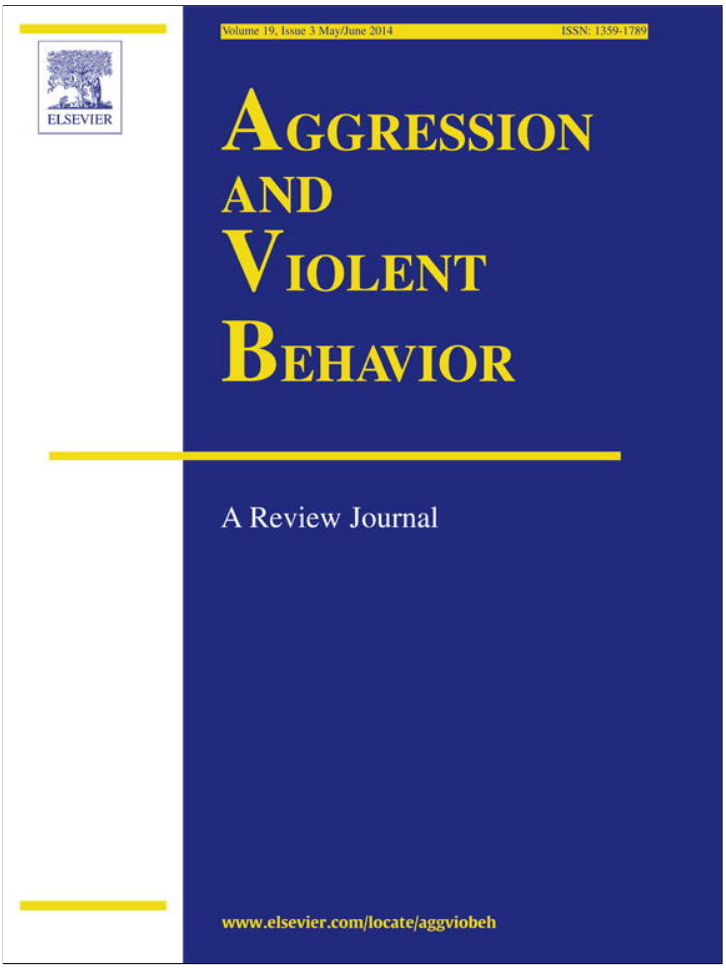

Aggression and Violent Behavior 19 (2014) 196–199

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

The "sword of a woman": Gossip and female aggression

Francis T. McAndrew *

Department of Psychology, Knox College, Galesburg, IL 61401-4999, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 November 2013
Received in revised form 7 April 2014
Accepted 8 April 2014
Available online 18 April 2014

Keywords:
Gossip
Sex differences
Aggression
Relational aggression
Female competition

ABSTRACT

An interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females, and women are more likely than men to use gossip in an aggressive, competitive manner. The goal of such gossip is to exclude competitors from a social group and damage the competitor's ability to maintain a reliable social network of her own. Timeworn assumptions about an affinity between females and negative gossip appear to be more than just a stereotype. Understanding the dynamics of competitive gossip may also give us insight into related social phenomena such as how people use social media such as Facebook.

Contents

1. Gossip as a strategy for reputation management in social competition

Gossip can be a way of learning the unwritten rules of social groups and cultures and an avenue for socializing new group members (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Laing, 1993; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Suls, 1977), and it is a low-cost form of punishment that is an effective deterrent to deviance and useful for enforcing cooperation (Barkow, 1992; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg, Cheng, & Willer, 2012; Levin & Arluke, 1987). In fact, it has been documented that gossip, in response to the violation of a social norm, is met with approval and is often perceived as the "moral" thing to do (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, and Keltner, 2012).

On a darker note, gossip offers a means of manipulating reputations by passing on negative information about competitors as well as a means of detecting betrayal by others. Gossip is more or less interesting to us depending upon whom it is about. We should be especially interested in information about people who matter most in our lives: rivals, mates, relatives, partners in social exchange, and high-ranking figures whose behavior can affect us (Barkow, 1992), and our interest in the doings of same-sex others ought to be especially strong. Wilson and Daly (1996) have identified same-sex members of one's own species as our principal evolutionary competitors, and Shackelford (1997) has verified the cross-culturally universal importance of same-sex friendships and coalitional relationships. Managing alliances and friendships posed important adaptive problems throughout human history because it was important to evaluate the quality and intentions of one's allies and rivals if one was to be successful. Given how critical such relationships are, and also given that such relationships would be most likely to exist between members of same-aged cohorts, we should be most interested of all in gossip about other people of the same sex who are close to us in age.

Several studies have confirmed that people are indeed most interested in gossip about individuals of the same sex as themselves who also happen to be around their own age (e.g., McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). These studies have also confirmed that information that is socially useful is of greatest interest to us: we like to know about the scandals and misfortunes of our rivals and of high-status people because this information might be valuable in social competition. Positive information about such people tends to be

* Tel.: +1 309 341 7525.
E-mail address: fmcandre@knox.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2014.04.006
1359-1789

uninteresting. Conversely, positive information about our friends and relatives is highly prized and likely to be used to our advantage whenever possible.

2. Gossip and indirect relational aggression in women

There has been some inconsistency in the literature when it comes to describing aggression that does not involve a direct physical attack. It has variously been described as "indirect aggression" (Björkqvist, 1994), "social aggression" (Galen & Underwood, 1997), and as "relational aggression" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although researchers have argued about the possible differences among these forms of aggression and the merits of one label over another, Archer and Coyne (2005) concluded in a review of the literature that this distinction probably does not matter much. They believe that each of these supposedly different categories of aggression are covert strategies of social competition that involve some combination of behaviors such as gossip and social exclusion, resulting in a debate that is more a matter of semantics than anything else. Following the lead of Archer and Coyne, I will, therefore, use these terms interchangeably. Such indirect relational aggression is a relatively low-cost strategy when compared with direct physical confrontation. Evolutionarily speaking, since the costs of direct physical aggression are greater for women than for men (Campbell, 1999), one would expect to find that women are more likely to engage in indirect aggression than they are to engage in direct, physical aggression, and that aggressive gossip ought to be more common in female competition than in male competition.

The word *gossip* has always been linked with females more than with males, and an examination of historical Western tactics for handling gossipers reveals a persistent concern with clamping down on the gossip of women (Rysman, 1977). As far back as the Old Testament, cautions abound regarding gossipers in general and female gossipers in particular. A notable exception to the Bible's pervasive use of the male pronoun and references to men in general in its dictums can be found in an unkind description of widows:

> "Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies. Saying what they should not."
>
> [Timothy (5:13)]

The perceived universality of the link between women and malicious gossip is also reflected in an ancient Chinese proverb stating that "the tongue is the sword of a woman — and she never lets it go rusty" (Forumosa.com, 2013). Setting aside such inherited "wisdom" for the moment, the important question to ask is whether there are data to suggest that women are more prone to gossip than are men or that women are more likely to use gossip in an aggressive or socially destructive manner. The evidence suggests that the answer to both of these questions is "Yes."

An interest in the affairs of same-sex others is especially strong among females, and women have different patterns of sharing gossip than men do. Males report being far more likely to share gossip with their romantic partners than with anyone else, but females report that they would be just as likely to share gossip with their same-sex friends as with their romantic partners (McAndrew et al., 2007). And although males are usually more interested in news about other males, females are virtually obsessed with news about other females. This fact can be demonstrated by looking at the actual frequency with which males and females selected a same-sex person as the most interesting subject of the gossip scenarios presented to them in a study by McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002). On hearing about someone having a date with a famous person, 43 out of 44 women selected a female as the most interesting person to know this about, as compared with 24 out of 36 males who selected a male as most interesting. Similarly, 40 out of 42 females (versus 22 out of 37 males) were most interested in same-sex academic cheaters, and 39 out of 43 were most interested in a same-sex leukemia sufferer (as opposed to only 18 out of 37 males). A female preoccupation with the lives of other women has been noted by De Backer, Nelissen, and Fisher (2007) as well. They presented college students with gossip-like stories containing male or female characters. After reading the stories, the participants were given a surprise recall test for the information they had been exposed to. Women remembered more about other women than men did about other men, especially details about their physical attractiveness.

The fascination that women have with other women is not always benign, and women are much more likely than men to engage in indirect relational aggression (Vaillancourt, 2013), and gossip (with the goal of socially ostracizing rivals) is the weapon of choice in the female arsenal (Archer, 2004; Campbell, 2012; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Hines & Fry, 1994; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000a). Females are more likely than males to socially exclude others, a sex difference that appears as early as the age of six (Benensen, 2013). Such relational aggression usually transpires in retaliation for perceived slights or envy over physical appearance or males (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000b); the fact that highly attractive adolescent girls (who may be threatening because of their high mate value) are at greater risk for victimization by indirect aggression is consistent with the notion that mate competition is a motive for such aggression (Vaillancourt, 2013). Whatever the reason for it, the goal is usually to exclude competitors from one's social group and to damage their ability to maintain a reliable social network of their own (Geary & Flinn, 2002). As it turns out, this is a highly effective way of hurting other women. When a workplace bully is a woman, indirect relational aggression is the usual *modus operandi* and her victim is almost always another woman. The levels of stress reported by the victims in these situations are extreme (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009), and other studies have confirmed that females are more sensitive than males to indirect aggression and report being more devastated by it (Galen & Underwood, 1997). These findings may be connected to other research results which show that a majority of women who suffer from persecutory delusions identified familiar people such as friends and relatives as their persecutors and what they specifically feared was that they were being "talked about" or excluded from the in-group. Men suffering from persecutory delusions were much more likely to fear physical attacks by other men who were strangers (Walston, David, & Charlton, 1998).

Women spend more time gossiping overall than do men, and they are more likely to gossip about close friends and relatives (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to talk about themselves, their work, their relationships, and engage in more self-promotion than do women (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997). The amount of gossiping that occurs between two people is a good predictor of friendship quality in men, especially if the gossip concerns achievement-related information, but the amount of gossip between two women does not predict the quality of their friendship in such a straightforward fashion (Watson, 2012). When pairs of friends gossip, it is rare for listeners to respond negatively to gossipy information, and such information usually evokes agreement and supportive responses rather than disapproval (Eder & Enke, 1991). Females in particular tend to demonstrate highly encouraging responses to gossip that they hear from their friends, and the frequency of negative gossip is highest of all between female friends (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). There is evidence that it is specifically the gossip that occurs between women that is most likely to be aggressive and competitive. The nature of the topics that are discussed between women is qualitatively different from those that are featured in gossip between men or between a man and a woman, and the frequency of negative gossip is highest of all between female friends (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Younger women are more likely to gossip about rivals than are older women, possibly because the competition for mates is more intense during the earlier, reproductive part of a woman's life (Massar, Buunk, & Rempt, 2012), and the characteristics of rivals that are most likely to be attacked through malicious gossip are precisely those things that have

traditionally been most vital to a woman's reputation in the mating market: physical appearance and sexual reputation (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Vaillancourt, 2013; Watson, 2012). A recent study fuels the perception that physical appearance is a primary arena of competition among women in that a woman with a "hypercompetitive personality" is significantly more likely to undergo cosmetic surgery than is a less competitive woman (Thornton, Ryckman, & Gold, 2013).

Understanding the dynamics of intrasexual competitive gossip can generate hypotheses about how people pursue social information and present themselves through social media such as Facebook. The internet provides unprecedented opportunities to spread and track gossip, and it is self-evident that traditional face-to-face social competition now plays out in cyberspace. Since gossip and ostracism are primarily female tactics of aggression, one would expect female aggression to be amplified by the internet more than would male aggression. Troubling media stories about cyberbullying on Facebook, sometimes tragically resulting in the suicide of the victim, usually involve female aggressors and almost always involve female victims. Studying internet behavior in light of what we know about gossip shows great promise for helping us deal with this important problem. For example, an internet survey utilizing an international sample of 1026 Facebook users discovered that overall, females engaged in far more Facebook activity than did males. They spent more time on Facebook and they had more Facebook friends, and, consistent with previous research on gossip seeking behavior, females were more interested than males in the relationship status of others and they were more interested in keeping tabs on the activity of other women than men were in keeping tabs on the activity of other men. They also expended more energy than men in using profile photographs as a tool for impression management and in studying the photographs of other people (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012).

There is also evidence that time on Facebook is positively correlated with more frequent episodes of jealousy-related feelings and behaviors, especially among women (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; McAndrew & Shah, 2013; Morris, Reese, Beck, & Mattis, 2009; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). In one recent episode, a woman actually stabbed her boyfriend simply because he received a Facebook friend request from another woman! (Timesleader.com, 2012)

3. Conclusion

The current evidence about sex differences in gossip, much of it quite recent, indicates that preconceptions about females being more likely to use gossip in an aggressive fashion are more than just anecdotal and more than just a stereotype. However, this does not mean that women are more aggressive or "nastier" than men. Men and women simply differ in their preferred style of aggression, and generalizations about sex differences in aggression have limited usefulness in predicting the behavior of specific individuals. Men can certainly engage in competitive gossip and social ostracism when the circumstances call for it, just as women can behave in a physically aggressive fashion on occasion. Having said this, it has been well established that men are more physically aggressive than women (McAndrew, 2009), and concluding that women choose indirect relational aggression over physical aggression does not denigrate women any more than discussing the male propensity for physical violence denigrates men. An understanding of the different ways in which males and females manage aggression will help us develop more effective strategies for dealing with the problems of aggression in society, and connecting the study of gossip with the study of aggression will also offer new insights into emerging new social problems related to human interaction on the internet.

References

Archer, J. (2004). Sex differences in aggression in real-world settings: A meta-analytic review. *Review of General Psychology*, *8*, 291–322, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.8.4.291.

Archer, J., & Coyne, S. M. (2005). An integrated review of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *9*, 212–230, http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0903_2.

Barkow, J. H. (1992). Beneath new culture is old psychology: Gossip and social stratification. In J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, & J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture* (pp. 627–637). New York: Oxford University Press.

Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., & Vohs, K. D. (2004). Gossip as cultural learning. *Review of General Psychology*, *8*, 111–121, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.8.2.111.

Beersma, B., & Van Kleef, G. A. (2011). How the grapevine keeps you in line: Gossip increases contributions to the group. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *2*, 642–649, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1948550611405073.

Beersma, B., & Van Kleef, G. A. (2012). Why people gossip: An empirical analysis of social motives, antecedents, and consequences. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *42*, 2640–2670, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00956.x.

Benensen, J. F. (2013). The development of human female competition: Allies and adversaries. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, *368*, 20130079.

Björkqvist, K. (1994). Sex differences in physical, verbal, and indirect aggression: A review of recent research. *Sex Roles*, *30*, 177–188, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01420988.

Buss, D.M., & Dedden, L. (1990). Derogation of competitors. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *7*, 395–422, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407590073006.

Campbell, A. (1999). Staying alive: Evolution, culture, and women's intrasexual aggression. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *22*, 203–252, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X99001818.

Campbell, A. (2012). Women and aggression. In T. K. Shackelford, & V. A. Weekes-Shackelford (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of evolutionary perspectives on violence, homicide, and war* (pp. 197–217). New York: Oxford University Press.

Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, *66*, 710–722, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1131945.

Crothers, L. M., Lipinski, J., & Minutolo, M. C. (2009). Cliques, rumors, and gossip by the watercooler: Female bullying in the workplace. *Psychologist-Manager Journal*, *12*, 97–110, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10887150902886423.

De Backer, C. J. S., Nelissen, M., & Fisher, M. L. (2007). Let's talk about sex: A study on the recall of gossip about potential mates and sexual rivals. *Sex Roles*, *56*, 781–791, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9237-x.

Dunbar, R. I. M., Duncan, N. D. C., & Marriott, A. (1997). Human conversational behavior. *Human Nature*, *8*, 231–246, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02912493.

Eder, D., & Enke, J. L. (1991). The structure of gossip: Opportunities and constraints on collective expression among adolescents. *American Sociological Review*, *56*, 494–508, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2096270.

Elphinston, R. A., & Noller, P. (2011). Time to face it! Facebook intrusion and the implications for romantic jealousy and relationship satisfaction. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, *14*, 631–635, http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2010.0318.

Feinberg, M., Cheng, J. T., & Willer, R. (2012). Gossip as an effective and low-cost form of punishment. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *35*, 25, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X11001233.

Feinberg, M., Willer, R., Stellar, J., & Keltner, D. (2012). The virtues of gossip: Reputational information sharing as prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *102*, 1015–1030, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0026650.

Forumosa.com (2013, February 23). Famous Chinese proverbs about women. http://www.forumosa.com/taiwan/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=123832 (retrieved on April 4, 2014)

Galen, B. R., & Underwood, M. K. (1997). A developmental investigation of social aggression among children. *Developmental Psychology*, *33*, 589–600, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.4.589.

Geary, D. C., & Flinn, M. V. (2002). Sex differences in behavioral and hormonal response to social threat: Commentary on Taylor et al. (2000). *Psychological Review*, *109*, 745–750, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.4.745.

Hess, N. H., & Hagen, E. H. (2006). Sex differences in indirect aggression: Psychological evidence from young adults. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *27*, 231–245, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2005.11.001.

Hines, N. J., & Fry, D. P. (1994). Indirect modes of aggression among women of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Special Issue: On aggression in women and girls: Cross-cultural perspectives. *Sex Roles*, *30*, 213–236, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01420991.

Laing, M. (1993). Gossip: Does it play a role in the socialization of nurses? *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, *25*, 37–43.

Leaper, C., & Holliday, H. (1995). Gossip in same-gender and cross-gender friends' conversations. *Personal Relationships*, *2*, 237–246, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.1995.tb00089.x.

Levin, J., & Arluke, A. (1987). *Gossip: The inside scoop*. New York: Plenum Press.

Massar, K., Buunk, A. p, & Rempt, S. (2012). Age differences in women's tendency to gossip are mediated by their mate value. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *52*, 106–109, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.09.013.

McAndrew, F. T. (2009). The interacting roles of testosterone and challenges to status in human male aggression. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *14*, 330–335, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.04.006.

McAndrew, F. T., Bell, E. K., & Garcia, C. M. (2007). Who do we tell, and whom do we tell on? Gossip as a strategy for status enhancement. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *37*, 1562–1577, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2007.00227.x.

McAndrew, F. T., & Jeong, H. S. (2012). Who does what on Facebook? Age, sex, and relationship status as predictors of Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *28*, 2359–2365, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.007.

McAndrew, F. T., & Milenkovic, M.A. (2002). Of tabloids and family secrets: The evolutionary psychology of gossip. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *32*, 1064–1082, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2002.tb00256.x.

McAndrew, F. T., & Shah, S. S. (2013). Sex differences in jealousy over Facebook activity. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *29*, 2603–2606.

Morris, J., Reese, J., Beck, R., & Mattis, C. (2009). Facebook usage as a measure of retention at a private 4-year institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, *11*, 311–322.

Muise, A., Christofides, E., & Desmarais, S. (2009). More information than you ever wanted: Does Facebook bring out the green-eyed monster of jealousy? *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *12*, 441–444.

Noon, M., & Delbridge, R. (1993). News from behind my hand: Gossip in organizations. *Organization Studies*, *14*, 23–36.

Owens, L., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2000a). "Guess what I just heard!" Indirect aggression among teenage girls in Australia. *Aggressive Behavior*, *26*, 67–83.

Owens, L., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2000b). "I'm in and you're out..".: Explanations for teenage girls' indirect aggression. *Psychology, Evolution and Gender*, *2*, 19–46.

Rysman, A. (1977). How the 'gossip' became a woman. *Journal of Communication*, *27*, 176–180.

Shackelford, T. K. (1997). Perceptions of betrayal and the design of the mind. In J. A. Simpson, & D. T. Kenrick (Eds.), *Evolutionary social psychology* (pp. 73–107). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Suls, J. M. (1977). Gossip as social comparison. *Journal of Communication*, *27*, 164–168.

Thornton, B., Ryckman, R. M., & Gold, J. A. (2013). Competitive orientations and women's acceptance of cosmetic surgery. *Psychology*, *4*, 67–72.

Timesleader.com (2012, July 23). Man stabbed after receiving Facebook friend request. Timesleader.com (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania). http://www.timesleader.com/stories/Police-Man-stabbed-after-receiving-Facebook-friend-request-,180035 (accessed July 24, 2012)

Utz, S., & Beukeboom, C. J. (2011). The role of social network sites in romantic relationships: Effects on jealousy and relationship happiness. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *16*, 511–527.

Vaillancourt, T. (2013). Do human females use indirect aggression as an intrasexual competition strategy? *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, *368*, 20130080.

Walston, F., David, A. S., & Charlton, B. G. (1998). Sex differences in the content of persecutory delusions: A reflection of hostile threats in the ancestral environment? *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *19*, 257–260.

Watson, D. C. (2012). Gender differences in gossip and friendship. *Sex Roles*, *67*, 494–502.

Wilson, M. I., & Daly, M. (1996). Male sexual proprietariness and violence against wives. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *5*, 2–7.