

Psst. I hear that gossip is not all bad.

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When I was growing up, there was a woman in the neighborhood known as The Mayor. She was not a mayor in any official sense, and in fact held no political office. She was a busybody and a gossip, and she made it her mission to spread the word on other neighbors' lives—who got a DUI last night, whose teenage daughter was pregnant, who got fired at the factory and whose car dealership was struggling. Her specialty was scandal mongering, but truth be told, she usually had her facts right.

Gossips have a reputation for being trivial and petty and often meanspirited. But is it possible that such babbling serves some valuable social purpose? Social scientists have debated this question for years, and now a team of researchers in California is offering a new idea about the upside of gossip. Matthew Feinberg of Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and colleagues propose that gossip is key to making communities aware of people's reputations—good and bad—and that this knowledge of people's actions and character is essential for the cooperation that forms society's foundation.

If true, this theory would illuminate one of the great puzzles of psychological science—why humans cooperate so readily, when self-interested exploitation would seem more advantageous. Feinberg and his colleagues believe that gossip fosters widespread cooperation, but only when it is paired with the power to ostracize scoundrels. That is, if you and I are made aware of others past behavior, we can use this knowledge to choose who to do business with in the future—and to exclude those who have earned a reputation for selfishness and dishonesty.

They tested the idea that gossip and ostracism work together as a powerful weapon against freeloaders. In the study, volunteers were given the opportunity to make a costly contribution that would benefit the group as a whole. Some made the sacrifice and some did not, and then all the volunteers moved on to another round of interaction, with another chance to cooperate but with new people. But in only some cases, group members were allowed to “gossip” first—to spread information about another member's behavior—whether that person was selfish or cooperative. In addition, only some of those who got this reputational information could use it to ostracize a disreputable group member from the future group. It was the laboratory equivalent of outing the town freeloaders and holding them accountable. The scientists expected that there would be higher levels of cooperation in groups where volunteers were able to gossip *and* that information could be used against the violator.

And that's basically what the scientists found, and describe in an article forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*. They discovered, first, that people are eager to communicate information about others' reputations, and that those who get this information readily use it to choose or avoid future interactions. This allows community members to contribute to the welfare of the community without fear of being exploited. They also found—and this is important—that people who are ostracized subsequently become cooperative.

These results suggest that ordinary gossip is what gives reputations their potency, and that this sharing of

reputations can moderate self-centered behavior. The findings also suggest that The Mayor was not alone in her scandal mongering. The rest of us may not whisper over the backyard fence, but we all likely share what we know about the community's good citizens and scoundrels—and contribute to community welfare by doing so.

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