

Girl Talk: Gossip, Friendship, and Sociometric Status

Kristina L. McDonald – Duke University

Martha Putallaz – Duke University

Christina L. Grimes – Duke University

Janis B. Kupersmidt – Innovation Research & Training

John D. Coie – Duke University

Deposited 03/26/2021

Citation of published version:

McDonald, K., Putallaz, M., Grimes, C., Kupersmidt, J., Coie, J. (2007): Girl Talk: Gossip, Friendship, and Sociometric Status. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 53(3).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mpq.2007.0017>

Girl Talk

Gossip, Friendship, and Sociometric Status

Kristina L. McDonald, Martha Putallaz, and Christina L. Grimes *Duke University*

Janis B. Kupersmidt *Innovation Research & Training*

John D. Coie *Duke University*

This study examined the characteristics of gossip among fourth-grade girls and their close friends. Sixty friendship dyads were videotaped as they engaged in conversation, and their gossip was coded. Analyses revealed gossip to be a dominant feature of their interaction and that it was primarily neutral in valence. Sociometrically popular girls and their friends were observed to gossip more about peers, and their gossip was more evaluative than that between rejected girls and their friends. Gossip frequency and valence related to observed friendship closeness and friendship quality. Race differences in the characteristics of gossip were also explored. The study results are important in our efforts to develop a fuller understanding of the important interpersonal process of gossip and the functions that it serves in the context of close friendships.

It is universally recognized that friendship plays an important role in children's lives. Friendships are an important social context for children and are distinct from acceptance or rejection within the larger peer group

Kristina L. McDonald, Department of Psychology & Neuroscience; Martha Putallaz, Department of Psychology & Neuroscience; Christina L. Grimes, Department of Psychology & Neuroscience; Janis B. Kupersmidt, Innovation Research & Training; John D. Coie, Department of Psychology & Neuroscience.

This work was funded by grant MH52843-05 from the National Institute of Mental Health. Portions of this research were presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Atlanta, GA, April 8, 2005. We are grateful to the children who participated in this research and to the staff of the Social Development Lab, especially Stacey Yee, Charlotte Roberts, and Lorlita Spann for their contributions to data coding.

Correspondence should be addressed to the first author at the Department of Psychology, Box 90086, Durham, NC 27708. Phone: (919) 660-5756. Fax: (919) 660-5726. E-mail: klm17@duke.edu.

Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, July 2007, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 381–411. Copyright © 2007 by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI 48201.

(Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Parker & Asher, 1993). A significant amount of research on friendship has taken place since Hartup's (1996) call for a renewed focus on the role it plays in children's development. Past research has primarily used questionnaire methods to assess friendship characteristics, and relatively little observational research has been conducted. However, such observational information is necessary to develop a richer understanding of friendship interactions (Ginsberg, Gottman, & Parker, 1986). It would be a mistake to assume that all important dynamics critical to understanding children's friendships would be captured by questionnaire reports alone.

Girls' friendships in particular offer a rich context for observational researchers because friendship is an important developmental niche for girls (Maccoby, 1986). Although friendships may also be important for boys, Maccoby (1998) suggests that they may be especially significant for girls, who place a great deal of importance on establishing distinct interpersonal relationships, whereas boys focus more on status and group acceptance. Girls spend more time in dyadic interaction, and boys tend to interact more frequently in groups (Maccoby, 1986). Girls report their friendships to be higher in the qualities of validation, caring, help, guidance, closeness, security, self-disclosure, and intimacy than boys (e.g., Parker & Asher, 1993; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Thus, observational studies of girls' friendships may offer insight into the dynamics of a variety of friendship processes and interactions.

The process of interest within the current study is gossip, a dominant form of social interaction (Dunbar, 2004; Eder & Enke, 1991; Levin & Arluke, 1985) especially among friends (Blumberg, 1972). Although there is literature on gossip between adults, little work other than a few interesting but primarily qualitative studies (Eder & Enke, 1991; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986) has focused on children. In this study, we examine the characteristics of gossip, especially peer-related gossip, and the possible negative and positive functions that gossip serves in girls' friendships.

Gossip

The origin of the word "gossip" is from the Old English *godsibb*, meaning "godparent" (Rosnow, 2001) or an activity that one engaged in with close friends (Dunbar, 2004). Before the nineteenth century, gossip was used to refer to men's camaraderie as well as that of the women who gathered in the home awaiting the birth of a child. By the beginning of the 1800s, gossip had come to refer to idle talk, slander, and backstabbing conversation (Rosnow, 2001). Whereas gossip began as a positive term used to describe both

sexes, it became a derogatory term used principally to refer to women (Rysman, 1977). There is little empirical research concerning the amount that men and women gossip, yet there is some support that more of females' talk is devoted to gossip than that of males (Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Levin & Arluke, 1985).

Gossip is commonly considered a malicious behavior, one requiring numerous social sanctions against it (e.g., "It is not nice to talk about other people"; "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all"). Yet not all scholars have defined it as involving purely negative evaluations of others. Although some definitions include unflattering talk including slander and rumors about others' misfortunes (Pendleton, 1998), other definitions of gossip have included any talk about absent third parties (Dunbar, 2004; Eder & Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Levin & Arluke, 1985). Levin and Arluke (1985) observed gossip episodes of college students in a natural setting and found that only about a quarter of all gossip was negative-evaluative. Gossip was positive-evaluative in 27% of episodes, and the remaining gossip was neutral or mixed. Interestingly, they also found that both men and women engaged in the same amount of negative gossiping.

In contrast, Leaper and Holliday (1995) examined only evaluative gossip among college students and their friends about familiar third parties. They found that negative gossip was more common than positive gossip and that female friends did more negative gossiping than male friends and cross-gender friends. Levin and Arluke (1985) and Leaper and Holliday (1995) used different operationalizations of gossip, the former using all talk about others and the latter only examining evaluative statements about familiar people. Leaper and Holliday (1995) also examined gossip between friends, a particularly safe context in which to gossip. Gossip between friends about familiar others may be more likely to be negative because participants may be less likely to feel inhibited and more likely to speak freely.

Gossip Functions

There is great variety in the proposed functions of gossip. Consistent with the notion of gossip involving negative evaluations, much of the research in psychology has conceptualized gossip as a strictly aggressive behavior. However, it seems likely that sometimes negative gossip is not done maliciously, solely with the intention to attack the target of gossip. Abrahams (1970) suggests from his work with Afro-Caribbean peasants that gossip has many aspects of performance or storytelling, highlighting the entertainment quality of gossip. Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) suggest that

negative gossip is especially interesting compared to positive gossip because people have stronger responses to negative than they do to positive events. Additionally, gossip may serve as a form of social comparison and communicate morals and norms to people in a group. Negative gossip stigmatizes inappropriate behavior and communicates this disapproval to all who hear it, serving as a powerful mechanism of social control as well as fostering self-worth through social comparison (Eckert, 1990; Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Finally, gossip may be linked with the intimacy or familiarity of a group or relationship. Gossip is less likely to take place between acquaintances than between friends (Blumberg, 1972). This may be due to the trust and security needed to share risky opinions or to the shared social history needed to understand the subtleties of gossip (Abrahams, 1970; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Hannerz (1967) suggests that gossip itself is a way to communicate to partners that they are trusted and valued. If the gossiper is comfortable with the listener, he or she will feel safer disclosing more information, which will further solidify the relationship (Derlega & Chaiken, 1977). It is also proposed that gossip is a mechanism through which groups, partners, or acquaintances further their felt intimacy or closeness by strengthening the knowledge that they share the same opinions (Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Leaper & Holliday, 1995).

Children's Gossip

Gossip, especially negative gossip, may be a very important and salient social process during childhood (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). Fine (1977) noted that children begin to talk about others and their behavior at a young age, soon after learning to speak. Children show a relatively mature understanding of gossip and although they may disapprove of it (Kuttler, Parker, & La Greca 2002) do not restrain from participating (Eder & Enke, 1991; Fine 1977). In research on children's social development, gossip is typically grouped with other aggressive behaviors that are meant to harm others and their relationships (Crick, 1997; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Underwood, 2003; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). In middle childhood aggression becomes more covert, and children may use behaviors such as gossip to victimize others in their peer groups (Crick, Nelson, Morales, Cullerton-Sen, Cassas, & Hickman, 2001). Eder and Stanford (1986) have suggested that gossip replaces direct ridicule in the repertoire of children's behavior as they get older. Longitudinal analyses have shown that there is an increase in the amount of social ostracism through the use of gossip among girls as they enter adolescence (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman,

Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989). In ethnographic depictions of “mean” girls, girls are depicted as using gossip or “talking behind the backs” of their friends in order to maintain or increase their own position in the social hierarchy. Merten (1997) gives several accounts, such as the following one, illustrating how gossip and rumor are used to manipulate social relationships: “She started getting mad at me and then she started making up things that [she said] I said. Sara told Brenda and Gretchen so they would get mad at me, too. So now I guess Gretchen has made up something and told Well-sley. They are all mad at me and laughing and everything” (p. 182). Clearly, gossip can be a powerful tool used to harm others’ reputations, relationships, or social position.

However, as with adults, it is unlikely that gossip is used solely as a means to hurt others. Gossip may be a way for children to learn about life and age-appropriate behavior as well as communicate and reaffirm norms and manage impressions and reputations (Fine, 1977). As children enter middle childhood and peer acceptance becomes a major goal, gossip becomes even more relevant and useful to understanding group norms and managing one’s place within the group (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). Fine (1977) suggests that gossip is a behavior that children must master as part of a socially competent repertoire. Gossip appears so integral to social processes in middle childhood that it may determine whether two child strangers hit it off (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986).

Gottman and Mettetal (1986) proposed gossip to be a normal developmental process through which children establish similarities and share personal information. Based upon their own intensive observational study of a small sample of female dyads, they suggested that gossip may serve to establish solidarity and establish norms among middle childhood girls. For instance, gossip was observed to establish commonality between the girls in their study through the girls’ joint establishment of their shared opinions about others (“Katie is a cry baby”), shared common beliefs or norms (e.g., one should not be a cry baby), shared sense of humor, and to increase self-disclosure between fellow gossipers.

As well as enhancing the bonding between relationship partners, knowing interesting gossip may be attractive to potential friends. Parker and Seal (1996) found that children with friends were more likely to be nominated by peers as knowing interesting gossip compared to chronically friendless children. They did not, however, find any difference between children with friends and children without friends on whether they were rated as being someone who gossiped behind others backs. Thus, knowing how to appropriately gossip may be an important skill for friendship formation. Gossip may make one a more attractive friendship partner both by

demonstrating that one is knowledgeable about the social sphere and by enhancing the bond felt between individuals.

In conclusion, gossip may serve a variety of functions for friends. Gossip offers friends opportunities to learn about the morals and norms of their peer group (Fine, 1977) as well as a way to bond and increase the intimacy between them (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Hannerz, 1967). Gossip may also be a way for a child to be an interesting and fun companion (Abrahams, 1970; Parker & Seal, 1996). Additionally, it may be that gossip serves as a way to manage a friendship in the larger peer group through the establishment of "us versus them" (Fine, 1977; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). Finally, friendship is a safe context for social aggression in the form of gossip that is especially risky or meant to harm others (Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Goals of the Current Study

The current study seeks to better understand gossip within the context of friendship through an observational study of gossip between fourth-grade girls and their close friends. As mentioned previously, gossip has been defined in various ways, ranging from evaluative talk about others to any talk about third parties. In order to develop a fuller understanding of the social process of gossip among girl friends, we first examined gossip broadly by looking at all talk about absent third parties. More in-depth analyses focused on gossip solely about peers familiar to at least one dyad member.

A primary goal of the present study was to describe the characteristics of girls' gossip with friends. Observations of the amount, target, valence, and topics of gossip were made in order to accurately describe the features of general gossip and peer-related gossip between girl friends. The second goal of the study was to investigate the functions that peer-related gossip serve between girls and their friends. There have been numerous suggested functions that gossip may serve for individuals and groups, yet gossip in the context of children's close friendships has gone unexamined.

In particular, the current study focused on two specific gossip functions: social aggression and fostering intimacy or solidarity. If gossip serves as a form of social aggression, then peer nominations of girls' aggression should be related to the characteristics of their peer-related gossip with friends. Further, past research with this age group has shown a positive association between rejection and relational aggression (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Thus, it was hypothesized that a greater proportion of peer-related gossip between rejected girls and their friends would serve a socially aggressive function than that of more well-liked girls. It is also well established that in childhood, children who are well liked by their peers

have better social skills and have more friends than children who are less well liked (for a review, see Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Thus, if gossip is a sign of social competence or social skillfulness, then we would expect that sociometrically popular girls would gossip more about peers than rejected girls. We would also expect that more of well-liked girls' peer-related gossip would be in the service of fostering intimacy than that of rejected girls. Gossip that is evaluative may be more likely to foster intimacy and solidarity than neutral gossip (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986); therefore, it is hypothesized that well-liked girls' peer-related gossip would be more evaluative than that of rejected girls. Furthermore, if gossip is associated with or furthers intimacy and solidarity between friends, we would expect that peer-related gossip between friends would be positively linked with assessments of their friendship quality.

A secondary goal of the current study was to explore ethnic differences in peer-related gossip between African American and European American girls. Parker and Gottman (1989) stressed that future studies should investigate friendships among minority children and children of low socioeconomic status (SES). To date, the majority of friendship research has focused on primarily White middle-class children, and there has been considerably little research on African American friendships (Way, Gingold, Rotenberg, & Kuriakose, 2005). Townsend (1998) suggests that many of the social and affective behaviors of African Americans may be tied to the African mores and traditions of their ancestors and, therefore, that they may hold more interdependent collective values than European Americans. Similarly, Way et al. (2005) have suggested that the interdependent value system of many minority families may be important to consider because the values emphasized within the family may extend to extrafamilial relationships and increase child and adolescent need for mutually supportive friendships and increased self-disclosure and intimacy among friends. Therefore, an important secondary goal of the present research was to explore how ethnicity relates to peer-related gossip behavior among girls and their friends. Intensive observational research on African American and European American girls' friendships would greatly add to our understanding of friendship interactions and the processes of friendship maintenance.

Method

Data are from a larger study of peer relationships in a mid-sized southeastern city. Sociometric nominations were obtained from 1,397 fourth-grade students (72% of targeted children) on 913 boys and 915 girls in 78 fourth-grade classrooms from 13 public schools. Six of the schools were predominantly

African American, three were predominantly European American, and four were racially balanced. Parent consent and child assent were obtained through forms distributed in all fourth-grade classrooms of the participating schools.

Sociometric Nominations

Children completed unlimited sociometric nominations for who they liked most and liked least from gradewide rosters. Liked most and liked least scores were summed and then standardized within classroom. Individual social preference scores were calculated for participants according to the standard procedures established by Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982) with scoring modifications developed for use with unlimited nominations (Terry, 2000). Children were classified as being rejected by peers if their social preference score was less than -1 , standardized like most score was less than 0 , and standardized like least score was greater than 0 . Children were classified as sociometrically popular if their social preference score was greater than 1 , standardized like most score was greater than 0 , and standardized like least score was less than 0 . Children were classified as being sociometrically average if their social preference score was between -1 and 1 and their social impact score was less than 1 . Children also made unlimited gradewide nominations for overt aggression (who fights a lot) and social aggression (who leaves others out and tries to get other kids not to like someone). These nominations were summed and standardized within classroom for each child.

Observation of Friendship Dyads

A subset of 139 fourth-grade girls was invited to participate in a supplementary study on girls' friendships. The sample was approximately evenly split on sociometric status (45 sociometrically popular, 48 average, and 46 rejected girls), and each status group was evenly split on race (51% European American and 49% African American). SES for target girls' families, computed using Hollingshead's (1979) index, ranged from 14 to 66 ($M = 41.27$, $SD = 14.26$). Each target girl was asked to invite a close friend to participate in the study. The close friend had to be another girl, within two years of age of the target girl, and could not be a relative. All of the target girls were able to name a close friend. Of the invited friends, 71% identified the target girl as a best friend, and the remaining described the target girl as a close friend. This did not differ by the target girl's sociometric status ($\chi^2[2] = 2.57$, $p > .10$).

After parental consent was attained for both the target girl and her friend, the girls were brought to a laboratory playroom, where activities were explained and they assented to the procedure. The room had a one-way mirror through which the dyads were videorecorded during the activities. For the first 15 minutes, dyads were given a snack and left alone to "talk like they normally would on the playground, at lunch, or at one of their houses." For the second 15 minutes, girls were given craft materials and asked to work together on a creative joint activity. After participating in these joint tasks, girls were brought to separate rooms and interviewed individually about their friendship. Following individual interviews, girls were reunited and given a small token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

Observational Coding

Macro ratings of friendship interactions. Independent coders (1 African American, 1 European American, and 2 Asian American females), blind to the sociometric status of the girls, rated the overall videotaped interaction of the friends during both 15-minute periods. Ratings of low, average, or high were made for a number of different characteristics of dyad interaction (see Lansford, Putallaz, Grimes, Schiro-Osman, Kuper-smidt, & Coie, 2006). Given that scales were ordinal, correlations were used as an index of reliability. For the purposes of the current study, three of these domains served as indicators of the closeness of the dyad. Ratings of closeness pertained to the warmth, comfort, synchrony, and connectedness of the dyad as well as how much the girls seemed to know about each other ($r = .71$). Ratings of the quality of friendship pertained to the overall rating of whether the friendship seemed rich and supportive ($r = .68$). Ratings of awkwardness pertained to perceived discomfort evident between the two friends, including nervous laughter, obvious discomfort, pregnant pauses, excessive politeness, and difficulty maintaining a conversation ($r = .75$). Separate ratings were made for the discussion and craft segments of the interaction, and these ratings were averaged to form composite ratings for each of the three indices of the intimacy of the friendship interactions.

Gossip coding. A subsample of 60 dyads was randomly chosen from the larger sample of friendship dyads for microanalytic coding of gossip. Dyads were selected so that equal numbers would contain sociometrically rejected and popular target girls and would be African American and European American (15 rejected African American, 15 rejected European American, 15 popular African American, 15 popular European American).

Research assistants transcribed the 15 minutes of conversation for each dyad. A second set of research assistants (1 African American, 1 Asian

American, and 1 European American) who had not previously coded for the project and were blind to the girls' sociometric status were trained to code gossip between the friends. As mentioned previously, gossip was defined as any talk about an absent third party (or group of people). Gossip episodes began when a third party was mentioned and ended when the topic of discussion switched to something else or to another person. Coders watched the entire 15-minute interaction before watching again to identify gossip episodes. Coders were allowed to watch episodes as many times as needed to accurately code all the episodes. Fifteen percent of the dyads were used to assess episode recognition and establish reliability. There was high agreement on episode recognition (87.84%). Cohen's kappas are listed after the description of each code.

The target of gossip referred to whom the gossip was about. Gossip could be about an individual or a group of individuals. Subcategories included female peers, male peers, mixed-gender peer groups, romantic male peers, family members, teachers or school officials, celebrities, or experimenters ($\kappa = .94$). All gossip, regardless of target, was initially examined, and subsequent in-depth analyses were conducted focusing solely on peer gossip (i.e., female peers, male peers, romantic male peers, and mixed-gender peer groups). The valence of the gossip episode referred to the valence or opinion expressed by both girls during the entire gossip episode. Episodes could be classified as positive, negative, neutral, or mixed if girls did not share the same opinion ($\kappa = .77$). The topic of gossip referred to the subject or issue being discussed about the target of the gossip. Categories were not mutually exclusive, as it is possible that gossip may have had more than one focus at a given time. Possible topics included physical characteristics (appearance, clothes, or hygiene; $\kappa = .72$), personal characteristics (individual traits, demographic variables, or permanent characteristics including SES, intelligence, ethnicity, religion, or family; $\kappa = .74$), behavior (actions or behavior that are voluntary including social skills, abilities, specific actions, and morals; $\kappa = .96$), sexuality (sexual interests or sexual behavior; $\kappa = 1.00$), and peer associations (group associations, cliques, who likes who, friendships, and group membership; $\kappa = .92$).

The function of gossip referred to the perceived purpose or function of the gossip episode. Categories were not mutually exclusive, as it is possible that gossip may serve more than one possible function at a time. Gossip for social aggression was defined as negative gossip that could hurt the target's reputation or relationships with others (e.g., "She thinks she's all that because she's got a chest"; $\kappa = .79$). The furthering intimacy function was defined as gossip that facilitated closeness ($\kappa = .78$). Examples include statements about feeling vulnerable (e.g., "Her and her friends, they just

make fun of me. They talk about my hair and the way I dress on weekends.”), about liking boys (e.g., “He’s cute. I like him.”), or exchanges that established a shared dislike for another (e.g., A: “I don’t like telling Tiff anything.” B: “Of course.”). Gossip that established norms was defined as discussion about “proper” behavior, what is right and wrong, and how one should or should not act and also required joint agreement on its appropriateness (e.g., A: “I don’t like Tara . . . cause you tell Tara something, you might as well go ahead and tell the whole class.” B: [nods] “It’s going to get out to the whole class”; $\kappa = .79$). Gossip for entertainment was defined as talk about others to have fun, laugh, or share an interesting story (e.g., two girls play a game with a disliked peer’s name, making each letter in her name the beginning of a derogatory phrase; $\kappa = .75$). Gossip that was judged as sharing information was defined as gossip that shared facts or information with no personal details or opinions included (e.g., “I sat by June at lunch today”; $\kappa = .65$).

Additionally, the number of words and the number of exchanges were calculated for each episode. Proportions were computed for each of the above codes by dividing the number of gossip episodes for each characteristic by the total number of gossip episodes for the dyad. The proportion of all talk classified as gossip during the 15-minute segment was calculated by dividing the total gossip word count by the total word count for the session. Proportions were calculated for peer gossip in a similar way. The number of peer episodes with each characteristic was divided by the total number of episodes concerning peers.

Results

Characteristics of All Gossip

In order to describe general gossip between fourth-grade girls and their friends, descriptive statistics for the general characteristics of gossip were computed. As can be seen in Table 1, gossip was a dominant portion of friends’ talk, comprising almost half of their dialogue. There was also marked variability in the amount that girls gossiped and the number of people discussed. There was great range in the number of gossip episodes, but on average dyads engaged in about 36 episodes within the 15-minute period. They discussed 25 different people on average, and episodes were relatively short in length, lasting approximately 3 exchanges.

Next, the characteristics of the girls’ gossip episodes were examined using a series of repeated measures one-way ANOVAs in order to see which characteristics were most common. Along with the results of the F-tests,

Table 1. Characteristics of Gossip between Fourth-Grade Girl Friends

Gossip Characteristics General Features	All Gossip		Peer Gossip	
	M (SD)	Range	M (SD)	Range
Number of episodes	36.43 (16.42)	10-80	14.60 (10.73)	1-41
% talk that is gossip	48.41 (18.76)	4.74-87.22	27.36(19.91)	0.61-82.60
Average # exchanges	3.39 (1.56)	1.46-6.20	3.94 (1.60)	1.00-7.81
Number of different targets	24.73 (12.25)	3-60	11.60 (8.07)	1-29
Targets of Gossip				
% episodes about female peers	20.39 (12.04) ^a	0-52.17	58.40 (27.51) ^a	0-100
% episodes about experimenters	18.88 (17.50) ^{ab}	0-80.00		
% episodes about relatives	13.03 (13.59) ^{bc}	0-63.16		
% episodes about celebrities	8.44 (4.55) ^{cd}	0-81.82		
% episodes about male peers (nonromantic)	7.57 (7.66) ^d	0-24.24	17.74 (17.19) ^b	0-66.67
% episodes about mixed-sex peer groups	5.39 (7.35) ^d	0-38.46	13.49 (19.72) ^{bc}	0-100
% episodes about male romantic peers	5.02 (8.87) ^d	0-46.15	10.57 (16.45) ^c	0-63.16
% episodes about school officials	4.72 (5.93) ^d	0-20.83		

Episode Valence					
% neutral episodes	76.70 (14.30) ^a	26.25–100	68.24 (22.18) ^a	28.57–100	
% negative episodes	14.61 (9.70) ^b	0–36.11	21.51 (17.48) ^b	0–66.67	
% positive episodes	5.83 (6.19) ^c	0–20.83	6.93 (11.81) ^c	0–50.00	
Topic of Gossip					
% behavior	73.32 (14.79) ^a	21.74–94.12	69.63 (23.88) ^a	0–100	
% personal and physical characteristics	17.02 (12.88) ^b	0–57.69	23.96 (24.47) ^b	0–100	
% peer associations	10.23 (10.72) ^c	0–35.71	22.69 (23.95) ^b	0–88.89	
Function of Gossip					
% information function	54.23 (17.52) ^a	9.09–85.00	52.49 (25.94) ^a	0–100	
% entertainment function	25.88 (18.44) ^b	0–77.27	27.05 (22.91) ^b	0–81.25	
% intimacy function	19.87 (15.84) ^b	0–63.64	22.34 (22.86) ^b	0–100	
% social aggression function	7.47 (8.16) ^c	0–30.30	13.51 (14.29) ^c	0–56.25	
% establish norms function	4.40 (5.77) ^d	0–22.22	6.61 (10.45) ^d	0–54.55	

Note. Within-column means with different letters are significantly different from one another.

effect size estimates, partial eta-squared (η_p^2), are reported throughout the analyses. Partial eta-squared (η_p^2) is the proportion of total variability attributable to a factor, “partialling out other factors from the total nonerror variation” ($\eta_p^2 = SS_{\text{effect}}/[SS_{\text{effect}} + SS_{\text{error}}]$) (Pierce, Block, & Aguinis, 2004, p. 918). Partial eta-squared values can sum to more than 1 because each effect size estimate uses a different denominator. First, the targets of gossip were examined. There was a significant effect for target type ($F[7,413] = 15.79, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .21$). As seen in Table 1, a greater proportion of friends’ gossip centered on female peers and experimenters, with less focused on relatives and celebrities and the least involving male peers, mixed-gender peer groups, and school officials. Next, the valence of the gossip episodes was examined.¹ There was a significant effect for valence ($F[2,118] = 587.05, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .91$), revealing that neutral gossip (77%) occurred significantly more often than negative gossip that, in turn, occurred significantly more than positive evaluation gossip.

In order to investigate what girls gossiped about with their friends, the topics of girls’ gossip conversations were examined. The topics of personal and physical characteristics were combined to form a single category because of their similar nature, and the topic of sexuality was not included in analyses because of its infrequent occurrence. There was a significant main effect for the topic of gossip ($F[2,118] = 351.96, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .86$). Significantly more gossip focused on a third party’s behavior or actions (73%) than personal or physical characteristics and peer associations. Finally, a significant effect for function was found ($F[4,236] = 100.85, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .63$). More gossip episodes were seen as serving an informational function than any other function (54%). Further, gossip was judged as serving an entertainment function or in the service of furthering intimacy between friends more than it was seen as serving a socially aggressive function or establishing norms.

Characteristics of Gossip about Peers

Characteristics of peer-related gossip were examined in more detail, as peer-related gossip is especially relevant for understanding the gossip functions of social aggression and establishing intimacy and may provide valuable insight into how gossip may relate to friendship processes. First, the characteristics of peer gossip were examined, again using a series of repeated measures one-way ANOVAs to examine which characteristics were most common.

¹Mixed valence episodes were not included in analyses due to their low frequency of occurrence.

As seen in Table 1, girls talked about peers a great deal. Over a quarter of all their talk was peer-related gossip, yet there was great variability in the amount the girls talked with friends about peers. There was a significant effect for target type ($F[3,177] = 52.90, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .47$), with more peer-related gossip being about female peers (58%) than about male peers and mixed-gender groups. More gossip was about male peers than about romantic male peers. Similar to the characteristics of all gossip, a greater proportion of peer-related gossip was neutral rather than negative, and more was negative than positive ($F[2, 118] = 133.90, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .69$). As with all gossip, a greater portion of peer-related gossip was about behavior rather than personal and physical characteristics or peer associations ($F[2, 118] = 55.52, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .49$). Finally, most peer-related gossip served an information function, with less serving an intimacy or entertainment function. Even fewer peer-related gossip episodes were for social aggression or to establish norms ($F[4, 236] = 38.31, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .39$).

In order to better comprehend how the function of peer-related gossip was related to episode valence, correlations were computed among the proportion of neutral, positive, and negative episodes for each dyad and the proportion of episodes coded for each gossip function (Table 2). As expected, the proportion of gossip episodes serving a social aggression function was highly correlated with the proportion of episodes negative in valence and was related negatively to episodes neutral in valence. Interestingly, the intimacy function was significantly associated with all three valences, as it was related highly to episodes that were both negative and positive in valence and was related negatively to neutral valence gossip. Gossip that served the function of establishing norms was highly related to negative valence episodes and negatively associated with the proportion of

Table 2. Correlations between Peer Gossip Episode Valence and Percent Episode Function

% Episode Function	% Episode Valence		
	Negative	Positive	Neutral
Social aggression	.68**	.06	-.59**
Intimacy	.39**	.44**	-.55**
Establish norms	.58**	-.09	-.44**
Entertainment	-.05	-.29*	.20
Information	-.32*	-.14	.35**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

neutral episodes. Finally, the proportion of gossip for entertainment purposes was negatively related to positive valence episodes, and gossip that provided information was inversely related to the proportion of negative valence episodes and positively related to neutral valence episodes.

Closer Examination of the Functions of Gossip

Aggression and gossip. As mentioned previously, it was hypothesized that if gossip serves a socially aggressive function, then socially aggressive girls would be expected to gossip more about peers, this gossip would be more negative, and they would be more likely to use gossip for the purpose of social aggression than would less aggressive girls. Correlations were computed to examine the relationships between peer nominations for overt and social aggression and the characteristics of peer gossip (Table 3). Overt aggression was positively associated with the proportion of peer gossip about female peers and negatively related to the proportion of episodes that served an intimacy function. Both social and overt aggression were positively related to the proportion of gossip about behavior and negatively associated with the proportion of gossip about personal and physical characteristics.

Status and gossip. Previous research has found that well-liked children are socially competent (Rubin et al., 1998). Thus, it was hypothesized that if gossip is a skillful behavior that fosters intimacy between friends, dyads with well-liked girls would gossip more about peers, would be more evaluative (both negative and positive) in their peer-related gossip, and more of their gossip about peers would be judged as fostering intimacy and solidarity than would the gossip of rejected girls and their friends. Furthermore, because past research has indicated relationally aggressive behavior to be associated with being less well liked (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), it was expected that rejected girls and their friends would engage in more socially aggressive gossip about peers than would sociometrically popular girls. To test these specific hypotheses, a series of planned analyses were conducted to contrast sociometrically popular and rejected girls. The remaining characteristics of gossip for sociometrically popular and rejected girls were also compared using more conservative MANCOVAs. Given that sociometric status was associated with SES ($t = -2.31, p < .05$), SES was included as a covariate in all analyses. Results are summarized in Table 4.

First, we examined if amount of gossip was associated with social skillfulness as hypothesized, specifically whether sociometrically popular girls gossiped more with their friends about peers than rejected girls. Two ANCOVAs were conducted to investigate sociometric status differences on the number of peer-related gossip initiations and the proportion of the

Table 3. Correlations between Peer Nominations of Aggression and Characteristics of Peer Gossip

Gossip Characteristics General Features	Peer Nominations	
	Overt Aggression	Social Aggression
Number of episodes	-.16	-.18
% talk that is gossip	-.19	-.21
Average # exchanges	-.16	-.04
Number of different targets	-.14	-.14
Targets of Gossip		
% episodes about female peers	.33*	.14
% episodes about male peers (nonromantic)	.22	-.10
% episodes about mixed-sex peer groups	-.12	.03
% episodes about male romantic peers	-.18	-.18
Episode Valence		
% neutral episodes	.22	.04
% negative episodes	-.01	.06
% positive episodes	-.24	-.10
Topic of Gossip		
% behavior	.33*	.36**
% personal and physical characteristics	-.37**	-.30*
% peer associations	.03	-.15
Function of Gossip		
% information function	.21	.12
% entertainment function	-.02	-.01
% intimacy function	-.29*	-.19
% social aggression function	.11	-.14
% establish norms function	.04	.04

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

friends' conversation devoted to peer-related gossip. Both were significant, indicating that popular girls had a greater number of gossip episodes than rejected girls and that a larger proportion of well-liked girls' conversations with friends consisted of peer-related gossip than that of rejected girls. An additional MANCOVA was conducted to investigate status differences on the number of different targets and the average number of gossip exchanges between well-liked and rejected girls and their friends.

Table 4. Differences by Status in Observed Characteristics of Peer Gossip

Gossip Characteristics	Popular M(SD)	Rejected M(SD)	F	df	η_p^2
Number of episodes	17.70 (11.84)	11.50 (8.62)	6.35**	(1,57)	.10
% talk that is gossip	33.52 (21.22)	21.20 (16.68)	8.05***	(1,57)	.12
Average # exchanges	4.36 (1.62)	3.52 (1.49)	5.09**	(1,57)	.08
Number of different targets	13.97 (8.60)	9.23 (6.84)	6.45**	(1,57)	.10
Targets of Gossip					
% episodes about female peers	54.78 (24.60)	62.02 (30.13)	1.19	(1,57)	.03
% episodes about mixed-sex peer groups	9.83 (10.57)	17.14 (25.54)	3.19	(1,57)	.06
% episodes about male peers	22.18 (17.89)	13.30 (15.50)	4.40**	(1,57)	.07
% episodes about male romantic peers	13.30 (18.09)	7.85 (14.40)	3.23	(1,57)	.05
Episode Valence					
% evaluative gossip (positive and negative)	33.17 (19.69)	23.72 (20.42)	4.76**	(1,57)	.08
% episodes neutral valence	64.19 (20.92)	72.30 (23.00)	3.60*	(1,57)	.06
Episode Function					
% intimacy function	31.68 (25.19)	22.41 (19.72)	4.10**	(1,57)	.07
% social aggression function	15.87 (13.91)	11.16 (14.52)	2.08	(1,57)	.04

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Note. Analyses controlled for target girl SES.

There was a significant multivariate main effect for status ($F[2,56] = 4.77$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$). Follow-up univariate ANCOVAs indicated a significant status effect for target, indicating that well-liked girls talked about a greater number of different peers than rejected girls. There was also a significant difference between well-liked and rejected girls with regard to their average number of exchanges per gossip episode.

As there were no a priori hypotheses regarding status group differences and specific targets of peer gossip, an omnibus MANCOVA was conducted. A significant main effect was found for status ($F[4,54] = 2.69$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$). Follow-up univariate ANCOVAs revealed only one significant main effect; that well-liked girls and their friends were more likely to talk about male peers than were rejected girls and their friends.

Next, we examined the specific hypotheses related to the valence of the gossip. It was hypothesized that sharing positive and negative opinions of others is associated with intimacy (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). It was also hypothesized that well-liked girls' gossip would contain more evaluations (positive and negative) of peers than the gossip of rejected girls. Proportions of positive and negative peer-related gossip were summed to create a composite evaluative gossip score. An ANCOVA revealed that well-liked girls engaged in more evaluative gossip than rejected girls. An additional ANCOVA on the proportion of neutral gossip was also conducted in order to complete the examination of status and gossip valence. Rejected girls and their friends engaged in marginally more neutral gossip about peers than well-liked girls and their friends.

With regard to the function of gossip, it was hypothesized that more of the gossip between well-liked girls and their friends would be devoted to fostering intimacy than would gossip between rejected girls and their friends. Further, it was hypothesized that rejected girls and their friends would engage in more socially aggressive gossip than would well-liked girls and their friends. Two ANCOVAs were conducted to test for status group differences for these functions. There was a significant status difference for the portion of peer gossip used to establish intimacy. More of well-liked girls' peer gossip was rated as furthering intimacy than rejected girls'. There was no significant difference for the social aggression function. A follow-up MANCOVA conducted on the remaining function categories was not significant ($F[3,55] = 1.36$, $p > .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$).

There were no specific hypotheses regarding status group differences on the topics of gossip; therefore, a MANCOVA was conducted to compare the topics of gossip of well-liked and rejected girls' peer gossip with friends. There was no significant multivariate effect for status ($F[3,55] = 1.30$, $p > .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$).

Table 5. Correlations between Macro Interaction Codes and Peer Gossip Characteristics

Gossip Characteristics	Macro Codes of Dyad Interaction		
	Closeness	Quality of Friendship	Awkwardness
Number of episodes	.39**	.27*	-.18
% Talk gossip	.46*	.37**	-.17
Average # exchanges	.59**	.46*	-.34**
Number of different targets	.40**	.28*	-.19
% Negative episodes	.26*	.20	-.14
% Positive episodes	.16	.21	-.04
% Neutral episodes	-.33*	-.34**	.19
% Social aggression function	.41**	.25	-.10
% Intimacy function	.40**	.50**	-.11
% Establish norms function	.22	.17	-.11
% Entertainment function	-.18	-.30*	-.21
% Information function	-.25	-.20	.25

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Friendship and gossip. To further examine the hypothesis that peer-related gossip may serve an intimacy or solidarity function for girl friends, the correlations between the characteristics of gossip and the macro ratings of the dyad interaction were computed. If gossip serves to increase bonding between friends, then friendship interaction ratings of closeness, relationship quality, and awkwardness should be associated with characteristics of friends' peer-related gossip. As can be seen in Table 5, the observed closeness and quality of the girls' friendships showed very similar patterns in their relation to gossip. In general, the closeness and quality of the girls' friendships were positively related to the amount of their peer-related gossip, the length of episodes, and the number of peers discussed. Closeness and quality also related to the amount of gossip serving an intimacy function and were negatively associated with the proportion of peer gossip that was neutral in valence.

Ethnicity and Gossip

In order to examine the peer-related gossip characteristics of European American and African American friends, a series of MANCOVAs were conducted. Because SES was associated with ethnicity ($t = 8.48, p < .01$), SES was con-

trolled in all analyses. A MANCOVA examining general features of peer-related gossip showed a significant main effect for ethnicity ($F[4,54] = 3.72$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$). As seen in Table 6, univariate tests revealed that African American dyads engaged in more peer gossip episodes and a greater portion of their conversation was devoted to peer gossip than European American dyads. Additionally, African American friends' gossip included a wider variety of targets than that of European Americans friends.

A second MANCOVA, computed to examine ethnicity differences with regard to the valence of peer-related gossip, revealed a significant effect for ethnicity ($F[2, 56] = 3.43$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$). Univariate analyses revealed a significant ethnicity difference only for evaluative gossip. MANCOVAs were also conducted to look for possible ethnicity differences with regard to the particular targets of gossip ($F[4,54] = 1.59$, $p > .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$), the topics of gossip ($F[3, 55] = .13$, $p > .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$), and functions of gossip ($F[5,53] = 2.25$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$), but none of these analyses were significant.²

Discussion

One of the primary goals of the current study was to examine the characteristics of gossip between fourth-grade girls and their friends. From our observations, it is clear that fourth-grade girls talk about others a great deal while interacting with their close friends. They predominantly discuss their female peers or family members, and their talk is often about the behavior or actions of these individuals. Most of girls' gossip is neutral, which corresponds to the predominantly information-sharing function of their gossip.

Of particular interest were the characteristics of peer-related gossip. Over a quarter of girls' talk was about peers, and on average they discussed 12 different peers or peer groups in their discussion, demonstrating that peer-related gossip is common among girl friends. Most peer gossip concerned female peers, with the least amount focused on males referenced as romantic targets. Furthermore, similar to gossip in general, much of peer gossip, as in the following example, was nonevaluative and narrative in form, providing information to their friend.

J: Lisa, I got one for her. She was wanting a real Tamagachi, but I got her a Pet Vet. It's about the same thing, except four buttons and three

²In order to see if ethnicity qualified any of the status effects, tests for interactions between ethnicity and status were also conducted. There were no significant interaction effects between status and ethnicity.

Table 6. Differences by Race in Observed Characteristics of Peer Gossip

Gossip Characteristics	African American	European American	F	df	η_p^2
	M(SD)	M(SD)			
Number of episodes	17.77(11.42)	11.43(9.11)	6.59*	(1,57)	.10
% Talk that is gossip	33.65(21.54)	21.07(16.15)	6.60*	(1,57)	.10
Average # exchanges	4.15(1.58)	3.73(1.62)	1.13	(1,57)	.02
Number of different targets	14.47(8.74)	8.73(6.24)	10.66**	(1,57)	.16
Episode Valence					
% Evaluative gossip (positive and negative)	34.80(19.53)	22.09(19.65)	5.70	(1,57)	.09
% Episodes neutral valence	61.97(20.43)	74.51(22.41)	3.51	(1,57)	.06

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note. Analyses controlled for target girl SES.

buttons. It's kinda different. And, um, she plays with that a whole lot, and she taught me how to play.

Similar to Leaper and Holliday (1995), we found a significantly larger proportion of peer-related gossip between girl friends to be negative rather than positive (22% vs. 7%). Take the following example:

M: Tyson is ugly.

H: What's so bad about Tyson?

M: Nothings wrong with Tyson it's just that . . .

H: He got monkey ears.

The second main goal of the study was to investigate the proposed functions of gossip. One of the proposed functions of negative gossip has been social aggression. The proportion of negative peer gossip between friends was found to be related to the proportion of gossip with the function of social aggression. This is illustrated in the next example, as the one friend's negative statements about Katie could change her friend's opinion for the worse:

K: Do you know Katie M.?

N: Katie M? What about her?

K: Do you like her?

N: Yeah. Why, do you? Why?

K: She's a big booger. That's why.

N: Why?

K: Because she got picked out someone's nose. That's why she's a big booger.

It was hypothesized that if gossip served a socially aggressive function, peer nominations of aggressive behavior would be associated with the amount of girls' gossip with friends as well as the proportion of gossip for the function of social aggression. However, we did not find support for the hypothesis that peer-nominated overt and social aggression is related to the amount of gossiping girls did with friends, the valence of their gossip, or the proportion of gossip that was socially aggressive. Although there were a few significant associations between girls' overt and social aggression and some characteristics of gossip, we did not find meaningful associations between gossip and aggression that related to any of our hypotheses.

Furthermore, if gossip is a solely aggressive behavior, it was hypothesized that the sociometrically rejected girls would gossip more than the

well-liked girls. On the other hand, if gossip is a socially competent behavior, associated with furthering intimacy between friends, it was hypothesized that the sociometrically popular girls would gossip more than the rejected girls and their friends. It was found that well-liked girls and their friends gossiped more about peers and did more evaluative gossip about peers than did rejected girls and their friends. In addition, sociometrically popular girls were more likely to gossip and engage in more evaluative gossip than rejected girls.

It was also hypothesized that if gossip furthers intimacy between friends, it would be associated with the quality of the friendship between individuals. It was found that friendship quality and closeness were associated with the amount of peer gossip and with the proportion of gossip used for social aggression and intimacy. Thus, it seems that gossip is not simply a negative behavior but may also be significantly related to social competence and friendship.

On the surface, these results seem surprising. One can envision the reaction to the implied normative advice to girls to gossip more and more negatively as a way of deepening their friendships and increasing how well liked they are by their peers. Most often, however, negative gossip was not done solely to hurt the target of gossip but rather was part of a self-disclosure between friends. It served as a means for friends to become closer and share intimate information:

S: And she laugh at me on the front porch with her sisters and their friends and her friends and her little sister's friends, and it's really embarrassing me, so I would like it if she would stop it.

D: True.

S: But you can't talk to her.

D: Yeah. She giggle too much.

Examples of socially aggressive gossip that simultaneously built intimacy and solidarity between friends were frequent in our data, illustrating that negative gossip may often serve several purposes. Sometimes gossip also served the function of establishing norms about how peers should or should not treat one another, as illustrated in the following example:

P: Okay, . . . the people I hate in Mrs. Stanton's class is Tisha, Jill . . . put it like this all the girls except for Monica.

V: Why you say that? . . . What's wrong with them?

P: Look, in the mornings Tisha ride our bus.

V: For real?

P: They be talking about all of us, everybody in the [inaudible].

V: And then she gone hug me and stuff.

P: Who?

V: Tisha. See, I didn't know about that. That's why I hugged her and everything.

In this example, V discusses how Tisha is insincere. This episode has several functions. It is socially aggressive and also furthers intimacy through the discussion of a hurtful situation. In addition, it establishes the norm that being insincere is not how one should treat friends. Thus, negative gossip is not simply a socially aggressive behavior but rather a complex behavior also serving important social functions for friends.

Finally, a secondary goal of the current study was to explore differences in the characteristics of gossip between African American and European American girls and their friends. Our investigation revealed a pattern of gossip among African American girls that is similar to that of well-liked girls and friendship dyads rated as close and having higher-quality interactions. Just like sociometrically popular girls, African American girls gossiped more about peers, had more gossip episodes directed at more targets, and engaged in more evaluative peer-related gossip than European American girls. There are several possible explanations for these differences. First, it has been proposed that gossip has even greater utility for minority groups because it helps in the maintenance of group bonds, identity, and control over group actions (Gluckman, 1963; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Gluckman (1963) suggests that for threatened groups, especially minority groups, gossip among group members may actually strengthen group norms and protect values from being lost in the majority culture. Thus, gossip between African American girls, as a minority group in the United States, may be more productive for strengthening in-group norms, bonding together, and reaffirming values. In addition, the interdependent orientation characteristic of African Americans (Townsend, 1998) may promote more concern and interest in others and their peers (Way et al., 2005) than the more individualistic values of European American girls. This heightened interest in others may contribute to the amount that they discuss others in their social sphere.

Future Directions

Although past scholars have hypothesized that gossip may strengthen bonds between individuals and within groups, our study can make no causal claims. Gossip may help friends establish shared opinions, agree on norms, or increase self-disclosure (Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Gottman

& Mettetal, 1986; Leaper & Holliday, 1995). It is also possible that friends who feel closer and have more experiences in common engage in more gossip because they feel more secure or because they share a peer group and have more individuals to discuss (Abrahams, 1970; Derlega & Chaiken, 1977; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Thus, even though friendship closeness and relationship quality are associated with more gossip, it is not clear whether gossip increases these features in a friendship or simply serves as a marker of these characteristics. However, observations of gossip by Gottman and Mettetal (1986) between acquaintances (rather than friends) suggest that gossip interactions increased intimacy between girl strangers. Future research should continue to investigate the nature and direction of the association between gossip and friendship.

Additionally, as Abrahams (1970) and Gluckman (1963) highlight, there may be an art to gossiping well, and the context of gossip may dictate how gossip should be enacted. Gluckman (1963) observes that gossiping about certain people may only be allowed when one is a member of the same group. Strangers or outsiders may often be shunned when they gossip about a person within a group of which they are not a member. Gluckman (1963, p. 313) states that "it is bad manners . . . to tell unpleasant stories about your friends to strangers," which illustrates the complex nature of gossip. Indeed, there may be numerous implicit social rules about gossip that may aid or hinder one's performance.

Along these lines, Leaper and Holliday (1995) highlight that the relational context among gossip participants may be especially relevant in understanding the functions of gossip. Because of the relatively safe and reciprocal nature of friendship, gossip may be more likely to further intimacy or bonding between individuals than in larger groups. Moreover, as illustrated by Parker and Seal (1996), knowing gossip may be associated with having friends, but being known as a gossip may not be. That girls were only interacting with friends might explain why there were no relationships with peer nominations of social aggression in this study. Social aggression may be viewed very differently within the context of close friendship than in a larger group. Perhaps one reason rejected girls may be seen by peers as overtly and socially aggressive, even though they are not observed to be so in the friendship dyads, is that they do not understand the appropriate context for negative gossip (i.e., only with a close friend) and are thus more indiscriminate in their use of it, engaging in it more publicly and less discretely.

Gossip in larger peer groups may serve different functions than gossip in friendship dyads. It is possible that gossip in groups may also help to build solidarity and establish norms among members. Gossip about out-group members may serve to strengthen in-group bonds and establish an

“us versus them” mentality (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Additionally, gossip about in-group members may help to maintain social control and communicate behavior that is and is not permissible (Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Conversely, in a group context in which status is contested and has more importance, gossip among group members may be more likely to serve the purpose of gaining power or prestige and manipulating relationships. Future research is required to investigate the functions of gossip within larger groups and different contexts.

Our study examined the gossip of fourth-grade girls and their friends, but it may be interesting to study the characteristics and functions of gossip in different age groups. Although we found that social status was associated with gossip, the specifics of this relation remain unclear. It is possible that gossip is a skill that sociometrically popular, or well-liked girls, utilize to bond with their friends; however, it is also possible that well-liked girls gossip more because they know more people and have larger social networks than rejected girls (George & Hartmann, 1997). In order to gossip, one must have interesting information to contribute. Sociometrically well-liked girls may have an advantage because they have greater access to social information than do rejected girls.

Ethnographic studies of gossip among junior high children suggest that the girls who are perceived to be popular also seem to be the girls who are doing the most gossiping (e.g., Merten, 1997). Perceived popularity, measured by asking children who they think are popular, has been associated with relational aggression in a number of studies; however, this association seems to be dependent on age. There does not appear to be a significant association for younger girls, but as they enter adolescence, perceived popularity and social aggression become positively correlated (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). It may be interesting to study how gossip relates to perceived popularity and social status as girls enter junior high. It may be that gossip in the friendship context may always be related to friendship quality and social skills but that gossiping within the larger peer group is associated with relational/social aggression and perceived popularity. Future research should examine how these constructs relate to gossip with friends and within the larger peer group and should investigate age-related differences in these associations.

It would also be important to broaden the examination of children's gossip by studying it outside of the laboratory. Our analysis of all gossip revealed that 19% of girls' gossip was about experimenters. This could be considered a measure of reactivity to the situation. Much of the talk about experimenters happened earlier in the interaction and diminished as the interaction continued. Anecdotally, it seemed that friends who were

uncomfortable with each other or had difficulty engaging in conversation were more likely to talk about experimenters, while friends who were more at ease with each other focused on other targets in their gossip. Supplementary analyses indicated that rejected girls and their friends gossiped more about experimenters and staff members than well-liked girls. Studying gossip in more naturalistic settings may reduce reactivity and increase the generalizability of our findings.

Research on children's gossip should also be extended to include boys. Gossip among boys and their close friends may be quite different both in form and function. Maccoby (1998) has described that girls are socialized to be relationship focused and to avoid interpersonal conflict, whereas boys are socialized to be achievement-oriented and concerned with their dominance in the group. Gossip among boys, then, may not be in the service of intimacy to the same extent as with girls but rather may be a way of calibrating achievement among individuals and may be used more for norm setting. Further research is necessary to develop our understanding of the important functions that gossip serves for males.

Thus, in summary, it is clear that gossip is an important and complex interpersonal process, one serving both positive and negative functions. Even though gossip can serve to increase intimacy and solidarity among friends and establish norms (Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Leaper & Holliday, 1995), it can also cause great harm when used carelessly or aggressively (e.g., Cairns et al., 1989; Crick et al., 2001; Eder & Stanford, 1986; Merten, 1997). A full understanding of the phenomenon will require an analysis of both the beneficial and negative impact of gossip as well as the role it plays in the normal developmental process.

References

- Abrahams, R. D. (1970). A performance-centered approach to gossip. *Man*, 5, 290–301.
- Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., & Vohs, K. D. (2004). Gossip as cultural learning. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 111–121.
- Blumberg, H. H. (1972). Communication of interpersonal evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 23, 157–162.
- Bukowski, W. M., & Hoza, B. (1989). Popularity and friendship: Issues in theory, measurement, and outcome. In T. J. Berndt & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and child development* (pp. 15–45). New York: Wiley.
- Cairns, R. B., Cairns, B. D., Neckerman, H. J., Ferguson, L. L., & Garipey, J. (1989). Growth and aggression: 1. Childhood to early adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, 25, 320–330.

- Cillessen, A. H. N., & Mayeux, L. (2004). From censure to reinforcement: Developmental changes in the association between aggression and social status. *Child Development, 75*, 147–163.
- Coie, J. D., Dodge, K. A., & Coppotelli, H. (1982). Dimensions and types of social status: A cross-age perspective. *Developmental Psychology, 18*, 557–570.
- Crick, N. R. (1997). Engagement in gender normative versus nonnormative forms of aggression: Links to social-psychological adjustment. *Developmental Psychology, 33*, 610–617.
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 6*, 710–722.
- Crick, N. R., Nelson, D. A., Morales, J. R., Cullerton-Sen, C., Cassas, J. F., & Hickman, S. E. (2001). Relational aggression in childhood and adolescence: I hurt you through the grapevine. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 196–214). New York: Guilford.
- Derlega, V. J., & Chaiken, A. L. (1977). Privacy and self-disclosure in social relationships. *Journal of Social Issues, 33*, 102–115.
- Dunbar, R. I. M. (2004). Gossip in evolutionary perspective. *Review of General Psychology, 2*, 100–110.
- Eckert, P. (1990). Cooperative competition in adolescent “girl talk.” *Discourse Processes, 13*, 91–122.
- Eder, D., & Enke, J. L. (1991). The structure of gossip: Opportunities and constraints on collective expression among adolescents. *American Sociological Review, 56*, 494–508.
- Eder, D., & Stanford, S. (1986). The development and maintenance of interactional norms among early adolescents. *Sociological Studies of Child Development, 1*, 283–300.
- Fine, G. A. (1977). Social components of children’s gossip. *Journal of Communications, 27*, 181–185.
- Foster, E. K. (2004). Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions. *Review of General Psychology, 8*, 78–99.
- George, T. P., & Hartmann, D. P. (1997). Friendship networks of unpopular, average, and popular children. *Child Development, 67*, 2301–2316.
- Ginsberg, D., Gottman, J., & Parker, J. (1986). The importance of friendship. In J. M. Gottman & J. G. Parker (Eds.), *Conversations with Friends* (pp. 3–50). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gluckman, M. (1963). Gossip and scandal. *Current Anthropology, 4*, 307–316.
- Gottman, J., and Mettetal, G. (1986). Speculations about social and affective development: Friendship and acquaintanceship through adolescence. In J. M. Gottman & J. G. Parker (Eds.), *Conversations with friends* (pp. 3–50). New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Hannerz, U. (1967). Gossip networks and culture in a Black American ghetto. *Ethnos*, 32, 35–59.
- Hartup, W. W. (1996). The company they keep: Friendships and their developmental significance. *Child Development*, 67, 1–13.
- Hollingshead, A. B. (1979). *Four-Factor Index of Social Status*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kuttler, A. F., Parker, J. G., & La Greca, A. M. (2002). Developmental and gender differences in preadolescents' judgments of the veracity of gossip. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 48, 105–132.
- Lagerspetz, K. M. J., Bjorkqvist, K., & Peltonen, T. (1988). Is indirect aggression more typical of females? Gender differences in aggressiveness in 11- to 12-year-old children. *Aggressive Behavior*, 14, 403–414.
- Lansford, J. E., Putallaz, M., Grimes, C. L., Schiro-Osman, K. A., Kupersmidt, J. B., & Coie, J. D. (2006). Perceptions of friendship quality and observed behaviors with best friends: How do sociometrically rejected, average, and popular girls differ? *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 52, 694–719.
- Leaper, C., & Holliday, H. (1995). Gossip in same-gender and cross-gender friends' conversations. *Personal Relationships*, 2, 237–246.
- Levin, J., & Arluke, A. (1985). An exploratory analysis of sex differences in gossip. *Sex Roles*, 12, 281–286.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1986). Social groupings in childhood: Their relationship to prosocial and antisocial behavior in boys and girls. In D. Olweus, J. Block, & M. Radke-Yarrow (Eds.), *Development of antisocial and prosocial behavior: Research, theories, and issues* (pp. 263–284). New York: Academic Press.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1998). *The two sexes: Growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Merten, D. E. (1997). The meaning of meanness: Popularity, competition, and conflict among junior high school girls. *Sociology of Education*, 70, 175–191.
- Noon, M., & Delbridge, R. (1993). News from behind my hand: Gossip in organizations. *Organization Studies*, 14, 23–36.
- Parker, J. G., & Asher, S. R. (1993). Friendship and friendship quality in middle childhood: Links with peer group acceptance and feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. *Developmental Psychology*, 29, 611–621.
- Parker, J., & Gottman, J. (1989). Social and emotional development in a relational context: Friendship interaction from early childhood to adolescence. In T. Berndt, & G. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relations in child development* (pp. 95–131). New York: Wiley.
- Parker, J. G., & Seal J. (1996). Forming, losing, renewing, and replacing friendships: Applying temporal parameters to the assessment of children's friendship experiences. *Child Development*, 67, 2248–2268.

- Pendleton, S. C. (1998). Rumor research revisited and expanded. *Language and Communication, 18*, 69–86.
- Pierce, C. A., Block, R. A., & Aguinis, H. (2004). Cautionary note on reporting eta-squared values from multifactor ANOVA designs. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 64*, 916–924.
- Rose, A. J., & Rudolph, K. D. (2006). A review of sex differences in peer relationship processes: Potential trade-offs for the emotional and behavioral development of girls and boys. *Psychological Bulletin, 132*, 98–131.
- Rose, A. J., Swenson, L. P., & Waller, E. M. (2004). Overt and relational aggression and perceived popularity: Developmental differences in concurrent and prospective relations. *Developmental Psychology, 40*, 378–387.
- Rosnow, R. (2001). Rumor and gossip in interpersonal interaction and beyond: A social-exchange perspective. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving badly: Aversive behaviors in interpersonal relationships* (pp. 203–232). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rubin, K. H., Bukowski, W. M., & Parker, J. G. (1998). Peer interactions, relationships, and groups. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development* (5th Ed., pp. 619–700). New York: Wiley.
- Rysman, A. (1977). How the “gossip” became a woman. *Journal of Communication, 27*, 176–180.
- Terry, R. (2000). Recent advances in measurement theory and the use of sociometric techniques. In A. H. N. Cillessen & W. M. Bukowski (Eds.), *New directions for child and adolescent development, No. 88: Recent advances in the measurement of acceptance and rejection in the peer system* (pp. 27–53). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Townsend, B. L. (1998). Social friendships and networks among African American children and youth. In L. H. Meyer, H. Park, M. Grenot-Scheyer, I. S. Schwartz, & B. Harry (Eds.), *Making friends: The influences of culture and development* (pp. 225–242). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Underwood, M. K. (2003). *Social aggression among girls*. New York: Guilford.
- Way, N., Gingold, R., Rotenberg, M., & Kuriakose, G. (2005). Close friendships among urban, ethnic minority adolescents. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 107*, 41–59.
- Wert, S., & Salovey, P. (2004). A social comparison account of gossip. *Review of General Psychology, 2*, 122–137.
- Xie, H., Swift, D. J., Cairns, B. D., & Cairns, R. B. (2002). Aggressive behaviors in social interaction and developmental adaptation: A narrative analysis of interpersonal conflicts during early adolescence. *Social Development, 11*, 205–224.