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The Importance of Gossip

By Ann Rosen Spector, PhD.

Why do people gossip? Everyone does, especially those who swear that they hate people who do. If as few people did it who admit to it, how would we know as much about the people in our neighborhood, at work or at school, our relatives (and our in-laws), much less support the 24/7 "news" shows, blogs, and articles?

How could any of the paparazzi earn a living? What would happen to the people who work for People, US, or the National Enquirer? Who would feed and house Perez Hilton?

We have to be honest; people have always gossiped and always will. Totally without data, I presume that many of the early cave drawings were gossiping about the people in the cave two cave openings away.

And they know why.

Pssst: gossip is both a pleasure and a sin. Doesn't that enhance its value? Since it's a constant feature of the human experience, across all cultures, it must exist for a reason.

Luckily for all of us, there is a vast body of social science literature to explain it. I, for one, began to think about it as an intellectual concept in the early 1980s, after Penn psychology professor John Sabini gave a talk about his book, *Moralities of Everyday Life*, which he co-authored with psychologist Maury Silver.

Frankly, it was one of the few highlights for me of graduate school. Except for the gossip about the professors who were having affairs with other professors' spouses or graduate students. But I digress.

Sabini's talk began with an anecdote about the co-workers at his wife's new job. (Now, as a university lecturer for almost 30 years, I disclose to my students that my stories are at best, as non-academic scholar of the human experience Stephen Colbert would say, a form of "truthiness.")

At his wife's worksite, apparently and perhaps only metaphorically, the people in the Break Room commented whenever someone spent too much time and money on what they wore to work, or appeared to spend too little.

Sabini and Silver concluded that gossip was a form of social regulation; it tells us what will fit under the main part of the Bell Curve. Woe to those who live on either extreme end of “what people like us” are supposed to do.

The data was supported by the work of earlier scholars, like sociologist Georg Simmel, social psychologist Erving Goffman, and cultural anthropologist Max Gluckman. They all found that gossip is a universal form of quasi-public talk about private matters. It is the selective sharing of secrets to an audience handpicked to pre-agree with what we are about to say.

Sort of like the infamous Tea Parties of a few months ago.

It is the mechanism by which we reaffirm our own sense of what is right and appropriate. We decide whom to tell our “Hot-Hot-Hot” to knowing that our recipient will share our moral sensibilities. If we didn’t believe that, we would either tell someone else or keep it to ourselves. And what fun would that be?

About 10 years ago, my husband turned to me as we taxied down the runway en route to a rare vacation without our children. “You have five days to decipher one of the secrets of the Universe. I will give you one hint per day. Don’t ask for more.”

“Really?” I said, “Could it be that Mr. and Mrs. X are getting a divorce?” (See: I can keep a secret forever.)

“How did you know?” he asked, astounded that his plan to tease me for a week had fallen like a bad soufflé.

“I saw her at the supermarket two weeks ago. She lost twenty-five pounds, colored and cut her hair, is now wearing contact lenses and looks amazing.” “Why didn’t you tell me?” he huffed.

“I thought you didn’t like gossip.”

Viewing gossip as a social barometer and the topic of numerous journal articles means we must do it, not that we shouldn’t. It’s our duty. Now, we can say we are doing it to keep the moral order.

No matter that there is no one moral order, despite what some media outlets would have us believe, not is there one right way to be an American. If there are three hundred million of us, there must be a fair amount of variance.

Grist for the mill. Grist for the mill.

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