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# WHAT IS GOSSIP ABOUT? AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS

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A notable feature of the various sociological explanations of gossip which have been made, is their neglect of the connexion between gossip and communication. I wish to draw attention to this connexion, which I term information-management, and in so doing to put forward a further explanation of gossip. This is that gossip is, first, a genre of informal communication and, second, a device intended to forward and protect individual interests. These are obviously related properties, which provide an explanation for the regulation of gossip. I do not pursue the functional explanation of gossip, and find cause to criticise it; nor do I attempt to present an exhaustive explanation of gossip. Rather, I am concerned here with gossip purely as purposive behaviour.

## *Previous hypotheses*

The informational aspect to gossip has been recognised by Hotchkiss (1962), Roberts (1964) and to a varied extent in recent writings from the Newfoundland scene, e.g. Faris (1966a; 1966b), Firestone (1967) and Szwed (1966a; 1966b), while writings of Goffman (e.g. 1959; 1961) are indispensable in this connexion. However most social anthropologists have looked—and may still be looking—at gossip with the help of hypotheses derived from a body of Radcliffe-Brownian structural theory which is of itself an inadequate tool for taking account of processes of communication. The psychological hypotheses that have been offered are also inadequate for this purpose (e.g. Festinger *et al.* 1948; Kluckhohn 1944: 76 sqq.). Even work concerned with networks of relations has not taken account of patterns of gossip as an important variable in the operation of the observed groupings (e.g. Barnes 1954; Mayer 1963), or has failed to provide a satisfactory account (e.g. Bott 1957: 67, 76 sqq.).

However, connexions have been recognised between gossip and individual catharsis, local social control, the maintenance of local 'we' groups, and the creation of leaders. Frequently, all these functions of gossip may be implied in a monograph where gossip is rather casually, but episodically, included. An hypothesis of good standing, developed particularly by Herskovits (1937), is that gossip provides a 'wary' or informal and indirect sanction where one cannot risk an open and formal attack, where it is inexpedient to do so, or where there are simply no other sanctions available. The role of gossip here is near to that which has been recognised for wizardry (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1937; Nadel 1954; Kluckhohn 1944); recent writers on Mediterranean societies have also drawn attention to it (e.g. Pitt-Rivers 1954; Campbell 1964). This view of gossip usually omits problems connected with information, however. It is assumed that different persons

have made available sufficient information for a section of the community to make a judgement: gossip, here, is the execution of this judgement. It is, in fact, also the broadcasting of the judgement: a facet to the situation about which we are usually told far too little. The hypothesis itself is acceptable and useful; however, for an understanding of the processes involved, one is bound, I think, to turn to information-management.

Another hypothesis is that advanced by Colson (1953). Gossip is a thematic feature of her *The Makah Indians*. She skilfully shows it employed by Indians competing for the personal attainment of élite (or special status) privileges. Colson's treatment illuminates two matters of special interest to us here. First, the gossipers are in competition with each other and gossip is one of the ways by which they 'manage' their competition; and second, they use gossip as a means of imparting information. Much of the information is, necessarily, retrospective; it brings to mind Roberts's (1964: 441) suggestion as to the role of gossip in 'informational storage and retrieval'.<sup>1</sup>

However, Colson's material is not, after all, best suited to an exposition of information-management. It is really scandal in which the Makah mainly indulge: they talk to discredit (not to learn); they accuse each other.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the accusations are directed not wholly, nor even essentially, at fellow gossipers but at officials who take decisions concerning who is or is not a Makah entitled to privilege.

Gluckman (1963)<sup>3</sup> makes a *tour de force* of the implication he finds in Colson's monograph. We may call it the latent function of Makah scandalising. For it is stated in the monograph that 'the constant criticism, gossip and backbiting is a reassertion of these [Makah] values, which today can be expressed in no other way. If they repressed the gossip and backbiting, the values themselves would disappear, and with them much of the feeling that the Makah are a distinct people' (Colson 1953: 228).

Gossip, Gluckman says (p. 313), speaking generally, 'is a hallmark of membership' and 'the values of the group are clearly asserted in gossip and scandal'. This view dominates another recent study: 'Gossip is undoubtedly the most important channel for constant reaffirmation of shared values about behaviour' (Loudon 1961: 347). Other authors could be quoted to the same effect. But Gluckman also says (p. 313), 'You must scandalize about an opponent behind his back' and not to his face, because 'insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretence of group amity'. Similarly (p. 312), the reason why 'differences of opinion are fought out in behind-the-back tattle, gossip and scandal', and not in committee meetings,<sup>4</sup> is 'so that many villagers who are actually at loggerheads, can outwardly maintain the show of harmony and friendship. They remain a community, despite . . . '.

Gossip is here being brought into service to illustrate two bedrock assumptions of much structural anthropology, namely, the 'unity' of the group which has been isolated as a unit of study, and its 'equilibrium'. Thus gossip is conceived as a property of the group; its use is regulated by the group in such a way that it serves to demarcate the group and, at the same time, helps to perpetuate it. However, this argument of Gluckman and others appears to contain a contradiction. On the one hand, gossip is recognised as promoting unity in the sense of impressing the fact of common membership; on the other, it is supposed that gossip can

destroy the unity which is, anyway, now referred to as 'the pretence of group amity'. Gossip does not have this deleterious effect because, as Gluckman points out, it is regulated. This saves the community; but we are still left with an unsatisfactory argument.

I hope to show below that the argument is unsatisfactory because it makes the community the centre of attention instead of the individual. This causes Gluckman to attribute to gossipers the 'unity' of their community as their paramount value, and to explain the regulation of gossip with reference to the protection of this value. In my view, a discussion of the values of gossipers is best related to what we can find out about their self-interests; I would hypothesise that gossipers also have rival interests; that they gossip, and also regulate their gossip, to forward and protect their individual interests. As a matter of fact, I find my argument supported, or at least not refuted, in Gluckman's *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (1955). Here a community is considered as a system of constraints. It is a complex system which, on balance, is centripetal; and, where members of a given population are involved in a rivalry of interests with each other rather than with other persons, their conflict itself may be a constraint with centripetal effect. Thus we may reject as naïve any hypothesis to the effect that gossip is not face-to-face because of inhabitants' anxiety that if it were, their community might fall apart.

*The alternative hypothesis: gossip and self-interest*

We may well begin by asking a question about the scene, in Jane Austen's *Emma*, which Gluckman also discusses (p. 308). Why did Mr John Knightley suppose it *would* be but idle chatter that awaited him out in the country at the dinner table of Mr Weston? Gluckman's comment is:

'These were people living on land, rents and gilt-edged shares, marking themselves off from others by talking about one another. *And talking about one another was what helped maintain them as a group—an élite—in the wider society in which they lived.* Mr John Knightley had left this society to practice law in London; hence he was intolerant of its gossip. His more intelligent, and very high-principled brother, joined in the gossip with interest, for he was still fully absorbed in the social life of the village' (p. 308; italics added).

But if the talk is to be regarded as being simply about one another, then Mr John Knightley *was* included—being of the same class, a relative, etc. On the other hand, if the talk was really *an exchange of news*, then Mr Knightley could with justice protest that, as far as he was concerned, there was little basis for reciprocity: *he* had a legal practice in Town, *they*—and these are the clues to which Gluckman draws our attention—lived on land and rents. Surely the point about the 'idle chatter' was that John Knightley no longer had a *use* for the information it contained.

Gluckman says that 'the values of the group' are asserted in gossip, but is this not true and important primarily in the sense that individuals appeal to each other in terms of these values in order to forward their own interests? When Gluckman says that he finds gossip emphasising the 'overall unity' of a community (p. 314), one agrees with him that it may well do so, but parts company with him when he suggests that this is somehow what gossip is about. It is the individual and not the

community that gossips. What he gossips about are his own and others' aspirations, and only indirectly the values of the community.

Sarakatsani gossip provides a forceful example of this point. The Sarakatsani shepherds (Campbell 1964) are an ethnic group in Greece whose relations with the surrounding Greek (non-Sarakatsani) sedentary society and culture are those of opposition and exclusion. Within the group, each Sarakatsani family struggles alone to retain its fund of prestige. As this is measured in relation to what prestige others possess, each family, in its struggle, attempts to slight the prestige of others. Thus, the social prestige of each family 'depends on the favourable response of enemies; or more accurately, on the inability of enemies effectively to denigrate a family's reputation' (Campbell 1964: 265). A common form of denigration is slander and ridicule passed in gossip.

Yet Campbell does point out that, among the Sarakatsani, a man is not gossiped about to his face; following Gluckman the reason would be that to do so would 'make impossible the pretence of group amity'. We have seen that the Sarakatsani make little pretence of amity, and it is quite clear from Campbell that the explanation concerns the protection of family prestige and not the unity of the Sarakatsani. Among the Sarakatsani, 'normally there is no shame in delivering insults, only in receiving them' (1964: 286) and failure to avenge an insult brings a person near to the edge of social obloquy. While it is sometimes necessary for a married Sarakatsani to expose his family to acts of vengeance, to do so unnecessarily is to disregard its self-interest and wins no approbation from other Sarakatsani. Thus heads of households resort to gossip in order to accomplish the social humiliation of their enemies without exposing themselves: '... the subtlety of gossip and ridicule as sanctions is that, since they do not generally operate in his presence, they offer a man no excuse for violent response' (1964: 315).

Unmarried men, knowing no such considerations of family responsibility and intent on proving their Sarakatsani 'manliness,' dispense with gossip and trade insults and quarrels: their insults require a violent response and their quarrels 'are necessarily public' (1964: 281). And Sarakatsani acknowledge that it is among these young men that the highest Sarakatsani value, 'manliness,' resides (1964: 280).

This example of the Sarakatsani is especially interesting in connexion with the issues raised by Gluckman's stress on the moral implications of gossip (1963). From this point of view gossip is 'statements making moral judgements'.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, this is a most apt definition in connexion with Sarakatsani gossip; and yet Gluckman's explanation of gossip would still be wide of the mark in the case of these Sarakatsani shepherds. For Gluckman merges the issue of morality into that of unity; indeed it would seem that, in his usage, the two notions are mutually dependent and the argument circular (gossip→morality→unity→gossip→morality and so on). Returning to the Sarakatsani, the considerations they have in mind *are* those of morality: but, at the same time, considerations of unity are not an issue among them, but rather those of self-interest. Sarakatsani compete for moral status. This means that morality and self-interest are brought extremely close to each other, and among the Sarakatsani there is little contradiction between these two things. Gossip is not used by the Sarakatsani to separate morality from self-interest, but to cast doubts upon the abilities and achievements of other families in order to improve one's own self-interested and competitive claims to moral recognition.

My general conclusion is that the investigation of gossip is best kept on an instrumental plane even where we are interested in exploring the important connexion it has with morality. In other words, important data concerning the 'moral order' of a group are the manipulations it is possible for individuals to make concerning their interests, and gossip is a device used in these manipulations.

The gossip of the Makah Indians is, in my view, very similar to that of the Sarakatsani. For each Indian is trying to keep the descendants of his own relatives on the tribal roll and those of others off the roll—and that is what the gossip is about. Yet both authors do bring the thesis of group unity into their consideration of gossip; Colson speaks of 'reassertion of values' (1953: 228), Campbell of 'reaffirmation of solidarity' (1964: 314). It is clear that neither refers to purposive behaviour.

The principal issue in this paper so far is one of the utilities of alternative kinds of explanation. Gluckman (1963) is offering a functional explanation, or an explanation by implication. Its disadvantage is that it makes 'gossip' similar to just about everything else in the social structure. It is demonstrated as integrative to the structure (or disintegrative, as the case may be) and may then be regarded, by the analyst, solely in respect of this implication. On the other hand, to explain gossip as purposive behaviour in terms of communication and individual interests affords, I believe, greater sociological penetration; for it allows one to compare gossip, in different societies, as a component of social relations. Handled in this way, the analysis of gossip should advance the fundamentally comparative aims of anthropology.

#### *Gossip and information-management*

In adopting the viewpoint that gossip, whatever else it may be in a functional sense, is also a cultural device used by the individual to forward his own interests, we drop certain assumptions otherwise generally present in the treatment of gossip, for example, the notion that gossip is the property of 'we' groups, and that 'we' do not gossip with any 'they' but among ourselves only.

It is this notion of a group in which the emphasis is placed on social exclusiveness that is at the root of my dissatisfaction with Gluckman's treatment of gossip. A 'we' group, in fact, usually turns out to be a coterie of rival interest-based quasi-groups (Mayer 1963). It is upon the latter that we should concentrate. It is also likely that the individual participants in these quasi-groups have ties and interests beyond the boundary of their 'we' group, and some of them may lead into other 'we' groups. Even where this does not happen, participants in quasi-groups, because these are interest-based, will have need of information about people outside their 'we' group. Patron-client, landlord-tenant, producer-consumer, etc., are examples of relationships where communication across 'we' group boundaries is necessary, and in a political life the same is true between members of opposing political parties. Gossip is a very general, and important, way of obtaining this information: sometimes it is the only way. Nor will the probable complexity of the situation be apprehended by thinking simply in terms of overlapping interest-groups; probably the crucial concept is the prolific ego-centred network and the crucial distinction one between 'processes characteristic of focused



interaction, rather than groups as such' (Goffman 1961: 10-11). But beyond this basic conceptual framework, assumptions should not be included at the outset of an investigation of gossip regarding the distribution, strength and character of social alignments in a community. These features should be constructed from the data collected about the lines of communication and the flow of information (of various kinds) in the community.

From the present point of view, a working definition of gossip would include

1. talk of personalities *and* their involvement in events of the community, and
2. talk that draws out other persons to talk in this way. For a gossip usually endeavours to receive more than he gives. He has 'long ears' and part of his art lies in arranging a constant flow of information to himself. This argument does not deny that a gossip, still with the intention of receiving more than he gives, often distributes information. In part, he does so in recognition of one of the first principles of information-management. Namely, there is always some information that *he* wishes certain people to possess—e.g. as a reassurance to them about his activities—in order that his, and not their, definition of the situation prevails.<sup>6</sup> He also distributes information as a move in a series of prestations. Where he is thinking simply of the maintenance of a general flow of information back to himself, he circulates information that he can easily afford. But where he wishes to acquire particular information from particular persons he will distribute a selection of information that he knows *they* wish to possess.

The concepts of confidence and audience are both crucial: sometimes a good gossip plans on certain of his 'confidences' being passed on; at other times the social costs to him of a leakage would be disastrous. The use of information itself to promote a situation of prestation, whereby he himself acquires information in return for what he has given, is indispensable to the gossip. A particular problem is what the individual can do to ensure that his gossip flows in ungarbled form, and from person to person in the sequence he desires.

The informal context of gossip is usually emphasised. This is a diacritical mark of gossip also from the present point of view. However, it should be realised that we are not dealing with informal information but informal communication, i.e. information that flows in an informal way; by this is meant that the channels of communication are selected by the individual as alternatives to the available official or open ones. What the gossip has in mind is not necessarily secrecy; indeed we must also distinguish those occasions where he selects channels as being the most suitable for the random dissemination of messages. He is interested in securing independent sources of information and in heightening his control over the routes of messages which he himself sends.

In this view of gossip, there is no *a priori* assumption that gossip of itself either avoids conflict or exacerbates it, that it brings people together or pushes them into opposing factions. It may have implications in either or both of these directions. On the other hand, I think it can be demonstrated that gossip is a catalyst of social process, so that one or another of the effects just mentioned is likely to be produced. In this sense, it may be held that gossip serves to pattern issues which were but vaguely or confusedly perceived by a local population. Clearly, then, gossip is a powerful social instrument for any person who learns to manage it and can thereby direct or canalise its catalytic effect.

## NOTES

This paper, in its first version, was presented in September 1964 at a seminar at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, attended by Professor Gluckman. I wish to thank colleagues at Bergen and Oslo, present colleagues at the Memorial University of Newfoundland and Professor Gluckman, for their stimulation and criticisms.

While editing this version with a view to publication, I read Szwed's *Gossip, drinking and social control* (1966b). Szwed opens with a statement of position, cf. Mandelbaum (1965) and Spindler (1964), regarding work on patterns of alcohol consumption, most pertinent to and congruent with the position adopted here.

<sup>1</sup> Information is 'stored' when it is not flowing from person to person; 'retrieval' means the resumption of its flow. One common way in which this is accomplished is by a person, perhaps by dexterous use of gossip, contriving an association between the stored information and external situations and events.

<sup>2</sup> For present purposes, it is sufficient to use 'gossip' as a catch-all term subsuming both 'rumour' and 'scandal'. In a forthcoming publication (Paine, in press) I will consider the technical distinctions, based on informal communication, that can be usefully hung on each of these words, as well as applying the information-management approach to material gathered in a single community.

<sup>3</sup> All references made in this article to Gluckman refer, unless otherwise specified, to this paper. Among the useful services which Professor Gluckman performed in it was to demonstrate that gossip is not 'idle chatter', and to stand on its head the notion that gossip is a social malaise and that gossips are pernicious; cf. Kluckhohn (1944) *vis-à-vis* witchcraft, Firth (1956) *vis-à-vis* rumour.

<sup>4</sup> Gluckman is here referring to Frankenberg's study (1957) of a village in Wales.

<sup>5</sup> A comment made by Gluckman at the Bergen seminar.

<sup>6</sup> Goffman (1959: 85): 'The object of a performer is to sustain a particular definition of the situation, this representing, as it were, his claim as to what reality is.' Note may be taken here that G. H. Mead (1959: 204-09), an important precursor of Goffman, recognised gossip as helping to promote a sense of superiority of self, a purposive behaviour akin to that spoken of here as self-interested. (I am indebted to Robert Stebbings for this reference.)

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