

# Gossip – tales of the human condition

Toni Brennan on the socio-psychological functions of a quintessentially social activity

**Gossip – only ‘others’ do it, right? This article attempts to shed light on this ubiquitous and often frowned upon human activity. In recent times, social psychology and allied disciplines have seen a surge of interest in gossip. What is its function in human interaction? A quick overview of theories and empirical investigations of gossip shows that there is far more to this activity than ‘idle talk’...**

A very famous, married Hollywood actor is, apparently, ‘seeing someone else’; rumour has it, they are about to go on an ‘exotic’ holiday. Should I care? The media frenzy over this piece of gossip, in newspapers (tabloids and broadsheets alike), magazines, blogs and websites screams that I should. There is clearly great interest in celebrity gossip, but everyday evidence also suggests that if the couple in question had lived two doors down, the resulting gossip would have enlivened his neighbours’ exchanges over the garden fence for at least a few days. As Emler (1990) has argued, gossip falls under the umbrella of ‘reputation management’, and it is deployed in settings as diverse as Hollywood, prisons and the workplace.

Gossip always involves people, not just as originators or recipients of communication, but as its ‘subject’. Indeed this distinguishes gossip from rumour, which can also be about events, like ‘collective speculation’ that the stock market is about to crash (cf. Rosnow & Fine, 1976).

Given that gossip is such a ubiquitous and quintessentially ‘social’ activity, it is surprising that it has been quite a neglected area in psychology – until recently. Foster (2004) reports that a PsycINFO search for articles with the single keyword ‘gossip’ in the abstract yielded just over 30 items for the period between 1970 and 1990, and just over 70 up to the year 2000. In the 2000s there has been a buzz in psychology (as well as in sociology and cultural anthropology) around gossip and its possible functions,

with the *Review of General Psychology* publishing a special issue in 2004.

So, why do people engage in this activity that is ostensibly frowned upon (only ‘others’ do it) in present times, just as it was proscribed in times of yore, with the Book of Leviticus (19:16) thundering that ‘thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people’? And what about the contrast between this condemnation and the origin of the word ‘gossip’, meaning ‘God’s sibling/someone close to God’? Is there a positive side to gossip?

Dunbar (1996, 2004) argues, from an evolutionary perspective, that humans as a species represent the culmination of the remarkable sociality observed in other primates that ultimately contributed to the development of language. Sociality is contingent upon reading (and predicting) patterns of behaviour, and upon certain individual (mostly short-term) sacrifices being made for the (long-term) common good of avoiding predators as a group. Both these features constitute the basis of forming alliances, with attendant advantages and obligations. Primates initiate, foster and maintain their alliances through social grooming – experienced as rewarding because it releases endorphins. Interestingly, a ‘junior’ member of the group will spend more time grooming others than being groomed, so the activity also helps to reinforce the social position of group members.

Gossip serves a similar function to social grooming, but more efficiently. It takes up less time, given that communication (unlike social grooming) can be achieved while engaged in other activities; and it is not necessarily a one-to-one exchange, thereby allowing larger social networks to form and thus confer more strength to the group. Through gossiping, humans keep au fait with what is going on in their social networks, enjoy the opportunity to promote themselves and to manipulate information and other people’s reactions for their own advantage, as well as policing those who fail to abide by the explicit and implicit rules of the

## questions

Is there a positive side to gossip?  
Are there non-essentialist explanations of the apparent sex differences in interest in gossip?

## resources

[www.apa.org/science/psa/apr05gossip.html](http://www.apa.org/science/psa/apr05gossip.html)  
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group. If things seem to get a bit Machiavellian here, there is a positive side to this policing: especially in small communities, the person who spreads malicious gossip (like a liar or a thief) would be soon 'found out', and ostracism in such circumstances would have such a high price that it serves as a deterrent.

Wilson et al. (2000) showed in the laboratory that when individuals are called upon to judge the behaviour of 'gossipers' in different gossip scenarios, 'gossipers' who used their tales to undermine someone and to serve selfish purposes were judged very negatively, while gossip with the aim of reinforcing the group's rules and policing deviance was seen in a neutral light. This evidence is consistent both with an evolutionary perspective and a more culture-oriented view. Here gossip is seen as a form of cultural learning (Baumeister et al., 2004), a composite of cautionary tales, everyday 'adventures' and anecdotes to help

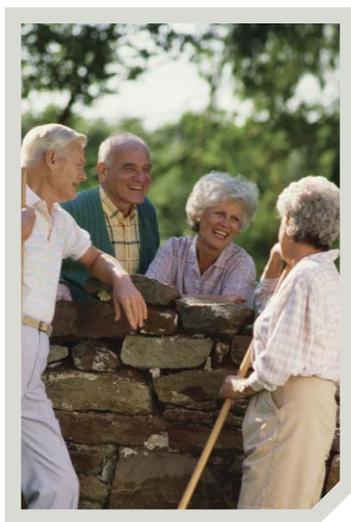
people become competent members of their culture and to negotiate the maze of explicit and unspoken rules of social behaviour, as well as to cement the bond between those involved in the communication of the stories.

This emphasis on cultural learning is particularly evident in the case of 'positive gossip', which, contrary to popular belief, is not a contradiction in terms: Levin and Arluke (1985)

analysed the recording of 194 instances of gossip in naturalistic settings and found that, while

27 per cent were negative, wholly positive gossip accounted for the same percentage, with the rest (almost half of the sample) containing a mixture of positive and negative elements. We enjoy hearing about positive gossip because, ultimately, hearing about people's behaviour helps us understand and perhaps adjust or 'model' our own (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994) – and this includes how to achieve positive outcomes as well as how to avoid pitfalls and embarrassment. Some positive gossip, like the story that our boss is to be awarded a prize, gives us an opportunity to learn and a chance to feel good 'by association'.

In other words, social comparison theory (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000; Festinger, 1954) seems to be central to the function of gossip. As Wert and Salovey (2004) argue, several types of social comparison can be mobilised by gossip. Comparison with peers is mostly deployed to seek validation, and perhaps to impart on one's audience some kind of 'first among equals' self-presentation impression. In the realm of emotion, as first found by Schachter (1959) in the case of uncertainty and threat, comparison with people in the same situation can alleviate the sense of threat, or have a 'therapeutic' function, so special attention to gossip pertaining to 'misery' when we are going



Does 'reputation management' enliven border discussions?

## The 'same boat' phenomenon

Medini and Rosenberg (1976) used the term 'same boat phenomenon' to reflect that both psychotherapy and gossip confirm our membership in the 'human club'

**Psychotherapy** – in many ways, 'the sharing of the personal-forbidden with another person' (p.455) or in a group. The individual undergoing psychotherapy gains reassurance that no matter how distressed or even ashamed they might feel about a problematic situation they are experiencing, it is simply 'human'. Psychotherapy fosters an atmosphere of openness and intimacy and breaks down inhibitions.

**Gossip** – 'part of its power lies in this repetition of the message that others have private lives like our own' (p.455). Hearing about other people's actions, especially about behaviour that is frowned upon or that causes us conflict and guilt makes us feel that, unlike what we might feel sometimes, we are not the only person on the planet engaging in this behaviour and/or experiencing the conflict. Gossip, as unrestrained, informal talk, breaks down inhibitions, lifts the 'public' mask and 'illuminates the private face...[to find that] the private face is not that bad, after all' (p.459).

through misery ourselves can lend support to the saying that 'trouble shared is trouble halved'. Upward comparison can spur someone to achieve more, but more commonly it can give rise to envy-laced gossip. The more popular downward comparison, to put it plainly, makes us feel better at the expense of those we perceive as less fortunate, by distancing ourselves from the 'other'. At group level, this distancing translates into defining who is with 'us' and who is with 'them', thereby reinforcing the group's social identity (Hogg, 2000). This kind of gossip usually draws on prototypes and stereotypes of ingroup and outgroup behaviour. Such abstractions are also elicited in the case

of 'constructed social comparison', when individuals compare themselves and others with an imaginary person or social type. So, for example, given the stereotype 'out there' of the student or teenager who drinks too much, a fair amount of gossip (whether positive, negative or neutral) will have as a starting point the extent to which one

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particular individual's behaviour (including oneself) is aligned with this widespread construction (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Social comparison theory is also useful when we consider the popularity of 'celebrity gossip'. Goffman (1959) used the analogy of theatre to describe self-presentation strategies: we are on stage, we present a front to the world, and we endeavour to keep to ourselves the 'backstage' self. Celebrities are by definition 'on stage' and elicit people's curiosity as to what their 'backstage self' may be. This may also entail the idea of cutting them down to size (a form of gossip stemming from an upward comparison), sometimes even in a sympathetic way, like a plain-looking person who may consider that they are no traffic stopper themselves, but... 'look at poor supermodel X, who was dumped by e-mail by a man twice her age'. Gossip on celebrities' misadventures, to the delight of publicists and the 'consolation' of celebrities, can also make celebrities appear more 'human', down-to-earth, earning them the 'sympathy' vote. A notable recent example of sympathy for a celebrity was the outpouring of support for Kylie Minogue as she battled breast cancer.

Sometimes, the extent of information available for social comparison – the ubiquity of information on celebrities' lives, their habits, likes and dislikes – offers the illusion that they are like friends. The 'parasocial hypothesis' predicts not only that constant exposure to celebrities turns them into 'people next door' but also that individuals who are socially isolated will be more interested in gossip about celebrities, who then fulfil the role of 'ersatz friends', than in individuals with a stronger real-life social network. In a recent study by De Backer et al. (2007) the 'parasocial hypothesis' received only partial support, in that it was found that 'media exposure, but not social isolation, was a strong predictor of interest in celebrities' (p.334).

Another common view of gossip is that women engage in it more than men do. However, research has failed to show gender differences in frequency of gossip, but gossip communicated by males is often recast as 'shop talk' or 'shooting the breeze', quite apart from the issue that



## Do you have a tendency to gossip?

Sample items from the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (Nevo et al., 1993), with many thanks to Professor Ofra Nevo of Haifa University.

- I like analyzing with a friend the compatibility of various couples
- I like talking with a friend about the personal appearance of other people
- I tend to talk with friends about the educational level of people we know in important positions
- I enjoy analyzing with my friends the motives and reasons for other people's behaviour
- I tend to talk with friends about the love affairs of people we know
- I like reading biographies of famous people

Mostly agree? No reason to worry – think of the therapeutic function of gossip (see 'The "same boat" phenomenon', p.25).

'gender' is also 'done' through language, rather than being an inherent characteristic of a particular embodiment.

So what should you think if others have called you a gossip? Well, you could check on a standardised questionnaire which purports to tap into a 'tendency to gossip' (see above box). Thus, even this short overview of the role of gossip in human interaction and of theories and empirical investigations of the topic, has arguably shown that gossip has many

positive effects – if nothing else, for the therapeutic and enriching exchange of 'tales of the human condition'.

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