

Not all gossip is antisocial

Gossip is often considered an undesirable, unattractive feature of society, amounting to idle chatter that undermines trust and damages reputations, but now a new study suggests it has an upside, it helps maintain social order by keeping bad behavior in check, and preventing exploitation. And it also lowers stress. You can read how researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, arrived at these findings in January 2012 online issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Co-author and social psychologist Robb Willer said they had found evidence that gossip plays a vital role in maintaining social order: "Spreading information about the person whom they had seen behave badly tended to make people feel better, quieting the frustration that drove their gossip."

Willer and colleagues found gossip has a therapeutic effect: volunteer's heart rates rose when they observed someone behaving badly, but then the heart rates lessened somewhat when they warned others about what they had witnessed.

For the study, the researchers focused on "prosocial" gossip, which is intended to warn others about untrustworthy or dishonest people. This is in contrast to other forms of gossip, such as voyeuristic rumor-mongering about a celebrity's latest exploits.

To study prosocial gossip, the researchers carried out four experiments where they monitored volunteers as they watched people playing an "economic trust game" against each other and where players' generosity was measured according to how many dollars or points they shared.

In the first experiment, 51 volunteers agreed to have their heart rate monitored as they watched two people play the game and observed their scores. After two rounds it was obvious from the score that one of the players was not playing fair and was hoarding all the points.

As they witnessed the cheating, the volunteer observers' heart rates rose, and in fact, when a new player came in to play against the cheat, many of the observers took the opportunity to slip them a "gossip note" to warn them about their opponent. When they did this, their heart rate went down somewhat.

Willer said being able to warn the new player made the observers "feel better": Passing on the gossip note ameliorated their negative feelings and tempered their frustration," he said.

In the second experiment, the researchers invited 111 participants to complete questionnaires about their level of altruism and cooperativeness, and then asked them to watch a screen that showed the scores from three rounds of the economic trust game. They could see from the scores that one of the players was cheating. Again, they were given the chance to pass a gossip note to warn the next player. The observers also answered questions about how they felt about what they saw and their actions.

The results showed that the observers who scored the highest on the prosocial scales were the ones who reported feeling frustrated by the cheat's behavior, but then very relieved to be able to warn the vulnerable person, the next player, via the gossip note.

In the third experiment the researchers raised the stakes for the observers: they were asked to sacrifice the fee they were paid for taking part in the study if they wanted to pass the gossip note to the next player. And they were told their sacrifice would not affect the cheat's score. Even with the stakes set higher, the majority of the observers chose to forfeit their fee and send the warning gossip note.

And in the final experiment, the researchers recruited 300 game players from around the country to play several rounds of the same economic trust game online (they recruited them via Craigslist, the free online network for classified and other advertisements). The currency of the game was raffle tickets: winning tickets would be entered in a draw for a \$50 cash prize, so there was an incentive to hold on to as many of these as possible.

However, the difference with this game was that some of the players were told at the start that the volunteers observing the game would have a chance during a break to pass a gossip note to the players of the next round to warn them about the behavior of cheats. The threat of being the subject of "negative" gossip spurred nearly all of these players to play fairly, even the ones who had scored low on altruism in questionnaires they had completed at the outset.

The researchers conclude that the results of experiments 1, 2 and 3 show that:

- People who witness a negative act feel bad (experience negative affect), and are compelled to pass on their information to a potentially vulnerable person.

- Sharing this information reduces the negative affect that arose from seeing the antisocial behaviour.
- People who are more prosocial are the ones most motivated to engage in such "gossip", even at personal cost, and are the ones most likely to experience the greatest reduction in negative affect.

They conclude that experiment 4 shows that "prosocial gossip can effectively deter selfishness and promote cooperation". Willer said taken together, the results of all four experiments demonstrate that we become frustrated when we see people behave immorally. "But being able to communicate this information to others who could be helped makes us feel better," he added.