

# Have You Heard? Gossip Is Actually Good and Useful

Talking behind other people's backs may not always be nice, but sometimes it can help promote cooperation and self-improvement.

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While gossiping is a behavior that has long been frowned upon, perhaps no one has frowned quite so intensely as the 16th- and 17th-century British. Back then, gossips, or “scolds” were sometimes forced to wear a menacing iron cage on their heads, called the “branks” or “scold’s bridle.” These masks purportedly had iron spikes or bits that went in the mouth and prevented the wearer from speaking. (And of course, *of course*, this ghastly punishment seems to have been mostly for women who were talking too much.)

Today, people who gossip are still not very well-liked, though we tend to resist the urge to cage their heads. Progress. And yet the reflexive distaste people feel for gossip and those who gossip in general is often nowhere to be found when people find themselves actually faced with a juicy morsel about someone they know. Social topics—personal relationships, likes and dislikes, anecdotes about social activities—made up about two-thirds of all conversations in analyses done by evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar. The remaining one-third of their time not spent talking about other people was devoted to discussing everything else: sports, music, politics, etc.

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“Language in freely forming natural conversations is principally used for the exchange of social information,” Dunbar writes. “That such topics are so overwhelmingly important to us suggests that this is a primary function of language.” He even goes so far as to say: “Gossip is what makes human society as we know it possible.”

In recent years, research on the positive effects of gossip has proliferated. Rather than just a means to humiliate people and make them cry in the bathroom, gossip is now being considered by scientists as a way to learn about cultural norms, bond with others, promote cooperation, and even, as one recent study found, allow individuals to gauge their own success and social standing.

Dunbar's theory is that as humans were fruitful and multiplied, we began to live in larger groups and it became hard to keep track of what everybody was up to just by observing them. And so, we needed language. Language allows us to know what other people have been doing, even if we weren't there to witness it.

When a person chooses to share a story about someone else, it's because they think that story is significant in some way. It might just be scandal or the thrill of some out-of-the-ordinary news. But researchers wrote in a 2004 study in the *Review of General Psychology*: "In many cases defamation of the target's character is not the primary goal, and may even be irrelevant."

A piece of gossip, they argue, is an opportunity to find out how someone did something right, or something wrong, and learn from the example. Learning how to live with others is something that continues throughout life—once you've learned not to eat paste, you can graduate to more nuanced lessons of human behavior.

As the study explains, "by hearing about the misadventures of others, we may not have to endure costs to ourselves," by making the same mistake. And because negative stories tend to stick better in the mind than positive stories, it makes sense that gossip about people who violated norms would be more instructive than gossip about people who are really great at norms. (What's more, study found that sharing a negative opinion of a person with someone is better for bonding with them than sharing a positive opinion.)

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And indeed, when study participants described what they took away from recent gossip they'd heard, "most of their answers took the form of generalizations that would be useful maxims for their own social life," including: "Don't fool around with random people," "Just because someone says they have pictures of something doesn't mean they do," and "It just proves to me that fraternities are directly related to drinking." Good lessons, all.

Of course, the norm-policing effects of gossip can be used for good or ill. Some norms are stupid. If you need an example, head to your local high school, hide yourself in one of the cafeteria trashcans, cover yourself with garbage, and eavesdrop for the duration of lunch hour.

But some norms are helpful to know, for reasons like not getting fired. In one 1985 study of Silicon Valley companies, gossip was shown to help recent hires adjust to their new jobs, by filling them in on things like office expectations and what they shouldn't say to the boss.

"If society could have its own mind, its goal would be to prevent people from misbehaving," says Matthew Feinberg, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of Toronto, who has studied how gossip can promote cooperation in groups.

In a couple of studies in which participants played trust-based investment games, Feinberg and his fellow researchers noticed that when someone did something selfish in a game, people were very motivated to rat them out to other participants, even at personal cost to themselves. The unfairness of it all got them all riled up—they felt annoyed and frustrated, and had elevated heart rates. But when they were allowed to gossip, by passing a note saying the cheater was not to be trusted, they calmed down, suggesting that gossiping can be physiologically relieving.

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In one of Feinberg's studies, participants were allowed to exclude non-cooperators. After being ostracized for a round of the game, people were more likely to behave themselves in subsequent rounds. In fact, in both studies, people tended to cooperate more when they knew their behavior might be gossiped about, so even the threat of gossip was enough to get people to toe the line. Again, knowledge that can be used for good or evil.

"There's a big question in many fields of social science, which is why people cooperate when it's in their self-interest not to," Feinberg says. "Even if we're interacting with somebody we'll never see again, we live in a very gossipy society, so everything we do, in a sense, is public knowledge."

This has benefits at the group level, by motivating people to act in everyone's best interests, not just their own. But a study published in late October in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* posits that individuals see benefits from gossip as well. Not just because a well-timed tidbit could prevent you from being exploited (by dating someone who's a known cheater, for example), but because learning information about others helps you evaluate yourself.

“Hearing gossip communicates norms of the group,” lead study author Elena Martinescu told me in an email, “but individuals who receive this information will use it to reflect on themselves: Do they personally respect the norm? What can they expect if they break it?”

Humans, self-esteem monsters that we are, like to have a positive self-concept, research says. And while the old axiom that people put others down to make themselves feel better isn't wrong, the dynamics of gossip and self-evaluation are a little more complex. The new study, out of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, found that both positive and negative gossip about others' achievements helped people evaluate their own success and social status.

Positive gossip, about people doing something well, had “self-improvement value” for participants, as an example of how they themselves could do better. Negative gossip did indeed make people feel better about themselves, but it also made them more fearful that they might be gossiped about, too. After all, hearing negative gossip meant they were in an environment where people gossip negatively about each other. They could be next.

Nobody likes to live in fear of what people might be saying behind their backs, hence gossip's understandably bad reputation. And yet people spend most of their conversational capital talking about other people, not just because it's fun, but because it's useful. “We happily say something like ‘I don't want to gossip, *but ...*’” Feinberg says. “The desire and motivation to gossip likely came about for important reasons, even if we look down on it.”

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