

How Gossip Serves a Greater Good

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Pacific Standard:

Halfway through the 1800s, someone named Cecil B. Hartley wrote a guide titled *The Gentlemen's Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness*, which offers instruction on everything from conversation to dress to table manners to manly exercises. On the topic of gossip, Hartley advises readers to shun the practice outright, deeming it “detestable” in a woman and “utterly despicable” in a man.

His sentiment was neither new nor dated. From the Bible, which declares that a “gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret,” to modern author and etiquette columnist Mary Mitchell, who encourages people to avoid spreading stories that can both hurt and harm, centuries of collective wisdom tends to support Hartley's position that gossip is bad. In short, it's a negative force that tears people down and pulls cultures apart.

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In a new study titled “Gossip and Ostracism Promote Cooperation in Groups” and published online by the journal *Psychological Science*, researchers from Stanford and the University of California-Berkeley argue that a healthy society allows its members to talk behind each other's backs as a means of self-regulation. If one member happens to be exploiting the hard work of those around him or somehow damaging the larger whole for his own personal gain, clandestine chatter and his subsequent expulsion from the chemistry club, basketball team, or nomadic tribe can help restore equality. Gossip, in other words, can both prevent and punish freeloading.

Read the whole story: [*Pacific Standard*](#)