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GOSSIP

Gossip is commonly defined as a negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties that takes place within a bounded group of persons in a private setting. In many societies, gossip is regarded as devoid of value and consequence, or as a reprehensible activity to be avoided or even feared; yet gossip is so pervasive that it is probably a universal phenomenon in one form or another. It is closely related to "scandal," defined as gossip that has become public knowledge, and "rumor," defined as the unconstrained propagation of information about an event of importance to the group.

These general characterizations raise a number of problems. First, they leave open the question of what constitutes a private setting and when a situation can be considered private enough for gossip to take place. Even though the private and its contrasting category, the public, are highly elaborated cultural categories in some societies (e.g., middle-class North America), these notions are generally of a dynamic nature, in that the events that take place in a setting are what define it as private, a situation that leads to circularity for the social-scientific definition of "public" and "private." Second, the issue of when a third party is considered to be absent is more problematic than may be apparent at first glance. For example, interactors can make innuendos and veiled remarks about a person who is within hearing range, and these activities bear close resemblance to gossip. Similarly, conversationalists can make morally damaging statements about their own behavior, and whether this type of activity should be considered gossip is open to question. Third, characterizing gossip as a form of criticism raises the issue of whether any form of talk is ever devoid of moral evaluation, and therefore brings up the question of from which forms of talk gossip should be differentiated. Furthermore, the evaluative character of gossip is often skillfully disguised under the appearance of a straightforward narrative, in which case what constitutes gossip and what does not may require careful analytic scrutiny.

Whether a particular conversation is to be considered an instance of gossip depends in part on the perspective of the participants themselves. Here again, however, analytic difficulties arise. Members of a society may lack a label for the range of activities

roughly comparable to what English speakers term "gossip," or may fail to recognize gossip as a significant interactional category. Such is the case for the Zinacantan of southern Mexico, who engage in verbal exchanges that ethnographer John B. Haviland clearly identified as gossip, even though Tzotzil, the language spoken by the Zinacantan community, offers no specific descriptive term for such exchanges (Haviland 1977). In other societies, gossip is defined as an activity in which only certain types of individuals engage. For example, on Nukulaelae Atoll in the Central Pacific, the word that most closely resembles "gossip" is *fatufatu*, literally, "to make up [stories]." This term, however, is most clearly associated with women's interactional activities. When men engage in what an outsider would recognize as gossip, they are said to *sauttala*, "chat"; labeling their chatting as *fatufatu* would implicitly question their masculinity, even though men's *sauttala* resembles women's *fatufatu* in many respects. The characterization of women's communicative activities as reprehensible and unwholesome gossip and of men's as morally neutral talk, a phenomenon observed in numerous societies, enables men to denigrate women's social activities and thus justify gender hegemony.

In short, an airtight and universal definition of what constitutes gossip is probably not possible because the category itself is subject to context-dependent interpretations, and possibly contestation, by members of the same society. Indeed, an adequate definition of gossip must take into account the dynamic and shifting nature of the category. To date, our theoretical and comparative understanding of gossip has been hampered by the lack of detailed ethnographic descriptions of gossip in specific societies. This dearth of documentation results from the fact that gossip is a difficult topic to investigate, for a number of reasons. First, gossip typically takes place in small, intimate groups, from which the ethnographer, as an outsider, is typically excluded. Although it has been claimed that the information ethnographers gather in the field consists mainly of gossip, there are fundamental differences between gossip that is addressed to an ethnographer during an ethnographic interview and gossip among members of the same society. Second, a careful investigation of gossip as a communicative and social practice necessitates a sophisticated understanding of language, norms, and presuppositions, as well as an intimate familiarity with the personal biographies of the persons who are gossiping and are being gossiped

about. For example, gossips on Nukulaelae Atoll often do not even mention the name of the person about whom they are talking, to the extent that autochthonous interlocutors themselves sometimes have difficulties guessing the identity of the target of the gossip (Besnier 1989). Understanding gossip thus presupposes a degree of intimacy with persons and events that is rarely attained by anthropologists; as Haviland (1977) points out, understanding gossip amounts to understanding a culture.

Gossip as a legitimate object of inquiry first came into focus in the work of structural-functionalist Max Gluckman (1963). Gluckman was particularly concerned with the function of gossip in society, arguing that its principal role is to maintain the unity of social groups: gossip provides a way of asserting the boundary between morally acceptable action and deviant behavior, and thus helps to solidify consensus and to control dissent without recourse to direct confrontation. It was Gluckman who first recognized that gossip is an effective political tool. Political anthropologists had traditionally focused on social contexts and events in which political dominance in its various guises is displayed, enacted, and contested; yet probably in all societies of the world, much political action takes place behind the scenes, in highly informal, domestic, or private settings. Gossip is exemplary of such informal forms of political action: focusing on anything from the actions of the most insignificant members of society to the doings of the most prominent, gossip emerges as a powerful tool through which the social and moral order can be manipulated.

Gluckman's interpretation of the functions of gossip has been subjected to intense critical scrutiny, particularly by scholars such as Robert Paine (1967), who maintains that gossip, rather than being a harmony-maintaining mechanism, is a tool that individuals use to foster their own agendas and to undermine the interests of others. This thesis has come to be known as the "transactionalist" stance. The debate between supporters of the structural-functionalist and transactionalist views, of which Sally Engle Merry (1984) provides an excellent summary, dominated the anthropological study of gossip until the mid-1970s, diverting scholarly attention from aspects of gossip that later researchers would show to be of great importance, such as the aesthetic and micro-organizational aspects of gossip as verbal performance and communicative practice. Subsequent work demon-

strated that the hypotheses that Gluckman and Paine put forth are not mutually exclusive: gossip can have both cohesion-building and self-serving purposes or consequences. Furthermore, by focusing on the needs of speakers in contrast to the needs of the group, scholars involved in this early controversy ignored an important aspect of gossip—namely, the role of the audience. In certain societies, such as that of Bhatgaon, a Fiji Indian village, speakers and audiences cannot even be easily differentiated because gossip is created jointly by all participants, and the authorship of particular gossip stories is fundamentally blurred (Brenneis 1984). Even in social settings in which speakers are rarely interrupted in the course of storytelling, gossip depends crucially for its effectiveness on the cooperation and active participation of the audience. For example, successful Nukulaelae gossips often pause dramatically at strategic moments in their narratives and wait for an interlocutor to issue an interjection or comment on the scandalous nature of what has been narrated (Besnier 1989). More than any other form of interaction, gossip is jointly created by interactors, a fact that an anthropological investigation of gossip must be able to reflect.

Even though gossip is commonly thought of in many societies as an insignificant activity, it can have dramatic consequences for its victims. Indeed, the potency of gossip as a political tool often derives from the contrast between its social evaluation as trivial talk and the seriousness of its potential repercussions. Thus, the question of the consequences gossip may have for the individuals who are targeted is an important concern in the anthropological study of gossip. A focus on consequences differs from the focus on functions that characterized early investigations in that consequence, unlike function, is not an intrinsic characteristic of gossip; it is, rather, what derives from gossip. Understanding the consequences of gossip thus helps explain how gossip is embedded in a broader social and political context. According to Merry (1984), gossip can have economic consequences, in that it can restrict its target's access to resources, particularly those obtained from cooperative efforts. Gossip may have political consequences: it can help to mobilize support for particular individuals, to level structures of inequality, and to delimit factionalism in disputes. Social consequences of gossip may include ridicule, ostracism, or even death. Finally, gossip sometimes has no consequences; individuals who are already socially marginalized (e.g., the rich, the poor, and the

different) may be immune to gossip and may even turn it to their advantage. Why some forms or instances of gossip are consequential whereas others are not is a question that merits further scrutiny.

A closely related issue is the question of whom gossip benefits or harms. Because gossip is particularly difficult to repress or contain, it frequently emerges as an instrument of protest and resistance in the hands of those with restricted access to more overt forms of political action. It thus can provide a political voice to individuals and groups (e.g., women, younger people, underdogs) that are excluded from more overt political processes. The extent to which the powerless can bring about a change in the status quo through gossip alone is open to question; it depends on the political dynamics of the particular context.

In contrast, gossip can also be used by those in power to control people, as well as material and symbolic resources, and thus to ensure the continuity of preexisting structures of inequality. For example, among the Kwanga of Papua New Guinea, leaders commonly encourage rumors about their ability to perform maleficent sorcery to enhance their own prestige and intimidate potential rivals and dissidents (Brison 1992). In short, who benefits or suffers from gossip is contingent on the sociopolitical makeup of particular groups.

The position of gossip among other forms of social and political action, particularly various forms of conflict and aggression, is a crucial question. Specifically, what alternatives to gossip are available to members of particular societies in dealing with particular situations? Anthropologists to date have been concerned mostly with the escalating consequences of gossip (i.e., with the role of gossip in fomenting conflict, dissent, and hegemony), but gossip can also deflect conflict: people sometimes gossip in order to avoid aggressive confrontations. For example, Goodwin (1990) describes how African American children in a Philadelphia working-class neighborhood tattle on one another about each other's gossip, using complex narrative structures consisting of multiply embedded reported speech constructions. Because these narratives implicate many individuals, they provide a way for the children to engage in forms of aggressive behavior that deflect responsibility and thus avert more serious physical confrontation, while allowing the protagonists to save face. Here again,

whether gossip aggravates conflictual situations or soothes strained relations hinges on the dynamics at play in the broader social setting.

The articulation of gossip within the broader sociocultural context in which the gossip takes place is most fruitfully investigated through an approach that takes as its object of inquiry both the microscopic aspects of gossip and the sociocultural context in which the gossip is embedded. Research conducted in this vein recognizes that the meaning of gossip (and, for that matter, of talk in general) cannot be derived by simply analyzing words. The structural and organizational aspects of the interaction, such as turn taking, reported speech constructions, and ways of interweaving evaluative elements with the narrative representation of events all carry great import. The richness of gossip as communicative and social action can be understood only through an investigation of minute aspects of actual samples of naturally occurring gossip, even though these details may appear at first glance familiar and unworthy of analytic scrutiny (Bergmann 1993). The importance of basing analyses of gossip on original-language data, rather than on translations and paraphrases, has also been amply demonstrated.

A significant finding of microscopic approaches is that gossip aside from being a form of political action, frequently constitutes a form of artistic performance for those who partake in it. The contexts in which gossip takes place often provide narrators the opportunity to display their aesthetic creativity for their own enjoyment and that of their audience. Particularly notable analyses of the aesthetic dimensions of gossip include Roger Abrahams's research on gossip in a St. Vincent village in the Caribbean (1970) and Donald Brenneis's research on gossip among rural Fiji Indians (1987). Brenneis, for example, demonstrates that Fiji Indian gossip is characterized by sustained rhythmic structures, repetitions, strategically timed overlaps, and word-play sequences. These features provide a coordinated harmony to the interaction that is both aesthetically pleasing and socially rewarding to members of a society that places much value on the maintenance of an egalitarian ideology. In many societies, gossip is thus the meeting ground for politics and aesthetics, and the dual nature of gossip as aesthetic performance and political action enhances the efficacy of gossip as a form of social action.

At the root of the various questions that anthropologists have addressed on the issue of gossip is the basic recognition that gossip occupies a pivotal position between the sociopolitical structure of the group and the agency of particular members of the group. Thus, gossip can enhance social structure and perpetuate the status quo, but it can also be used by individuals to bring about more or less fundamental and lasting changes. Studying gossip is thus tantamount to investigating the relationship between individual action and the structure of society in which the individual is embedded.

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