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[−] Abstract and Keywords

Gossip is the weapon of choice in the indirect relationship aggression that occurs among women. However, gossip can also be a positive force in the life of groups. In this chapter, I maintain that gossip is an evolutionary adaptation that enabled our prehistoric ancestors to be socially successful and explore the complicated roles gossip plays in human social life. I argue that an interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females and that this is not always benign. I review the evidence that women are more likely than men to use gossip in an aggressive, competitive manner and maintain that 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 and why men and women often have such different tastes in movies and television.

Keywords: gossip, sex differences, aggression, female competition, evolutionary psychology, Facebook

Gossip is an enigma. It can be a tool for building or destroying reputations, or it can be the cohesive glue that holds a group together. It can be a self-affirming source of social-comparison information or a devastating conduit of betrayal. It may even be the instrument used to banish an individual from the group entirely. In this chapter, I explore these seemingly contradictory functions of gossip and trace the path by which gossip has become historically and stereotypically more strongly associated with women than with men. I also examine the ways in which gossip serves as the primary vehicle for indirect aggression in social competition between women.

Although everyone seems to detest a person who is known as a "gossip," and few people would use that label to describe themselves, it is an exceedingly unusual individual who can walk away from a juicy story about one of his or her acquaintances. Each of us has had firsthand experience with the difficulty of keeping spectacular news about someone else a secret, but why does private information about other people represent such an irresistible temptation for us? It is only in the past fifteen years or so that psychologists have turned their attention toward the study of gossip, partially because it is difficult to define exactly what it is. Most researchers agree that the practice involves talk about people who are not present and that this talk is relaxed, informal, and entertaining (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Morreal, 1994; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Spacks, 1985). Typically, the topic of conversation also concerns information that we can make moral judgments about (McAndrew, 2008). Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) distinguished four distinct motives for gossiping: to influence others negatively, to gather and validate information, for social enjoyment and entertainment, and to protect the group from some internal threat. Of these motives, the gathering and validating of information appears to be the most common one. In his book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, British psychologist Robin Dunbar (1996) suggested that gossip is a mechanism for bonding social groups together, analogous to the grooming that is found in primate groups, and other researchers have proposed that gossip is one of the best tools that we have for comparing ourselves socially with others (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). The ultimate question, however, is how did gossip come to serve these functions in the first place? Let us begin with the story of how gossip has become so

strongly associated with women (Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Spacks, 1985).

How Did "The Gossip" Become a Woman?

The title of this chapter was inspired by an article published by Alexander Rysman (1977) in which he asks a very interesting question: How, in the convoluted linguistic history of the word "gossip," did this brand of social behavior become so intimately identified with women? The answer lies in the very root of the word itself.

The term is derived from the Old English phrase *God Sib,* which literally translates as "god parent." The term originally referred to companions who were not relatives but who were intimate enough to be named as godparents to one's child. These companions were almost always females, and they were usually present during labor and the birth of a child. Apparently, medieval European births were very social affairs restricted entirely to women. The hours were passed in conversation and moral support, and it undoubtedly was a strong bonding experience among those who were present (Rysman, 1977). Thus the original word was a noun specifically referring to the female companions of a woman during childbirth, and it was entirely benign in its usage. However, by the 1500s, the word had taken on a decidedly negative connotation. The first known literary use of the word in this negative context occurred in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream,* and the Oxford English Dictionary defines the sixteenth-century use of the word as describing a woman "of light and trifling character" who "delights in "idle talk" and was a "newsmonger" or a "tattler" (www.OED.com, retrieved June 21, 2013). Rysman suggested (perhaps facetiously) that the word acquired negative connotations over time because one of the side effects of women coming together in solidarity was an increase in hassles for men! It was not until the 1800s that the word was applied to a type of conversation rather than to the person engaging in the conversation.

The useful social role played by gossip in human groups is often overshadowed by the way it is employed by individuals to further their own reputations and selfish interests at the expense of others (Dunbar, 1996; Emler, 1994; Spacks, 1985). The recognition of gossip's potential for social disruption is everywhere reflected in a wide variety of laws, punishments, and moral codes designed to control it (Emler, 1994; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). One need look no further than the Bible for examples of societal efforts to stifle destructive gossip:

> A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends
>
> (Proverbs 16:28)
>
> The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.
>
> (Proverbs 18:7–8)
>
> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.
>
> (James, 3:7–8)
>
> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips.
>
> (James 3:7–8).

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.
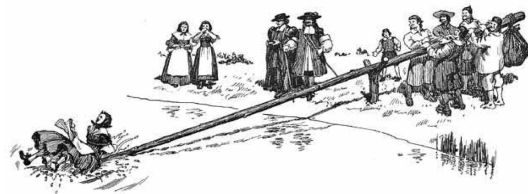>
> Timothy (5:13)

And let us not forget that one of the ten commandments is "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

Click to view larger

Figure 1 . The Scold's Bridle.

Click to view larger

Figure 2 . The Ducking Stool.

Thus there have always been legal and religious sanctions that could be brought to bear upon gossipers who crossed a line and gossiped about the wrong people at the wrong time. Most nations still have laws against slander on the books, and until relatively recently dueling to the death was considered an honorable way of dealing with those who had transgressed against one's reputation and good name. However, an examination of historical European tactics for handling gossipers reveals a persistent concern with clamping down on the gossip of women. The two most common punishments for gossipers in Europe and colonial America from the early 1500s to the early 1800s were almost exclusively reserved for women: the "Scold's Bridle" and the "Ducking Stool."

The Scold's Bridle (sometimes referred to as the "Brank's Bridle," or more simply, "The Branks") was a device used to publicly punish and humiliate women who were perceived as quarrelsome or as gossips, shrews, or scolds. It first appeared in Britain during the 1500s (Science Museum of London, 2013) and it gradually spread to several other European countries, becoming especially popular in Germany. The Scold's Bridle was a heavy iron mask, somewhat like a cage, that fit tightly over a woman's head (see Figure 1). The mask included a flat piece of iron. This flat piece of iron was sometimes spiked, and it was thrust into the woman's mouth over her tongue. While wearing a Scold's Bridle, a woman would be completely unable to speak (Cox, 2003). Variations of the Scold's Bridle sometimes included a bell on top of it to attract attention and/or a ring attached to a chain so that a husband could drag his wife around the village and subject her to the ridicule of others. The Scold's Bridle was employed with the approval of the church and local authorities, and in some villages the Bridle was actually kept in a cabinet

in the church when not in use (Canadian Broadcasting Company, 2012).

The origins of the Ducking Stool are shrouded in the mist of time, but it was in wide use by the late medieval period, and it remained in use well into the 1800s in western Europe and colonial America. The Ducking Stool was reserved almost exclusively for women, although occasionally quarrelsome married couples were tied back-to-back and subjected to it together (Cox, 2003). Ducking Stools consisted of a chair fixed to the end of two long beams, usually between 12 and 15 feet in length (see Figure 2). The woman was strapped into the chair, hoisted out over a pond or river, and then plunged underwater by several men who operated the apparatus from land. The number of times she was dunked and the length of each submersion depended on the degree to which her gossip had been deemed harmful to the community, and it undoubtedly also depended on the political connections of the people she had offended. For especially serious offenses, a woman could be kept in the chair for hours and subjected to repeated dunkings. Beleaguered husbands could present their scolding wives for dunking with the blessing of the church. Given the condition of the bodies of water located in or near towns during this period of history, what the woman was being immersed in was usually not much better than raw sewage, providing a strong incentive for her to keep her mouth tightly closed. Later in this chapter, we examine the evidence pertinent to the question of whether or not the perceived association between women and negative gossip is based on anything more than simple stereotypes.

How Might Gossip Have Become an Evolutionary Adaptation?

Gossip is central to the social life of humans. Most of our conversations are concerned with matters of social importance, and the available historical information and cross-cultural data suggest that this has always been the case. The prominent role played by gossip in the conversation of everyday people has been documented in populations as geographically diverse as medieval Europeans (Schein, 1994), the !Kung Bushmen of West Africa (Lee, 1990), the Hopi of North America (Cox, 1970), and the Kabana people of Papua New Guinea (McPherson, 1991). When evolutionary psychologists stumble upon something that is shared by people of all ages, times, and cultures, they usually suspect that they have identified a vital aspect of human nature—something that became a part of who we are in our long-forgotten prehistoric past. Examples of such evolutionary adaptations include our appreciation of landscapes containing fresh water and vegetation, our never-ending battle with our sweet tooth, and our infatuation with people who look a certain way. These adaptations enabled us to not only survive but to thrive in our prehistoric ancestral environments. In this chapter, I am exploring the possibility that our preoccupation with gossip is just another of these evolutionary adaptations.

It will be obvious to most readers that being drawn to environments that provide resources, food that provides energy, and romantic partners who appear able to help one bear and raise healthy children might very well be psychological adaptations that evolved because of their indisputable advantages. However, it may not be so clear at first glance how an interest in gossip could possibly be in the same league as these other human characteristics. If one thinks in terms of what it would have taken to be successful in our ancestral social environment, however, the idea may no longer seem quite so far-fetched.

Our ancestors lived their lives as members of small cooperative groups that were in competition with other relatively small groups (Dunbar, 1996; Lewin, 1993; Tooby & DeVore, 1987). To make matters more complicated, it was necessary to cooperate with in-group members so that the group as a whole could be successful, but competition between members of the same group was also unavoidable insofar as there was only a limited amount of food, mates, and other resources to go around (Krebs & Denton, 1997). Living in such groups, our ancestors faced a number of consistent adaptive problems that were social in nature, for example, obtaining a reproductively valuable mate and successfully managing friendships, alliances, and family relationships (Shackelford, 1997). The social intelligence needed for success in this environment required an ability to predict and influence the behavior of others, and an intense interest in the private dealings of other people would have been handy indeed, and it would have been strongly favored by natural selection. In short, people who were fascinated with the lives of others were simply more successful than those who were not, and it is the genes of those individuals that have come down to us through the ages (Alexander, 1979; Barkow, 1989, 1992; Davis & McLeod, 2003; Humphrey, 1983; McAndrew, 2008). Like it or not, we are descended from busybodies, and our inability to ignore gossip and information about other individuals is as much a part of who we are as is our inability to resist doughnuts or sex— and for the same reasons.

A related social skill that would have had a big payoff is the ability to remember details about the temperament, predictability, and past behavior of individuals who were personally known. We need to be on guard against individuals who have taken advantage of us in the past so that it does not happen again (hence, our often regrettable tendency to hold grudges) and also to have clear recollections of those who have been helpful and can be counted on in future times of need. In our prehistoric past, there would have been little use for a mind that was designed to engage in abstract statistical thinking about large numbers of unknown outsiders. In today's world, it is advantageous to be able to think in terms of probabilities and percentages when it comes to people, because predicting the behavior of the strangers whom we deal with in everyday life requires that we do so. This task is difficult for many of us because the early wiring of the brain was guided by different needs. Thus natural selection shaped a thirst for, and a memory to store information about, specific people. It is well established that we have a brain area specifically dedicated to the identification of human faces (de Haan, Pascalis, & Johnson, 2002; Nelson, 2001) and that we perceive and remember faces best when they have been paired with negative information about individuals who are described as cheaters or as socially undesirable in other ways (Anderson, Siegel, Bliss-Moreau, & Barrett, 2011; Mealey, Daood, & Krage, 1996). For better or worse, this is the mental equipment that we must rely on to navigate our way through a modern world filled with technology and strangers. I should not be surprised when the very same undergraduate students who get glassy-eyed at any mention of statistical data about human beings in general become riveted by case studies of individuals experiencing psychological or relationship problems. Successful politicians take advantage of this pervasive "power of the particular" (as cognitive psychologists call it) when they use anecdotes and personal narratives to make political points. Even the dictator Josef Stalin noted that "one death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic." The prevalence of reality TV shows and nightly news programs focusing on stories about a missing child or the sexual scandals of politicians is a beast of our own creation.

Gossip may be one of the relatively few social behaviors that have been shaped by natural selection operating on individuals competing within groups as well as by natural selection acting on groups in competition with other groups (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). According to multilevel selection theorists such as David Sloan Wilson (1997), it is crucial to distinguish between the competition going on between individuals within the same group and the competition that occurs between individuals in different groups. Within-group selection follows the more accepted idea that individual organisms (or collections of genes) are in direct selfish competition with each other. Group-level adaptations, on the other hand, require thinking in terms of between-group selection in which groups can be thought of as adaptive units in their own right and not just as by-products of individual self-interest (Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2000). According to Multiple Level Selection Theory (MST), groups do not evolve into adaptive units for *all* traits but only for those that are adaptive in a group but not in an individual context. In other words, "group selection favors traits that increase the fitness of groups relative to other groups"(Wilson, 1997, p. S122).

Although MST is not inherently incompatible with more traditional evolutionary viewpoints, it is often presented as if this was the case. The most common attacks leveled against MST stem from a basic misunderstanding of what the theory is saying. Many mistakenly equate MST with long-discredited naïve theories of group selection based on organisms acting for "the good of the species" and think that MST discounts the importance of natural selection that occurs in units smaller than groups. MST does not deny that selection at lower levels of organization is vitally important; on the contrary, MST maintains that selection at the individual level occurs at a faster pace than selection at the group level (Boehm, 1997). In fact, MST maintains that traits such as altruism are selected at the group level precisely because they are ultimately adaptive to the individuals in successful groups. The confusion apparently arises over the fact that it is the individual's membership in a group faced with particular selection pressures that cause the group to become the vehicle for behaviors that benefit each individual.

If it is true that gossip evolved in response to both within-group and between-group selection pressures, the evolution of gossip as we now see it (or hear it?) would have been a delicate balancing act. Competition among members of a social group would remain adaptive to the individuals involved only so long as these competitive forces did not completely undermine the ability of the group to function as a cooperative unit. Similarly, a highly cooperative group that thwarted the reproductive fitness of too many of its members would not survive for long. Theoretically then, the gossip we see in modern humans is really a finely balanced double-bladed weapon, with one blade (a broadsword?) wielded on behalf of the group to deter free-riders and other disruptive individuals, while the other blade (a dagger?) is used more selectively and quietly by one group member against another in a

quest to climb the social ladder. So, even though gossip has a bad reputation, it also serves essential positive social functions, and human society could not exist without it (Emler, 2001). I now compare what is known about self-serving, negative, within-group, "bad gossip" to the less selfish "good gossip" that serves the interests of the larger group.

"Bad Gossip": The Selfish Gossip Used Within One's Own Group

The average person's reaction to the word "gossip" is reflexively negative, probably because we most easily think of the negative, selfish use of gossip. It is true that when gossip is examined in the light of competition between people in the same social group, it is very much about enhancing one's own social success (Barkow, 1989). Gossip offers a means of manipulating others' reputations by passing on negative information about competitors or enemies as well as a means of detecting betrayal by others in our important relationships (Shackelford, 1997; Spacks, 1985). According to one of the pioneers of gossip research, anthropologist Jerry Barkow (1992), 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. Given the proposition that our interest in gossip evolved as a way of acquiring fitness-enhancing information, Barkow also suggests that the type of knowledge that we seek should be information that can affect our social standing relative to others. Hence, we would expect to find higher interest in negative news (such as misfortunes and scandals) about high-status people and potential rivals because we could exploit it. Negative information about those lower than us in status would not be as useful. There should also be less interest in passing along negative information about our friends and relatives than about people who are not allies. Conversely, positive information (good fortune and sudden elevation of status, for example) about allies should be likely to be spread around, whereas positive information about rivals or nonallies should be less enticing because it is not useful in advancing one's own interests.

For a variety of reasons, our interest in the doings of same-sex others ought to be especially strong. Wilson and Daly (1996), among others, 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. According to Shackelford, 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 in all areas of life, and also given that such relationships would be most likely to exist between members of same-aged cohorts, we should be most interested in gossip about other people of the same sex who are close to us in age. Hence, the eighteen-year-old male caveman would have done much better by attending to the business of other eighteen-year-old males rather than to the business of fifty-year-old males or females of any age. Interest about members of the other sex should be strong only when their age and situational circumstances would make them appropriate as mates.

The gossip studies on which my students and I have worked at Knox College over the past fifteen years (e.g., Goranson & McAndrew, 2013; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; McAndrew et al., 2007) have focused on uncovering what we are most interested in finding out about other people and what we are most likely to spread around. We have had people of all ages rank their interest in tabloid stories about celebrities, and we have asked college students to read gossip scenarios about unidentified individuals and tell us which types of people they would most like to hear such information about, whom they would gossip about, and with whom they would share gossip. In keeping with the evolutionary hypotheses suggested earlier, we have consistently found that people are most interested in gossip about individuals of the same sex as themselves who also happen to be around their own age. We have also found that information that is socially useful is always 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 uninteresting to us. Finding out that someone who is already higher in status than ourselves has just acquired something that puts him even further ahead of us does not supply us with ammunition that we can use to gain ground on him. Conversely, positive information about our friends and relatives is highly prized and likely to be used to our advantage whenever possible. For example, we consistently found that college students were not much interested in hearing about academic awards or a large inheritance if it involved one of their professors and that they were also not very interested in passing that news along to others. Yet the same information about their friends or romantic partners was rated as being quite interesting and likely to be spread around.

"Good Gossip": Gossip Can Serve the Interests of the Group as a Whole

In spite of its generally negative reputation, studies indicate that most gossip cannot be accurately described as malicious in its intent (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Dunbar, et al., 1997; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Spacks, 1985), and this is just as true for women as it is for men. Levin and Arluke (1987), among others, have proposed that gossip is universal because it is psychologically and socially useful. Anthropologists have frequently identified gossip as a cultural device that can be used not only by individuals to advance their own interests but also as a means by which groups can enforce conformity to group norms (Abrahams, 1970; Cox, 1970; Lee, 1990). It is this dual nature of gossip that creates so much ambivalence toward it. The recognition of its importance in maintaining group life makes acceptance of it a necessity, but its potential for advancing the interests of one individual at the expense of another poses a threat that must be contained if the group is to function effectively. Thus, paradoxically, gossip can serve as both a form of antisocial behavior *and* as a means of controlling antisocial behavior (Wilson et al., 2000).

Gossip probably evolved as a social control mechanism that served the interests of the group as well as the interests of individuals. Boehm (1999) proposes that gossip can serve as a "leveling mechanism" for neutralizing the dominance tendencies of others, making it a "stealthy activity by which other people's moral dossiers are constantly reviewed" (p. 73). Boehm believes that small-scale foraging societies such as those typical during human prehistory emphasized an egalitarianism that suppressed internal competition and promoted consensus seeking in a way that made the success of one's group extremely important to one's own fitness. These social pressures discouraged free-riders and cheaters and encouraged altruists (Boehm, 1997). He also believes that such egalitarian societies were necessary because of the relatively equal and unstable balance of power among individuals with access to weapons and shifting coalitions. In these societies, the manipulation of public opinion through gossip, ridicule, and ostracism became a key way of keeping potentially dominant group members in check (Boehm, 1993). Please note I am *not* proposing old-fashioned group selection here. Behaviors that favor the good of the group over the selfish interests of individuals can evolve only if the resulting success of the group trickles down and ultimately proves to be adaptive for the majority of the individuals in the group as well.

Ample evidence exists that gossip can indeed be a positive force in the life of a group. Gossip can be a way of learning the unwritten rules of social groups and cultures by resolving ambiguity about group norms and an avenue for socializing newcomers into the ways of the group (Ayim, 1994; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Laing, 1993; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Suls, 1977). Gossip is also an efficient way of reminding group members about the importance of the group's norms and values, and it can be an effective deterrent to deviance and a low-cost form of punishment useful for enforcing cooperation in groups (Barkow, 1992; Feinberg, Cheng, & Willer, 2012; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Merry, 1984). Evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers (1971, 1985) has discussed the evolutionary importance of detecting "gross cheaters" (those who fail to reciprocate altruistic acts) and "subtle cheaters" (those who reciprocate but give much less than they get). Gossip can be an effective means of uncovering such information about others and an especially useful way of controlling these free-riders who may be tempted to violate group norms of reciprocity by taking more from the group than they give in return (Dunbar, 1996; Feinberg et al., 2012).

Studies in real-life groups such as California cattle ranchers (Ellickson, 1991), Maine lobster fishermen (Acheson, 1988), and college rowing teams (Kniffin & Wilson, 1998; Wilson & Kniffin, 1999) confirm that gossip is used in these quite different settings to maintain boundaries between the in-group and out-group and to enforce group norms when individuals fail to live up to the group's expectations. In all these groups, individuals who violated expectations about sharing resources and meeting responsibilities became frequent targets of gossip and ostracism, which put pressure on them to become better citizens. Anthropological studies of hunter-gatherer groups have typically revealed a similar social control function for gossip in these societies (Lee, 1990; McPherson, 1991). Experimental evidence also shows that prosocial gossip keeps people in line. Beersma and Van Kleef (2011) used a laboratory "dictator game" to study this problem. In their experimental game, people could contribute lottery tickets for a large monetary prize to a group pool (which would be spilt evenly among the group if there was a winning ticket), or they could keep the tickets for themselves. People who believed that other people in the group might gossip about them reduced their free-riding and increased the level of their contributions compared to people who did not believe that gossip about them would be possible or likely. Similarly, another study demonstrated that people will use gossip prosocially to rat out selfish, exploitative individuals in experimental game

situations even when they have to spend money to do so (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012). In other words, prosocial gossip is so rewarding that people will even incur a cost for the opportunity to engage in it! In keeping with all of the findings described above, it has been documented that gossip that occurs 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; Wilson et al., 2000).

Individual Differences in Gossip

The jury is still out on how gossipers are perceived by others. Jaeger, Skleder, Rind, and Rosnow (1994) looked at gossip in a college sorority. They found that "low gossipers" scored higher in the need for social approval than "high gossipers." They also found that the high gossipers tended to have more close friends than low gossipers but paradoxically were perceived as less likeable than the low gossipers. Similarly, Farley (2011) discovered that high-frequency gossipers were liked significantly less than low-frequency gossipers and "negative" gossipers were liked less than "positive" gossipers. At least among fourth- through sixth-grade girls, however, gossipers are liked *more* than the targets of their gossip (Maloney, 1999). Given that being in possession of gossip gives an individual a position of power relative to others in the group, it might be expected that gossipers would be better liked and more influential. Part of the problem is that the few studies that have been conducted so far have simply looked at *how often* an individual does or does not participate in gossip, but no attempt has been made to study gossipers based on the quality of the gossip they provide or the skill with which they conduct themselves in gossip situations. I believe that using the mere frequency of gossiping as a research variable is something of a red herring, and it is quality, not quantity, that counts. It is probably the case that skillful gossipers are indeed well liked and wield a great deal of social power in groups (Farley, 2011).

I have suggested in the past that gossip is social skill rather than a character flaw, insofar as we only get in trouble when we do not do it well (McAndrew, 2008). After all, sharing gossip with another person is a sign of deep trust because the gossiper is clearly signaling that he or she believes that the person receiving the gossip will not use this sensitive information in a way that will have negative consequences for the gossiper; shared secrets also have a way of bonding people together. An individual who is not included in the office-gossip network is obviously an outsider who is not trusted or accepted by the group. Adopting the role of the self-righteous soul who refuses to participate in gossip at work or in other areas of social life ultimately will be self-defeating, and it will turn out to be nothing more than a ticket to social isolation. On the other hand, indiscriminately blabbing everything one hears to anyone who will listen will quickly get one a reputation as an untrustworthy busybody. Successful gossiping is about being a good team player and sharing key information with others in a way that will not be perceived as self-serving and about understanding when to keep one's mouth shut. Future studies need to work on developing a valid and reliable way of assessing skill as a gossiper.

As with most psychological traits, the tendency to gossip and the need to compare one's self to others appear to be stable and measurable individual differences. Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi (1993) have constructed a measure called the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire, which appears to have acceptable validity and reliability. A subsequent study using the questionnaire found that individuals employed in people-oriented professions such as counselors and psychotherapists score especially high on this scale (Nevo et al., 1993). A high need to exert social power seems to be one factor that distinguishes heavy gossipers from others (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010).

Is Gossip Indeed the "Weapon of Choice" in Aggressive Competition Between Women?

I now return to the question of whether negative gossip is more prevalent in relationships among women. It is clear that throughout Western history, gossip was formally frowned upon and that the gossip of women in particular was identified as a serious social problem. The universality of the perceived link between women and malicious gossip is reflected in an ancient Chinese proverb stating that "the tongue is the sword of a woman—and she never lets it go rusty." However, is there any evidence 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 these questions is "Yes."

An interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females, and women have somewhat different patterns of sharing gossip than men do (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; McAndrew, et al., 2007). The

studies by McAndrew and colleagues reveal that men report being far more likely to share gossip with their romantic partners than with anyone else, but women report that they would be just as likely to share gossip with their same-sex friends as with their romantic partners. And although men are usually more interested in news about other men, women are virtually obsessed with news about other women. This fact can be demonstrated by looking at the actual frequency with which men and women 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, forty-three out of forty-four women selected a woman as the most interesting person to know this about, as compared with twenty-four out of thirty-six men who selected a male as most interesting. Similarly, forty out of forty-two women (vs. twenty-two out of thirty-seven males) were most interested in same-sex academic cheaters, and thirty-nine out of forty-three were most interested in a same-sex leukemia sufferer (as opposed to only eighteen out of thirty-seven men). In fact, the only two scenarios among the thirteen studied in which men expressed more same-sex interest than women did involved hearing about an individual heavily in debt because of gambling or an individual who was having difficulty performing sexually.

A female preoccupation with the lives of other women has been noted by other researchers as well. For example, De Backer, Nelissen, and Fisher (2007) presented college students with gossip-like stories containing male or female characters in which the nature of the gossip presented in the stories was an important variable. 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. Also, the attractiveness of female characters and the wealth of male characters were most easily recalled.

The fascination that women have with the doings of other women is not benign. It has been well established that men are more physically aggressive than women (McAndrew, 2009). However, women are much more likely 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 (Campbell, 2012; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Hines & Fry, 1994; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000a). Women are more likely than men to socially exclude others, a sex difference that appears as early as the age of six (Benenson, 2013). The motivation for this relational aggression can be as trivial as simple boredom, but it more often 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 that 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, 1985). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to talk about themselves, their work, and their own relationships and generally engage in more self-promotion than do women (Dunbar et al., 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). Women in particular tend to demonstrate highly encouraging responses to gossip that they hear from their friends (Leaper & Holliday, 1995).

Evidence shows 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 in gossip between female friends (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). The way that female-to-female gossip plays out is also consistent with what would be expected if gossip developed as a response to evolutionary pressures. 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). Furthermore, the characteristics of rivals that are most likely to be attacked through malicious gossip are precisely those characteristics that have traditionally been most vital to a woman's reputation in the mating market: her physical appearance and sexual reputation (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Vaillancourt, 2013; Watson, 2012). A recent study fuels the perception that physical appearance is a primary arena of competition among women in that a woman with a "hypercompetitive personality" is significantly more likely to undergo cosmetic surgery than is a less competitive woman (Thornton, Ryckman, & Gold, 2013).

Applications: The Role of Gossip in Competition and Other Social Phenomenon

When gossip is discussed seriously, the goal usually is to suppress the frequency with which it occurs in an attempt to avoid the undeniably harmful effects it often has in work groups and other social networks. This tendency, however, overlooks that gossip is part of who we are and that it is an essential part of what makes groups function as well as they do. Understanding the nature of intrasexual competition and the role played by gossip in such competition can lead to an understanding of other seemingly unrelated phenomena. Thus the gossip behaviors that developed to manage the social lives of our prehistoric ancestors provide the skeleton for the global social world of the Internet that we now inhabit. Theoretically, the same selection pressures that produced "good gossip" and "bad gossip" are alive and well and will continue to guide our interactions in this brave new world.

For example, understanding the dynamics of competitive gossip can generate hypotheses about how people will pursue social information and present themselves on the Internet through social media channels such as Facebook. The Internet provides unprecedented opportunities to spread and track gossip, and it is self-evident that the face-to-face social competition that social scientists have traditionally studied now plays out in cyberspace. Given that gossip and ostracism are primarily female tactics of aggression, one would expect female aggression to be amplified by the Internet more than male aggression would be. Troubling media stories about cyberbullying on Facebook, sometimes even resulting in the suicide of the victim, usually involve female aggressors and almost always involve female victims. Studying Internet behavior in light of what we know about gossip shows great promise for helping us deal with this important problem.

Gossip studies by McAndrew et al. (2007), McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002), and De Backer, Nelisson, and Fisher (2007) discovered that most people have a greater interest in gossip about same-sex and same-age individuals, with women being especially interested in gossip about other women. The researchers concluded that this was rooted in the evolutionary necessity of keeping tabs on our competitors for status and mates, and traditionally our chief competitors are those in our own age and sex cohorts. Similarly, it is well replicated that men and women have very different mating strategies and preferences, with men seeking attractiveness, youth, and fertility in mates while advertising their own status, achievement, and access to resources and women showing the opposite pattern (Buss, 1989a, 1989b; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Geary, 2010). These findings suggest the following predictions about how people might use Facebook.

First, everyone should spend more time looking at the Facebook pages of people about the same age as themselves. However, to the extent that this interest is driven by the social competition needs described earlier, older people should be under less pressure to do so and will exhibit less interest in same-sex peers and more interest in family. Second, there will be more interest in looking at the pages of same-sex others versus opposite-sex others, and this tendency will be even stronger in females than in males. Because of the greater emphasis placed on the physical appearance of women, females, compared to males, will spend more time on activities related to impression management with their profile pictures, and females will also spend more time looking at the photos of other people. Finally, males, compared to females, will spend more time looking at items on the pages of others' that reflect an individual's status or prestige, such as educational background, work/career information, and number of Facebook friends.

Preliminary research regarding these predictions has been promising. In an Internet survey utilizing an international sample of 1,026 Facebook users (284 males, 735 females; mean age = 30.24) I conducted with one of my

students, Hye Sun Jeong (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), we discovered that, overall, women engaged in far more Facebook activity than did men. They spent more time on Facebook and they had more Facebook friends. Consistent with previous research on gossip-seeking behavior, women were more interested than men in the relationship status of others, and they were more interested in keeping tabs on the activity of other women than men were in keeping tabs on the activity of other men. They also expended more energy than men in using profile photographs as a tool for impression management and in studying the photographs of other people. On the other hand, men, aside from the fact that they were more interested in how many friends their Facebook friends had, were not more likely than women to attend to the educational and career accomplishments of others.

Evidence shows that time on Facebook is positively correlated with more frequent episodes of jealousy-related feelings and behaviors, especially among women (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Morris, et al, 2009; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). In one recent episode, a woman actually stabbed her boyfriend simply because he received a Facebook friend request from another woman (Timesleader.com, 2012). Overall, research indicates that men and women do not differ in the frequency or magnitude of episodes of experienced jealousy, but different factors serve as the triggers for jealousy for men than for women (Buss, 2012). Given its emphasis on relationships and physical appearance, Facebook seems to be more likely to pull the triggers relevant to female jealousy. The inherent ambiguity of many Facebook comments, photos, and other activities offers ample opportunity for flirting (or at least perceptions of flirting), creating new avenues for eliciting jealousy, intentional and otherwise. Sahil Shah (another one of my students) and I explored this issue in a study of sex differences in jealousy over Facebook activities. We confirmed that females are in fact more prone to Facebook-evoked jealousy than males, and, perhaps surprisingly, we also found that males are more sensitive to this sex difference than are females. This suggests that misunderstandings between romantic partners over Facebook use will more likely be due to females' misunderstanding their partners' reactions to Facebook activity than the other way around (McAndrew & Shah, 2013).

If the predisposition to gossip has evolved to facilitate an interest in those who are socially important to us and an interest in information that would be essential for success in social competition, learning about how it all works could even help us to understand the sex differences in what entertains us as well as our obsession with the lives of celebrities. Soap operas and similar entertainment venues press the buttons that pique women's interests in relationships, appearance, and competition for mates. These programs always feature deception, backstabbing, and, yes, gossip. The intrigue surrounding questions such as, "When will he catch her cheating on him?" or "When will everyone find out whose baby that *really* is?" plays directly into the competitive interests and tactics utilized by women. In contrast, male entertainment interests in movies and TV shows featuring physical violence, warfare, and athletic competition is more reflective of male competitive interests, and hence they become intrinsically entertaining to men. The otherwise inexplicable popularity of some American reality television program such as *Survivor, Fear Factor,* and *the Amazing Race* may be due at least in part to the skill with which they tap into the competitive interests of men and women alike.

What about the fascination that people have with the lives of celebrities who are total strangers to them? One possible explanation may be found in the fact that celebrities are a recent occurrence, evolutionarily speaking. In the ancestral environment, any person about whom we knew intimate details of his or her private life was by definition a socially important member of the in-group. "There was never any selection pressure in favor of our distinguishing between genuine members of our community whose actions had real effects on our lives and those of our kin and acquaintances and the images and voices with which the entertainment industry bombards us' (Barkow, 1992, p. 630). Thus the intense familiarity with celebrities provided by the modern media trips the same gossip mechanisms that have evolved to keep up with the affairs of in-group members. After all, anyone who we see *that* often and know *that* much about *must* be socially important to us. This is especially true for television actors in soap operas that are seen on a daily basis. In fact, it has been documented that tabloids prefer stories about TV actors who are seen regularly over movie stars who are seen less often; these famous people become familiar friends whose characters take on a life of their own (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Consequently, TV doctors receive letters asking for medical advice, and people send cards and gifts to celebrate the birth of soap-opera babies. The public's interest in these high-status members of our social world seems insatiable; circulation of supermarket tabloids and magazines such as *People* and *Us* run into the tens of millions per week. People seem to be interested in almost all aspects of celebrity lives, but unflattering stories about violations of norms or bad habits are most in demand. Stories about ordinary people typically make it into the tabloids only if they concern

extraordinary events (Levin & Arluke, 1987).

In our modern world, celebrities may also serve another important social function. In a highly mobile, industrial society, celebrities may be the only "friends" people have in common with neighbors and coworkers. They provide a common interest and topic of conversation between people who otherwise might not have much to say to one another, and they facilitate the types of informal interaction that help people become comfortable in new surroundings. Hence, keeping up on the lives of actors, politicians, and athletes can make a person more socially adept during interactions with strangers and even provide segues into social relationships with new friends in the virtual world of the Internet. Research by De Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, and McAndrew (2007) finds that young people even look to celebrities and popular culture for learning life strategies that would have been learned from role models within one's tribe in the old days. Teenagers in particular seem to be prone to learning how to dress, how to manage relationships and how to be socially successful in general by tuning in to popular culture.

Conclusion

Regarding the overarching theme of this handbook, women and competition, studies of gender stereotypes have traditionally revealed "softer and gentler" impressions of women as creatures who are more likeable and just plain *nicer* than men. Such studies find that we expect women to be more cooperative, sensitive, and agreeable than men, who are perceived as more dominant, aggressive, and, yes, *competitive* (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991; Haddock & Zanna, 1994). The eminent social psychologist Alice Eagly has tagged this with the moniker "the *women-are-wonderful effect*" in an invited address at the American Psychological Association convention in 1994 (Myers, 2013). While this may appear to represent a positive state of affairs for women, Glick and Fiske (1996) believe that it ultimately leads to a form of *benevolent sexism* by which women are excluded from competitive professional opportunities because such situations are not deemed to be compatible with their "nature."

The impressive collection of scholarship in this handbook puts to rest any idea that women are not competitive, and this chapter in particular puts a damper on the notion that they are particularly agreeable and nice when they *do* compete with each other. The seemingly universal historical preoccupation with controlling the gossip of women reflects a long-standing awareness of a competitive aspect of female social life that has only recently been recognized and confirmed by empirical research. We now have documentation that women are fascinated with the affairs of other women (e.g., DeBacker, Nelissen, and Fisher, 2007; McAndrew et al., 2007; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002) and that the gossip that erupts from this fascination is explicitly driven by competitive motives (e.g., Geary & Flinn, 2002; Vaillancourt, 2013; Watson, 2012). Given that ancient people as far removed from each other as Old Testament Hebrews and pre-Confucian Chinese seemed to be aware of the link between female competition and gossip, I have been puzzled by how long it has taken psychologists and other social scientists to discover it. After all, it is not as if we were unaware that gossip existed. I believe that its omnipresence and mundane everydayness is precisely the reason it was ignored for so long. There has been a peculiar history to the progression of the sciences in that the more intimately related to daily human experience a phenomenon is, the longer it has taken to become an object of scientific study. Humans probably had a working grasp of astronomy, complete with theories about the structure and mechanisms of the universe, long before we had a scientific understanding of anything else. And yet, what could possibly be farther removed from us than objects that are literally light years away? Eventually, an understanding of physics developed in ancient Greece. Chemistry began to take shape with the alchemists of the late medieval period, and it was only about 300 years ago that any progress of note began to occur in biology. Experimental psychology did not appear until the very end of the nineteenth century, and social psychology only blossomed after World War II. Whether the late development of the science of human social behavior is due to the difficulties of doing good science when so many variables are involved, a misplaced smugness that we already "know" how it all works, or a philosophical position that such things are simply beyond the reach of science is impossible to say. But for whatever reason, the study of gossip and the role that it plays in competition between women has come late to the party. The extensive list of references at the end of this chapter reveal that virtually nothing was written about it until the 1970s, and the first experimental work in the field did not appear until the dawn of the twenty-first century. Thus the field is still in its infancy, and it will be exciting to see what develops over the next couple of decades. I hope that this chapter opens the door just a bit to allow us to take a peek at how understanding this backbone of social life will shed light on topics as diverse as aggression between women, why we become addicted to the Internet, and what makes us laugh and cry in the

movies. If nothing else, accepting gossip as an innate part of human nature may help you feel just a bit less guilty the next time you find yourself hooked on some story about a B-List celebrity about your own age.

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