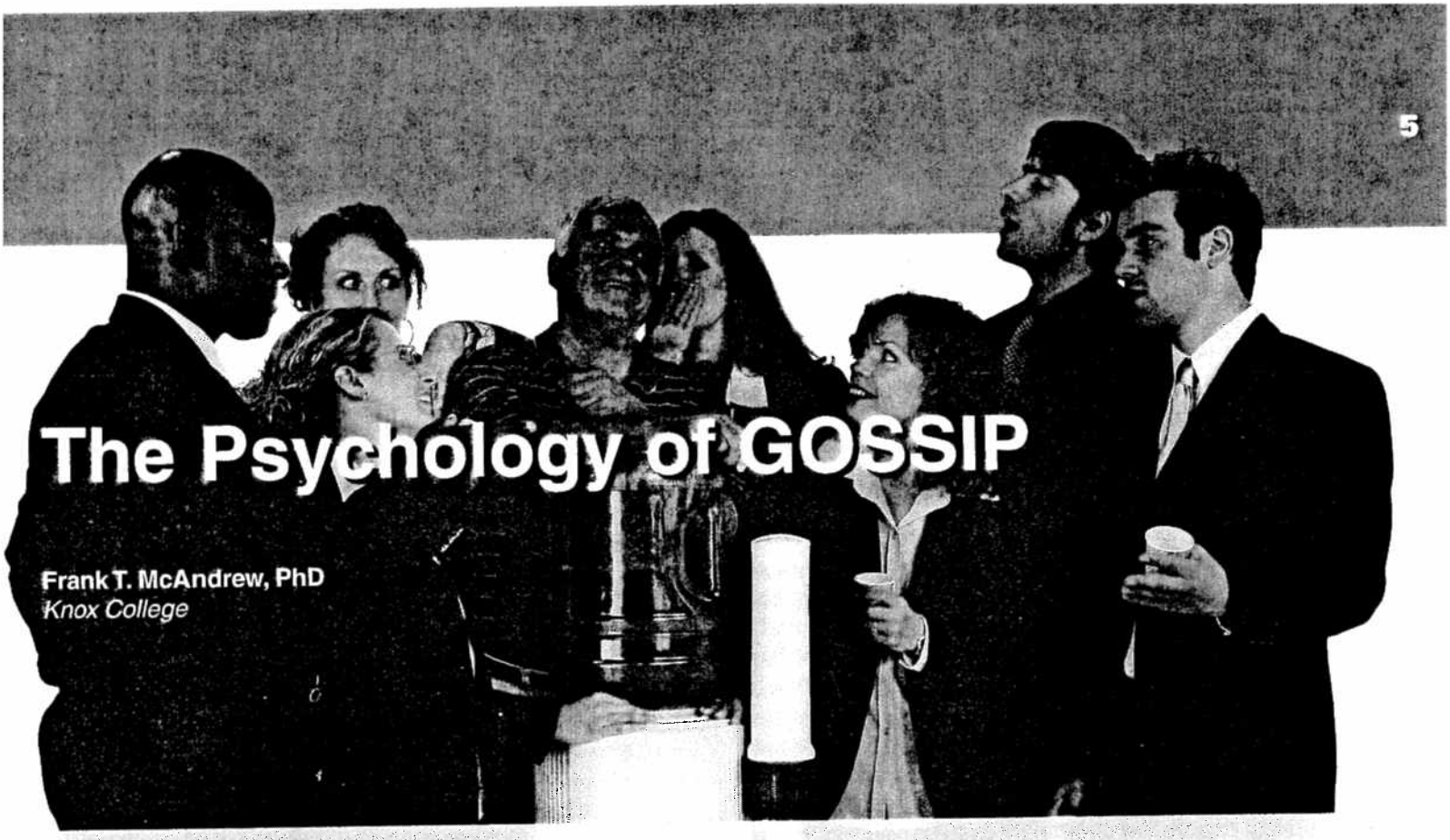

The Psychology of GOSSIP

Frank T. McAndrew, PhD
Knox College

About 10 years ago, a few of my colleagues and I were wondering why so many people buy the supermarket tabloids that focus almost exclusively on gossip about celebrities. After all, the celebrities are strangers who have little impact on our day-to-day lives. Yet, it appears as if we cannot get enough information about them. All available historical and cross-cultural data suggest that gossip has always been an integral part of human social life, and so it seemed that the study of this ubiquitous human trait might potentially reveal a great deal about human psychology. This brief conversation inspired me to undertake a series of experiments on gossip that eventually led to several publications, dozens of interviews with the media, and invitations to speak at conferences and universities across the United States and Europe. In short, it has been great fun! I hope that by sharing some of the things I have learned about the psychology of gossip I might spark some new ideas for helping teachers engage their students with psychology.

WHAT IS GOSSIP?

Let me begin by defining exactly what I mean when I use the word "gossip," as the term gets used in a variety of different ways, sometimes interchangeably with terms like "rumors," which I think are quite different. For information to qualify as gossip, it needs to have a few key features.

1. It must be about a person, usually someone who is not present at the time the information is being discussed.
2. It must be something that is not widely known and usually something that a person might make a moral judgment about.
3. It is inherently entertaining and often irresistible.

IS GOSSIP ALWAYS A BAD THING?

No one wants to be labeled "a gossip," and our initial inclination is to describe people who gossip in a very negative way. However, research has indicated that a predisposition toward gossip is an innate, normal part of human nature. As such, it might be better to think of gossip as a social skill rather than as a character flaw, because it is only when we don't do it well that we get into trouble. Sharing intimate information with another person is a sign of trust, and being included in the gossip network is a sign of a person's acceptance by a group and a measure of that person's status in the eyes of others. Gossiping creates bonds between people and increases the cohesiveness of groups. Basically, we like people who share gossip with us, as long as we can trust them to keep information about us private.

HOW DID GOSSIP BECOME PART OF HUMAN NATURE?

Our ancestors lived their lives as members of small cooperative groups that were in competition with other small groups (Dunbar, 1996). To make matters more complicated, it was not only necessary for our ancestors to cooperate with in-group members for success against out-groups, but they also had to recognize that these same in-group members were also their main competitors when it came time to divide limited resources. Living under such conditions, 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. The social intelligence needed for

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success in this early environment required a person to have an ability to predict and influence the behavior of others. Any process that would have provided fitness-relevant information would have been strongly selected for, and an irresistible interest in gossip would have been very handy indeed. In short, people who were fascinated by 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 through the ages. Like it or not, our inability to resist gossip is as much a part of who we are as is our inability to resist doughnuts or sex, and for the very same reasons.

WHY THE 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 celebrities? 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 never was any selection pressure in favor of our distinguishing between a genuine member 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 who we see that often and know that much about must be socially important to us. This is 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 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.

In our modern world, celebrities may also serve another important social function. In a highly mobile, industrialized society, celebrities may be the only "friends" we have in common with our new neighbors and coworkers. They provide a common interest and topic of conversation between people who otherwise might not have much to say to each other, and they facilitate the types of informal social 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.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF GOSSIP?

Researchers sometimes make a distinction between "good gossip," which serves the interests of the group rather than the interests of individuals, and "bad gossip" that is nothing more than an individual's selfish efforts to further his or her own reputation and interests at the expense of others. When used properly, "good gossip" can be a positive force in the life of a group. It can be a way of socializing newcomers into the ways of the group and an efficient way of reminding group members about the importance of the group's norms and values. It can also be an effective deterrent to deviance and a way of punishing those who flout the standards of the group. Research has confirmed that gossip that occurs in response to violations of social norms is indeed looked upon more favorably than self-serving gossip (Wilson, et al., 2000).

A colleague of mine, Charlotte DeBacker (2008) of the University of Leicester in England, has also made a distinction between strategy-learning gossip and reputation gossip. Strategy-learning gossip can be interesting no matter who it concerns because it teaches valuable lessons about how to live our own lives. For example, my students might be very interested in a story about a recent college graduate who got fired from her job because she had an affair with her boss, even if they do not personally know that individual. This occurs because the information provided by the gossip might be directly applicable to their own lives. Reputation gossip, on the other hand, is only interesting because of the information that it supplies about specific individuals. For example, hearing that my friend Larry had a drink at a party last Saturday night should only be interesting to people who already know Larry and know that he never drinks.

WHAT KIND OF GOSSIP IS MOST INTERESTING TO US?

The gossip studies that my students and I have worked on over the past decade (e.g., McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002;

McAndrew, Bell & Garcia, 2007) have focused on "bad gossip," and more specifically, 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 and who they would gossip about. We have consistently found that we are most interested in gossip about people of the same sex as ourselves who also happen to be around our own age. We have also found that information that is socially useful is always of greatest interest to us. Hence, we are most interested in information about the misfortunes and scandals of our rivals and high-status people, since this information might be exploited in social competition. Positive information about such people tends to be uninteresting to us. Conversely, positive information (good fortune, sudden elevation of status) about our friends and relatives is very interesting and likely to be used to our advantage whenever possible.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, I think that you will find that gossip is a topic that will be inherently interesting to your students and something that can be used as a springboard to discussing a variety of theoretical and methodological issues in psychology. It might be especially fun to explore how the latest social networking tools, such as *Facebook* and *MySpace,* are driven by our thirst for gossip and how these 21st century technologies enable us to sharpen the very same human tendencies that evolved around the campfires of our prehistoric ancestors so long ago.

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DID YOU KNOW?

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2004, 3.057 million high school students graduated from public and private high schools (compared with 3.176 million in 2006). Also in 2004 (the most current year for which data was available), about 726,100 seniors had taken a psychology course sometime during their 4 years in high school, or, roughly, 26% of the senior class of 2004 had some coursework in psychology on their high school transcript (NCES, 2004).

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