

Gossip as Cultural Learning

Roy F. Baumeister
Florida State University

Liqing Zhang
Case Western Reserve University

Kathleen D. Vohs
University of Utah

To complement views of gossip as essentially a means of gaining information about individuals, cementing social bonds, and engaging in indirect aggression, the authors propose that gossip serves to help people learn about how to live in their cultural society. Gossip anecdotes communicate rules in narrative form, such as by describing how someone else came to grief by violating social norms. Gossip is thus an extension of observational learning, allowing one to learn from the triumphs and misadventures of people beyond one's immediate perceptual sphere. This perspective helps to explain some empirical findings about gossip, such as that gossip is not always derogatory and that people sometimes gossip about strangers.

The father of one of the authors of this article had retired some years ago and began to fill some of his free hours by watching infomercials. One of these infomercials persuaded him to purchase a set of magnetic sheets that promised health benefits and enhanced longevity. But he discovered that when he slept on them, sometimes his hand would tingle, and there were other unsettling twinges. So he decided to return them, as the smiling folks on the infomercial had guaranteed he could do for a full refund any time up to a year after purchase.

When he called the company, however, the pleasant voice on the other end of the line regretted to inform him that the company had gone bankrupt and therefore could not return any of his money. They offered more merchandise, such as if he wanted to send a set of sheets to someone else while returning his own. He agreed and began to think who else might benefit from these sheets. Then, however, he called

his credit card company and complained that he had bought this merchandise and wanted to return it, but could not get a refund because of the company's bankruptcy. The credit card company meditated on this conundrum for a few days and then issued a judgment in his favor, followed by crediting his account with the full purchase price. This anecdote was repeated and passed along by several relatives and acquaintances who heard it, and it was even told to people who did not know the man. Indeed, any of the authors of this article would repeat it to any acquaintance who found himself or herself in a similar predicament.

We have included this story here to illustrate what we think is a sometimes overlooked but perhaps crucially important function of gossip. Such anecdotes reveal potentially useful information about how our culture and society operate. Modern human society is a rapidly changing, highly complex system. It offers great opportunities but also contains unforeseen risks and problems. Often neither the problem nor its solution can be foreseen reliably and safely. Individuals may therefore have to make their painful way through a problem's shifting mazes by hard experience.

The way can be smoothed and softened, however, by learning about the adventures and misadventures of others. The anecdote just recited can be profitably understood as having multiple useful lessons. First, infomercials can tempt

Roy F. Baumeister, Department of Psychology, Florida State University; Liqing Zhang, Department of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University; Kathleen D. Vohs, Department of Psychology, University of Utah.

Kathleen D. Vohs is now at the Marketing Division, Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Roy F. Baumeister, Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 209 Copeland Avenue, Tallahassee, FL 32306. E-mail: baumeister@darwin.psy.fsu.edu

even well-educated individuals into spending substantial sums of money (in this case, approximately a thousand dollars) on crackpot products. Second, money-back guarantees become worthless if a company goes out of business, and so if you buy from dubious organizations you may not get your money back from them even if they have promised it in writing and on television. Third, if the seller will not refund your money, your credit card company might do so. Fourth, magnetic bedsheets are not for everyone, and indeed they have apparently not attracted enough satisfied customers to keep the manufacturer in business. These are useful lessons for living in our community today, and stories such as this help transmit them from one person to another.

Existing Theories About Gossip: Or, Perspectives on Gossip

Psychology has not generally had much respect for gossip. The traditional and prevailing view has regarded it as an indirect form of aggression, akin to teasing. In this, it has emphasized how gossip depicts the target in an unflattering light. Our impression is that most psychologists have regarded the motive to gossip as rooted in the malicious desire to harm others by damaging their reputation. (Indeed, the original invitation we received to contribute to this issue was based on Baumeister's research on aggression.)

We concede that there is some truth to this view. People may well seek to harm someone by passing along information that makes him or her look bad, thereby encouraging people to hold a poor opinion of that person (whom we label the target of gossip). It is plausible, however, that in many cases defamation of the target's character is not the primary goal and may even be irrelevant. (In the example above, the father emerges as somewhat gullible but also resourceful, and in any case repeating the story to people who have never met him does not effectively harm him.) Moreover, if some forms of gossip lack any pejorative dimension, then defamation cannot be the sole purpose of gossip.

Recently, a different view of gossip has been put forward by Dunbar (1996), an anthropologist. His views are also presented in this issue, and therefore we do not dwell on them. Essen-

tially, he holds that gossip is an important form of social communication that serves to bond people together. In gossip they share information about themselves and about others in their social community. He has proposed, provocatively, that gossip replaces grooming as a way for people to maintain social relationships.

Strictly speaking, there are two different functions that can be subsumed under the view that gossip serves social relationships. One is that the bond between teller and hearer may be strengthened insofar as they spend time in conversation together and perhaps share information of mutual interest. The other is that the information contained in the gossip may be useful to the hearer for learning about the target person, assuming that the target person is someone within the hearer's social sphere so that the hearer can pursue that relationship more effectively by virtue of having gained more information about him or her.

Undoubtedly, this view also has merit. We merely propose, again, that it is not the whole story. The content of gossip may have important utility well beyond its power to bond people together. Yes, the parallel is intriguing: Apes spend hours picking bugs off each other, while people spend hours discussing the misadventures of their neighbors, and in both cases the jointly spent time can help cement and maintain social bonds. We add, however, that gossip can convey valuable information to the hearer about culture and society. Our analysis of gossip as providing information and thus promoting cultural learning is congruent with other existing theories of gossip, such as that of Yerkovich (1977), who stated that gossip is useful for conveyance of information to others, for social influence, and for entertainment. Sabini and Silver (1982) also noted that gossip essentially involves codes of conduct and moral rules embedded in concrete stories. We go further than these analyses, however, in saying that gossip is observational learning of a cultural kind. By hearing about the misadventures of others, we may not have to endure costs to ourselves because we will have successfully avoided making the mistake they made.

Cultural Animals

The context for the present analysis involves treating the human psyche as designed by nature

for participation in culture, with culture defined as an information-based system that organizes social interactions and helps people to fill basic social and biological needs (Baumeister, *in press*). Culture thus improves on merely social life, enabling life to become better through such culturally mediated advances as communicative pooling of information (including novel solutions to environmental problems), division of labor with specialization, and transmission of discoveries and advances to subsequent generations.

Although the benefits of culture are hard to deny, culture makes far more demands on the individual psyche than would a simpler, noncultural style of life. Effective participation in human culture typically requires the individual to behave according to a vast set of externally structured, meaningful guidelines, including norms, laws, morals, scripts, traditions, and other rules.

Human beings are capable of cultural life in part because they have a powerful innate capacity to regulate their own behavior and to alter it to suit these external guidelines and rules. Nonetheless, it is not enough to be able to live up to all of these rules; one must first learn them.

The process of socialization (which might more appropriately be called culturalization) is to a great extent a matter of learning all of the rules and guidelines for how to live in a culture. The learning is extensive and difficult, not least because cultural life continues to confront individuals with new situations, especially those involving unforeseen problems and nonobvious solutions. Anything that might ease or facilitate the process of learning these rules would be beneficial to the individual seeking to live in the culture.

That is where gossip comes in handy. In our view, gossip is a potentially powerful and efficient means of transmitting information about the rules, norms, and other guidelines for living in a culture. On the surface, gossip consists of stories and anecdotes about particular other people, perhaps especially ones that reflect negatively on the target. We readily concede that some of the appeal of gossip is simply learning about other people. However, we think that a second, less obvious function of gossip is to convey information about social norms and other guidelines for behavior. Indeed, one might

say that gossip goes beyond educating the hearer about social norms; it also affirms them. The very act of repeating a particular story implicitly signals that the teller regards it as significant, and this significance is often elaborated further insofar as the teller comments on the behavior as proper or improper.

The cultural animal perspective follows evolutionary thinking in recognizing that biological functions are not necessarily prominent in the experiences and motivations of individuals. To say that gossip is the result of evolution and serves the goal of learning about culture does not therefore entail that every individual act of gossiping is motivated by the desire to teach or learn rules. Instead, we suggest that gossip serves a valuable function in helping people learn about life in their culture, and so nature may have instilled a penchant for gossip as one generally useful adaptation toward cultural life. Just as sex may serve the biological function of reproduction even though sexual desire is often independent of such a goal (and in fact many people engage in sex while taking precautions to avoid reproduction), gossip may serve the function of cultural learning even though people may be drawn to gossip without being aware of any desire to promote cultural learning.

Why should gossip be more often bad than good? If gossip is regarded as a form of indirect aggression, then of course it should be almost always derogatory, because one can only harm the target by presenting him or her in a bad light. The cultural learning view differs from the aggression view on this issue, however. According to the cultural learning view, gossip can be effective regardless of whether it presents the target in a positive or in a negative light. We would therefore predict that some gossip would not be derogatory or pejorative. Still, the cultural learning view would predict that the majority of gossip would be derogatory. Norms are perhaps best conveyed by focusing on violations, as are laws and other rules. A story about law-abiding behavior may fail to reveal what the underlying laws were, whereas a story about breaking the law illustrates the sense and intent of the law.

The principle that bad is stronger than good may be relevant (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Across many different spheres of psychological responses, bad events elicit stronger responses than good ones.

Gossip may be one more illustration of this principle: People are more interested in hearing and telling bad things about others than good things. We also think that there are sound reasons that bad may be stronger than good. With respect to gossip, stories about norm violations may be more informative than stories about actions that conform to norms. The story with which we began this article may therefore be unusual as an instance of gossip, insofar as it does not reflect particularly badly on the target, and its most interesting aspect may be that it conveys a positive modeling of an effective (but nonobvious) solution to a problem. Such accounts may be useful, but probably they are less common than the lessons that can be learned by recounting the misfortunes and misdeeds of others. Bad may be stronger than good in general because it is more important and more adaptive to learn about dangers than about opportunities: Failing to recognize or anticipate an opportunity can result in missing a chance to improve life in some way, but failing to recognize or anticipate a danger can result in death or other misfortunes, which are much more salient and severe.

Although gender differences are not our focus here, they do represent a potential extension of the cultural animal approach. In nearly all cultures—with modern Western cultures being the closest to an exception—men and women have occupied somewhat separate spheres and performed somewhat different tasks. Men tend to organize hierarchically into large social groups, whereas women focus on close, dyadic, and other intimate relationships. In fact, even according to modern American data, women's "need to belong" tends to focus on dyadic and intimate connections, whereas men orient toward the broader sphere of collective activity (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). There is some evidence that patterns of gossip maintain these distinctions, which would be expected if gossip is a means of learning about how to play one's role in the culture. Some studies reveal no gender differences, but others (perhaps especially those that make the careful methodological distinctions) show that men gossip more about celebrities, sports figures, politicians, and mere acquaintances, consistent with the view that men are oriented toward the broader social and cultural sphere, whereas women's gossip is concerned more with family members and close

friends (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1985).

Need for Gossip in Learning

Consider the danger of playing in the street. Children have not evolved to avoid the dangers of motorized traffic. They may play in the street and get run over. How would they learn to avoid this, without gossip? Skinnerian learning, based on trial and error, would presumably work for those children who survive, but because most human beings value each of their children they do not want their children to learn about such dangers the hard way. Direct observation (social learning) may be somewhat effective, but again it is effective only if the child can actually see other children get run over by trucks, and this is neither practical nor probably even really effective. (Children who do see others get run over might become so afraid they would fear to go outside or even cross the street at a light.) Appealing to reason is a third way: One might explain the dangers or rules in the abstract, but perhaps this is not sufficiently vivid to impress the child.

And so probably most parents end up relying on gossip. They tell their children about some other child who played in the street and was run over by a car and could never walk again, or never saw her mama again, or whatever. The story is not told as a form of aggression against the child who was injured. Rather, it is told to produce a positive, desirable effect on one's own child, one that may extend to helping the child survive to adulthood.

Viewed in this way, gossip constitutes a form of social information that uses narratives to communicate rules. In this, it is not unique. Aesop's fables, Jesus's parables, Buddha's stories, and many other famous stories accomplish the same end. Communicating principles by telling stories is apparently more effective than describing the principles in the abstract, at least for reaching many audiences.

Research on children's talk supports the idea that gossip is a tool that young minds use as a way of learning about their worlds. Sociologist Gary Fine (1977) showed that children start to gossip almost as soon as they can talk and see the importance of other people. Gossip is crucial even to the conversations of children as young as 4 and 5 years, with their enthusiasm

for gossip thought of as reflecting their eagerness to learn about the world before experiencing it firsthand. Although not all children believe the content of gossip, the older children get, the more likely they are to believe the stories told (Kuttler, Parker, & La Greca, 2002). This may be because older children recognize the utility in listening to gossip as a way to manage their own lives.

Other research has likewise concluded that gossip can serve to communicate useful information, contrary to the stereotypes of gossip as either idle or malicious. Ben-Ze'ev (1994) noted that one primary function of gossip is to allow people access to information about others' personal and intimate lives (information to which they would not otherwise be privy), with the ultimate purpose of using that information to control and understand their own lives.

Gossip provides a mechanism for learning the local culture's implicit rules and regulations. As Ben-Ze'ev (1994) pointed out, gossip does not tend to focus, for example, on discussing the results of the latest survey tallying up the average amounts of sex in the United States; rather, people gossip about the amounts of sex their friends and neighbors are having. Thus, gossip is uniquely cultural, both in terms of the content of the information and in terms of the consequences of the information. In some cultures having a great deal of sex with one's partner would not be cause for negative talk (and may be cause for positive talk), whereas in other cultures it would be cause for scandal.

Gossip is a way of learning the rules as well as the sanctions for breaking the rules within a culture. This function can be seen readily in corporations or other institutions in which the organization has its own cultural values, rules, and mores. Indeed, an analysis of gossip as a part of corporate culture (Ayim, 1994) showed that many people at the top rung of institutions rely on gossip to give them crucial information that is otherwise difficult to come by. Those who are left out of gossip circles have considerably less power and control and therefore often do not stay at the top for long. In one study of corporate cultures such as IBM and Hewlett-Packard, gossip was found to be a central source for new employees to learn the rules about their new institution, telling them, for instance, what topics not to mention in front of their boss or what "off the record" expectations

went along with their current position (Kelly, 1985).

Interpersonal relationships present complex sets of rules and expectations, and learning them is no small task. One study concluded that gossip helps people learn rules as to what one should versus should not do in interpersonal relationships (Baxter, Dun, & Sahlstein, 2001). Almost one fifth (18%) of all rules were conveyed through gossip, such as when one participant learned "do not date more than one guy at a time" after hearing negative comments made about a girl who had multiple boyfriends at once (Baxter et al., 2001, p. 182).

Not only does gossip provide the informal rules of a culture, but gossip can also serve as history by functioning as a way of making policy. In some nonliterate cultures such as the Hopi Indian culture, gossip served a primary role as information management, with conflicts, debates, or trials in the present being influenced by gossip about previous trials, resolutions, and their results (Cox, 1970).

A theory relevant to our own is one that depicts gossip as a form of social control. This theory has been advanced from an evolutionary perspective, and it supports the idea that gossip serves as a group-level adaptation to individuals' misdeeds (Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2000). Specifically, gossip serves as a policing device that cultures employ as a low-cost method of regulating members' behaviors, especially those that reflect pursuits of selfish interests that come at a cost to the broader community. In two studies conducted by Wilson et al. (2000), participants read stories about people gossiping together, and the stories were varied to manipulate key aspects of the content of or the motive behind the gossip. Their results conform to a cultural, rule-learning perspective on gossip: Participants judged the teller of gossip harshly when the teller used gossip for self-serving reasons (e.g., to make the target look bad), whereas judgments about the gossip were neutral when gossip was used as a policing device to warn others about a rule violation. Moreover, one study showed that failing to gossip can lead to negative interpersonal consequences: Male participants negatively evaluated an actor who failed to pass along gossip and instead was silent when the information would have been useful to the other actor in the scenario.

One important aspect of the idea that gossip is a learning mechanism is that gossip should be concerned not only with negative, rule-breaking instances but also with positive, rule-strengthening instances. Although early definitions and accounts of gossip tended to treat gossip as the spreading of negative information, scholars now acknowledge that much of what is gossiped about is positive. In one study (Levin & Arluke, 1985), the content of 194 instances of conversational gossip was analyzed, and the results clearly showed the widespread use of positive gossip. Whereas only 27% of the gossip instances were wholly negative, an equal number (27%) were wholly positive. (The remaining instances contained some positivity and some negativity.) More recent analyses confirm these numbers, showing that approximately 30% of oral conversation gossip is positive, as is 45% of tabloid gossip, and 50% of gossip in newspapers (Walker, 2003). Thus, positive gossip also has a place in culture, and it is likely that behaviors that endorsed or strengthened cultural rules were elected as positive sources of gossip.

Why Gossip?

Dictionary definitions of gossip tend to depict it as idle talk, which implies that people engage in it for no particular reason or just to fill their time. The view of gossip as essentially a form of indirect aggression suggests that gossip is done out of malicious intent to blacken the reputation of the target (and no doubt the negative connotation of gossip is partly attributable to the presumption of such malicious motives). In contrast, we are proposing that gossip is used for positive reasons. Our perspective must therefore offer some explanation of why people engage in gossip.

From our perspective, gossip anecdotes involve the use of a narrative form to communicate rules in the society and culture. The hearer would be interested partly because it is valuable to know information about these rules. (To be sure, some enjoyment of other people's suffering may also contribute to the enjoyment of hearing gossip.) For example, in the anecdote with which we began this article, the message about how to get one's money back from a vendor that has gone bankrupt may be useful to hearers. The more complex the culture, and the more rapidly it changes, the more useful it is to

hear about the successes and failures of others insofar as these experiences reveal rules and guidelines. The rapidity of change makes gossip an ideal format to communicate new or revised rules; to use formal channels would be nearly impossible because of the delay in posting the new rules and the structural baggage such a system would entail.

The view that gossip appeals to the hearer because it contains personally relevant information has been confirmed by McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002). In two very different studies, with participants ranging in age from 17 to 62 years, people rated gossip as most interesting when it contained information about people of the same age and gender as the hearer. Thus, people are most interested in learning about others (including strangers, in the research of McAndrew and Milenkovic) who occupy a somewhat similar position in the social structure, at least in terms of age and gender categories. If gossip were mainly idle or malicious, there would not be much reason for it to focus even on strangers in a social position similar to one's own, but if gossip conveys useful information, then it should indeed emphasize people whose experiences are likely to be comparable to one's own.

Two additional points on why gossip is the means to convey and transmit cultural information highlight the social and semantic structure of gossip. First, gossip is organized in such a manner that hearers are constrained to support the point of the gossip and not challenge it (Eder & Enke, 1991). Unlike a heated scientific debate, gossip primarily takes the form of conveying a piece of information that is heard by others and then confirmed without question. In their analysis of gossip in naturalistic settings, Eder and Enke (1991) found that if a hearer does not challenge the point being made during the next speaking turn, there will be no subsequent challenges to the gossip. Gossip's corroborative semantic structure most likely aids in the transmission of cultural information, in that the weight of the evidence is strengthened if new information is readily confirmed by new hearers.

The second aspect of gossip that reinforces its use as a cultural learning mechanism pertains to the shared nature of gossip. Gossip is not mere storytelling, such as a monologue spoken by the teller that is aimed at passive hearers. Rather,

gossip is a shared and collaborative experience that encourages hearers to elaborate and thus contribute to the story. Eder and Enke (1991) observed that in other types of conversation, a speaker needs to have direct experience in a matter to be able to contribute an opinion to the topic. For instance, if someone has not heard a particular song on the radio, this person cannot add her or his view on whether it is a good or poor piece of music. This is not the case with gossip, because gossip allows people who have only just heard the story of a stranger's mishap to comment and share their opinions. A stranger's mishap is not only information received, but also information that is elaborated upon by the hearer. Cognitive science has well demonstrated that information that is actively expanded upon after receipt is more likely to be remembered and used in subsequent settings. Thus, the collaborative nature of gossip may also boost its effectiveness as social learning.

What about the teller of gossip? Again, we do not dispute that some gossiping may be motivated by a malicious desire to blacken someone's reputation, but that is not a fully satisfactory explanation in our view. Our perspective suggests two main motives. First, some tellers may simply want to pass along useful information so as to help others. A mother telling her child about some other child who was hurt by a car because of playing in the street is presumably not motivated by a desire to make the victim look bad; rather, the intention is to help her own child learn to avoid such a fate.

A second reason that gossip tellers may engage in gossip is that their social status can be elevated by relaying stories confirming that they understand the relevant rules or moral principles that are involved. Research on teasing, for example, has suggested that teasers gain status by demonstrating that they know certain norms or rules, especially ones that are not yet understood by the victim of teasing, and so being the first person in the group to tease is a way of proving oneself to be the most knowledgeable about the relevant norms (Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1987). In the same way, the person who relates a juicy piece of gossip claims status by indicating that he or she understands what the rules are in the context of the anecdote.

Study

We conducted a simple study of gossip with the aims of gaining insight into whether gossip might serve some valuable function for cultural learning. Fifty-eight undergraduate students (33 men and 25 women) in introductory psychology classes participated in the study in connection with course requirements. They all filled out two questionnaires. The first asked the respondent to report the most interesting piece of gossip that he or she had heard in the past week, in the past month, and in the past year. The order was counterbalanced. Demographic information was also obtained.

The second questionnaire consisted of three parts, each of which asked for ratings about the three gossip units reported on the first questionnaire. The questions were as follows: "Why did the person tell you the gossip?" "Who was the target in the gossip?" "Did you tell the gossip to others? How many people did you tell?" "What emotions did you feel when you heard the gossip?" (Respondents were asked to rate the intensity of each emotion.) "Did the gossip reflect badly on the target? Why?" "Did you learn anything from this gossip that you could apply to your own life?" "Was what you learned from the gossip important to you?" (Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the gossip on a 10-point scale.)

Our findings indicated that most but not all gossip was focused on people known to the participant. The largest categories consisted of "a friend of mine" (33% of the 172 stories), "someone I know" (30%), and "a close friend of mine" (22%). Family members were not usually the focus of gossip (1%). Strangers were the focus of 11% of the total, and celebrities accounted for another 4%.

Thus, the gossip in this sample focused mainly on the social network outside the immediate family. People heard the most gossip about people they knew but to whom they were not related. Still, there was some degree of gossip about complete strangers, and additional gossip about celebrities. If the celebrity and stranger categories were combined, 15% of the gossip pertained to people not personally known to the hearer. Although a clear minority, this is sufficient to suggest that gossip must serve some function beyond conveying information about acquaintances, which in turn sug-

gests that gossip does more than elaborate on knowledge about specific individuals known to the hearer.

One might challenge the cultural learning view by noting the high proportion of gossip that was focused on people known to the hearer. After all, if gossip is merely a means of cultural learning, why should it not emphasize stories about strangers? We suspect the answer is connected with the appeal of narrative information generally. That is, why should it help to communicate rules through stories rather than simply stating rules in abstract, propositional form? Most likely the narrative form has some advantage in terms of being vivid, persuasive, and memorable, and such advantages are enhanced if the story is about someone known to the hearer and teller.

About half of the gossip in our sample was passed on. Ninety-four of the units of gossip (55%) were related by the participant to others. Those who engaged in the gossip told an average of 2.3 others, and more than a quarter (28%) told it to more than three other people.

Most people had some emotional reaction to the gossip, which suggests that gossip has emotional and presumably motivational significance. Only seven responses (4%) indicated no emotional reaction to hearing the gossip.

We coded the emotions as either positive or negative, in combination with the alternative neutral category of "surprise." Negative emotions were the most common; approximately half (51%) of the respondents reported only negative emotions, and another quarter (26%) reported both positive and negative reactions. Purely positive emotions were also present, however, and they were reported in 15% of the cases. An additional 4% of the respondents reported only surprise. Thus, gossip tends to make people react with negative emotions in the majority of cases, but positive emotional reactions also occur in a large minority (41%) of instances.

The specific emotions reported spanned a broad spectrum. The negative emotions participants listed on hearing gossip included anger, sadness, worry/anxiety, guilt, upset, fear, depression, disappointment, shock, disgust, disturbed, bitter, annoyed, pain, confused hurt, distrust, worthlessness, hopelessness, and scandalized. The positive emotions reported included happiness, joy, excitement, relieved, proud, in-

terested, elated, cheerful, and humor or amusement.

Elsewhere, we have developed the argument that an important function of emotion is to promote adaptation to life in a cultural society, insofar as emotion causes people to analyze the meaning of recent events so as to distill useful lessons from them (Baumeister, in press; Baumeister, Zhang, & Bargh, 2003). Negative emotions in particular stimulate retrospective analysis, including counterfactual thinking (e.g., Roese, 1997). Consistent with this view, the present data revealed a link between experiencing a negative emotion and learning a lesson. There was a significant correlation between reports of negative emotion on hearing the gossip and whether the person claimed to have learned anything from the gossip. Furthermore, the more negative emotions respondents reported, the more likely they were to say that they had learned from the gossip. Reporting more negative emotions also correlated with a higher rating of the importance of what was learned. Thus, the worse people felt on hearing the gossip, the more they said they learned from it.

Negative emotion (indeed emotion in general) was not related to whether the gossip reflected badly on the target. This result seemingly disputes the view that the main function of gossip is to provide information about the target person. The emotional response of the person hearing gossip appears to depend very little on how the gossip depicts the target but very strongly on whether the hearer learns something useful for his or her own life.

Nearly two thirds of the units of gossip in our sample (64%) were accompanied by a clearly positive answer to the question of whether the hearer learned anything that he or she could apply to his or her own life. Thus, the clear majority of participants indicated that they had learned something from the gossip that was useful to them in their own lives. A random sample of gossip might yield a somewhat lower figure, because the instructions for our questionnaire asked people to list the most interesting gossip they had heard, and people might have more interest in some piece of gossip as a function of whether they learned something useful from it. Still, these results suggest that gossip often contains useful information, as opposed to the traditional stereotype that gossip is merely

idle, useless chatter that accomplishes little, or the alternative stereotype that gossip is a form of aggression that harms the reputation of the target but provides little direct benefit to the hearer.

We asked people to articulate what they had learned from the gossip. Most of their answers took the form of generalizations that would be useful maxims for their own social life, including “Just don’t drink”; “Don’t forget your true friends”; “Infidelity will eventually catch up with you”; “Just because someone says they have pictures of something doesn’t mean they do”; “Don’t fall for guys who will treat you badly, no matter how charming they are”; “Betrayal is horrible and I would never do it to anyone, especially loved ones”; “Cheerful people are not necessarily happy people”; “Don’t drink in the dorm”; “Don’t cheat in school”; “Don’t have sex with minors when in a respected position”; “Do not tell lies”; “Don’t masturbate”; “Practice safe sex”; “Sometimes people really do live up to self-fulfilling prophecies”; “People usually find out what you try to hide”; “Long distance relationships are difficult to manage”; “Never involve yourself with people living in the same dorm building as you”; “Don’t be a hypocrite”; “Girls get upset about some of the stupidest things”; “Don’t fool around with random people”; “Live an exciting life and people will listen”; “Everyone does not follow rules in the same way”; “It just proves to me that fraternities are directly related to drinking”; “Don’t have sex with people your friends have had sex with because guys compare their partners”; and “Yes, be careful when dealing with women.”

Even some of those who claimed not to learn anything new gave answers that suggested that the gossip may have contained lessons that could be useful, although they were not useful to them in this case. Several said the gossip conveyed “nothing that I shouldn’t have known long ago” or “nothing new,” “nothing really that I didn’t already believe,” or “nothing that I didn’t already know/do/not do.” Another response was the following: “It was an isolated situation really; I’m not sure it is something one could ‘use’ to help themselves.” Thus, the value of gossip for cultural learning may be higher than the mere numbers indicate, because there is considerable redundancy: People may have

learned the particular lesson from previous gossip.

To be sure, some of the lessons pertained to specific individuals. These responses included “I learned that my best friend is tougher than she portrays herself”; “I learned that I couldn’t trust what my friend told me”; “Not really, I had never liked this girl anyways, so I was always suspicious of her” (although technically this was an explanation of why the gossip did not have a lesson); “Well, I would never do what that person did, but I guess it was a valuable lesson”; “This girl likes to tell stories that show how ‘crazy’ she is, or thinks she is”; and “Don’t associate with these people anymore.”

Because of the theoretical importance of the question of whether gossip conveys information about specific individuals or useful general lessons, we coded the lessons into these two categories. Two responses were not classified because they could be taken either way (“You can’t judge your roommate by just his appearance” and “Yes, the girl’s mother died, which taught me to appreciate my mother more”). Of the remaining 88 lessons, 82 (93%) were of a general variety.

Thus, lessons that pertained to a specific person were a small minority (7% of the cases in which anything was learned). The people who learned anything useful mostly articulated these lessons in terms of general guidelines for behavior, rather than how to deal with a specific person. This finding is highly relevant to the question of whether gossip mainly functions to help people know more about specific individuals or, instead, helps provide useful information about how to live effectively in one’s society.

Conclusion

Gossip is widespread and probably has existed in most societies and cultures. It is probably so common because it serves multiple functions. In this article, we have reviewed several hypotheses about what those functions are, including maintaining or strengthening the close relationship between the teller and the hearer, enabling the hearer to learn more about the target, and harming the target. We then offered a fourth possibility, namely that gossip helps people learn about how to function effec-

tively within the complex and ambiguous structures of human social (and cultural) life.

Gossip may well serve all of these functions. Our argument is merely that the fourth (cultural learning) function deserves a prominent place in the theory of gossip. The data from our small study provided findings that are not consistent with the view that the other three hypothesized functions are the sole ones. Thus, the prevalence of negative affect in reactions to gossip is difficult to reconcile with the view that gossiping brings teller and hearer closer together, because people typically experience positive emotions as they draw closer together, whereas negative emotions are mainly associated with deterioration of relationships (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995, for a review). The view that gossip serves mainly as an aggressive means of harming the target was inconsistent with the finding that more than a third of the gossip was rated as not reflecting badly on the target.

The view that gossip serves mainly to enable the hearer to learn more about the specific target person conflicted with several findings. For one thing, some of the gossip pertained to strangers, who by definition are not in the hearer's social world. For another, this view was consistent with only a small minority of the lessons people claimed to learn from hearing gossip, because only a handful of these lessons were expressed in terms of learning something about a specific person. Instead, most of the lessons pertained to general guidelines about how to function effectively in society. Finally, the emotional reactions of the hearer seemed unrelated to how the target was depicted, whereas they correlated strongly with whether the hearer learned something of value for his or her own life.

Gossip can be understood as an extension of observational learning, in the sense that people can learn about the complexities of social and cultural life by hearing about the successes and especially misadventures of others. One important feature that separates cultural beings (mainly humans) from the great many other social animals is that knowledge and information can be stored in the collective, thereby creating a common stock of knowledge on which all individuals can draw (and to which they can make further contributions, allowing for progress; Baumeister, in press). Gossip is one simple means of accomplishing such cultural learning, insofar as many different individ-

uals can learn from the experience of someone else, even if they were not involved and did not witness the events. Gossip is cheap, easy, efficient, and apparently rather effective.

One hallmark of life in human culture is that learning continues over a much greater proportion of the life span than in almost any other species. The amount that one can potentially learn about how to function effectively in a modern culture is practically unlimited. Learning by one's own direct experience is important, but it can be painful and time consuming. Learning by direct observation of others has greatly expanded how much people can learn, but even that is somewhat constrained by how little time one has to observe many different people in different situations. Gossip greatly expands the opportunities for cultural learning, because one can benefit from the experiences of others outside of one's field of vision and sometimes even outside one's circle of friends. If researchers continue to dismiss gossip as essentially idle, malicious talk about unfortunate individuals, they may overlook some of its most important and valuable functions.

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