



## *Social Components of Children's Gossip*

by Gary Alan Fine

*The status and not the presence  
or absence of the target determines  
whether denigrating gossip will occur.*

Gossip is not solely the preserve of adults and adolescents. Children gossip practically from the time they can talk and can begin to recognize others. Elizabeth Nolan, a developmental psychologist, has noticed in her research that children by the age of three will talk about the traits and actions of non-present children (12). At first these comments occur without any evaluative judgments, but soon these judgments follow. In my work with four- and five-year-olds, I have been able to discover gossip which sounds remarkably similar in form to the gossip of adults. Gossip seems to be a central ingredient of young children's conversations, as it is for adolescents and adults, and tattling which is common in childhood is a form of directed gossip.

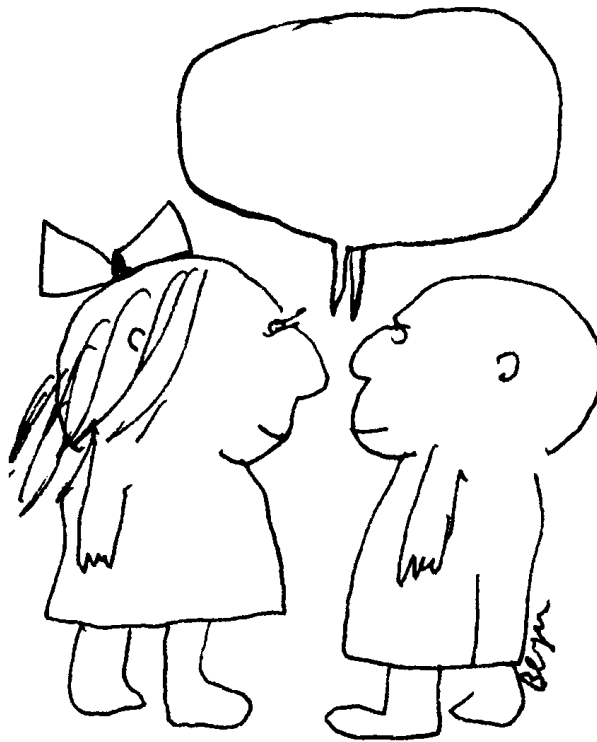
Children's gossip can be seen to have four different components: (1) a content-socialization component, (2) a normative or evaluative component, (3) an interpersonal/social structural component, and (4) an ability/competence component. Each of these acting in concert makes gossip an important interactional tool for children.

*Content-socialization.* One of the most important elements of gossip for any age is the transfer of information, which has a socializing effect. Much of the content of gossip is directly related to children's interests. Among the pre-adolescent boys I have worked with in both suburban and small town communities, sexual and aggressive behaviors are frequently the topics of gossip. What happened on a first date, who is going with whom, who chickened out of prearranged fights are spread from friend to friend with remarkable speed.

Gossip, for children, is one way to learn about the facts of life and the ways of the world. Discussions of breakthroughs in sexual behavior allow the less

Gary Alan Fine did this study while at the Department of Psychology, Harvard University and is presently in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. He is the co-author with Ralph L. Rosnow of *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (Elsevier, 1976).

Thanks are due Norman Belanger, Gina Maccoby, and Susan Fine for their invaluable help in the preparation of this manuscript.



developed or mature members to learn vicariously how to behave when their turn for such activity arrives.

*Evaluative.* Closely tied to the factual content of gossip is a normative evaluation. Most gossip carries explicitly or implicitly some perspective on the behavior that is being described. Thus it has been suggested that "gossip is one of the chief means by which norms are stated and reaffirmed" (4, p. 204; see also 5, 6).

Numerous studies of children have emphasized the large amount of social conformity that occurs throughout the growing up period (7, pp. 404-429; 11, pp. 586-587, 655-657; 14). Little research, with the exception of the Sherifs' study, has attempted to study the determinants of conformity in natural situations. One of the determinants of this conformity is through the normative regulation of gossip. Joyce Maynard has described this process as it affected fifth-grade girls in the 1960s:

*We knew each other's faces and bodies and wardrobes so well that any change was noticed at once, the fuel for endless notes. That's why I dressed so carefully mornings—I was about to face the scrutiny of fifteen gossip-seeking girls, ten only slightly less observant boys ready to imitate my voice and walk. . . . At every moment—even at home, with no one but family there—I'd be conscious of what the other kids, The Group, would think if they could see me now" (9, pp. 40-41).*

The damning judgments of peer groups in preadolescence and adolescence seem to have much greater impact on their targets than similar judgments among adults.

*One salient difference between the social structure of adult gossip and that of children is that adult gossip is virtually always about non-present others, whereas children often gossip in front of the target.*

Thus, among the Hell's Angels, a group of six middle-class twelve-year-old boys, one boy was teased by another about crying when his girl friend left for the summer. While its content was much like gossip, the fact that the boy in question was present makes it somewhat different from the traditional picture of gossip. This public gossip occurs quite frequently among preadolescents and frequently combines aspects of gossip with that of teasing. Since most of the comments have an evaluative overtone their normative elements are rather clear. The boy generally will have a chance to defend himself against the piece of information if it is derogatory, or if he has no defense to learn quickly that his behavior is frowned upon by his peers. Deviation from prescribed norms will be quickly commented upon among pre- and early adolescents. If the behavior continues the actor will become stigmatized. Unlike adult gossip, which may need many links before the comment gets to the target (if it ever does), among children gossip feedback is swift and sure.

Despite adult frowns, children do not see gossiping as something that will be negatively evaluated by their peers. I have asked numerous preadolescents if they gossip; they all admit that they do frequently. I have yet to find one who is embarrassed about doing it, although some realize that it can be cruel or can break up friendships. Gossip is much more public among children than adults, thus allowing children to evaluate the behavior of their peers directly.

*Interpersonal/Social structural.* The reputational and impression management functions of gossip have been noted by those who study adults (*viz* 3, 13), but these functions seem particularly potent among children, where the esteem of one's peer group is of great importance. The importance of reputation for children has been much attested to both by those growing up and those writing about those growing up (*viz* 8) and one of the most direct threats to one's reputation is gossip. Thus guarding against untoward gossip may be central for the pre- and early adolescent. Gossip is not directed anywhere in a children's social system, but can only be directed at certain members, generally those of lower or marginal status. Although two boys may commit the same action, perhaps only one of them will be the target of gossip or possibly both will be gossiped about but only one will be negatively regarded. Some children because of their power, prestige, or the sterlingness of their reputations will therefore be relatively immune from denigrating gossip. Gossip both for children and adults often contains within it some generalization about the target person, and it must be decided by the speaker whether the act being described is characteristic of that individual's usual conduct. With children, much of this decision rests upon the target's status.

Thus, in Little League baseball games, for example, occasionally a player will make a poor play or break into tears. The reaction to this event both at the time and subsequently in later conversations will largely depend upon that person's previous status. High status team members will not be criticized for a poor play and will be generally comforted if they become upset with their performance. Low status members, perhaps less deserving of criticism because of lack of natural ability, are frequently insulted, ignored, and gossiped about afterwards. Players on rival teams not having a positive reputation will receive scorn for errors and emotional outbursts. The players of one team took great delight in the fact that a disliked opponent was removed from a game for throwing his bat after being struck out.

Similarly, depending upon a boy's reputation, he may or may not be criticized for his attitudes towards girls. Boys at the age of twelve may gossip cruelly about boys they dislike who have not developed an interest in girls, while other boys, better liked for other reasons, may escape similar criticism.

*This social differentiation of gossip targets is important for the understanding of children's gossip.*

Much adult gossip is aimed at the high and mighty, such as political, social or economic leaders, and indeed some children's gossip is aimed at powerful figures such as teachers or other authorities. Intragroup gossip seems, at least from my experience, to be primarily directed downward in the social structure. By the time a child reaches preadolescence, he or she is sufficiently aware of social interaction to use gossip as a means of impression management as effectively as adults do.

*Ability/Competence.* One of the important elements in children's gossip is the ability that comes with learning how to gossip adequately. Abrahams (1) makes a strong case that through gossip one can learn the rules for proper performance. It is not simply the content of gossip that is involved, but the style as well. He argues following the viewpoint of the residents of St. Vincent, British West Indies that there is an art in gossip.

Indeed, the use of gossip is sometimes suggested as a valuable educational technique; Gluckman cites the following report from the *London Times* of October 13, 1954:

*A recommendation that children in West Riding schools should be encouraged to gather in small groups for "gossip" sessions as an aid in learning English, is made by The Education Committee Inspectors, who have concluded an inspection of modern secondary schools throughout the country. . . . The inspectors claim that emphasis on oral expression can be achieved by allowing children to talk naturally about things which interest them . . . (5, p. 313).*

Gossiping and hearing gossip about one's self can also allow an individual to develop poise in embarrassing situations. I had the impression that a large part of the gossip which occurred in front of the target person was said largely to

observe that individual's reaction. Recently I heard a boy gossip in a teasing vein that he thought that a friend's girl friend behaved childishly; this comment was immediately relayed to that target person in order to see the reaction (which was a parallel insult about the gossiper's girl friend). Learning to maintain poise is important in many children's cultures. Insult games such as the Dozens have become informally institutionalized to provide a testing of poise, as have kissing games (15); in middle-class American culture one way poise is tested is through public gossip.

The third educational aspect of gossip among children is that it promotes recall ability. To be a successful gossip one must be able to recall what others have said or what has happened. Studies of children's story telling ability indicate that children's reports are consistently inferior to that of adults (10, 16). Allport and Postman (2) report that the number of items in a story which are recalled increases with age, so that by the time a child is in Junior High School his memory is essentially as good as an adult's. Certainly one component contributing to this maturational effect is the practice from the retelling of stories, rumors, and gossip.

Thus, children's gossip, while similar to adult gossip in terms of its structure, is different in certain key respects. The topics which are discussed are those topics of particular interest and concern to children. And portions of the gossip etiquette of children, such as the frequent examples of public gossip, are particular to their social world.

#### REFERENCES

1. Abrahams, R. D. "A Performance-Centered Approach to Gossip." *Man*, n.s., 5, 1970, pp. 290-301.
2. Allport, G. W. and L. J. Postman. *The Psychology of Rumor*. New York: Henry Holt, 1947.
3. Bailey, F. G. (Ed.) *Gifts and Poison: The Politics of Reputation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
4. Bott, E. *Family and Social Network*. London: Tavistock, 1957.
5. Gluckman, M. "Gossip and Scandal." *Current Anthropology* 4, 1963, pp. 307-316.
6. Gluckman, M. "Psychological, Sociological and Anthropological Explanations of Witchcraft and Gossip." *Man*, n.s., 3, 1968, pp. 20-34.
7. Hartup, W. W. "Peer Interaction and Social Organization." In P. Mussen (Ed.) *Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology*. New York: John Wiley, 1970, pp. 361-456.
8. Hollingshead, A. R. *Elmtown's Youth*. New York: Science Editions, 1961.
9. Maynard, J. *Looking Back*. New York: Avon, 1973.
10. McGeoch, J. A. "The Influence of Sex and Age Upon the Ability to Report." *American Journal of Psychology* 40, 1928, pp. 458-466.
11. Mussen, P. H., J. J. Conger, and J. Kagan. *Child Development and Personality* (third edition). New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
12. Nolan, E. Personal communication. June 1976.
13. Paine, R. "What is Gossip About: An Alternative Hypothesis." *Man*, n.s., 2, 1967, pp. 278-285.
14. Sherif, M. and C. W. Sherif. *Reference Groups*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964.
15. Sutton-Smith, B. "The Kissing Games of Adolescents in Ohio." *Midwest Folklore* 9, 1959, pp. 189-211.
16. Whipple, G. M. "The Observer as Reporter: A Survey on the 'Psychology of Testimony.'" *Psychological Bulletin* 6, 1901, pp. 153-170.