



## Small Talk Grooming

### Social and Evolutionary Functions of Gossip

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Gossip is practiced everywhere, enjoyed everywhere, despised everywhere (Boyer 2001: 123)

**Abstract.** – This article analyzes the biosocial origins of gossip by pointing to its significant social and evolutionary functions. Along with the problems of defining it, the article deals with gossip's bad reputation and analyzes sociocultural functions of gossip and small talk as mechanisms of social comparison, as well as means of transferring cultural norms, values, and rules. Furthermore, it offers a detailed analysis of gossip as an evolutionary phenomenon that represents a unique form of social grooming among humans and performs the function of strengthening social ties and social cohesion. Finally, the gossip is portrayed as a means of spreading adaptive information concerning status, resources, and sex. [*gossip, small talk, social grooming, social control, social cohesion*]

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#### Gossip and Small Talk: Between Good and Bad Reputation

Gossip is one of the many cultural universals (Brown 1991; Pinker 2002) and it is a uniquely

human phenomenon. Even in the qualitative sense, gossip is uniform in all cultures and all social spheres. Thus, it can be regarded as a “favorite” pastime in all societies.<sup>1</sup> It can even be observed early in the development of children and adolescents, and it performs a number of important social functions and roles.<sup>2</sup> Although it is often viewed as a trivial activity, it nonetheless is one of the key features of everyday social life. It is not easy to determine exactly how much time people spend gossiping, but it is reasonable to assume that it is a considerable amount of time. According to certain estimates, about 70 % of the time spent in conversation is dedicated to gossiping (Emler 1992). The importance of small talk and gossip for social life is reflected in the well-known fact that individuals who gossip too much or too little can be easily marginalized in their social groups (Foster 2004). Namely, if someone does not want to discuss the small, intimate, and microsocially relevant topics, this person is perceived as someone who promotes nonreciprocal interactions, the same way as someone who shares too much information about other people is often perceived as a person who should not be trusted.

In English, the term *gossip* originally had no negative meaning or connotation, and it simply denoted an activity in which a person would engage with individuals she or he is particularly

1 Stirling 1956; Pinker 1997; Boyer 2001.

2 Gluckman 1963; Eder and Enke 1991; Bloom 2004; Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs 2004.

close to, that is, individuals from her/his personal surroundings who could be regarded as equivalents of godparents. These individuals were referred to as *godsibs*, with the combination of words *god* and *sib* denoting a person who is close to an individual based on a connection coming from God. These were female individuals close to the mother at the moment of childbirth, and they were the child's godmothers of a sort. It was not until later that the word began to be used to denote conversations between intimate friends in general, which involved personal issues and relations, sharing secrets, and so forth, that is, what we now mean by the word *gossip* (Rysman 1977; Dunbar 1996). On the other hand, although everyone "knows" what gossip is, giving a precise definition and accurately identifying gossip is a particularly complex enterprise in terms of practical research. Thus, everyone intuitively knows what gossip is (about), but when one attempts to research this phenomenon, the matters get more complicated. A reason for the difficulties of defining gossip may be the fact that gossip represents something everyone is intuitively familiar with. Hence, as a scientific problem, it does not enjoy much understanding on the part of scientists (Coulpland 2003; Bloom 2004).

Since gossiping is a fundamental part of everyday life, people most often do not seek confirmation or validation of information obtained through gossiping. In consequence, in everyday use, gossip is usually viewed as something negative or bad, which from a sociological perspective is not adequate (Martinescu, Janssen, and Nijstad 2014), since it is possible to discriminate between praise gossip and blame gossip (Elias and Scotson 1965). Furthermore, from a Durkheimian point of view, even individual adverse phenomena such as negative gossips can perform a positive social function (Durkheim 1915). Many ethical condemnations of gossip are based on the supposed rules of privacy, which is why some theoreticians (e. g., Bok 1983) view it as a morally indefensible behavior as it violates the aforementioned rules and/or norms.

However, as Schoeman (1994) points out, the essence of the matter is not whether gossip violates privacy but whether it moderates and/or prevents direct conflicts. Gossip can help build both a good and a bad reputation. In this context, it is clear that it has a "strong manipulative potential" that can be used by "social cheaters" in order to influence the reputations of others, but also in order to alter one's own reputation (Sommerfeld et al. 2007). It is interesting to note that certain studies (e. g., Sommerfeld, Krambeck, and Milinski

2008) have shown that the manipulative potential of gossip can be diminished by its abundance, so that multiple gossip statements may provide a better sense of the person's actual behavior, further implying that an inaccurate or false gossip has little sway as long as it is not massively reproduced.

Having in mind the potential positive and negative effects of gossip on an individual's reputation, gossip may be most adequately defined as "*evaluative talk about a person who is not present*" (Eder and Enke 1991: 494 – italics in original; see also Bloom 2004; McAndrew 2008). Gossip can be described as a "genre of informal communication" (Paine 1967: 278), that is, a kind of informal communication of valuable information about the members of one's social surroundings or as "*value-laden information*" (Noon and Delbridge 1993). There are exceptions to these definitions, as sometimes gossiping can take place in the presence of the person who is the subject of the gossip. This is frequently the case among children (see Gluckman 1963; Goodwin 1982), although gossiping about individuals who are present is more adequately labeled as public exposure or ridicule.

No matter what research says, it is assumed that no society sees gossip as a useful activity (Boyer 2001). This universal disdain for gossip is the result of two, equally important factors. Firstly, no matter how much we want to hear a gossip about status, sexual relationships, and wealth/fortune of other people, we do not want such information about ourselves to be spread, which points to the fact that information is an extremely powerful resource. Secondly, no matter how much we want to hear a gossip and pass it on, we also have the need to present ourselves as persons of trust. This is necessary if we wish to maintain stable social interactions and to cooperate with other individuals. In other words, we need to present ourselves as persons worthy of trust and persons who would not spread information outside the circle of friends. Thus, gossip is an ambivalent phenomenon, which indicates that the disdain of gossip is not necessarily hypocritical (Boyer 2001).

Certain studies (e. g., Dunbar, Duncan, and Marriott 1997) point to the existence of significant gender differences in terms of human conversational behavior. These include men's tendency towards devoting more conversation time to intellectual and work-related topics, the fact that this pattern becomes more pronounced in the presence of women and, finally, the fact that male conversations change more dramatically with age than female conversations, with a shift of emphasis from personal relationships to factual experiences. The

authors explain these differences in terms of gender differences in reproductive tactics. In this context, female conversations are mainly directed towards social networking, while male conversations are usually directed towards self-promotion.

In this article, we claim that not only gossip does not disrupt social relationships and interactions, but that it represents a source or the very basis of social cohesion. In order to demonstrate this, we will first point to important sociocultural functions of gossip and small talk. Further, we will analyze the hypothesis about gossip as a unique form of social grooming and gossip as adaptive information. In this sense, we will provide an overview of the biosocial origins of gossip and small talk, which serves the function of preserving and strengthening the phenomenon Durkheim referred to as social solidarity (1984), that is, the “glue” that holds society together. We argue that apart from important proximate (sociocultural) functions, gossip also performs ultimate (adaptive and evolutionary) functions in the context of the sociality of the human animal. These are functions related to the preservation of social bonds and relationships, the strengthening of social cohesion, and, thus, the perpetuation of social structure as a whole.

## The Sociocultural Functions of Gossip

Human interaction is simply impossible without gossip, although probably no author sees it as a phenomenon with a singular purpose. Thus, essentially there is a consensus in social sciences that gossip performs multiple sociocultural functions, with the key ones being: “information, entertainment, friendship (or intimacy), and influence” (see Foster 2004: 84). This means that gossip plays an important role in the understanding and the clarification of social norms that are based on the collective evaluation of the situation as well as in the transfer of information (Eder 1985). In the psychological sense, gossip performs various primary functions in different stages of development (Gottman and Mettetal 1986). In early childhood, it is mainly used to strengthen group solidarity, in middle childhood, it is used to clarify the norms of the group, and in adolescence, it primarily serves as a means of resolving interpersonal issues, although the aforementioned two functions are still present.

A highly important dimension observed in adolescence is the function of gossip as a means of social comparison (Festinger 1954). In this con-

text, it is possible to discriminate between several kinds of social comparison motivated by the need for self-evaluation, self-improvement, and claiming a social identity (Wert and Salovey 2004). The implication is that gossip has practical benefits that arise from social comparison, while at the same time eliminating the risk of embarrassment and confrontation. This is particularly important since avoiding shame and embarrassment is one of the key motivators of human social behavior (see Goffman 1956; Scheff 2000; 2003).

Gossip is a means of transferring and revealing many secrets that constitute important parts of social life (Simmel 2009). This function indicates that gossip is inextricably bound to trust and reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> So far, we mostly mentioned universal dimensions of gossip, but the fact is that gossip does not transcend its own culture completely. Namely, it is impossible for it not to be shaped by the culture it belongs to, which is why there are many local rules and specificities as well as boundaries and the repercussions of overstepping those boundaries (Gluckman 1963). Like scandal, it allows for norms and values of a certain group to be reevaluated, since the subjects of gossip are often individuals who have breached those norms and values.

Furthermore, gossip plays a role in socialization and it can be viewed as a unique extension of observational learning. In this sense, it enables individuals to learn from the successes and failures of other people, that is, people outside their immediate environments. Since social norms are not always clear and precise, gossip can make it easier for an individual to navigate certain sociocultural environments. But this also means that it represents a form of social control, “a low-cost method of regulating members’ behaviors,” especially of those members, whose “selfish interests … come at cost to the broader community” (Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs 2004: 115). Throughout evolution, there was a strong need for mechanisms that would enable us to determine what kind of a partner a person would be by means of social exchange (Cosmides and Tooby 1992). Therefore, it is not surprising that gossip, in this context the information about breaching of social norms, was more important than information about behavior in accordance with the norms. Gossip is one of the important means of uncovering and controlling social cheaters (Enquist and Leimar 1993), which makes its social value quite significant, since the

<sup>3</sup> (Trivers 1971; Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna 1985; McAndrew 2008).

information that is transferred through gossip gives us power. Finally, it should be noted that gossip is sometimes its own means and end, in the sense that individuals may gossip because of the mere pleasure derived from gossiping, without any “higher” or external goal in mind.

However, the most important sociocultural function of gossip is “bringing group members together” through the sharing of norms, whereby boundaries are established to distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Gossip between acquaintances and strangers is much rarer, probably because shared social meanings and histories are crucial to the understanding of the subtle elements of gossip. At the group level, certain scholars (e. g., Gluckman 1963) note that outsiders simply cannot understand gossip and that insiders sometimes intentionally use gossip to exclude the outsiders. For all the reasons stated above, it is obvious that gossip has a number of positive aspects, which are often disregarded in social sciences as well as popular imagination. Of course, gossip can serve as a unique “social weapon” or mechanism of social control, but it primarily serves the purpose of preservation of unity, morality, and values of social groups. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the conceptualization of gossip as a unique mechanism of social grooming among humans.

## Gossip as Social Grooming

As stated previously, ethnographers and social scientists mostly consider gossip as a phenomenon that benefits social groups, since it helps to spread group values and to define the boundaries of social groups but also functions as a mechanism of punishing those who breach the norms. Still, in the light of (yet) unresolved debates in biology concerning the nature of the unit of selection, there are two opposing viewpoints about gossip. The key issue is whether behavior should be analyzed exclusively from the viewpoint of the wellbeing of the individual, or whether the group also represents an entity that can behave (non)adaptively (Wilson et al. 2000). Both viewpoints allow us to recognize the evolutionary significance of gossip, since its ultimate function is most probably related to survival of the fittest (Barkow 1992). Although there is another, more simple explanation of the origin of gossip – maybe it evolved because language evolved and because we find that other people are worth talking about (Bloom 2004: 139). Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the option

that gossip is a phenomenon whose rudiments can be found in certain primates.

The evolution of gossip is linked to the evolution of language. Robin Dunbar, in particular, sees the evolutionary origins of gossip in primate grooming, the size of social groups, and the development of neocortex in relation to the rest of the brain,<sup>4</sup> since social grooming serves the purpose of maintaining group cohesion in primates (Barash 1977: 236). Dunbar views gossip from a wider perspective and wants to determine why the ability to exchange information (i. e., language) developed in humans in the first place, referring to the fact that the societies of anthropoid primates are characterized by a high intensity of sociality. This intensity depends on the understanding of the ways in which the minds of other individuals work (Humphrey 1976) and the use of trust and duty, so that social relations could function efficiently and perform their basic functions.

Furthermore, sociality requires individuals to make compromises in terms of their short-term goals for the sake of long-term benefits, which primates resolve by creating alliances with powerful elements of trust and loyalty nurtured through social grooming (Boyer 2001). Apart from the manifest function of eliminating parasites, grooming also has a latent function, since it efficiently encourages the release of endorphins, creates the feeling of relaxedness, lowers heart rate, and diminishes the signs of anxiety like scratching. Since these effects are more than familiar to humans, it is no wonder that many individuals show a tendency towards “old-fashioned primate grooming in ... more intimate relationships” (Dunbar 2004: 101), which involves a form of communication based on physical contact. Still the question remains of why humans spend so little (or barely any) time in mutual physical grooming in comparison to their primate relatives. One could argue that language has taken over this role, that is, that gossip is the basic mechanism of social grooming in humans.

It is also interesting to note that the amount of time devoted to grooming grows with the size of the group, but grooming still has a limited potential in terms of group maintenance and inevitably loses its primary function when the group grows to include more than 80 individuals. It should be noted that the average human group allegedly counts about 150 individuals, which is the so-called Dunbar’s number (Dunbar 2010), the upper

4 Dunbar (1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 2008); Hill and Dunbar (2003); Pérez-Barbería, Shultz, and Dunbar (2007).

limit on group size in which all individuals can know each other personally (although this idea is contested, see, e. g., Wellman 2012; Škorić and Kišjuhas 2015). Therefore, the “old-fashioned” physical grooming becomes an insufficiently effective social mechanism and is gradually replaced by language (Dunbar 1996) with gossip as a verbal substitute for grooming. In other words, language becomes “grooming at a distance” (Foster 2004: 87), which would mean that gossip evolved in order to resolve certain adaptive problems in larger social groups. We still do not know exactly how and why language evolved, but it is reasonable to assume that one of its functions was the possibility to increase the size of interactional groups (Dunbar 1993a, 1993b) and that it also played a role in the development of (hypertrophied) social intelligence (Boyer 2001). Therefore, this enabled humans to exchange information about one another, that is, to exchange socially valuable information, apart from the ones crucial to mere survival.

Social grooming is usually an activity where individuals engage in one-on-one interactions, while conversational groups can easily include more than two individuals (Dunbar, Duncan, and Nettle 1995). Put plainly, language is more efficient than grooming, and unlike grooming it allows individuals to find out something about people who are not present, which is a common component of the definitions of gossip, as we have mentioned earlier. Through language it is easier to discover socially relevant information, because natural selection favored the ability to remember details about someone’s personality, past behaviors, predictability, reliability, and so forth, that is, the storing of information about specific people (which is reflected in the special areas of the brain concerning face recognition).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it can be concluded that gossip performs two basic functions in the context of the strengthening of social ties. One is that the relationship between the speaker and the listener can be improved / optimized if they spend time communicating and exchanging (secret) information of common interest. The other function is that information about a certain person can be of use to the listener if the person in question belongs to the social sphere of the listener, since gossip can be used to find out something about its subject. Due to the information obtained, this allows for the establish-

ment of a more efficient social tie with the person in question.<sup>6</sup>

In any case, language did not (exclusively) evolve to allow our ancestors to exchange “technical” information about the aspects of the physical world in which they lived but also for the purpose of exchanging social information in which gossip plays an important role. However, Dunbar “does not posit any special *psychological* role for gossip,” but proposes a point of view according to which gossip is a “particularly useful activity from the standpoint of reproductive success” (Bloom 2004: 140; italics in the original). During the evolutionary history of our species, it is highly likely that larger groups have had better chances of survival and that language has been our adaptation that allowed for the maintenance of larger groups with the size of the group and language standing in a coevolutionary relation. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that language as a means of exchanging information, with gossip being its crucial component, represents an integral element of sustainability and coherency of large groups.

Yet, the hypothesis that social grooming promotes group cohesion remains contested. The problem with Dunbar’s methodology is that he attempts to establish the time when language evolved based on a process that includes the examination of the size of the neocortex in relation to the overall size of the brain, after which the size of the neocortex is used to determine the size of the group, and based on the size of the group the time spent grooming is established. In this sense, it is not as obvious that language is the equivalent of grooming, primarily because it is too complex phenomenon. And this is the reason why we need to establish more structural and behavioral similarities between grooming and language (Cartwright 2000).

## Gossip as an Evolutionary Adaptive Information

Language can be used for numerous purposes, but in the context of gossip, the most important purposes are: (1) seeking advice or discussing hypothetical situations, (2) surveillance or control of those who do not behave in accordance with (in)formal social rules, (3) self-promotion, and (4) deceit (Dunbar 2004: 103f.). In order to interact

5 Emler (1990, 1992); Enquist and Leimar (1993); McAndrew (2008).

6 Gluckman (1963); Barkow (1989); Pinker (1997); Boyer (2001); Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004); McAndrew (2008).

with other people, we need a “social mind,” i. e., various mental systems specially designed to organize social interaction. However, during interactions, people do not only rely on their social mind and its functions but instead employ the entire mental apparatus that processes other information about the interlocutor, the entire social situation, body postures during interaction, various ambient sounds, and so forth. Humans live in a cognitive niche whose content is provided by other humans, thus resulting in a specific human behavior and its various capacities, one of which is hypertrophied social intelligence (Boyer 2001). Namely, many species possess social intelligence, that is, specialized capacities for social interaction, but no other species possess systems as complex as those found in humans.

Since our ancestors lived in relatively small groups in which everyone knew everyone, it was important for them to discover information about other people’s (un)reliability, social exchanges, kin and sexual relations, and so forth. Social intelligence necessary to discover this information involved the ability to predict the influence and behavior of others, and it can be assumed that it was favored by natural selection. That is the reason why we can say that people gossip because knowledge is power (Pinker 1997). The knowledge about who needs a favor and who can offer it, who is reliable and who is a fraud, who is available as a sexual partner (or soon to be available), and who is protected by a jealous partner or family, affords obvious strategic advantages in everyday life but also in the ultimate goal of organisms in terms of survival and reproduction (Barkow 1989, 1992; Pinker 1997). Furthermore, there are numerous reasons why we are interested in information about people of similar age and the same gender, all of which are related to evolutionary competition (McAndrew 2008).

In that sense, information that is of greatest interest to us is the one that can help us increase our adaptive value, or in other words, the information we most diligently seek is the one that can influence our relative social status (in comparison to other people). Information contained in gossip can be of value as it results in an unequal distribution of knowledge. Social status can rise with gossiping, since the listeners can conclude that the person telling the gossip possesses knowledge about his or her immediate social environment (Bergmann 1993). It is important to highlight the parallel between the transactional nature of gossip and the traditional patterns of economic exchange (Rosnow and Fine 1976), with the main difference

being that – unlike in the case of material and economic exchange – information can be shared without any material loss (Wright 1994).

The sexual dimension of gossip has proved to be highly instructive since people often gossip about sex (Symons 1979). Human reproductive competition takes place in highly complex social circumstances and individual reproductive interests of humans are always conflicting to a certain degree. It is this complexity of human sexual life that has placed an emphasis on the human psyche that is so interested in sexuality, which is reflected in the characteristic content of gossip (Dunbar, Duncan, and Marriott 1997). In the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (Symons 1992), in which human mental evolution took place, the key information was related to enemies, predators, food, and water, but also to social maneuvering of life and sexual resources. In other words, due to the significance of adaptive value, it is more important to know who has sexual relations with whom than how soundly people sleep (Barkow 1992).

In the end, we can conclude that in spite of the predominantly negative connotation of gossip in everyday communication and perception, it is necessary for scientists to study it like any other biosocial phenomenon, which in itself is neither good nor bad. The content of gossip can be of great use extending far beyond its power to connect people in the sense of social grooming. It does not play an isolated role in the life of a community but is itself an essential part of the life of that community. Like scandal, it unites a group within the society or turns it against another group by creating a shared history, while also serving as a means of latent struggle for prestige and status in a socially acceptable way (Gluckman 1963). That is why gossip is an essentially social activity and why we as individuals are “programmed” by natural selection to be social animals and socially interact with the members of our species. Although gossip, in the modern sense of the word, refers to scandalous behavior (Gluckman 1963) and may seem, at first, as a force of division in the society, the truth may be the exact opposite. i. e., that gossip unites people in a common value system (Tiger and Fox 1971: 200) and, thus, it could perhaps be claimed that without gossip and small talk there would be no society.

The paper was written as part of project no. 179037 which is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Republic of Serbia and the project no. 114-451-2790/2016-01 which was

financed by The Provincial Secretariat for Higher Education and Scientific Research.

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