

# The threat of gossip can rein in selfishness

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Gossip can be hurtful, unproductive, and mean. It can also be an important part of making sure that people will share and cooperate, according to a study in the current *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Researchers Bianca Beersma and Gerben Van Kleef of the University of Amsterdam set out to test whether the threat of gossip could suppress [selfish behavior](#). To do so, they brought people into the lab, and convinced them that they were part of a group that would interact first through computers and then face-to-face.

People were told they had been randomly chosen to distribute 100 tickets for a cash-prize lottery. With the task, people could be generous and distribute the tickets to group members, or they could be selfish, and keep a large share of the tickets for themselves.

Half of the time, the person was told that the choice would be kept private -- none of the other group members would know how many tickets went into their personal account. The rest of the time, people expected that their group members would know exactly how many tickets they kept for themselves.

Sometimes the participants were told that other group members were prone to, and sometimes they were told the other group members were quite unlikely to gossip.

Beersma and Van Kleef wanted to know just how generous people would

be, and so they had people actually dole out the tickets, and compared how selfish or generous people would be when they faced the prospect of their decisions being the topic of gossip.

In every condition, people acted selfishly to some degree—most people kept more than an equal share for themselves. But when their actions were public and the chance for gossip was high, people became substantially less selfish. When people knew that their selfishness would be on display—and very likely to be talked about—they acted most generously to others.

"When the threat of gossip exists, [group members](#) can expect that they will be talked about if they decide to take a free ride" wrote the authors. Gossip can be malicious and harmful to groups, but it can have a positive side -- the threat of [gossip](#) can increase fairness and hold selfishness in check.

**More information:** The article "How the Grapevine Keeps You in Line: Gossip Increases Contributions to the Group" in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* is available free for a limited time at: [spp.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 405073.full.pdf+html](http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../405073.full.pdf+html)

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