Have You Heard? Gossip Turns Out to Serve a Purpose August 16, 2005 New York Times

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Juicy gossip moves so quickly - He did what? She has pictures? - that few people have time to cover their ears, even if they wanted to. "I heard a lot in the hallway, on the way to class," said Mady Miraglia, 35, a high school history teacher, speaking about a previous job, where she got a running commentary from fellow teachers on the sexual peccadilloes and classroom struggles of her colleagues. "To be honest, it made me feel better as a teacher to hear others being put down," she said. "I was out there on my own, I had no sense of how I was doing in class, and the gossip gave me some connection. And I felt like it gave me status, knowing information, being on the inside."

Gossip has long been dismissed by researchers as little more than background noise, blather with no useful function. But some investigators now say that gossip should be central to any study of group interaction. People find it irresistible for good reason: Gossip not only helps clarify and enforce the rules that keep people working well together, studies suggest, but it circulates crucial information about the behavior of others that cannot be published in an office manual. As often as it sullies (discredits) reputations, psychologists say, gossip offers a foothold for newcomers in a group and a safety net for group members who feel in danger of falling out. "There has been a tendency to denigrate (criticize) gossip as sloppy and unreliable" and unworthy of serious study, said David Sloan Wilson, a professor of biology and anthropology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. "But gossip appears to be a very sophisticated, multifunctional interaction which is important in policing behaviors in a group and defining group membership."

When two or more people huddle to share inside information about another person who is absent, they are often spreading important news, and enacting a mutually protective ritual that may have evolved from early grooming (making neat and clean) behaviors, some biologists argue.

Long-term studies of Pacific Islanders, American middle-school children and residents of rural Newfoundland and Mexico, among others, have confirmed that the content and frequency of gossip are universal: people devote anywhere from a fifth to two-thirds or more of their daily conversation to gossip, and men appear to be just as eager for the skinny (gossip) as women.

Sneaking, lying and cheating among friends or acquaintances make for the most savory material, of course, and most people pass on their best nuggets to at least two other people, surveys find. This grapevine branches out through almost every social group and it functions, in part, to keep people from straying too far outside the group's rules, written and unwritten, social scientists find.

In one recent experiment, Dr. Wilson led a team of researchers who asked a group of 195 men and women to rate their approval or disapproval of several situations in which people talked behind the back of a neighbor. In one, a rancher complained to other ranchers that his neighbor had neglected to fix a fence, allowing cattle to wander and freeload. The report was accurate, and the students did not disapprove of the gossip. But men strongly objected if the rancher chose to keep mum (quiet) about the fence incident. "he should have told the other ranchers about the problem to warn them," wrote one study participant, expressing a common sentiment that, in this case, a failure to gossip put the group at risk.

"We're told we're not supposed to gossip, that our reputation plummets, but in this context there may be an expectation that you should gossip: you're obligated to tell, like an informal version of the honor code at military academies," Dr. Wilson said. This rule-enforcing dynamic is hardly confined to the lab. For 18 months, Kevin Kniffin, an anthropologist at the University of Wisconsin, tracked the social interactions of a university rowing crew team, about 50 men and women who rowed together in groups of four or eight. But a preliminary finding, he said, was that gossip levels peaked when the team included a slacker, a young man who regularly missed practices or showed up late. Fellow crew members joked about the slacker's sex life behind his back and made cruel cracks about his character and manhood, in part because the man's shortcoming reflected badly on the entire team. "As soon as this guy left the team, the people were back to talking about radio, food, politics, weather, those sorts of things," Dr. Kniffin said. "There was very little negative gossip."

Given this protective group function, gossiping too little may be at least as risky as gossiping too much, some psychologists say. After all, scuttlebutt is the most highly valued social currency there is. While humor and story telling can warm any occasion, a good scoop spreads through a room like an illicit and irresistible drug, passed along in nods and crooked smiles, in discreet walks out to the balcony, the corridor, the powder room. Knowing that your boss is cheating on his wife, or that a sister-in-law has a drinking problem or a rival has benefited from a secret trust fund may be enormously important, and in many cases change a person's behavior for the better.

"We all know people who are not calibrated (adjusted) to the social world at all, who if they participated in gossip sessions would learn a whole lot of stuff they need to know and can't learn anywhere else, like how reliable people are, how trustworthy," said Sarah Wert, a psychologist at Yale. "Not participating in gossip at some level can be unhealthy, and abnormal."

Talking out of school may also buffer against low-grade depressive moods. In one recent study, Dr. Wert had 84 college students write about a time in their lives when they felt particularly alienated socially, and also about a memory of being warmly accepted. After finishing the task, Dr. Wert prompted the participants to gossip with a friend about a mutual acquaintance, as she filmed the exchanges. Those who rated their self-esteem highly showed a clear pattern: they spread good gossip when they felt accepted and a

more derogatory (critical) brand when they felt marginalized (uncertain, unsteady). The gossip may involve putting someone else down to feel better by comparison. Or it may simply be a way to connect with someone else and share insecurities. But the end result, she said, is often a healthy relief of social and professional anxiety. Ms. Miraglia, the high school teacher, said that in her previous job she found it especially comforting to hear about more senior teachers' struggle to control difficult students. "It was my first job, and I felt overwhelmed, and to hear someone say, 'There's no control in that class' about another teacher, that helped build my confidence," she said.

Adept gossipers usually sense which kinds of discreet talk are most likely to win acceptance from a particular group. For example, a closely knit corporate team with clear values - working late hours, for instance - will tend to embrace a person who gripes in private about a colleague who leaves early and shun one who complains about the late nights. By contrast, a widely dispersed sales force may lap up gossip about colleagues, but take it lightly, allowing members to work however they please.

In one 2004 study, psychologists had college students in Ohio fill out questionnaires, asking about the best gossip they had heard in the last week, the last month and the last year. The students then explained in writing what they learned by hearing the stories. Among the life lessons they described were: "Infidelity will eventually catch up with you," "Cheerful people are not necessarily happy people" and "Just because someone says they have pictures of something doesn't mean they do."

None of which they had learned in class.