

Gossip as an effective and low-cost form of punishment

doi:10.1017/S0140525X11001233

Matthew Feinberg^a, Joey T. Cheng^b, and Robb Willer^c

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-1650; ^bDepartment of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z4, Canada; ^cDepartment of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-1980.

matthewfeinberg@berkeley.edu

<http://sites.google.com/site/matthewfeinbergpsychology/>

joeycheng@psych.ubc.ca

willer@berkeley.edu <http://willer.berkeley.edu/>

Abstract: The spreading of reputational information about group members through gossip represents a widespread, efficient, and low-cost form of punishment. Research shows that negative arousal states motivate individuals to gossip about the transgressions of group members. By sharing information in this way groups are better able to promote cooperation and maintain social control and order.

Central to Guala's target article is the claim that experimental studies of costly punishment should not be interpreted as evidence for the existence of costly punishment outside the lab, but at best as evidence for the existence of strong *motivations* to punish those who have behaved antisocially. In most field settings, however, these motivations are likely to manifest in lower or zero-cost behaviors like ridicule, ostracism, and gossip. We agree with this point and highlight the specific role played by gossip as a ubiquitous form of low-cost punishment prevalent in all known human societies. Indeed, Dunbar (2004) estimates that gossip constitutes 65% of all spoken communication.

We argue that gossip – the sharing of evaluative information about an absent third party – is a widespread and highly effective form of punishment found in field settings (Dunbar 1996/1998) that alleviates the need for costlier forms of punishment. Gossip promotes cooperation in groups in two primary ways: (1) by spreading reputational information that warns group members about a transgressor, leading them to avoid or ostracize the transgressor; and (2) by increasing reputational incentives that deter individuals from behaving antisocially (Beersma & van Kleef, in press; Feinberg et al. 2011; Willer et al. 2010).

Recent research finds that the social psychological dynamics driving gossip correspond quite well with the motives revealed by experimental research on costly punishment. In a series of studies, Feinberg et al. (2011) demonstrate that gossip is driven by the same negative affective response that underpins costly punishment. After witnessing a target behave selfishly in a social dilemma situation, observers showed heightened levels of negative affect (e.g., frustration, annoyance) and physiological arousal, both of which were reduced by passing on reputational information to the transgressor's future interaction partner. A subsequent study showed that participants would gossip even when it required investing their own earnings to do so. Akin to altruistic punishment findings, these results suggest that when individuals detect the presence of defectors in the environment, they experience a strong motivation to share reputational information with other group members, even when doing so is costly. Additional research has found gossip deters antisocial behavior; when given the opportunity to behave selfishly in a social dilemma, individuals behaved more prosocially if they knew an observer was likely to gossip about them (Beersma & van Kleef, in press; see also Dunbar 1996/1998; 2004; Piazza & Bering 2008a; Sommerfeld et al. 2007).

Whereas Guala emphasizes that the anthropological evidence fails to show robust patterns of costly punishment in the field, there is substantial cross-cultural evidence for the prevalence of gossip outside the lab. Evidence that gossip serves as a mechanism for maintaining cooperation has been demonstrated in small societies in Mexico, Polynesia, and Fiji, to name a few

(Arno 1980; Besnier 1989; Haviland 1977). It is sensible that gossip would be so widely used in small egalitarian societies because of its efficiency, effectively promoting cooperation at minimal cost. The small size of these societies means that all members know one another, ensuring that information can potentially spread to all group members and recipients of gossip know and potentially interact with the target. Additionally, in small societies, the spread of negative reputational information has a significantly greater impact on transgressors, with each individual person hearing of one's negative reputation representing a larger proportion of the group aware of the transgression. Moreover, gossip's low cost alleviates potential second-order free-rider problems that more costly punishment behaviors typically face.

Because of its effectiveness and low cost, we should expect gossip to be a more common response to the observation of anti-social behavior than more costly forms of punishment. This notion is consistent with evidence suggesting that costly punishment may become limited in environments where indirect reciprocity or reputational information offers a cheaper means of social control (Rockenbach & Milinski 2006). That said, the fact that gossip is a more efficient tool of punishment in most settings does not rule out the possibility of more costly punishment in situations where gossip is impractical or ineffective.

Guala views gossip as a costless form of punishment, and we agree that its low-cost nature is likely critical to its prevalence. But the costs and benefits of gossip remain unclear and deserve future study. Gossip entails risks of retaliation and reputation loss. At the same time, it is also possible that gossip could offer benefits to the gossiper (Willer 2009; Willer et al. 2010). Passing on reputational information may lead to a variety of possible benefits: (1) deterring antisocial behavior directed towards the gossiper by communicating that he or she will readily spread information about antisocial behavior; (2) improving status by advertising the extensiveness of the gossiper's connections in the group's social network (Cheng et al. 2007); and (3) advertising the gossiper's prosociality, thereby making him or her an attractive, trustworthy partner. Future research is needed to better understand the magnitude of costs and benefits associated with gossip and how these might vary across different contexts.

Blood, sex, personality, power, and altruism: Factors influencing the validity of strong reciprocity

doi:10.1017/S0140525X11001245

Eamonn Ferguson^a and Philip Corr^b

^aPersonality and Social Psychology Group, School of Psychology, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, United Kingdom; ^bSchool of Social Work and Psychology, and Centre for Behavioural and Experimental Social Science (CBESS); University of East Anglia., Norwich NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom

eamonn.ferguson@nottingham.ac.uk

<http://www.psychology.nottingham.ac.uk/staff/ef/home.html>

P.Corr@uea.ac.uk

<http://www.ueapsychology.net/differential-psychology-pg14.html>

Abstract: It is argued that the generality of strong reciprocity theory (SRT) is limited by the existence of anonymous spontaneous cooperation, maintained in the absence of punishment, despite free-riding. We highlight how individual differences, status, sex, and the legitimacy of non-cooperation need to be examined to increase the internal and ecological validity of SRT experiments and, ultimately, SRT's external validity.

In his critique of strong reciprocity theory (SRT), Guala highlights some concerns with its external validity, but contends that its internal validity is less problematic. We endorse the concerns about external validity, but raise additional concerns with respect to internal validity. We suggest ways to improve the