The debrief: The function of gossip in configuring pro-social relationships

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ABSTRACT

This project presents the familiar story of a new relationship via the lens of the gossip that fuelled it and investigates the function of gossip within female student friendships. It proposes 'the debrief' as a term under which to categorise different gossip-based events contrasting 'urgent', 'formal', and 'moving', debriefs. It argues that gossip functions to transmit both the content of an event and information about the gossip-teller. This information sharing facilitates social bonding and maintains established bonds. For participants, the debrief carried multiple functions: an opportunity for collective problem solving, an outlet for emotional expression, a diversion away from unproductive conflict, and a pleasurable experience within with to romanticise storytelling amongst friends. The project ultimately argues that the debrief is a highly functional occurrence more frequently structured with a positive outlook as opposed to circulating negative content.

Daisy screamed downstairs. Happy screams, but still loud enough to outcompete my music. I jumped up from my desk and threw open my fire door. It slammed behind me. I started screaming too; I didn't know why yet but I knew that I was excited. I hung over the landing banister to see Daisy stood at the bottom of the stairs. Amongst a healthy number of giggles, I gathered that Charlie had replied – Daisy had a date.

We were interrupted by our phones chiming in unison. Violet was finishing a meeting in her room and frantically texting us to get an explanation for the noise. This was clearly time sensitive information. Our fourth flatmate (Sage) was injured and in bed but was shouting out to be heard and join the debrief conversation.

Violet was texting from downstairs. Daisy was downstairs shouting up the stairs. Sage was in bed upstairs, gathering context from her phone, and shouting her inputs loud enough for me (on the landing) to pass along the chain and back down the stairs. It wasn't particularly organised, but it was functional. Everyone gave Daisy advice on how to reply and in return she told us about Charlie. This formation repeated itself throughout the evening as Daisy needed more advice or just wanted to share exciting news.

INTRODUCTION

My fieldwork centred around the 'debrief' and its offshoots to investigate the influence of gossip on female student friendships. 'Debrief' here indicates a semi-structured, often deliberate, gathering of people to present information in gossip form. The opening vignette presents the informational origin of a theme that frequently occurred through-

out my participant observation: the emergent relationship of Daisy and Charlie. To analyse the debriefs stemming from this event, I will present this familiar story of a new relationship via the lens of the gossip that fuelled it.

Anthropologists have analysed gossip and friendship in various forms. Gossip may transmit knowledge for pleasure or protection (Barrett 2020; Drążkiewicz 2020; Monson 2020) and may mediate perceptions of Self and Other (Goodwin 1980; Valentinsson 2020). Gossip has been observed to negatively impact reputations (Cole 2014); however, my present focus is on the positive repercussions of gossip and its role in companionship. I found that gossip was a generally enjoyable occurrence that brought friends closer though the transmission of information, even if this content was itself negative. Aspects of this positive slant are also present in literature (Bell 2003). Friendships have been presented as functional, often calculated relationships (Ahn 2011; Clement & Harding 1978; Dyson 2010) with strong emotional bonds (Mains 2013). I believe my fieldwork mirrors these sentiments whereby gossip is not just a pastime within friendships, but also a tool for building strong, pro-social relationships.

Methodology

I utilised participant observation to study the debrief by virtue of already being an 'ingroup' member. My participants were all female university students with which I had previously established friendships. All participants were members of overlapping, but non-identical, friendship groups such that everyone was known to each other but with varying levels of familiarity. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six key informants. These were recorded with participant consent. I have changed the names of all participants to preserve anonymity throughout.

The Urgent Debrief

Many participants stated that they felt some gossip must be communicated as immediately as possible. Cam explained that this content was typically superficial information surrounding spontaneous interactions or witnessing something they thought would be meaningful to a friend. Another type of urgent communication, conducted in more of a debrief fashion, occurs when one friend needs help with time sensitive problem solving – such as in the opening vignette. These occurrences require trusted friends to be contacted quickly so participants tend to consist of whoever is both trusted and presently available. Those in physical proximity are targeted first and, barring this opportunity, texts are sent until somebody replies.

In the opening vignette, I was the initial point of contact as I was physically close and available to talk. Observing the actions of Sage and Violet, however, reveal the importance attributed to participation in such an urgent debrief. Though Sage and Violet could not move to the stairs to talk at that moment in time, their texting and shouting reflects their serious endeavour to provide support to their friend in this exciting situation and learn about someone important to her. The main role of gossip in this situation was to give quick, situational context so that we could most effectively help Daisy. We were informed of how they met, instances of contact so far, and Daisy's feelings towards and opinions about Charlie. We were quickly and efficiently 'clued in' to the situation and all engaged in collective problem solving to help her feel confident in her message.

This debrief was highly animated which both reflected and maintained the exciting atmosphere. The animated nature positively reinforced

Daisy's reflections on Charlie and reassured her that this new contact was a desirable path of action. In her interview, Daisy explained that it was unlikely she would have pursued a relationship with Charlie had the initial, and subsequent, reactions to her talking about Charlie not been so positive. She expressed that debriefs are, "unifying, supportive and encouraging" experiences. Throughout my fieldwork, I found that debriefs all centred around the theme of helping friends and the idea that this help, whether informational or actionable, will be reciprocated. This mirrors the theme of reciprocity in friendship presented by Mains (2013). In both instances, unrequited action (whether gifting material goods or gossip content) leads to distress and weakening relations between friends.

The Formal Debrief

I have named this next presentation the 'formal' debrief as it feels more structured than other gossip exchanges and involves a full group gathering. My household utilises the kitchen for these gatherings, but Cam, Maggie, and Zahra's respective households use a designated bedroom. The common theme uniting all participants however was that this 'main stage' was a constant: the location did not change unless the debrief content or group makeup significantly changed. This gathering represents, in my opinion, the purest form of the debrief. When I asked participants about 'debriefs', this was the occurrence they first associated with the language.

During my fieldwork, debriefs with this configuration occurred frequently. They typically occurred over morning coffee or following somebody returning alone from an exciting event they wanted to share — such as Daisy and Charlie's date. Daisy called on her way home to initiate a debrief gathering. This pre-planned aspect was common to most formal debriefs and typically took the form of a call or text at relatively short notice. There were also more spontaneous forms of full group gathering often initiated by somebody being particularly loud in the kitchen in hopes that others would hear and join in. Spontaneous meetings typically functioned less to present information and more to catch up after a period apart.

Daisy returned from her date to find me and Sage waiting in the kitchen. Violet was still walking home so was swiftly called and told to hurry up; she ran home to start the conversation. This positive content gossip always entailed a sense of genuine fun that was best appreciated when everyone was present. In interviews, Violet expressed, "what's the point in my life being interesting if I can't tell my friends?". Although said in a humorous manner, this highlighted a sentiment which was common to many interviews: participants seemed to enjoy high points more vividly when they could share experiences with their friends. The debrief provided a stage upon which to romanticise storytelling. The more information that was shared, the closer participants felt to one another. Consequently, happiness increased. Wutich et al. (2014) found an association between low social bonding levels and low mental health. It would be interesting to model the effect of gossip on bonding and investigate a potential regression model between mental health and positive gossip occurrences.

Upon Violet's return, everyone assumed their "debrief positions" (Violet, interview). The presenter stands, often pacing the floor space, whilst the audience sits; the two stool are filled first and the third member sits on any clear counter space. In this instance, Daisy presented the events of her afternoon whilst her audience asked frequent questions and offered validating statements when her confidence lulled. Throughout the conversation, Daisy asked for

group opinions on appropriate next actions. In debriefs, everyone presents their perspective and a group decision on which route best achieves the desired outcome within an actor's boundaries is agreed upon. When asked what they had learned about their friends through gossip, many participants expressed that listening to stories or observing other's reaction to their own gossip helped them better understand how their friends were likely to respond to situations. This gave participants a deeper, functional understanding of their friends. The debrief allowed them to learn how to tailor their treatment of friends to maintain the most emotionally advantageous relationships.

Confidentiality and Proxy Conflict

Inclusion in a debrief depends on the level of trust shared across actors. Although individual relationships may vary, trust that the group will provide you with non-judgemental confidentiality is essential to participation. I believe it is this sense of confidentiality that facilitates the free sharing of information. The debrief represents a safe space: it would not be initiated if all members did not have pre-requisite trust and immediately stops if a third party enters. In all my interviews, trust was in some way correlated with a feeling of closeness. Zahra highlighted that time spent with others was integral to her felt level of closeness and Maggie cited that less organised gossip could accelerate this relationship.

Violet expressed that the knowledge I have of her life by virtue of gossip could potentially ruin many of her valued relationships. The nature of our friendship would prevent me from spreading such information; however, I believe that the way in which I learned this information also signalled in the moment of hearing that the content had potential negative repercussion if repeated. Once trust is established, there seems very little need to specify what is, and what is not, confidential.

Maggie expressed that she enjoyed discovering through gossip that her experiences were not unique; it made her feel less alone in a new place. She further explained that gossiping with friends facilitated an avoidance of direct conflict. She could vocalise her thoughts to friends and work through her emotions in a safe space. This notion was also highlighted by Violet. She presented that having open conversations without escalating to a dramatic conflict required close friendship and engaging in such conversation for the first time was a significant move in any relationship. She expresses her anger at third party actors to her friends through gossip to avoid having to signal this trust to a new person before she is ready and sure that it will be reciprocated.

The Moving Debrief

The moving debrief is the most informal debrief category and entails gossip exchanged on a directional walk. These conversations are quick due to the hard time limit defined by arrival to your destination. Participants hit key points like giving headlines. This may be revision of old information or teasing new gossip to be fully discussed later in an alternate debrief form. One moving debrief with content centred around Daisy's relationship occurred on a walk home from town. Cued by the simple question, "how has Charlie been lately", Daisy started filling me in on all the recent 'good headlines' and well as the worrisome. I responded with reassurance and brief snippets of advice that should be (and were) expanded on later, in a larger group. I functioned as a sounding board for Daisy to figure out her own feelings. The pace of the conversation dramatically accelerated as we neared our road, and we finished as we reached our driveway.

Theoretically, this conversation could continue inside the house but the change in environment often entails a change in group composition or signals the necessity of another activity like a lecture. Including more actors or elaborating ideas would shift the conversation into an alternate debrief category. In this way, the moving debrief often merges into other debrief categories. I have separated the categories as they feel distinctly different whilst participating. This was a shared sentiment among participants.

Alternatively, the moving debrief may be used to fill in friends from overlapping groups about non-confidential events. Surface level gossip occurs between members who are building the trust required to talk in deeper terms. This content focuses on individual feelings rather than specific explanations of others' activities as it skirts the boundary of what is acceptable to reveal. During fieldwork, Maggie and I often engaged in this type of debrief as we walked to lectures. Maggie expressed that these conversations accelerated the formation of our relationship. She felt they gave each of us an insight into the other's respective world, in which we were not active participants, and ultimately solidified our friendship.

The Importance of Relative Location

Participants consistently used one room per household to conduct formal debriefs. Participants from my household expressed that the kitchen provided a neutral backdrop for conversation and was physically convenient. The back door (our most frequented entry point) leads directly into the kitchen and this, added with the functional use of the room, positioned it as the most common meeting place. Violet elaborated that moving the conversation to a bedroom feels more personal and the gossip content tends to

reflect this. Gossip occurring in bedrooms, with a subsection of an entire household group, consistently contained more emotional content than group discussions. During interviews, it could be observed that participants meaningfully selected the bedroom to talk in as they were seeking out a specific individual to converse with. Debriefs in bedrooms have consistent participant formations much like the layout of the formal, kitchen debriefs. Across all households, debrief participants tend to sit on the bed or floor. There is a distinct lack of chair use even though every bedroom in question does contain at least one chair. This is a point that none of my participants could raise an explanation for.

The use of technology to check the location of other members was an unexpected theme that occurred during fieldwork. I frequently observed my household checking, or checked myself, the location of other group members by tracking phones. This is an ability all group members have equal access to. Checking which members might overhear a conversation often determined the volume at which that conversation took place or the room itself. These checking occurrences became more frequent as my fieldwork progressed as a conflict emerged among participants. This resulted in a decreased frequency of four-person formal debriefs as the level of trust required to talk openly as a group decreased. Formal debriefs subsequently started to occur with three people although the format was slightly altered by virtue of the more secretive nature. The kitchen was still the first choice for meeting however, if this made transmission of information unattainable, bedrooms as a place of debrief became more common.

The term 'debrief' with this gossip centred meaning seems to be group specific. When searching literature, 'debrief' appeared predominantly within the context of debriefing

medical interviews (Rancila 2021). If you were not a group member, you would not witness a debrief due to issues of trust. However, if you could invisibly observe, I believe you would still be unable to access the full content due to the extensive use of colloquialisms. Many passages of my transcriptions were unintelligible without adding contextual notes. The language included code-named, third-party references and silent gestures. It was common to gesture to the identifying location of a person discussed to indirectly signify identity: the general direction of their house (if outside the household) or their bedroom or kitchen cupboard (if inside the household). Understanding the colloquialisms and gestures required context gained through lived experienced.

Unanswered Questions and Methodological Reflections

My fieldwork only included participants with which I had established friendships due to the time constraint on and nature of the project. All participants responded when asked that they believed everyone was engaging in at least similar interactions. Despite this, I am unclear on how universal debrief analogues are. The conflict that occurred during my fieldwork changed the group makeup of many debrief sessions and moreover dictated content. As an invested member in this conflict, I chose not to target it as an area of investigation as I this would have exacerbated the situation. I believe it would, however, be fruitful to investigate instances where the debrief goes wrong and the line between the positive function and the negative applications of gossip.

Throughout the process, I encountered many 'false start' interviews. It was often in these moments of spontaneous tangents that I discovered most about my participants as they were uninhibited by the desire to give the 'right' answer. During my first attempt at interviewing Violet, we were overheard talking in her bedroom. Sage and her (trusted) houseguest entered the room, and we all proceeded to engage in a debrief nearing two hours. Though not one of my questions was directly answered, this experience demonstrated the captivating power of a debrief. All four of us were fully engrossed in discussion of, on reflection, mundane daily activities scattered with opinions of people we had encountered with no regard for the time even though Sage's guest had a 4am flight the next day.

I did not expect to encounter the amount of laughter that I did throughout this process. Lots of laughter came from genuinely enjoyable moments that naturally occurred during debriefs. The other type of laughter occurred in response to participants discovering and evaluating my research focus. Many participants did not think their gossiping practices were worth researching and I was frequently told during interviews that individuals didn't think they could give me any helpful information. This may also reflect the strict confidentially surrounding the debrief. Participants might have held reservations as it is uncommon to talk about the debrief outside of debriefing previous gossip.

Conclusions

At its most basic level, the debrief transmits information between friends via a gossip medium. Participants learn about present events whilst simultaneously learning about friends' boundaries and interests. This information sharing facilitates social bonding and the maintenance of established bonds. Debriefs require an attendance to confidentiality and can accelerate the formation of trusting relationships. Once members have strong, trustworthy bonds, the debrief provides an

opportunity for collective problem solving. In this way, the debrief provides an outlet for performative expression of information allowing participants to maintain close social relations.

The debrief is a highly functional occurrence with a generally positive outlook. I believe the core aspect of the debrief is emotional regulation. Gossip provides an outlet for emotional expression in a safe space that facilitates sharing the highs of friends and supporting them in their lows. The debrief is a stage for catharsis and can siphon off anger to be processed amongst friends instead of creating unproductive conflict.

Overall, I believe the debrief exists not only due to its function in social bonding and problem solving but simply because it is pleasurable. All participants expressed a sense of enjoyment surrounding debriefs and my fieldwork was densely populated with laughter. Violet's closing interview remarks reflect the experience of being a newly independent adult and the uniting nature of the debrief in such an exciting but unsure time. Her words can be made out amongst her intense laughter on the recording, reflecting the joy she associates with the experience.

"It's like I'm in a sinking boat in the ocean. I'm trying to stay afloat, and I look across and see that you're sinking too and we're like [beat] 'we're both fucked!'. And we just keep paddling. [Laughter]" – Violet

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