

Whispers as Weapons: Gossip can be a Potent Tool for Forging Alliances— and Ostracizing Others

By Sadie F. Dingfelder

According to Sheldon Fort, 15, hardly a day goes by where he doesn't hear one of his classmates talk behind the back of another. In one recent incident, Fort's friend told him that a girl, who was new to the school and beginning to rise in popularity, had gotten pregnant. The rumor was false, but those who spread it managed to hurt the girl's feelings and social standing anyway, Fort recalls.

"Probably they were intimidated about her—a new girl getting so much attention," says Fort. "They were mudslinging, to make her seem less appealing."

Incidents like the one Fort observed, when gossip and rumor are used for malicious purposes, are probably less common than their other functions, notes Martha Putallaz, PhD, a psychology professor at Duke University who studies gossip among children. As-yet-unpublished data collected by Putallaz and graduate student Kristina McDonald suggests that when two children who are close friends gossip, they talk with the intent of hurting a peer only about 7 percent of the time.

"Gossip is also a way kids vent and establish solidarity," Putallaz notes.

But when it's used to hurt others, the effects can be devastating to the target's social standing and self-esteem, says Marion Underwood, PhD, author of the book *Social Aggression Among Girls* (Guilford Press, 2003).

"It looks like social aggression is a behavior that really does hurt children," says Underwood, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Dallas. "Loneliness, anxiety and depression are higher both for children who do it at high levels, and for children who receive it at high levels."

However, research suggests that many healthy children—and perhaps some adults—dabble in malicious gossip, and that it can be an effective way to be aggressive without facing social sanctions.

"What is so interesting about gossip is that it really walks the line between what is acceptable and what is not," says Underwood. "It is completely unacceptable for me to punch my colleague, but if I tell people he drinks too much, I am less likely to be called on it."

Piling on

In addition to serving as a proxy for punching, malicious gossip can improve one's social standing at the expense of others' status, according to research by Antonius Cillessen, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Connecticut. Cillessen followed 905 children from the ages of 10 to 14, asking them each year to rank each other in terms of likability, popularity and social aggression. The children who others rated as socially aggressive—those who, for example, spread gossip about peers or intentionally excluded others from games—became more popular, according to a study published in a 2004 issue of *Child Development* (75. 1, p. 147-163).

Gossip may enhance children's social standing because, by talking about someone who is not present, the gossipers form a social alliance, notes Underwood. If that talk is negative, the subject of the gossip is explicitly excluded from the new alliance, she notes. For example, a group of boys who talk about someone who recently acted like a "crybaby" establishes that theirs is a non-crybaby group.

Children who strategically exclude others in this manner may be able to gossip their way to the top of the social ladder, Cillessen says. Adults may also use such strategies from time-to-time too, though they are likely to do so in more subtle ways, and have multiple aims with a single instance of gossip, he says.

The collaborative nature of gossip may help explain its power to form exclusive, social groups, notes Donna Eder, PhD, a sociology professor at Indiana University Bloomington. In a study published in *American Sociological Review* (54. 4, p. 494-508), Eder and her colleagues recorded the lunchtime conversations of 78 middle school students with their permission. They found that when a teenager offered a gossip gambit, others responded encouragingly about 80 percent of the time. They would confirm the information given—"Tina is a flirt"—or even elaborate on it, Eder says.

"What happens is, once one person makes that agreement, it is very unlikely for someone else—a third person or a fourth in the sequence of the talk—to disagree," says Eder.

However, if someone does disagree early in the conversation, others are more likely to dissent as well, she notes. This may be the case for both middle school students and adults, she notes.

"What I learned from this study is if you are in a group, and someone is being evaluated and you disagree, say it right away," says Eder. "I do this all the time in faculty meetings—I know it will be easier to disagree with one person than to disagree with the whole group."

Popularity's price

While malicious gossip may be an effective way to enhance one's social standing—with little chance that others will disagree with you publicly—those who do may pay a hidden price, Cillessen has found.

In Cillessen's 2004 study, he found that popular fifth-graders tended to also be well liked by their peers, but by ninth grade, the two factors were negatively correlated. The increasing disparity may come from their need to gossip to stay atop the social heap, his findings suggest.

"What we see is...girls who are using relational aggression to be powerful in their peer group are seen as central and cool, but they are increasingly disliked by others," says Cillessen.

Speaking ill of others to become popular—and then having to do it more to stay popular—leads to an escalation of malicious gossip, suggests Cillessen's study. However, relational aggression as a method to socially climb seems to level at 9th grade, and it begins to decline around 10th, suggests as-yet-unpublished data by Cillessen.

That may be good news to Fort, who is currently in 10th grade.

"I think gossip brings about more gossip, and things can grow out of control and really hurt someone," Fort says. "If gossip were alcohol, my whole school would be wasted."

The New Word on Gossip

By Nigel Nicholson

[Dr. Nicholson is a professor of organizational behavior at London Business School. He is the author of *Executive Instinct: Managing the Human Animal in the Information Age*.]

From cocktail parties to family reunions, the water cooler to the professional convention, we all enjoy the guilty pleasures of talking about other people. But gossip is more than just idle chit chat, it's also how we arrange our world as social animals, Nigel Nicholson, Ph.D., discusses the evolutionary reasons why humanity is a beehive of communication.

WE'VE ALL SEEN BOTH SIDES OF GOSSIP.

One side is the warm feeling you get from spending time with a friend and sharing stories about mutual acquaintances. The other side is the stomach-churning anger, shame and frustration you feel when you realize someone is spreading bad news about you. We want to be on the right side of gossip, but sometimes it illuminates while other times it just burns.

When it's good, it binds people and communities together. As anyone who has lived in a small community knows, gossip is something that people who share a collective identity do naturally. But rampant individualism, the fragmentation of our lifestyle and the pervasiveness of competitive striving can drive gossip and rumor down more poisonous channels.

If you want to gauge the health of an organization, tap into its grapevine, taste a sample or two, and test the toxicity. Companies that think they need to eradicate the rumor mill to clean up the culture have got it the wrong way around. Gossip is inevitable and blameless—the problem lies instead in its content, which reflects precisely what is going on in people's minds.

Evolutionary psychology argues that human nature—our psychological architecture as much as our physical form—was shaped to survive and reproduce under a particular set of conditions. This was the existence of clan-dwelling primates, who subsisted by foraging and hunting in a savanna-like environment. It is only in recent biological times that we left the world of clan-dwelling primates for the world of agriculture, city settlements and, eventually, business organizations. We inhabit our high-tech world with Stone Age minds because there has not been enough time to change our psychology to match our environment.

In evolutionary psychology, several elements conspire to give gossip pride of place. First is the physiological capability of speech. Evolution gave us a stunning ability to vocalize by allowing the windpipe full access to the thorax and vocal chords. The second element is language. We have brains endowed with speech centers that allow every growing child to perform the greatest miracle of learning in nature—the acquisition of nearly 13,000 words by the age of six, rising to 60,000 by adulthood. This is what psycholinguist Stephen Pinker, Ph.D., has called “the language instinct.”

Thirdly, the large and complicated brain that evolution gave us to create language has also mastered the politics of complex social living. British psychologist Robin Dunbar, Ph.D., discovered a direct relationship between primate brain and clan size; we are prodigiously equipped mentally to master the subtleties of a social network of up to 150 people.

Our mental design also includes a Machiavellian intelligence—the ability to empathize and read signs that indicate each other's motives and emotions. This is essential for “cheat detection,” a key skill in the human tribe.

These tools allow us to gossip. But what role is played by over-the-fence chat in the fate and functioning of the human animal? There are three very essential functions of gossip: networking, influence and social alliances.

NETWORKING

As social animals we are status-conscious, and for good reason. Navigating the social pathways of the tribe requires a good understanding of its complexity. There is an extensive stream of research, summarized in the work of sociologist Lee Ellis, Ph.D., and epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson, Ph.D., showing that among humans, as in other primate species, being of high rank confers an important array of benefits: health, wealth and happiness.

But attaining these benefits and avoiding failure is difficult. One reason is that social hierarchy is multidimensional. People deploy a wide repertoire of talents to compare themselves with others. What's more, social structure is dynamic; it changes all the time.

Various media keep us in touch not only with the fate of the notorious and celebrated, but also with the ever-shifting ideas and fashions that form the currency for social discourse. The media give us material to discuss and tell us about our own location within this labile lattice of relationships. It is no different on the local level. The position and importance of people in your circle of influence are constantly shifting.

INFLUENCE

The second function of gossip is influence. Even when our social position is apparently immobile, we retain an active interest in making sure we do not lose it. When we find an opportunity, we try to advance a good opinion about ourselves to those who can help us.

However, it is not enough to do good; you need a reputation for doing good for it to count in your favor. Like it or not, we all are confronted with the task of selling ourselves and making sure other people have a positive impression of us.

Self-promotion is not always a conscious strategy. We do it whenever we meet a stranger. It's in the way we engage in small talk and mobilize our facial expressions to convey interest and sympathetic sentiments. I once spoke with the leader of a jazz band who told me that many superb musicians don't get the recognition they deserve, while there are many high-profile stars of lesser talent.

Not everyone is equally good at self-promotion—or equally motivated to put the effort into it. Introverts have figured out that if they leave socializing to the extroverts they'll end up at the bottom of the pile. So they learn how to practice the arts of self-promotion, though it doesn't flow as naturally for them. Extroverts see that everyone is playing the same game—and assume the world is full of extroverts like themselves.

ALLIANCES

Often times we use gossip for the sake of what seems to be pure one-on-one pleasure. This pleasure derives from the third function of gossip: alliances.

Human gossip follows the same asymmetries as a monkey picking lice from another's fur; the weak groom the strong more than vice versa. People supply information to whom they are attracted and with whom they wish to align themselves. When I give you a tidbit of gossip—“remember, it's a secret”—I am also telling you that you are valuable enough to be a recipient—and that you should think well of me for doing so. We use information to form advantageous alliances that we hope will provide some stability, and ideally an upper hand, to our place in the social hierarchy.

When we gossip, of course, all three functions are being served at the same time. Go to any professional conference—which are huge circuses devoted almost exclusively to official and unofficial gossip—and see how people move among their networks seeking both influence and alliances. To experience a sense of powerlessness and exclusion, go to one as a complete outsider.

THE DARK SIDE

Many people link gossip with malice; indeed gossip can be vicious. John can raise his own status with Jane and boost Jane's own sense of self by telling her something bad about Steve, a known enemy of hers. Steve, without even knowing this is happening, can be damaged.

But Jane is also likely to go away thinking that Steve's predicament could happen to her. Although gossip can strengthen the bonds within a community, sometimes it becomes a covert contest between winners and losers. In an ever-shifting matrix of alliances, people will always be looking for an advantage, which leaves others at a disadvantage.

Negative gossip about third parties, who of course have no opportunity to defend themselves, is a dangerous game that can rebound on the gossiper. To be good at malicious gossip requires a high degree of subtlety and skill. The trick is to appear to be sympathetic to the victim while holding him below the waterline with implicit denigration.

Most people find this distasteful. Much malicious gossip is conducted unconsciously, an act that requires self-deception. But humans are especially adept at it; it helps us to maintain consistent social performance, according to Robert Trivers, Ph.D., one of the originators of evolutionary psychology. In the world of gossip, self-deception often takes the form of genuinely believing one is on the high moral ground of charitable sympathy, looking down on one's slowly sinking victim.

MEN DO IT TOO

It is said that women gossip more than men do. Perhaps they only do it better. Men just call it "networking."

What does tend to differ by gender is the content of gossip. Men are much more interested in who is up and who is down (hence sports-page obsession), as befits their predilection for competitive game-playing. Women tend to gossip more about social inclusion and moral alignment—who's in and who has merit.

What Darwin called sexual selection—the search by females for good male genes, and by males to advertise their quality—drives men toward competition and a single-minded focus on instrumental action. It drives women toward the dynamics of intimacy, emotions and social relations.

A key element of gossip is storytelling. We have a narrative instinct that is an essential aid to social insight and action, and a great vehicle for learning. Children are irresistibly drawn to stories, and we use them to instill all the most important ideas about the human community, its daily dangers and rules, plus moral fables about how to succeed and be happy.

In daily life we ruminate in narrative voice—telling ourselves moral tales in which we are the hero or innocent victim of some chain of events. In so doing we consistently make attribution errors—placing a human agent as the key element in a chain of events when in reality the true cause was something impersonal or random.

Collectively the same thing happens in organizations—especially when management becomes defensively tightlipped at a time of impending crisis. Nature abhors a vacuum and the gossip rushes to fill it.

Leaders and politicians have to be reminded that openness costs less, ultimately, than the impact of false stories and the time it takes to rub out the stain they leave. But the reticence of public figures and the public's appetite for news stem from the same hardwired motive to avoid loss and safeguard our interests. It requires a community of trust for gossip to be good for us all.

“Gossip”

By Deborah Tannen

[Dr. Tannen is University Professor and Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University. She has written over sixteen books, both scholarly and popular. “Gossip,” is an excerpt from her book, *You Just Don't Understand*, which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly four years.]

The impression that women talk too freely and too much in private situations is summed up in a word: gossip. Although gossip can be destructive, it isn't always; it can serve a crucial function in establishing intimacy—especially if it is not “talking against” but simply “talking about.”

The label “gossip” casts a critical light on women's interest in talking about the details of people's lives. Evidence that the negativity of the term reflects men's interpretation of women's ways of talking can be seen in the following excerpt from Marge Piercy's novel *Fly Away Home*. Daria falls in love with Tom partly because he differs from her former husband, Ross, in this respect:

It surprised her what he knew about the people around him. Ross would never have known that Gretta disliked her son's teacher, or that Fay had just given walking papers to her boyfriend because he drank too much in front of her boys. For a man, Tom had an uncommon interest in the details of people's lives. Gossip, Ross would call it, but she thought it was just being interested in people.

Not only men disparage an interest in the details of people's lives as “gossip.” The great southern writer Eudora Welty, remembering her Mississippi childhood, writes that her mother tried to keep a talkative seamstress from telling stories about local people in front of her little girl: “I don't want her exposed to gossip,” Welty recalls her mother saying, “as if gossip were the measles and I could catch it.” But far from having a bad influence on the child, the gossipy stories about people that Welty loved to hear inspired her to become a writer. When people talk about the details of daily lives, it is gossip; when they write about them, it is literature: short stories and novels.

Mary Catherine Bateson draws another parallel—between gossip and anthropology, the academic discipline that makes a career of documenting the details of people's lives. She recalls that her mother, Margaret Mead, told her she would never make an anthropologist because she wasn't interested enough in gossip.

In Gossip Begins Friendship

Telling details of others' lives is partly the result of women's telling their friends details of their own lives. These details become gossip when the friend to whom they are told repeats them to someone else—presumably another friend. Telling what's happening in your life and the lives of

those you talk to is a grown-up version of telling secrets, the essence of girls' and women's friendships.

In Alice Mattison's story "New Haven," [...] Eleanor tells Patsy that she is falling in love with a married man. As soon as these words are out, Eleanor feels "a little ashamed to lack her secret suddenly," but "she also feels pleased; she doesn't have to guard it, for once. And it's exhilarating to talk about Peter." I was struck by Mattison's phrasing—"to lack her secret"—which captures the way that having a secret makes a person feel enhanced, and telling it is giving something away—in the sense of possession as well as the idiomatic sense of revelation. Mattison also captures the pleasure in not having to hide something, and being able to talk about what's really on your mind.

Not only is telling secrets evidence of friendship; it creates a friendship, when the listener responds in the expected way. Eleanor does not know Patsy well, but she would like to. There is an affinity and a budding friendship between them; they have taken to going together for coffee and ice cream following the rehearsals of the musical group in which they both play. By telling Patsy what was going on in her life, telling her secret, Eleanor promoted Patsy from acquaintance to friend.

Keeping friends up to date about the events in one's life is not only a privilege; for many women it is an obligation. One woman explained that she didn't enjoy telling the story of her breakup with her boyfriend over and over, but she had to, because if she had failed to inform any of her close friends about such an important development, they would have been deeply hurt when they found out. They would have taken her secrecy as a sign that she was curtailing their friendship, clipping its wings. The woman, furthermore, was incredulous when she learned that her boyfriend had not told anyone at all about their breakup. He had gone to work, gone to his gym, and played squash with his friends, all as if nothing had happened to change his life.

Because telling secrets is an essential part of friendship for most women, they may find themselves in trouble when they have no secrets to tell. For example, a woman I'll call Carol had several women friends she talked to every few days, exchanging stories about dates with men. They would share their excitement before a new date, and after the date took place, they would report in detail what had been said and done. So when Carol fell in love and formed a lasting relationship with a man, she ran out of material for talks with her friends. She also had less time to talk on the phone, since she now spent most of her free time with the man. This put a strain on her friendships; it was as if she had gathered up her marbles, reneging on her part in the partnership of talk that constituted the friendship. [...]

Many things conspire to separate people from their single friends if they find a stable relationship. I had a friend, a man, who had been single for many years and had developed a wide and strong network of women friends to whom he talked frequently. When he developed a stable relationship with a woman and they moved in together, his friends complained that he did not tell them anything anymore. "It's not that I'm keeping things from them," he told me. "It's just that Naomi and I get along fine and there's nothing to tell." By saying this, he did, however, tell me about a problem in his relationships—although it involved not his partner but his friends.

Rapport-Talk As Lament

A folklorist, Anna Caraveli, studied women's laments in the villages of Greece. Laments are spontaneous, ritualized, oral poems that some Greek women chant to express grief over the

loss of loved ones to expatriation or death. According to Caraveli, women typically recite laments in the company of other women. Even more significant, women feel they need other women to participate for the lament to be successful. One woman who performed a lament for Caraveli to tape remarked that she could have done it better if she'd had other women there to help her.

When the Greek women gather to share laments, each one's expression of grief reminds the others of their own suffering, and they intensify each other's feelings. Indeed, both Caraveli and anthropologist Joel Kuipers, who has studied a similar lament tradition in Ball, note that women judge each other's skill in this folk art by their ability to move others, to involve them in the experience of grieving. Expressing the pain they feel in losing loved ones bonds the women to each other, and their bonding is a salve against the wound of loss. According to anthropologist Joel Sherzer, the performance of "tuneful weeping" over dead loved ones is the exclusive domain of women in vastly differing societies all over the world.

Folk rituals of lament are parallel to the less formal but equally widespread ritual by which modern American and European women get together for troubles talk. They too bond in pain. This may explain why troubles make such good talk. Bonding through troubles is widespread among women and common between women and men. It seems to be far less common between men.

Some of the men I interviewed said they did not discuss their problems with anyone. Most of those who said they did told me they tended to discuss them with women friends. Some men said that they had a man friend with whom they discussed problems. But there were differences that indicated they were farther on the continuum from the pole of intimacy than most women. First of all, they had one friend, at most two, with whom they discussed problems, not several, or even many, as was the case with many women I talked to. Second, they often said they had not spoken to that friend in a while—days, weeks, months, or even longer—but they knew that if they needed him, he would be there. Most women were in constant touch with their closest friends, and frequently discussed even minor decisions and developments in their lives. One man told me he does have a friend that he tells his troubles to, but if he does not have a serious problem, he does not call his friend; that's why so much time can pass without their talking. [...]

When most men talk to their friends on the phone, they may discuss what's happening in business, the stock market, the soccer match, or politics. They do gossip (although they may not call it that) in the sense of talking about themselves and other people. But they tend to talk about political rather than personal relationships: institutional power, advancement and decline, a proposal that may or may not get through the committee, a plan for making money. If men do mention their wives and families, the mention is likely to be brief, not belabored and elaborated in depth or detail. If they make reference to a difficult personal situation, it will likely be minimal and vague ("It's been rough").

A man described his Thanksgiving to me. Three generations of his wife's family had gathered: brothers and sisters, their children, and their parents. The men went outside to play football, while the women stayed inside and talked. The older women ended up telling the youngest granddaughter she was too young to get married.

[... W]omen's inclination to engage in troubles talk is confusing to men, who mistake the ritual lament for a request for advice. Now we can see that troubles talk is just one aspect of the ongoing intimate conversation that can be called gossip. Not only is providing solutions to minor

problems beside the point, but it cuts short the conversation, which is the point. If one problem is solved, then another must be found, to keep the intimate conversation going. [...]

When Gossip is Rumor

The most negative image of gossip reflects a situation in which destructive rumors that have no basis in fact are spread. An extreme illustration of such a situation is described in Edna O'Brien's story "The Widow." In this story, a woman named Biddy, whose beloved husband has drowned, finally finds happiness in a new relationship. The people of the town watch her every move and criticize her new love interest, predicting disaster, but she has what she thinks is the last laugh when she becomes engaged. A week before the wedding, the happy couple visit the local pub and stand everyone to drinks.

Then Biddy, being a little tipsy, tapped her glass with her engagement ring and said she was going to give a little recitation. Without further ado, she stood up, smiled that sort of urchin smile others, ran her tongue over her lips, another habit, and recited a poem entitled "People Will Talk." It was a lunge at all those mischievous, prurient people who begrudged her her little flourish. It may have been — indeed, many people said that it was — this audacious provocation that wreaked the havoc of the next weeks. Had she confided in a few local women, she might have been saved, but she did not confide; she stood aloof with her man, her eyes gleaming, her happiness assured.

Far from assured, Biddy's happiness is doomed. She is undone by malicious and unfounded gossip. The rumor is spread that her first husband committed suicide because she made his life intolerable. Biddy tries desperately to prevent her fiancé from hearing the false rumors, and one of her efforts in this regard leads to her death. O'Brien implies that spreading the malicious rumor was the townspeople's way of punishing Biddy for thumbing her nose at the power of their tongues, and for holding herself aloof from them by not confiding in other women—in other words, they undid her with gossip because she had not shown the proper respect for it.

In many ways, our society is becoming more private than public in orientation, more gossip-like in public domains. Most forms of public communication, such as television news and public officials' press conferences, are becoming more informal in style, with remarks being made (or made to seem) off the cuff rather than prepared. One result of this is the need for frequent public apologies, and even resignations, by people who have spoken off the cuff, making the kinds of comments that are common in private conversations but unacceptable in public. Another aspect of this development is increased interest in the private lives of public people. It is perhaps not surprising that an aspect of this interest—perhaps a byproduct of it—is the role of rumor in public life.

A *Washington Post* article headlined THE PUBLIC POLITICS OF RUMOR notes that whereas rumors have long been "a staple of politics," only recently have they been readily reported by the media, whether or not the reporter has been able to confirm their truth. The incident that sparked this article was one in which the Republican National Committee's communication director resigned after having written and distributed a memo implying— not stating—that the newly installed Democratic Speaker of the House was homosexual. The *Post* writer comments that rumors are effective even if they are later disproved and retracted; the damage is done by their mere existence, because most people assume "where there's smoke, there's fire." The American public arena has become a little more like the Irish community of Edna O'Brien's story.

The Uses of Gossip

These are dramatic examples of the destructive potential of gossip. Nora Ephron describes the more circumscribed danger of telling one's secrets to friends in her novel *Heartburn*. The heroine, Rachel, runs into her friend Meg Roberts on a plane to Washington from New York. Meg mentions their friend Betty's birthday party, and Rachel is aghast to realize she forgot all about the party. She has an unassailable excuse: She left her husband and flew to New York because she had learned that he was passionately in love and having an affair with another woman. Now, however, she is on her way back home with her husband, intending to resume her marriage. She doesn't want to make use of her excellent excuse because it would be too good as gossip:

The only way Betty would ever forgive me would be for me to tell her why, and if I told her why she'd tell everyone in Washington, and then everyone in town would know something about our marriage that I didn't want them to know. I know all about Meg Roberts' marriage, for example, because Meg confides in her friend Ann, who confides in Betty, who confides in me.

True friends, everyone feels, do not repeat their friends' secrets to others. Revealing a secret can be the basis for the end of a friendship. And yet people do often repeat what is told to them in confidence by their friends. Why is this so?

Penelope Eckert, an anthropologist, spent time with high school girls and got to know their social worlds. Donna Eder, a sociologist, did the same in junior high. Both noticed that girls get status by being friends with high-status girls: the cheerleaders, the pretty ones, the ones who are popular with boys. If being friends with those of high status is a way to get status for yourself, how are you to prove to others that a popular girl is your friend? One way is to show that you know her secrets, because it is in the context of friendship that secrets are revealed.

A few high school girls told Eckert that they prefer to have boys as friends because boys don't try to get juicy details and are less likely to spread them around. The girls may think that this demonstrates the moral superiority of boys. But Eckert points out that the reason a boy is less likely to scavenge for gossip and distribute his findings is that he has much less to gain by it. Boys' main access to status is less a matter of whom they are close to than of their achievements and skill, primarily at sports, and their ability to prevail in a fight (though the older a boy gets, the more his fights tend to be verbal rather than physical).

There is yet another way that the desire to forge connections may be at work in creating gossip. Talking about someone who is not there is a way of establishing rapport with someone who is there. By agreeing about their evaluation of someone else, people reinforce their shared values and world views.

Gossip as Social Control

The reinforcement of values by talking about other people also works in another way. We measure our behavior against the potential for gossip, hearing in our minds how others are likely to talk about us. In trying to decide what to do, we automatically project contemplated actions onto the backdrop of this imagined dialogue, and our decisions about how to act are influenced by what we think others would say about them. Having decided, we hide, adjust or display our behavior to prevent criticism and ensure being praised. Those who are of a rebellious nature and age may defy expectations evidenced in gossip. Regardless of the stance taken toward them, the assumptions underlying "what people will say" plant in us an image of what a good person is and

does. Hearing people praised for being generous and self-effacing, we get the idea that these are good things to be. Hearing people criticized for being stingy, disloyal, or ugly, we get the idea that these are not good things to be.

Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connections. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status. Being disliked is a more devastating punishment for girls and women, because of their need for affiliation. Marjorie Harness Goodwin, in her study of teen and preteen boys and girls at play, found that when a girl's behavior was strongly disapproved, the other girls ostracized her for a month and a half—the ultimate means of social control. In contrast, although boys sometimes left the group when they felt they were insulted too much, Goodwin did not find boys excluded for an extended period of time. [...]

The Power of Details

Discussing details about the news and exchanging details about private lives are coming together, as newspapers report more about the private lives of people in the news. The phenomenal success of *People* magazine is only the most extreme instance. Consider this article opening:

Charles and Jeanne Atchison live near the Cowboy City dance bar on a gravel street in a peeling white and gold mobile home. Weeds sway in the breeze out front. It's a street with a melancholy down-on-one's-luck feel about it. The town is Azie, Tex., a tiny speck on the periphery of Fort Worth.

A few years ago, the picture was a far prettier one. Charles (Chuck) Atchison was all set. He made good money— more than \$1,000 a week—enough to pay for a cozy house, new cars, fanciful trips. But all that is gone. He's six months behind on rent for his land, and don't even ask about the legal bills.

"It's sort of like I was barreling along and I suddenly shifted into reverse," Mr. Atchison said with a rueful smile. "Well, welcome to whistle blower country."

Chuck Atchison is 44, with a stony face and a sparse mustache.

These lines are not from a short story or magazine article. The excerpt is from the front page of the "Business" section of *The New York Times*—that soberest section of the soberest of American newspapers. In reporting what happened to Atchison, a quality control inspector who exposed safety violations at a nuclear plant, the journalist gives a personal view of the whistleblower: what he looked like, what his house looked like—details that involve the reader.

According to columnist Bob Greene, journalists began turning their attention to such mundane details in 1963, when Jimmy Breslin wrote a column entitled "A Death in Emergency Room One" describing the last moments of John Kennedy's life. Greene says Breslin's column "literally took his readers into the corridors and operating rooms of Parkland Hospital on that day." Greene observes, "Journalists today are trained to get those telling details quickly...." The same brand of journalism is said to have established the career of columnist Russell Baker, whose coverage of Queen Elizabeth's coronation focused not on the public pageantry but on the backstage details — for example as a reviewer noted, the "long lines of colonial potentates in animal skins and gold braid forming to use Westminster Abbey's toilets."

Why would readers want to feel that they were in the corridors and operating rooms of the hospital in which Kennedy lay? Why would they be interested in the lines outside the toilets at a coronation? Because such details give them a pleasurable sense of involvement, of being part of something, just as gossip does for women who talk about the details of their own and others' lives. [...]

Talking-About Versus Talking-Against

The relatively positive or negative value that is placed on talking about personal details—of one's own life or others'—is reflected in the positive and negative views of gossip. One man commented that he and I seemed to have different definitions of gossip. He said, "To you it seems to be discussion of personal details about people known to the conversationalists. To me, it's a discussion of the weaknesses, character flaws, and failures of third persons, so that the participants in the conversation can feel superior to them. This seems unworthy, hence gossip is bad."

This man's view parallels that of a woman who told me she was troubled by one of the women in her child care co-op who gossiped too much. But it turned out that this woman's gossip was all negative: putting down other members of the co-op and criticizing them. It was not the talking-about that was disturbing, but the talking-against. This distances the speakers from those they are talking about, rather than bringing them closer. Furthermore, it is natural to assume that someone who has only negative things to say about others will also say negative things about you when you aren't there.

Gossip as talking-against is related to a verbal game that Christine Cheepen calls "scapegoat." In conversations she analyzed, Cheepen found that speakers talked against someone who wasn't there to redress imbalances of power that had erupted. "Scapegoat" was a way for speakers to achieve parity with each other by teaming up against someone else.

In Cheepen's examples, however, the third party whom the conversationalists teamed up against wasn't just anyone—it was their boss. And this brings us back to the view of the man who told me why he considers gossip to be bad. To the extent that talking about someone who is not there brings an absent party into the room, the effect is to establish connection. But if that party is brought into the room to be put down, then the effect is negotiation of status. As always, connection and status are operating at once, so both views are valid. They are different takes on the same scene....