

Receiving gossip about others promotes self-reflection and growth

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Gossip is pervasive in our society, and our penchant for gossip can be found in most of our everyday conversations. Why are individuals interested in hearing gossip about others' achievements and failures? Researchers at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands studied the effect positive and negative gossip has on how the recipient evaluates him or herself. The study is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

In spite of some positive consequences, gossip is typically seen as destructive and negative. However, hearing gossip may help individuals adapt to a social environment, illustrate how an individual can improve, or reveal potential threats.

Design of the study

The first study asked participants to recall an incident where they received either positive or negative gossip about another individual. Participants were then asked questions to measure the self-improvement, self-promotion, and [self-protection](#) value of the received gossip information. Individuals that received positive gossip had increased self-improvement value, whereas negative gossip had increased self-promotion value. Negative gossip also increased self-protection concerns.

"For example, hearing positive stories about others may be informative,

because they suggest ways to improve oneself," lead researcher Elena Martinescu explains. "Hearing negative gossip may be flattering, because it suggests that others (the gossip target) may function less well than we do. However, negative gossip may also be threatening to the self, because it suggests a malign social environment in which one may easily fall victim to negative treatments."

Participants in the second study were assigned the role of a sales agent and asked to imagine they had written a job description that was presented to them. Participants received either negative or positive gossip about another's job performance. This scenario included an achievement goal manipulation with two conditions; a performance goal condition, and a mastery goal condition. People who have a salient performance goal strive to demonstrate superior competence by outperforming other people. People who have a salient mastery goal strive to develop competence by learning new knowledge, abilities, and skills.

Results of the study

Consistent with the first study, positive gossip had more self-improvement value, whereas negative gossip had self-promotion value and raised self-protection concerns. Negative gossip elicited pride due to its self-promotion value since it provides individuals with social comparison

information that justifies self-promotional judgments. Negative gossip also elicits fear and anxiety due to increased self-protection concerns, since individuals may worry that their reputation could be at risk if they become targets of negative gossip in the future.

The second study found that individuals with a mastery goal are more likely to learn from positive gossip than individuals with a performance

goal, while the latter experience more concern for self-protection in response to positive gossip. Individuals who pursue performance goals feel threatened by positive gossip because rivals' success translates to their own failure.

The researchers expected that individuals would be more alert after receiving positive rather than negative gossip because they might find positive gossip provides a source of information they can learn from. However, the results were surprising, and alertness was high for both positive and negative gossip, presumably because both types of gossip are highly relevant for the receiver.

Gender differences between men and women were also observed.

"Women who receive negative gossip experience higher self-protection concerns possibly because they believe they might experience a similar fate as the person being the target of the gossip, while men who receive positive gossip experience higher fear, perhaps because upward social comparisons with competitors are threatening," Elena Martinescu elaborates.

Gossip provides individuals with indirect social comparison information, which is in-turn valued highly by receivers because it provides an essential resource for self-evaluation. Instead of eliminating gossip, Elena Martinescu and her colleagues suggest that individuals should "accept gossip as a natural part of our lives and receive it with a critical attitude regarding the consequences it may have on ourselves and on others." Receiving gossip about other people is a valuable source of knowledge about ourselves, because we implicitly compare ourselves with the people we hear [gossip](#) about.

More information: Martinescu, E., Jansen, O., Nijstad, B.A. (2014). Tell Me the Gossip: The Self-Evaluative Function of Receiving Gossip About Others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(12).

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