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### Introduction to the Special Issue on Gossip [Special Issue: Gossip]

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#### Abstract

This article represents the introduction to a special issue of the *Review of General Psychology* on gossip. All of the articles in this special issue argue that gossip is purposeful and important to social functioning.

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In this special issue of *Review of General Psychology*, we consider gossip. Gossip is everyone's behavior, egalitarian in practice and in allure. Whether one fears it, flock to it, or is deprived of it, gossip affects us all. Gossip matters to all things social, yet social scientists have been slow to pursue its secrets. What is gossip, and why do we participate in it? What are the consequences of gossip? Why do some people gossip more than others? When is gossip harmful? When is it helpful? Some of these questions are addressed by the authors of the articles that follow in this special issue.

The first article by Eric Foster (2004) sets the stage by reviewing current conceptions of gossip and how it differs from related phenomena and by discussing research and research methods used to study gossip. This is an important starting point for two reasons. First, definitions of gossip vary, and what is considered gossip is far from settled. Although defining and describing gossip is an interesting enterprise in its own right, this difficulty in settling on a definition of gossip may contribute to stymied progress in its study. Indeed, it often seems that the scientific discussion of gossip has bogged down at this first step, that of defining the phenomenon. If empirical researchers are to proceed, they must grapple with this issue of exactly what behavior is being studied when one studies gossip. What "counts" as gossip? Opinions abound. Some researchers delineate which conversational occurrences fall under the purview of gossip; others allow the participants to report on behavior that they themselves consider to be gossip. Either way, definitional issues of gossip loom large in its empirical study. The article by Foster gives good discussion to this issue.

Second, the empirical study of gossip is challenging, no matter how it is defined. Given that it tends to be private behavior, it is especially sensitive to research methods. In fact, these challenges may be responsible for the dearth of empirical research on gossip. In addition to being a private behavior, gossip takes place within conversations, vastly complex situations themselves. And when gossip occurs within conversations, it is often very subtle, sometimes too subtle for an outside observer, such as a researcher, to decode. This subtlety makes it difficult to ascertain the purposes and achievements of gossip, and even whether the behavior in question is gossip at all. Indeed, definitional issues surrounding gossip often couple with methodological issues, making for serious barriers around the study of gossip. This, no doubt, explains in part why such a ubiquitous and, as we shall see, important behavior as gossip has gone understudied for so long. Foster's article leads us through these brambles toward what might be solutions or at least help in reducing barriers to the empirical study of gossip.

Another unresolved issue about gossip is its purpose. Indeed, almost as many functions of gossip have been argued as writers who write about gossip. In the remaining three articles in this special issue, three different functions of gossip are emphasized, and arguments are presented for the primacy of each. In the first of these articles, R. I. M. Dunbar (2004) considers the original purpose of gossip, and, provocatively, places gossip as *the* central player in the evolutionary story of human intelligence and social life. In the final two articles, the authors take a social constructivist view of gossip. Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) argue that gossip's primary purpose is that of a teacher of social norms and a transmitter of explicit social information. Wert and Salovey (2004) also argue that gossip is a source of social information, but they focus on the generation and transfer of information in social comparison processes, which they claim are present in all gossip.

What is common among the writers who have contributed to this special issue is a wish for the social science community to take notice of gossip. Each of the contributors highlights important and interesting aspects of gossip. We hope that their interest in this multifaceted behavior is contagious.

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