**Popular Science Writing: Exploring Social Psychology**

Social psychological findings are so inherently interesting and widely applicable that it’s almost impossible to look through a newspaper or magazine and not find an article on a social psychological topic! For most people, the popular press is the only place where they read about scientific research. Thus, communicating scientific research to “the masses” is an incredibly important (though not easy!) task. For this reason (and many others) this course includes a special emphasis on writing. Throughout the semester you will be guided through the process of writing a popular science article on a social psychological topic of your choosing (akin to the types of articles published on [http://in-mind.org](http://in-mind.org) or [http://psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com)). Certain lectures will include writing tutorials (indicated by “WT” on the lecture schedule), where you will receive instruction and actively practice your writing (and other relevant skills). In addition, you will submit drafts of your papers and receive helpful feedback from the writing TAs on how to improve, so that your final paper is as flawless and fascinating as possible!

**Assignment Structure:**
- **Peer Review:** Monday, November 4th (must bring draft of paper to class) (5% of final grade)
- **Complete Draft:** Due by 6:00pm on Monday, November 18th (10% of final grade)
- **Final Paper:** Due by 6:00pm on Wednesday, December 4th (30% of final grade)

**In-Class Writing Tutorials (WT):**
- **WT1:** Finding & Using Sources (September 16th)
- **WT2:** Developing a Thesis & Providing Evidence (October 7th)
- **WT3:** Peer Review (November 4th)
- **WT4:** Revising & Editing (November 25th)

**Key Learning Objectives:**
This assignment has been designed with a number of learning objectives in mind. Many (if not all) of the skills you will learn while completing this assignment will be useful to you in future endeavours – knowing how to *effectively communicate through writing* is an incredibly useful (and marketable!) skill!

*Upon completion of this assignment, you should know how to:*
- Find, read, and “use” journal articles (e.g., summarize, paraphrase)
- Integrate material from different sources to create a coherent story
- Recognize where empirical support (“evidence”) is needed and how to provide it
- Write clearly and concisely (cut unnecessary clutter!)
- Acknowledge constructive feedback and revise your writing
- Apply social psychological concepts and theories to everyday life
- Approach future writing assignments with increased confidence!

In order to successfully complete this assignment, you will need to:
- **Choose a topic** from the list below that you are interested in (okay, this may not be “necessary”, but it is certainly highly recommended!)
- **Do some research** on your topic and figure out what you want your “story” to be – what do you want to focus on?
- **Read examples** of the type of paper you are expected to write (some will be provided for you). As a general rule, the more you read, the better you write! Obviously you don’t want to be tempted to “steal” from other articles, so it may actually be best to read articles on topics that are quite different from your own.
- **Write!** And re-write, and write some more. Good writing takes time and practice.
Get feedback from others (teaching assistants, peers) and be open to constructive criticism. Also be sure to seek out help right away if you find yourself struggling or stressed. Writing your paper should be challenging, not overwhelming!

Actively participate in all of the in-class writing tutorials

Getting Started
(because “exploring” is better when you have some guidance!)

Topics List:
(Note: These topics are broad and are meant as ‘starting places’ only - it is up to you to decide the specific direction in which you want to take your paper)

1. Forming impressions of people online
2. The role of prejudice and stereotypes in politics
3. Cultural differences in advertising
4. The social psychology of being an avid sports fan
5. Gender differences in aggression
6. The relationship between money and happiness
7. The impact of long-distance on romantic relationships
8. Media effects on self-esteem
9. The role of social norms on university/campus life
10. The development of pro-social behaviour in children

Note: If you have a great idea for a paper that doesn’t fit under any of these topics, please just send me an email and I will let you know if it is acceptable.

Some reputable social psychology journals:
- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
- Journal of Experimental Social Psychology
- Social Psychological and Personality Science
- Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin
- European Journal of Social Psychology
- Journal of Applied Social Psychology

Some reputable general psychology journals (that often feature social psychological topics):
- Psychological Science
- American Psychologist
- Journal of Experimental Psychology
- Canadian Psychology
- Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology

Questions to Ask Yourself (and then potentially address in your paper):
1. Why should the reader care about this topic? Why is it interesting, important?
2. What does the social psychological literature have to say about this issue? Are there any existing controversies (e.g., findings that point to different conclusions?). Does the research seem to match up with ‘common sense’ or are there some surprising findings? (hint: have you learned anything that you wanted to tell someone else about? If so, it’s probably something worth writing about!)
3. Are there any existing holes in the literature (something you wondered about, but couldn’t find any research on?). What are the remaining questions, future directions for this area of research?
4. What can people learn from this work? How can they apply it to their own lives?
Final Paper Requirements

Your final paper must:

✓ Be double-spaced (including the references)
✓ Be typed in Times New Roman 12-point font, with standard (1") margins
✓ Include page numbers
✓ Be between 4 - 6 (double-spaced) pages in length, NOT including references
✓ Include a minimum of 4 references (research articles)
✓ Include an APA-formatted references section (as well as APA-style in-text citations)
✓ Have a title that is specific to your paper (not “Popular Science Article”)
✓ Be submitted through Blackboard (via the TurnItIn Assignment tool)

Your final paper DOES NOT need to include:

• A title page (though you may include one if you want to)
• An abstract
• A running head/page header
• Any figures or images (though again, you may include one if you want to)

Sample Paper

The following is an edited (shortened) version of a paper that I have published in In-Mind Magazine about the role of gossip in society. It serves as a nice example of popular science writing, the type of paper you will be writing in this class. For more examples, visit http://beta.in-mind.org. As you read through the article, think about how this style of writing differs from more formal (e.g., research proposal) types of writing assignments as well as how the paper addresses the questions listed above. Also pay attention to how this paper narrows in on a particular subject – it does not attempt to review everything researchers know about gossip, because such a task would be impossible in such a short space. There are many different papers that could be written about this very same subject (the role of gossip), just as there are many different papers that could be written about all of the topics that are listed above – it is up to you to determine the scope and direction of your paper.

The Dish on Gossip

Think about the last conversation you had. What did you talk about? Was the conversation focused on yourself, or your conversation partner? Did someone else come up in the conversation? It has been estimated that most of our daily conversation is social in nature (that is, about people, rather than, say, work or the weather) and that gossip makes up a large part of this social talk (Emler, 1994; Foster, 2004). What’s more, this is true not only in industrialized societies, but across cultures (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994; Dunbar, 2004). Even those who may adamantly deny ever gossiping about others would no doubt have to admit that they have listened to gossip, or been the target of gossip, at some point in their lives. Gossip is ubiquitous, yet it remains largely misunderstood by most people. The goal of this paper is to elucidate what psychologists and other researchers have learned about gossip and its role in society, while also clearing up some common misperceptions about gossip. But first, let’s take a closer look at what is meant by the term “gossip” in the first place.
Defining Gossip

If you were to ask a group of friends to write down their definitions of gossip, you would probably find that most people define gossip as something like “talking behind someone’s back” or “spreading rumors about somebody.” But how do psychologists and other researchers define the term gossip? It turns out that there is no simple answer to this seemingly simple question. The origin of the word itself is from the Old English term godsibb, meaning godparent (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Before the 19th century, gossip referred to the amity of family and friends as they gathered to welcome the birth of a child. Only later did the word adopt a more negative tone, and come to be used only in reference to women. Its current usage retains these undertones, as gossip is commonly defined as “idle chatter” or “girl talk”; in particular, talk that is malicious or derogatory toward others. In every day speech, this vague and varied usage of the term gossip is fine. However, researchers often need to define gossip in clearer terms, as it is impossible to identify or measure something without a specific working definition of what “it” is (Foster, 2004). Because different researchers approach gossip from different perspectives, their definitions of it often vary. After reviewing all of the different definitions that have been proposed for gossip, Foster (2004) declared that the most common definition may be summarized as “…the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties” (p. 83).

The Functions of Gossip

Researchers have proposed a wide variety of gossip functions, arguing that gossip serves a purpose and is not merely “idle chatter” (e.g., Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Here I will focus on the different functions gossip may serve for individuals, though it is noted that some of the functions of gossip may occur more at a collective-level (serving the purposes of the group rather than the individual). Many different functions of gossip have been proposed over the years, but they generally fall within two main categories: Mastery functions and connectedness functions.

Mastery functions

Mastery functions refer to those functions of gossip that help individuals learn about their social worlds, allowing people to understand and predict events in order to obtain rewards (Smith & Mackie, 2007). It turns out that we can learn a whole lot “through the grapevine.” Gossip provides us with information not only about specific others, but about our culture more generally, as well as information about ourselves. Gossip allows information about cheaters and free-riders (basically the “bad seeds” of society) to be shared widely, so that you know not to trust “deceitful Dave” without having to actually interact with him and learn firsthand that he should be avoided (Dunbar, 1996, 2004). Positive gossip can also be helpful, of course – for example, you may learn from a friend that a potential romantic partner shares your love of modern art, and this motivates you to ask him or her out on a date. Or you may be deciding whether to accept a job offer and learn from current employees that your potential boss is very family-oriented and flexible in terms of work hours. This type of personal information is unlikely to be found anywhere else except in the form of gossip, making gossip an extremely important form of inquiry (Ayim, 1994).

The information function of gossip is not limited to learning about specific individuals; it also teaches us about the norms and rules of our culture more generally. Imagine that you’ve accepted that new job, and in the lunchroom one day a colleague complains to you about another co-worker who “always takes bagels from the lunchroom, but never brings any in.” In this situation, not only are you learning something about this particular colleague (that he or she is selfish), but you are also learning about a norm in your workplace (that taking bagels is fine, so long as you’re

Because gossip is a vague term that people may define differently than researchers, it’s important to clarify the concept (e.g., that gossip includes talking about someone positively behind their back).

Instead of presenting a lengthy list of all the functions that have been proposed, the functions are organized into two main categories, providing a framework for the reader (making it easier for them to understand).
also willing to bring them in). We don’t have to witness the co-worker being chastised to learn how to avoid his or her fate - we can learn as much from gossip (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004).

Finally, gossip can also tell us information about ourselves, and it does this through the process of social comparison. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people have a fundamental desire to evaluate their abilities and opinions, and when objective evaluations are not possible, people will compare their abilities and opinions with similar others, in order to get a sense of where they stand. For example, if I want to get a sense of how sociable or popular I am (for which an objective measure may be hard to find), I might compare the number of Facebook friends I have with those of my peers. According to Sarah Wert and Peter Salovey, all gossip involves social comparison. Whereas direct comparisons with others can lead to awkward moments or tension (for example, you wouldn't want to ask a friend how much money she makes, or how many men she has slept with), gossip allows us to compare ourselves with others in an indirect manner, gathering information about our peers from other people, and thereby avoiding the risks involved in direct comparisons (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

**Connectedness functions**

Connectedness functions refer to those functions of gossip that help individuals obtain acceptance and liking from important individuals and groups (Smith & Mackie, 2007). Gossip helps us connect by strengthening bonds between gossip-tellers and receivers (in the case of face-to-face gossip), and also by creating a web of shared knowledge and entertainment (in the case of celebrity gossip, which may travel from one source to millions of people).

Sharing gossip can strengthen the bond between two individuals by demonstrating trust. Gossiping with someone, particularly if it involves sharing a piece of scandalous information, implies that a certain level of confidence exists between the two parties, or at least that the gossiper has confidence in the gossip recipient (e.g., Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). Not surprisingly, most gossiping occurs among friends, and gossip can even be used strategically to keep certain people on the “outside” (Foster, 2004). As noted by McDonald and colleagues (2007) in their examination of gossip among fourth-grade girls, negative gossip is shared not only to harm the target of the gossip, but to enhance the connection between the pair of friends who exchange the gossip. Thus, gossip (particularly negative gossip) both requires a certain level of trust and friendship, and also works to enhance the social bond between gossiping parties.

The role of gossip as a communicator (or creator) of culture (Baumeister, et al., 2004; Kyratzis, 2004; Lyons & Kashima, 2001), described above as serving mastery goals, can also clearly be seen as serving connectedness functions. Learning group norms does not just tell us how to behave in order to obtain desired outcomes (e.g., getting that promotion), but it helps establish ourselves as good group members, deserving of respect and acceptance by the in-group.

Finally, gossip can be a form of entertainment, as evident in the countless magazines and websites that exist purely for the purpose of sharing celebrity gossip. The fact that celebrity gossip is so widespread also means that it may provide unacquainted individuals with common ground – a way to break the ice, allowing new connections to be made. Gossiping in general—not just about celebrities—can also function as a form of entertainment, and Fine and Rosnow (1978) argue that this is likely to be one of the major functions of gossip in situations in which friendship is already established and “there are no external needs or threats” (p. 164). Others have argued that gossip shares similarities with other entertainment-focused activities that strengthen
social bonds, such as conversational humor (Morreall, 1994), and joking (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994).

Conclusion
Gossip is an undeniable part of human life, and despite its bad reputation, it serves many important functions in society. Far from empty or mindless talk, the motives and consequences of gossip can be much more complex than most people realize. And while it can, at times, be hurtful or troublesome, there are numerous positive benefits associated with (even negative) gossip. Although long-ignored by academics as a topic too frivolous for study, many researchers have begun to examine gossip more closely - and I encourage you to do the same when you encounter gossip in your own life.

References
FAQs

Q: I’m still not sure I understand what a “popular science” article is?
A: Don’t overthink it! All this term means is that the paper is appealing and comprehensible to a wide audience (unlike many scientific articles which are written for other scientists and go over the heads of most people outside of the discipline). The good news for social psychologists is that just about everything we study is appealing to a wide audience! The trick is to write in a way that is interesting, understandable, and engaging.

Q: Why are we writing a popular science article instead of a research paper or proposal?
A: Why not! You’ll have plenty of time in other courses (especially in your upper-level classes) to write research proposals and lab reports. My goal here is to provide some very basic (but extremely useful and widely applicable) writing instruction – skills that you will be able to apply to any writing assignment in the future. Social psychology is such a relatable discipline that writing in this “popular” style seems to come almost naturally – so why fight it?

Q: Can I really use “I” in my paper?
A: Yes! (and you can see that “I” is used in the sample paper above). Most popular science writing is written from the first-person perspective (using pronouns such as “I”, “we”, and “us”). But this is not absolutely necessary, and you can certainly write a great paper without ever using “I”. Whether you choose to write your paper from the first-person, second-person, or third-person point of view is ultimately up to you. Not sure what the difference is between the three styles? Check this out:

Q. What is a journal article? Where do I find them? How do I search for the particular type of article that I need?
A: A journal article is typically a primary research article that has been through the process of peer-review before being accepted for publication. Most articles (even very old ones) can be accessed online. To search for journal articles, go to the U of T Library website and click the tab for “articles”. It may take you a while to figure out which search terms are useful and which are not. Try using the “advanced search” function, especially if you happen to know the author or title of the article you are looking for. NOTE: The first in-class writing tutorial will provide additional (and much better) advice and instruction on how to conduct a literature search for your paper.

Q. Why do I need to cite journal articles? Can’t I just cite the textbook for everything?
A: You need to cite journal articles (and not the textbook) because the journal articles are the primary source of the information. Resources such as textbooks are considered secondary sources. Consider the following analogy: You hear about something really amazing from two different friends - one who was actually there when the ‘something amazing’ happened and another who heard it from the first friend. Which friend should garner more of your attention? Whose version of the story are you going to find more credible? Hopefully you get the idea. Secondhand sources can be extremely useful (and may in fact be an ideal place to start your research – for example, by flipping through your textbook), but if possible, you want to find and cite the primary source of the information or idea you are using.
Q. What is APA citation style? Where can I find more information about it?
A: APA (American Psychological Association) style is very commonly used in the social sciences (and the most widely used writing style in psychology, go figure). I don’t care so much about other aspects of the style (how to format a title page, for example), but I do want you to learn (and/or practice) using this citation style in your papers (which refers to both in-text citations and the references section at the end of the paper). A list of helpful APA resources and links can be found below as well as on Blackboard.

- Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/

Remember to use Piazza and/or come to myself or any of the teaching assistants with any questions or concerns! For general questions, Piazza is best (remember to check if your question has already been answered!). For more personalized assistance, please attend office hours or set up a one-on-one appointment with a teaching assistant.

Happy writing!