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Kinds of Gossip

In the early 1800s, gossip as a noun designated a mode of conversation rather than a kind of person. Gossip is a connotation of idle talk, and it warrants concern about the private lives of others. The dictionary defines gossip as someone who reveals personal information about others(noun); as a verb, it means to tell secret information to another person. In this present time, gossip as a noun or verb has lost all dignity in the dictionary. The modern thesaurus gives the following synonyms as gossip: Hearsay, rumors, slander, dishing, etc. We all engage in some type of gossip, whether we are aware of it or not. Gossip may start out as harmless but its nature can shift because of miscommunication and misinterpretation.

One form of gossip is rumors. Rumor as defined in the dictionary is “talk or opinion that is widely disseminated with no discernable source.” In other words, its truth or lack of truth cannot be verified. Rumors are common in office conversations. In this type setting, rumors may represent an attempt to rationalize or explain the unknown. According to Keith Davis, professor of management at Arizona State University, stated that most people occasionally participate in gossip and rumor spreading. Davis study revealed that 90% of employees are passive listeners and 10% take gossip seriously and become active links in the passage of information. Rumor exposure can prompt children to engage in highly constructive rumor mongering with peers. Research has shown that children naturally propagate overheard false rumors and that the circulation of such information can induce children and their peers to wrongly recall actually experiencing rumored-but-nonexperienced events(Principe). Results indicated that compared with children who overhear rumors spread by adults, those who pick up rumors from peers during natural interactions engage in deeper and more inventive rumor mongering(Principe). Rumors arise when information is scarce (Kapferer). The source of many rumors is troubling because rumors mobilize a group’s attention(vol.29) The fewer the pieces, the greater the role the group’s unconscious plays in their interpretation(vol.29). Once rumors are started, why do they spread with persistence? The reason is because we want to believe them.

Slander is defined as the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage another’s reputation. Under the law, slander is defined as defamation by speech, while defamation by writing is libel. Gossip becomes slander when there is intent to misrepresent and defame another’s reputation. Tabloids often misrepresent and defame one’s reputation. The National Enquirer, The Star, and other supermarket tabloids deliver the scandalous stuff that mainstream media will not touch. Celebrities are on the top of the list when it comes to slander. Why is it when slanderous things are exposed about someone we are drawn to find out more. Instead of showing compassion and empathy, we would rather feed into curiosity. Slander can be compared to mud being thrown on a wall, it may not stick but it will definitely leave a dirty mark.

Backbiting is another form of gossip that involves malicious talk about someone who is not present. We may all been involved or heard this type of gossip. Backbiting can be perceived as a form of delinquent behavior due to inferiority complex. Most people often use backbiting to throw blame off themselves onto someone else. This type of gossip often occurs after confrontation with another individual. There are several reasons why backbiting is started. Anger and malice pushes a person into backbiting. Selfishness is used to bring themselves up by putting others down. Other reasons for backbiting are jealousy and bad thinking. When one uses jealousy as backbiting, it points out the flaws of the other person to decrease his/her value in other people’s eye. When someone thinks that other people are talking about them, this can start gossip and in turn the other person starts talking about them to other people. Bad morals trigger each other.

It seems that gossip has a pretty bad reputation, but it is not necessarily true. In spite of its reputation, gossip does not always involve spreading untruths or malice. Researchers believe that gossip was a way to learn about their neighbors and determine trust. It was considered a survival tool. There are some benefits of gossip, which include intimacy, trust, and accuracy. When gossiping that information is reciprocated to a trusted individual. Gossiping encourages social bonding of a particular group. Gossiping also is used in social interactions which have different roles. Social interactions include, entertainment, influencing one another’s opinion, exchange of important information, pointing out and enforcing social rules, and most importantly learning from other people’s mistakes. It is hard to determine if gossip is a social tool or discredit it as an unnecessary social evil. In other words, gossip can help people learn how to behave and understand social cues faster and efficiently than direct observation.

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