis demonstrated that higher accuracy is grounded in higher detection of social information and in a more comprehensive utilization of this information. The ability to utilize the detected information more appropriately for those traits that are observable in first encounters confirmed the assumption that socially curious individuals have gained a higher expertise about indicators of personality. In frequent interactions with unknown persons socially curious individuals might have learned which behaviors and attributes are associated with Extraversion or Openness, and consequently, utilized the information more appropriately (Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995; Hill, Lewicki, Czyzewska, & Schuller, 1990; Lewicki, Hill, & Czyzewska, 1992). Thus, the results showed that social curiosity indeed facilitates the social information and knowledge acquisition and suggested that this effect may

be due to higher attention towards new social information and knowledge about personality and its reflection in behavior gained in repeated social interaction.

These findings are furthermore relevant for the research domain dealing with the accuracy of personality judgments. The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 1999), a prominent model in that area, postulates that a judge only comes to an accurate personality judgment when the relevant and available information is detected and appropriately used. Funder (1999) further theorizes that knowledge about the reflection of personality in behavior gained through interpersonal experience as well as the ability and the motivation of the judge influence the detection and/or utilization of cues, and consequently, the accuracy of personality judgments (Funder, 1999). In line with these assumptions, previous research had shown that more interpersonally oriented individuals were more accurate when judging personality and emotional states of other people (Vogt & Colvin, 2003; Letzring, 2008; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Individuals high on general intelligence provided more accurate personality judgments than those who scored lower on general intelligence measures (Christiansen, Wolcott-Burnam, Janovics, Burns, & Quirk, 2005; Harris, Vernon, & Jang, 1999; Lippa & Dietz, 2000). These findings were interpreted as evidence for higher cue detection and/or more appropriate cue utilization based on greater knowledge about indicators of personality as well as superior ability (Christiansen et al., 2005; Funder, 1999; Harris et al., 1999; Letzring, 2008; Lippa & Dietz, 2000; Vogt & Colvin, 2003). However, as none of these studies included cue detection and cue utilization it could not be confirmed that the higher accuracy is indeed due to a better detection and utilization of cues and not merely due to projection or stereotype usage (e.g., Furr, 2008; Hoch, 1987). Thus, the present dissertation is among the first that empirically investigated how the process of personality judgments varies as a function of judge characteristics.

Analyzing the process of personality judgments provides valuable insight in differential information usage when people form impressions of others. However, it has also

more practical advantages. The knowledge about valid and utilized cues can be applied to train professionals that are repeatedly confronted with the task to form personality judgments about others. For instance, identifying which cues or cue patterns are appropriately used by socially curious individuals to judge Openness may help other people to correctly identify valid cues and utilize them correctly. However, before such steps can be taken further theorizing and empirical research is needed. So far, there has been no attempt to classify the myriads of cues that potentially might influence person perception or to organize the situations that might influence the validity and usefulness of cues.

*Formation of Social Relationships and Networks*

The present dissertation also provided empirical support for the notion that social curiosity facilitates the formation of social relationships and networks. Consistently, socially curious individuals were more likely to state that the exchange of social information is an indicator of friendship and enhances closeness with the social network (*Chapter 2*). In *Chapter 4* the notion was tested more specifically. Within a becoming acquainted situation it was tested how initial interactions with socially curious individuals were experienced. The results demonstrated that interaction partners experienced initial interactions with individuals perceived as socially curious as more pleasant and positive. Thus, it seems that social curiosity has positive effects on first encounters and may therefore facilitate the formation of social relationships.

Exploratory and responsive behaviors such as 'asking questions' and 'responding to what the other said' were associated with social curiosity and also with the experienced interaction quality. This is in line with theoretical assumptions by Kashdan and Roberts (2004) suggesting that curious individuals are perceived as more attractive because they are more responsive towards interaction partners. Also other empirical findings are in support of the present findings (Gold, Ryckman, & Mosley, 1984; Hess, Fannin, & Pollom, 2007;

Mason, Tatkow, & McCrae, 2005). For instance, a study conducted by Reeve (1993) demonstrated that curious individuals thoroughly observe their target of interest and other studies have shown that establishing or maintaining eye contact is associated with liking on the side of the target person (Gold et al., 1984; Mason et al., 2005). Thus, the results are consistent with the notion that the behaviors of socially curious individuals have an influence on the quality of interaction.

It was furthermore assumed that social curiosity promotes social competence and socially curious individuals might therefore more easily initiate and form social relationships. In support of that notion, social curiosity was closely connected with social competence. This finding closely replicated previous research showing that social curiosity is associated with measures of social functioning (Renner, 2006). Interestingly, social competence did not contribute to the perceived interaction quality. As social competence is a multifaceted construct (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988; Riggio, 1986) other aspects of social competence might contribute to experienced quality of social interaction. For instance, the sensitivity for emotional cues and being empathic as captured by the Emotional Sensitivity Scale (Riggio, 1996) might influence the quality of interactions. Therefore, even though in the present thesis social competence did not translate into a higher interaction quality another operationalization of social competence might have a different effect. Nevertheless, the findings of the present thesis suggest that the competence to initiate and steer social conversations is not sufficient to create a pleasant interaction atmosphere. Rather, being motivated to learn as much as possible about the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of one's interaction partner might translate into a pleasant interaction.

Taking together, the desire to learn about other people and the resulting exploration of the immediate social environment (i.e., interaction partner) fosters the experience of positive interactions for people interacting with socially curious individuals. Thus, the results showed

that social curiosity indeed facilitates the formation of social relationships and suggest that this is in part due to the behavior of socially curious individuals.

One might object that this reasoning is limited because interaction quality as well the behaviors were merely associated with other-rated social curiosity rather than with self-rated social curiosity, commonly seen as reflecting the 'true personality'. However, as Vazire (2010) stated, neither perspective — the self or others — is clearly the best perspective from which to judge personality. Rather, comparing the accuracy of self- and other-perceptions of personality traits in predicting behavior and other outcomes suggest that the different perspective predict different types of behavior and outcomes (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996; Paunonen & O'Neil, 2010; Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000; Vazire & Mehl, 2008; Vazire, 2010). However, there is not much knowledge about the relative merits of each perspective for predicting different outcomes (Oltmanns &Turkheimer, 2009; Vazire, 2010).

Therefore, based on findings from self-other-agreement of personality judgments, Vazire (2010) propose that the accuracy of the self- and the other-perspective is dependent on the observability and the evaluativeness of the traits in question. According to her reasoning, others know more about observable and evaluative traits, consequently coming to more accurate predictions concerning related behavior (John & Robins, 1993; Vazire, 2010).

In the light of this reasoning, it appears less surprising that the other-perspective of social curiosity was related to interaction quality and behaviors whereas the self-perspective is not. Findings of the present thesis suggest that social curiosity is an observable and socially desirable, thus, evaluative trait. Specifically, social curiosity yielded comparably high self-other agreement indicating that social curiosity represents a visible trait (*Chapter 4*; for comparison: Ames & Bianchi, 2008 ; Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004; Kurtz & Sherker, 2003). Moreover, people perceived themselves as more curious than their average peer indicating that social curiosity is appraised as a rather desirable trait

(*Chapter 2*; Renner, 2006). Thus, the other perspective of social curiosity might have had a more predictive validity because social curiosity represents an observable and evaluative trait.

Considered from a different point of view, the findings underline the importance to include multiple perspectives in personality research. The perspective that other-reports provide is invaluable, especially when personality variables are used to predict an outcome in which the self has less insight (Vazire, 2010; Wagerman & Funder, 2007).

*Social Curiosity and Controllability of the Social World*

The present thesis provided furthermore preliminary evidence that social curiosity is related to the controllability of the social world. Specifically, socially curious individuals were more likely to state that gossip is an effective policing device allowing themselves and other to adjust their behavior (*Chapter 2*).

In future research it would be interesting to explore possible pathways through which social curiosity may provide individuals with control over their social environment. For instance, actively searching for new information within an interaction through asking questions or changing the conversation towards a new topic may provide the socially curious individuals with control over the course of conversation. Moreover, Berger and Calabrese (1975) suggest that information-seeking within an initial interaction between two strangers reduces uncertainty and increases predictability of behavior. In support of that notion, Swann and colleagues showed that individuals who had recently been deprived of control demanded more diagnostic information about a person they were due to interview than individuals who had not been deprived of control (Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981). Thus, seeking for and gaining of information about others may facilitate mastery of the social world (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister et al., 2004; Dunbar, 2004).

Taking together, the results of the present dissertation suggest that social curiosity serve important functions: The acquisition of social information and knowledge, the

facilitation of social bonding as well as a feeling of controllability of the social world. Thus, social curiosity appears to serve social functioning thereby facilitating to negotiate ones way through the social world.

## Future Prospects

*Relationship among Functions*

The current thesis was the first to examine the functions of social curiosity and approached this aim by investigating the functions independently of each other. However, without much doubt the functions are not independent but rather relate to each other in a complex interplay. For instance, as outlined before gaining information and knowledge about the social world may help to gain control over social situations; being in control of a social situation in turn may help to obtain a desired piece of information; having broader network of people to socialize with provides individuals with more opportunities to obtain new social information; and so on.

With regard to the results of the present thesis, another possible relationship is striking: The ability to facilitate first encounters may in turn facilitate the acquisition of social information, and thereby, the accuracy of personality judgments. This notion is based on the consideration that the characteristics of a judge might not only influence the detection and utilization of cues (Letzring, 2008). Rather, the advantage of "good judges" may also be due to an ability to evoke relevant cues in the verbal and nonverbal behavior of the target. Consistently, Letzring (2008) could show that interaction partners of "good judges" were more accurately judged by outstanding observers suggesting that "good judges" were able to elicit relevant behaviors which then could have been used to judge the interaction partners' personality. Applying this notion to the studies of the present thesis might broaden the perspective on the ability of the socially curious judge. One might speculate that the positive interaction climate experienced with socially curious judges may in turn prompt interaction

partners to show more genuine and open behaviors that can be detected and utilized to judge their personality. Therefore, in accordance with the approach of Letzring (2008), in future research it would be worthwhile to examine whether interaction partner of socially curious judges are judged more accurately by outstanding observers.

*Unknown to known*

The present thesis focused on social curiosity within a becoming acquainted context because social curiosity should be especially evoked by and directed towards an unknown person. However, as many of our daily encounters are with individuals we repeatedly meet, the question arises whether known people can be as interesting for socially curious individuals as unknown. According to current theories about the determinants of curiosity the answer is yes: Loewenstein (1994), for instance, argues that curiosity is positively related to one's knowledge in a particular domain. The more knowledge one has about a particular topic or domain the more likely one's attention is drawn to the gap in one's knowledge (Loewenstein, 1994). Thus, the more one knows about another person the more the attention may be drawn to aspects of the persons' personality or history that are still unknown. Therefore, social curiosity probably emerges also within developing and ongoing social relationships.

Consequently, the exploration of social curious individuals might also affect developing and ongoing relationships. An immediate arising question in this regard is whether the "pole position" of socially curious individuals holds: Do socially curious individuals more readily develop an ongoing relationship? Are their ongoing social relationships more pleasant and positive? Empirical research suggests that socially curious individuals have a higher social activity (*Chapter 2*; Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Renner, 2006) and in combination with the findings of the present thesis that social curiosity facilitates first encounters (*Chapter 4*) one might assume that socially curious individuals more easily build a broad social network. Thus,

longitudinal studies focusing on the relationship and network development of social curious individuals are necessary.

Moreover, social curiosity might also affect the accuracy of judging the personality of an ongoing relationship partner. Research on personality judgments demonstrated that accuracy of personality judgments varies as a function of acquaintance, the so called "acquaintanceship-effect": The better people know each other the more accurate they judge the personality traits of each other (e.g., Paulhus & Bruce, 1992). This finding is explained by referring to the amount and quality of information people gain from each other during acquaintanceship (Funder, 1999). Thus, it is assumed that during weeks, month or years of acquaintanceship there is simply more relevant information available to base the judgment on. Considering that social curiosity facilitates the acquisition of social information and knowledge the question arises whether socially curious individuals gain in total more information about a relationship partner, and consequently, reach higher levels of accuracy or whether socially curious individuals gain the relevant information within a shorter period of time, and consequently, reach a common level of accuracy in less time.

Taking together, it would be interesting to study the effects of social curiosity in an ongoing relationship (e.g., friends, co-workers) and especially worthwhile to study how the effect of social curiosity change with time in order to examine how the functions of social curiosity develop and interplay.

## Conclusion

Social curiosity is defined as the desire for new social information leading to exploratory behavior (Renner, 2006). The present dissertation extends the knowledge about the concept of social curiosity by showing that social curiosity is a distinct aspect of social conversation and that it is related to social functioning. In particular, social curiosity appears to serve multiple important functions such as the acquisition of social information and knowledge, the establishment of social relationship, and the controllability of the social world. By facilitating these aspects of social life, social curiosity may help individuals to successfully take part in human society and reduce their risk of social exclusion and rejection. Taking together, the results of the present dissertation suggest that social curiosity is an important aspect of social participation and helps individuals to successfully adapt to their social environment.

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## List of Contributions

The present thesis is part of my (FMH) finalization of several years of work as a doctoral student supervised by Prof. Dr. Britta Renner. In the following, contributions of Prof. Dr. Britta Renner and FMH are detailed.

The study of *Chapter 2* was conducted at the Jacobs University Bremen (formerly International University Bremen) under the supervision of Prof Dr. Britta Renner. FMH designed the study, collected and analyzed the data as well as composed the manuscript together with Prof Dr. Britta Renner.

The data used in *Chapter 3* and *Chapter 4* were collected at the Behavioral and Social Sciences Laboratory of the Jacobs University Bremen. FMH designed the study together with Prof Dr. Britta Renner and collected the data. For the manuscripts of *Chapter 3* and *Chapter 4*, the data analysis and the composition of the manuscript were done by FMH. Prof. Dr. Britta Renner contributed revising the manuscript and supervised the study.