



In the past few years

I have heard more people than ever before puzzling over the 24–7 coverage of people such as Paris Hilton who are “celebrities” for no apparent reason other than we know who they are. And yet we can’t look away. The press about these individuals’ lives continues because people are obviously tuning in. Although many social critics have bemoaned this explosion of popular culture as if it reflects some kind of collective character flaw, it is in fact nothing more than the inevitable outcome of the collision between 21st-century media and Stone Age minds.

When you cut away its many layers, our fixation on popular culture reflects an intense interest in the doings of other people; this preoccupation with the lives of others is a by-product of the psychology that evolved in prehistoric times to make our ancestors socially successful. Thus, it appears that we are hardwired to be fascinated by gossip.



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Can Gossip Be Good?

It helped us thrive
in ancient times,
and in our modern
world it makes
us feel connected
to others—as long
as it is done
properly

by Frank T. McAndrew

IMAGE
IMAGE

Gossip serves a function in human society similar to the grooming of companions found in nonhuman primates.



Only in the past decade have psychologists turned their attention toward the study of gossip, partially because it is difficult to define exactly what it is. Most researchers agree that the practice involves talk about people who are not present and that this talk is relaxed, informal and entertaining. Typically, the topic of conversation also concerns information that we can make moral judgments about. Gossip appears to be pretty much the same wherever it takes place; among co-workers it is not qualitatively different from gossip among friends outside of work. Although everyone seems to detest a person who is known as a “gossip” and few people would use that label to describe themselves, it is an exceed-

ingly unusual individual who can walk away from a juicy story about one of his or her acquaintances, and all of us have firsthand experience with the difficulty of keeping spectacular news about someone else a secret.

Why does private information about other people represent such an irresistible temptation for us? In his book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1996), British psychologist Robin Dunbar of the University of Liverpool in England suggested that gossip is a mechanism for bonding social groups together, analogous to the grooming that is found in primate groups. Sarah Wert, now at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Peter Salovey of Yale University have proposed that gossip is one of the best tools that we have for comparing ourselves socially with others. The ultimate question, however, is how did gossip come to serve these functions in the first place?

An Evolutionary Adaptation?

When evolutionary psychologists detect something that is shared by people of all ages, times and cultures, they usually suspect that they have stumbled on a vital aspect of human nature, something that became a part of who we are in our long-forgotten prehistoric past. Evolutionary adaptations that enabled us not only to survive but to thrive in our prehistoric environment include our appreciation of landscapes containing freshwater and vegetation, our never-ending battle with our sweet tooth and our infatuation with people who look a certain way.

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FAST FACTS

The Power of Gossip

- 1>> In the past decade researchers have turned to the study of gossip—our predilection for talking about people who are not present. Why is news about others so irresistible?
- 2>> As it turns out, gossip serves a useful social function in bonding group members together. In the distant past, when humans lived in small bands and meeting strangers was a rare occurrence, gossip helped us survive and thrive.
- 3>> Our modern-day infatuation with celebrities reveals the ancient evolutionary psychology of gossip in sharp relief: anyone whom we see that often and know that well becomes socially important to us.

It is obvious to most people that being drawn to locations that offer resources, food that provides energy, and romantic partners who appear able to help you bear and raise healthy children might well be things that evolution has selected for because of their advantages. It may not be so clear at first glance, however, how an interest in gossip could possibly be in the same league as these other preoccupations. If we think in terms of what it would have taken to be successful in our ancestral social environment, the idea may no longer seem quite so far-fetched.

As far as scientists can tell, our prehistoric ancestors lived in relatively small groups where they knew everyone else in a face-to-face, long-term kind of way. Strangers were probably an infrequent and temporary phenomenon. Our caveman ancestors had to cooperate with so-called in-group members for success against out-groups, but they also had to recognize that these same in-group members were their main competitors when it came to dividing limited resources. Living under such conditions, our ancestors faced a number of consistent adaptive problems such as remembering who was a reliable exchange partner and who was a cheater, knowing who would be a reproductively valuable mate, and figuring out how to successfully manage friendships, alliances and family relationships.

The social intelligence needed for success in this environment required an ability to predict and influence the behavior of others, and an intense interest in the private dealings of other people would have been handy indeed and would have been strongly favored by natural selection. In short, people who were fascinated with the lives of others were simply more successful than those who were not, and it is the genes of those individuals that have come down to us through the ages. Like it or not, our inability to forsake gossip and information about other individuals is as much a part of who we are as is our inability to resist doughnuts or sex—and for the same reasons.

A related social skill that would have had a big payoff is the ability to remember details about the temperament, predictability and past behav-

ior of individuals who were personally known to you; there would have been little use for a mind that was designed to engage in abstract statistical thinking about large numbers of unknown outsiders. In today's world, it is advantageous to be able to think in terms of probabilities and percentages when it comes to people, because predicting the behavior of the strangers whom we deal with in everyday life requires that we do so. This task is difficult for many of us because the early wiring of the brain was guided by different needs. Thus, natural selection shaped a thirst for, and a memory to store information about, specific people; it is even well established that we have a brain area specifically dedicated to the identification of human faces.

For better or worse, this is the mental equipment we must rely on to navigate our way through a modern world filled with technology and strangers. I suppose I should not be surprised when the very same psychology students who get glassy-eyed at any mention of general statistical data about human beings in general become riveted by case studies of individuals experiencing psychological problems. Successful politicians take advantage of this pervasive “power of the particular” (as cognitive psychologists call it) when they use anecdotes and personal narratives to make political points. Even the dictator Josef Stalin noted that “one death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.” The prevalence of reality TV shows and nightly

news programs focusing on stories about a missing child or the personal gaffes of politicians is a beast of our own creation.

Is Gossip Always Bad?

The aspect of gossip that is most troubling is that in its rawest form it is a strategy used by individuals to further their own reputations and selfish interests at the expense of others. This nasty side of gossip usually overshadows the more benign ways in which it functions in society. After all, sharing gossip with another person is a sign of deep trust because you are clearly signaling that you believe that this person will not use this sensitive information in a way that will have negative consequences for you; shared secrets also have a

Gossip helps bond social groups together and is a tool for comparing ourselves socially with others. How did gossip come to serve these functions in the first place?



Successful politicians who rely on the power of narratives about individuals to make their points take advantage of our brains' preference for news about people we know over faceless statistics.

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way of bonding people together. An individual who is not included in the office gossip network is obviously an outsider who is not trusted or accepted by the group.

There is ample evidence that when it is controlled, gossip can indeed be a positive force in the life of a group. In a review of the literature published in 2004 Roy Baumeister of Florida State University and his colleagues concluded that gossip can be a way of learning the unwritten rules of social groups and cultures by resolving ambiguity about group norms. Gossip is also an efficient way of reminding group members about the importance of the group's norms and values; it can be a deterrent to deviance and a tool for punishing those who transgress. Rutgers University evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers has discussed the evolutionary importance of detecting "gross cheaters" (those who fail to reciprocate altruistic acts) and "subtle cheaters" (those who reciprocate but give much less than they get). [For more on altruism and related behavior, see "The Samaritan Paradox," by Ernst Fehr and

Suzann-Viola Renninger; *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN MIND*, premier issue 2004.]

Gossip can be an effective means of uncovering such information about others and an especially useful way of controlling these "free riders"

who may be tempted to violate group norms of reciprocity by taking more from the group than they give in return. Studies in real-life groups such as California cattle ranchers, Maine lobster fishers and college rowing teams confirm that gossip is used in these quite different settings to enforce group norms when an individual fails to live up to the group's expectations. In all these groups, individuals who violated expectations about sharing resources and meeting responsibilities became frequent targets of gossip and ostracism, which applied pressure on them to become better citizens. Anthropological

studies of hunter-gatherer groups have typically revealed a similar social control function for gossip in these societies.

Anthropologist Chris Boehm of the University of Southern California has proposed in his

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book *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 1999) that gossip evolved as a “leveling mechanism” for neutralizing the dominance tendencies of others. Boehm believes that small-scale foraging societies such as those typical during human prehistory emphasized an egalitarianism that suppressed internal competition and promoted consensus seeking in a way that made the success of one’s group extremely important to one’s own fitness. These social pressures discouraged free riders and cheaters and encouraged altruists. In these societies, the manipulation of public opinion through gossip, ridicule and ostracism became a key way of keeping potentially dominant group members in check.

Favored Types of Gossip

According to one of the pioneers of gossip research, Canadian anthropologist Jerry Barkow of Dalhousie University, we should be especially interested in information about people who matter most in our lives: rivals, mates, relatives, partners in social exchange, and high-ranking figures whose behavior can affect us. Given the proposition that our interest in gossip evolved as a way of acquiring fitness-enhancing information, Barkow also suggests that the type of knowledge that we seek should be information that can affect our social standing relative to others. Hence, we would expect to find higher interest in negative news (such as misfortunes and scandals) about high-status people and potential rivals because we could exploit it. Negative information about those lower than us in status would not be as useful. There should also be less interest in passing along negative information about our friends and relatives than about people who are not allies. Conversely, positive information (good fortune and sudden elevation of status, for example) about allies should be likely to be spread around, whereas positive information about non-allies should be less enticing because it is not useful in advancing one’s own interests.

For a variety of reasons, our interest in the doings of same-sex others ought to be especially strong. Because same-sex members of one’s own species who are close to our own age are our principal evolutionary competitors, we ought to pay special attention to them. The 18-year-old male caveman would have done much better by attending to the business of other 18-year-old males rather than the business of 50-year-old males or females of any age. Interest about members of the other sex should be strong only when their age



and situational circumstances would make them appropriate as mates.

The gossip studies that my students and I have worked on at Knox College over the past decade have focused on uncovering what we are most interested in finding out about other people and what we are most likely to spread around. We have had people of all ages rank their interest in tabloid stories about celebrities, and we have asked college students to read gossip scenarios about unidentified individuals and tell us which types of people they would most like to hear such information about, whom they would gossip about and with whom they would share gossip.

In keeping with the evolutionary hypotheses suggested earlier, we have consistently found that people are most interested in gossip about individuals of the same sex as themselves who happen to be around their own age. We have also found that information that is socially useful is always of greatest interest to us: we like to know about the scandals and misfortunes of our rivals and of high-status people because this information might be valuable in social competition. Positive information about such people tends to be uninteresting to us. Finding out that someone already higher in status than ourselves has just acquired something that puts him even further ahead of us does not supply us with ammunition that we can use to gain ground on him. Conversely, positive information about our friends and relatives is

Information about those who are of our same sex and near our age is more interesting to us than news about people of the opposite sex who are much older or younger than we are.

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Why the obsession? In our ancestral environment, any person about whom we knew intimate details was, by definition, socially important to us.

very interesting and likely to be used to our advantage whenever possible. For example, in studies that my colleagues and I published in 2002 and in 2007 in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, we consistently found that college students were not much interested in hearing about academic awards or a large inheritance if it involved one of their professors, and that they were also not very interested in passing that news along to others. Yet the same information about their friends or romantic partners was rated as being quite interesting and likely to be spread around.

We have also found that an interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females and that women have somewhat

different patterns of sharing gossip than men do. For example, our studies reveal that males report being far more likely to share gossip with their romantic partners than with anyone else, but females report that they would be just as likely to share gossip with their same-sex friends as with their romantic partners. And although males are usually more interested in news about other males, females are virtually obsessed with news about other females.

This fact can be demonstrated by looking at the actual frequency with which males and females selected a same-sex person as the most interesting subject of the gossip scenarios we presented them with in one of our studies published in 2002. On hearing about someone having a date with a famous person, 43 out of 44 women selected a female as the most interesting person to know this about, as compared with 24 out of 36 males who selected a male as most interesting. Similarly, 40 out of 42 females (versus 22 out of 37 males) were most interested in same-sex academic cheaters, and 39 out of 43 were most interested in a same-sex leukemia sufferer (as opposed to only 18 out of 37 males). In fact, the only two scenarios among the 13 we studied in which males expressed more same-sex interest than females did involved hearing about an individual heavily in debt because of gambling or an individual who was having difficulty performing sexually.

Why Such Interest in Celebrities?

Even if we can explain the intense interest that we have in other people who are socially important to us, how can we possibly explain the seemingly useless interest that we have in the lives of reality-show contestants, movie stars and public figures of all kinds? One possible explanation may be found in the fact that celebrities are a recent occurrence, evolutionarily speaking. In our ancestral environment, any person about whom we knew intimate details of his or her private life was, by definition, a socially important member of the in-group. Barkow has pointed out that evolution did not prepare us to distinguish among members of our community who have genuine effects on our life and the images

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and voices that we are bombarded with by the entertainment industry. Thus, the intense familiarity with celebrities provided by the modern media trips the same gossip mechanisms that have evolved to keep up with the affairs of in-group members. After all, anyone whom we see *that* often and know *that* much about *must* be socially important to us. News anchors and television actors we see every day in soap operas become familiar friends.

In our modern world, celebrities may also serve another important social function. In a highly mobile, industrial society, celebrities may be the only “friends” we have in common with our new neighbors and co-workers. They provide a common interest and topic of conversation between people who otherwise might not have much to say to one another, and they facilitate the types of informal interaction that help people become comfortable in new surroundings. Hence, keeping up on the lives of actors, politicians and athletes can make a person more socially adept during interactions with strangers and even provide segues into social relationships with new friends in the virtual world of the Internet. Research published in 2007 by Charlotte De Backer, a Belgian psychologist now at the University of Leicester in England, finds that young people even look to celebrities and popular culture for learning life strategies that would have been learned from role models within one’s tribe in the old days. Teenagers in particular seem to be prone to learning how to dress, how to manage relationships and how to be socially successful in general by tuning in to popular culture.

Thus, gossip is a more complicated and socially important phenomenon than we think. When gossip is discussed seriously, the goal usually is to suppress the frequency with which it occurs in an attempt to avoid the undeniably harmful effects it often has in work groups and other social networks. This tendency, however, overlooks that gossip is part of who we are and an essential part of what makes groups function as well as they do. Perhaps it may become more productive to think of gossip as a social skill rather than as a character flaw, because it is only when we do not do it well that we get into trouble. Adopting the role of the self-righteous soul who refuses to participate in gossip at work or in other areas of your social life ultimately will be self-defeating. It will turn out to be nothing more than a ticket to social isolation. On the other hand, becoming that person who indiscriminately blabs everything you hear to anyone who will listen will quickly get you a reputation as an un-



Attempts to suppress gossip because of its potentially harmful effects overlook that it is part of who we are.

trustworthy busybody. Successful gossiping is about being a good team player and sharing key information with others in a way that will not be perceived as self-serving and about understanding when to keep your mouth shut.

In short, I believe we will continue to struggle with managing the gossip networks in our daily lives and to shake our heads at what we are constantly being subjected to by the mass media, rationally dismissing it as irrelevant to anything that matters in our own lives. But in case you find yourself becoming just a *tiny* bit intrigued by some inane story about a celebrity, let yourself off the hook and enjoy the guilty pleasure. After all, it is only human nature. **M**

(Further Reading)

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