



The “sword of a woman”: Gossip and female aggression



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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

An interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females, and women are more likely than men to use gossip in an aggressive, competitive manner. The goal of such gossip is to exclude competitors from a social group and damage the competitor's ability to maintain a reliable social network of her own. Timeworn assumptions about an affinity between females and negative gossip appear to be more than just a stereotype. Understanding the dynamics of competitive gossip may also give us insight into related social phenomena such as how people use social media such as Facebook.

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1. Gossip as a strategy for reputation management in social competition

Gossip can be a way of learning the unwritten rules of social groups and cultures and an avenue for socializing new group members (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Laing, 1993; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Suls, 1977), and it is a low-cost form of punishment that is an effective deterrent to deviance and useful for enforcing cooperation (Barkow, 1992; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg, Cheng, & Willer, 2012; Levin & Arluke, 1987). In fact, it has been documented that gossip, in response to the violation of a social norm, is met with approval and is often perceived as the “moral” thing to do (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, and Keltner, 2012).

On a darker note, gossip offers a means of manipulating reputations by passing on negative information about competitors as well as a means of detecting betrayal by others. Gossip is more or less interesting to us depending upon whom it is about. We should be especially interested in information about people who matter most in our lives: rivals,

mates, relatives, partners in social exchange, and high-ranking figures whose behavior can affect us (Barkow, 1992), and our interest in the doings of same-sex others ought to be especially strong. Wilson and Daly (1996) have identified same-sex members of one's own species as our principal evolutionary competitors, and Shackelford (1997) has verified the cross-culturally universal importance of same-sex friendships and coalitional relationships. Managing alliances and friendships posed important adaptive problems throughout human history because it was important to evaluate the quality and intentions of one's allies and rivals if one was to be successful. Given how critical such relationships are, and also given that such relationships would be most likely to exist between members of same-aged cohorts, we should be most interested of all in gossip about other people of the same sex who are close to us in age.

Several studies have confirmed that people are indeed most interested in gossip about individuals of the same sex as themselves who also happen to be around their own age (e.g., McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). These studies have also confirmed that information that is socially useful is of greatest interest to us: we like to know about the scandals and misfortunes of our rivals and of high-status people because this information might be valuable in social competition. Positive information about such people tends to be

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uninteresting. Conversely, positive information about our friends and relatives is highly prized and likely to be used to our advantage whenever possible.

2. Gossip and indirect relational aggression in women

There has been some inconsistency in the literature when it comes to describing aggression that does not involve a direct physical attack. It has variously been described as “indirect aggression” (Björkqvist, 1994), “social aggression” (Galen & Underwood, 1997), and as “relational aggression” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although researchers have argued about the possible differences among these forms of aggression and the merits of one label over another, Archer and Coyne (2005) concluded in a review of the literature that this distinction probably does not matter much. They believe that each of these supposedly different categories of aggression are covert strategies of social competition that involve some combination of behaviors such as gossip and social exclusion, resulting in a debate that is more a matter of semantics than anything else. Following the lead of Archer and Coyne, I will, therefore, use these terms interchangeably. Such indirect relational aggression is a relatively low-cost strategy when compared with direct physical confrontation. Evolutionarily speaking, since the costs of direct physical aggression are greater for women than for men (Campbell, 1999), one would expect to find that women are more likely to engage in indirect aggression than they are to engage in direct, physical aggression, and that aggressive gossip ought to be more common in female competition than in male competition.

The word *gossip* has always been linked with females more than with males, and an examination of historical Western tactics for handling gossipers reveals a persistent concern with clamping down on the gossip of women (Rysman, 1977). As far back as the Old Testament, cautions abound regarding gossipers in general and female gossipers in particular. A notable exception to the Bible's pervasive use of the male pronoun and references to men in general in its dictums can be found in an unkind description of widows:

“Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies. Saying what they should not.”

[Timothy (5:13)]

The perceived universality of the link between women and malicious gossip is also reflected in an ancient Chinese proverb stating that “the tongue is the sword of a woman — and she never lets it go rusty” (Forumosa.com, 2013). Setting aside such inherited “wisdom” for the moment, the important question to ask is whether there are data to suggest that women are more prone to gossip than are men or that women are more likely to use gossip in an aggressive or socially destructive manner. The evidence suggests that the answer to both of these questions is “Yes.”

An interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females, and women have different patterns of sharing gossip than men do. Males report being far more likely to share gossip with their romantic partners than with anyone else, but females report that they would be just as likely to share gossip with their same-sex friends as with their romantic partners (McAndrew et al., 2007). And although males are usually more interested in news about other males, females are virtually obsessed with news about other females. This fact can be demonstrated by looking at the actual frequency with which males and females selected a same-sex person as the most interesting subject of the gossip scenarios presented to them in a study by McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002). On hearing about someone having a date with a famous person, 43 out of 44 women selected a female as the most interesting person to know this about, as compared with 24 out of 36 males who selected a male as most interesting. Similarly, 40 out of 42 females (versus 22 out of 37 males) were most interested in same-sex

academic cheaters, and 39 out of 43 were most interested in a same-sex leukemia sufferer (as opposed to only 18 out of 37 males). A female preoccupation with the lives of other women has been noted by De Backer, Nelissen, and Fisher (2007) as well. They presented college students with gossip-like stories containing male or female characters. After reading the stories, the participants were given a surprise recall test for the information they had been exposed to. Women remembered more about other women than men did about other men, especially details about their physical attractiveness.

The fascination that women have with other women is not always benign, and women are much more likely than men to engage in indirect relational aggression (Vaillancourt, 2013), and gossip (with the goal of socially ostracizing rivals) is the weapon of choice in the female arsenal (Archer, 2004; Campbell, 2012; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Hines & Fry, 1994; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000a). Females are more likely than males to socially exclude others, a sex difference that appears as early as the age of six (Benenson, 2013). Such relational aggression usually transpires in retaliation for perceived slights or envy over physical appearance or males (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000b); the fact that highly attractive adolescent girls (who may be threatening because of their high mate value) are at greater risk for victimization by indirect aggression is consistent with the notion that mate competition is a motive for such aggression (Vaillancourt, 2013). Whatever the reason for it, the goal is usually to exclude competitors from one's social group and to damage their ability to maintain a reliable social network of their own (Geary & Flinn, 2002). As it turns out, this is a highly effective way of hurting other women. When a workplace bully is a woman, indirect relational aggression is the usual *modus operandi* and her victim is almost always another woman. The levels of stress reported by the victims in these situations are extreme (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009), and other studies have confirmed that females are more sensitive than males to indirect aggression and report being more devastated by it (Galen & Underwood, 1997). These findings may be connected to other research results which show that a majority of women who suffer from persecutory delusions identified familiar people such as friends and relatives as their persecutors and what they specifically feared was that they were being “talked about” or excluded from the in-group. Men suffering from persecutory delusions were much more likely to fear physical attacks by other men who were strangers (Walston, David, & Charlton, 1998).

Women spend more time gossiping overall than do men, and they are more likely to gossip about close friends and relatives (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to talk about themselves, their work, their relationships, and engage in more self-promotion than do women (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997). The amount of gossiping that occurs between two people is a good predictor of friendship quality in men, especially if the gossip concerns achievement-related information, but the amount of gossip between two women does not predict the quality of their friendship in such a straightforward fashion (Watson, 2012). When pairs of friends gossip, it is rare for listeners to respond negatively to gossipy information, and such information usually evokes agreement and supportive responses rather than disapproval (Eder & Enke, 1991). Females in particular tend to demonstrate highly encouraging responses to gossip that they hear from their friends, and the frequency of negative gossip is highest of all between female friends (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). There is evidence that it is specifically the gossip that occurs between women that is most likely to be aggressive and competitive. The nature of the topics that are discussed between women is qualitatively different from those that are featured in gossip between men or between a man and a woman, and the frequency of negative gossip is highest of all between female friends (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Younger women are more likely to gossip about rivals than are older women, possibly because the competition for mates is more intense during the earlier, reproductive part of a woman's life (Massar, Buunk, & Rempt, 2012), and the characteristics of rivals that are most likely to be attacked through malicious gossip are precisely those things that have

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