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Rumor and Gossip Research

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Popular and media interest in rumor and gossip never seems to wane, but psychological research on rumor has been cyclical and that on gossip has, until recently, been dormant (Foster, 2004). World War II saw a burst of interest in the psychology of rumor and rumor control. Seminal work was done by Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman (1947), the impetus for which was their concern about the damage to morale and national safety caused by menacing rumors spreading needless alarm and raising extravagant hopes (p. vii). There was some formative research in the following decade (e.g., Back, Festinger, Kelley, Schachter, & Thibaut, 1950; hachter & Burdick, 1955) and then a period of quiescence. Another cycle of interest is evident in the late-1960s and 1970s, starting with the publication of sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani's (1966) book, the Kerner et al. (1968) report on civil disorders, and Milgram and Toch's (1969) essay on collective behavior, followed by other books written from a sociological or psychological perspective (Morin, 1971; Knopf, 1975; Rosnow & Fine, 1976). More recently, there has been another spate of books on rumor and gossip (Fine & Turner, 2001; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Kapferer, 1990; Kimmel, 2004; Koenig, 1985; Levin & Arluke, 1987; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998; Turner, 1993). There has also been a flurry of research and conferences focused on these and related forms (e.g., Fine, Heath, & Campion-Vincent, in press), though there continues to be more theory and speculation than empirical research. Nonetheless, there have been empirically grounded insights.

We should distinguish between rumor and gossip, as each appears to function differently in its pure state. Rumors have been described as public communications that are infused with private hypotheses about how the world works (Rosnow, 1991), or more specifically, ways of making sense to help us cope with our anxieties and uncertainties (Rosnow, 1988, 2001). On the other hand, as Wert and Salovey (2004b) noted, "almost as many functions of gossip have been argued as writers to write about gossip" (p. 77). More than rumor, gossip tends to have an "inner-circleness" about it, in that it is customarily passed between people who have a common history or shared interests. Popular usage defines gossip as "small talk" or "idle talk," but gossip is hardly inconsequential or without purpose (e.g., Gluckman, 1963; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985; Sabini & Silver, 1982; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). For example, it has been theorized that gossip played a fundamental role in the evolution of human intelligence and social life (Dunbar, 2004; Davis & McLeod, 2003) and that it continues to play an active role in cultural learning (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004) and as a source of social comparison information (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004a). To be sure, it is often noted that rumor and gossip can also be undeniably aversive and problematic—currently illustrated, for example, in the way that rumor and gossip have generated resistance to medical efforts to deal with HIV and AIDS (e.g., Smith, Lucas, & Latkin, 1999; Stadler, 2003).

Allport and Postman called their most far-reaching assertion "the basic law of rumor." It declared that rumor strength (R) will vary with the importance of the subject to the individual concerned (i) times the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at hand (a), or $R \approx i \times a$. The basic law of rumor was not empirically grounded in any rumor research, but was adapted from the earlier work of Douglas McGregor (1938) on factors influencing predictive judgments (Rosnow, 1980). One difficulty with the basic law of rumor was that the factor of "importance" was elusive and not easy for researchers to operationalize. Also of concern was that the basic law of rumor ignored the emotional context of rumor. Based on subsequent research findings, Rosnow (1991, 2001) proposed a modified theory in which rumormongering is viewed as an attempt to deal with anxieties and uncertainties by generating and passing stories and suppositions that can explain things, address anxieties, and provide a rationale for behavior. At a molar level, we can usually distinguish between two types of rumors (Rosnow, Yost, & Esposito, 1986), those invoking hoped-for consequences (wish rumors) and those invoking feared or disappointing consequences (dread

rumors), but finer distinctions within each category have been described as well (e.g., DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000). Another addendum is that people have a tendency to spread rumors that they perceive as credible (even the most ridiculous stories), although when anxieties are intense, rumormongers are less likely to monitor the logic or plausibility of what they pass on to others (Rosnow, 2001).

These modifications of the classical view of rumor have implications for how potentially damaging rumors may be effectively combatted (DiFonzo, Bordia, & Rosnow, 1994; Fine & Turner, 2001; Kimmel, 2004) and have recently served as a stepping stone for other researchers' innovative work. For example, Chip Heath, Chris Bell, and Emily Sternberg (2001) have been exploring how rumors and urban legends thrive similarly on information and emotion selection. They have developed the thesis that rumors and urban legends are subsets of what biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) called memes, reasoning that there is a cultural analogy between ideas that compete for survival and biological genes.

As another recent illustration, Air Force Captain Stephanie R. Kelley (2004), for her Master's thesis at the Naval Postgraduate School, did a content analysis of 966 rumors collected in Iraq from a weekly feature in the *Baghdad Mosquito*. Proceeding from the idea that rumors serve as a window into people's uncertainties and anxieties, she identified fears inhibiting cooperation with U.S. counterinsurgency efforts and formulated ideas for improving Coalition information campaigns. That rumors might be projections of societal attitudes and motivations goes back to the classic work of Robert H. Knapp (1944), who sorted through a large collection of World War II rumors printed in the Boston *Herald's* "Rumor Clinic" column and collected through the auspices of two mass circulation magazines, *The American Mercury* and *Reader's Digest*. Knapp settled on three categories of rumors: pipe-dream rumors, bogies or fear rumors, and wedge-driving rumors.

Social psychologists Nicholas DiFonzo, at Rochester Institute of Technology, and Prashant Bordia, at the University of Queensland in Australia, have collaborated in another significant program of research on rumor and rumor control (and are putting the finishing touches on a book to be published by the APA). Their work has largely focused on the sensemaking aspect of rumors at the individual level, exemplified by a series of studies exploring how rumors are embedded with stable cause attributions that affect perceptions and predictions in systematic ways (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1997, 2002). Whereas traditionally the dynamic of rumor was studied employing a one-way communication paradigm resembling the telephone game, these researchers have studied it in rumor discussion groups (Bordia, 1996; Bordia & DiFonzo, 2004; Bordia, DiFonzo, & Chang, 1999; Bordia & Rosnow, 1995), for example, a chat group discussion of a rumor in cyberspace over a 6-day period. They have uncovered systematic patterns in both the content and level of individual participation, consistent with the theoretical idea of rumormongering as a collective, problem-solving interaction that is sustained by a combination of anxiety, uncertainty, and credulity (Bordia & Rosnow, 1995).

Empirical gossip research has not coalesced into a mainstream approach. Most researchers are in accord that the term can apply to both positive and negative aspects of personal affairs and that, depending on the point of view, it can have positive or negative social effects. An early factionalism was reflected by the opposing views of Gluckman (1963), who maintained that gossip served the interests of the group, and Paine (1967), who countered that gossip was a tool wielded by individuals for personal advantage. Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, and Weiser (2000), using evaluations of gossipy vignettes, showed that gossip that upheld group norms tended to reflect better on the gossipers (and more harshly on the targets) than self-serving gossip did. Studies have also focused on individual differences in gossip use, perception, and vulnerability (e.g., Davis & Rulon, 1935; Jaeger, Skleder, & Rosnow, 1998; Litman & Pezzo, 2005; Nevo, Nevo, & Derech Zehavi, 1993; Radlow & Berger, 1959).

In a forthcoming chapter (Foster & Rosnow, in press), we use social network analysis (SNA) to explore how the structure of the network—the links among all the members—can affect the potency of gossiping behavior. The SNA approach simultaneously takes into account the density of the network and the positions of individuals within it to predict how gossip will affect influence and group coherence. We found that denser networks are less vulnerable to social fragmentation from gossip. However, this effect is moderated by "gatekeepers" who tend to position themselves along unique social bridges between other network members. Disintermediating, that is, increasing the density of social connections around gatekeepers, is expected to decrease negative effects of gossiping and to assist in improving norm coherence. Thus, the structure of the gossip network, as much as the content, can contribute to collegiality and understanding as well as to inequality and conflict.

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