A Social Comparison Account of Gossip

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The central thesis of this article is that all gossip involves social comparison. Research on social comparison is applied toward understanding motivations for gossip. In addition, the authors address why gossip tends to be negative and make predictions about factors that trigger especially negative talk about others. Factors such as need for moral information, powerlessness, formation and maintenance of in-groups and out-groups, and situations that bring on perceptions of injustice or feelings of jealousy, envy, and resentment all contribute to malicious gossip. Finally, the morality of gossip is considered, especially as it relates to the misuse or overuse of social comparison. Gossip is purposeful and, perhaps, necessary for healthy social functioning.

At least 60% of adult conversations are about people who are not present (Emler, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1985). Often it is interesting or even necessary to discuss community members, peers, or colleagues in their absence, but seldom, it seems, are these reports limited to a mere relating of facts. Rather, they are soon embellished with opinion and commentary about the event or the individual in question. This commentary can vary in tone, from flattering to malicious. Sometimes we speak of others in terms of the praise we have for them or the envy we feel toward them. Other times, we cast them in terms of weakness of character or proclivity for scandal (Eder & Enke, 1991; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Levin & Arluke, 1985).

This latter variety of talk—malicious or defamatory conversation out of earshot of others—is considered a sin by many of the world's major religions. Lay intuition concurs; talking badly about someone can make for feelings of moral violation and guilt (Yerkovich, 1977). Yet, against their better judgment, individuals often find themselves engaged in negative or even malicious discussions about peers, colleagues, or community members in their absence. What leads people to violate their own scruples and the scruples of society to discuss the foibles and failings of others?

Some claim that the answer is simple: Talking about others is so enjoyable and important that the only condition necessary for its thriving is two or more people who are each in association with a third person who is not present in the conversation (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). Others see the tendency to talk about others in terms of individual proclivities. A "need for gossip" scale has had some success in capturing these individual differences (Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994). But beyond this seeming ubiquity of desire to talk about others and the more pronounced habits of some, might there be situational factors that influence the amount or tone of this talk? An exploration of this question is a central concern of the present article.

The term most closely associated with evaluative talk about absent others is *gossip*, but it can also be called *networking*, *shoptalk*, *small talk, schmoozing*, or *shooting the breeze* (Rosnow, 2001). Gossip has been defined as evaluative talk among people who are familiar with each other concerning the personal matters of a third person who is not present (Eder & Enke, 1991; Sabini & Silver, 1982). Some add to this definition that the talk must be negative or malicious (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996; Hom & Haidt, 2001). Others see gossip as an enjoyable, relaxing,

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bond-building social activity that is only rarely harmful (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; de Sousa, 1994).

An operational definition of gossip is hard to delineate because whether a statement is negative depends on the context and on the shared understandings of the gossipers. Often, subtle evaluations are embedded in a speaker's tone or in jokes that outsiders cannot understand. For these and other reasons, the conceptualization of gossip remains controversial. Our purpose is not to resolve this controversy. Rather, we are interested in the behavior itself. The behavior on which we focus and that serves as our definition of gossip is *informal, evaluative talk about a member of the discussants' social environment who is not present.*

Gossip is considered widely to be negative talk. Indeed, a review of anthropological and sociological studies conducted by Bergmann (1993, p. 15) listed the most common topics of gossip as "personal qualities and idiosyncrasies, behavioral surprises and inconsistencies, character flaws, discrepancies between actual behavior and moral claims, bad manners, socially unaccepted modes of behavior, shortcomings, improprieties, omissions, presumptions, blamable mistakes, misfortunes, and failures." At first, this list appears to suggest a preoccupation with complaining about our companions and community members. But further consideration suggests another common theme, that of evaluation. Each of these topics proceeds from an evaluation or a comparison. Gossipers make a comparison between the person they are talking about and some social or egocentric reference point, such as social norms or their own perspective and behaviors.

The central thesis of this article is that all gossip involves social comparison. Support for this claim is drawn from social comparison theory and from research on gossip. A second major point of this discussion has already been alluded to, and that is to address why gossip tends to be negative and to make predictions about factors that trigger especially negative talk about others. Finally, the morality of gossip is considered in light of this social comparison account. Before addressing these main points, we begin by summarizing briefly social comparison theory, the backbone of our view of gossip.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory was articulated by Leon Festinger (1954). Festinger believed that people have a fundamental desire to evaluate their opinions and abilities and that they prefer to evaluate themselves against what Festinger called "objective reality tests" (p. 257), or actual criteria. However, when objective reality tests are not available, individuals must rely on each other to gain information about the soundness of their opinions and the strength of their skills. This social reality testing is especially likely in domains in which objective information is difficult to find, such as social skills or community participation. Thus, social reality testing becomes the main avenue for gathering this type of information, and it is accomplished through social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison theory has evolved over the years and now encompasses many different types of comparisons. The current, broader conception of social comparison theory includes "any process in which individuals relate their own characteristics to those of others" (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000, p. 491), and social comparison is motivated not only by the need for self-evaluation but by the need for self-improvement, self-enhancement, and claiming a social identity as well (Wood, 1989).

Social Comparison and Gossip

All gossip, we claim, involves social comparison. In some ways, this position is not all that interesting given that it is imbedded in our definition of gossip: that gossip is *evaluative* talk. After all, an evaluation *is* a comparison of sorts. So why bother defending such an obvious claim? It allows us to apply the considerable body of empirical and theoretical work on social comparison toward a better understanding of gossip, a topic that has been given comparatively little empirical study. When gossip is viewed as an act of social comparison, knowledge of the various motivations behind social comparison can be used to understand motivations for gossip.

The social comparison function of gossip has been suggested by others (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Suls, 1977). Much of our understanding about the world in general, not just the social world, comes from making comparisons. We

understand our position as a relative one, and comparisons are what help us to locate ourselves more precisely. The same is true, as Festinger (1954) claimed, for our social lives. Many investigators since Festinger have provided evidence to support this claim and have identified a number of more specialized types of social comparison in which people commonly engage (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). The present analysis follows suit by considering several varieties of comparison that we believe occur in gossip. Six types of comparison are discussed: (a) comparison with similar others; (b) comparison with less fortunate, less able, or less powerful others (downward social comparison); (c) comparison with more fortunate, more able, or more powerful others (upward social comparison); (d) comparison of in-group with out-group; (e) comparison with imaginary entities (constructed social comparison); and (f) comparison with others to understand our emotional states (emotional comparison). A discussion of the factors that might lead to the tendency for these comparisons to be negative or unflattering of the target of gossip accompanies each type of comparison.

Comparison With Similar Others

In the social world, there are many people with whom one could compare oneself. The choice of comparison person depends on one's goals (Wood & Taylor, 1991). When one is interested in comparison for the purpose of gaining accurate information about oneself—that is, validating one's opinions or estimating the strength of one's abilities—one tends to choose comparison persons who are similar to oneself (Festinger, 1954), similar enough to make the comparison meaningful (Goethals & Darley, 1977). One's close friends, for example, are probably similar in terms of values and attitudes. To them, one can turn for an example of how someone else who is similar feels about an issue or situation, and gossiping with them or about them is a way to find out.

By listening to peers gossip, one can learn valuable lessons about how to behave or, more commonly perhaps, how *not* to behave. One learns how others in the peer group might have discussed one's behavior had one not conformed to social expectations. Indeed, parables related during gossip—third-hand lessons about

what can happen if one commits a certain behavior—are powerful teachers of social skills and social norms. Through the fine-grained analyses of behavior that often comprise gossip, much can be learned about what the gossipers think is appropriate and inappropriate, right and wrong. Such specific instances of moral transgression as are discussed in gossip may serve as concrete examples of moral principles that might otherwise remain too abstract for one to grasp the application (Sabini & Silver, 1982). Furthermore, these discussions may tend toward the negative because negative information about someone is considered more diagnostic of moral character than is positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). People are pulled toward categorizing others in terms of good and bad. Negative behavior is more diagnostic of a person being in the bad category than positive behavior is of a person being in the good category. After all, we assume, bad people are not always bad, but good people are seldom bad (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). Thus, tales of misdeeds may be taken as more morally instructive than tales of virtue. Gossip as a teaching ground for morality may explain why it tends to be more negative, especially among younger people (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986).

Another benefit of gossiping with one's peers is that one can compare others' reactions to events with one's own reactions to help make sense of things or to vet a position on an issue (Sabini & Silver, 1982). Drawing a comparison between how someone behaved and one's own expectations about appropriate behavior, and making this comparison public, is a way of checking the reasonableness of one's position. Of course, the feedback traded in gossip sessions is probably biased. In fact, there is evidence that very little contradicting goes on in gossip circles (Eder & Enke, 1991; Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Nevertheless, these comparisons can serve self-evaluation needs because they provide an outside opinion to support one's own.

Gossiping *about* peers is also an opportunity to learn through comparison, but it allows for these comparisons to be made indirectly (Suls, 1977). Sometimes direct comparisons are not possible, or even desirable. For example, a direct comparison on a skill or ability might bring about feelings of embarrassment for one or both people. Or if close friends differ on important

values or beliefs, a direct comparison might result in a confrontation or a rift (Sabini & Silver, 1982). Gossip provides an indirect way of finding out such comparison information about similar others without the hazards or potential discomfort of a direct comparison (Suls, 1977).

Sometimes comparisons with peers produce unsettling results (Tesser, 1988). According to self-evaluation maintenance theory, the discovery of one's standing on a given ability relative to others bears on one's self-esteem, particularly if the ability in question is central to one's self-concept or identity. In domains that one considers especially dear, it is important in regard to self-esteem to view oneself as somewhat better than others in the comparison group. Gossip may help. Consider groups of individuals with talents or interests in the same domain, such as athletic teams or academic disciplines. In these groups, individual self-esteem needs may give rise to gossip that seeks to belittle others in the group in an unrelated domain. A remark disparaging the athletic ability of someone known to be top ranked in her sport, for example, is likely to be seen for what it is—a ploy to maintain self-esteem—whereas a remark disparaging her social skills may be taken more seriously. Thus, within groups of people who are similarly skilled in a given domain and who are highly identified with that domain, negative gossip may erupt as a way of dealing with the constant threat to self-esteem inherent in such a situation.

When comparisons with similar others are made in gossip, it is most likely in the pursuit of validating opinions or abilities. How does this help us to understand why gossip tends to be negative? Unlike some forms of comparison (which we address shortly), there is nothing inherent in comparisons with similar others that would lead to unflattering talk about the comparison person. One reason, in addition to the self-esteem maintenance motive just mentioned, is the old standby explanation that bad news is simply more interesting than good news. Indeed, negative social information grabs attention (Pratto & John, 1991). This implies that people gossip for gossip's sake; the more interesting the talk, the more people are interested in talking. Although circular, this explanation is popular (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Bergmann, 1993; Sabini & Silver, 1982; G. Taylor, 1994). Thus,

it may be that negative spin, although unnecessary for comparisons with similar others, is nevertheless used as a kind of spice to make the talk more alluring and interesting: to keep the conversation going.

Making critical evaluations is also a way of presenting oneself as smart (Amabile, 1983). Thus, the motive to self-present—to project an image to others—may explain some overly critical talk. At the same time, gossip often seems directed at *decoding* the self-presentational efforts of others. Goffman (1959) distinguished between the self that individuals present to the world, the front stage self, and the self that is not intentionally shown to others, the backstage self. Much of gossip seems to be an inquiry into the backstage lives of others: What is this person really about? What is motivating him or her? Where do his or her loyalties lie? These are questions that occupy gossip circles, and this may be why gossip is seen as invasive and evaluative. It pries into others' private regions, the self that they have tried to keep from view (Bergmann, 1993). This suggests that we are wise to others' self-presentation efforts. Through gossip, discussants are able to put together their observations and opinions to form a picture of what might be the backstage self of the person in question (Post, 1994). Nevertheless, given that comparisons with similar others do not necessarily produce negative talk, perhaps this type of comparison is less common in negative gossip than other types of comparison that do, by their nature, give rise to negative talk. One such comparison type is downward social comparison.

Downward Social Comparison

People are most likely to select a comparison person who is worse off than themselves when they want to feel better about themselves (Wills, 1981). These "downward" comparisons are a way to self-enhance. In fact, people are especially likely to seek out comparisons with others whom they consider to be less skilled in a particular domain when they feel threatened in that domain (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Friend & Gilbert, 1973; Hakmiller, 1966). Gossip is an ideal medium through which to make these comparisons with less skilled, less fortunate, or less powerful persons because it offers the chance to do so indirectly (Suls, 1977).

Feelings of embarrassment or of envy on the part of the less skilled or lower status person can be avoided by making comparisons behind her or his back (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Suls, 1977). These downward social comparisons are a way to build oneself up (Wheeler, 1991), but at the expense of the comparison other.

Downward social comparisons have emotional consequences that may have implications for gossip. One of the relevant emotions is pride. When people compare themselves with another and find that they come out on top, they are likely to feel pride if they think that their advantage is due to their own internal strengths or characteristics (Major, Testa, & Blysma, 1991; Smith, 2000). Because pride is an emotion that swells in the presence of an audience (Smith, 2000), it may be especially tempting to tell gossip stories that allow tellers to show off their superiority. Thus, the quest to experience over again feelings of pride may occasion negative gossip.

Another emotion that can arise from downward comparison is contempt, an emotion that also may inspire gossip. This emotion arises when the focus shifts from oneself (the focus of pride) to the inferior comparison person. Instead of pride in oneself, one feels contempt or scorn for the other (Smith, 2000). Comparisons that lead to feelings of contempt or scorn are likely to involve not only a comparison with the self, but with the comparer's conception of norms of decent behavior. Thus, the scorned person is assumed to be both inferior and in violation of social norms. Because a norm violation is involved, one who feels contempt is likely to assume that others will share this feeling once they hear of it. Alternatively, gossipers may manufacture feelings of contempt to justify gossiping. According to Bergmann (1993, p. 134), "[Gossipers] turn a private accusation into a publicly relevant flaw and thereby legitimize the indiscretion" of talking badly about someone behind his or her back. Either way, the expression of contempt seems common in negative gossip.

Downward comparisons are inherently unflattering to the comparison person and flattering of the comparer. Indeed, the chief motivator of downward comparison is self-enhancement (Wills, 1991). Thus, negative gossip that proceeds from a downward comparison can be understood as the gossiper's pursuit of a positive self-view.

Upward Social Comparison

When people are interested in self-improvement, they tend to compare themselves with people whom they perceive to be better in some way than themselves (S. E. Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Tennen, McKee, & Afflect, 2000; Wood, 1989). People are keenly interested in, and sometimes have a preference for, information about others who are better or more powerful than themselves, but they are loath to seek this information in a direct or public way (Wilson & Benner, 1971). By gossiping about superior others, they are able to acquire comparison information about them without the embarrassment to themselves of a face-to-face comparison (Suls, 1977). In this way, one may learn how successful others succeeded.

Similar to the case of comparisons with similar others, there is nothing inherently negative about comparisons with superior others. Often the opposite is true. However, there is something implicitly ambitious about comparing oneself with higher-ups for the purpose of self-improvement, and this ambition may be distasteful to some audiences: one's peers, for example. One way around this is to dress up the talk in negative tones to obscure its real purpose. If one is interested in finding out how a wealthy neighbor made his fortune, for example, this interest can be disguised by gossiping disdainfully about his excesses.

What other reasons may lead to gossip about higher-ups being negative? One possibility is that many upward comparisons, particularly those based on hierarchy or status, often lead to the conclusion that the superior other's advantaged position is unjustified. From such discoveries, resentment may follow, especially when the advantage seems unattainable by oneself (Folger, 1987). Feelings of resentment are almost entirely focused on the advantaged person, as opposed to the self, and the unfair advantage is seen as the advantaged person's fault (Smith, 2000). This makes it easy for others to recognize the injustice and to resonate to feelings of resentment caused by an unfair situation (Smith, 2000). Thus, public airing of feelings of resentment may be especially satisfying.

What is more, resentment can lead to aggression when the unfairly advantaged person is not liked or is perceived to be arrogant (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Given that gossip can be seen as an act of verbal aggression (Crick, 1996; Galen & Underwood, 1997) and that cases of injustice are particularly sympathy producing, resentment themes may be quite common in malicious gossip. What seems a common theme in office gossip, that of "trashing the boss," is an example. Perceived incompetence in a superior may inspire resentment, and the superior's illegitimate claim to power may add to this an aggressive opposition that is most prudently expressed indirectly. From this mixture, malicious gossip may flow.

Another emotion that can result from an upward comparison is envy (Salovey, 1991). Unlike resentment, envy requires not only the recognition of the other's advantage but the simultaneous recognition of one's own disadvantage. But personal feelings of disadvantage may not rise to the level of legitimate injustice in the eyes of others. This is why feelings of envy have less social currency than feelings of resentment (Smith, 1991). Thus, envy needs a disguise. Otherwise, envy implicates the envious person in a way that makes her or his motives transparent, and therefore she or he is a less credible source of gossip about the envied person. Envious gossipers may dissemble by choosing to derogate the envied person in an unrelated dimension (Salovey, 1991).

Upward comparisons may also result in feelings of jealousy (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Jealousy arises from the perception that the comparison person constitutes a rival, a person who threatens to take a valued (self-esteem-relevant) possession, relationship, or advantage (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Silver & Sabini, 1978). Although stemming from different realizations, both envy and jealousy involve feelings of threat to the self. To feel these emotions, the individual must recognize that he or she stands to be bested by a rival, either because the rival is already in possession of something desired (envy) or because the rival is positioned to take away the desired thing (jealousy). Either case is unflattering to the self and undesirable to admit publicly (Sabini & Silver, 1982). Thus, similar to envy, jealousy may need to be expressed indirectly, which makes both envy and jealousy prime suspects as instigators of negative gossip.

A common source of envy and jealousy is romantic relationships in which there exists a perceived rival (Schmitt, 1988). Through comparisons made in gossip, one can learn about the rival. Even though comparisons with rivals may produce these unpleasant emotions, they nevertheless provide an opportunity to learn which qualities appeal to one's love interest. Self-improvement efforts in those areas can then be applied (Salovey, 1991). A similar pattern may exist in any set of relationships involving rivalry, real or imagined. For example, coworkers may think of themselves as rivals, and gossip may be used as a way to both obtain information that will help them compete and derogate the other in hopes of securing favored status.

Upward social comparisons are most common in the service of self-improvement, that is, finding out information about superior others that will help to improve one's standing. But upward comparisons can lead to emotional reactions that may inspire negative talk about the superior person. Resentment, envy, and jealousy all arise from upward comparison, and all three of these emotions may find their most socially acceptable outlet in negative gossip.

Gossip about superior others seems quite common. So far, we have understood this as an instance of upward social comparison. However, a more thorough understanding of gossip about superiors may come from considering it as an instance of the next type of comparison to be discussed: in-group and out-group comparisons.

In-Group and Out-Group Comparisons

Social comparisons are sometimes made for the purpose of establishing a social identity (Baumeister, 1982), and this type of social comparison is a central concern of social identity theory (Hogg, 2000). Social identity theory predicts that when individuals can claim membership in a group, they feel better about themselves and feel less uncertain about the world (Hogg, 2000). People can be part of several groups at the same time. For example, a group can be based on friendship, type of employment, political affiliation, race, gender, or citizenship. It is membership in various groups that establishes social identity. However, knowing who we are is only half of the picture. We also need to know who we are *not*. This need gives

rise to the powerful tendency for people to distinguish between their *in-group* and an *out-group*, a *them* that is different from *us* (Tajfel, 1978). Social comparisons are used to create and distinguish the two, and they do so by identifying differences between groups. These differences are then culled to create two proto-types—one of the in-group and one of the out-group (Turner, 1991)—and knowledge of these two prototypes is essential to individuals feeling part of the group (Hogg, 2000). Indeed, the more people feel that they understand the pro-totype of their group (what a member of their group is like), the closer they feel to that group (Hogg, 2000).

This is where gossip comes in, as it is an important source of information about who is in and who is not in the group (Gottman & Met-tatal, 1986) and about the norms of the group (Eder & Enke, 1991). Indeed, many gossip themes seem to boil down to "us versus them," and this talk is necessarily unflattering of the out-group owing to the requirement of a con-trast between the in-group and out-group and to the strong preference for feeling positive about one's in-group (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1975). It follows that, in some cases of negative gossip, what is at stake is nothing less than individuals' sense of identity.

"Us versus them" gossip also seems common even when groups are clearly defined. Consider hospital physicians and nurses. A friend who had spent 30 years working in hospitals, first as a nurse and then as an administrator, suggested this example. She described the nursing com-munity in the hospital as highly gossipy and related that the gossip was very negative. The gossip, she observed, was not just about doctors but also about fellow nurses, and even about the patients. When asked why she thought that the nurses gossiped so much, she said that she thought it was because they are "oppressed and underappreciated." If she is right, that nurses are oppressed and underappreciated, why would this make them gossip more? One reason is that it may provide them with an outlet for frustra-tion or anger (Spacks, 1985) and serve as a forum for complaints about those in power. This may be a reason why rulers throughout history have tried to prohibit gossip (Rysman, 1977; Schein, 1994). For example, slave owners are said to have prohibited slaves from talking in their native African languages (Ayim, 1994),

and men have forbidden women from congre-gating with other women for fear of their talking to one another and then becoming too indepen-dent, even to the point of prohibiting women from leaving the house unattended (Oakley, 1972). The Taliban in Afghanistan are a recent example of rulers who imposed such sanctions.

Indeed, gossip may be a subversive form of power. When people are left out of the loop, either because of their situation or because of social convention, gossip remains an avenue of inquiry and a source of information (de Sousa, 1994). By gossiping, individuals in low power groups may gain damning information about superiors and, what is more, they may learn that they are in agreement in their lack of esteem for the ruling group. Insurrection and insubordina-tion then become a possibility. As Spacks (1985) wrote, "The ferocity of several centu-ries' attack on derogatory conversation about others probably reflects justifiable anxiety of the dominant about the aggressive impulses of the submissive" (p. 30).

Temporary forms of relief from oppression may also be provided by gossip. Gossip seems to be most frequently about the private lives (as opposed to the professional lives) of people (de Sousa, 1994). This focus on the personal and private may have an equalizing or democratiz-ing effect, thus leveling the strata a bit (de Sousa, 1994), if only momentarily in the minds of the gossipers as they imagine the powerful others not in their capacity as rulers but as ordinary people with ordinary personal prob-lems. In this way, gossip can bring powerful others "down to size."

In addition to "us versus them" gossip, peo-ple gossip about in-group members as well. People confer with each other through compar-ison processes to obtain the most accurate in-formation with which to compare their own views and opinions. Moreover, these individual attempts at information gathering result in pres-sures toward agreement, harmony, and consen-sus among the group. Or it may be the reverse: Consensus is sought, and comparison inquiries are a means of uncovering the point of consen-sus (Festinger, 1954). Regardless, comparisons among group members are powerful shapers of norms and of judgments. Indeed, information about group norms is especially in demand in groups (e.g., workplace groups) from which people cannot easily escape (Turner, 1991). The

best strategy in this kind of situation, perhaps, is to be the careful student of group norms, and group norms are frequently deduced through participating in gossip discussions (Eder & Enke, 1991; Gluckman, 1963). This observation may explain why there seems to be such fierce gossip within some groups: Social survival may depend on an accurate and detailed understanding of what is and is not permissible, and surviving in the group may be especially important when it is difficult to survive outside of the group.

Restatement of the group's norms through gossip appears to increase when the group is threatened from without (Gluckman, 1963). Anthropological studies of societies threatened by a larger, more powerful or dominant society have pointed to rampant gossip within the threatened society. One study of the Macaw Indian tribe in Washington State revealed much vicious "backbiting" among the members of this tiny community, a community surrounded by the increasingly dominant and influential American culture (Colson, 1953, cited in Gluckman, 1963). Similarly, the residents of a Welsh farming town threatened by the increasing industrializing forces surrounding their village were observed to gossip very often and very negatively about their fellow villagers (Frankenberg, 1957, cited in Gluckman, 1963). Unfortunately, these studies involved only descriptions of single communities, so it is impossible to say whether the amount of gossip was more or less than that taking place in communities not so threatened. What can be said, however, is that the amount of negative gossip that these researchers observed in their communities of study was striking to them and led them to conclude that the gossip must have been in reaction to the threat to the group's identity (Gluckman, 1963). One interpretation is that group loyalty was in question: Who is likely to defect to the other group? Who has aspirations of joining a group higher in the social order? Careful analyses of individuals' behavior, as found in gossip, might provide a clue.

But how accurate are individuals' understandings of the group's views? Individual group members are biased in several ways, and these biases can stem both from too much comparison and from insufficient comparison (Forsyth, 2000). Groups tend to oversample shared information. They focus on information that

two or more members possess to the exclusion of information held by only one person (Stasser, 1992; Stasser, Taylor, & Hanna, 1989; Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996). This produces a lopsided view, leading to judgments that are biased as a result of overrepresenting shared information and underrepresenting unique views. Of course, this bias leads to the sought-after state of group unity and consensus, but at a cost, perhaps, to accuracy and fairness. This tendency of people to focus on information that they know others possess (Wittenbaum, Stasser, & Merry, 1996) may be exploited by gossipers. By configuring their gossip stories and their evaluations in a way that taps into generally held beliefs about social types (Bergmann, 1993) or stereotypes, gossipers stand to bolster the credibility of their claims. Stereotypical information may be overly relied on and may consequently influence judgments about the target of the gossip.

Another blind spot generated by group discussion can come from an underappreciation of the diversity of views among group members. Groupthink is the mistaken belief that consensus exists when it does not (Janis, 1982). This appears to result from group members not expressing the full extent of their doubts about an issue. Rather, they emphasize areas of agreement to boost the cohesiveness of the group. This seems especially likely in gossip circles, as contradictions appear to be infrequent (Eder & Enke, 1991). Rather, gossip tends to proceed, unchallenged for the most part, from story to story (Bergmann, 1993). In this way, individuals may come away from gossip sessions falsely believing that there was unanimity in judgments about the subject of the gossip.

This is similar to another phenomenon emerging from group discussion: group polarization. After an issue has been discussed among a group, individuals' judgments become more extreme (Myers & Lamm, 1976). As Brown (1974, p. 469) wrote, "To be virtuous . . . is to be different from the mean in the right direction and to the right degree." In this way, gossip discussions may lead to judgments of the subject of gossip that are more extreme than those of any individual group member. In fact, some types of gossip discussions may be especially susceptible to group polarization. One such type of group discussion identified by Bergmann (1993) is "so completely gossipy in

nature" that it is called a "coffee-klatch" (p. 71). A coffee-klatch is a group of acquaintances that gather (over coffee, for example) for the explicit purpose of gossiping. In fact, *klatsch* is the German word for gossip. The coffee-klatch has its origins in 18th-century male-only coffee houses, where newspaper editors and writers would gather to discuss "business." In reaction to this exclusion, women soon developed their own discussion circles, but in the privacy of their homes. Bergmann claimed that in the coffee-klatch setting, gossip is unrestrained. The gossip need not be masqueraded as anything other than what it is, and the gossipers need not worry that they will be judged for gossiping because all in attendance know that gossip is the meeting's very purpose. Thus, there is less pressure to moderate claims or judgments. Gossip in this setting is at risk of becoming carried away and extreme, leading to a highly polarized group view. This may be another situation in which stereotypes are maintained, or perhaps formed.

Gossip that is focused on making distinctions between the in-group and the out-group relies on references to prototypes of both the in-group and out-group. Intergroup and intragroup gossip can forge accurate images of what is prototypical of the out-group and of the in-group. It can also form biased views that lead to extreme judgments and, possibly, to the formation and maintenance of negative stereotypes. Regardless, gossip can lead to images of people who may not actually exist. This brings us to the discussion of another type of comparison: constructed social comparison.

Constructed Social Comparison

Sometimes social comparisons are with imaginary people or social entities (Goethals, 1986; Suls, 1986). These "constructed social comparisons" can be amalgams of qualities or clusters of tendencies that we wish to imagine others possess. The aforementioned in-group and out-group prototypes are an example of these constructed comparison entities, as are stereotypes. Much of the time, it seems, gossipers are comparing the subject of the gossip with an imagined person who embodies the norms and values of the group. Gossip has long been suspected of being an important vehicle for the transmission of group norms (Baumeister,

Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Gluckman, 1963), but explanations for how this occurs have been unsatisfactory (Bergmann, 1993). One possible mechanism involves the implicit comparison in gossip between the behavior of the subject of the gossip and the perfect behavior of the imaginary embodiment of the norms. In gossip, the evaluations of the subject of the gossip are made against some reference point, and in certain cases, this reference point may be an imagined group of qualities that the best, most fit member of the group would possess, even though no actual person possesses all of those qualities. In this way, social norms may be transmitted and maintained.

Sometimes the imaginary comparison person is constructed during the gossip session itself. Bergmann (1993), through analyses of transcribed gossip sessions, found that gossip involves both tearing apart and putting back together the person being gossiped about. Initially, by focusing on a limited sample of behavior and then using this unbalanced sample to make generalizations, the person is deconstructed and reduced to a "social type" (Bergmann, 1993, p. 121). Next, gossipers put the person back together, but this time as a caricature, an exaggeration of selected aspects or features (Bergmann, 1993; Yerkovich, 1977). This newly constructed person then becomes the target of comparison in gossip. Instead of comparing the actual person with themselves, gossipers are comparing themselves with a caricature of that person.

The result of social comparisons made with imagined or socially constructed entities is that comparers have a less accurate picture of the world but feel reassured of the validity of their opinions and abilities (Goethals, 1986). With reassurance as the motive behind constructed social comparisons, there is every reason to believe that the creation of these entities is guided by self-serving goals. Gibbons and Gerrard (1995), for example, found that teenagers hold an image of the typical adolescent heavy drinker. Whether or not this image is a positive one determines how similar to the prototype teens see themselves. Those who think that they compare similarly with the prototype tend to engage in more risky behavior. This decidedly biased view of the typical can make for a (conveniently) biased view of reality (Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985).

In gossip, the use of constructed comparison targets may be common. After all, these self-serving constructions give gossipers ultimate flexibility in drawing whatever comparisons they would like. And as a group, gossipers can collectively construct a comparison target that allows reassurance of group values and opinions (Yerkovich, 1977). Indeed, these constructed comparisons may be guided by ideals. Consider the question of leadership, for example. Community members must decide what kind of person they want to lead or to represent them. The hoped for set of beliefs and practices that a leader should possess is refined as community members talk about their needs. Candidates are then compared with this socially constructed image. In this way, gossip may decide the question of leadership.

Emotional Comparison

The final type of comparison that we consider concerns an early offshoot of Festinger's original theory pioneered by his student, Stanley Schachter. Schachter (1959) extended social comparison theory to include the domain of emotion. He believed that when people are uncertain of how to feel about a threatening situation, they turn to others for comparison purposes. This means that when people feel threatened, they seek out and talk with others who are similarly threatened. This affiliative behavior may be due to a need for emotional comparison (to understand one's own feelings better; Schachter, 1959) or to a need for cognitive clarity (to understand the situation better; Festinger et al., 1948). Regardless of the underlying motives, the finding remains that when people are uncertain about a situation and feel threatened by it, they are more likely to talk with others who are in a similar situation (misery loves equally miserable company). And the talk need not be about the threatening concern per se. In fact, studies of threat and affiliation have shown that people talk mostly about threat-irrelevant topics (Kulik, Mahler, & Earnest, 1994; Kulik, Moore, & Mahler, 1993).

Gossip may be relied on as a source of emotional comparison information during anxious or uncertain times. Evidence for this comes from research on a closely related phenomenon, rumor transmission. More than mere evaluations, rumors contain some piece of information or news (Rosnow, 1980). Building on initial work by Allport and Postman (1947), Rosnow and colleagues have found that as anxiety increases, so do rates of rumor transmission (for a review, see Rosnow, 1991). Anxiety comes from apprehension about a potentially unfavorable outcome (Rosnow, 1980), and it may facilitate rumor transmission because, through discussion of the rumor, emotional tensions can be vented (Allport & Postman, 1947; Rosnow, 1991). From numerous anecdotes about rumors that flourished before riots, in the aftermath of natural disasters, or during wartime, Rosnow (1991) concluded that "rumors persist either until the wants and expectations that give rise to the underlying uncertainties are fulfilled, or until the anxiety abates" (p. 487). Festinger, too, believed that anxiety leads to rumors, but his view was that rumors are started as a way of justifying feelings of anxiety (Festinger et al., 1948). Incidentally, this theorizing about rumor transmission led Festinger to his theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Empirical evidence for the role of anxiety in rumor transmission has been supplied by a few experiments. In two studies, self-reported anxiety was positively correlated with rumor transmission (Anthony, 1973; Jaeger, Anthony, & Rosnow, 1980). In one of these studies, 93% of the people in the upper half of the anxiety score range reported that they had heard a rumor, which had been planted by the experimenter, as compared with 31% of people scoring in the lower half of the anxiety score range. Interestingly, pretest and posttest measures of anxiety showed no changes, which led the investigator to question whether passing on rumors actually reduces individuals' anxiety (Anthony, 1973). Individuals high in trait anxiety were also more likely to pass on rumors (Jaeger et al., 1980). Experimentally manipulated anxiety produced a similar pattern: People in the high-anxiety condition were more likely to pass on a rumor than were those in the low-anxiety condition (Walker & Beckerle, 1987). More relevant to the current discussion, anxiety is also implicated in the tendency to gossip (Jaeger, Skelder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994). Individuals high in self-reported anxiety are more likely to be nominated by peers as frequent participants in gossip.

Ambiguous or uncertain situations also appear to heighten rates of rumor transmission,

especially when information is intentionally withheld, such as during wartime or the restructuring of a corporation (Rosnow, 1991). Schachter and Burdick (1955) demonstrated this positive relationship between rates of rumor transmission and ambiguity experimentally. Two groups of students in a preparatory school witnessed their principal enter their classroom and say to one of their classmates, "Miss K., would you get your hat, coat, and books, please, and come with me. You will be gone for the rest of the day" (Schachter & Burdick, 1955, p. 365). The student then left with the principal. In one of the student groups, a couple of days before the principal removed the student from the classroom, a rumor was planted with some of the students that some exams had been stolen and that there was an investigation under way to find the thieves. In another condition, this same rumor was planted, but without the subsequent visit from the principal. In both conditions, students were well aware of the rumor of the stolen tests. However, 78% of the students in the cognitive unclarity condition—those who witnessed the mysterious removal of their classmate—reported transmitting the rumor of the stolen tests, as compared with 40% of the students who heard the rumor but were not exposed to the student being removed (Schachter & Burdick, 1955).

Desire for relief from anxiety or uncertainty may lead people to talk more with one another. But all of this talk can transform individual unrest into group unrest. When anxieties run high, others' emotions become especially contagious (Schachter & Singer, 1962). Thus, through the exchange of gossip (like rumors), individual anxiety, fear, or anger may become group anxiety, fear, or anger. This points to the power of gossip. An individual who is unhappy with someone in his or her social environment, for example, may gossip with others in the group about the events that led to this unhappiness. Those who are uncertain of what to make of the person gossiped about may become influenced both cognitively and emotionally. Events may be interpreted in such a way as to find consistencies between one's own experience and the experience of others as told through gossip. Thus, a situation that formerly lacked clarity has now been given clarity, and the picture is decidedly negative. In this way, negative gossip is a route to lowered morale. If gossip is a contagion that alters the way people think and feel about one another, then it must be practiced with care. Otherwise, group morale and individual reputations are vulnerable.

Gossip stemming from anxiety and uncertainty seems especially likely in relationships in which one person is dependent on the other, and the dependent person has little information about the character, intentions, or loyalties of the person on whom she or he is dependent. Because much is at stake, the worst case scenario is important to apprehend. Thus, gossip that is negative is of greater utility and more in demand because it may be diagnostic of future threats. For this reason, especially aloof persons with power might expect a fair amount of gossip and conjecture about themselves.

Workers who are cut off from information from management, for example, may need to rely entirely on others in their work group for information about how to behave and how to interpret the behavior of others. This can be seen in instances in which the division between levels in the hierarchy is especially great. Consider the gulf between executives and their administrative assistants. Secretaries have a reputation for being gossips (Bergmann, 1993), discussing among themselves the events of the day and their interactions with those in upper management. Their need to talk may be great because they are cut off from formal sources of information about corporate goings-on that affect them. Similarly, students may discuss faculty members in an attempt to know more about the personalities with which they must grapple to complete their studies.

Summary of Social Comparison and Gossip

Social comparisons are motivated by the desire for self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954), self-improvement (S. E. Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989), self-enhancement (Wills, 1981), and establishment of social identity (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1975). The foregoing has posed that gossip proceeds from social comparison, and hence the motivations behind the various forms of social comparison can be applied to gossip. In gossip we gain information about the validity of our opinions and abilities by talking with or about similar others; we gain information that helps us improve ourselves by gossip-

ing about superior others; we can feel better about ourselves by comparing ourselves with those we think are inferior; and we can develop our social identity by comparing our in-group with out-groups.

Gossip may turn especially negative when one or more of these four social comparison motives—self-evaluation, self-improvement, self-enhancement, and establishment of a social identity—become especially urgent for the individual. These motivations may be heightened by a number of situational triggers, some of which we have already mentioned. Seven are highlighted as particularly likely triggers of negative or malicious gossip. One trigger is the need for moral information. Gossip that conveys information about another's (believed) moral failing may be more instructive of behavioral expectations than positive stories (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). A second trigger is suspicion of injustice, particularly in the distribution of rewards or power. Injustice breeds resentment, which may give rise to malicious talk about the undeserving person. A third trigger is competition or rivalry. Feelings of envy and jealousy can be engendered in such circumstances and may fuel attempts to disparage competitors or rivals. A fourth trigger is increased pressure to make in-group and out-group distinctions. Groups are forged through identification of differences (real or imagined), and those who point out such differences always put their own group in a positive light (Turner, 1975). Especially negative gossip may spring up when pressure between groups increases. A fifth trigger is powerlessness. Those who are disenfranchised from formal modes of influence and communication—those who do not have a say in decisions that affect their lives—may need to seek a back road. Talking badly about those in control is one way to achieve this in both actual terms and imaginary terms. A sixth trigger is the "coffee-klatch" or its analogs. In this setting that is free from the usual restraint, gossipers may allow themselves to get carried away and say especially extreme or malicious things. A seventh trigger is anxiety and ambiguity. Both vague and specific threats lead people to talk more with one another (Dunbar, 1996; Schachter, 1959), and the need to prepare for the worst case may focus this talk on the negative. Hence, powerful but mysterious people

may be particularly likely to be the subject of negative gossip.

Morality and Gossip

Angels probably do not gossip. It is unsavory, if not sinful. This is the claim of religious and lay folk alike. But why? What moral offense is committed when we talk about others behind their back? To answer this, we consider two perspectives, that of the community and that of the individual.

First, why would communities be harmed by gossip? We have argued that all gossip involves social comparison. Social comparisons provide useful, even necessary, information. But they also serve the self. The desire to self-evaluate, to self-improve, to self-enhance, and to claim a social identity underlies social comparisons. Of all of these motives, the one that seems most transparent in gossip is self-enhancement. When people make negative evaluations of others, they are, implicitly or explicitly, presenting themselves as better than those they are talking about. It may be the collective effect of all members making themselves look good that threatens the well-being of the community.

Of course, as they gossip, individuals may not consider such hazards to the community. Why, then, do individuals sense that gossip is wrong? Again, recall the self-serving nature of social comparisons. And recall that gossip, we argue, is motivated by these same self-serving goals. Thus, along with the knowledge we gain from social comparisons comes distortion, and this distortion, we have argued, is made greater in the context of gossip. People must have at least tacit awareness that the information exchanged, or even created, in gossip is not entirely accurate. What is more serious from a moral viewpoint is that, by participating in gossip, they have been complicit in generating falsity. In other words, people knowingly generate inaccurate pictures of each other and knowingly benefit from doing so.

Another reason individuals may feel that gossip is wrong has to do with the informational purpose of social comparison. People need social information, and they obtain it through gossip. When we ourselves gossip, though it can feel a little naughty, we sense its benefits. But when we observe others gossiping, we do not say to ourselves, "Oh, they are just responding

to their need for social information." Rather, we wonder whether they are gathering *too much* information, information that could be later used instrumentally. For some, this fear is well founded. But might it also be our own neediness that we recognize in others as they gossip that we find distasteful? No one is in full command of his or her social world. We all have a weakness for the inside scoop.

Conclusion

The larger points of this article are three. The first point is a response to a question raised at the outset: What leads people to violate their own scruples and the scruples of society to discuss the foibles and failings of others? We have argued that people gossip to be socially "in tune." Otherwise, without comparison information with which to calibrate, they would find themselves adrift in a mysterious and murky social world. We have also argued that people gossip to be socially connected. Otherwise, they would find themselves alone, without allies (Dunbar, 1996, 2004) and without a group to which to belong. Gossip, therefore, is very often purposeful, and any appearance of idleness is a façade to mask its seriousness (Emler, 1994; Gluckman, 1963; Sabini & Silver, 1982).

The second point is that negative gossip may be understood as a response to situational triggers that heighten social comparison motives: self-evaluation, self-improvement, self-enhancement, and establishment of a social identity. As an example of such a situational trigger, consider the "freshman class" situation. Most of us have been part of a group of people, all new to a job or to a school, who are uncertain of exactly how to do their job and uncertain of who will be their friend and who will not. A specific example comes from a friend who recalled her first couple of years as a high school teacher. They were ridden with malicious gossip. She remembers teachers talking badly about one another, and she remembers taking comfort from these discussions. Maybe she was not as bad a teacher as she had feared; there were worse teachers, according to the gossip. She remembers feeling compelled to gossip negatively with other teachers to feel a part of the group, to feel better about her own skills in relation to the other "freshman" teachers, and to learn what *not* to do as a teacher. Now in her

fourth year, and at a new school, she avoids gossiping at work. The reason, she believes, is that she is now confident in her abilities as a teacher and is less concerned with what others think. In other words, she avoids negative gossip at work because she does not need it as much. No longer is she in a situation in which she feels uncertain, anxious, and without friends.

The third point is an obvious one: Gossip is social psychological behavior and can be better understood through the application of social psychological principles and research. One such application has been a main goal of this article, the application of social comparison theory. By viewing gossip as an instance of social comparison, we have tapped into a body of research and theory that may help us better understand gossip. And it is important to learn more about gossip: It is very likely that gossip is necessary for healthy social functioning. It is often the only source of valuable social information. Yet, gossip is considered morally suspect. How are we to navigate such a tight spot? Before offering advice on this problem, it seems, we need to know more about gossip. For example, how does gossip—hearing it or speaking it—affect people's judgments of those about whom they gossip, both in the long term and in the short term?

The early days of social psychology saw serious consideration of gossip in the work of Allport (Allport & Postman, 1947) and Festinger (Festinger et al., 1948). Decades later, Rosnow and Fine (1976) issued a reminder call to social psychologists to include gossip in their research and in their theories. Few have answered. Like Rosnow and Fine, we believe that gossip is overlooked by psychologists, both as an interesting phenomenon itself and as a promising venue for studying social comparison, stereotyping, in-group/out-group processes, attributional processes, and many other psychological phenomena.

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