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Why you SHOULD make small talk at the Christmas party: Vocalization is a way to strengthen social bonds

- Lemurs only answer calls of the individuals they share closest bond with
- Vocalizations act as a way for bonded group members to stay in touch
- Findings have implications in primate vocal evolution and human speech

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Small talk may be a lot more important than you think.

A new study from Princeton University has found that idle conversations could be an evolutionary tool for social-bonding.

In social primates like ringtailed lemurs, vocalizations act as a way for closely-bonded group member to keep in touch when they are separated.



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The study examined the vocal interactions and grooming habits of ringtailed lemurs living at Duke University's Lemur Center and on St. Catherines Island.

These primates groom selectively, only pairing with certain members of the group.

Even more exclusive were the vocalizations between the lemurs, who only responded to calls of the individuals they groomed the most.

When researchers played recordings of individual lemur calls for the group, only the lemurs with the closest relationship to the calling animal responded.

'Our results indicate that when animals respond to each other's vocalizations, they are in fact also working on maintaining their social bonds,' said Ipek Kulahci, first author, who received her Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology from Princeton.

The researchers found that lemurs would respond even when their calling friend was not nearby, indicating that vocalization enhances strong bonds.

WHY 'SMALL TALK' IS IMPORTANT

Idle conversations could be an evolutionary tool for social-bonding.

In social primates like ringtailed lemurs, vocalizations act as a way for closely-bonded group member to keep in touch when they are separated.

Researchers discovered that the lemurs only responded to calls of the individuals they groomed the most.

The findings could be applied to the understanding of primate vocal evolution and human speech.

Speech may have developed with growing primate group sizes, as a way to maintain familiarity.

Understanding how the lemurs use grooming and vocalization to establish and enforce bonds could help scientists determine the interrelationships between different forms of communication.

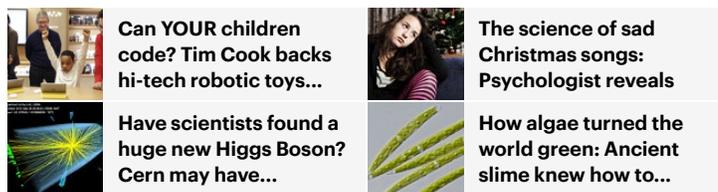
'By exchanging vocalizations, the animals are reinforcing their social bonds even when they are away from each other,' says Kulahci.

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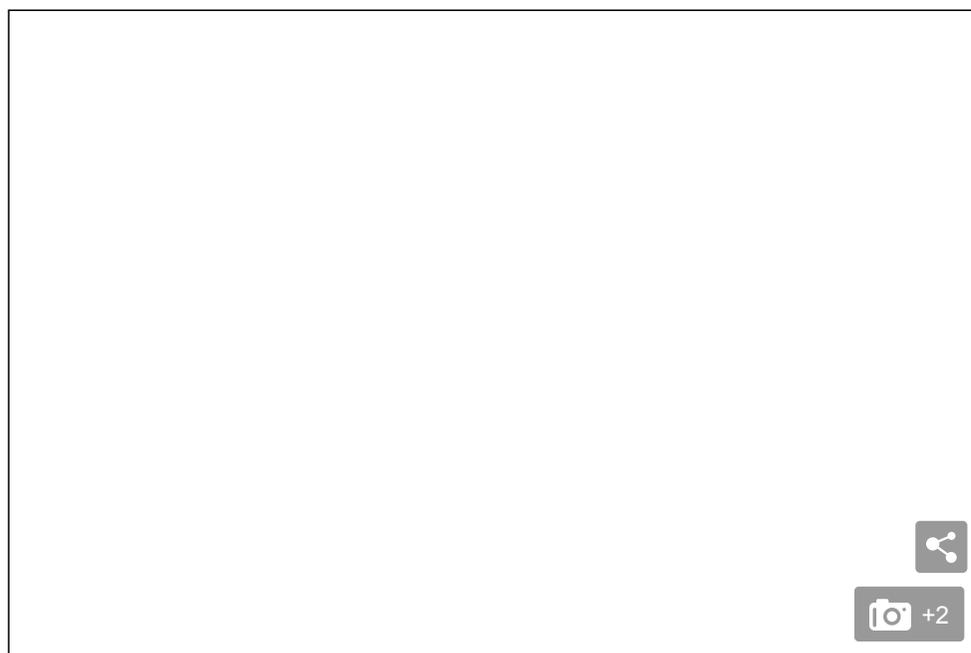
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'This social selectivity in vocalizations is almost equivalent to how we humans keep in regular touch with our close friends and families, but not with everyone we know.'

Asif Ghazanfar, a professor of psychology at the Princeton Neuroscience Institute, and Daniel Rubenstein, Class of 1877 Professor of Zoology and professor of ecology and evolutionary biology co-authored the paper, also acting as doctoral advisors.



The findings could be applied to the understanding of primate vocal evolution and human speech. Speech may have developed with growing primate group sizes, as a way to maintain familiarity. Understanding how the lemurs use grooming and vocalization to establish and enforce bonds could help scientists determine the interrelationships between different forms of communication

Ghazanfar says that the findings could be applied to the understanding of primate vocal evolution and human speech. Speech may have developed with growing primate group sizes, as a way to maintain familiarity.

'Talking is a social lubricant, not necessarily done to convey information, but to establish familiarity,' says Ghazanfar.

'I think these vocalizations are equivalent to the chitchat that we do. People think that conversations are like exchanging mini-lectures full of information. But most of the time we have conversations and forget them when we're done because they're performing a purely social function.'

Understanding how the lemurs use grooming and vocalization to establish and enforce bonds could help scientists determine the interrelationships between different forms of communication, says Rubenstein.

'We raise our voice and use our hands when making an emphatic point, but stick to voice only when not particularly excited or the situation is less urgent.'

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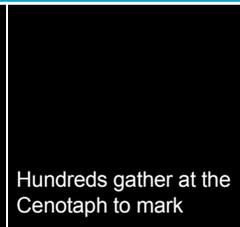
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