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From the 8/96 issue of Psychology Today:

The English word "gossip" originated as "godsibb," meaning "a person related to one in God," or a godparent. Until the 1800s, "gossip" denoted friendship. Today gossip is defined by the dictionary as "chatty talk; the reporting of sensational or intimate information."

"If people aren't talking about other people, it's a signal that something is wrong - that we feel socially alienated or indifferent," says Ralph Rosnow, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Temple University and coauthor of *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*.

"For a real understanding of our social environment, gossip is essential," agrees Jack Levin, Ph.D., professor of sociology and criminology at Boston's Northeastern University and coauthor of *Gossip: The Inside Scoop*. "Its primary function is to help us make social comparisons. For example, if we read bad news about celebrities in the tabloids, or get into the gruesome details of our neighbor's misery over a cup of coffee, our own problems begin to pale in comparison."

Many people may gain from being gossiped about. Targets of gossip are made more human, more easy to identify with.

Gossip is a way for people to let you know, without confrontation, the limits on personal behavior. "If you move into a community and your neighbor tells you how the previous homeowner never disposed of his garbage properly, his gossip is letting you in on something else.

"Gossip shepherds the herd. It says: these are the boundaries and you're crossing them. You're not abiding by the rules and you'd better get back in step," says Rosnow.

"If you want to know about the kind of insurance coverage your employer offers, look in the company handbook," says Levin. "But if you want to know who to avoid, who the boss loves or loathes, who to go to when you need help, what it really takes to get a promotion or raise, and how much you can safely slack off, you're better off paying attention to the company grapevine."

Gossip tells you who's in. If you're worth being talked about, you're in. If you've got valuable information, you're in.

Kids' gossip is more innocent and cruel than that of adults. "Cruel comments, but effective ones," says Levin, "because the target learns some important information. Namely, that he is not invisible to the rest of the world. The result? This vital piece of information [badly dressed, a cheater or whatever] helps him see he needs to change his offensive

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behavior."

Women gossip more than men. Women talk about people in their lives while men engage in "shop talk," which revolves around work, sports stars, politicians...

"Gossip is similar to a Rorschach test," says Levin. "If you look at the nature of someone's gossip, you can find out what concerns them."

"We found that people who gossip the most rank highest on the anxiety scale," says Rosnow. "Not only do they disclose more, but the anxious are on the receiving end of gossip more often and are more likely than those less anxious to consider information crucial."

Dr. Gary Allen Fine says "we gossip about people we care about. We don't bother talking about people who don't matter to us."

Most of the time, the gossip spread between two people about a third absent friend is neutral news: a pregnancy, a promotion. But betraying a confidence, spreading sensitive information like an adulterous affair, can end a friendship.

When Dr. Rosnow asked subjects who they "liked," he found gossipees - the people being talked about - were usually not the most popular, essentially because they're different and don't conform. But the people engaging in gossip weren't particularly popular either because of their untrustworthiness.

Gossip is always about people, involving either fact or supposition. Rumors may or may not involve people but are always speculative. Rosnow says rumors deal with people's anxieties. There are two types: wish rumors that we hope are true, and dread rumors that we pray are false.

"Rumors are an echo of ourselves," says Dr. Jean-Noel Kapferer. "They reveal the desires, fears, and obsessions of a society."

In an essay in the New Republic, Nicholas Lemann writes: "Gossip is an appurtenance of a striving, socially unified society. It's worth watching as a barometer of our aspirations. As the middle classes obtain for themselves the glamorous, turbulent lives of the rich and famous, there is real danger that gossip as we know it could wither away. We could return to the status quo, ante-Society in which nobody's personal life was considered to be nationally riveting.

"The truth is, the proper time to become alarmed about the role of gossip in American Society is when there starts to be less of it."

© Associated Newspapers Ltd., 31 July 1998, This Is London:

Old-fashioned gossip is not only about dishing the dirt - it is essential to survival, according to an academic study today. Any employer who wants a happy and efficient company should let office gossip continue rather than try to stamp it out, the report claimed.

It revealed that the need to gossip and spread rumours is an instinct modern humans have kept since the Stone Age.

In those days it was vital to swap information on where the food was and to let others know who was the chief hunter, and so on. Today it is not that much different says Nigel Nicholson, professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School. "People create rumours when they are uncertain and need to create certainty to fill a vacuum," he added. "They gossip to create a social network and put themselves in that circle and give themselves an advantage by being in with the right group.

"Gossiping - which goes back to the Stone Age and beyond - is good for you. It makes you more psychologically positive. "A good boss should not try to quash rumours and gossip with memos and e-mail, he should get involved in it. I call it management-by-wandering-about. Go out there and communicate properly. He should know what people talk about."

The report, published by the influential journal Harvard Business Review, urges employers to communicate by talking instead of on computers or paper.

Without the traditional gossip network - from neighbours chatting over the garden fence to political spin doctors - society could crumble. "Any social system needs gossip to remain intact," he added.

Morality of Gossip

Luke: When I first came to Judaism, I took on the value that gossip was a sin. It was destructive and unethical. Then, from late 1995 onwards, I resumed my career as a journalist. Part of my job is to deal in gossip. I read Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's book on gossip (*Words That Wound, Words That Heal*) and found it initially impressive. Now I've developed a reputation as a professional gossip. That it is what I do for a living. I've now also revised my views on the morality of gossip. I now think of gossip as like any other activity, morally neutral. The morality of gossip depends entirely on its content and context. I now no longer think of gossip as overwhelmingly destructive.

I'm reading a book entitled "Good Gossip." It is one of many academic works over the past few years in praise of gossip, pointing out the good that gossip does, such as bonding, community, developing, enforcing and subverting norms, challenging power, overturning institutions. I no longer agree with the comment that idiots talk about people, and the wise about ideas. Why are ideas more important than people? Sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. Context is king.

Ethel: "My experience with gossip was work-related. I took a college course on management of human resources. To my great shock, there was a section defining the grapevine as a legitimate communication source. It changed my whole POV concerning gossip. It's so rational too. So it's really important to accept gossip and then manage it personally so it doesn't effect one's own good judgement. One's personal observations should be primary when decision-making is needed."

Larry: Gossip serves an additional role that is still significant today, but was very important to our ancestors. Gossip develops the values, significance, judgmental capacity, and group consensus -- or chasm -- of the gossipers.

I agree with Luke's words, "...the good that gossip does, such as bonding, community, developing, enforcing and subverting norms..."

Ancestors were ravaged by disease, infirmity, and the elements, to an extent that we find hard to imagine. If a member of the group were suspected of being, what we now call, less lucid then drawing that person into gossip could test that person's judgment.

Puzzles are central to mythology ; ditto for gossip. I wonder if any languages have one word for our two concepts: myth and gossip.

There's that guy on the radio, who's arguing for the importance of Values in our schools. Lots of settings determine values ---

-- Eye-to-eye explanation from parent to child

-- Formal explanation by religious institutions

-- Formal teaching by schools.

Some people have the audacity to claim that **actual practice** is at least half as significant as **formal explanation** in these three settings.

Now, let's consider ----- gossip: Children's values are shaped as much

by vicarious participation in gossip, as they are shaped by some of the settings mentioned above.

Among teenagers exploring the realm of less-restricted behavior, gossip is not so much about confirming 'valid' information about THEM 'over there.' Instead, gossip forges and shepherds the behavior of oneself and one's closest peers. It does so for better or worse.

In summary, here's another puzzle: As a whole, gossip is bad. Yet not only is some gossip good, some is essential.

From The New Republic, William Powers writes 6/9/97:

...undergirding all tabloid journalism is a rigid code of right and wrong, in which people are held to very particular standards of behavior. In this system, which may be the closest thing we have today to a universal populist ethos, all the ancient social norms are honored: thou shalt not kill, rape, steal, lie and so forth. But in the tabloids' reckoning of the world, which is calculated to mirror that of the supermarket masses, two sins in particular--pride and hypocrisy-- have special importance. This is why the JonBenet Ramsey case, which in the tabloid storyline is really about two parents who exploited their daughter's beauty to feed their own pride, is the premier tabloid story of the day. Many children are murdered each year, but this is not just a murder story, it's a morality play about a "tiny beauty" and her wicked stage parents. "Away from the bright lights," the Star reported, "she just wanted to be a normal kid." This is probably pretty much the way most Americans see the story, too.

And to the tabloids, the O.J. Simpson story, which preceded JonBenet in the number-one spot, was not a parable about race, as the mainstream media suggested. It was about a celebrity who thought he was above the law. (And this is certainly the way a lot of people saw the O.J. case.) Nothing raises tabloid fury more than the spectacle of a celebrity getting away with something, or getting above himself. In the pages of the National Enquirer, drug abuse, infidelity and myriad other wrongs are often forgiven, but if you are caught pretending to be something you're not--caught being too big for your britches--they'll flay you. Far from mindlessly adoring celebrities in the way the New York glossies and many newspapers do, the tabloids cover movie stars and other famous people with one eye narrowed, ever-vigilant for phoniness, grossness or some species of immoral behavior. Violators are swiftly, gleefully cut down. It is ruthless and ugly and cruel, but it is arguably more honest than the way the proper press covers these things. Who do you think has a truer sense of Roseanne--the average tabloid reader or the reader of John Lahr's New Yorker valentine?

When Magic Johnson was revealed to be infected with the HIV virus, who did a more brutally honest job of covering the story of his promiscuous lifestyle--the tabs or the Times?

From 12/27/2000 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

But the battle against gossip has been a long and mostly unsuccessful one, partly because it's such a fixture of human communication, according to Dan Santoro, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh -- Johnstown.

"People have always gossiped," he said. "Maybe, at one time, gossip was news if you lived in a village and there were no formal channels for disseminating information."

In pre-industrial societies, he said, relationships were based on customs and traditions. "What was really important," Santoro said, "was your reputation. The fear of your reputation being questioned kept people in line.

"In our society right now, it has just become a big industry. Your personal reputation isn't as important as it used to be."

Gossip and rumors always have been a part of politics. In her book, "Scorpion Tongues: The Irresistible History of Gossip in American Politics" (William Morrow, 1998), author Gail Collins writes about George Washington's alleged mistresses, the rumor that Grover Cleveland beat his wife so severely during her pregnancy that their daughter was born with extensive brain damage and the story that when Woodrow Wilson proposed to his second wife, she was so surprised that she fell out of bed.

Various magazines, talk shows and TV programs featuring "stars" such as Rush Limbaugh, Howard Stern and Don Imus track the real and imagined peccadilloes of public figures.

Jim Lichtman, an author and ethics specialist in Santa Barbara, Calif., divides gossip into two categories: talk among family and friends, and malicious or unethical gossip. That does not mean, he said, that either is right. "Would you want somebody passing around inaccurate or false rumors about yourself?" he asked.

"The real criteria we should use, although it sounds simple, is to more or less follow the golden rule: 'Do unto others as you would have others do to you.' "

Lichtman is author of "The Lone Ranger's Code of the West" (Scribblers Ink, 1996), a book focusing on eight ethical values of the

masked do-gooder. A frequent speaker on ethics to corporations, Lichtman likes to challenge his audiences to ponder ethics questions with, "What would the Lone Ranger do?"

It's a way, he said, to force people to be more conscious about their decisions and have a greater commitment to ethical values. To that end, Lichtman said, a person doesn't have to speak gossip in order to be guilty of it. And it doesn't stop there.

"As soon as you participate in it, you are involved," he said. "You begin to lower the bar for yourself. Other things become less important. "In business and in public life today ... the thing you erode away faster than anything else is trust. Once the credibility is gone ... you're going to have to work two, three, four times as hard to get it back."