



Short Communication

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Gossip and Pandemic: Possible Theoretical Considerations of Social Collapse and Reorganization

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Introduction

Contemporary digital environments have enabled information dissemination at unprecedented scales and velocities, fundamentally transforming the nature of social interactions. As evidenced by the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the proliferation of fake news and misinformation in digital spaces has profoundly impacted public health. This study reevaluates the theoretical legacy of gossip research by Paul Radin and Melville J Herskovits in a modern context, presenting novel theoretical perspectives on information dissemination structures and their effects in contemporary society through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic experience. While the author has previously conducted research in this domain [1], this brief paper addresses negative aspects and future research challenges.

Theoretical Foundations of Gossip Research

In his 1927 work "Primitive Man as Philosopher" [2], Paul Radin posited that "gossip emerged from the development of anthropological interest in the growth and dissolution of small groups." This perspective on generation from the "disruption of the everyday" exhibits structural parallels with social phenomena observed during the COVID-19 outbreak. Melville J Herskovits further advanced this theory, scrutinizing gossip in the Caribbean region as a mechanism of social control [3-7]. His studies, particularly those examining the suppression of the Shouters sect and gossip through songs at convit (labor gatherings) in the Valley of Haiti, revealed several crucial functions: "Preservation and reinforcement of moral standards", "Enhancement of communal solidarity", "Intergenerational transmission of cultural values", "Means of articulating social critique".

Radin's Theoretical Innovation: Mechanisms of Social Cognition Formation

Paul Radin's 1927 work "Primitive Man as Philosopher" intro-

duced groundbreaking theoretical perspectives to gossip research. His theoretical contributions were revolutionary in three

Key Aspects

First, through his concept of "primitive thought," Radin positioned gossip not merely as a means of information transmission but as a fundamental mechanism in the formation of social cognition. His analysis demonstrated that gossip functions as a collective practice constructing social reality. Notably, his research among the Winnebago tribe revealed gossip's decisive role in shaping communal worldviews. Second, Radin meticulously examined gossip's function in the "social construction of knowledge" process. His research indicated that gossip serves to generate and sustain social truths. In this process, individual facts and experiences undergo reconstruction through communal interpretative frameworks, establishing themselves as collective "truths." Third, Radin identified gossip's role in "social boundary delineation." His case study of the Pueblo tribe particularly demonstrated how gossip strengthens in-group cohesion while clarifying boundaries with outgroups.

Herskovits's Theoretical Elaboration: Insights from Caribbean Research

Melville J Herskovits's Caribbean studies (1930s-1940s) further refined the theorization of gossip's social functions [3,5,7]. His extended fieldwork in Trinidad and Haiti illuminated gossip's multifaceted functions. The core of Herskovits's theoretical contribution lies in his analysis of gossip as a "social control mechanism." His research on Trinidad's Shouters sect demonstrated how gossip fulfilled functions of maintaining religious norms and sanctioning deviants. Notably, gossip achieved effective social control while avoiding direct violence or exclusion and his study of convit (la-



bor gatherings) in the Haiti Valley analyzed the cultural functions of gossip through songs. Several key points emerged: First, gossip through songs transmitted cultural values in conjunction with the physical practice of agricultural labor. Second, collective singing provided a socially acceptable format for expressing personal criticisms and dissatisfaction. Third, cultural memory passed between generations through the repetition and variation of lyrics.

Structural Isomorphism between Pandemic and Gossip

The process of everyday disruption and social discipline reorganization during the COVID-19 outbreak shares profound similarities with the mechanisms of social transformation revealed by gossip studies. As Herskovits demonstrated in “Trinidad Village” and “Life in a Haitian Valley,” gossip is inherently social. During the spread of COVID-19, information dissemination on social networking sites amplifies social anxiety while simultaneously contributing to the formation of new behavioral norms. Particularly noteworthy is the similarity in transmission pathways between both phenomena. The spread of gossip through social networks exhibits structural isomorphism with the transmission of infectious diseases through human contact networks. The digital environment accelerates this dissemination, enabling global-scale impact.

Contemporary Development of Classical Theory in Digital Environments

Modern digital environments have qualitatively transformed the traditional functions of gossip analyzed by Radin and Herskovits. Specifically, algorithmic information filtering on social networking sites amplifies the “social reality construction” process identified by Radin. The echo chamber phenomenon can be understood as a digital reproduction of the “social boundary delineation” function Radin analyzed.

Structural Isomorphism of Public Health Risks: Warnings from Classical Studies

The proliferation of gossip and fake news in contemporary digital environments demonstrates remarkable structural isomorphism with the community collapse processes studied by Radin and Herskovits. The similarities are fundamental in several aspects: First, the deepening of social division. The community fragmentation process Radin observed in the Pueblo tribe closely resembles polarization in modern social media. Both involve the construction of “truth” through gossip, irreversibly deepening conflict between different social groups. Second, the loss of cultural immunity. The collapse of traditional value systems Herskovits observed in Haiti structurally parallels the breakdown of social trust in today’s fake news environment. Notably, the spread of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic severely impeded the formation of social consensus regarding public health measures. Third, the dysfunction of social control mechanisms. Herskovits’s analysis of the Shouters sect exemplifies the pathology when gossip-based social control becomes excessive. Similarly, cyberbullying and conformity pressure on modern social networks impede healthy social dialogue and distort rational judgment in public health matters.

Reconstruction of Cultural Value Transmission Systems

As demonstrated by gossip through songs at *convit* in the Haiti Valley, traditional communities transmitted cultural values through direct interaction. However, in the social networking era, global value conflicts occur daily, resulting in the loss of cultural context and dismantling of traditional value systems. The rapid proliferation of digital communication during the pandemic has accelerated this process. The increasing influence of social media influencers is transforming cultural value formation processes, while viral phenomena’s rapid value dissemination complicates sustainable cultural formation.

New Research Challenges and Public Health Implications

Analysis of smartphone application log data during the COVID-19 crisis [8] has highlighted new challenges: risks to the public health environment from increasingly dense digital communication, gossip, and pseudo-information; mental illness caused by digital environment-dependent defamation; and the causal effects of digital communication on physical illness. These challenges can be understood as contemporary transformations of the individual thought formation process shown by Radin and the social control mechanisms analyzed by Herskovits. Particularly, the system of cultural value transmission demonstrated through gossip songs at *convit* in the Haiti Valley provides important insights into understanding the essence of information transmission in the contemporary digital environment [4]. Our taken-for-granted digital environment, transcending borders and temporal constraints, has become a breeding ground for fake news, as evidenced by the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This shows structural similarities to misinformation spread during the COVID-19 pandemic and presents significant public health challenges.

Conclusion

Classical gossip research theory and COVID-19 pandemic experiences provide important insights into social reorganization mechanisms emerging from the “disruption of the everyday.” The essence of transformation in small human communities engaged in social life necessitates new conceptualization of the public health environment and health preservation of social communities, which are once again becoming digitalized.

Particularly, Radin’s perspective on “small group growth and decay” provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding social transformation in the contemporary digital environment. Furthermore, Herskovits’s insights into social control mechanisms offer significant implications for the formation and maintenance of new behavioral norms under pandemic conditions.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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