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## Gossip in same-gender and cross-gender friends' conversations

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### Abstract

Gossip initiations and listener responses were examined in conversations between 25 female–female, 19 male–male and 24 female–male pairs of friends. Participants were 18 to 21 years of age (mean age = 19) and had known one another at least 2 months (mean length = 24 months). Transcribed tape recordings of 5-minute unstructured conversations were analyzed for gossip initiations (evaluative comments about a familiar third person) and gossip responses (discouraging, neutral, mildly encouraging, moderately encouraging, highly encouraging). Overall, encouraging responses were more likely than discouraging or neutral responses. Group differences were also observed. Negative gossip was more likely to occur between female pairs than between male pairs or cross-gender pairs. Also, among female pairs only, negative gossip was more likely than positive gossip. Furthermore, the female pairs tended to respond to evaluative gossip with highly encouraging comments. There were no gender differences within the cross-gender pairs associated with any behaviors. The findings suggest that women may be more likely than men to use and encourage gossip in same-gender friendships in order to establish solidarity and make social comparisons.

Gossip is typically defined as social evaluations about a person who is not present (Eder & Enke, 1991). This form of communication can promote solidarity and intimacy in a relationship through the creation of a “we-against-them” climate (Eckert, 1990; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Rysman, 1977; Suls, 1977; Tannen, 1990). Additionally, evaluative comments implicitly or explicitly establish norms for appropriate behavior (Eckert, 1990; Eder & Enke, 1991; Fine, 1977; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Suls, 1977; Tannen, 1990). Eckert (1990) argued that these functions are especially important in women's friendships due to their traditional

reliance on close relationships to establish a sense of self-worth and power. Consistent with her proposal, popular stereotypes assume that women gossip more than men (Rysman, 1977). Yet, to date, Levin and Arluke (1985) is the only published empirical study that specifically tested for gender differences in gossip behavior. Their analyses of gossip collected from observations in an undergraduate student lounge revealed *no* significant gender differences in either positive or negative gossip. Thus, despite widespread assumptions to the contrary, there is no clear empirical basis for the claim that women gossip more than men. Given the discrepancy between the findings from this study and the popular beliefs regarding gender differences in gossip among both the general public and some social scientists, further research is warranted. The present study sought to investigate the relationship between gender and gossip through an analysis of friends' conversation.

Although Levin and Arluke's investigation is the sole study to compare women's

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and men's likelihood of making evaluative comments about another person, several studies have tested for gender differences in discussions about other people in general. The findings consistently indicate that talk about other people is more common in conversations between women than between men (see Bischooping, 1993, for a review). This difference is consistent with the relational orientation traditionally emphasized more in women's than in men's friendships (Aries, 1987; Eagly, 1987; Leaper, 1994). As previously noted, women's greater relational orientation and concern for social comparison are the bases for hypothesizing that women gossip more than men. In particular, Eckert (1990) proposed that a gender difference in the importance of social comparison in close relationships is based on traditional differences in women's and men's access to power:

Whereas a man's personal worth is based on accumulation of goods, status, and power in the marketplace, a woman's worth is based on her ability to maintain order in, and control over, her domestic realm . . . . Whereas men compete for status in the marketplace, women must compete for their domestic status . . . . The marketplace establishes the value of men's [status], but women's [status] must be evaluated in relation to community norms for women's behavior. The establishment and maintenance of these norms require regular monitoring, and, because it is women who must compete in relation to these norms, it is they who have the greatest interest in this monitoring. To the extent that they can control norms, women can increase their competitive edge. (pp. 93-94)

Thus, Eckert proposed that women make competitive social comparisons with one another through gossip, to establish norms for behavior that reflect well on their self-worth. Her model provides part of the conceptual background for the present study's investigation into young adult friends' use of gossip.

Although Eckert's interpretation provides a rationale for predicting that gossip

would be more likely between female friends than between male friends, Levin and Arluke's (1985) study did not indicate any gender difference in evaluative references about others. However, some characteristics of Levin and Arluke's study may account for their null results. The first factor worth considering is the operational definition of gossip that they employed. As with any construct, how one defines gossip is apt to shape the kinds of results one finds. Levin and Arluke defined gossip very broadly as a "conversation about any third person, whether present or absent from the group" (p. 282). Included in this definition were references to personal relationships as well as to public figures. Although they found that men's talk centered more on discussions of public figures, while women's talk focused more on personal relationships, they did not distinguish between these two topics when comparing women's and men's use of positive and negative gossip. Therefore, their analyses did not specifically test for gender differences in evaluative comments about personal versus impersonal relationships. This distinction was made in the analyses reported here.

Another methodological consideration is whether or not gossip behavior is studied as an interactional process between two speakers. Levin and Arluke (1985) examined the overall extent to which certain forms of gossip are used. In contrast, some recent qualitative conversational analyses have highlighted the potential benefit of also analyzing people's responses to gossip (Eckert, 1990; Eder & Enke, 1991). For example, Eder and Enke (1991) interpreted 16 gossip episodes from adolescents' conversations with peers. Their analyses suggested that the way people respond to one another's evaluations can reveal potentially important aspects of a relationship. For instance, they interpreted challenges to negative evaluation as reflecting the participants' relative status and power to one another. Thus, another aim of our research was to examine the degree to which friends

provide encouraging or discouraging responses to one another's gossip.

In addition to considering how one measures gossip, it is also important to note whom one is observing. As recent research on sex-typing and gender roles has underscored (Deaux & Major, 1987; Eagly, 1987; Huston, 1985; Leaper, 1994), observing gender differences in behavior often depends on the nature of the social context. One especially influential aspect of the interactive context is the relationship between the interactants. In this regard, friends and acquaintances have been found to differ on various measures of conversational behavior (Planalp, 1993). Significantly, Levin and Arluke (1985) did not determine the degree of familiarity between the subjects in their study. Evaluative comments about another person are more likely to occur between friends rather than between strangers or casual acquaintances. With friends, there is less risk of appearing too critical or petty by, say, offering negative evaluations. If, indeed, gossip serves such relational functions as fostering solidarity and establishing social norms, then it would be more likely to occur between friends than between strangers. Accordingly, the present study specifically examined conversations between actual friends.

The gender composition of the interactants has also been found to influence the quality of social interactions. Levin and Arluke (1985) did not report any comparisons of same-gender and cross-gender gossip behavior. This is a relevant consideration because some gender differences in social behavior appear to be more likely with same-gender friends, whereas other differences occur more often with cross-gender friends (Carli, 1990; Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, in press; Winstead, 1986). In this regard, Carli's (1990) research called attention to whether differences in men's and women's social behavior reflect underlying gender differences in social norms and values, or whether they reflect underlying asymmetries in power and status. Her research suggested that norm-

based gender differences in social behavior (e.g., greater relational orientation in women's friendships) are more likely in same-gender than in cross-gender interactions. For example, she found that women used more expressive language than men—but only when same-gender interactions were compared. By extension, we predicted that gender differences in the use and encouragement of gossip would be more apparent when pairs of female friends were compared to pairs of male friends.

In contrast, Carli's research indicated that status-based gender differences in social behavior are more likely in cross-gender interactions due to men's traditionally higher status. For example, she found that men use more assertive language than women in cross-gender interactions, but not in same-gender interactions. To extend Carli's model to the study of gossip, a challenging response to someone's gossip (especially a negative evaluation) is a highly assertive act, given the normal obligation to provide a supportive response (Eder & Enke, 1991). Therefore, we expected that if there were any gender differences in discouraging responses to evaluative gossip—especially negative gossip—it would be more likely for men in cross-gender interactions. However, it should be noted that previous studies emphasizing the impact of gender-as-status in cross-gender social interactions have based their analyses on either unacquainted partners (e.g., Carli, 1990) or groups of peers (e.g., Eder & Enke, 1991). There has been little consideration of how men and women interact with one another as friends (O'Meara, 1989). It is possible that the power dynamics are less salient between women and men when they are friends (McWilliams & Howard, 1993).

In summary, the present study sought to extend previous investigations of gender differences in friends' gossip. To this end, we examined the structure of gossip initiations and listener responses between same-gender and cross-gender friends. Using verbatim transcriptions of unstructured 5-minute conversations, we tested three hypotheses.

First, we hypothesized that there would be more gossip among female than among male friends. In contrast, we did not expect gender differences within the cross-gender pairs. Second, we hypothesized that female friends would provide more encouraging responses to one another's gossip than male friends. Again, gender differences were not predicted within the cross-gender pairs. Finally, we predicted that men would make more discouraging responses than women within the cross-gender pairs, whereas no gender differences were expected between men and women within same-gender pairs.

## Method

### Sample

Participating in the study were 69 pairs of young adult friends between the ages of 18 and 21 years ( $M = 19.40$  years,  $SD = 1.02$ ). There were 25 female–female pairs, 24 female–male pairs, and 20 male–male pairs. However, one of the male–male pairs was excluded from the study after it was learned that the two were cousins. Thus, the analyses reported here are based on a sample of 68 pairs of friends.

Students were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a California university. Participants received either course credit or were entered in a raffle drawing for a personal stereo. Three criteria were specified for participation in the study. First, participants had to be between 18 and 21 years old. Second, participants needed to bring a friend whom they had known for at least 2 months. Third, the friends were not supposed to have any romantic interest in one another. The mean lengths of friendship were 31.52 months ( $SD = 39.38$ ) for the female friends, 21.63 months ( $SD = 21.72$ ) for the male friends, and 18.29 months ( $SD = 17.00$ ) for the cross-gender friends. Although the mean length of friendship for the female pairs was higher than for the others, the three groups did not significantly differ,  $F(2, 65) = 1.48$ , n.s.

### Procedure

Each pair was seated in a university research office. There were four conversation sessions that followed. For each one, the two friends were left in the room by themselves for 5 minutes while their conversations were audio-recorded. During the first 5-minute period, they were asked to talk about whatever they wanted. This is the session that was used in the present study. In subsequent sessions, the participants were given specific topics to discuss for the purposes of other investigations (e.g., Leaper et al., in press).

### Measures

Audio-taped recordings of the conversations were transcribed using the standard conventions employed in conversational analysis (see West & Zimmerman, 1985). Included were descriptions of paraverbal information (e.g., interruptions, voice tone, silences, etc.). Transcripts were subsequently coded for the incidence of gossip and listener responses.

Intercoder reliability was tested between two researchers using 12 transcripts (four of each friendship type). High levels of reliability were obtained using Cohen's kappa coefficients, which adjust for chance levels of agreement. The kappa values and definitions for each code are presented below.

### Gossip initiations

A gossip initiation was defined as any topic of discussion about a third person whom the speaker appeared to know personally. (There were virtually no references to public figures in the conversations.) Specific types of gossip were coded as follows: *Positive gossip* ( $\kappa = .84$ ) refers to compliments or other positive statements about a third person (e.g., "That was very nice of your grandmother to send those earrings"). *Negative gossip* ( $\kappa = .81$ ) includes criticisms about a third person (e.g., "Ryan is so self-centered").

### Listener responses

Five types of responses were coded. *Discouraging responses* ( $\kappa=1.0$ ) are reactions that disrupt the partner's gossip. Two forms of discouraging responses were initially identified. One form occurs when the listener expresses disinterest in the topic (e.g., "I don't want to talk about him right now"). The other occurs when the listener changes the topic (e.g., Initiation: "Brian met Shannon yesterday." Response: "I went to a party on Friday"). However, both types of responses were low in occurrence; therefore, they were subsequently combined to create a single discouraging response category. *Neutral responses* ( $\kappa=1.0$ ) occur when the listener neither explicitly encourages nor explicitly discourages the gossip (e.g., silence following a gossip initiation). *Mildly encouraging responses* ( $\kappa=.95$ ) involve a simple encouragement for the other person to continue through either a brief acknowledgment (e.g., "Yeah"), a clarification question (e.g., "Really?"), or a laugh. *Moderately encouraging responses* ( $\kappa=.95$ ) actively encourage continuation of the gossip. They include reflective questions and statements (e.g., Initiation: "Daryl said that he and Veronica split up." Response: "That must be really painful for both of them. What else did he say?"). *Highly encouraging responses* ( $\kappa=.98$ ) elaborate on the friend's gossip. This typically occurs through further disclosure (e.g., Initiation: "Carrie is a great dancer." Response: "Yeah, she's fantastic. Her boyfriend is a dancer too but he's not as good as she is").

When an instance of gossip was followed with another instance of gossip (as illustrated in the example for the highly encouraging response), the reciprocated gossip was double-coded as both a gossip initiation and a listener response.

### Results

Because of the unequal cell sizes for the three friendship groups, we used the SAS

General Linear Models (GLM) statistical procedure for unbalanced designs (SAS Institute, 1990). This conservative procedure uses adjusted least-squares means in its computations. Any reported comparison tests were based on this type of analysis.

### Preliminary analyses

To control for possible differences in how well the different friends knew each other, preliminary analyses were carried out using the length of friendship as a factor. This variable was created using a median-split technique, whereby the sample was divided into two groups based on the median length of friendship (12 months). (The three friendship groups did not differ significantly.) The length of friendship factor did not appear in any significant main effects or interactions. Therefore, the analyses were repeated without this factor to increase the power of the other predictors.

Additionally, the different groups were compared to test for possible differences in the amount of talkativeness (total utterances) or in the amount of nonevaluative references to other people. There were no significant group differences in total utterances,  $F(2, 65) = 1.07$ , n.s. ( $M = 86.44$ ,  $SD = 19.84$ , for female pairs;  $M = 90.47$ ,  $SD = 29.86$ , for male pairs;  $M = 80.67$ ,  $SD = 16.86$ , for cross-gender pairs). Also, there were no significant group differences in the number of neutral references to other,  $F(2, 65) = 1.38$ , n.s. ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 4.91$ , for female pairs;  $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 3.04$ , for male pairs;  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ , for cross-gender pairs).

### Gossip initiations and listener responses

The three friendship groups were compared in their use of gossip initiations and listener responses in a mixed design  $3$  (Friendship Group)  $\times$   $2$  (Gossip Initiation)  $\times$   $5$  (Listener Response) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Friendship group was a between-group factor. Using gossip initiation and listener response as repeated

measures, 10 initiation–response sequence frequency scores were entered into the ANOVA for each friendship group.<sup>1</sup>

Significant main effects were obtained for friendship group,  $F(2, 65) = 4.83, p < .02$ , and gossip type,  $F(1, 65) = 4.85, p < .04$ . However, a significant Friendship Group  $\times$  Gossip Initiation interaction effect indicated that the effect of each factor was moderated by the other,  $F(2, 65) = 6.39, p < .003$ . Subsequent tests indicated a significant simple main effect for friendship group with negative gossip only,  $F(2, 65) = 6.44, p < .003$ . Also, there was a significant simple main effect for gossip type for female pairs only,  $F(1, 24) = 9.58, p < .006$ . As seen in Table 1, higher rates of negative gossip occurred among female friends than either among male friends or cross-gender friends. Also, negative gossip was more common than positive gossip for female friends.

A significant main effect for response type also occurred,  $F(4, 260) = 14.60, p < .001$ . Comparison tests revealed that the three types of encouraging responses were more frequent than either the neutral or the discouraging responses (all  $ps < .001$ ).

Additionally, there was a significant Friendship Group  $\times$  Listener Response interaction,  $F(8, 260) = 2.75, p < .007$ . A simple main effect for friendship group occurred with highly encouraging responses,  $F(2, 65) = 5.67, p < .006$ . As shown in Table 1, this response type occurred significantly more often among female friends than among either male friends ( $p < .003$ ) or cross-gender friends ( $p < .02$ ). The effect did not depend on the type of gossip initiation (negative or positive).

To consider gender differences between partners in the cross-gender friendship

pairs, we carried out separate analyses using individual scores for each partner as a repeated measure. No significant differences existed between the male and the female partners on any of the measures.

## Discussion

The present study examined gossip processes during conversations among same- and cross-gender pairs of friends. Three issues regarding the possible external validity of our study are worth addressing. First, the conversations were openly recorded in a research office. It is likely that social desirability concerns influenced the participants' behavior somewhat. Nevertheless, even though they knew their conversations were being recorded, both male and female participants were still more likely to express negative than positive comments about others. In other words, self-censorship was limited.

Second, the basic criterion for participating in the study was that the pair had known each other for at least 2 months. Although most pairs had known each other for several months ( $M = 24$  months), the possibility that length of friendship was a confounding factor was considered. This concern was pertinent, given the research indicating that conversational behavior varies between interactants depending on their degree of familiarity (Planalp, 1993) and our study's specific concern with friendship relationships. However, when the length of friendship was tested as a factor, it did not appear as a significant main effect or in any interactions with friendship group. These tests lend additional support to the presumption that our observations reflect interactions between actual friends rather than between mere acquaintances.

Finally, one limitation of our study is that the analyses of the social interactions were derived from audio-taped recordings. Consequently, we were unable to code nonverbal information, such as nods and facial expressions, when listeners were responding to gossip. This area is a potentially impor-

1. Given the absence of group differences in total utterances, frequency scores were used, rather than proportion scores, when analyzing gossip initiations and listener responses. The same findings were found when proportion scores were analyzed. Therefore, only the results for the frequency scores are presented.

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations for frequency of gossip initiations and listener responses by friendship group

Gossip Behavior	Female Pairs	Male Pairs	Cross-Gender
<i>Gossip initiations</i>			
Positive gossip	1.68 <sub>a</sub> (1.52)	1.16 <sub>a</sub> (1.50)	2.17 <sub>a</sub> (2.08)
Negative gossip	4.64 <sub>a</sub> (4.91)	1.79 <sub>b</sub> (1.57)	1.37 <sub>b</sub> (2.28)
<i>Listener responses</i>			
Discouraging	0.76 <sub>a</sub> (0.97)	0.63 <sub>a</sub> (1.01)	0.41 <sub>a</sub> (0.58)
Neutral response	0.88 <sub>a</sub> (1.17)	0.42 <sub>a</sub> (0.69)	0.58 <sub>a</sub> (0.97)
Mildly encouraging	3.52 <sub>a</sub> (3.02)	2.32 <sub>a</sub> (2.33)	3.79 <sub>a</sub> (2.55)
Moderately encouraging	2.88 <sub>a</sub> (1.74)	2.00 <sub>a</sub> (2.11)	2.71 <sub>a</sub> (2.49)
Highly encouraging	4.08 <sub>a</sub> (4.24)	1.26 <sub>b</sub> (1.66)	1.88 <sub>b</sub> (2.05)

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Row means with different subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ). Additionally, the difference between positive and negative gossip for female pairs was significant ( $p < .01$ ).

tant one for future research on gender differences in friends' social interactions.

Turning to our specific findings, we found that, in general, friends provided more encouraging than discouraging or neutral responses to each other's gossip. Indeed, discouraging and neutral responses were relatively infrequent forms of response. In a similar way, Eder and Enke (1991) also found that peers generally provided supportive responses to one another's gossip. They interpreted gossip as having a collaborative structure that provides very limited opportunities for challenges. Their analyses indicated that, once the two friends engage in a gossip topic together, evaluations become jointly constructed and challenges are increasingly unlikely. This conversational process underscores the use of gossip to establish shared understandings in friendships that help define the self in relation to others (Eckert, 1990; Eder & Enke, 1991; Fine, 1977; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

There were also group differences in the extent to which particular gossip behaviors

occurred. First, we found that negative gossip was more likely between female friends than between male friends or cross-gender friends. Also, female friends were more likely to use negative than positive gossip, whereas male friends and cross-gender friends were equally likely to use negative and positive gossip. Although the observed group difference in gossip behavior confirms our hypothesis, it is discrepant with the only prior empirical test for gender differences in gossip. When Levin and Arluke (1985) looked at undergraduates' gossip in a student lounge, they did not find any gender differences in the percentages of negative or positive gossip. However, three important differences between the two studies may account for this discrepancy in findings.

First, our measures of gossip were not the same. We limited our definition of gossip to discussions about another person who appeared to be known by at least one of the friends. Levin and Arluke did not differentiate between evaluative discussions about others who were personal acquaintances and those about public figures, even though



they found that men talked more about the latter than the former. A discussion about a personal relationship may involve more emphasis on social comparison than talk about an impersonal figure. If so, combining discussions about personal and impersonal figures may blur some of the underlying differences in evaluative content.

Second, unlike the present study, Levin and Arluke's (1985) investigation did not control for the relationship between the undergraduates who were observed. The degree of familiarity between the interactants is a relevant consideration because friends and acquaintances have been found to differ on other measures of conversational style (Planalp, 1993). If negative gossip serves such relational functions as fostering solidarity and establishing social norms, then we suspect that it is more likely to occur between friends than between strangers or casual acquaintances. Also, speakers are apt to feel less concerned about appearing too critical or petty for expressing negative evaluations when with friends than with strangers.

Finally, Levin and Arluke (1985) did not report the effect of the partner's gender. As our findings indicate, this consideration was important in detecting gender differences. Only women in the same-gender pairs demonstrated more of the particular gossip behaviors. Analogously, Carli (1990) found that women were more likely than men to use expressive language forms, but only when interacting in same-gender groups.

In addition to their greater use of negative gossip, our results also indicate that the female friends were more likely than the other groups to demonstrate highly encouraging responses to one another's gossip. As Eder and Enke's (1991) analysis indicated, it is uncommon for listeners to respond negatively to gossip. Indeed, the prevailing norm in conversation is agreement (Grice, 1975; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). However, whereas the male pairs and the cross-gender pairs fulfilled their minimum requirement as cooperative listeners by providing mild-to-moderate encourage-

ment, the female friends took the process one step further by offering strong encouragement. Thus, it would appear that female friends had different "interaction agendas" (Sigman, 1983) than the other friendship groups.

The greater incidence of negative evaluations and encouraging responses to evaluative gossip among the female friends in our study may reflect an underlying gender difference in the ways women and men traditionally have obtained their sense of self-worth and power. Men traditionally have derived self-esteem and power through instrumental achievements in the world of work (Eckert, 1990; Leaper, 1994). In contrast, women traditionally have established their sense of self-worth and power through close relationships. Establishing closeness and negotiating norms for acceptable behavior become ways to evaluate one's self in relation to others (Eckert, 1990; Eder & Enke, 1991; Fine, 1977; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Suls, 1977). In this regard, Eckert (1990) interpreted women's relationships with others as a measure of status. She proposed that women compete for status through direct or indirect comparisons with others. Negative gossip may be one of the ways that women carry this out. Although positive comments can also provide useful information, negative comments may be more effective in this process due to their greater emotional salience. People are often particularly attentive to those characteristics that will bring them disfavor.

The following excerpt from the conversation between Joy and Kara (pseudonyms) illustrates some of the possible functions served by negative gossip. The friends are discussing another student from one of their classes.

- Joy: Amazingly, though, what's-her-name didn't say anything today.  
 Kara: Oh yes!  
 Joy: The brassy one.  
 Kara: The big woman [laughs]  
 Joy: [laughs]  
 Kara: Ver-, the very obnoxious woman. Yes.

In this example, Joy offers a negative evaluation of the other student ("The brassy one") to which Kara reciprocates with her own negative evaluation ("The big woman"). In commenting on this other woman's personality and appearance, Joy and Kara may be accomplishing three functions in their own relationship. First, they create a sense of solidarity by jointly criticizing "what's-her-name" together. Second, they contribute to their shared ideas regarding appropriate norms for behavior ("the very obnoxious woman"). Finally, they may be reaffirming their own feelings of self-worth by highlighting this other woman's shortcomings.

Thus far, our discussion has focused on those findings that confirm our hypotheses. There was one hypothesis, however, that was not supported. We had predicted that men would be more likely than women to make discouraging responses following gossip—particularly in the cross-gender pairs. We based this hypothesis on the proposal that discouraging responses would reflect a power-assertive move on the listener's part (Eder & Enke, 1991), and that gender differences in power would be more likely in cross-gender interactions than in same-gender interactions (Carli, 1990). Carli (1990) found that men were more likely than women to use assertive language forms during cross-gender interactions, but not during same-gender interactions. However, we did not find any gender differences in the frequency or proportion of discouraging responses to gossip either between the female pair and the male pairs or between men and women in the cross-gender pairs.

The different types of relationships in the two studies may have accounted for the different pattern of findings. As in most language and gender investigations, the interactants in Carli's study were previously unacquainted with one another. Perhaps male dominance in cross-gender interactions is less likely in friendships than in other types of relationships. For example, people who have cross-gender friends may be less sex-typed in their interests and behavioral

styles (O'Meara, 1989). What is probably more important, however, is that gender is most apt to act as a status characteristic when people know the least about one another (Wood & Karten, 1986). Because hierarchical ranking generally does not occur in relationships that are high in solidarity (such as friendships), status generalizations are less likely in cross-gender friendships (McWilliams & Howard, 1993; Monsour, Beard, Harris, & Kurzweil, 1994).

In conclusion, our study indicated that woman and men differed in their use of gossip in same-gender friendships only. To the extent that gossip serves an important social function in relationships, the results lend support to the idea that there tends to be a greater relational orientation in women's friendships than in men's friendships or in cross-gender friendships. Women in the same-gender interactions demonstrated more negative gossip and provided more encouraging responses to one another's gossip.

The research still leaves several questions unanswered about the nature and use of gossip in friendships. Did women in the same-gender and cross-gender friendships differ in their preferences for gossip (cf. Winstead, 1986)? Or were the women in the cross-gender friendships simply accommodating to the expectation or knowledge that gossip was not something their male friends liked (cf. Deaux & Major, 1987)? We also wonder how the participants' own gender attitudes influenced their behavior (cf. Leaper, 1987). For example, would men with feminist attitudes or nontraditional sex-role identities be more apt to engage in gossip than more traditional men? Analogously, would nontraditional women be less likely to gossip than more traditional women? In addition to their attitudes and beliefs, there may be other background characteristics that mediate the incidence of gender differences in friends' gossip. For example, are gender differences in gossip less likely among friends at work (cf. Fine, 1986) who have similar levels of status? These are some of the issues worth exploring in future research.

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