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Of Tabloids and Family Secrets: The Evolutionary Psychology of Gossip[1]

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Two experiments tested hypotheses about gossip derived from an evolutionary perspective. In the first experiment, 128 people ranging in age from 17 to 62 years ranked the interest value of 12 tabloid stories about celebrities differing in age and gender. In the second experiment, 83 college students ranked the interest value and likelihood of spreading gossip about male or female professors, relatives, friends, acquaintances, or strangers based on 12 different gossip scenarios. The results of these experiments confirmed a consistent pattern of interest in gossip marked by a preference for information about others of the same age and gender. Exploitable information in the form of damaging, negative news about nonallies and positive news about allies was especially prized and likely to be passed on. The findings confirm that gossip can serve as a strategy of status enhancement and function in the interests of individuals, and that it does not just function as a means of social control within groups.

The tendency to gossip is at the heart of the social life of many people, and most casual conversations are concerned with matters of social importance (Dunbar, 1996). All available historical information and cross-cultural data suggest that this has always been the case (Barkow, 1992; Cox, 1970; Lee, 1990; McPherson, 1991; Paine, 1967; Schein, 1994).

Levin and Arluke (1987), among others, proposed that gossip is universal because it is psychologically and socially useful. Within the field of social psychology, the few attempts to tie gossip into a larger body of theory have typically described it as a form of social learning or social comparison (Levin & Arluke, 1987; Morreal, 1994; Suls, 1977). In other words, gossip is a way to get information about others that can give us guidance for leading our own lives or increased feelings of self-worth through comparison with others (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Gossip can be an especially appealing way to acquire social-comparison information because it is so indirect and nonthreatening. Comparing oneself to high-ranking people may be important in self-evaluation, but doing so directly and

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publicly could be risky and threaten the standing that one already has (Suls, 1977). Thinking about gossip as a form of social comparison can be even more useful if the connection between social-comparison processes and gossip is embedded in a larger theoretical context that will help to make greater sense of both. It seems as if the perspective offered by evolutionary psychology might provide such a unifying principle.

Evolutionary perspectives are often presented as being antagonistic to more mainstream social psychological ideas, but Crawford (1998) pointed out that nonevolutionary explanations are not necessarily incompatible with evolutionary ones. Crawford cites the traditionally strong resistance to evolutionary explanations in the social sciences as the source of the assumption that such explanations must inevitably be at odds with each other. He goes on to say that any good explanation of behavior can be compatible with any other good explanation, even if their theoretical origins are quite different. This might be the case for our understanding of the relationship between social comparison and gossip. More specifically, both social comparison and gossip might have developed in response to evolutionary pressures; and the two are related only insofar as they are overlapping strategies that can enhance status, and, ultimately, reproductive fitness. From this evolutionary perspective, both social comparison and gossip are social strategies that developed in human beings in response to evolutionary pressures experienced throughout early human prehistory.

The available evidence suggests that our ancestors lived their lives as members of small cooperative groups that were in competition with other relatively small groups (Dunbar, 1996; Lewin, 1993; Tooby & DeVore, 1987). To make matters more complicated, it was not only necessary to cooperate with in-group members for success against out-groups; in-group competition was unavoidable insofar as it was necessary to divide resources among the group members (Krebs & Denton, 1997). Living in such groups, our ancestors faced a number of consistent adaptive problems that were social in nature: obtaining a reproductively valuable mate; and successfully managing friendships, alliances, and family relationships (Shackelford, 1997). The social intelligence needed for success in this early environment required an ability to predict and influence the behavior of others (Alexander, 1979; Barkow, 1989, 1992; Humphrey, 1983). Any process that provided fitness-relevant information would have been strongly selected for, and an irresistible interest in gossip (especially when coupled with a tendency to engage in social comparison) would have been handy indeed. Thus, a strong drive to quickly gather and exchange social information for the management of social alliances would have bestowed a tremendous advantage on those individuals with such predispositions.

It is an open question as to how well the evolutionary perspective can handle the subtleties of human gossip, as there are virtually no relevant data available. An evolutionary perspective that might provide the framework needed for

understanding the complex role of gossip in social relations is multilevel selection theory (MST). According to MST, the evolutionary unit of selection can occur at many levels, from genes through social groups and even multispecies communities. Since the 1960s, it has been considered generally inappropriate to talk about natural selection occurring at any level larger than that of the individual organism, but in recent years the levels-of-selection debate has been rekindled and many now believe that the concept of natural selection can be applied meaningfully at the group level (Hamilton, 1996; Wilson, 1997b).

According to Wilson (1997a), adaptation at different levels of the biological hierarchy requires flexible thinking about natural selection. Within-group selection follows traditional evolutionary thinking in terms of individual organisms (or collections of genes) in direct selfish competition with each other. Group-level adaptations, on the other hand, require thinking in terms of between-group selection in which groups can be thought of as adaptive units in their own right, and not just as byproducts of individual self-interest (Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, A). According to multilevel selection theorists, groups do not evolve into adaptive units for all traits, but only for those that are adaptive in a group but not in an individual context. In other words, "group selection favors traits that increase the fitness of groups relative to other groups" (Wilson, 1997a, p. S122). MST does not deny that selection at lower levels of organization is vitally important. On the contrary, MST maintains that selection at the individual level occurs at a faster pace than does selection at the group level (Boehm, 1997). Nevertheless, the MST perspective has been an especially useful way of thinking about traits such as altruism that may appear to decrease the fitness of individual altruists, but may work because groups of altruists will be more fit than groups of nonaltruists under the right conditions (Wilson, 1997a). According to Sober and Wilson (1998), traits like altruism only evolve when more than one group is present, when group selection will favor any behavior that increases the relative fitness of the group.

Critics of MST believe that traits such as altruism can be explained through kin selection (favoring those who share our genes) or through reciprocal altruism with unrelated others when an act of altruism is likely to induce a return benefit (Dawkins, 1989; Trivers, 1971, 1985). In either case, the belief is that the trait is selected because it is adaptive to individuals, not because it contributes to the fitness of the group as a whole.

Although MST is not inherently incompatible with more traditional evolutionary viewpoints, the two views are often presented as if this was the case. The question quickly becomes murky because at this time it is not even clear which theoretical perspective is the more parsimonious. It will not be the goal of this paper to take sides in the levels-of-selection debate, but rather to use both evolutionary models (i.e., group selection and individual selection) to build a schema for making sense of gossip. Some authors (e.g., Gluckman, 1963)

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believe that gossip primarily serves the interests of groups, while others (e.g., Paine, 1967) maintain that individuals gossip only for their own benefit. We believe that gossip may be selected at both levels, albeit in somewhat different ways, and that its pervasiveness in human groups can be explained by the fact that a predisposition for gossip has evolved through both within-group and between-group selection. Thus, paradoxically, gossip can serve as both a form of antisocial behavior and as a means of controlling antisocial behavior (Wilson et al., [B]).

At the between-group level of selection, gossip would have evolved as a social-control mechanism that serves the interests of the group rather than the interests of individuals, and there is ample evidence that when it is controlled, gossip can be a positive force in the life of a group indeed. It can be used to resolve ambiguity about group norms (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Suls, 1977) and to help socialize newcomers into the ways of the group (Ayim, 1994; Laing, 1993). Gossip is an efficient way of reminding group members about the importance of the group's norms and values, and it can be an effective deterrent to deviance and a tool for punishing those who transgress (Barkow, 1992; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Merry, 1984).

Trivers (1971, 1985) discussed the evolutionary importance of detecting *gross cheaters* (those who fail to reciprocate altruisitic acts) and *subtle cheaters* (those who reciprocate but who give much less than they get). 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 (Dunbar, 1996; Kniffin & Wilson, 1998). Experiments in real-life groups such as California cattle ranchers (Ellickson, 1991), Maine lobster fishermen (Acheson, 1988), and college rowing teams (Kniffin & Wilson, 1998) confirm that gossip is used in these quite different settings to maintain boundaries between the in-group and out-group and to enforce group norms when individuals fail to live up to the group's expectations. Anthropological studies of hunter-gatherer groups have typically revealed a similar social-control function for gossip in these societies (Lee, 1990; McPherson, 1991). In keeping with these findings, Wilson et al. ([C]) found that gossip that occurs in response to the violation of a social norm is judged much less harshly than is self-serving gossip.

Boehm (1999) further proposed that gossip could serve as a leveling mechanism for neutralizing the dominance tendencies of others, a "stealthy activity by which other people's moral dossiers are constantly reviewed" (p. 73). 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 reduced within-group selection pressures and increased the importance of between-group differences in the

selection process. These social pressures discouraged free riders and cheaters and encouraged altruists (Boehm, 1997). He also believes that such egalitarian societies were necessary because of the relatively equal and unstable balance of power among individuals with access to weapons and shifting coalitions. 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 (Boehm, 1993).

The aspect of gossip that is troubling to many is that it is not only a mechanism used by groups to enforce conformity, but it can also be a strategy used by individuals to further their own reputations and selfish interests at the expense of others (Dunbar, 1996; Emler, 1994; Spacks, 1985). When framed under within-group selection, gossip is very much about enhancing one's own success in social competition (Barkow, 1989). Gossip offers a means of manipulating others' reputations by passing on negative information about competitors or enemies, as well as a means of detecting betrayal by others in our important relationships (Shackelford, 1997; Spacks, 1985). According to Barkow (1992), 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 people whose behavior can affect us. Barkow also proposes that the type of information that we seek should be information that can affect our social standing relative to others. Hence, information about control of resources (e.g., financial news); sexual activity; current alliances and political dealings; and an individual's reputation as a reliable, trustworthy partner in social exchange will be especially interesting to us. All of these speculations about the within-group selective advantages of gossiping make sense and are consistent with evolutionary thinking. However, in contrast to the aforementioned experiments documenting the social-control functions of gossip, there has been very little empirical evidence that gossip does in fact function to promote selfish individual interests.

If an evolutionary perspective is valid, it should provide specific, testable predictions about the circumstances in which we will be interested in gossip, and it should also suggest hypotheses about the types of information we seek and the people about whom we seek it. This perspective will also have to be able to deal with certain features of gossip that do not have an obvious explanation. For example, if the predisposition to gossip has evolved to facilitate an interest in people who are socially important to us, how would the evolutionary perspective explain the fascination that people have with the lives of celebrities who are total strangers to them? One possible explanation may be found in the fact that celebrities are a recent occurrence, evolutionarily speaking. In the 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. According to Barkow (1992),

> There was never any selection pressure in favor of our distinguishing between genuine members of our community whose actions had real effects on our lives and those of our kin and acquaintances and the images and voices with which the entertainment industry bombards us. (p. 630)

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. This will be especially true for television actors in soap operas that are seen on a daily basis. In fact, it has been documented that tabloids prefer stories about television actors who are seen regularly to movie stars who are seen less often. These famous people become familiar friends whose characters take on a life of their own (Levin & Arluke, 1987). The public's interest in these high-status members of our social world seems insatiable; circulation of supermarket tabloids and magazines such as *People* and *Us* run into the tens of millions per week. People seem to be interested in almost all aspects of celebrity lives, but unflattering stories about violations of norms or bad habits are most in demand. Stories about ordinary people typically only make it into the tabloids if they concern extraordinary events (Levin & Arluke, 1987).

The focus of most of the previous research on gossip has been on the between-group selection, social-control functions of gossip and on what people talk about when they gossip. In the present paper, the emphasis will be on filling in some of the gaps in our knowledge by focusing on gossip-seeking behavior and by examining predictions based on the self-serving, within-group selection functions of gossip. All of the hypotheses to be tested in the current research are derived from basic evolutionary principles such as kin selection and the importance of detecting cheaters in social-exchange situations (Trivers, 1971, 1985), and Darwin's (1859, 1879) principle of sexual selection in which characteristics that enhance one's likelihood of reproductive success will drive the adaptiveness of behavior.

Given the proposition that gossip exists as a way of acquiring fitness-enhancing information, it would be predicted that individuals would be most interested in information that could be exploited for social gain. Hence, we would expect to find higher interest in negative information (e.g., misfortunes, scandals) about high-status people and potential rivals, since this would be something that might be exploited. 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 allies (friends and relatives) than about people who are not perceived as allies. Conversely, positive information (good fortune, sudden elevation of status) about allies should be very likely to be spread around, while

positive information about nonallies should be less interesting because it is not very useful in advancing one's own interests.

For a variety of reasons, our interest in the doings of same-gender others ought to be especially strong. Wilson and Daly (1996), among others, identified same-gender members of one's own species as our principal evolutionary competitors, and Shackelford (1997) verified the cross-culturally universal importance of same-gender friendships and coalitional relationships. According to Shackelford, managing alliances and friendships posed important adaptive problems throughout human history because it was important to evaluate the quality and intentions of one's allies and rivals if one was to be successful. Given how critical such relationships are in all areas of life, and also given that such relationships would be most likely to exist between members of same-aged cohorts, we usually should be most interested in gossip about other people of the same gender who are close to us in age. Interest about members of the opposite gender should be very strong only when their age and situational circumstances would make them appropriate as mates.

The two experiments to be described in this paper were designed to test some of the hypotheses suggested earlier and to provide preliminary data on gossip-seeking behavior. In Experiment 1, participants were asked to rank the degree of interest they had in 12 tabloid articles about various celebrities. This was done primarily to test the hypothesis that individuals will be most interested in information about others of roughly the same age and gender as themselves. In Experiment 2, participants read short scenarios that would qualify as gossip. Some of these scenarios consisted of positive information (e.g., inheriting a large sum of money), while others consisted of negative information (e.g., cheating, drug abuse). The participants then ranked how interesting this information was and how likely they would be to pass it along, depending on whether the person involved was a professor, a friend, a relative, an acquaintance, or a stranger. Experiment 2 was designed primarily to determine if individuals would in fact be most interested in information that might be exploited for social gain.

Collectively, the hypotheses of the two experiments can be summarized as follows:

> *Hypothesis 1*. Participants should express the greatest interest in gossip about others of the same gender and approximately the same age as themselves.
>
> *Hypothesis 2*. Participants should show greater interest in positive information about allies (e.g., friends and relatives) than in positive information about nonallies.
>
> *Hypothesis 3*. Participants should be more likely to spread positive information about allies and negative information about nonallies.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

There were 128 participants (61 males, 67 females) ranging in age from 17 to 62 years. Of the males, 19 were over the age of 30 years, and 42 were under the age of 30 years. Of the females, 20 were over the age of 30 years, and 47 were under the age of 30 years. The mean age of participants in the over-30 age group was 45.77 years (46.32 for males, 45.25 for females). The mean age of participants in the under-30 age group was 19.61 years (19.81 for males, 19.43 for females). Participants were 83 undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, 21 nonstudent employees of the same institution, and 24 employees of a local public elementary school. All data were collected in late 1996 and early 1997.

Materials

The stimulus materials consisted of 12 articles about celebrities taken from tabloids published in the fall of 1996. There were six articles about female celebrities and six about male celebrities. There were two articles each about male and female celebrities who were under age 35 years (Robert Downey, Jr.; John F. Kennedy, Jr.; Courteney Cox; Oksana Baiul); between the ages of 36 and 55 years (Don Johnson, Kelsey Grammer, Christie Brinkley, Jamie Lee Curtis); and over the age of 56 years (Frank Sinatra, The Frugal Gourmet, Barbara Walters, Jane Wyman). All of the celebrities were living at the time of the experiment and were in the age categories described earlier.

The tabloid articles were paper-clipped together in alphabetical order by the first name of the celebrity featured in the article. The articles were preceded by a set of written instructions and followed by a sheet on which the participants recorded their responses.

Procedure

The participants were given 2 min to look through the 12 tabloid articles. They were instructed not to read each of the articles, but rather to briefly examine the articles and to reorganize the articles in descending order of interest. The story that was most interesting was to be placed on top and the story that was least interesting was to be placed on the bottom of the stack. The other stories were to be distributed in between these two extremes. After doing this, each participant recorded the rank assigned to each article by assigning a number ranging from 1 (*most interesting*) to 12 (*least interesting*). A forced-ranking procedure was used to induce participants to choose among the articles and to prevent them from saying that they were equally interested (or uninterested) in the different stories.

Table 1

Rank Order of Interest Value of Tabloid Articles Split by Participant Gender and Age

Subject of article	Male		Female	
	Over 30 years (n = 19)	Under 30 years (n = 42)	Over 30 years (n = 20)	Under 30 years (n = 47)
Barbara Walters	7	8	8	8
Christie Brinkley	3	10	1	4
Courteney Cox	9	7	6	3
Don Johnson	2	3	7	9
Frank Sinatra	10	11	9.5	11
The Frugal Gourmet	11	5	12	10
Jamie Lee Curtis	4	2	5	5
Jane Wyman	12	12	9.5	12
John F. Kennedy, Jr.	5	9	3	7
Kelsey Grammer	1	6	2	6
Oksana Baiul	6	4	4	1
Robert Downey, Jr.	8	1	11	2

Note. Articles were ranked on a 12-point scale ranging from 1 (*most interesting*) to 12 (*least interesting*).

Each individual signed a consent form prior to participation. Participants who were not college students provided information about their gender, age, and occupation. Students indicated their age, gender, year in school, and major. The college students completed Experiment 2 in the same session as this experiment, with 42 of them completing Experiment 1 followed by Experiment 2, and 41 of them completing the experiments in reverse order.

Results

The mean rankings for each tabloid article broken down by the gender (male vs. female) and age (over 30 years vs. under 30 years) of the participants are presented in Table 1. The first step in the data analysis was to determine the extent of agreement in the rankings given by the participants in the different categories. The classic technique for assessing agreement among a set of judges (in this case, the participants in each of the four different gender/age combinations) who have

ranked or ordered the same set of stimuli (i.e., the 12 tabloid articles) is Kendall's coefficient of concordance, *W* (Lehman, 1991; Lindeman, Merenda, & Gold, 1980; Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977; McNemar, 1969). This statistic describes the amount of the maximum possible variance that can be accounted for by the agreement among the judges, and it provides a valid measure of the extent of agreement displayed by judges when only ordinal level data are available. If all of the judges agree exactly on all rankings, Kendall's coefficient *W* would be equal to 1. The Kendall's coefficient obtained by analyzing the ranks assigned to the tabloid articles by the four groups of participants was .54. The test of significance for *W* revealed that the agreement on the ranks exceeded chance levels, E $\chi^2(11, N = {}^{E}) = 23.89$, $p < .02$. More specific comparisons of the ranks given to the tabloid articles were done on the basis of age and gender using a Kendall's Tau. A comparison of the ranks given by the participants over age 30 and those F under age 30 showed no significant correlation, ${}^{F}T(12) = .30$, $z = 1.36$, *ns*. A comparison of male and female rankings of the stories revealed a small but statis- G tically significant correlation, ${}^{G}T(12) = .45$, $z = 2.04$, $p < .05$.

To some extent, the significant agreement detected by the previous analyses may be a result of the consistently low ranks assigned by almost everyone to the oldest celebrities in the tabloids. For example, very few people had any interest in stories about Jane Wyman or Frank Sinatra, possibly because none of the participants in the experiment had yet reached retirement age. The consistently low ranks assigned to the older celebrities would probably have been enough to push the Kendall's coefficient above chance levels.

An alternative way of testing the hypothesis that similarity in age and gender would be a good predictor of interest in celebrity gossip was to examine the choices made by the participants in selecting the most interesting tabloid story. Most participants under the age of 30 years selected a story about a celebrity under the age of 36 years as the most interesting article, whereas participants over the age of 30 years showed the opposite pattern. A chi-square analysis H revealed that this difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = {}^{H}) = 7.22$, $p < .01$. The frequencies used in this analysis have been converted to percentages for the purpose of illustrating the relationship between age and interest in celebrities in Figure 1.

Similarly, a chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant tendency for individuals to select a celebrity of their own gender as most interesting, I $\chi^2(1, N = {}^{I}) = 10.33$, $p < .01$. The relationship between gender and celebrity choice is depicted in Figure 2.

Discussion

There was better than chance agreement between males and females regarding the interest shown in various celebrities, but no agreement between

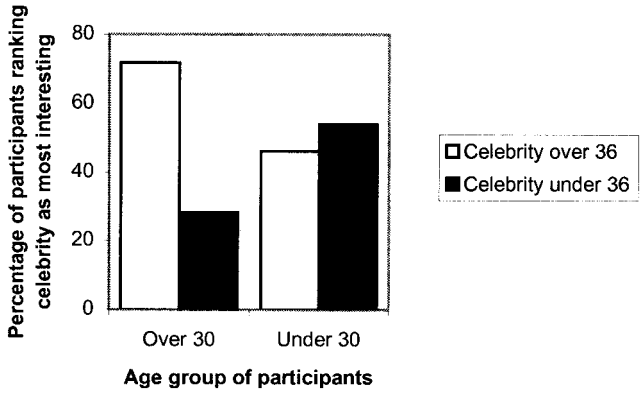

Figure 1. Interest in tabloid stories about celebrities: interaction between the age of the celebrity and the age of the participant.

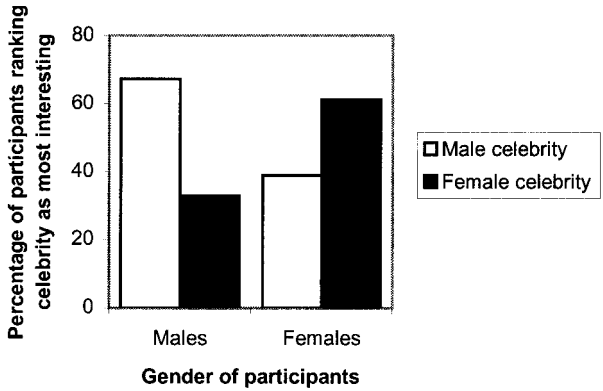

Figure 2. Interest in tabloid stories about celebrities: interaction between the gender of the celebrity and the gender of the participant.

participants under 30 years and over 30 years. There was a striking difference in the frequency with which celebrities were chosen as most interesting, as individuals tended to be most interested in celebrities of their own age and gender. The under-30 participants were most interested in younger celebrities, and the over-30 participants were most interested in middle-aged celebrities. Neither group had a strong interest in celebrities who were much older than them. There was also a statistically significant tendency for males to select a male celebrity for the most interesting story and for females to select a female story as most interesting.

There were two celebrities that were exceptions to these rules. John F. Kennedy, Jr., was included among the "young celebrities." However, he was more interesting to participants over the age of 30 years than to those under the age of 30 years. Discussions with many of the participants after the experiment indicated that he acquired his celebrity status through his famous parents, and it was this connection that made him interesting to the older participants. Another apparent exception to the rule was the relatively strong interest shown in the tabloid article about The Frugal Gourmet by young males. The Frugal Gourmet was a man of 58 years who hosted a television cooking show. At first glance, this should not have been a person of great interest to males under 30 years of age. However, the tabloid article used in the experiment involved his alleged sexual molestation of teenaged boys. In hindsight, the clear hedonic relevance of this experiment to a young male audience should not have been surprising. In summary, the results of Experiment 1 are consistent with the prediction made in Hypothesis 1 that persons of our own age and gender should be the most fascinating objects of gossip.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants

There were 83 participants (39 males, 44 females) ranging in age from 17 to 22 years. These individuals also participated in Experiment 1, and all were undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest.

Materials

Each participant received a page of written instructions followed by 12 hypothetical gossip scenarios. Each scenario was a brief (3 or 4 sentences in length) story about a fictitious person. The age and gender of the person were not specified in any of the stories. Each story provided personal information that would clearly qualify as gossip; that is, each scenario presented information of a highly personal nature that could be influential in the judgments that others would make about the character, reputation, or status of the individual in question. The themes of the scenarios in order of presentation were as follows: a large inheritance, stealing computers, promiscuity, drug abuse, sexual dysfunction, sexual infidelity, a major academic award, drunken behavior, gambling problems, a terminal illness (leukemia), academic cheating, dating a famous person.

Procedure

Participants were instructed to read each scenario and to answer two questions about each one. The first question asked each participant to rank how likely

he or she would be to seek out more information about the situation described in the scenario for 10 different types of people: male or female professors, relatives, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. For these 10 possibilities, a ranking of 1 was to be assigned to the person about whom they would be *most likely* to seek more information, a ranking of 2 indicated the person they would be next most likely to seek information about, and so on down to the person who was least interesting. That person would receive a ranking of 10. As all of the participants in Experiment 2 were college students, professors were included as a category in an attempt to present a high-status person whose behavior can affect the respondents.

The second question asked participants to rank how likely they would be to pass along the information in the story for each of the 10 types of individuals, using the same ranking system described earlier. At the beginning of the experiment, participants signed a consent form and reported their age, gender, year in school, and major.

Results

The frequencies with which different types of stimulus persons were selected as being most interesting and most likely to be gossiped about were tallied and analyzed via chi-square tests for each scenario. These analyses revealed a significant difference in the frequency with which different types of people were ranked as interesting and likely to be talked about for every scenario. Hence, the participants in this experiment were making consistent judgments as to who they would most like to *hear gossip about,* and who they would be most likely to *spread gossip about*.

In the interest of readability, chi-square values and degrees of freedom will not be reported for most of the analyses that are to be discussed. The level of significance reflected by the chi-square values from each analysis will, however, be indicated. All differences that are significant at a level of $p < .05$ will be described, but given the large number of comparisons that were made and the fact that only about half of them were derived from a priori predictions, a Bonferroni adjustment (Harris, 1985) indicated that a more conservative criterion of $p < .001$ may be the more reasonable guideline to use when evaluating the likelihood that the reported differences are not a result of chance.

People were most interested in information about friends in all situations except two. The participants in this experiment were most interested in friends when it came to news about academic cheating, sexual dysfunction, computer theft, drug abuse, drunken behavior, having a date with a famous person, gambling problems, receiving an academic honor, promiscuity, and sexual infidelity to a partner: $\chi^2(4^J) = 61.38, 128.24, 45.81, 93.06, 93.06, 116.56, 72.77, 84.94, 49.38$, and 126.59, respectively, $p < .0001$. The two scenarios that were

exceptions involved being significantly more interested in relatives when it came to news about a large inheritance, $\chi^2(4^K) = 103.38$, $p < .0001$; or leukemia, $\chi^2(4^L) = 111.53$, $p < .0001$.

The relationship between the type of person the gossip was about and the likelihood of passing it along was a bit more complicated than the relationship with interest in hearing gossip. Participants were most likely to pass along information about dishonesty, such as academic cheating ($p < .001$) or computer theft ($p < .0001$), if it involved a high-status person (e.g., a professor). Bad behaviors, such as drinking ($p < .0001$) and drug abuse ($p < .0001$), were more likely to be passed along for professors and strangers than for others. Good news was most likely to be spread about friends, followed very closely by relatives, $\chi^2(4^N)$, $p < .0001$, academic honors (78.37), a large inheritance (58.69), a date with a famous person (57.88).

Gossiping about sexual matters seemed to be especially sensitive to particulars of the situation. Participants were least likely to spread information about the sexual difficulties ($p < .001$) or shameless promiscuity ($p < .001$) of relatives, but were equally likely to talk about everyone else. Cheating on a partner was most likely to be reported if done by a friend and least likely if done by a relative ($p < .001$).

The gender of the participants and the gender of the stimulus persons were related in interesting ways. Perhaps the strongest finding was the tendency for the participants to be most interested in information about members of their own gender when the news was good. This was true for academic honors ($p < .0001$), an inheritance ($p < .01$), and a date with a famous person ($p < .0001$). Such good news was also more likely to be passed on if it was about a same-gender individual, especially if that person was a friend or relative ($p < .0001$). Dishonesty (i.e., academic cheating, $p < .0001$; or computer theft, $p < .01$) was also most interesting if it involved a same-gender stimulus person, but there was no gender preference when it came to passing on such information ($p > .05$).

Females were most interested in the behavior of other females when it came to stories about promiscuity ($p < .001$) and sexual infidelity ($p < .05$), but males had equal interest in other males and in females in these situations ($p > .05$). However, this was reversed when the gossip concerned an inability to have sex. In this case, males were significantly more interested in news about other males ($p < .01$), and females had no preference ($p > .05$). Females, however, were significantly more likely to pass along information about the sexual difficulties of males ($p < .05$) and the promiscuity of other females ($p < .02$). Males had no predisposition to gossip about one gender over the other in either of these situations ($p > .05$). Neither males nor females had a gender preference when it came to passing along gossip about sexual infidelity ($p > .05$).

Both males and females were more interested in the drunken behavior of same-gender individuals ($p < .001$), but neither had a gender preference when it

came to passing along this information ($p > .05$). Similarly, males and females were more interested to find out about a same-gender other who had leukemia ($p < .001$), but only females showed this same-gender preference when it came to telling others about it (males, $p > .05$; females, $p < .0001$).

Males ($p < .0001$), but not females ($p > .05$), were more interested in the gambling problems of same-gender others, but neither males nor females had a gender preference in gossiping about it ($p > .05$). Conversely, females ($p < .0001$) but not males had a preference for news about same-gender others regarding drug abuse, and neither had a gender preference when it came to passing it along ($p > .05$).

Discussion

In general, the results of Experiment 2 were consistent with predictions made in Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. People tended to be more interested in information about others of the same gender, and they were more likely to pass along negative information about potential adversaries (strangers, powerful others) and to protect negative information about allies (friends and relatives). On the other hand, positive information about nonallies was relatively uninteresting and unlikely to be transmitted, whereas positive information about allies would be shared enthusiastically. All of this is consistent with an evolutionary notion of gossip as a status-enhancing mechanism.

There were some more subtle trends in the data. For example, while it is true that both males and females tended to show more interest in same-gender others, in most scenarios the tendency was even more pronounced for females than it was for males. This can be illustrated by looking at the actual frequency of selecting a male or female as the most interesting subject of the gossip scenarios. For a date with a famous person, 43 out of 44 women selected a female as the most interesting person, as compared to 24 out of 36 males who selected a male as most interesting. Similarly, 40 out of 42 females (vs. 22 out of 37 males) were most interested in same-gender academic cheaters, and 39 out of 43 were most interested in a same-gender leukemia sufferer (as opposed to only 18 out of 37 males). In fact, the only scenarios in which males expressed markedly more same-gender interest than females involved an individual heavily in debt because of gambling, or an individual who was having difficulties performing sexually.

At first glance, the eagerness with which people wish to share good news about same-gender others may seem to contradict the prediction that this would not be in one's own self-interest. However, in this experiment, the finding seems to be confounded by the fact that in most cases the desire is to spread information about same-gender friends or relatives who are allies, thus making the transmission of such information status enhancing.

General Discussion

The patterns of interest in gossip in both Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 paralleled what might be expected if gossip was serving primarily as an individual status-enhancing mechanism. This provides clear evidence that gossip does indeed function in accord with the selfish interests of individuals and confirms the belief that not all gossip serves the interest of the group as a whole. Dishonest or irresponsible behavior is most likely to be used against high-status people and nonallies, while news about the good fortune of such people is ignored. On the other hand, good news about allies (relatives and friends) is likely to be interesting to and used by individuals who have access to it. In most cases, the interest shown in the affairs of others also reflects their similarity to us in age and gender.

Gossip about sexual matters was especially sensitive to situational factors. Females were quite interested in knowing about the promiscuity and infidelity of other women, whereas males were only interested in other men when the information involved an individual's inability to have sex. While men were equally likely to pass on (or not pass on) sexual gossip about males and females, women were more likely to spread gossip about promiscuity if it involved another woman, and sexual difficulties if it involved a man.

The data we obtained in these experiments highlighted the special and difficult status of same-gender friends in our lives. Other researchers (e.g., Shackelford, 1997) have discussed the conflicted feelings we often have about friends. They are indispensable as allies and crucial to our social success, yet they are also our principal rivals and our greatest threats because of the access they have to our lives. Given such a relationship, it should not be surprising that friends were the category of people who consistently attracted our participants' greatest interest. It seems as if we want desperately to know what is going on in their lives so that we can monitor the status of our friendship, protect ourselves if necessary, and use our friends to our advantage when possible. Hence, our data confirm that the people we are most likely to brag about when good fortune comes their way are the same people whom we may betray first when sexual infidelity occurs. The only situations in which friends were not the most interesting people were in situations in which our kinship connection to relatives would have been even more salient, as in the case of a large inheritance or a diagnosis of leukemia. Once again, the pattern of interest in gossip mirrored the relationships most relevant to one's self-interest.

The gender differences in gossip that appear in these experiments were also provocative. Males were less likely than females to express a strong gender preference regarding the "gossipee." The only cases in which men did show a stronger gender preference than women were in two areas that would be extremely salient to a male concerned about his status in a social hierarchy: the financial status (resources) and sexual abilities of other men.

In summary, the results of these experiments are in line with the hypotheses that were derived from a within-group selection perspective on gossip. People actively seek information about others that will be most useful in social competition. We seek exploitable, damaging information about high-status people and nonallies; we actively disperse status-enhancing information about our allies; and we keep a very watchful eye on our friends. We do not contend that an evolutionary perspective is the only possible explanation for these data, and the results of these preliminary experiments can in no way conclusively make the case for an entirely evolution-based explanation of gossip. However, they certainly indicate a great deal of promise for learning more about gossip if we begin to think about it at least partially in evolutionary terms. Future research should attempt to determine the extent to which more traditional social psychological models (e.g., social learning theory and social comparison) can themselves be thought of in evolutionary terms, and search for situations in which these alternative theories might make different predictions. Hopefully, such an eclectic theoretical approach ultimately will provide even greater predictive power for social phenomena such as gossip.

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