The Structure of Gossip: Opportunities and Constraints on Collective Expression among Adolescents
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THE STRUCTURE OF GOSSIP:
OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS ON
COLLECTIVE EXPRESSION AMONG ADOLESCENTS*

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Previous studies of gossip among adolescents have found a strong tendency toward consensus and negative evaluation in gossip episodes. However, few attempts have been made to examine the actual structure of this common speech activity. We recorded and analyzed 16 gossip episodes that occurred in adolescent conversations in a middle school setting. We used a combination of ETHNO and sociolinguistic analysis to examine the overall ordering of acts in the gossip episodes. Our findings reveal a gossip structure among adolescents that promotes the expression of negative evaluations — there are many opportunities to express support and limited opportunities to challenge a negative evaluation. We also find that gossip has a flexible structure but that the ordering of acts is critical. In particular, the first response to an initial evaluation strongly influenced subsequent responses. These findings highlight the importance of examining how evaluations develop in gossip and encourages a broader approach to the study of power in discourse which includes the power inherent in responses.

Gossip is a common speech activity in informal groups. However, there have been few attempts by sociologists to examine its nature or structure. The term gossip can refer to any informal talk about someone who is not present, including rumor, slander, or simply the exchange of information. In our study we define gossip as evalutative talk about a person who is not present. Evaluative talk is readily identifiable and is particularly important because of the salience we attach to it.

Gossip is a routine activity of early adolescence. It occurs on a regular basis during informal interaction and most adolescents appear to be familiar with it. In order to better understand how adolescents recognize this speech activity and learn how to participate in it, we attempted to identify the basic structure of their gossip.

Most research on evaluative gossip has been done by anthropologists. Some research has focused on the role of gossip in strengthening group bonds (Gluckman 1963; Haviland 1977; Gilmore 1978; Almirol 1981). Other studies have viewed gossip as a means to project a positive self-image by discrediting others (Cox 1970; Paine 1967). Still others have concluded that gossip may promote bonding and positive self-images simultaneously (Besnier 1989).

Psychologists have found that gossip is one of the most salient social processes in childhood and adolescence — that it serves different functions in different developmental periods. In a study of dyadic conversations between friends recorded in laboratory settings Gottman and Mettetal (1986) found that in early childhood gossip was mainly used to promote group solidarity. In middle childhood gossip clarified group norms as well. By adolescence gossip functioned primarily to solve interpersonal problems, although it continued to serve the two earlier functions. Gottman and Mettetal also found that in adolescence gossip could include both positive and negative evaluations of the same person, while in earlier developmental periods gossip consisted primarily of negative evaluations. This study drew attention to different types of gossip and their functions. Howing the data, this paper has benefited from comments and discussions with William Corsaro, Cathy Evans, Gary Fine, Allen Grinshaw, David Heise, David Kinney, Nancy Lesko, Stephen Parker and Brian Powell. This research was supported by NIMH Grant No. 36684. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Sociological Association Meetings, Atlanta, August 1988.

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ever, because it was done in a laboratory setting, it did not examine gossip within the context of children's natural environments and day-to-day conversations. Nor did it investigate gossip in groups with more than two members.

The few sociological studies on gossip have been done within the context of naturally occurring conversations and have emphasized gossip's role in developing social norms and values. Fine (1986) showed how gossip is used by adolescent females to clarify norms that are grounded in an emergent collective evaluation of a situation. Eder and Sanford (1986) found that in early adolescence girls begin to rely more on gossip and less on direct ridicule to communicate social information and clarify social norms. Beginning as early as sixth grade, girls would reprimand their peers for engaging in open ridicule, but would accept evaluations of others "behind their backs." Almost all gossip exchanged by these early adolescent girls consisted of negative evaluations of others.

A few researchers have examined interaction patterns within naturally occurring gossip episodes. These studies have shown that gossip tends to result in consensus and have identified some linguistic strategies used by gossip participants to avoid conflict. According to Fine (1986) adolescent females minimized potential conflict by expressing opposing viewpoints in ways that allowed them to be modified easily. Goodwin (1980) found that black girls attempted to assess others' evaluations of the target of gossip before indicating their own opinions.

In studying the structure of gossip we focus on the ordering of acts within gossip episodes. The ordering of acts was first examined in formal speech in a variety of settings. For example, elementary classroom lessons consist of a series of question-answer-evaluation sequences (Mehan 1979); doctor-patient interviews are ordered around question-answer sequences with optional commentary on the part of doctors after patients' answers (Fischer 1984; Frankel 1984); and courtroom interaction is characterized by basic question-answer sequences (Atkinson and Drew 1979). In all of these studies, the concept of sequences was essential to showing that utterances are closely tied to those that precede them in the interaction as well as to those that follow (Schegloff 1968; Heritage and Atkinson 1984). The ordering of acts in informal speech has also been studied. Ritual insulating and other forms of conflict exchange among children and adolescents have been investigated (Labov 1972; Kochman 1983; Maynard 1985; Corsaro and Rizzo 1988), including a study of disputes about comments made during gossip episodes (Goodwin 1980). Again, analyzing sequences of interaction such as insult-insult exchanges and accusation-denial sequences have been essential in the identification of acts.

In analyzing the ordering of acts in gossip episodes we are interested in both the sequences of particular utterances and in the overall ordering of specific kinds of talk. Many speech activities studied previously are ones in which the same sequences are repeated. This is not the case with gossip episodes — even causal observation reveals it is not structured around repeated sequences.

An analysis of the structure of gossip among adolescents may help explain the strong tendency in gossip episodes toward negative evaluation and consensus. Our analysis will show that: (1) the structure of gossip promotes the expression of negative evaluations by providing many opportunities for expressing support for negative evaluation statements and limiting opportunities for challenging them; (2) the structure of gossip is flexible, allowing different kinds of responses by different group members; (3) the first response to an initial evaluation in a gossip episode strongly influences subsequent responses — a supportive response constrains the group to continue to make additional supportive statements, and a challenge frees the group to make different kinds of statements; (4) responses by even low-status group members can have considerable influence on the course a gossip episode takes.

DATA AND METHODS

The students in this study were between 10 and 14 years old. They came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds including working-class and lower-class families. The students attended the same middle school located in a medium-sized midwestern community. The middle school enrolled approximately 250 students per grade from the community and surrounding rural areas. Most students at the school were white; only a small number of black students attended.1

One male and three female researchers observed naturally occurring peer group interactions during lunch periods on a regular basis for

1 This paper is part of a larger study of peer relations and interaction in a middle school setting (Eder 1985; Eder and Parker 1987).
Table 1. Definitions of Notations Used in Transcripts

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( )</td>
<td>Unclear utterance or unclear identification of speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( )</td>
<td>Nonverbal behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>//</td>
<td>Point at which next speaker begins to talk during someone’s speaking turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Pause during speaking turn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All names of people and places are fictitious.*

three years. Eight of the groups were mostly female and three were entirely male. One of the groups included a black female for part of the year. The rest of the students were white.

Researchers entered the setting by simply eating lunch with students in the cafeteria. Two of us also observed athletic practices, where we met students who we later joined at lunch. Every attempt was made to enter through peer contacts rather than through adult authority figures. We explained to the students that we were studying adolescent activities and interests. Within the first week or two, we witnessed students swearing or engaging in other minor forms of deviance. Since we never evaluated or reported such “violations” students began to trust us and to speak freely in our presence. The fact that we observed them on a regular basis and over such a long time also contributed to a high level of rapport.

Once rapport was established, we audio-taped and/or video-taped between 4 and 8 conversations in each lunch-time peer group. The audio-taping was done in the lunch room. The videotaping was done in the media center, a room where students were free to spend time with friends during the lunch period. We recorded a total of 79 students. Because most male groups were large, the audio tapes of their conversations were difficult to transcribe. We thus relied primarily on the video-taped recordings of male groups and have somewhat less data on male interactions. While transcripts of these audio and video-taped conversations serve as our main source of data, ethnographic information from our field notes of lunch periods were also used to help interpret and analyze the recorded data.

We defined evaluative gossip as episodes in which there was a positive or negative evaluation of someone who was not present followed by a response by another student.2 Episodes could be as brief as a single exchange between two students but typically involved a series of exchanges among two or more peers. The episode was considered over when the last evaluative comment about the identified target was made. The most typical and readily identifiable gossip episodes were those in which the evaluation was explicit. The following example illustrates a typical gossip episode applying this definition: The evaluation is explicit and is followed by supportive responses from group members. (See Table 1 for the definitions of symbols used in the conversations presented here.)

Irene: She’s real — you know that real tall one. She’s kinda fat.

Penny: There’s a lot of ‘em like that! (laughs)

Betty: On Mitchell there’s this great big one that walked up // (shakes her shoulders up and down))

(?): Yeah.

(?) And (bigger) (laughs)

In other cases, the evaluation took the form of a complaint. As long as these complaints were responded to by others they were also defined as gossip, as in the following example:

Nan: She — every time, every time I — we call her a name she takes it seriously and goes off and pouts. (angry tone)

Peg: She calls us names all the// time. (angry tone)

Nan: And she calls us names every// (day).

Terri: (whispering)) She’ll call ya a bitch for no reason. She’ll come in// and say ( )

There were other cases where a complaint was challenged instead of supported. Since our definition required only that there be some type of response to the initial evaluation, challenged complaints were included as gossip as well. An example of part of of such an episode follows:

Natalie: She’s a flirt like ( ), man.

Ellen: Reminds me of somebody I used to know.

Natalie: Not me! I don’t flirt.

Ellen: You and her are the people that used to be the biggest flirts I knew.

Natalie: What!?

Hannah: She’s still the biggest flirt.

Here Ellen’s remarks consist of both insults to Natalie and further evaluation of the target of the gossip, making the episode one involving both insult and gossip. However, because we were interested in comparing evaluations that were fully supported with those that were not, we in-
included cases such as this when the initial evaluation was challenged by another group member.

Once all cases of gossip were identified we used a computer program called ETHNO in combination with a sociolinguistic analysis of the recorded data. While ETHNO has been used in the past to analyze event structures (see Heise [1989] and Corsaro and Heise [1990] for detailed discussions of this program), it has not been used to analyze discourse data. When analyzing event structure models ETHNO is used to identify key aspects of routines and to define logical relations among these aspects. ETHNO relies on actual recorded events as data and allows the researcher to modify the model whenever it fails to account for some particular sequence.

ETHNO helped us think systematically about our recorded data. We ran 16 recorded episodes of evaluative gossip through the program, seven of which are presented in this paper. These 16 episodes ranged in length from four “speaking turns” to sixteen “speaking turns.” A speaking turn is defined as any verbal utterance including brief supportive remarks such as “Yeah” and “I know.” We then identified “acts” within speaking turns where acts refer to the aspects of speech that accomplish some function such as identification, evaluation, support, challenge, etc. In some cases more than one act occurred within the same turn, i.e., identification and evaluation of the target. These acts constituted the units for our analysis when using ETHNO to identify the basic structure of a gossip episode. We then used the ETHNO program along with sociolinguistic and ethnographic analysis to determine when and why challenges to evaluations occurred. The actual examples used here reflect both the common structure of gossip and the important forms of variation identified through our analysis.

ANALYSIS

The Basic Structure of Gossip

The key elements that identify gossip are the identification of a target and an evaluation of the target. Gossip differs from other forms of evaluative talk such as insulting, ridicule, and teasing in that the target of the evaluation is not present. This requires that the target first be identified before an evaluation is made. We found that once identification and evaluation occur, a variety of “acts” can follow. These include explanations, expansions on the evaluation, support, exaggerated affect, and challenges. These are shown in Figure 1. Any of these acts, except challenges, can occur at any point in a gossip episode. Variability in expected response is an important difference between gossip and other informal evaluative activities such as an insult to a person who is present. Clearly the expected response to an

\[3\] When using ETHNO one is asked to name the different acts in the order in which they occur in the first episode you are analyzing. After each act is entered, the program asks you if the previously entered acts are required for the current act to occur. After entering all of the acts in the first episode, the acts found in the next episode are entered in the order in which they occur until all the acts found in all the episodes are recorded. Then, a second analysis is done in which you are asked to consider the necessary prerequisite acts for each act in the model. ETHNO continually updates the model as new data and information are added.

\[4\] The meaning of acts were determined largely by how they were responded to by the participants. Thus, for example, if a student responded to an act as if it were a disagreement, it was considered to be a disagreement even though the intent of the respondent may have been to agree with the evaluation.
Example to tell how

opportunities the to sip members win case point. aimed evaluative insults

498

speaks 6

4

5

11

2

1

2

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4

5

6

The example

Andrea:

Elaine:

Elaine:

Andrea:

Elaine:

Andrea:

The example

Example 1: Sixth-Grade Girls

1 Elaine: I forgot to tell ya.

2 Andrea: What?

3 Elaine: One reason why I don’t like Greta Collins.

4 Andrea: (Why?)

5 Elaine: Cause she’s a snob. # ask her if (she) wanted to play basketball ya know. She goes # ([in a snide voice]) “Cheerleaders don’t play basketball.”

6 Andrea: She said that? ([nonverbal response from Elaine]) God, man that went to her head.

7 Elaine: I know.

8 Andrea: Cheerleaders don’t play basketball. # God damn ([silence]) That’s ridiculous.

9 Florence: I bet she plays when she gets home.

In speaking turn 3, Elaine identifies the gossip target. In her next turn she offers a negative evaluation of Greta and then goes on to offer an explanation for the evaluation. With this explanation Elaine provides her own support for the initial evaluation. Andrea goes on to offer an expansion on the explanation, asserting that becoming a cheerleader must have gone to her head. She also provides some expressions of exaggerated affect, i.e., “God, man” and “God damn.” She summarizes the gossip episode when she concludes, “That’s ridiculous.” Andrea’s comments further support the negative evaluation, making it even less likely that another group member would challenge it. In fact, in our data once another group member supported the initial evaluation in some way, a challenge was never made by another group member.

This gossip episode shows how easy it is for group members to participate. Unlike collaborative story-telling where it is often necessary to have participated in a shared event or experience in order to engage in collective talk (Eder 1988), shared experience is not necessary for gossip participation. In Example 1, Andrea’s participation may be facilitated by her apparent familiarity with the target. However, even though Andrea did not witness the event Elaine described, she can participate in the gossip by offering expressions of affect and additional support for the evaluation. Florence makes a smaller contribution, but offers additional support for the developing perception that Greta’s refusal to play basketball at school stems from her snobbishness and not from a lack of interest in basketball. Thus, all three girls contribute to the developing view that Greta Collins is snobbish and that snobbishness is negative.

The initial evaluation by Elaine was negative and supportive comments by the other two group members were in line with the initial negative tone. Other research supports the observation that assessments of others tend to be followed by statements of agreement (Pomerantz 1984). Since most gossip episodes in our data began with a negative evaluation (15 out of 16), the strong tendency to support the initial evaluation led to a high degree of negative talk during these episodes. This pat-
tern in our data reflects the general findings from other studies of early adolescent children (Gottman and Mettel 1986).

The basic structure illustrated in Figure 1 and in Example 1 describes most of the gossip episodes we observed — once a target was evaluated by other group members readily participated. However, gossip presents certain problems that do not exist in other routine speech activities. Unlike insulting and teasing where the target is present, the target of gossip is not present and may therefore not be known by all group members. As a result, we found that some gossip episodes we observed included additional acts: clarification requests and responses to those requests. We also found a few cases in which expansions on the identification were made without requests for clarification. These additional acts are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that clarification requests can immediately follow the identification of the target. While in one case this ordering of events did occur, in most cases clarification requests were not actually made until after both the identification and evaluation were stated since initiators usually made both of these acts in their first speaking turn. Thus, some group members could not clearly identify the target until after the target had been evaluated, and in some cases several supporting comments were made before the identity of the target was clarified for a group member.

Likewise, we found that expansions on identification could occur immediately after the identification and before the evaluation, although expansions also followed an evaluation if it was included in the initial speaking turn. On the other hand, requests for clarification of evaluation could only occur after the initial evaluation was made. Although not shown in Figure 2, these requests could be responded to by evaluations which could then be followed by any of the other acts which normally follow.

All of these acts add additional complexity to a gossip episode. Clarifications of identity and evaluation might occur simultaneously with evaluations and explanations for evaluations. Because of this, clarification requests can influence the direction the evaluation takes. (See Example 2.) Also, it is clear that self-selection of speaking turns is important in this more complex gossip structure — any group member can respond to a clarification request, not just the gossip initiator.

In Example 2, two different types of clarification requests are made by the same boy who apparently does not know the gossip target. This episode took place in a group of seventh-grade boys during a discussion of Little League teams, players, and coaches. Barry begins the gossip. He identifies the coach’s son as the target and in the same speaking turn makes a negative evaluation.

**Example 2:** Seventh-Grade Boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Barry: Yeah, Tommy Payson. ((meaning the coach’s son)) He’s a jerk.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Johnny: Who, who is he? ((to Barry))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Barry: Tommy Payson, he was on my team. He’s a jerk. I saw him at the movies with a girl. He was goin’ ((imitates boy with a goofy, jive walk)) walkin’ around. Oh gosh. ((everybody giggles))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Johnny: What, well isn’t he any good?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kevin: Not really.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Barry: No. He wears basketball shoes to baseball practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Johnny: ((giggles))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After Barry responds to Johnny’s request for clarification of the target’s identity, he goes on in his second speaking turn to explain his evaluation: “He wears basketball shoes to baseball practice.” Like Elaine in Example 1, Barry supports his own initial evaluation. Johnny’s second clarification request, this time regarding Barry’s evaluation, is responded to by Kevin. By supporting Barry’s negative evaluation with his own, Kevin increases the likelihood that Barry’s evaluation will go unchallenged. Kevin’s evaluation is followed by several expansions offered by both Barry and him as they jointly develop their negative evaluation of the target, Tommy.

Note that even though Barry initiated the gossip, Kevin responded to a clarification request. In the groups we observed, members other than the gossip initiator frequently responded to clarification requests. These adolescents clearly saw gossip as an activity in which anyone can contribute to the expressed evaluation at hand. Note also that clarification requests can provide opportunities for participation by group members who were not familiar with the target. These requests can even influence the focus of the evaluation: Johnny’s request about Tommy’s abilities changed the focus of evaluation from Tommy’s general character to his athletic ability.

By analyzing this basic structure of gossip we have gained a better understanding of how adolescents recognize a gossip episode and know how to participate in one. When a group member identifies and evaluates a target, other group members recognize that a gossip episode has begun. If they are familiar with the target they can participate in a number of ways including offering explanations of the evaluation, expansions, and responses to clarification requests. Those who are less familiar with the target request clarifications of various types.

Gossip as Developed Through Interpretation and Collaboration

This basic structure provides some, but not all, of the background knowledge needed to participate in a gossip episode. In our analysis we found that we had to rely on other interpretative processes to fully understand how adolescents orient to and participate in gossip episodes. Knowing when it was acceptable to speak and what types of acts were acceptable was not enough to allow full participation in gossip episodes. Students also needed to know how to interpret indirect evaluations and make sense of acts that depended on later acts for their meaning. Sometimes, it was the later comments of other group members that brought out the evaluative meaning implied by someone else’s comment. The meaning of the evaluation was often negotiated within the interaction.

Example 3 illustrates the need for additional interpretative work on the part of both the participants and the researchers in order to better understand participation in gossip episodes. This episode took place in a group of eighth-grade girls who sat together during lunch for the entire year. Bill, a cousin of one of the group members rarely sat with this group during lunch, but he had contact with some group members outside of school. The gossip begins with Natalie’s negative evaluation of Amanda’s appearance in shorts. She draws the group’s attention to where Amanda is standing in the cafeteria. The other group members immediately support Natalie’s negative evaluation.

Example 3: Eighth-Grade Students

| 1 | Natalie: Oh my God!! Amanda Perkins is in shorts!! # # |
|   | ( ) me out! Yuch! ((shril voice)) and they’re tight as hell on her! |
| 2 | (?): Where? |
| 3 | Natalie: ((in a shrill voice)) Over there by the catsup stand!! |
| 4 | Peg: Jesus Christ! |
| 5 | Natalie: Oh # my God. |
| 6 | Peg: Ugh — that’s gross! # That is real gross. # You don’t have to look for it. |
| 7 | Bill: I wouldn’t want to. |
| 8 | Peg: She stands out like a sore thumb. |

The first speaking turn by Natalie illustrates an interpretation problem for both researchers and group members. Natalie makes a statement with exaggerated affect before she identifies or evaluates the target. Group members and researchers are able to “make sense” of this affect only after the identification and evaluation that follow it (Schegloff 1968; Cicourel 1974; Mehan 1979). The identification and evaluation are necessary prerequisites to full understanding of exaggerated affect, even though the exaggerated affect is
expressed first. The exaggerated affect aids in interpreting the evaluation as being extremely negative.

It is also clear that Bill's participation in this gossip requires additional shared background knowledge beyond shared knowledge of the basic structure. Peg expands on the negative evaluation by providing further evidence of why Amanda's choice of clothing is inappropriate when she states, "You don't have to look for it." Although she never specifies what "it" refers to, Bill's comment "I wouldn't want to," suggests that he shares enough background knowledge to understand Peg's comment—that it is inappropriate to wear shorts that are so tight that the buttocks are revealed, especially when you are overweight.

In this case, as in many episodes of gossip, participation in gossip draws on and further develops the shared knowledge of group members. Shared knowledge was needed to interpret ambiguous comments well enough to expand on them. At the same time, the group was developing or reinforcing additional knowledge by expressing a collective view of the inappropriateness of wearing tight clothes or standing out in general if one is already highly visible due to being overweight. The importance of shared knowledge and interpretative work is even more apparent in Example 4. Here the initiator identifies a target but offers only an implicit evaluation in the course of a narrative about an event that took place in choir. This implicit evaluation is interpreted by other group members as being a negative evaluation which they then expand upon; the episode clearly becomes gossip. However, without this interpretative work and the collaboration of group members, the episode might have remained a simple narrative.

Example 4: Eighth-Grade Girls

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Penny: In choir that girl was sitting in front of us and we kept going &quot;Moo.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Karen: We were going, &quot;Come here cow. Come here cow.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Penny: And that girl kept going.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bonnie: I know. She is one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Penny: She looks like a big // fat cow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Julie: Who is that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bonnie: That girl on the basketball team. //</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Penny: That big red-headed cow. //</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bonnie: From Clintonville.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Julie: Oh yeah. I know. She is a cow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Penny begins by describing a joint action these girls engaged in during choir. In her description, the target is identified as "that girl was sitting in front of us." There is an implicit evaluation in the joint action of saying "Moo" to this girl. Karen, who also participated in this event, expands the negative evaluation by adding that they also said, "Come here cow." Bonnie then makes the negative evaluation of this girl even more explicit by moving out of the narrative frame and stating, "She is one." Thus, even though the initial evaluation of the target was implicit, the girls in this group interpreted it as a negative evaluation and brought out this meaning by expanding on the evaluation.

This example illustrates the existence of shared knowledge at a number of levels. These girls first of all shared knowledge of the basic structure of gossip and knew that evaluations can be developed in a collaborative manner. They also knew how to infer negative meaning in certain terms like "moo" and "cow." Ethnographic data indicate that these girls were quite negative about girls who were even somewhat overweight and considered girls who were already developing breasts to have "developed before their age time." They used the term "cow" to refer to females who were somewhat overweight and had particularly large breasts; "cow" had a shared negative meaning within this group.

One of the group members, Julie, appears to be less familiar with the target and finally requests clarification concerning her identity. As we saw in other examples, any group member can respond to these requests, and here both Bonnie and Penny respond. Julie, then concludes the episode by agreeing, "Oh yeah. I know. She is a cow." It is interesting to note that even though Julie was unclear just moments before as to who they were discussing, she now adds her negative evaluation to the collective negative expression. This illustrates an important aspect of the highly collaborative nature of gossip. Since the structure of gossip includes mainly acts that support the initial evaluation, it is much easier to continue to develop the expressed viewpoint of a group than it is to challenge it.

Structural Constraints on Gossip Participation

While the basic structure of gossip allows other group members many opportunities to participate in a gossip episode, this participation had definite constraints. Examples 1 through 4 showed different ways that the initial evaluation could be supported by group members throughout a gossip episode. It was also possible for group mem-
bers to challenge the initial evaluation. However, we found that challenges were infrequent and occurred only in the speaking turn immediately following the initial evaluation. In other words, once a response from another group member supported the initial evaluation, other group members made only supportive comments.

Challenges occurred in three of the groups we observed — once in two of the groups and twice in the third group. Challenges stemmed in some cases from misinterpretation of indirect comments. Unlike Example 4, where group members drew on shared background knowledge to interpret indirect evaluations, group members sometimes interpreted indirect remarks incorrectly and inferred negative evaluations that were unintended. In Example 5, a gossip episode occurred during another discussion of baseball players by the group of seventh-grade boys from Example 2. Barry begins the episode by offering a negative evaluation of a team. In the course of identifying this team he describes the pitcher of the team as “little.” One of the group members then makes an explicit negative evaluation of the pitcher and Barry immediately challenges the evaluation.

Example 5: Seventh-Grade Boys

1 Barry: I hate a team we played, um, uh last, whenever all three of us played? Um, with that little short pitcher ((measures short pitcher’s height to be about 2 1/2 - 3 feet))

2 Perry: Oh.

3 Barry: Remember him, Ted Henderson.

4 Perry: Yeah.

5 Johnny: I hate him.

6 Barry: ((drumming table with his fingers)) He’s alright. (Johnny moves away from Barry slightly)) but man, he pitched weird.

7 Perry: Yeah, he did.

8 Barry: He’s so short an’ then //

9 Kevin: He’d have to throw UP. ((gestures))

10 Barry: You think it’d be low and it would curve, it’d go ((mimes motion of curving ball)) WHOOOM.

11 Perry: ( )

12 Barry: Yeah, he was a good pitcher //

13 Perry: ((nodding his head)) Yeah, he sure was.

14 Barry: For a little kid like that.

15 Johnny: ((under his breath)) Yeah.

16 Perry: Yeah.

Rather than viewing Barry’s description of the pitcher as an attempt to identify a particular team, Johnny appears to interpret it as an indirect negative evaluation of the pitcher. Johnny makes the negative evaluation explicit in speaking turn 5. Barry, however, does not share this negative evaluation and challenges it: “He’s alright, but man, he pitched weird.” He makes this remark before anyone else in the group offers support for the negative evaluation. Thus, Barry is only expressing disagreement with one individual (Johnny), not with a jointly established viewpoint.

Note that Barry’s challenge includes a negative as well as a positive evaluation of the pitcher, i.e., saying that he pitched weird. In her work on assessments, Pomerantz (1984) found that disagreements with assessments of others were rare, and when they occurred they often included a statement of agreement along with the disagreement. Murray (1985) argued that this might be a way for speakers to give the expected response and at the same time state an opposing view. By including a negative evaluation of his pitching, Barry provides the expected supportive response along with his challenge to the evaluation of the pitcher’s character.

Once Barry makes this new evaluation, other group members support it by making supportive statement and expanding the description of the "short" pitcher’s unusual style. Barry later offers a positive evaluation of his pitching which Perry and even Johnny support. Thus, although this episode starts out with an initial challenge, it is similar to the previous examples — most of the participation by other members is in the form of supportive remarks. However, instead of collectively developing an expressed negative evaluation of the target, the boys in this episode move collectively toward a positive evaluation.

Challenges also occurred in the gossip episodes we observed when the evaluation was based on a term which the group defined differently. This lack of shared background knowledge increased the likelihood that a challenge would follow an initial evaluation.

In Example 6 Clara, the target of the gossip episode, is seated at another table. She is an attractive group member who has a reputation within the group for flirting, particularly with boys that the other group members like. Natalie begins a discussion of Clara by noting that she is now wearing nicer clothes to school. She then goes on to complain that Clara is a flirt. Rather than supporting this evaluation of Clara, Ellen challenges it by asserting that Natalie herself is a flirt.
Example 6: Eighth-Grade Girls

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Natalie: See — look at Clara — how she’s changed! (Clara and another girl are at another table with boys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Researcher: How she’s, how she’s what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Natalie: How she’s changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Researcher: How do you think she’s changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Natalie: Look at her! How she’s dressed!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Researcher: (she )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Natalie: In the blue slacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Researcher: Um hum. # She’s dressed up. // ( )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Natalie: She dresses like that every day. ((In comparison to previously wearing old jeans))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ellen: Her mother ( )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Natalie: She’s a flirt like ( ), man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ellen: Reminds me of somebody I used to know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Natalie: Not me! I don’t flirt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ellen: You and her are the people that used to be the biggest flirts I knew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Natalie: What!?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hannah: She’s still the biggest flirt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Natalie: I / flirt every once in a while, but —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Peg: God damn it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Natalie: From now on ( )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Researcher: What’s happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Peg: (I don’t know) but I look over there and she’s ( ) # God damn! (Clara is flirting with Peggy’s boyfriend)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Researcher: That’s who you like? (some more negative talk about Clara, but hard to understand)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 6 also shows that gossip and accusation-denial exchanges can occur simultaneously. Note that Ellen’s challenge came prior to any other group member’s supportive statement, and immediately after Natalie’s initial evaluation. Natalie did not have the chance to offer an explanation of her evaluation or to clarify what she meant by the term “flirt.” Thus, the challenge preceded any supportive response or explanation. Although Peg’s comment in speaking turn 21 gave some support to Natalie’s evaluation (she points out that Clara is flirting with the boy she likes at that very moment), none of the other group members pick up on this.

It appears that these girls do not share the same understanding of what it means to be a flirt. Some of the girls in the school use the term flirt to refer to someone who expressed romantic interest in a boy that another group member likes. This is how Natalie appears to use the term when she accuses Clara of flirting. Other girls use the term to refer to someone who expresses romantic interest in numerous males in a relatively non-discriminating manner. Both Ellen and Hannah use the term this way when they accuse Natalie of having been or of currently being a flirt. It is also likely to be the way Natalie herself is using it when she admits to flirting “every once in a while” (speaking turn 17).

Unlike the previous examples, the episode in Example 6 does not end in a collectively expressed evaluation of the target. Whereas the challenge in the Example 5 is followed by supportive comments from other members, this challenge is followed by a counter challenge. This leads the talk even further away from the supportive mode of most gossip episodes and instead sets up a framework for continued controversy on the topic of flirting.

In our next and final example, an initial evaluation is again followed immediately by a challenge. The challenge arises from the lack of a shared definition of the term “snob.” This time the response to the challenge is more complicated and involves both support and disagreement. However, the timing of the challenge in this episode allows the girls to view this as an exchange of opinions, freeing them from the constraint to provide support that we observed in most gossip episodes.

The episode in Example 7 took place among three sixth-grade girls who sat together occasionally, but who were not particularly close friends. Prior to this episode they were discussing the fact that a classmate was now sitting with a group

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5 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.
of boys instead of sitting with Jane May. This reference to Jane May leads Laura to evaluate her negatively, claiming that she is a snob. Instead of agreeing with her, Natalie immediately challenges her use of that label.

Example 7: Sixth-Grade Girls

1 Andrea: I (don't) I just can't believe it. I mean usually she's sittin' with Jane May and those guys you know.

2 Researcher: Where's Jane May? ((They point to her.))

3 Laura: ( ) she's a snob.

4 Natalie: (I don't think she's a snob.)

5 Andrea: Huh?

6 Natalie: I don't think she's a snob.

7 Andrea: I don't think she's a snob either. It's just I don't like her. ((Laughs.))

8 Laura: ( ) I don't care if other people like her # I just # it's my opinion.

9 Andrea: The thing that uhm # the thing that people are jealous of her # girl # other girls are jealous of her. They say you know like uh # they don't like her because uh uhm # because she's pretty and all the boys like her (and they think that she's) stuck stuck up. # She's really not. She's really very nice.

As in Examples 5 and 6, Natalie's challenge comes immediately after the evaluation and before Laura offers any explanation for her evaluation. This is clearly the easiest point to challenge an evaluation. Andrea then supports the challenge, saying "I don't think she's a snob either," but she goes on to support the initial negative evaluation by adding, "It's just I don't like her."

Since both statements receive some support, the episode moves into a framework for the exchange of individual opinions rather than for establishing a single group evaluation. In fact, Laura explicitly says that this is just her opinion and acknowledges that other girls might like this classmate. Andrea also explains her view, saying that she thinks the reason this girl is not liked and considered stuck up is because she is pretty and liked by the boys. Andrea herself doesn't consider her stuck up because she is "really very nice," implying that someone who is a "snob" would not be so friendly.

Like Example 6, this gossip episode does not lead to a shared expressed view of the target. Instead, it is explicitly acknowledged that individuals might differ in their opinions about the same person. Again, the fact that the challenge occurred immediately (only challenging the view of one individual) made it possible for group members to express different viewpoints. Had someone offered support prior to the challenge, these girls might have been constrained to continue support rather than to begin an exchange of individual viewpoints.

Examples 5 through 7 show that once a challenge occurs in a gossip episode, different forms of talk can follow, from establishing a new expressed viewpoint to setting up a framework for additional disagreement or exchange of opinions. Challenges removed the constraint to provide only supportive statements. Consistent across these three examples and all the episodes in which challenges occurred, is that challenges always immediately followed the initial evaluation. While these adolescents felt they could challenge the opinion of another group member, it appears they were reluctant to challenge the collectively expressed evaluation of a group.

This finding indicates that the first response to an evaluative statement is a powerful determinant of the direction a gossip episode takes. Once a group member supports an evaluation, other members are constrained to think they must also offer support. However, expressions of support from the other group members may not reflect their actual viewpoints; we found cases where members who were unfamiliar with the target or who expressed a conflicting view later provided support for the view their group collectively expressed.

Social Status Constraints on Gossip Participation

While additional studies of groups of adolescents are needed to examine the relationship between social status and participation in gossip, we can make some tentative observations based on our data. We identified social status through sociometric data that was available for most of the adolescents we observed and through ethnographic data on peer relations within groups. Based on these indicators we identified the following trends: 1) Gossip in the groups we observed was initiated primarily by adolescents who had either high or medium status within their peer group or within the school as a whole; 2) challenges were made only by adolescents who had a status level equal to or higher than the person they challenged; and 3) supportive responses, including first responses that were supportive, were made by adoles-
cents of all status levels, even those with the lowest status within the peer group.

Given the structure of gossip we have uncovered, these patterns make sense. Because challenges remove constraints and disrupt the typical pattern of evaluation followed by supportive responses, it is not surprising that challenges were made only by students with relatively high social status. Conversely, students with low status were unlikely to initiate evaluations because group members with higher status could challenge them. Thus, initiation and challenges, which both have a powerful influence on a gossip episode, appear to be restricted to group members with relatively high social status.

In contrast, we found that the first supportive response, also a highly influential act, could be made by group members of any status level. This act is particularly important because it constrains further responses to be supportive. In our observations, the first supportive response was never challenged. Thus, in this case the structure of gossip itself, not social status, constrains the participants making challenge less likely and allowing all group members to participate. As a result, even low-status group members have one opportunity to strongly influence the gossip episode.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Although gossip is more flexible than other informal speech activities like ritual insulting, it has a basic structure. Knowing this structure, (an evaluation and the subsequent acts that can follow) gives group members the ability to participate in gossip episodes. At the same time, among the adolescents we observed, group members often needed other forms of shared knowledge to help them interpret indirect or ambiguous evaluations and comments. To identify these indirect or ambiguous comments we examined the interpretative processes needed to participate in these more complex episodes.

Challenges to initial evaluations did occur, often because of a lack of shared background knowledge, but they were relatively infrequent. More important, we found that among these adolescents challenges only occurred immediately after the initial evaluation. Thus, what appeared to be a very flexible structure actually had a significant constraint. This constraint stems from the fact that while adolescents appear to feel comfortable challenging the evaluation made by an individual, they seem reluctant to challenge a "group" evaluation. Once an initial evaluation was supported by another group member, it was never challenged.

Other research has found that the most frequent or preferred response to most assessments (with the exception of negative self-assessments) is some form of agreement (Pomerantz 1984). Thus, the tendency to not challenge evaluative statements about others may be part of a larger phenomenon of not challenging any type of evaluative statement. Because Pomerantz focused primarily on sequences she did not examine the effect that supportive or challenging responses had on subsequent responses. By examining subsequent responses we have shown that the responses to evaluations are more important than the evaluations themselves in determining the nature of subsequent responses.

Since the structure of gossip limits opportunities for challenges after the beginning of an episode, the end result is likely a stronger expressed agreement than may actually exist. In several cases, students expressed some form of support even though they had little familiarity with the target or appeared to express a different viewpoint previously. Since most gossip episodes began with a negative evaluation, the pattern of support contributed to the expression of more negative statements, even if they did not match the individual's own feelings. The structure of gossip helps to explain the overwhelmingly negative tone of most gossip episodes.

Several studies have found that gossip strengthens group bonds (Gluckman 1963; Haviland 1977; Gilmore 1978; Almirol 1981). Given the tendency among adolescents toward expressing shared viewpoints found in this study, it is not surprising that participation in gossip would have this effect. Gottman and Metteal (1986) have pointed out that the "us versus them" orientation of gossip also contributes to the strengthening of bonds. While strengthening peer bonds is very important to adolescents, it is unfortunate that gossip also promotes agreement that individual differences are negative.

Gottman and Metteal (1986) have reported that this tendency toward both negative evaluations and consensus decreases with age. When comparing 8 to 12-year-old children with children who were 13 to 17 they found that the older group tended to have more episodes where both positive and negative evaluations were made of the same target. Although the seventh and eighth graders in this study would fall into the older age group, they did not differ from the sixth graders in either the degree of consensus or level of nega-
tivity in their evaluations. The existence of a challenge had more to do with where it occurred in the episode and the lack of shared background knowledge than with the age of the students. Gottman and Mettel studied gossip in dyads only; our study did not include older adolescents or adults. Future studies of naturally-occurring gossip among groups of older adolescents and adults could determine the relative impact of age, group structure, and shared knowledge on the degree of expressed support and on gossip structure itself.

The main topics of gossip among the adolescent females in our study were the appearance of other students and the "conceited" behavior of particular girls, while the main topic of gossip among the males was athletic performance. The social and structural constraints of gossip and the difficulty of challenging the initial evaluation of the target make it a particularly powerful way to reinforce traditional gender concerns. Gossip was also used to help develop norms related to adolescent culture. For example, the criteria for being considered a "snob" or "flirt" were still in the process of being negotiated.

Our findings contribute to a general understanding of how meaning is constructed through social interaction. We found that often the responses of group members made the evaluative aspect of an initial comment more explicit helping to define the episode as gossip rather than as a narrative or non-evaluative talk. This supports the findings of conversation analysts who have shown that in conversations the responses of others help to bring out potential meanings of earlier utterances and are necessary to fully establish the meaning of an interaction (Goodwin 1980; 1982; Kochman 1983; Maynard 1985; Goodwin 1987). For example, in his study of conflict episodes among young children, Maynard (1985) found that their responses often brought out the conflictual nature of earlier utterances.

Our findings also support the social constructivist perspective, and in particular the work of Latour (1987). While Latour has focused primarily on the construction of scientific facts, we also found that the initial response to an evaluative statement had a strong influence on subsequent responses. In fact, in our data, a single supportive statement by another group member was enough to constrain members from making challenges, showing that in certain types of social interaction the immediate response is extremely critical. This finding highlights the importance, at least in adolescence, of challenging initial evaluations quickly if one has a counter view. A challenge later to a shared view may threaten the solidarity of the group. It also suggests the importance of not providing too much turn-taking structure for formal evaluative talk where similar constraints may exist. For example, when evaluating workers during review meetings it would be important to not use turn-taking techniques which limit opportunities to participate such as "going around the room" in which people can speak only after the person seated next to them has spoken. Such techniques would limit the opportunity for persons who disagree with the initial evaluation to express their view early in the interaction.

Future research should focus on the power of responses in social interaction. Until recently, power and status has been associated primarily with acts of initiation such as interruptions, topic initiations, and the amount of time spent talking (Ridgeway 1983; Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989). Our findings along with the work of Latour (1987) suggest that we need to focus more on the power of the responses themselves since they often play a critical role in establishing the direction an interaction or social construction takes. Also, our tentative findings regarding the relationship between social status of adolescents and their participation in gossip suggest that some responses are available to all group members regardless of status. These responses may be a form of influence available to those who are least empowered.

In summary, we found that gossip among adolescents has a flexible structure, but also constrains participants toward the expression of negative evaluations. We also found that responses to initial evaluations played a crucial role in determining the course of a gossip episode. These findings suggest that we need to examine talk more closely to determine the critical role that responses play in shaping the course of the interaction and social constructions of all types. They also suggest that we need to broaden our notion of powerful forms of discourse beyond initiation acts to include the power inherent in responses to those acts.

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REFERENCES


