



## Did You Know That . . . ?

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"I probably shouldn't tell you this, and it may not be true, but I heard that John. . . ." There it begins. The speaker now has the full attention of the listener, knowing that ultimately, this will not be a one-way communication. The listener soon becomes the speaker, pointing out that "I hadn't heard that, but now that I think about it, I could see John doing. . . ." Without John there to clarify the truths and half-truths from that which is false, the conversation continues, becoming more animated as more is "known" about John.

Coming home from school one day, I rush into my house to find my mother. "Mom, guess what? Mr. Smith left his wife. The other kids say he has been having an affair with someone and now she is pregnant!" "David, I've told you many times it's not nice to talk that way. Now, how was your day at school?" The discussion ends, and I am left wondering why what I said was so awful.

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In the cafeteria at university, I sit down with two friends who are talking. The topic of conversation is a mutual friend of ours. Noticing my discomfort, one friend asks why I am being so quiet. I point out my hesitance to talk about someone who is not present. "Dave, how can you understand somebody if you don't talk about him? Ron is in some sort of trouble, and we're talking about him because we care."

When is gossip gossip and when is it not? Is gossip different from "talk," discussion, or conversation? Is a dialogue gossip just because it is about an absent person, or is there more to it than that? These and other questions come to mind. As a so-called "helping professional," I find myself talking with my peers about clients or students (or about other peers!): I tell myself I discuss these others because I truly want to understand them, to formulate clearly for myself what I think of them. How else will I begin to help them? This formulation is certainly necessary; in fact, much of counselor training involves "figuring out" clients in a structured way. We have seminars in which videotapes of sessions are reviewed and each seminar member contributes thoughts on the client's behavior. Sometimes, though, the tone changes in the middle of these conversations—particularly after a statement like "You wouldn't believe the client I had today!"—and I find myself thinking "This is structured gossip, not structured discussion." I am then left wondering if caring is really the motive behind the dialogue. Even if caring is the motive, does this make our conversations something other than gossip?

When discussing an issue or another person, the quest is for truth. We want to understand that part of the world being discussed: if the topic is another person, we want to understand why that person behaves as he or she does so that we can better relate to the person. When gossiping, we talk about a third party, and we care about *something* or we would not be bothering to gossip. But what is the object of our care? The expression “idle gossip” suggests we just care to pass the time; that gossip has no direction. “Malicious gossip” implies that we care to hurt someone. And the expression “juicy gossip” points us to something forbidden. These expressions indicate three views of gossip, but what actually occurs in gossip? Merely sharing information about another person is not always gossip. For example, “Bob quit his job” does not necessarily begin a gossip session. “Bob quit his job, but I think it was because he was caught stealing from the company” is more likely to begin gossip. How do we know this? Also, how do we know that the reply “I always suspected Bob was dishonest” is a sure sign that gossip has begun? We see obvious content differences, but we need to look at more than just the words exchanged: Who is being referred to? What is the relationship between the speaker and the one being referred to? How are the statements being made? What is the nature of the topic which the other is involved in? These are questions we need to examine more closely.

### Risk

The experience of gossip occurs through our way of interacting with another. Indeed, some can make any event the focus of gossip just through the manner of telling. There is a way of speaking peculiar to gossip; a manner of telling which requires no particular sort of content. Our subdued tone of voice and leaning forward in our chair suggest something secretive. We feel a sense of mission—time is against us and the words don’t come out fast enough. But we must temper our speed: What we have to say is too important to just blurt out. Timing is crucial in developing a sense of expectancy in our listener. We feel expectant as well, but our excitement is not merely related to the morsel which we have to tell. We become anxious while we wait for our listener’s reply, all the while thinking “Does he find this as ‘gossipy’ as I do? Will he think this is none of our business? Is he ‘above’ this kind of talk? Or, will this be ‘old news’ to him?” We have taken a risk and feel a sense of uneasiness accompanying our excitement.

Our sense of uneasiness remains until our telling is met with surprise (even if what we are saying is not really surprising); a “No! Really?” or variation thereof. Not just any surprise will do, however. Our partner must be surprised at the *event* we are telling rather than at the *telling* itself. A reply of “So what?” shows us that our partner is surprised that we are even bothering with our telling. This implied judgment of our excessive morality effectively ends the

possibility for gossip. Our telling can be judged in another way: “How can you even think that?” indicates surprise at our moral impurity while highlighting our listener’s innocence. Our listener’s innocence is important in gossip, but it must be in relation to the person we are gossiping about rather than in relation to ourselves. Our listener must be surprised at the other, not us. Only veteran gossipers may not show surprise, nodding and behaving as if what they have just heard is exactly what they expected. But here we are not at risk: We know that “real” gossipers are worldly and can gossip about anything. We know that they will not be surprised at our willingness to gossip—they have “heard it all.”

After we have received the necessary response we wait for something more. Our gossip session is not really in full-swing until the information we’ve given is worked with, commented on, and elaborated. If we begin with “Bob quit his job,” our manner of throwing out this initial tidbit of information merely sets the tone for what is to continue—our partner in the session must respond in certain ways for our interaction to truly be gossip. Gossip is not just exchanged commentary, it is a building of ideas about the other, ideas which take on a specific form.

### Judgment

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Our partner, sitting in the kitchen or cafeteria with us, asks “Why did Bob quit?” knowing by our tone that Bob did not quit because he was offered a better position somewhere else. No, our partner knows that gossip is beginning, and has responded with the only acceptable query for gossip to continue. With the “Why?” we are able to respond with our knowledge or speculation of Bob’s reasons for his action. Bob’s reasons for his decision are the interesting part of gossip because they tell us something more about Bob than we can directly see. His reasons allow us to reflect on who he is; what his motivations are; what type of person he is. In gossip, information is exchanged which allows us to make judgments about the other. Our judgments in gossip are ones of *character*, that is, we generalize about the other’s way of being. “I always suspected Bob was dishonest,” is a judgment of Bob’s character. Dishonesty is just one aspect of character; however, like all character traits it is the person’s *choice* to be that way. The aspect of decision is important here: Gossip rarely centers around the inevitable in life. We do not gossip about the fact that someone’s spouse died; however, we do gossip about how that person is “handling it.” The death of the spouse is not as interesting in gossip as the way the survivor deals with the loss. The way the person deals with it indicates the person’s character—“She’s a strong lady”—and this is the focus of gossip.

The relationship between character and gossip is as old as the word “gossip” itself. The term originated with *godsibbe* (Morris & Morris, 1971), *god* having the same usage as today, while *sibbe* has the

meaning of relative or kin. *Godsibbe* means godparent, the person related to god who sponsors a child at baptism. A godparent is responsible for the development of the child's moral character in the event of failure on the parents' behalf. As *godsibbe* changed to "gossip," it was extended to refer to intimate friends, those who knew one's private affairs. Acting as a *gossip* meant acting as a trusted, guiding confidant, helping one avoid the *unsibis* (lawless, wicked) life (Skeat, 1910).

From godparent to guiding confidant, gossip has become a sharing of information about a third party, information which tells us something about the person's character. Whereas "character" has accompanied "gossip" throughout its change in meaning, the notions of trust, guidance, responsibility, and caring have not. The relationship has changed in such a way that the present day gossipper is anonymous to the other. Thus guidance is not possible and the sense of responsibility to the other is lost.

Like the *godsibbe*, we do not judge character in and of itself. The continuation of our gossip session requires that the other's character is found to be different than our own or, at least, different than it "should" be. "Sue and Gord slept together last weekend" is a likely beginning to a gossip session provided that the gossipers see this as a wrong-doing. If the gossipers are "sexually liberated," Sue and Gord's sexual behavior is no more interesting than their movie-going behavior. "Linda is pregnant" only becomes fodder for gossip if, in the view of those gossiping, Linda should not be.

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### The Other

The other's character is compared to our own or compared to what it should be. But what makes the other available for gossip? By its very nature, gossip requires an absent other. The identity of the absent other may influence the nature of gossip, or even change gossip to nongossip. Further, our relationship with the other may decide whether we are gossiping or just conversing.

When gossiping with a neighbor in our kitchen or over the fence in the backyard, the other is someone we both know. We could gossip about our boss or fellow employees with our neighbor, but doing so requires that we give a history or biography of this unfamiliar other. If we do not, our neighbor cannot really engage with us in assessing the other's character. More importantly, the neighbor will not care to engage. Although different from *sibbe*, there is a relationship between the gossipper and the other. In neighborly gossip the other is often a neighbor (perhaps a recent one) in the community. "What do you think of so-and-so who moved in down the street?" may begin the conversation. This may appear to be idle talk, but its frequent occurrence in communities suggests there is more to this than just passing the time. The other's "goodness of fit" into our community is being established: We are asking ourselves whether the other has

the character that we perceive our community (and therefore, ourselves) to have. In this process of comparison we are both defining our community with our neighbor (fellow employee, classmate) and placing the other outside of it until judgment has passed.

### **“Us” and “Them”**

The definition of the character of our community, whether the community is the area where we live, our workplace, school, or place of worship, is a form of moral discourse. Using the other, we examine how life should be lived: “If I was in that position, this is what I’d do. . . .” Unlike examining our own lives, gossip provides us with distance. We examine our lives by implication—by judging the character of the other we indirectly judge ourselves. However, the indirectness of the examination weakens our judgments. When we say “I always suspected Bob was dishonest” we imply and assume, rather than examine and ascertain, our own honesty. Thus by judging implicitly, we really keep true judgment away from ourselves and those we gossip with. When we talk about another with a friend, our friend is being moral, just as we are. When our friend agrees with our assessment of another, we feel close: We have found someone with the same kind of character as our own. By gossiping with them, we find out what our neighbors, classmates, and co-workers perceive themselves to be like. Our very willingness to gossip with another suggests a trust, an intimacy, between ourself and our gossip partner. Our gossiping with another is a statement of our opinion of their character and a putting forth of our character. Through the process of defining a community, gossip creates and coheres the community. Gossip is a normative activity which creates a “we” through contrast with a “they.”

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### **Betrayal**

We distance the other by making the other one of “them.” “You just can’t trust . . .” begins the sentiment ending with “bosses,” “professors,” “women,” or “men.” To use Buber’s (1958) words, our relationship with the other becomes *I-It* rather than *I-Thou*. This alienation of the other becomes especially important when the other is an established member of the community in question. Gossip can make “one of us” into “one of them,” and here we see the possibilities for malicious gossip. When we gossip about the other rather than dialogue with the other, no resolution is possible. We distance ourselves from the other by making the other a “character” rather than a person, by judging instead of understanding. A gossip columnist’s comment, “You can’t write a gossip column without writing clichés,” (Lapham, 1986, p. 50) illustrates this characterization.

Betrayal is an important consideration in distinguishing the experience of gossip from the experience of other talk. We may use information against the other which was obtained in trust. In counseling practice, we often view videotapes of sessions where the therapist

appears to be unconditionally accepting the client (and consequently obtaining a great deal of information from the client) while hearing the client's various misdeeds. Meanwhile, the same therapist who is watching the tape with us is giving a running commentary along the lines of "Can you believe this guy? He should be locked up!" The therapist is truly "talking behind his back," that is, telling others things which are hidden from the client. The therapeutic encounter has become voyeurism for the purpose of subsequent gossip. Telling others we believe George is dishonest is a different kind of telling if we are hiding this judgment from George rather than if we have told George our opinion. Thus it can be different speaking about your spouse or best friend than speaking about an acquaintance or celebrity. We are more likely to know if the former would consider our talk to be a breach of trust. If the other does not care that we relay information about him or her, we may not be gossiping. For example, if we have seen John tell a group of people at a party that his marriage is in trouble, are we really gossiping when we tell this to someone else? A better indicator of gossip would be our telling someone else that "John will do anything for attention; he even told a group of people at the party about his marriage."

A form of betrayal can be seen in reading gossip columns or hearing about celebrities on television shows. How can we betray a celebrity whom we do not even know? At first glance, it may appear that celebrities are the other in gossip because they have "made it" in the world and appear better than ourselves. Their indiscretions demonstrate to us that they, too, are human. However, this view may be somewhat glib: Perhaps there is more of a dialectic between celebrity-status and gossip than is immediately apparent. The making of a celebrity may require gossip as much as it requires success. Many find the name Margaret Trudeau very familiar but few of us know Mr. Walton, the richest man in the United States (Lapham, 1986). One is considered a "personality" and the other is not. It is we who render someone a celebrity or hero; "making it" in the world is not enough. In the words of G.K. Chesterton (1908, as cited in Lapham, 1986),

There has crept, I notice, into our literature and journalism a new way of flattering the wealthy and the great. In more straightforward times flattery itself was more straightforward; falsehood itself was more true. A poor man wishing to please a rich man simply said that he was the wisest, bravest, tallest, strongest, most benevolent and most beautiful of mankind; and as even the rich man probably knew that he wasn't that, the thing did the less harm. . . . The modern method is to take the prince or rich man, to give a credible picture of his type of personality, as that he is business-like, or a sportsman, or fond of art, or convivial, or reserved; and then enormously exaggerate the value and importance of these natural qualities. . . . The old flatterer took for granted that the King was an ordinary man, and set to work to make him out extraordinary. The newer and cleverer flatterer takes for granted that he is extraordinary, and that

therefore even ordinary things about him will be of interest. (p. 43)

In days of old, the titled and the rich had enormous influence over our lives. Now we choose who influence us, our culture, and our fashions. We *give* others this influence, thereby creating celebrities. In turn, we retract or betray this giving through gossip: We find weaknesses in this character which we have created. It is as if we set up “extraordinary” expectations of our heroes only to ensure that they cannot live up to them. This process reflects the more subtle enactment of our own interplay between morals and action. We establish for ourselves the character which we wish to be but, like celebrities, inevitably fall short of in our action. We may drink and drive, but “How could a great hockey player like so-and-so do such a thing?” The direct examination of this failing of ours is painful, often too painful to even contemplate. We use the other, the politician, the movie star, the teacher, or the priest, to distance the possibility of examining ourselves and our failures.

### **Absolution**

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Gossip can be a vindication of the discrepancy between the ideal and real in ourselves, a vindication which we crave. When we gossip, something in us is piqued—an insatiable curiosity. “Did you know that . . .” expressed in the tone of voice that suggests incredulity, immediately gets our attention and prepares us for the unexpected, the surprise. Few things in life are more painful than someone beginning “Did you know that . . .” and then interrupting themselves with “No, I really shouldn’t tell you, just forget it.” A similar cruelty occurs when a musician does not play the last note of a well-known piece: The note pleads to be played. What do we wait for in gossip?

The expectation arising from “Did you know that . . .” is that we will hear of a wrong-doing of some sort. The wrong-doing will either allow us to make a judgment or it will confirm the judgment already made. In either case, it is an absolution of our own shortcomings. We feel this when we hear of wrong-doings on the part of members of our spiritual community. Our minister or priest seems to be speaking directly to us when standing at the pulpit, reminding us of our digressions and exhorting us to be morally pure. We feel we are certainly the most impure of the congregation—at least until gossip begins. While gossiping we hear someone mention a moral error of a member of the congregation. This is what we have waited to hear: We are not the only impure ones.

Judging others removes judgment from ourselves. Gossip terminates when our friend asks “How can you say that? You do the same thing yourself.” We feel betrayed: The judgment has been turned to us. Now we must reflect on our own life and justify our own actions, a difficult task which lowers our enthusiasm for further discussion.

## Care

Earlier, I introduced caring as a means of distinguishing gossip from the act of discussing another. Gossip does involve a form of caring—caring about ourselves; caring about our status as moral beings. Gossip confirms the status of our character without examining the actuality of our character. As a normative process, gossiping is a caring for the “shoulds” and “oughts” of a community. Statements such as “I heard that Dr. Jones finally got caught for trying to seduce some of his students. It’s about time” indicate that gossipers care *about* the other without caring *for* the other. In therapy we are supposed to care for the other and hope to better understand and relate to the other. This understanding of the client may require discussion between colleagues. But here there is no need for judgment of character: References to our client being a “pathological liar” or “incorrigible kleptomaniac” are nothing but technical forms of gossip. We may notice that our client has been dishonest in the course of therapy, but this observation should point us to something deeper. We should be asking “How does this dishonesty enable the person to cope with her world? What is it about his or her world that creates the necessity for lying? What can we do to make the ‘therapy-world’ a place wherein the client can be comfortably honest?” Answering these questions requires no judgment of character and no reflection of the other’s character in comparison to our own. These queries demand a deep understanding of the other and his or her world.

If therapeutic concerns involve understanding rather than judgment, how does the possibility for therapists’ gossip arise? Retracing our steps, we find a suggestion in the word’s origins. A *gossip* was a guiding confidant, one who advised and facilitated the other’s development of character. But is this guidance part of the role of the therapist? In one sense, the *godsibbe* is the therapist’s ancestor. The therapist’s *being* as therapist comes about through guidance, by guiding the client on the path of fulfilling his or her own being. Our clients seek us because they do not have a mentor or *godsibbe*. Sometimes, though, it is easy for us to focus on the nature of guidance itself at the expense of our attention toward the client. Then, like the gossip, we look at the “shoulds” and “oughts” of character. “Characters” are easier to deal with than persons: “Alcoholics commonly behave in such and such a manner. Neurotics, mind you, are a bit different.”

In gossip the “shoulds” and “oughts” are differentiated, delineated, and clarified. “If only she would leave him . . .” is a variant of a common sentiment in gossip (particularly familial gossip). “If only . . . then . . .” is a prescription for the other; one which, if followed, will “solve” the other’s problems. But the prescription here is for our gain: The other’s behavior offends our sense of order and decency. “How can she be so stupid? Why does she put up with her boss’s

advances? She should report him!" These statements show a concern for principles, not persons. However, we can talk prescriptively without gossiping. Prescriptive statements about the other exchanged amongst therapists, friends, or family can express a caring hope rather than a directive for the other to follow: "If he would just open up in our sessions . . ." is an expression of our caring for the client. Prescriptions in gossip are distinguished by their normative nature. Gossip directives intend to order *our* world and conform others to our conception of character. The other's struggle to be is obscured or ignored and prescriptions are given for prescriptions' sake.

The therapist creating his or her own being can easily fall into the temptation of attempting to mold the other's being. Allowing others to engage in their own painful battles with being and nonbeing in their own way can be difficult, if not tortuous. We feel an urge to jump in and "make things right." As a descendant of the *godsibbe*, the true therapist avoids this entrapment in "idle," "juicy," or "malicious" gossip by forming a caring and responsible relationship with the client.

### References

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