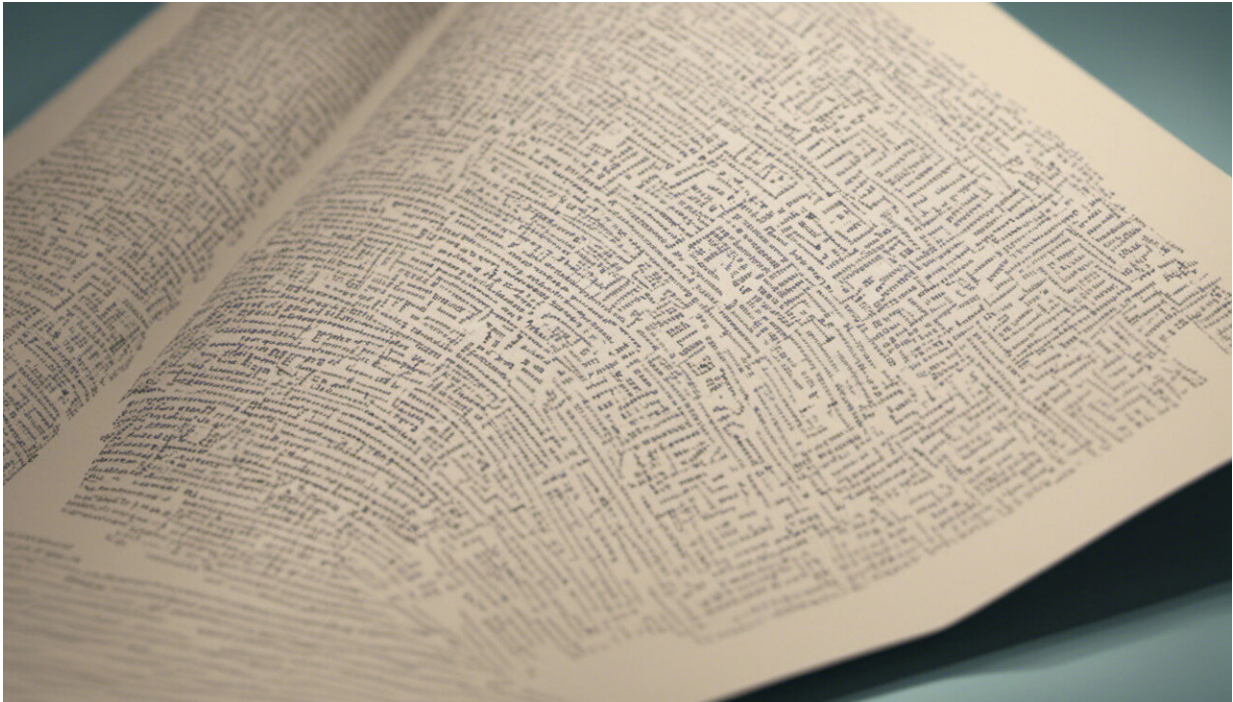


Gossip and ostracism may have hidden group benefits

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Conventional wisdom holds that gossip and social exclusion are always malicious, undermining trust and morale in groups. But sharing this kind of "reputational information" could have benefits for society, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*.

Robb Willer, an associate professor of sociology, explored the nature of [gossip](#) and ostracism in collaboration with co-authors Matthew Feinberg, a Stanford University postdoctoral researcher, and Michael Schultz from the University of California–Berkeley.

Their research shows that gossip and ostracism can have positive effects, serving as tools by which groups reform bullies, thwart exploitation of "nice people," and encourage cooperation.

"Groups that allow their members to gossip," said Feinberg, "sustain cooperation and deter selfishness better than those that don't. And groups do even better if they can gossip and ostracize untrustworthy members. While both of these behaviors can be misused, our findings suggest that they also serve very important functions for groups and society."

The researchers divided 216 participants into groups, asking them to play a game and make [financial choices](#) that would benefit their respective groups.

Researchers commonly use this public-goods exercise to examine social dilemmas because individual participants will benefit the most by selfishly free-riding off everyone else's contributions while contributing nothing themselves.

Before moving on to the next round with an entirely new [group](#), participants could gossip about their prior group members. Future group members then received that information and could decide to exclude – ostracize – a suspect participant from the group before deciding to make their next financial choices.

Invest in the public good

The researchers found that when people learn about the [behavior](#) of others through gossip, they use this information to align with those deemed cooperative. Those who have behaved selfishly can then be excluded from group activities based on the prevailing gossip. This serves the group's greater good, for selfish types are known to exploit more cooperative people for their own gains.

"By removing defectors, more cooperative individuals can more freely invest in the [public good](#) without fear of exploitation," the researchers noted.

However, there is hope for the castaways. When people know that others may gossip about them – and experience the resulting [social exclusion](#) – they tend to learn from the experience and reform their behavior by cooperating more in future group settings. In contrast, highly anonymous groups, like many Internet message boards, lack accountability and thereby allow antisocial behavior to thrive.

"Those who do not reform their behavior, behaving selfishly despite the risk of gossip and ostracism, tended to be targeted by other group members who took pains to tell future [group members](#) about the person's untrustworthy behavior," Willer said. "These future groups could then detect and exclude more selfish individuals, ensuring they could avoid being taken advantage of."

The very threat of ostracism frequently deterred selfishness in the group. Even people who had been ostracized often contributed at higher levels when they returned to the group. "Exclusion compelled them to conform to the more cooperative behavior of the rest of the group," the researchers wrote.

The study reflects past research showing that when people know others may talk about their reputation, they tend to behave more generously.

Where reputational concerns are especially strong, people sometimes engage in "competitive altruism," attempting to be highly pro-social to avoid exclusion from a group. The same appears to hold true for those returning from "exile" – the incentive is to cooperate rather than risk more trouble.

"Despite negative connotations, the pairing of the capacity to gossip and to ostracize undesirable individuals from groups has a strong positive effect on cooperation levels in groups," Willer said.

Real-world implications

Looking ahead, Willer and his colleagues are conducting field experiments on how the threat of gossip and exclusion affect behavior in real-world settings – in one study, for instance, they're calling car repair shops for estimates, with one group of callers stating they are active users of Yelp, the online review service that can make or break reputations.

As Willer points out, whether one calls it gossip or "reputational information sharing," as sociologists and psychologists do, this behavior, along with ostracism, seems fundamental to human nature.

People pass on information about how others behave in workplaces, student workgroups, business and political coalitions, on the Internet, in volunteer organizations and beyond. While much of this behavior may be undesirable and malicious, a lot of it is critical to deterring selfishness and maintaining social order in groups.

"I think it does speak to the mechanisms that keep people behaving honestly and generously in many settings and, where behavior is entirely anonymous, helps explain when they don't," Willer said.

More information: Matthew Feinberg, Robb Willer, and Michael Schultz. "Gossip and Ostracism Promote Cooperation in Groups." *Psychological Science* 0956797613510184, first published on January 24, 2014 doi:10.1177/0956797613510184 . pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97613510184.abstract

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