

Gossip influences who gets ahead in different cultures

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Gossip influences if people receive advantages whether they work in an office in the U.S. or in India—or even in a remote village in Africa, a Washington State University study found.

In a set of experiments, WSU anthropologists found that positive and negative [gossip](#) influenced whether participants were willing to give a person a resource, such as a raise or a family heirloom, especially when the gossip was specific to the circumstance. For instance, positive gossip concerning job-related behavior, such as saying the person worked well under pressure, increased the participants' willingness to give a work-related benefit compared to gossip about [family relationships](#).

The researchers ran the experiment with 120 online participants workers in the U.S. and India, and after making some culturally appropriate adjustments, with 160 Ngandu horticulturalists, who make a living from small gardens in the Central African Republic. In all three groups, they found similar results.

"Gossip seems context relevant. People don't just say random things," said Nicole Hess, a WSU anthropologist and lead author on the study published in the [journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*](#). "Gossip that was relevant to the exchange and the relationship had the most impact on whether a person gave a resource, or not."

Anthropologists consider gossip, defined as exchanging reputational information about other community members, to be a feature of almost every human society, but it is less clear what function it serves. Some

argue that talking about other people this way helps enforce social norms or serves as social bonding between the gossipers. This study lends evidence to yet another theory: that gossip is used competitively because it shows a direct relationship between gossip and the likelihood of receiving more resources.

"Up until this study, no one had even really asked 'what is the end result of gossip?' Gossip makes a person's reputation worse or better, so what is the result?" Hess said. "These findings support the competitive evolutionary model: that people are using gossip to compete with each other over valuable resources in their communities."

For this study, Hess and co-author Ed Hagen, also a WSU anthropologist, developed a set of experiments that provided participants with job- or family-related scenarios. For the [office workers](#) in the [industrialized countries](#), the scenarios described a situation where they could either give a raise to one of their co-workers or an inherited painting to a family member.

They then were given a mix of gossip statements about how a theoretical co-worker or relative behaved at work or dealt with their family. For example, the work statement might be about whether the colleague was willing to work late to finish a project, or on the family side, whether they got along well with their siblings.

After reading a mix of these statements, the participants were asked whether they were willing to give that fictional person the resource.

For the Ngandu farmers, the work scenario was adjusted to have them evaluate a fictional worker they hired to help with their garden, and whether they would share some shirts with the worker that a produce buyer had given them. The family scenario involved deciding whether to give a relative some nice clothes the participant had inherited.

Both surveys showed a similar pattern: participants were more willing to give the resource when exposed to more positive, context-specific gossip statements about them, and less willing when exposed to more negative, context-specific gossip statements.

In this paper, the researchers also included an [observational study](#) of 40 Aka hunter-gatherers who live near the Ngandu horticulturalists. This study was designed as a series of questions asked verbally about real people the participants knew, which increased the study's ecological validity, meaning it shows that the results can be generalized to real-life settings.

While not exactly parallel with the experimental studies, these observational results also indicated that an individual's positive reputation strongly influenced whether the Aka participants were willing to share a resource with them.

"The cultural contexts are different, but they have the same patterns of responses," said Hess. "This appears to be the universal psychology in how people evaluate reputation in allocating valuable things from industrial societies to small scale communities."

More information: Nicole H. Hess et al, The impact of gossip, reputation, and context on resource transfers among Aka hunter-gatherers, Ngandu horticulturalists, and MTurkers, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2023.02.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2023.02.013)

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