



Hearing Negative Gossip about Others Predicts Decreases in Own Self-esteem

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INTRODUCTION

Gossip is surprisingly common, making up 65-90% of people’s day-to-day conversations (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). While people gossip for different reasons (e.g., entertainment, social influence, to protect their group, gather information, and validation; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), it is clear that exposure to negative gossip causes people to develop negative impressions toward the targets of that gossip (Hauke & Abele, 2019).

What is less clear, however, is how negative gossip about others affects people’s own feelings of self-worth. In the current study we explored the possibility that exposure to negative gossip about a third party may actually increase positive impressions of the self through the process of social comparison (e.g., Crocker & Miller, 2000). That is, given that negative gossip provides an opportunity for downward social comparison, and downward social comparison can increase self-esteem (Crocker & Miller, 2000), the current study explored whether people who compare themselves to the targets of a negative gossip experience increases in their own self-worth.

METHODS

Participants

239 participants (180 women, 59 men) were recruited for participation in a study on Relations and Communication. The average age of participants was 19.12 years (Sd= 2.59)

Overview of Procedure:

Participants were asked to complete a background survey assessing demographic characteristics. Then participants were randomly assigned to the gossip or control condition, in which they recalled an event where a close other shared information about either a third party who was not present (gossip condition) or a television show/movie (control condition). Following the manipulation, all participants rated the negativity of the information shared with them and reported on their state self-esteem.

Measures:

Gossip Manipulation: Participants in the gossip condition were asked to describe a recent occasion where the close other they identified earlier in the study shared information with them about another person they both knew (while that third party was not present). Participants in the control condition were asked to describe a recent occasion where the close other they identified earlier in the study shared with them about a movie or television show the close other had watched.

Negativity Rating: Participants were asked to rate “How negative was the information your close other shared with you?” on a scale from 1 (Not at all Negative) to 7 (Extremely Negative).

State Self-Esteem: Using the state self-esteem scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), participants were asked to rate their feelings of self-worth (e.g., “Right now, I feel confident about my abilities;” “Right now, I feel good about myself”) on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

RESULTS

A multiple regression analysis was run predicting state self-esteem from condition, the centered main effect of information negativity, and the interaction between condition and information negativity. Analyses revealed a non-significant main effect of condition and a non-significant main effect of information negativity. However, the interaction between condition and information negativity predicting state self-esteem was significant (See table 1).

To determine the nature of the significant interaction, simple slope tests were run to determine the effect of negativity in the gossip and control conditions, respectively. In the gossip condition, information negativity was negatively related to participant’s state self-esteem ($\beta=-.24$, $t= -2.66$, $p= .01$, $CI95\%=[-.18,-.03]$), suggesting that when participants recalled gossip with more negative content, they felt worse about their own abilities, appearance and social lives (see Figure 1). In the control condition, information negativity was unrelated to state self-esteem ($\beta=.11$, $t= 1.19$, $p= .24$, $CI95\%=[-.04,.18]$).

Table 1: Condition and Information Negativity Predicting State Self-esteem

	β	t	p	95% CI	sr
Intercept		36.32	.000	3.11, 3.47	
Condition	-.03	-.34	.73	-.28, .20	
Information Negativity	.15	1.23	.22	-.04,.17	
Condition X Information Negativity	-.29	-2.52	.01	-.31,-.04	-.16

Figure 1. Information Negativity to Predict State Self-Esteem



Conclusions and Future Directions

In the current study, writing about negative gossip led participants to feel worse about themselves in the moment. These results are opposite of our predictions, suggesting that negative gossip has both a negative effect on impressions about the third party *and* impressions of the self.

Future research should explore the mechanisms behind this decrease in self-esteem in response to recalling negative gossip. One potential explanation for such findings is that negative gossip elicits feelings of guilt and therefore increases negative feelings about the self. Another potential explanation is that recalling negative gossip shared by a close other may decrease feelings of trust with that partner, ultimately decreasing self-esteem.

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