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Commentary on: J. Fields and F. Kauffeld's "The Presumption of Veracity in Testimony and Gossip"

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Fields and Kauffeld (F&K) assert and presuppose that gossip is epistemically unreliable. The following is one of many such claims in their paper:

Of course, as everyone knows, what gossip producers say is epistemically unreliable on its face.

(Here's another:

Gossip producers openly accept responsibility for the truthfulness (or something very like the truthfulness) and relevance of what they say, but they set such low standards for discharging those responsibilities as to tolerate (almost invite) epistemically unreliable discourse. Talk which merits evaluation as testimony should be constrained by higher standards.)

This (alleged) datum is held to undermine the contrasting views of testimony of Fricker and Coady, and so the unreliability claim is pivotal to F&K's paper. However, I argue that not only does everyone not know that gossip is unreliable, but that no one knows it, since false. Gossip is not essentially, necessarily, or characteristically unreliable. (In communities, where gossip is unreliable, this is a merely local and contingent fact.)

I have another reason to concentrate on this pivotal claim of F&K's: Elsewhere (Adler, 2002: Ch.5) I argue for a default view of testimony, like that defended by Coady as well as Burge (1993) and Brandom (1994). That is, the basic rule is that a hearer should accept a speaker's assertion unless he has specific reason to object. But I also hold that the default is justified, given our overwhelming background evidence of the reliability of testimony. If, though, gossip was as F&K allege, it would be a problem for me too because I take testimony or assertion to be governed by a requirement of truthfulness.

Borrowing from the ethnographer Jorg Bergmann, F&K tell us that the "communicative activity of gossiping has the following features." Briefly:

1. "gossip typically requires a minimum of three parties. In Bergmann's terms these are the gossip producer, the gossip recipient, and the gossip subject...."
2. "because of the manifest nature of its content, gossip implicates its participants in a potentially reprehensible intrusion into the affairs of the parties who are the subject of the gossip." The intrusion is of "private matters. This is the heart and source of gossip's ill repute."

3. "given the illicit character of the exchange something on the order of overt mutual consent is required in order for a gossip conversation to get fully underway."
4. "Gossip producers typically represent what they have to say as: Communication worthy...as unexpected, unconventional, juicy, strange, improper, immoral, eccentric."

I accept broadly this characterization. My main dissent is over the requirement of mutual consent, which seems to me to hold only of gossiping, not gossip per se. In any case, I'll show later that this condition is actually self-defeating for F&K's critique. Immediately after this characterization, they observe:

The preceding account of the phenomenology of gossip shows that the nature of gossip is readily apparent to gossipers and that it can be recognized as epistemically unreliable...and it is typically backed by corroborating detail and quotations that serve more to dramatize and heighten the entertainment value of the narrative than to lend substance to the gossipy report. Small wonder that gossip is commonly regarded as unreliable idle talk.

Certainly, then, gossip ought not qualify as testimony and does not deserve to be evaluated as such.

I do not see how they take this to follow from 1-4 above. There is nothing in the central points--of unethical invasion of privacy--that implies or even suggests that gossip is generally or essentially "epistemically unreliable." (Or, for that matter, that the gossiper is trying to "dramatize and heighten the entertainment value...")

The most persuasive way to refute their pivotal presupposition is by example. Unfortunately F&K offer almost none, so I'll do so.

1. Bill is going to be rejected by the club.
2. Marcia and Gary are splitting up.
3. Tony is having an affair.
4. The committee denied Fred's tenure.
5. Among schoolchildren: Johnny's socks don't match.
6. Lisa and Harry sleep in separate beds because Harry snores.
7. Smith is going to accept the job at Tech U.
8. Jones was pressured to resign because security found him drunk in his office.
9. Rick dropped out as a candidate because they could not get a job for his wife.

About these examples, I simply ask you to supply the appropriate context in which these would constitute gossip. My assumption is that each of us is an expert or authority on the matter--it is too basic, simple and pervasive a form of communicational practice for us not to grasp it well. I now claim the following about these examples and I seek your corroboration: First, in the context that you have envisaged, these constitute paradigm cases of gossip (and they could be endlessly multiplied). Second, within those contexts, the speaker meets the conditions of invasion and unethical behavior that F&K offer. Third, in envisaging circumstances in which

persons assert 1-9 as gossip, they offer these assertions as they would standard cases of testimony: they assert them as true. Fourth, and most crucial, you do not need to take these assertions as epistemically unreliable, and in a variety of contexts, you wouldn't.

So far I have offered two objections to F&K's presupposition: First, nothing in an adequate characterization of gossip requires epistemic unreliability. Second, when we reflect on cases of gossip, like those above, we do not find it essentially or even typically unreliable.

Admittedly, on this second point, my criticism suffers an anomaly. The normal way to test whether we, as hearers, regard a piece of testimony as unreliable is if we could properly challenge the speaker 'How do you know?' The anomaly is this: if we do not regard gossip as generally unreliable, how come it would not be out of place in many, if not all, of these cases for the hearer to raise the 'How do you know?' question. The answer is evident: The confidential or secretive nature of gossip. You would not be asking 'How do you know?' as a challenge to the veracity of the speaker in gossiping, but as a query as to how he obtained the information.

This last observation in regard to secrecy leads me to a typical feature of gossip, one that you readily import into the above examples. This feature implies that gossip could not serve gossipers' purposes were it believed or found unreliable. The feature that their characterization overlooks is this: gossipers typically want credit for the information they offer. They seek credit for inside information, and credit from the recipient for letting him in on secret or confidential or private information. (The closest they come is to note that the gossipier purports to have 'privileged information' and that: (Privileged information is information to which S (purports to) has [have?] unique access.)

But speakers can only gain this credit if what they affirm--the gossip asserted--is true, on the assumption, which is commonly satisfied, that the recipient or audience or hearer will soon be able to verify the truth of the gossip. Indeed, to get the credit they seek, especially given the ethical dubiousness of their speech-act, gossipers should impose on themselves, as hearer impose on them, higher than usual standards of veracity.

Since F&K take it as so evident that gossip is 'on its face' unreliable, it is unsurprising that they provide almost no grounds or evidence that even purport to support it. The closest to direct support they offer also borrows from Bergmann:

...it can hardly be the case that S has carefully investigated the factual basis for what S has to say about V's privileged affairs and still have exercised acceptable respect for V's privacy.

But this is wrong about conversational practice on two counts: It implicitly holds that one cannot assert something without having "carefully investigated" it, and that one cannot know of someone's "privileged affairs" without having already invaded someone's privacy.

On the former count, I do not reject the condition of careful investigation because I think ordinary assertion meets low standards. Pivotal to my account of belief is an elaboration on the claim defended by Unger and Williamson that assertion requires knowing. My point is rather that knowing does not require careful investigation. If a stranger asks me if Oregon is north of California, I answer 'yes' readily, without investigation. I do not check available maps. The stranger accepts my assertion because he takes it that I would not assert it unless I knew it.

More pertinently, to get to F&K's second point that S cannot obtain privileged information without invading privacy, take any of examples 1-9 above e.g. 2. Marcia and Gary

are splitting up, you can easily imagine that this information is obtained by the speaker from a close friend of Marcia and Gary's. No careful investigation or invasion of privacy in obtaining it. Nevertheless, the speaker can assert it as something he knows. The invasion--the gossipiness--comes in the speaker's spreading it, knowing that it is a private and delicate matter, not in how the speaker obtains it.

I would add that any requirement for careful investigation, over and above the readily satisfied requirements for knowledge would destroy the great informational value of communication. That requirement is enough to maintain the understanding that K&F reject:

truthfulness is a background condition supporting the possibility of human condition [communication?].

Turn now to the part of F&K's characterization that gossip involves a mutual recognition and even consent to the gossip, and so on their view, to its epistemic unreliability. The opening quotation from F&K is a flat-out assertion that everyone knows of gossip's unreliability, and later they make it clear that when we gossip we so recognize it:

The communicative character of gossip is essentially manifest and would in many cases be avowed by persons participating in gossip conversations by such frank confessions as 'We're gossiping about the Dean; want to join us?'

But this claim--not just that gossip is essentially manifest, but that its unreliability is as well--is simply incompatible with their objection to Coady, which also implicitly would apply to my view, as well as, though less so, Fricker. For if everyone knows this, if it is mutual, the default is overruled, and so there is no requirement of acceptance. (Here there is some comparison with tact. When you ask me how I like your new tie, and I reply 'it's nice,' the social setting is governed by a relaxed demand for truthfulness, and correspondingly such evaluative remarks are not taken literally, at least in retrospect. (Adler, 1997).)

But this last claim of F&K's as to the manifest nature of gossip and its unreliability, as well as gossiping as an activity, lead me to suspect that F&K have conflated gossip in various ways with rumor and bullshitting. This hypothesis would explain the extreme disparity in judgments--they take gossip's unreliability as obvious and manifest, whereas I take it as evident and necessary that it is not, a judgment with which I hope you concur.

While gossip and rumor frequently go together, they are distinguishable. With rumor you care to spread invasive or harmful information. But you do not care to be identified with it and, so correlatively, to stand behind its truthfulness. I have observed that the opposite is typical of gossip. Bullshitting or bull sessions, as discussed by Frankfurt (1988), involves keeping a social conversational activity alive, where there is little concern for truth. (Individual bullshitting or bullshit involves misrepresentation without the effort or design of lying or misleading.) There is indifference to truth or reality, and that fits with what F&K say of gossiping as a social activity and of its manifest recognition. But, as I have been at pains to argue, gossip itself, unlike social bullshitting, is asserted as true under normal standards, standards which are regularly met or at least are not markedly violated.

Let me then end by emphasizing these distinctions, even if by falsely suggesting a determinateness of the data and a tightness of usage, along the following dimensions:

- A. The governing presumption of the conversational exchange is truthfulness (reliability). (The purported purpose is primarily informational.)
- B. The speaker seeks to have himself identified as the source (of his assertion).
- C. The speaker intends to meet condition (A). (Or condition (A) is not noticeably unsatisfied.)

So to summarize:

1. Gossip generally satisfies (A), (B), and (C).
2. Everyday assertion satisfies (A) and (C). But satisfaction of (B) is highly variable.
3. Rumor generally satisfies (A), not (B), and not (C).
4. Social bullshitting or bull sessions satisfy none of (A), (B), or (C).
5. Lying, intentional deceiving, and misleading crucially depend upon condition (A). They do not satisfy (B) (indeed, usually anti-B), and their concern for (A) leads to their anti-C aim. (Bullshit falls in here, although the anti-C aim is satisfied only in a way indifferent to truth. It is a relaxed form of pretentious or pompous misrepresentation.)

Further distinctions would be needed to properly sort tact, politeness, humbug, and slander, and to distinguish among the various kind of misrepresentation under 5.

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