

Where's the Good?

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Mary's paper invites inquiry into the "kinds of relations constructed when we engage in...gossiping." Her own inquiry focuses mainly on the activity of gossiping itself and on the relations between those who gossip. I hope to contribute to this discussion by examining the relation between the activity of gossip and its content and the relation between gossipers and those about whom they gossip.

GOSSIP: TALKING BEHIND OTHERS' BACKS

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a fully developed conception of gossip. But I do want to at least sketch some of the characteristics of gossip that seem to distinguish it from other kinds of communicative interactions. Different authors treat gossip somewhat differently, but there appears to be widespread agreement that this sort of communication has two defining characteristics.¹ First, most broadly, the "content" of gossip is a person or group of people. One may engage in casual conversation or small talk about the state of the economy, recipes for apple pie, or lawn care products; but one does not gossip about these things. (Just try gossiping about the weather, a favorite topic of small talk: Can you believe it!? Low atmospheric pressure is actually moving into *our* geographic region!) Somewhat more specifically, gossip is concerned with matters that those who are gossiped about do not themselves discuss publicly.

This suggests a second characteristic of gossip. Gossip entails the exclusion of the person who is the topic of gossip. Gossip occurs behind the backs of others; one does not gossip about others *with* them. There is insufficient space here to discuss all the kinds of behind-the-back talk that are not gossip, so I will offer just a few examples. Generally speaking, behind-the-back talk is not gossip when the aim of talk is to provide public information. A professor is not engaged in gossip when she informs students about, say, an absent colleague's office hours or course offerings. Behind-the-back talk that is intended to help the person under discussion is usually not gossip. A teacher who consults her colleagues about instructional methods for a dyslexic child is not gossiping. Typically, discussing others behind their backs is not gossip when the talked about person's absence is incidental to, rather than a condition of, the discussion. A doctor who talks with other medical personnel about an unconscious patient's care is not gossiping. In short, there are lots of ways of talking behind others' backs without gossiping about them; but if one is not talking about others behind their backs, one is probably engaged in something other than gossip.

Gossip is also exclusive in the sense that it leaves out those who do not already share certain values. Louise Collins argues that gossip can commence and be sustained only among like-minded individuals:

First, we must share the meta-value that engaging in gossip is worthwhile. Second, we must agree with most of the evaluative judgements of the group with respect to the range of subjects discussed...Tied to these shared evaluations is a shared outlook in a broader sense

— witness the expressions “of course,” “needless to say,” “you’ll never believe” which presuppose consensus on what is obvious, inevitable, or incredible, what normally happens, what people usually do.²

THE CONTENT AND CONSEQUENCES OF GOSSIP

Mary observes that most philosophers have based their criticisms of gossip on its content, and suggests that a more fruitful alternative is to analyze gossip as a “form of relating.” There is a sense, though, in which separating gossip’s content and form is quite difficult; gossip is partly defined by its content: other people. Now, one can certainly analyze gossip without making *value judgments* about its content. Anthropologists are engaged in this kind of analysis when they describe such things as the rules governing who is included in and excluded from gossip or the means by which gossip helps to establish and maintain social norms.³ But Mary does not merely describe gossip as a “form of relating,” she attributes positive value to this kind of communicative interaction.

As my brief description of gossip may indicate, I do not assume that gossip is inherently bad. I question, however, whether the activity of gossiping has positive value in the abstract, that is, without regard for what gossipers say about an absent third party or for the consequences of their comments. Some of the philosophers who have criticized gossip may embrace the views that language is “transparent,” that communication is a mere “transmission” of ideas, or that “subject matter unproblematically determines meaning.” But it is not clear that criticisms of gossip hinge on such views. One may share Mary’s preference for an alternative that emphasizes “active understandings and nuanced constructings,” and still find gossip problematic when it entails, for example, spreading unfounded rumors or intentionally deceiving others.

The question about valuing gossip in the abstract occurred to me as I reflected on a news report about gossip among adolescent boys. The boys’ gossip, one might assume, had all the characteristics Mary attributes to this activity; it was “joyous and playful” and gave them “genuine satisfaction.” The “content” of their gossip included “rating” their female classmates on the basis of certain physical attributes, such as breast size. This is hardly an example of gossip in the extreme. But those who find this case unsettling will likely do so not because the boys gossiped — as Mary notes, nearly everyone gossips — but rather because of what they said while gossiping. If the boys had gossiped instead about some of the girls’ other attributes, say, their wit and intelligence, then most people, I think, would find their talk unobjectionable.

One reason why the content of some gossip raises concerns is that it has potentially harmful consequences. Gossip’s potential to harm others is less obvious when we look only at the relation among those engaged in gossiping. But this activity entails another relation, largely overlooked in Mary’s paper: that is the relation between those who gossip, and the person or group about whom they gossip.

The gossip in which girls were rated according to a physical attribute is most troubling when one considers its immediate consequences for the girls. When they learned what their classmates had said, the girls felt ashamed and humiliated. Gossip

may also have subtler consequences, regardless of whether those gossiped about are aware of what's been said behind their backs. If Collins is correct, gossip tends to reinforce beliefs and attitudes about others; assuming that our attitudes regarding others affect how we treat them, then gossip may have consequences for the quality of relations we can establish and sustain. These consequences are not necessarily negative; to reiterate, much depends on what is actually said. One can imagine that gossip among teachers reinforcing the belief that a particular student is exceptionally gifted will lead those who have reached this conclusion to treat her accordingly. However, regarding the boys' gossip, one can imagine that what was said reinforced the view that females are appropriately regarded mainly as sex objects. And it is not too great a stretch to suppose that this attitude is reflected in the boys' real-time treatment of girls and women.

Mary seems to locate the good in gossip in its consequences for gossipers themselves, arguing that "the emotional engagement in [gossip], like art, changes the way we look at the world." Aside from the question of whether gossip tends to reinforce or to challenge participants' outlook on the world is the question of whether this change is for the better. It appears to me that how the second question is answered depends in part, again, on the content of gossip. In gossip, one can discuss others with care and respect, but one can also, as Mary acknowledges, tell lies, pass along secrets, and say things that "unquestionably injure the person talked about." Generally speaking, the first kind of gossip appears more likely to change gossipers' outlook for the better, since this provides a kind of "practice" in treating others, if even only at arms-length, carefully and respectfully.

Mary's essay inadvertently suggests just how difficult it is to judge gossip in the abstract. Much of what seems to distinguish "good gossip" is its content; in "good gossip" what gets talked about includes such things as the "[gossipers'] unique embrace of the 'facts' and 'themes' of the past...and hopes for the future." While Mary criticizes other philosophers for basing their criticisms of gossip on its content, as noted above, she appears to agree that the content of at least some gossip "obviously invites our moral condemnations."

CONCLUDING COMMENT

I am not convinced by the traditional arguments that gossip is necessarily bad. But I am also skeptical about recent work extolling gossip's virtues.⁴ My guess is that when there is good in gossip, that good will be found in the same place as the bad: the details.

1. See, for example, Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben Ze'ev, eds., *Good Gossip* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994) and Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk?: A Social History of "Gossip" in Working-class Neighborhoods, 1880-1960* (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1995).

2. Louise Collins, "Gossip: A Feminist Defense," in Goodman and Ben Ze'ev, *Good Gossip* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 109.

3. See, for example, Max Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4: 307-316.

4 See, for example, Goodman and Ze'ev, *Good Gossip*.