Gossip

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Anthropology has sometimes been derided (as often from within the discipline, with ironic intent, as from outside the discipline, with hostile intent) as the science of gossip. Behind the supposed slur lies a serious methodological point: an ethnography has probably never been written whose pages do not preserve instances of gossip—in the broad sense of informal talk about an absent third party's activities—by and about individuals from the society being studied. Clearly, composing a portrait of everyday life in almost any community would be impossible without listening to what, and who, people in that community are talking about. Anthropology's reliance on gossip thus leads to three preliminary conclusions. First, gossip has been investigated in every society that anthropologists have visited. There are no well-known counterexamples of societies where gossip is almost absent, so it seems that indulging in informal conversations about the activities of absent group members is as good a candidate for a human universal as any. Second, gossip is useful. The reliance placed on it by ethnographers trying to rapidly understand a community for academic purposes is just a specialized instance of gossip's general value in integrating people into new social networks, teaching them social norms, and allowing them to keep track of individuals with whom they are ~~no longer~~ in direct personal contact. Third, however, to call someone “a gossip” is insulting. The point of the barb about the science of gossip—even if meant ironically—is that it might wound, because gossip is almost everywhere seen as a frivolous, morally dubious, sometimes even malicious, activity. Even though gossip is ubiquitous, it is feared and despised in many societies and often associated with low-status subgroups (especially women). Indeed, when they have considered gossip explicitly rather than just relying on it implicitly,

many anthropologists have focused on this “dark side” of gossip—on its role as an instrument of covert aggression and social competition rather than its more innocent function of spreading useful information about who is doing what with whom.

Although gossip has been recorded everywhere, it has not been explicitly investigated as a topic of anthropological interest in all societies, making it difficult to identify cross-cultural similarities and differences. Early ethnographies that contain extensive discussion of the role of gossip or rumor in a particular social group—and that were cited by Gluckman (1963) in his influential functionalist analysis of gossip—included works on peasants in Trinidad and Haiti; the Navajo Indians; rural Euro-American life in the Midwest; the Makah Indians of the Pacific Northwest; and a Welsh industrial village. After 1963, selected book-length ethnographies that contained noteworthy treatments of gossip included works on Sarakatsani shepherds in Greece; blood feuds in Montenegro; small-town life in Andalusia; carnival traditions in Cádiz; lobster-fishing communities in Maine; informal systems of social control among cattle ranchers in California; the Tzotzil Indian community of Zinacantan in Mexico; village politics in Papua New Guinea; and rumors of supernatural assault by white colonials on black Africans. Although this list is diverse, there was a noticeable bias toward European and North American societies. It is possible that this simply reflected local effects in terms of ethnographers who were interested in a particular anthropological theme and geographical area going on to supervise students who then became interested in the same theme and area. However, in response to that suggestion it should be noted that Gluckman, so influential in the anthropological study of gossip, was primarily an Africanist, yet until the early 2000s there had been little written (except in passing) on gossip in Africa. A more theoretically interesting possibility is that gossip is more common in periodically dispersed groups—such as cattle ranchers, shepherds, or fishermen—that exist at the margins of a modern state.

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The history of the anthropological study of gossip can be broadly divided into four phases: (1) early (pre-1960s) work, which saw gossip as an interesting phenomenon to be discussed in passing but rarely speculated on its fundamental importance to the society being studied or on its similarities and differences to gossip in other societies; (2) the 1960s, when a famous debate took place between Gluckman (1963, 1968), who put forward a social-functional analysis of gossip, and Paine (1967), who favored a more individualistic, social-process approach; (3) the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, when ethnographers either advocated one of these two theoretical positions or tried in some way to combine them; and (4) recent work since the 1990s, based on the recognition that gossip is universal and marked either by a neofunctionalist model based on evolutionary science or on the regional survey of the similarities and differences between patterns of gossip in different parts of the world.

Many passing mentions of gossip in pre-1960s ethnographies were summarized by Gluckman (1963) in a well-known review article. The debate that followed the publication of this article remains pivotal. Gluckman articulated a classic functionalist position, asserting that gossip has an important role in maintaining group cohesion. He argued that the group-serving functions of gossip are threefold. First, gossip helps to uphold social norms, partly because the fear of negative gossip may deter individuals from violating norms but also because evaluative talk about norms helps to reinforce people's sense that they are part of a social group who share these norms. Second, gossip is a kind of covert aggression, fought out strictly behind the scenes in order to maintain an outward show of harmony and friendship. A third point, not so often picked up on by other writers, is that gossip can help with the process of selecting a leader, enabling a group to evaluate powerful people informally without directly confronting them about their failures.

In a fierce critique, Gluckman's former student Paine (1967) took issue mainly with the second function of gossip: its use as a way of concealing aggression. He claimed that his mentor's argument contained a contradiction because gossip was supposed simultaneously to preserve a sense of group unity by enforcing norm adherence

and also to undermine that unity by providing a means of within-group aggression. Paine argued that gossip is better seen as a competitive activity practiced for the benefit of individuals rather than groups. However, Gluckman's (1968) reply did a good job of rebutting this criticism. His key point was that gossip is a form of *indirect* aggression. It does, therefore, make sense that the expression of aggressive impulses between individuals can help to hold a society together because these impulses are not *openly* expressed but are restrained and controlled within the rule-bound cultural activity of gossip. Gossip may indeed be aggressive behavior that serves the interests of individuals but the rules by which that behavior is governed, and which prescribe its indirectness, are cultural rules that are imposed by the group as a whole and serve the group's collective interests.

This debate left its mark on subsequent anthropological treatments of gossip, which often tried to present gossip as both an individual and a collective activity. For instance, Haviland (1977) argued that gossip among the Tzotzil-speaking Indians of Zinacantan in Mexico focused on normative rules, helping to reinforce in gossipers' minds the consequences of breaking these rules. In a topic-frequency analysis, he found that gossip was dominated by subjects such as drunken (mis)behavior, extraordinary wealth or poverty, fallings-out between kinsfolk, judicial punishment, divorce, and illicit sexual relations. Thus Haviland's work seems to support the idea that gossip is concerned with the reinforcement of group norms; but he also emphasized that gossip may be instrumental in furthering individual or factional ends, as a form of aggression. In contrast to this balanced approach, other ethnographers, particularly in the 1980s, tended to focus more on the covertly aggressive connotations of gossip, arguing that previous anthropologists had tended to overemphasize the social benefits of gossip rather than the emotions and motivations of the individuals concerned.

In the twenty-first century, ethnographers have continued to investigate gossip in particular locations but there has also been a new interest in investigating the shared properties of gossip across human societies. In the course of this, some interesting connections have emerged between gossip and witchcraft, sparking the idea that concerns about gossip and rumor are a

kind of historical successor to fears of witchcraft and sorcery. At one level, gossip and rumor play an important role in processes that lead to accusations of witchcraft. In societies where witchcraft is seen as a real—and dangerously counternormative—behavior, the activities of witches may form a frequent topic of gossip, as Haviland (1977) demonstrated. Witchcraft accusations, like negative gossip in general, may be motivated either by a genuine fear of the accused and distaste for their behavior or by a strategic attempt to damage their reputation—whether from envy, spite, or ambition.

At another level, however, gossip itself can act in an oddly similar way to the ways in which witchcraft and sorcery are imagined to act, owing to the ability of the gossip author to strike anonymously and from a distance. To use a modern example similar to one chosen by Gluckman (1963), the anonymity of the writer of an unsigned letter in a professional context, containing accusations of wrongdoing against a colleague, gives the writer aspects of a sorcerer, the harmful effects of whose actions are evident but whose identity is concealed. Moreover, negative gossip increases—and witchcraft is believed to increase—in social and historical contexts that are characterized by high degrees of social tension and ambiguity. A possible topic of future research is the idea that fear of witchcraft and sorcery, so widespread in agrarian societies at a certain level of political integration, is a kind of image of the fear of malicious, anonymous gossip, refracted through the lens of belief in supernatural agents. And like other things that induce social fear, gossip is a highly ambiguous behavior, oriented either toward a pole of social integration or a pole of aggression and social disruption.

Arguably the most theoretically grounded way of investigating the general properties of gossip is to analyze it in terms of its evolutionary costs and benefits. Since the 1990s there has been a rapid growth in both experimental and observational research on gossip from an evolutionary perspective. A particularly influential writer in this area has been Dunbar (1996), who elaborated a theory of the evolutionary significance of gossip based on its functions in reinforcing intimacy and excluding social deviants. Dunbar argued that informal chat (gossip being his main example of this) is analogous to the social grooming of

nonhuman primates. The use of verbal rather than tactile grooming has enabled humans to live in much larger groups than other primates, for three main reasons. First, language allows us to converse with an audience of multiple individuals, making it more time efficient than one-to-one grooming. Second, gossip allows us to keep in contact with geographically dispersed networks of kin members and friends via mutual contacts. Third, negative gossip encourages intragroup cooperation—which would otherwise become impossible to enforce as groups grew larger—by spreading information about the behavior of norm violators. Dunbar's argument helps to provide a solid biological explanation for the ambiguity of gossip. In any act of gossip, at least three individuals are involved: gossip, subject, and audience. If the gossip is about a norm violator, it is in our genetic interests to be in the audience (so that we can take precautions against the violator) but not to be the subject. The gossip's interests are less clear: they are gambling the potential benefits of helping their audience against the risks that derive from alienating the gossip subject. This is essentially a more scientific way of reframing Gluckman's core insight: human societies tend to be ambivalent about gossip because it can both help and hurt our individual and collective interests, encouraging norm compliance but often causing conflict as well.

SEE ALSO: <DRAFT: Social Cohesion>; Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic; Functionalism; Norms Psychology; Gluckman, Max (1911–75)

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ABSTRACT

Gossip is a universal feature of all human societies but has not been systematically investigated in all of them: ethnographies that have focused on gossip largely concern semidispersed groups at the margins of modern European and North American societies. The anthropological study of gossip can be divided into four historical phases: pre-1960s work, which tended to discuss gossip only in passing; a debate in the 1960s between proponents of social-functional and social-process approaches to gossip; the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, when ethnographers either advocated one of these two theoretical positions or tried to synthesize them; and recent work based on the recognition that gossip is universal. Current theoretical innovations include regional surveys of similarities and differences in patterns of gossip and the resurgence of a neofunctionalist model based on evolutionary science, in which gossip has adaptive value in promoting group cooperation.

KEYWORDS

cooperation (political and economic); language; reputation; rumor; social control