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Sex Differences, Initiating Gossip



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Synonyms

[Adaptive problems](#); [Gossip](#); [Indirect aggression](#); [Intrasexual competition](#); [Sex differences](#)

Definition

Adolescent girls' and women's penchant for indirect aggression has led to the prediction that gossip may be their preferred tactic of choice when competing against intrasexual rivals. Consequently, girls and women are predicted to initiate and engage in gossip more frequently than boys and men.

Introduction

Gossip has been defined as a form of evaluative communication that permits individuals to

exchange positive and negative information about absent third party others (Leaper and Holliday 1995; Levin and Arluke 1985). It is a construct that overlaps conceptually with rumor, but is distinct in that it tends to be truthful and about people as opposed to events (Foster 2004). The historic and cross-cultural ubiquity of gossip, as well as the consensus among researchers that it plays a vital role in human social relationships, has led to the proposal that it may be an evolved psychological adaptation that enabled our ancestors to survive and reproduce (Barkow 1992; Dunbar 2004; McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002; McAndrew et al. 2007). This evolutionary perspective challenges the notion that gossip constitutes idle “chitchat” and the mere passing along of trivial everyday details for the purpose of enjoyment. It also helps to contradict the pejorative gender stereotype sometimes associated with women's gossip by demonstrating that men also gossip to a significant extent. From this view, gossiping plays an essential role in how both sexes relate to and choose to coexist with other human beings (Foster 2004; McAndrew 2014); perhaps even to the point of defining the social group itself.

Gossip as an Adaptation to Overcome Adaptive Problems

As an adaptation, gossip is posited to be a heritable trait that was selected for because it helped to

solve problems linked to survival (e.g., locating food) and/or reproduction (e.g., gaining access to potential mates; see Davis et al. 2018 and McAndrew 2014 for discussion). Gossip has likely been preserved and has proliferated throughout human populations over time because it ultimately enhanced the reproductive success of our ancestors in the environment within which it was selected. What adaptive problem(s) might gossip have solved? For Dunbar (2004), the key adaptive challenges that gossip helped to overcome were those linked to group living.

In comparison to other primates, humans are unparalleled in their capacity for, and reliance upon, cooperation, cultural transmission, conformity, coalitional alliances, and “group-mindedness” (Barkow 1992; Dunbar 2004). To function in highly expansive communities requires an efficient means of gathering, sharing, and vetting information about others, as well as ways of encouraging cooperation and minimizing rule breaking (Foster 2004). Dunbar (2004) proposed that gossip helped to meet these challenges by (1) keeping track of others embedded in complex social networks, (2) emphasizing one’s potential as an ally, friend, or mate, (3) soliciting help from others regarding personal dilemmas, and (4) policing the duplicitous and exploitative actions of others. Similarly, Barkow (1992) argued that social living necessitates tracking the actions of peers and developing the capacity to predict and influence the behavior of others in order to vie for finite resources linked to fitness. To this end, gossip may be instrumental for our success in social competition as a tactic for reputation management and to facilitate the creation of internal representations of others who are likely to impact our fitness such as kin, allies, mates, and rivals (Barkow 1992; McAndrew et al. 2007).

Over evolutionary time, women and men have faced many of the same adaptive hurdles, such as detecting the presence of dangerous predators and competing for potential mates. However, it is evident that the favored competitive strategies, reputational concerns, mating interests, as well as the character of kin networks and alliances differ substantially by sex (Barkow 1992; Campbell 1999, 2004; Vaillancourt 2013). This is the case because women and men have recurrently faced many

different adaptive problems over their evolutionary histories, which has led to the selection of divergent adaptations with sex-specific design features (Arnocky 2016; Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2017; Buss 1989). The domains within which women and men have faced different adaptive problems are defined by the process of sexual selection, whereby traits like gossip are selected because they provide a reproductive advantage (Arnocky 2016; Buss and Dedden 1990). Sex can be defined as consistent, but flexible, variation in reproductive anatomy and function, hormone levels, and chromosomal makeup (Davis et al. 2018). Sex is distinct from, but inseparably interrelated with gender, which tends to be defined as the attitudes and behavior that a particular culture associates with sex.

Adaptations that emerge through the process of sexual selection manifest as a consequence of choosing preferred mates (i.e., intersexual selection) and through competition with members of the same-sex for access to opposite-sex mates (i.e., intrasexual competition; see Davis et al. 2018 for discussion). In the realms of social and mating competition, our primary rivals tend to be same-sex others because they have faced the same adaptive problems and thus seek the same resources to meet these evolutionary challenges (Barkow 1992; Buss 1989). Importantly, sexual selection embodies competition for mates and resources that influence the probability of mating, such as popularity and status (Arnocky 2016). Intrasexual competition among humans involves diverse tactics including, but not limited to, emphasizing one’s desirable qualities as a mate (i.e., self-promotion) and manipulating the reputations of competitors to lower their desirability as a mate relative to ourselves and diminish their capacity to compete (i.e., competitor derogation; Buss and Dedden 1990; Campbell 2004).

Gossip as an Intrasexual Competition Strategy

Evidence supports the argument that gossip is a key tactic for intrasexual rivalry. Davis et al. (2018) found positive relations between self-reported intrasexual competitiveness, a tendency

to gossip, and positive attitudes toward gossiping for both women and men. Furthermore, researchers have confirmed that we are most interested in, and share more negative gossip about, same-sex others of a similar age who are our primary intrasexual competitors in the context of heterosexual mating (McAndrew et al. 2007; McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002; McDonald et al. 2007; Owens et al. 2000). In the domain of mate competition, malicious gossip and rumor may be used to derogate rivals in an effort to lower their mate value and to access and retain reproductive resources (Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2012; Buss and Dedden 1990; Campbell 2004). This negative gossip is described as a type of indirect aggression which refers to a range of covert acts intended to influence and exploit interpersonal relationships, including social exclusion, spreading harmful gossip and rumors, and breaking confidences (Vaillancourt 2005, 2013).

Spiteful gossip, like other types of indirect aggression, is an effective mate competition tactic because it can be damaging to its targets (e.g., lowering self-esteem and increasing risk of depression for victims; see Vaillancourt 2013 for review) and it can be used to elevate our social standing (Vaillancourt and Hymel 2006), providing greater access to reproductive opportunities (Arnocky 2016; Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2012). Furthermore, gossip can be employed to manipulate social information in our favor and to impugn the reputation of rivals while disguising the identity of the gossip, which reduces the probability of physical, verbal, or social retaliation (Arnocky 2016; Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2017; Vaillancourt 2013). Nonetheless, many social norms govern gossiping, which if violated can result in reputational damage and social exclusion (Foster 2004). Therefore, spreading and listening to malicious gossip carries a certain level of risk, despite its stealthy nature. Cross-culturally, adolescent girls and women have been shown to prefer more covert and circuitous modes of aggression such as negative gossip and social exclusion, whereas boys and men are more likely to engage in risky and direct forms of aggression (e.g., verbal taunting and physically hitting another; Benenson et al. 2013; Björkqvist 1994; Campbell 1999, 2004; Owens et al. 2000;

Vaillancourt 2005, 2013; Vaillancourt et al. 2010). This sex difference in the proportional use of different types of aggression corresponds to the unique adaptive challenges faced by ancestral women and men.

Despite being a species that engages in biparental care, women's higher degree of obligatory parental investment, through gestation, child bearing, and post-partum care, and their smaller number of gametes translates into a lower lifetime reproductive potential in comparison to men (Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2017; Campbell 1999, 2004). In contrast, men's reproductive output is largely constrained by their capacity to outcompete same-sex rivals to obtain reproductive opportunities. A mother's death has also been found to increase the risk of child mortality more than a father's death, underscoring the importance of maternal investment. Ancestral women, therefore, could less afford to engage in risky and violent forms of intrasexual competition and benefited by carefully selecting successfully competitive mates who were able and willing to invest (Arnocky 2016; Campbell 1999, 2004; Vaillancourt 2013). The larger cost associated with women's use of risky and directly aggressive mate competition tactics can be seen in their preference for indirect aggression and their relative absence of armament designed for direct intrasexual combat (e.g., smaller stature, less muscle mass) in comparison to men. Girls and women, relative to boys and men, are therefore predicted to use gossip as a mode of indirect aggression to compete against intrasexual rivals for mates and to establish and maintain status within their peer groups (Eckert 1990; Leaper and Holliday 1995; McDonald et al. 2007; McAndrew 2014; Vaillancourt 2005, 2013). This proclivity may correspond to a greater tendency to gossip, greater enjoyment of the activity, and a stronger inclination to gossip for intrasexually competitive purposes. For the same reasons, girls and women may be more likely to initiate the spreading of gossip than boys and men.

Several studies have supported the hypothesis that girls and women tend to gossip more than boys and men (Björkqvist et al. 1992; Davis et al. 2017; Leaper and Holliday 1995; Levin and Arluke 1985). There are also sex differences

with whom men and women gossip. McAndrew et al. (2007) found that women were just as likely to share gossip with a same-sex friend as with their romantic partner, whereas men were significantly more likely to share gossip with their mates than with anyone else. Furthermore, women have been shown to express a stronger desire to hear gossip about members of their own sex and are more likely to gossip about same-sex friends and relatives in comparison to men (Leaper and Holliday 1995; Levin and Arluke 1985; McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002). Björkqvist et al. (1992) demonstrated that adolescent girls were nominated by their peers to be significantly more likely to spread malicious gossip in comparison to boys. Low et al. (2010) found that preadolescent and adolescent girls transmitted more malevolent gossip than boys and were more likely to be the targets of negative gossip. Women and men appear to spread a similar proportion of negative and positive gossip about other people in general (Levin and Arluke 1985); however, higher rates of spiteful gossip have been found to occur in female friend groups in comparison to male friend and female–male friend groups (Leaper and Holliday 1995). These findings support the idea that girls and women initiate gossip more than boys and men, particularly when spreading derogatory gossip about familiar others to same-sex peers.

Sex Differences in Initiating Gossip Episodes

To our knowledge, only one study has directly examined differences between women and men in who is more likely to be the first person to spread real or fake information about someone among mixed-sex groups. Levin and Arluke (1985) found that female friends initiated more negative gossip than male friends and cross-sex friends. Male friends were less likely to initiate the spread of positive gossip; however, cross-sex friends were just as likely as women to initiate favorable gossip. Further investigation of sex differences in the initiation of gossip is needed to examine if women are more likely to start an

episode of gossip in comparison to men within cross-sex groups. Women may be more likely than men to initiate gossip, particularly of a negative valence, with opposite-sex others because of their greater tendency to gossip among same-sex friends and their preference for using gossip as an indirect mode of aggression to compete against intrasexual rivals (Campbell 1999, 2004; Davis et al. 2018; McAndrew 2014). Nonetheless, a range of developmental, individual difference, interpersonal, and contextual factors are expected to influence this predicted sex difference.

Adolescent girls and young women are predicted to compete more intensely for mates and things linked to fitness (e.g., status, popularity) than younger girls and older women because of their relatively greater reproductive capacity and mate value (Campbell 1999, 2004; Massar et al. 2012; Vaillancourt 2013). Low et al. (2010) found that girls in grade six (aged 11–12) were more likely to gossip and to be the targets of gossip than girls in grade three (aged 8–9). Similarly, Björkqvist et al. (1992) found that 15-year-old girls were peer-nominated to be significantly more likely to spread negative gossip than their 8-year-old counterparts. Massar et al. (2012) demonstrated that young adult women reported gossiping more than their older same-sex peers. The authors found that this relation was mediated by mate value, such that more physically attractive women gossiped more often than their less attractive counterparts (Massar et al. 2012). Therefore, physically attractive adolescent girls and young women are more likely to initiate gossip about same-sex others because of their greater tendency to engage in the activity and their greater susceptibility to being the targets of gossip.

In comparison to boys and men, girls and women should be particularly likely to initiate gossip when it is being used to attack the relationships of same-sex peers. This is because girls and women regard close intimate friendships as more important than do boys and men and have tighter social structures (Eckert 1990; McDonald et al. 2007). Researchers have supported that girls and women are more likely to be the targets of indirect peer victimization, such as malicious gossip, and are more susceptible to the psychological harm

caused by this behavior (e.g., increased risk of depression, suicidal ideation; Benenson et al. 2013; Owens et al. 2000; see also Vaillancourt 2013 for discussion). At the same time, gossip can be a powerful social bonding mechanism that enhances intimacy and solidarity (Eckert 1990). This is likely of greater importance to girls and women who prefer close dyadic relationships characterized by intimacy, security, closeness, and trustworthiness (McDonald et al. 2007). Among older adolescent girls, qualitative reports have confirmed that aggressive gossip can play an important role in developing close personal relationships and peer acceptance (Owens et al. 2000). Perhaps girls and women initiate gossip more than boys and men when seeking to damage the relationships of same-sex others via indirect aggression and initiate the spread of negative gossip about others more often to enhance intimacy and acceptance among the peer group.

Because girls and women appear to place more value on their intimate same-sex friendships, are more relationally aggressive, and are more susceptible to the damage wrought by relational victimization relative to boys and men (see Eckert 1990 and Vaillancourt 2005, 2013 for discussion), it is sensible to predict that they may gossip more about social information (Davis et al. 2018). This would presumably allow girls and women to acquire vital knowledge about people in their social circles, to derogate intrasexual rivals, and to protect their relationships and themselves. In previous work, girls and women have been shown to gossip more about peers, friends, family members, the dating and romantic relationships of others, and to read gossip more often in the media (Davis et al. 2018; Eckert 1990; McDonald et al. 2007). Women have also been found to perceive more value in gossiping and to find the activity more enjoyable than men (Davis et al. 2018). Girls and women may then be more likely to initiate gossip when it concerns social information because these details are argued to be more pertinent to their intrasexual competition than amongst boys and men.

Along with social information, several sex differences in the initiation of gossip likely vary across different content domains where women

and men have encountered divergent adaptive problems (Buss and Dedden 1990). The mate preferences of one sex become the traits over which the opposite sex competes (Arnocky 2016; Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2017). Women's greater obligatory parental investment, the importance of maternal investment for the survival of offspring, and the fact that humans have more altricial young translates into women facing the adaptive challenge of securing mates who are both able and willing to invest significant resources in them and their offspring and to offer protection. Therefore, men are predicted to compete with one another to display and to derogate each other on traits linked to resource acquisition and holding potential such as status, achievement, ambition, and industry, as well as their physical strength and stature (Buss and Dedden 1990).

Davis et al. (2018) found that men gossiped more about achievement-related content in comparison to women, such as the salaries and work successes of others. Similarly, people also spontaneously recall gossip about the status and wealth linked to a hypothetical man more often than a similar fictional woman (De Backer et al. 2007). However, Levin and Arluke (1985) found that women were more inclined than men to gossip about schoolwork, such as teacher evaluations, exams and papers, and other students' grades. Men's frequent gossip about televised sports has been noted by previous researchers (e.g., Johnson and Finlay 1997). Unsurprisingly, adolescent boys and men have been found to gossip more about athletic performance and sports figures (Levin and Arluke 1985). These results suggest that the content of boys' and men's gossip generally corresponds to the evolved mate preferences of girls and women. Therefore, boys and men are predicted to initiate gossip about achievement and athletics more often than girls and women.

Due to men's paternity uncertainty, higher reproductive potential, cheap and replenishing gametes, as well as the inconspicuous nature of women's ovulation, ancestral men faced the adaptive challenge of finding, courting, and securing fertile and sexually faithful mates (see Arnocky 2016 and Arnocky and Vaillancourt 2017 for discussion). Consequently, men have evolved to

prefer women displaying cues linked to health, reproductive value, and fertility (e.g., youth, facial femininity, unblemished skin, full lips, large breasts, and a low waist-to-hip ratio), as well as sexual fidelity (Buss 1989). Therefore, women are predicted to compete primarily with same-sex rivals over traits like youthfulness, physical appearance, and sexual reputation.

Girls and women, more than boys and men, have been shown to derogate each other on their appearance using terms such as “ugly” and “fat” (Buss and Dedden 1990; Campbell 2004; Vaillancourt 2013). Key drivers for adolescent girls’ malicious gossip and social exclusion are envy over the appearance of same-sex others and jealousy over preferred male mates (Owens et al. 2000). Women have also been found to report greater feelings of jealousy and competitiveness when exposed to images of attractive women or when they perceive other women as being more physically attractive than they are (Arnocky et al. 2012). Similarly, women have been found to gossip more about the physical appearance of others (Davis et al. 2018). In addition, women and men have better spontaneous recall for gossip about the attractiveness of a fictional woman relative to a fictional man (De Backer et al. 2007). These results support the hypothesis that girls and women are more likely to initiate gossip about the physical appearance of others, particularly when the gossip is targeting a same-sex rival.

The most common insults that women direct toward same-sex rivals concern their sexual faithfulness and drawing attention to, or exaggerating, their promiscuity (Buss and Dedden 1990). Pejorative terms like “slut,” “whore,” and “ho” are common in the gossip and rumors of women’s competitor derogation (Vaillancourt and Sharma 2011; see Campbell 2004; Vaillancourt 2013). Although rare among women, the most commonly reported reason for women’s physical violence is retaliation in response to allegations of being licentious (see Campbell 1999). Vaillancourt and Sharma (2011) demonstrated experimentally that women voluntarily derogated a promiscuously dressed female research confederate more than the same woman dressed in more

conservative clothes. These results indicate that women compete against same-sex others and often maliciously manipulate the sexual reputation of their victims using gossip. Therefore, adolescent girls and women may initiate more derogatory gossip about a same-sex rival’s sexual reputation in comparison to boys and men.

Conclusion

Gossip plays an important role in the social dynamics and interpersonal relations of human beings (Dunbar 2004; Foster 2004). It is likely an adaptation that was sexually selected because it provided a reproductive advantage to ancestral human beings. Gossip may have evolved to solve adaptive problems in several domains that differentially impinged on the survival and reproduction of ancestral women and men. Thus, several authors have predicted that gossip has sex-specific design features (Campbell 1999, 2004; Davis et al. 2018; McAndrew 2014; Vaillancourt 2013). Evidence to date supports the hypothesis that girls and women initiate gossip more than boys and men, particularly when gossip is negative and shared among same-sex friends. It is somewhat unclear, however, whether women initiate more gossip episodes than men within mixed-sex groups. Due to their greater tendency to gossip and to use gossip to gather valuable social information as well as to derogate rivals, girls and women likely initiate gossip more often than boys and men in cross-sex groups. This propensity may be stronger for attractive adolescent girls and women, particularly during their earlier reproductive years when mate competition intensifies (Massar et al. 2012; Vaillancourt 2013) and when the content relates to a rivals physical appearance and sexual reputation. In contrast, boys and men may initiate gossip more often when it concerns content related to women’s evolved mate preferences, including cues to resource holding potential and physical formidability.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Contexts for Men's Aggression Against Men](#)
- ▶ [Contexts for Women's Aggression Against Women](#)
- ▶ [Derogation of Attractiveness](#)
- ▶ [Derogation of Promiscuity](#)
- ▶ [Development of Sex Differences](#)
- ▶ [Gossip and Grooming Hypothesis](#)
- ▶ [Gossip, Rumors, and Social Exclusion](#)
- ▶ [Intrasexual Rivalry Among Women](#)
- ▶ [Meta-analysis of Sex Differences in Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Relational Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Same-Sex Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Verbal Derogation](#)
- ▶ [Women's Use of Direct Versus Disguised Social Aggression](#)

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