

## The Utility of Gossip

No one likes gossip, but everyone keeps an ear open for it. This is one of those fascinating human paradoxes that psychologists love to investigate. Recently a group of researchers from Stanford and University of California at Berkeley explored the idea that gossip is a kind of policing activity. They divided 216 participants into large groups of 24 to play a public goods game.

In the Basic condition each player received 10 points (each point could later be cashed in for 2.5 cents) and then was assigned to play with three other players. At the beginning of each round, each player was invited to contribute points to a common pool, which would be doubled by the researchers and redistributed equally among all four players. The players were then assigned to another round of play with a new set of four players from the group of 24. Again each player decided how much to chip in to the group pool. This set-up invariably leads to some participants contributing minimal amounts, as they still get  $1/4^{\text{th}}$  of the doubled pool of points in each round no matter how much they put in. Such persons are considered “free riders” in that they don’t contribute as much as the others but benefit just as much. After six rounds of the game (each round with a different small group of players), the researchers added up how many points each of the 24 players had contributed to the pools.

Under the Gossip condition, after each round each player learned how much each of the other players had contributed to the pool for that round. All players were identified by a code name which they carried with them to each new small group. Players could also send a message about one of their previous group members to players in the new group. The groups changed players for each new round, up to six rounds, and again the researchers added up the contributions for each of the 24 players.

Under the Ostracism condition players not only could send a gossip message about a player to each new group, but the new group could also anonymously vote to exclude one member from the upcoming round. The small groups changed players over the six rounds, after which the researchers added up the contributions of all the players.

### Results.

- 1) Players contributed more to the group pool when playing the game under the Gossip condition than under the Basic condition.
- 2) Playing the game under the Ostracism condition led to higher group contributions than under the Basic condition or the Gossip condition. Furthermore, players contributed more under the Ostracism condition even in the first round of the game! Thus just knowing that word will get around about free riders was sufficient to keep contributions generous.
- 3) The more a player deviated from the average contribution of the group, the more that player was likely to be gossiped about.

4) In the Ostracism condition, players who contributed little in the first round contributed significantly more in the next round, which suggests that gossip promoted cooperation and generosity.

5) The players in the Ostracism condition each went home with higher earnings than players in the other conditions, mainly because free riding was kept to a minimum. This result suggests that in the long run cooperation is more profitable than free riding, at least in groups where gossip and ostracism are allowed.

6) The most generous contributors were also the ones most likely to send gossip notes about other players.

This research not only speaks to the power of gossip but also highlights how important reputation is in group endeavors. Gossip appears to be a mechanism for creating both good and bad reputations, which in turn provide information about how each of us is likely to behave in future encounters with the people around us. Perhaps this is why we have ambivalent feelings about gossip – we find it useful in judging others but worry about how it influences their judgments of us.

Feinberg, M.; Willer, R.; & Schultz, M. 2014. Gossip and ostracism promote cooperation in groups. *Psychological Science*, 25, pages 656 - 664