

Gossip serves a useful purpose after all

May 20 2011, by Lin Edwards

(Medical Xpress) -- Researchers in the US have discovered that hearing gossip about a person literally changes the way you see them, and hearing negative information about people makes their faces stand out.

Psychology Professor Lisa Feldman Barrett of the Northeastern University in Boston and her colleagues used binocular [rivalry](#), a technique in which different images are shown to the subjects' left and right eyes. The brain becomes conscious of one of the images before registering the other, and the time taken for the image to be registered is a measure of the importance the brain gives the image. The importance is also indicated by the length of time the image remains in the [conscious awareness](#), as the brain alternates between consciously registering the images of the face and house.

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The 66 volunteers, all university students, were shown photographs of faces and given some information about the people. Information was either positive (such as the person helped an elderly lady), neutral (such as they passed a man in the street) or negative gossip, such as the person had thrown a chair at a fellow student. The students saw the pictures of the faces with one eye, but the other eye was shown an image of a house. The students pressed a keyboard key when they were conscious of seeing the face and another when they saw the house. Some of the [photographs](#) of faces had not previously been seen by the students and they had

received no information about them.

The results showed that it took the students the same length of time to register seeing the unknown faces and those about which they had been told neutral or [positive information](#), but the picture of the person about whom they had heard negative information registered around half a second quicker. The face with [negative associations](#) also registered for substantially longer periods of time than the neutral, positive or unknown faces.

A second experiment backed up the findings and also showed that subjects saw the faces linked to negative gossip for longer periods than [faces](#) about whom they had heard about upsetting personal experiences.

The results suggest that if you have recently heard negative gossip about someone you are more likely to notice them in a crowd. The researchers said [gossip](#) gives people information about whether a person might be a friend or foe, and suggest that being able to spot the face of a person about whom they have heard negative stories could provide some social protection by focusing on people who could be a threat. This could protect us from “liars and cheaters” because the [brain](#) spends more time lingering on their image, giving time to gather more information on their potentially threatening behavior.

More information: The Visual Impact of Gossip, *Science* [DOI: 10.1126/science.1201574](#)

ABSTRACT

Gossip is a form of affective information about who is friend and who is foe. We show that gossip does not impact only how a face is evaluated—it affects whether a face is seen in the first place. In two experiments, neutral faces were paired with negative, positive, or neutral gossip and were then presented alone in a binocular rivalry paradigm

(faces were presented to one eye, houses to the other). In both studies, faces previously paired with negative (but not positive or neutral) gossip dominated longer in visual consciousness. These findings demonstrate that gossip, as a potent form of social affective learning, can influence vision in a completely top-down manner, independent of the basic structural features of a face.

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