Psst, have you heard...? What the thrill of gossip teaches us

Some gossip can be good, but things get tricky when doctors chatter about patients.

Chong Siow Ann

Gossiping has long had a bad rap. Way back in 16th- and 17th-century Britain, those found gossiping were sometimes punished with a “wrought bridle” – an iron contraption that encased the face with a gag to compress the tongue – making speech impossible.

But it is impossible to suppress what is probably a very human impulse and appetite.

We spend a great deal of our waking hours talking to each other, and much of this time is spent talking about other people and their doings which are none of our business – gossiping in other words. And let’s face it, most of us relish it.

“For what do we live, but to make sport of our neighbours and laugh at them in our turn?” asked Jane Austen’s Mr Bennet in Pride And Prejudice. This sort of behavior is surely gossip, but why would we not readily admit to it as we indulge in it. And certainly, we would not see ourselves as a group in the way the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines it: “a person who habitually indulges in the idle talk, especially the spreading of rumours and discussion of the private concerns of others.”

Added and altered by present-day technology, gossip has a reach and a speed unimaginable in Austen’s 19th-century world. Consider the recent mainstream of rumours and wild and salacious stories over Catherine, Princess of Wales, following her abdominal surgery.

The absence from public view of the princess spawned all manner of speculation, not just about her health but also about the state of her marriage, that did not abate until she commented in a video released by BBC Studios on March 22 that she has cancer. In the words of a commentator, “the (Kate) Middleton story is a collection of two popular cultures: conspiracy theorising and classic celebrity gossip.”

Setting aside issues of invasion of privacy, patient confidentiality, is gossip per se truly a bad thing?

IT’S GOOD FOR THE HEART

In recent years, gossip has entered the realm of serious academic studies, and research in the main has shown the positive effects of gossip – perhaps because of how scholars in this field have defined it – which is simply (and dramatically, very negative conversation) the relational personal communication about other people who are absent or treated as such.

The evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar posits that early gossip helped our ancestors survive by giving the group a way to maintain very large social networks through the sharing of valuable information. Gossip, as the theory goes, is a common activity that allows humans to display selective interest in stories about individuals which strengthens social bonds and conveys information without which other groups or society could function.

Gossip researchers have found it is also a way to learn about cultural norms and promote cooperation, and it even enables individuals to protect themselves – for instance, a timely rehash of gossip about a predatory associate could prevent someone from being exploited.

This is borne out by a study done by researchers from Stanford University published in 2014 in the journal Psychological Science. They found that a group of people would report less interest in those who they had learned through gossip were untrustworthy, and other groups would also exclude them.

And the act of gossiping might also have salutary physiological benefits. In a couple of related psychological studies where participants played trust investment games, the researchers observed that when someone cheated in a game, the other were all up for their heart rate shot up. And when they were allowed to gossip, by passing on a negative note identifying the culprit, they calmed down and their heart rate slowed as well.

Professor of psychology Megan Robbins, from the University of California, Riverside, argues that gossip can be deployed by society as both a form of policing and punishment.

“I’m gossiping about someone who cheats a lot, then that is itself to a consequence of cheating, of something that is in our culture we consider wrong,” she says. “So not only does gossip teach you what people consider good or bad behavior, but it can also serve itself as a consequence of bad behavior.”

The mere threat of being gossip about you can make people go to, talk to the line and be a bit more like a monkey with its tail curled,fragile situations and the inevitable consequence, a piece of gossip might allow an allaying of fears, but how not to conduct oneself.

FIRST WITH THE NEWS

When it comes to effectiveness, negative stories tend to stick better in the mind than positive stories, and what’s more, gossiping over something negative about someone makes for better bonding with the audience than sharing a positive opinion or a piece of good news — which says something unsettling about our culture.

There is an element of schadenfreude, or if vicarious sadness embodied in negative gossip. People tend to enjoy someone else’s misery and malfunctions, and are delighted that it’s not happening to them, or that there are others who are doing worse.

Gossiping takes place on many scales, from the horrifying commonplace to the malicious, and with its intent to hurt and humiliate, or to exact revenge. It can morph into an instance of mob mentality. People who do not like a person will typically seek out other like-minded people for a banding-together for the latest gossip. Subsequent conversations would focus on negative and unconstructive aspects of that person, and within that echo chamber, the hollering for the target of the gossip is validated and amplified.

Part of the allure of gossip is that it gives pleasure of being the person first with the news which comes with some sort of power of possessing some secret information, but it must be told to others to complete the triumph: it makes one the interesting person with “the scoop” which is gratifying to the ego – feeling though it might be, but it is no less compelling.

GOSSIPING ABOUT A PATIENT

In the face of the public’s insatiable lustiness about Kate Middleton’s medical situation, it subsequently emerged that a few staff at the London hospital that treated her are being investigated for accessing her medical records (even if they might have played a role as news reporters have been known to pay for such information).

What is disturbing is the disregard of her right to maintain privacy of her medical information and the betrayal of that patient confidentiality which is a cornerstone of medical practices. The duty to keep a patient’s information private is written into the codes of ethics of medical organizations and is even emphasized in the Hippocratic oath: “What I see or hear in the course of treatment, I shall keep to myself.”

Disclosure of confidential information without the patient’s consent is permissible only when mandated by the law, or to protect the patient or others from physical harms.

Transgressive gossip about patients is destructive because it trivialises them by turning the intimate aspects of their lives, emotions and psyche into banality, it is exploitative as it panders to the prurient entertainment of the public, and it degrades the medical profession. But it’s not that we don’t talk about our patients in the course of our work. We do talk about them in supervisions, in consultations and in case conferences – but always in a way that the patient cannot be identified.

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