

Who cares about women's talk? A field experiment

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This study investigates reactions to female talk. Despite stereotypic knowledge of female talk as gossip, empirical data is lacking as to whether it may influence behavior. In a natural setting, participants (126 men and 124 women) unwittingly overheard a conversation about love or do-it-yourself. Results showed that the semantic content of the conversation had an effect on female listeners' interest and later helping behavior, whereas it had no effect on male listeners. Contrary to previous findings, males did not display chivalrous helping. These findings may be related to males' perception of female talk and to automatic goal processing.

Key words: female speech, love, semantic induction, helping behavior

Early studies of gender differences in discourse (e.g., Johnson, 1994; Jones, 1980) have drawn attention to the deprecation of women's discourse, which has often been associated with gossip, i.e., casual, idle chat about intimate or domestic topics. Recent efforts have been made, however, to overcome this normative approach and to investigate the goals and functions that gossip may serve among men and women, such as status and achievement with males or relationship maintenance with females (Watson, 2012). This focus on motivations for gossiping has also led some research to leave aside the question of possible gender differences (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004) and, even more, the question of how men and women regard the other sex's discourse.

If women's gossip is discounted, attacked, and derogated by men (Jones, 1980), empirical data is still to be found to support this assertion. To our knowledge, in the past decades no research has attempted to investigate empirically men's and women's reactions to women's gossip. One rea-

son might be that efforts have been made in Western countries to overcome stereotypic thinking about women, and that the mere evocation of female talk as gossip may appear as provocative or sexist, for both researchers and participants. In particular, male participants in laboratory settings may be aware that their behavior regarding female participants' speech might be analyzed with regard to such normative expectations. This would influence men to demonstrate respect for women's speaking duration and show consideration for what they say. We argue that such constrained responses, however, can be limited when participants are observed in their natural environment, when they are not aware that they are participating in a research experiment and that their reactions are being unobtrusively observed.

This study was designed within a social-cognitive framework. The main assumption is that the semantic activation, or priming of a concept, can influence information processing and social behavior. Automatic social cognition occurs when such effects are triggered without the target person's awareness, intention, possibility of control, or effort (Bargh, 1994). The present study aimed at testing behavioral effects, namely, the time spent listening to a gossiping female stranger and helping behavior to her. In addition to this theoretical framework, we reasoned that reactions to female gossip may be interpreted in light of the social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and with regard to gender differences in self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). The main purpose of our experiment was

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to check for male and female reactions to female gossip. If women's discourse is derogated by men (Jones, 1980), it could be assumed that men, compared to women, would be reluctant to listen to it for a long time. However, men could be pleased to be near a woman they appraise as attractive, and therefore would tend to stay near her whatever her discourse. This might have been the case in our experiment, where female confederates were 18 to 19 years old and male participants were 30 to 50 years old. Thus, we expected male participants' listening duration to female confederates' gossip to be similar to female participants'. Further, we assumed that participants' reactions to female gossip may depend on its semantic features. We hypothesized that women would be more interested in, and responsive to female, gender-typical gossip, as compared to gender-atypical gossip. In contrast, men would display little interest in female gossip, whether gender-typical or atypical. Therefore, they would display similar reactions in both cases. Specifically, we used the activation of the concept of love, as compared to do-it-yourself, as an independent variable. The semantic activation of love has been found in previous research (e.g., Lamy, Fischer-Lokou, & Guéguen, 2009, 2010) to have an influence on helping behavior, especially in case of male participants displaying chivalrous helping to female confederates. We predicted that a reverse pattern would be found when the activation of the idea of love is achieved through female gossip. Women would show increased interest and helping behavior, whereas men would display little attention and no increase in helping behavior.

Previous research has found that women, compared to men, are more self-disclosing, especially with intimate partners such as friends, relatives, or spouses (Dindia & Allen, 1992), or on intimate topics (Aries, 1996). Women reveal more than men about their "true self" on the internet (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002) and, when compared to men, use more words relative to psychological states such as thoughts, feelings, and positive or negative emotions; discuss more about other people; and have a more social, "rapport" style of communication (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Newmann, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008). In contrast, men have been shown to use more affect words such as *love*, *happiness*, or *sadness* when speaking to women than to men (Shimanoff, 1983). This seems to indicate that women are stereotypically labeled as *emotional*, and indeed, it has been found consistently (e.g., Diel, Owen, Youngblade, 2004; Saragovi, Koestner, Di Dio, & Aubé, 1997) that a communal (as opposed to agentic) sex role is assigned to women, i.e., they are socialized to be other-oriented. Women perceive themselves and are perceived as more nurturing, compassionate, emotional, sentimental, loving, gentle, or sensitive, than are men. Moreover, women's self-construal is more interdependent than men's (Cross & Madson, 1997). Specifically, women typically focus on social relationships with close others, they conceive themselves as being embedded within such relationships,

and they display selective memory and behavioral intentions in favor of close partners (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999).

From these findings, it can be predicted that, when overhearing a female stranger's gossip, men will behave as to protect their independence; they will show little concern for a stranger's private conversation and little attention to its semantic features. Women will behave as if they were interdependent with the gossip; they will show interest to her speech and attention to its semantic content. As mentioned above, however, women focus on social relationships with intimate partners, but they have also been shown to be more cautious than men in public settings where strangers are encountered (Eagly & Koenig, 2006). Therefore, women might remain cautious with regard to female strangers unless the semantic features of the conversation they overheard were in line with the communal, loving, interdependent sex role assigned to women. If the social norm for interconnectiveness between women is made salient, one can expect it to become more prescriptive and thus to allow women to overcome their reserve in public settings – e.g., by helping the gossiping stranger if she appears to be in need of help. Nevertheless, at an earlier stage of the interaction, to stay on the reserve in a public setting is compatible with being interested in a conversation that one is unwittingly hearing.

As indicated above, the current research was designed to examine men's and women's reactions to women's gossip. Male and female passersby were led to unwittingly hear a female confederate's phone chat. This conversation dealt either with a topic that is gender-congruent – love – or gender-incongruent – do-it-yourself. We presumed that women would be more interested in love than in do-it-yourself, whereas no difference would be found for men.

Instead of asking participants directly about their opinion regarding the speech they overheard, we measured indirect, behavioral clues that we believe are connected with interest. First, we propose that the time spent listening to the conversation may be considered as an indicator of the participant's interest. More precisely, it could be stated that someone interested in the conversation will tend to stay and listen to it longer, whereas someone who leaves the place might not be interested, or might simply need to go somewhere else for an appointment, for business, or any other obligation. The second indicator we chose was helping behavior. Helping behavior was measured by the participant's reaction when the confederate, after a 5-minute phone call, left and inadvertently dropped a glove. Participants were observed to see if they helped the confederate get back her glove, or did nothing. In this situation, we predicted that participants who had little or no interest regarding the conversation they overheard, would tend to ignore the confederate, and consequently wouldn't notice she dropped her glove when leaving. In addition, among those participants who did notice the confederate dropped her glove, those who derogated the confederate's speech would tend to be less helpful than those who took interest in the speech.

In line with this reasoning, we hypothesized that (a) women would spend more time listening to a conversation upon love, rather than do-it-yourself; (b) women would display helping behavior more frequently in the love than in the do-it-yourself (DIY) condition; and (c) men would display similar behavior in both experimental conditions.

METHOD

Participants

Participants ($N_M = 126$, $N_F = 124$) aged 30 to 50 years, were sitting by themselves on a bench in a public park (Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris), on Saturday or Sunday afternoons.

Procedure

Twelve female students, aged 18 to 19, undertook this study. They were instructed to approach the first man or woman who appeared to be between 30 and 50 years old and who was sitting alone on a bench. The confederate sat down on the same bench while talking on her cell phone. As soon as she was seated the semantic induction was started. In the first experimental condition (love), she said: "So she met someone? (...) How is he? (...) Do you think she's really in love? (...) So it's a serious thing? (...)" The confederate simulated a personal conversation about falling in love. The confederate was instructed to use the word *love* or the phrase *in love* at the beginning of the conversation, then approximately every 90 seconds thereafter. If, after 5 minutes, the participant was still sitting on the bench, the confederate left the bench and walked away, dropping a glove as she did so. She walked away 10-15 meters without looking back. This gave time to the participant to call her and tell her she lost her glove, or to get up and collect the glove to return it.

In the second group (DIY condition), the semantic induction involved a personal conversation about putting up bookshelves. The confederate used phrases such as: "So how many shelves does she need to put up? (...) Does she have the tools to do it? (...) In which room is she putting it up? (...)". The words *bookshelf* and *put up* had to be pronounced, as in the love condition, at the beginning of the conversation and again every 90 seconds thereafter. In both groups, the confederate simulated listening to the information and asking questions. The confederate recorded the exact time (minutes + seconds) when she sat down on the bench and the exact time when the participant left. If the participant was still sitting after 5 minutes, the confederate left, dropping a glove as she did so. She then recorded if the participant helped or not: whether (a) the participant let her know that she dropped her glove or picked it up to give it back to her, or (b) didn't help her.

First, a pre-testing was conducted in order to allow confederates (a) to get accustomed to the procedure, (b) to detect possible flaws in the procedure, and (c) to compare different places where the experiment might take place. Each confederate made three to five trials before analyzing this first set of data with the experimenter and the whole team of confederates. It appeared then that the easiest way to measure the time spent by the participant listening to the confederate's conversation consisted of using the 'timer' application on their smartphone when sitting on the bench, after having programmed an alarm to go off in the vibrating mode when the five minutes were up (a). Confederates had to carefully avoid situations where participants were seemingly alone, but were in fact watching someone or waiting for someone (b). The most typical case was that of mothers sitting alone on a bench but keeping an eye on their children who were playing nearby. With the same aim of avoiding interferences with or interruptions of the experiment, we decided not to conduct it with people waiting for their train on a platform, nor with people sitting on a bench in a shopping center (c), who often were waiting for their mate shopping in the area. In addition, passersby in a railway station or a shopping center sometimes spontaneously took part in the experiment and their attitude or comments interfered with the participant's reaction. These interferences could easily be avoided when the experiment took place in one of the largest public parks in Paris (Jardin du Luxembourg).

Confederates were students in the first year of a university course for social workers, and had never studied psychology before. They volunteered to participate in this study which was in line with their classes on social psychology, nonverbal behavior, and interview techniques. They were not aware of concepts such as independence versus interdependence or gender norms, nor were they aware of the research hypotheses. After taking part in the experiment, they each had to write a report in which they described the reactions and the attitudes of the participants, as well as their personal impressions.

RESULTS

A 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (experimental condition) ANOVA was performed with the log-transformed waiting time as the dependent variable (Table 1). Neither main ef-

Table 1
Mean (and standard deviations) of participants' waiting time (in seconds, log transformed) according to experimental conditions and participant gender ($N = 250$)

	Loving	Dot-it-yourself	Total
Female	2.37 (0.24)	2.21 (0.35)	2.29 (0.31)
Male	2.29 (0.34)	2.31 (0.25)	2.30 (0.30)
Total	2.33 (0.29)	2.26 (0.31)	2.30 (0.30)

fect of participant gender, $F(1, 246) = 0.03, p = .88, \eta_p^2 < .005$, nor main effect of experimental condition, $F(1, 246) = 3.12, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .013$, was statistically significant. However, the interaction was significant, $F(1, 246) = 5.71, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .023$. Further comparison per gender revealed that women in love condition stayed longer than women in DIY condition, $t(122) = 2.98, p = .004, d = .54$, while no statistical difference was found between these two conditions for men, $t(124) = 0.38, p = .71, d = .07$.

Table 2

Percentage of participants who stayed on the bench for the full duration according to experimental conditions and participant gender ($N = 250$)

	Loving	Dot-it-yourself	Total
Female	68.3% ^a	39.3% ^b	54.0%
Male	50.8% ^a	54.0% ^a	52.4%
Total	59.5%	46.8%	53.2%

^a $n = 63$. ^b $n = 61$.

With the number of participants who stayed or left the bench before the 5 minutes delay, a loglinear analysis of the 2 (participant's gender) \times 2 (experimental condition) design revealed a main effect of experimental condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 250) = 4.09, p = .04, r = .13$, suggesting that, overall, more participants left the bench before the delay in the DIY condition (53.3%) than in the love condition (40.5%; Table 2). No main effect of participant gender was found, $\chi^2(1, N = 250) = 0.07, p = .79, r = .02$. However, the interaction between experimental condition and participant gender was significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 250) = 10.79, p = .005, r = .21$. Further comparisons revealed statistically significant difference between the two experimental conditions with female participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 10.58, p = .001, r = .29$, while the difference between the two experimental conditions was not significant for male participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 126) = 0.13, p = .72, r = .03$.

Table 3

Percentage of helpers according to experimental conditions and participant gender ($N = 250$)

	Loving	Do-it-yourself	Total
Female	47.6% ^a	26.2% ^b	37.1%
Male	36.5% ^a	28.6% ^a	32.5%
Total	42.1%	27.4%	34.8%

^a $n = 63$. ^b $n = 61$.

A 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (experimental condition) loglinear analysis using helping behavior as the dichotomous dependent variable revealed a main effect of experimental condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 250) = 5.94, p = .015, r = .15$, indicating that, overall, more participants helped the confederate in the love condition than in the DIY condition (Table 3). No main effect of participant gender was found, $\chi^2(1, N = 250) = 0.57, p = .45, r = .05$, while an interaction between experimental condition and participant gender was found, $\chi^2(2, N = 250) = 7.64, p = .02, r = .17$. Further comparison revealed statistically significant difference between the two experimental conditions with female participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 6.15, p = .013, r = .22$, whereas with male participants the difference between the two experimental conditions was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 126) = 0.91, p = .34, r = .08$.

As noted above, confederates reported their impressions about the participants' attitudes and reactions. According to these reports, it appeared that participants were frequently reading a book or a newspaper, or kept busy with their smartphone, or waiting for a phone call, or just watching around them. Female participants in the love condition frequently glanced at the confederate, whereas those in the DIY condition did not. Thus, in the love condition, female participants did not seem to make any effort to pretend they were not listening to the conversation. They frequently had tender smiles, especially after hearing the words *love* or *in love*. One female participant, aged approximately 50, heaved a sigh and left the bench. A few female participants asked questions or gave an advice concerning this love affair after returning the glove to the confederate. When overhearing a conversation about do-it-yourself, male and female participants displayed no sign of interest, and sometimes had an ironic smile. One male participant proposed to help putting up the shelves.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results support the view that the semantic content of female's talk had no effect on men's behavior. Male participants spent the same amount of time listening to a female's speech regardless of its semantic content, whether typical of women's gender role (love condition) or more typical of men's gender role (DIY condition). In addition, among male participants, the semantic induction of love did not enhance helping behavior, whereas previous research (Lamy et al., 2009, 2010) had found that men typically exhibit greater helpfulness when semantically induced with the idea of love and when help is requested by a young woman. This pattern of enhanced chivalrous helping when men have been exposed to semantics related to love was not found in the present research. One possible explanation is that male participants, having little interest in the conversation they overheard, therefore paid little attention to the female confederate, and thus didn't even notice she had dropped one of her gloves when leaving the bench. Thus it

appears that being exposed to the idea of love might have no effect on males when the induction stems from female's talk. In contrast, female participants displayed more interest in the love condition than in the DIY condition, as measured by the greater time that they spent listening to the confederate's conversation. Female participants also showed more helping behavior when they listened to the intimate, love-related conversation.

One possible interpretation of these differences may be that men heard the confederate's talk, whereas women listened to it. Women have been shown to endorse, more often than men do, a people-oriented listening style, with concern for other's feelings and emotions (Kirtley Johnston, Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 2000). Listening styles have an effect on how the information will be processed and recalled. In the present study, women might have focused their attention on the conversation, all the more so as it involved personal and relational features, i.e., in the love condition, more than in the DIY condition. Men might have consented not more than to hear an obviously people-oriented talk, dealing with an absent person's love or domestic affairs. Thus, men and women would have behaved in conformity to their gender role – independent versus interdependent, respectively. In a recent survey, Long and Tonini (2012) show that two opposite concerns appear among people who spend time in French public parks: (a) a hope for meeting people or avoiding loneliness, and (b) looking for peace and quiet as a way to escape the city's noise and excitement. This survey didn't investigate possible sex differences. However, in line with previous research on self-construal, one could argue that women are more likely than men, when visiting a public park, to search for social bonding, whereas men are trying to avoid being disturbed. Therefore, an automatic goal pursuit (Hasin, Bargh, & Zimerman, 2009) may take place, or a goal-goal conflict. Regarding women, the goal of being connected to other people is in accordance with the goal of listening, being interested in a stranger's personal conversation, and providing help to this person. In contrast, men's goal of being independent and serene might have been in conflict with alternative goals such as actively listening to a stranger's conversation, taking interest in it, and intervening when help may be required. This goal-goal conflict might result automatically in an inhibition of the cognitions and actions that did not contribute to attaining the goal that was initially held when entering the public park.

One of the main limitations of the present study is the lack of information about participants, e.g., socio-demographic information and attitudes regarding the confederate's gossip and the confederate herself. Pre-testing showed that participants often reacted very badly when they discovered the conversation was a simulation. Therefore we had to abandon the search for this information. Having no direct information on the reasons why participants were sitting on a bench where the experiment took place is also a possible flaw in our procedure. However, for ethical reasons, it could simply not be considered to ask 18-years old female

students to engage a conversation with strangers in a public park. Therefore, additional data should be collected by male confederates. Another limitation stems from the fact that empirical testing took place in only one location, thus limiting our results' generalizability. In addition, it is possible that the time when the experiment was carried out was an important factor, and that it could interact with gender. Men and women might have different reasons to sit on a bench in a public park during weekends, and other reasons to sit there on business hours.

Another important aspect that would merit further investigation is confederate's gender. The present study could be replicated with confederates of both genders. Notably, it might be interesting to investigate the fact that men are more reluctant to listen to female than to male gossip. In addition, in accordance with our initial rationale, the confederate's level of attractiveness could be further researched. Would men spend less time than women listening to female gossip when the confederate exhibited low attractiveness? This could be investigated by controlling the confederate's degree of attractiveness through clothing style and make-up, according to experimental conditions. Another avenue for future research would consist in checking for cognitive, rather than behavioral effects of exposure to male and female gossip. For instance, participants in a laboratory setting could unwittingly overhear a conversation, and later on be asked for recall of features of this conversation. This kind of procedure, combined with the one we developed, would allow more consistent support to the idea that men tend to depreciate and derogate women's gossip. Despite these limitations, this research is a first step in empirically testing people's reactions to female talk, beyond verbal declarations that may easily be influenced by social norms about gender.

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