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## GOSSIPING AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE MAIN THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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*The article presents an overview of main scientific interpretations to the study of gossip processes, developed in the field of social and humanities knowledge. In particular, paradigmes of psychoanalysis, functionalism, evolutionism, feminism, interactionism, social exchange are characterized. Special attention is given to describing the attribution approach, in which tendency to use personal characteristics of “targets” (internal attributions) as “exhaustive” prime cause of any actions and events as the essence of gossip is analyzed. Types of attribution distortion as being characteristic of gossip are described, among them being the fundamental error of attribution, belief in a just world, illusory optimism. This approach opens up new opportunities to study gossiping as a specific type of estimation.*

**Keywords:** *gossip; gossip research; causal attributions; internal attributions; distortions of attribution.*

## СПЛЕТНИЧАНИЕ КАК ПРЕДМЕТ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ НАУК: ОСНОВНЫЕ ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ

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*В статье представлен обзор основных научных трактовок изучения процессов сплетничания, разработанных в сфере социально-гуманитарного знания. В частности, охарактеризованы парадигмы психоанализа, функционализма, эволюционизма, феминизма, инте-*

*рационализма, социального обмена. Особое внимание уделено описанию атрибуционного подхода, в котором сущностью феномена сплетничания считается тенденция к использованию персональных характеристик «мишеней» (интернальных атрибуций) в качестве «исчерпывающих» первопричин любых поступков и событий. Рассматриваются характерные для сплетничания искажения атрибуции. Среди них фундаментальная ошибка атрибуции, вера в справедливый мир, иллюзорный оптимизм. Данный подход открывает новые перспективы к изучению сплетничания как специфической разновидности оценивания.*

**Ключевые слова:** сплетни; исследования сплетничания; каузальные атрибуции; интернальные атрибуции; искажения атрибуции.

In psychology, sociology and anthropology, gossiping as a variety of in-appraisal and gossip as a product of this process have been studied for over half a century. Over the time, within the framework of the theoretical paradigms of psychoanalysis, functionalism, evolutionism, feminism, interactionism, social exchange, attribution approach, there has developed a diverse and largely contradictory complex of scientific ideas concerning the nature of this phenomenon, its characteristics, functions and determinants. Let us compare the explanatory potential of the above-mentioned interpretations to clarify the nature of gossip.

### **Psychoanalysis**

According to the followers of Z. Freud, the gossip material contains ambiguous, unstructured symbols that allow those who spread them to raise their own sexual and aggressive fantasies onto the surface of mental life, i.e., to transfer their problems, internal conflicts and unconscious needs onto the people being talked about [11]. This is a unique means of “letting out steam” in a socially acceptable form of talking about those, who are not present at the moment. More precisely, gossip is one of the ways to overcome anxiety through the implementation of a number of protective mechanisms, as well as an act of cathartic purification from

anxiety, guilt, anger and return to the state of equilibrium of the body by reducing excitation [12].

It should be noted that the psychoanalytic interpretation of gossip with a focus on the deeper aspects has its significant limitations. It is believed to be more suitable for interpreting the act of gossip that has already occurred than for predicting inclinations to such behavior. In other words, it is not difficult to describe why an individual gossiped, finding explanations in an effort to reduce internal tension, a reaction to the libidinal ties rupture, or the influence of repressed childhood psychotraumas. It is more difficult to predict with what intensity or under what conditions they will do this in the future, and in general, whether they will prefer gossip to other methods of psychological defense. In addition, since it is clearly social behavior that is being under consideration, intrapersonal determinants themselves seem insufficient to describe it.

### **Functionalism**

Supporters of this research direction proceed from the expediency of interpreting social phenomena from the point of view of their adaptive nature. A particular phenomenon is described as a self-regulatory system, aimed at overcoming difficult situations and achieving currently important needs. Implementation of this approach was carried out by the anthropologist M. Gluckman [7], who, in particular, singled out the group-forming function of gossip, i.e., the unification of individuals based on common values while distancing from outsiders. Also, the author pointed out that there are several aspects to this function manifestation, such as participation in the creation of group traditions and history of relationships, the knowledge of which is included in the initiation of newcomers; the attainment of conformity with respect to the norms, values and goals of the group; group control over the behavior of those ones competing for status or prestige; formation of the structure of the group by assessing the character, leadership skills, moral character of its members.

It is interesting that participation in the act of gossiping is considered not only as a personal right, conditioned by belonging to the community, but also as a kind of “duty” as interest in the vices and virtues of

others is a declaration of being aimed at strengthening the unity of the interlocutors, focus on authorized opinions and approved acts as well as condemnation of violators of norms. That is why gossip is described not as a sporadic phenomenon with a negative connotation, but as a culturally determined process of community life [7].

In scientific literature on gossip, anthropological functionalism is not considered to be a popular conception. It is this scientific school's typical shifting of the emphasis on society and social groups while ignoring the individual level of analysis of the problem with regard to gossip that is not enough productive. In addition, the disintegrating role that the latter factors play in the life of the community fails to be sufficiently studied.

### **Evolutionism**

In the context of evolutionary anthropology and psychology, special attention is paid to the emergence of those behavior models that have contributed to the survival of mankind. Gossip, on the one hand, facilitates the interchange of information, but on the other, it becomes a mechanism for uniting individuals into cohesive groups, its analogue being the grooming of primates [6]. It is known that the procedures for caring for the hair/fur of one's kind in the form of combing, biting out, smoothing, etc. not only provide hygiene, but also contribute to releasing organic opiates, i.e. endorphins, providing an experience of mild euphoria, as well as lead to a natural strengthening of social bonds between individuals. However, increasing the size of the group, which is advisable in terms of counteracting both predators and competing associations of their own kind, reduces the effectiveness of grooming as a means of strengthening relations. In comparison with that, talking as "grooming at a distance," according to R. Dunbar, firstly, does not deter from performing other activities at that same time, and secondly, it can occur with several interlocutors, which provides additional time to search for food and doing other urgent activities.

Considering gossip as conversations on social and personal topics, R. Dunbar believes that it was they that ensured the evolutionary advantage of people, and not communications related to hunting and making tools.

After all, increasing the size of the group was inevitably accompanied by increased tensions between competing individuals and cliques, as well as the need to counter “social stowaways” who were eager to receive benefits without giving anything in return.

Despite certain shocking wording due to somewhat exceedingly broad understanding of gossip, it was a promising idea of the importance of informal contacts for human communities. However, speculations about their influence on the emergence of, say, morality, laws and other institutions look a bit extravagant.

The specificity of evolutionary anthropology and psychology is that behavior models are viewed as a manifestation of the human nature, formed over millennia of competition under conditions of natural selection. In this case, the arguments that this branch of knowledge operates are being developed by reasoning based on the data of neuropsychology, sociology, linguistics, ethology and other sciences. Obviously speculative character does not allow us to regard them other than as indirect evidence. This should also be fully referred to our scientific problems under consideration. The very fact of widespread condemnation of gossip and gossipers throughout the existence of humankind creates obstacles to the evaluation of this behavior as utterly adaptive.

### **Feminism**

In this tradition, gossiping is unilaterally regarded as a women’s cultural case, which is produced and perpetuated by the limitations of the female role [10]. This is one of the consequences of social order, in which women are forced into the sphere of private everyday contacts. While the status of men is determined by wealth or influence, their female companions have to compete for the internal status within the co-society by establishing control over compliance with its norms [14]. That determines both the topic selection of gossip, which is almost exclusively concerned with private life, and the importance of competitive comparisons for experiencing the individual’s inherent worth.

From the feminist standpoint, gossip is described as a “language of intimacy”, arising from the solidarity of women on the basis of the sim-

ilarity of experience. At the same time, the general picture of the world is maintained, as well as unity, values and morals are preserve and mutual support and entertainment are provided. “Women’s talk” occurs in places related to the implementation of feminine roles, such as a house, the hairdresser’s, a shop, etc. There is also a tendency to the constant interruption of such conversations with daily duties, which is reflected in the structure of gossip that is so flexible that it can continue any time where and when it is possible. Finally, due to the fact that participation in gossip assumes that the parties share knowledge about the basic behavioral standards, they have a “hinting character” that is understandable only to the initiated [10].

The studies on “male” gossip [9] consider that as a subcultural phenomenon on the basis of gender status. If we are dealing with behavior that is typical for both women and men (we can hardly doubt this judging by everyday experience), then there is an obvious reason for a distorted understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Interactionism**

E. Goffman, the author of the impression management conception [3], believes that an individual is interested in controlling the behavior of others, which is achieved through influencing the determination of a social situation. To achieve that, they try to present themselves in such a way that others would have to act in accordance with the initiator’s expectations. Likewise, those around are aimed at acquiring information about this individual, trying to do their best to organize their behavior in order to cause the initiator’s desired reaction.

Developing the described conception, B. Cox reflected the role of gossip in the struggle between the two “factions” of the North American Hopi tribe (“progressists” and “traditionalists”). Gossip was believed by both groups to be a means to achieve public support, as it allowed to control impressions through the “symbolic redefinition” of the political role of supporters and opponents. Thus, the same people could be “adherents of progress”, “materialists”, “unbelieving upstarts”, “sycophants of the bureau for Indian affairs”, while others were “guardians of traditions”,

“sympathizing with the Communists”, “dangerous “,”backward”. The goal was to “convert the sinner or brand them” [5, p. 88].

This conception helped to clarify the understanding of the function of the gossip influence, describing the role of information manipulation. Equally important is the dynamic of self-perception of subjects as a consequence of impression management. However, other characteristics of gossip were left out of consideration, which limited the prospects for implementing this approach.

### **Social exchange theories**

Supporters of these theories tend to describe the interaction in terms of seeking benefits, calculating possible rewards and costs. R. Rosnow commented that gossip can be viewed as a transaction in which people trade a conversation for status, power, fun, intimacy, money or other resources [13, p. 219]. The ability to gossip here is perceived as one of the indicators of inclusion in the social environment. After all, depending on the extent to which it manifests itself, gossip “gets converted into value,” being a “commodity on the exchange market.” Its value increases in proportion to the deficit, it tends to benefit the “trading” parties, it can provide dividends, as well as cause “bankruptcy” in the relationship.

It should be noted that this approach has inherent limitations. The tendency to consider the phenomenon from the point of view of its “turn-over” does not sufficiently reveal the specifics of the gossip itself, which acts only as one variable from a number of things that individuals can exchange. In addition, it should be considered to what extent the principle of “reimbursement-and-costs” is a universal regulator of interpersonal relations. For example, it is not clear why gossipers, while facing the threat of social condemnation, do not give up their favorite pastime.

### **Attributional approach**

New perspectives in understanding gossip can be found in the field of social and psychological knowledge, which is known as the theory of attribution. The sphere of their application extends to the everyday processes of social cognition, i.e., to the way people explain their own

or the other's behavior, attributing certain relations to social objects and giving them characteristics. In this case, the processes of causal attribution are of particular importance, representing a subjective interpretation of what causes certain actions and events. There are two types of such processes, i.e., external, when the cause is attributed to circumstances beyond human control, and internal, in which the cause is considered to be conditioned by the actor's characteristics [8].

According to our understanding of the scientific problem [2], a fundamental feature of this type of communication is the appeal to the personal characteristics of the "targets", i.e. the dominance of internal attributions takes place. The gossiping process is always reduced to discussing individual characteristics as the root causes of either failure or success. The center of the conversation is not an event, but a personality being in contrast to the others. There appears an opportunity to experience excellence, demonstrate the ability to understand motives, condemn from a moral standpoint, unite in a joint expression of emotions and social norms. While the description of the actions of "targets" may in general correspond to reality, their interpretation is always one-sided.

First of all, a phenomenon known as the fundamental error of attribution should be mentioned [4]. This notion denotes the tendency to exaggerate the importance of personal factors when interpreting someone else's behavior while underestimating situational circumstances. In other words, it reflects the tendency to ignore the possible compulsion of the other's behavior and hastily believe that it is solely due to personal characteristics. Thus, the victim of violence "has brought that on him/herself", the one who has failed to understand us is "stupid", and the one who has refused to help is "selfish."

In addition to it, a significant distortion of defensive nature can be observed, in particular, the "faith in a just world." Its essence is laconically expressed as the "idea that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get" [1, p. 141]. This attribution strategy postulates that reality is an orderly and predictable place where everyone has what they deserve. Even confronted with the evidence of the contrary, people continue to believe that good things happen to honest and decent people,



and bad things happen to bad ones, who, however, had the opportunity to change their way of life.

Internal attributions are useful in order to once again “prove” to themselves and others that no problems happen by chance. Members of the gossip circle, engaged in establishing a correspondence between the negative consequences and personal qualities of the “targets”, eventually receive responses of a soothing nature about the likelihood of their own calamities. After all, attributing certain characteristics to objects helps deny having them themselves. Moreover, the more successful gossip “diagnostics” of the pathogenic traits of “targets” is, the stronger gossipers’ positive difference from those people gets.

It should be noted that the gossip is accompanied by manifestations of another defensive distortion of attribution, i.e. the individual’s “illusory optimism” associated with the unjustified belief that in the future they are more likely to expect positive things to come, while problems will fall to the lot of others [15]. As E. Aronson et al. state, people prefer to remain confident that they personally are less likely to become addicted to alcohol, face the consequences of smoking, go to jail, die in the war, fall prey to criminals, lose their job, get into an accident, stay alone, etc. On the contrary, they expect greater prosperity than their peers, neighbors or colleagues [1, p. 141]. In our case, it is about the fact that by working with a set of negative internal attributions, the conviction is reinforced that they are to avoid those woes for which, as they “have determined”, there are no personal prerequisites.

Anyway, evaluation will be more successful provided its objects are stable in their properties, contrasting to others, and these properties are perceived as exhaustive determinants of actions. The process of joint formulation of cause-effect relations through internal attributions provides gossip with simple, shared and unambiguous answers to many questions.

An essential remark should be made. While arguing about the importance of the internal attributions for understanding the nature of gossip, we do not mean their indispensable verbalization as an appraising “verdict”. Often, a similar culmination of the discussion is not observed externally, which may be linked to the experience of previous interactions, the feeling

of interpersonal intimacy as experienced by the gossipers, and their use of nonverbal communication. In particular, it is known that non-verbal means of communication not only provide an exchange of information about the fact that gossipers understand each other and share their attitude to their “targets”, but they can also perform the function of speech replacement. It turns out that the personal features of the absent person are not discussed aloud, as the “feedback” convinces that it is completely unnecessary, and these features are replaced by non-verbal euphemisms.

It should not be forgotten that the public conscience attributes maliciousness, deceit, lightness to gossip, while malicious envy, craving for chatter, propensity to slander as considered its motives. The fact that the interlocutors are aware of the negativity of the social perception of their communication makes them mask their participation in gossip. Instead of a full-fledged verbal expression of internal attributions, substituting gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, laughter, etc. are observed. Thus, such discussion takes a certain “cropped” form, similar to a dry information message. Communicating parties “exchange facts”, “recall events,” “share news” as if not gossiping at all. This type is more typical of men who, under the threat of social condemnation, have to “hide” participation in “unmanly” conversations.

Summing up, it should be noted that gossiping is being studied by representatives of social and human sciences as a widespread communication type without any specific negative connotations. Some of these approaches focus on the group or, on the contrary, individual level of analysis of the problem, while others focus on identifying certain functions or are devoted to studying the patterns of motivation, information exchange or cognitive activity of interlocutors. However, this does not mean incompatibility of conceptual approaches. Admittedly, gossip is a more ambiguous and complex phenomenon than it was thought to be, and therefore deserves interdisciplinary research.

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