[00:00:00] [singing + piano] It's time for meaningful insights, every researcher's delight, it's data night!

Kasha Ely: Hello and welcome to Data Night. I'm Kasha Ely with the Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, and this is Sara Algoe, associate professor and Kenan scholar in the department of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC-Chapel Hill. Hi Sara.

Sara Algoe: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Kasha Ely: Thanks for joining us. To kick things off, first, can you tell me a little about yourself?

Sara Algoe: Yeah, so I'm a social psychologist. And as you just said, I'm in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience here at UNC. My expertise is in emotions, social interactions, relationships and health psychology. I'm from Minnesota. [laughter]

Kasha Ely: And how long have you been in Chapel Hill?

Sara Algoe: Let's see. I started here as a postdoc back in 2007 and I started on the tenure track in 2011.

Kasha Ely: So today we wanted to talk a little bit about one of your projects the LOVE Consortium. Can you tell me what is the Consortium all about?

Sara Algoe: Yeah, the other LOVE Consortium is a global network of researchers and we really strive to facilitate the collaborative use of archived data to advance the scientific study of social connection. In the Consortium, we really try to take two approaches to advancing in the use of archive data for collaborations. One is we have a digital space kind of a digital way for people to connect and that is our LOVE Consortium Dataverse, that I'll tell you about it. And sometimes I like to think of it as a little bit of a matchmaking system for researchers who have data to match them with people who are looking for data to test a research question. And the other thing that we do is, one [00:02:00] of the other things that we do, is we have networking events and kind of in-person opportunities for people to form collaborations. So.

Kasha Ely: Great. Thank you. And why did you create this project originally?

Sara Algoe: Well, I saw a really big need basically, and the timing just worked out really well, several things were really coming together at once for me as a researcher, and at the time that I started thinking about this I was just on the other side of, I was just a new assistant professor, actually, when I really first started thinking about this so this has been a few years in the making of daydreaming and scheming. But the gist was, to do research in this area, to really study the science of social connection, you need to have data that are really meaningful and address how social interactions happen in everyday life, for example. So a lot of times these are really expensive data sets. They take a long time to collect, a lot of times they involve both people in a given type of relationship. So if you're studying people who are in romantic relationships or peer groups or organizations, a lot of times you'll actually have the data from multiple people, and not only from like one survey, but a lot of times we'll also have people come into the lab and we have them have video recorded kind of naturalistic conversations or will have them respond to nightly questionnaires each night for 10 nights. Sometimes people follow them up for years, actually. And so these are really expensive data to collect.

So that's the first thing is that, you, to be able to access the data set like this, you really need to already be at the top of your game and have the resources to collect it. But also once you collect data like these, then really what happens is you'll write one paper or two papers or whatever right away and then you have another idea. And you get or you write another grant for another [00:04:00] paper and then you collect more data and what ends up happening is that you have all kinds of data just sitting there, you know on your hard drive. And it's kind of like a rainy day fund that you had this amazing opportunity to collect all the data. And so, of course you're going to ask as many questions as you can because it's so hard to get the people into the lab, but then the rest of the answers to their questionnaires might just be languishing until another grad student comes along who can work on that project with you or a different collaborator comes along. And so the people who have the data really end up being The Gatekeepers to a huge treasure trove of resources.

So that's one thing and as I was collecting these data sets of my own when I was an assistant professor, I was actually feeling a little guilty about it like, oh my gosh, there's all this opportunity for scientific discovery and I can't get to it! There are not enough hours in the day because I'm moving on to these other questions, but wow, what if somebody tested all these questions over here.

So that's one thing, another thing that was happening, is that in our field, so I'm in social psychology, there was a really important conversation right, that really started right around 2012 about really getting people to rethink the value of statistical power, which basically means having more people in your data set. So it's one thing and it, like I said, they're really expensive data to collect and so every person is more money. And then the other thing - and time - the other thing is about replication. So we really want to be able to see the same effect in multiple studies so that we know it's not just a fluke of, you know, maybe it's just that you're studying people in Chapel Hill, North Carolina or something. And so both of those features are especially hard when your data are more expensive to collect, and so that conversation was happening and I was watching a lot of Junior colleagues really feel like they were getting [00:06:00], in my, in this particular area, really feel like they were getting shut out of the field because it was an appropriate scientific conclusion that we really need to have more people in our studies and replicate, but it meant that we might be losing really important voices in the field.

And then the last thing for this was that I study things that are, I study positive psychological processes and kind of positive behaviors in relationships, like expressing gratitude and sharing laughter and sharing good news with other people and for historically, it's a pretty it's a pretty young field actually, and historically researchers were really focused on - they saw the importance of relationships but a lot of the questions were about how to keep them from breaking. So how do people fight well, how do people, well, how do people provide support when things are not going well. But there has been a really big push theoretically in the field about the value of positive moments between people, the the things that that we love are friends for. And so I knew that there were a lot of people who had been collecting these data behind the scenes, but because that might not have been their primary research question, those exact measures might have been the ones that were just kind of left languishing in these hidden data sets that nobody knew about.

So all of that came together just so I wanted to start the LOVE Consortium to really create, and also just really capitalizing on digital technology. It's about time we try to make use of the fact that we can do this now, so I wanted to create a space where people could say I have data. Let me tell you about it and just describe it and other people could say hey, I'm looking for data on this kind of thing. But by say that I mean they could just search, use metadata to search for the kinds of variables and, that they're looking for and so that whole confluence of events, that very long answer is how the LOVE [00:08:00] Consortium came to be.

Kasha Ely: Great and when did you start the LOVE Consortium?

Sara Algoe: We started, let's see, December 1st, 2019, is when we officially kicked off and that's due to a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation. That's when our grant started and that is when our board of advisors started meeting and to get the party started.

Kasha Ely: Can you tell me, I want to go back real quick to the Dataverse. Can you tell me what is a Dataverse and how do you guys use it?

Sara Algoe: That's great. So the Dataverse is a digital archiving space. It was originally created at Harvard and it's, the Harvard Dataverse is the original and there are lots of off shoots from that that really build on this open-source platform to be able to describe a data set and you can use metadata to say what kinds of variables are in your data set and other people can search those data set descriptions to try to find what they're looking for. So one of the really nice things about it is that it's archived in perpetuity. And so you then have this really nice record of all the investment that you made into collecting those data and you have it permanently documented. You also get a data citation, because it's permanent. And so then any time you publish anything using data from that data set description, you can actually cite that data set description and you can track your contribution to the field through that mechanism. So that's the Dataverse broadly.

One thing that we really wanted to do with the LOVE Consortium data verse is that we've worked with the Odum Institute to create customized metadata. So we really worked hard to think about what are the kinds of things that we would want to know if we were looking for data like these and so, so this includes things like [00:10:00] some of the standardized variables that we use in our field so that people could describe their data sets in really standardized ways. We also included metadata fields that that were like the specific methods. So was there an experiment involved? What, is there a naturalistic video recorded conversation? Do you have nightly diaries from nightly reports from people? Do you have a longitudinal follow-up? And those are the kinds of things that are really important for people who are looking to test a question. So we wanted to make sure that we had people have standardized deals so that they could use those to describe it. But then also that people could search really easily for the kinds of data that they might be looking for it advanced work on social connection

Kasha Ely: Interesting and can you tell me a little bit about your experience working with our archive team?

Sara Algoe: Oh my gosh, they were amazing from the very first meeting with, with Thu-Mai and Mandy, we just knew that it was like a match made in heaven, it felt like. So it was just really easy to to really troubleshoot and think through how we could really set it up so that it was optimized for the users that we were specifically looking for and then I learned a lot about archiving! And I didn't even know that this was possible and it was kind of a serendipitous twist that we found them and and it's been, it's been really wonderful so far. People who have used their Dataverse have said how easy it is to use and how helpful they think it'll be for conducting collaborations. And so we're really excited.

Kasha Ely: That's awesome. Always good to hear. I'm curious - the open science movement is very big right now, but there are still I think people who are hesitant to share their data. What would you say to researchers who are kind of on the fence about whether to put [00:12:00] their data out there?

Sara Algoe: Yeah. Well, that's a great question. I think that there are times when it's fine to not share your data itself and there are times when it makes a lot of sense to share the data themselves, and it just depends on, well it depends on lots of factors. So if the data are originally anonymous, then there shouldn't be a problem sharing the data. A lot of the data sets that we have, and this is actually something that we thought a lot about, so a lot of the data sets that people who study things in this domain, one of the special considerations is that people — let's say I'm studying people in romantic relationships, so, there are ways of identifying, like if you have a unique demographic pairing for example of the the couple, and if the couple knew that they, like, that this data set involved them, even if you don't have their names in the data set, if you just have an identifying number, we ask questions like about people's sex lives. So, a person could actually go go on there, if they knew that they were in that study and they had a unique, and they could look up the results.

So one of the things that's really — okay. So that's one piece of it. Is that sometimes, it's better to not openly completely share your data, and sometimes there are ways of still doing those collaborations with other people even if you're not posting the data to the world. So this way that we've come up with, we think of it as kind of a middle ground. So when researchers have ethics approval for example to openly share their data in a de-identified way, they can post their actual data set, the the raw numbers, to the data set description. But what's so nice about the Dataverse itself is that you can just describe what's [00:14:00] in the data set. So you can really make use of those metadata and people can still find you and be able to start that collaboration, and then you can do the ethically appropriate version of sharing the data set. Whatever that might, it may be totally open. But if you need special permissions or whatever that might be to be able to start that collaboration, then you can do it that way. And so, I don't, that was a really long winded answer.

Kasha Ely: That was a great answer, thank you.

Sara Algoe: Yeah, like sometimes it's good. Sometimes you might want to be cautious, and we think that we solved the problem by helping people to just tap into whatever works with their Ethics Committee.

So to the point of the value of open science. One thing that this does, is it does open the door to what are the data sets that are out there? And it starts to spark that conversation between people about the kinds of data that they might have to be able to answer questions. And so even if they're not, even if people aren't able to post the raw data, for example, knowing that there's another data set where you could actually test whether that question should be able to be replicated in a different data set by seeing that they have a data set, that there are data sets posted out there, I think that that's one added advantage of having them having the data sets describe the  Dataverse.

Kasha Ely: Absolutely. What do you want people to know about the LOVE Consortium?

Sara Algoe: Hmm. I want them to know that it's there, that we want them to use it to start collaborations. We really want this to be a collaborative space. We think that this is a really great opportunity for a scientific innovation as well as acceleration. And so that's a few things. That was really long. How about one more?

Kasha Ely: Yes, please.

Sara Algoe: I also really want people to take a close look at the variables that they could use [00:16:00] to test new questions on love because I think there are so many untapped questions out there and we have the data to be able to address them.

Kasha Ely: Well now that we've talked a lot about the LOVE Consortium, I'd love to step backwards and talk a little bit about your background and your experiences in the field of psychology. So what drew you to psychology?

Sara Algoe: Well what came to mind as an answer to that question is something, I've always been a people watcher. But then I realized that might sound a little creepy. [laughter]

I guess I would say, you know, I don't care, but um, I guess I would say that that's true. I really, I've always been fascinated by human behavior and what it is about how thinking about another person or, or actually their behavior itself can just change the nature of a social interaction. So it's really about, for me, I've always been fascinated by how the real or imagined presence of other people changes the way that we think and behave. And that's essentially the definition of social psychology. So, it was a pretty natural fit for me.

Kasha Ely: And why did you choose to focus on studying positive social connections?

Sara Algoe: That's a great question. So I thought, I started studying emotion and I really was interested in how people communicate emotion. And that was one of the things, even as an undergraduate back at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was studying that. And then - but part of that for me was that I was really curious about how we could better understand how the communication of emotions so we could understand how people get along. The theme has [00:18:00] always been there for me.

And then when I was in graduate school, I started working with someone who is studying some of the more positive emotions, and this was a time when people, that, not that many people were studying positive emotions. This was John Hite. And with him, I started studying gratitude. I got really interested in the motion of gratitude. And really early in my graduate career, I realized that emotions are these amazing devices that really helped to coordinate social interaction. And and that is a lot of how we connect with other people, our, through our emotional experiences and especially these positive emotional experiences. And it was just like a light bulb, you know, there's like there's a whole, it was a whole untapped domain of research questions where I felt like, this feels like the stuff that really makes my best relationships click and why don't we have more and better research in this domain? And so I just kept, there was just like question after question for me and it just felt like this wide-open area.

And so the more I learned about the topic that I was studying, especially at the time, which was the emotion of gratitude, the more intrigued I got and then I started learning about the, actually how important relationships are for health and well-being. So not only mental health but also physical health and even living longer. So now we know, and a lot of people know this that like the, that one easy way of saying it is that having good high quality relationships is as good for you as smoking is bad for for you. And so thinking about it that way, it's like wow, we really need to better understand, what is it about great relationships [00:20:00] that that make them so great and how can we really understand those fine-grained moments to help tap into that more? So one way that I describe what I do now is I study the moments that characterize our very best relationships.

Kasha Ely: That's really interesting. I'm curious, how do you study something like love that seems so abstract or good relationships, all of what you're discussing?

Sara Algoe: Yeah, that's a great question. Well, I think we have a long way to go on love. There are a couple of domains of researchers who study it. So there are lots of people who study people in love-based relationships, like parents and children or romantic relationships. They study all kinds of things within those relationships. There are emotion researchers and some of them are studying love itself, like this momentary feeling of love. So there are really three hallmarks of studying people who are in love-based relationships or really trying to understand these moments as they happen between people.

So one hallmark of my work is that I try to capture these things, these phenomena in the context of ongoing relationships so we can really know, we try to collect data from both members of a pair. So I've done work studying sorority sisters, for example, or people in romantic relationships or roommates, co-workers. So we try to collect the data from all sides of the picture.

A second hallmark is that we really try to capture meaningful behavior in ecologically valid context, so that we really know how well our findings hold up for one type of thing, like shared laughter between people, how it holds up in the midst of everything else that's happening in people's lives. And so one way we do this is by recreating a comfortable space within a lab and we actually have these like video recorded conversations. Another way is that we, like, each evening we'll have both people fill out a private questionnaire about how their day went and interactions went and we'll do that for like [00:22:00] 10 days or a month or something like that.

And then the third hallmark is that we, we use more advanced statistical modeling so that we can take into account the fact that we're collecting data from both members of the pair and that we have repeated measures. So that's for the science lovers in the room [laughter].

Kasha Ely: Perfect. Thank you. So is a lot of what you do mixed methods?

Sara Algoe: We, oh, we, we test our questions quantitatively.

Kasha Ely: Okay.

Sara Algoe: Yeah, that's a, I really appreciate that question. So most of our data are, involve quantitative methods. There are people who study relationships and social connections using qualitative methods, but not as many who are publishing in the journals that I publish in. That said, there are a lot of fields of researchers that we really want to bring into the LOVE Consortium.

So there are people in, who study communication, people in sociology or people who are in public health. There are all kinds of people who have data on individuals who are in social relationships and about people who are specifically in certain kinds of social relationships, and it doesn't really matter for the LOVE Consortium what kinds of data people have, although a lot of it is quantitative.

Kasha Ely: Good to know. In your career, in this field, are there any big obstacles that you have faced, or challenges?

Sara Algoe: Well, one is pretty relevant to the times. I was originally on the job market during the last big recession and that was a big, a big challenge. And I really didn't know what I was going to do. I definitely had a crisis moment of taking stock of all my skills and thinking about out which of these skills are transferable and which of the things do I like to do the most and what would I do if I left academia? So that was a real challenge. [00:24:00]

And another challenge is something thats related to my personality, which is that I'm a very agreeable person, and I think kind of early on in my career, I got in my own way because I was very agreeable with people and I maybe didn't take myself seriously enough and and so went down a lot of rabbit holes that were suggested by other people maybe because I was polite, even though I didn't know, so you know, I spent a lot of time, and that's valuable sometimes I mean, you never know where a new idea, what, you never know around which corner a new idea will lurk, I guess. But yeah, I think, it took me a while, some maturity or age or wisdom or I don't know, development of my understanding of my expertise to realize that I had some okay ideas along the way, I could have listened to that a little bit more.

Kasha Ely: I have a feeling that's very relatable for a lot of people listening, so thank you for sharing. What is your favorite part of what you do?

Sara Algoe: Oh man. So many things. Well, can I say three? Or more? [laughter]

Kasha Ely: Yes, absolutely. That's great.

Sara Algoe: One of the things that comes to mind is that I really love solving problems. I love designing studies in ways that really show people the meaning of how what I study relates to their, their own lived experience. For me, it feels really good when it kind of all comes together where you have the study design, but also, where you have that study designed in a way that really connects with people. So I keep bringing up shared laughter, we have a study where we had couples talking [00:26:00] about how they first met with their, they first met their partners and we actually quantified each person's laughter. So what we did was we went through and we watched the video and we had my, our team of research assistants, this is from my former student's work, Laura Kurtz.

We had the research assistants watch and they recorded every time one person started and stopped to laugh all the way through and then they went back and then they went to the other person and every time that person started and stopped to laugh all the way through, and then we overlaid those times and we pulled out the exact amount of time that they spent laughing together. And so we have these like really real findings that those seconds of shared laughter when you're talking about how you first met, make, are connected to how similar people feel with their romantic partner, how close they feel to their romantic partner for example.

And so there are a few things like that. So that's one thing, I really like to solve the problem that way. And then the other is, I really like to write. I like to connect the work with, with my audience and really try to get the word out there. So those are two things.

Kasha Ely: That's great. Any more?

Sara Algoe: I know I said three, so, but I'm like [laughter]

Kasha Ely: Oh no, it's fine. Those are perfect. Thank you. What advice would you have for people who are going into the field now or looking at psychology and thinking maybe that's the path I want to take?

Sara Algoe: Gosh, I would say follow your curiosity. This is actually something that I say to undergrads a lot. If you kind of wake up and walk around in the world naturally curious about how people think and feel and why they do what they do, then psychology is definitely a field that's worth considering. And if you want to solve those problems, you know, if you like really want to get to the bottom of the puzzle. And the other thing is to [00:28:00] be willing to be persistent in pursuit of those questions. Yeah. Can I say one more thing about the other question that you had? Another thing that I...

Kasha Ely: Yes, absolutely, very fitting.

Sara Algoe: Okay. So one other thing that I really love is working, when I'm working with students and, whether it's an undergrad who's working in my lab or an undergrad in my class or a graduate student, and they're working on understanding the science or putting together the research question on their own and really trying to figure out for themselves how to test the question well. I love seeing that light bulb come on for them about how the theory about the world and the theory about emotion or social behavior comes together into a study design that they can really test well and that they got it themselves. It's just so fun to see that, so that's the last thing I love about what I do.

Kasha Ely: All right. Well, I think that is a great way to leave off, very positive. [laughter] So thank you so much for joining us. This was wonderful, and we will definitely include links to the LOVE Consortium for anyone listening who might be interested in checking it out.

Sara Algoe: Wonderful. Thank you so much Kasha, I really appreciate it.

Kasha Ely: Thank you. Have a good day. And for everyone listening right now, we will be back soon and stay safe and well.