

(Un)Idle Talk: The Personal and Political Power of Feminist Gossip

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Psst! Did you hear? Feminist gossip is totally cool.

Gossip is a contentious concept. It is often dismissed as idle talk, or more specifically, as idle *women's* talk. It has been historically devalued as unreliable, disobedient, and even evil (Federici 2019). Gossip has been punished with ridicule, degradation, and even physical torture like the “gossip bridle” (a sixteenth-century device that locked around a woman’s head and pressed a metal spike onto her tongue). Patriarchy thrives when women are isolated and silent; it fears when we are together and loud.

Gossip, and the women who share it, are often demonized by men in positions of patriarchal power. Take, for example, this propaganda poster from WWII (Figure 1). It features four panels, two of which are women sharing secrets amongst one another. This gossip leads to war information reaching the “enemy,” but more damningly, in the image gossiping women are painted as the enemy as well.



Figure 1. “Telling a friend may mean telling the enemy,” poster (1942).

Gossiping does not make us the enemy. In fact, feminist gossip builds webs of relationality and trust. It is an affective information practice that can be crucial for feminists to survive and thrive in patriarchal systems (Guerrero 2022). Take for instance, how gossip operates within a university setting. Gossiping feminists in the university may share tips for academic nomination, insight into what misogynist academics to avoid, or personal experiences of gendered barriers within university walls. I am an emerging feminist scholar and young historian who has found solace and safety in the information shared during feminist gossip sessions. This is a personal practice for me as well as an academic one - much like feminist gossip.

Feminist gossip is dually personal and political, it is both intimate and collective. Gossip straddles two worlds that seem increasingly inseparable for feminists in academia: their political

stance in the university, and their personal embodied experience and relations. Below, I am building a definition of feminist gossip. I have pieced this definition together from the words of other scholars and some of my own in order to situate gossip as an important form of collective feminist action.

Feminist gossip - *noun*:

- A. a chatty talk, of an intimate and interested nature, that blurs the boundaries of personal and political (Merriam-Webster; Adkins 2022).
- B. A feminist praxis of care (Guerrero 2022).

Feminist gossip is a personal act and a political action. Defining gossip as feminist praxis allows us, as feminists, to dismiss conceptions of gossip as petty, dangerous, or disobedient. This definition simultaneously welcomes the personal intimacy of gossip and situates it as undoubtedly political.

Feminist gossip is personal.

Taking from the definition above, gossip is an intimate talk. It is a chatty space to share “emotional experiences, relationships, or memories”: things that are often seen as belonging in the personal world (unlike stereotypical “men’s talk” of sports, politics, and other safe public topics) (Guerrero 2022). But for feminists, the causes we fight for in our academic work are also the causes that we fight for personally: inclusion of diverse voices, bodily safety and autonomy, social equality, security, safety, and recognition. Our identities are at stake, and as a result, so are our hearts (Corner 2020).

Feminists often feel cynical, drained, and overwhelmed while working within institutional bounds (Raving 2021). Everyday sexism, institutional bullying, and patriarchal barriers compound upon us within the neo-liberal, productivity-obsessed space of the university. We are expected to work beyond our limits - and quietly. In response, we become hypervigilant to institutional sexism - we see it everywhere. Sara Ahmed (2020) says, “When you are harassed and bullied, when doors are closed, nay slammed, making it hard to get anywhere, it can be history you are up against; thrown up against.” Harassment from sexist superiors, exclusion from the ‘boy’s club’ of higher academia, and hostility towards feminist theory and scholarship drains us, both historically and currently. We become exhausted by the slammed doors of academia. We may feel angry, cynical, and tired.

All of these are feelings that are important to share with friends to lessen the disproportionate levels of burnout experienced by feminists in the academy (and elsewhere) (Ranganathan 2016). Gossip is an intimate space that revels in the messiness of emotion. It welcomes our broken feminist hearts. When we gossip in the university, we validate emotions, name them, and find a way to bring our broken hearts together in collective action that combats the patriarchal academy.

Feminist gossip is political.

Gossip as a collective action has the power to undermine, question, and dismantle the patriarchal norms of the university (Crawford and Windsor 2021). Everyone is afraid when women gather and talk. And when feminist gossip is involved, I think they have good reason to be. Feminist philosopher Karen C. Adkins (2002) says gossip can be an important area of knowledge-making, allowing those who participate to explore serious subjects and make connections between their experiences more freely (because of gossip's perceived casual nature). These gossipy sessions can unearth shared experiences. For example, the fact that women's emotional labour is crucial to the university, but goes unpaid and unsupported (Gray 2022). Conversations that begin in the realm of gossip can turn to discussions of policy, pay, and expectations that productively threaten normalized care-labour exploitation of academia.

Feminist gossip can act as a praxis of affective knowledge-making: a care-ful shared space where grievances and inequalities can be brought up and tangled with (Guerrero 2022; Adkins 2022). Emily Guerrero (2022), talking about gossip in archives, says she is fascinated when "information systems born out of the brilliance of survival are weighted equally against systems that understand information as a collection of inherent truths." Academia confines itself to being a 'life of the mind,' structuring an idea of truth and normalcy around white male thought. This dismisses the embodied and lived experience of marginalized academics (Gray 2022). Feminist gossip has the power to question this understanding of truth and to open up new avenues to disrupt academic institutions.

Feminist gossip is personal and political.

Gossip is yet another area for feminists where the personal *is* political (Hanisch 1972). Feminist gossip blurs the academic distinctions between cerebral and embodied. It rejects the assumption that casual talk is unreliable. Although the university sees these intimate chats as idle, feminist gossip has radical transformative potential because of what it allows us to share with one another. Having an unbounded, trustful, friendship-driven chatty talk can also disrupt an institution (Taylor and Klein 2018). Our intimate chats between feminist allies within the university productively disturb the distinctions of friend-talk and work-talk. Gossip likewise disturbs the neoliberal expectation of individualism (UnLeading 2024). Instead of celebrating alone-ness or individual success, gossip requires collaboration and interdisciplinary connection. Gossip combats academic demands that we are 'just one.' We become many.

It is impossible to separate feminist gossip from the critical networks of care and trust it creates. Guerrero (2022) describes this intricacy well, saying "gossip is a deeply relational communication system, reliant on in-jokes, community knowledge, and small groups of trusted kin. Through its combination of feelings, experience, and care work, it exists as a feminized tool, which is in turn routinely undervalued and demonized precisely because of its utility in efforts toward collective safety." Feminist gossip is a care-full and friend-full community effort.

We need feminist gossip.

Academia still dismisses the idea that gossip could be a source of knowledge. It is still seen as idle and unreliable. But despite its devaluation, feminist gossip remains a hugely important site

of personal and political care. Gossipy feminist relationships can become safe intimate spaces within unsafe institutions to share emotional experiences caused by those very institutions. Together, we build structures that help to bolster and sustain us. Gossip allows for personal catharsis, political knowledge-gathering, and the combination of the two.

So, let us make tea and chat. We can disrupt while the tea steeps. We can care while it cools.

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