Chapter 6

A Plea for Gossip

Stalel yec to 7oy slo7iltael (It always happens that there
 is gossip.)

J. L. Austin, in "A Plea for Excuses" (1961), suggests
that moral philosophers may profit from examining the excuses
people offer for their misdeeds and errors. At the same time,
Austin's plea embodies his conception of what philosophy
(and philosophizing) must be like, of what it means to unravel
certain philosophical tangles by attention to ordinary language.
People's excuses are well suited to the analytic methods of
ordinary language philosophy. We discover what counts as a
successful (or unsuccessful) moral argument by observing how
people use critical words to get themselves off the hook.
The study of excuses represents a sort of philosophical
"fieldwork." The philosopher investigates the logic of
moral reasoning through particular bits of actual excuse-
making (or by imagining possible excuses for hypothetical
transgressions.)

I wish to make an analagous plea for the study of gossip
in ethnography. Just as excuses reveal how people ordinarily
think and talk about certain kinds of moral dilemma (that is,
show what these dilemmas are), gossip reveals how native
actors examine, use, and manipulate cultural rules in natural
contexts. Just as excuses point up the aspects of an act or
situation relevant to ascriptions of fault or responsibility,
gossip dwells on those features of behavior which call

cultural rules into play, those items of information that enable people to make evaluations. Finally, just as excuses provide verbal raw material for philosophizing (Austin looks at, among other things, morally tinged adverbs), gossip contains ethnographically important words. Gossip distills verbal characterizations of significant roles, situations, and behavior.[1] Both gossip and excuses arise with departures from normalcy --- a symptom of the general axiom that the only things worth talking about are such departures. Both gossip and excuses occur in natural conversation; people both gossip and make excuses in ordinary, uncontrived language. Hence, as ethnographers or as philosophers, we have access to both gossip and excuses in our favorite form: as words and phrases in context.

But there is a stronger parallel between Austin's plea for excuses and my plea for gossip. Austin urges not simply that excuses are interesting in themselves but further that the study of excuses exemplifies the form of philosophical inquiry; that if we see how excuses can be put to work we shall see how one arrives at solutions to philosophical problems. I argue that while the study of gossip is certainly

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[1] Whorf (1956) suggests, perhaps tongue in cheek, that with respect to fire insurance claims the words people use to describe a situation literally determine what the situation is.

a powerful ethnographic tool(capable of uncovering otherwise
inaccessible facts and phenomena), if we appreciate the native
actor's ability to gossip and to understand gossip then we
must revise our notions of what constitutes ethnography. We
must expand our view of the 'cultural competence' of native
actors and alter our conception of what it is to understnad
ethnographic phenomena. I argue implicitly for these claims
in the last chapters of this thesis.

Gossip is, of course, a legitimate subject for ethno-
graphic study in its own right. Ethnographers have, no doubt,
always used gossip in the field; field notes, if not mono-
graphs themselves, are usually filled with the informant's
gossip about his neighbors and, almost as often, with their
gossip about him. In communities where the only news is
passed by word of mouth, the ethnographer who fails to inter-
cept at least a part of the gossip stream must remain unin-
formed. On the other hand, few ethnographers have had the
resources to study gossip (or even record it) systematically.

Gluckman's (1968 and 1963) early statements on gossip
and scandal emphasize a feature of gossip-groups that I have
already mentioned. Gossip is circumscribed by the boundaries
of the relevant groups within a society. That is, only in-
siders can gossip to each other about each other; gossip is
incomprehensible to the observer who is not acquainted with
the principals or who is inadequately informed about their

habits and histories. Gluckman characterizes a new member of a group as follows:

> "He may learn the rules of technique which keep the group in being, and he may be on excellent terms with the other members of the group, but he does not belong to the group until it is impossible for him to be rude to one of its members unintentionally." (1963: 314)

The same criterion applies to the gossip; learning to gossip implies learning, first, what constitutes rudeness, and then learning enough about everyone involved to know what to say to whom when, and the reverse. I have suggested that, in Zinacantan, in the baldest sense one cannot understand gossip without a good deal of information about important 'focal individuals'. I can attest from personal experience that it is possible to exist successfully in Zinacantan observing most ordinary canons of etiquette and correct behavior without possessing any of the knowledge or conversational skills which allow one to gossip. Gluckman argues that gossip is possible only within the boundaries of a group, and further that gossip is a "social weapon" by which a group protects itself from incursions by outsiders: how better to snub a newcomer than to demonstrate his alienness by gossiping in front of him? Whether or not people always use gossip consciously in this way (outside of the circles Prof. Gluckman mentions), it is clearly possible to chart the boundaries of a social group by the ability of individuals to participate in its gossip.

Professor Gluckman also addresses himself to the elusive relationship between gossip and the "morals and values of social groups." (1963:308) It is easy to suggest that gossip asserts or supports values (whatever these latter may be); in Zinacantan at least, 'values' are implicitly the subject of one portion of most gossip sessions. Gluckman expresses the nature of the relationship more subtly in other passages. He suggests that among the Makah "values and traditions largely persist in the gossip and in no other way." (1963:311) Again, even when conflicting groups have opposing interests, Welsh villagers (Gluckman refers to Frankenberg (1957))

> "evaluate people as leaders, as good villagers, and
> the like, so that gossip also serves to bring con-
> formity with village values and objectives." (1963:312)

Commenting on Paine's claim (1967:280) that people appeal to group values in gossip only insofar as this furthers their own self-interests, Gluckman observes

> "when one man advances his prestige by gossiping
> against another with allegations that the latter has
> broken the code of a group, he may value and desire
> to preserve the code. Even if he does not, the fact
> that he acquires prestige by defending the code,
> validates it." (1968:32)

These are difficult notions; I consider them further in Chapter 7. I showed in Chapter 4 how Zinacanteco gossip dwells on the moral dilemmas posed by the events narrated in gossip. Gossip in Zinacantan at least encourages speculation about what one might intuitively call values (e.g., about how a girl should behave during her courtship, or about the proper

way to raise children); and the moral argument in gossip
sessions clearly has the appearance of being based on a
shared set of ethical precepts.

Paine (1967 and 1968) emphasizes the function of gossip
as a tool towards an individual's attainment of ends. People
"gossip, and also regulate their gossip, to forward and pro-
tect their individual interests,"(1967:280) which may be
(and usually are) in conflict. This view of gossip has
implications both about the nature of gossiping groups,
and about the relationship between gossip and 'public moral-
ity.' First, even if gossip implicitly serves to maintain the
boundaries (hence the 'unity') of a group, gossip explicitly
furthers the ends of individuals or factions against those
of others within the group. A man once gossiped to me about
the disobedient and disrespectful behavior of his son (who
had moved out of his paternal home without making a proper
request) specifically in order to influence my willingness
to lend money to the boy. The man, it turned out, was in-
volved in a legal dispute with his son and wanted to elimi-
nate the possibility that the boy could hire a ladino lawyer
with my money. (G 20)

Gossip is most obviously instrumental in furthering
factional ends in Zinacantan when a well-spoken accomplished
'Zinacanteco lawyer' is recruited to support one side or
another. Various individuals bend the man's ear with accounts
of their enemies' wrongdoings. Zinacantecos are aware of the

power of gossip in this connection. One man told me how two groups of habitual enemies tried to enlist his aid in settling a marriage dispute (which had become the focus of their factional split): a man from one faction would invite my informant for a beer and tell him his side of the story, while a man from the other faction would eavesdrop on what they were saying. As soon as the one left, the other would accost my friend and harangue him with another version of the facts. (G 5) By convincing this one powerful man, one side of the dispute would gain a powerful ally.

Paine remarks that "gossip serves to pattern issues which were but vaguely or confusedly perceived by a local population" and hence that "gossip is a powerful social instrument for any person who learns to manage it and can thereby direct or canalise its catalytic effect." (1967: 283) A man gossips to control others, and accordingly fears gossip as it threatens to control him. Hence, a man tries to manage the information [2] that exists about others and

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[2]
 Cox (1970) applies the term "information management" to gossip. Cox also seems to claim that we can often look to the content of factionally motivated gossip to understand the issues over which factions are divided. Looking at factional divisions through the mutual gossip of the two sides, "one cannot forget what is being fought over. Since ... we must focus on the impression the parties wish to give of themselves (and of others), and the way they attempt to manage information in order to do so, we are bound to learn what each thinks important in the dispute." (1970:97) But much factionally based gossip in Zinacantan seems to mask, rather than to expose, the basis of conflict. Thus, the large

himself by gossiping about others (and drawing others into gossip-laden conversations) and trying to suppress gossip about himself. To advance one's ends through gossip requires skill and craftiness.

Hannerz (1967) (and cf. Szwed (1966)) considers the consequences of gossip in a black ghetto. He suggests that where a community makes available a large number of life strategies and value-orientations (and concomitantly, a large number of possible interactional networks, i.e., groups of friends and associates), gossip provides an individual with

> "a map of his social environment including details
> which are inaccessible to him in his own everyday
> life. He learns, in the most efficient way possible,
> what persons are currently desirable or undesirable
> associates from his point of view, and he also learns
> something about how one might profitably deal with
> them, as inferred from their latest gossiped-about
> characteristics." (1967:57)

Thus, generally, "gossip may serve to channel network affiliations" (1967:45) by distributing various kinds of instrumental information by which one decides one's own program of action. These remarks certainly apply to Zinacantan where there are thoroughgoing oppositions between traditional

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(continued) factions in Nabencauk square off periodically over land boundaries, public works, school, the presence of motorized corn mills, etc.: but the disputes which come to court, result in jailing, and generally proliferate gossip, usually have to do with, e.g., alleged witchcraft, or assassination attempts rather than more obvious political issues. (Rush (1971)). The gossip has less to do with real 'issues' and more with the personalities and evil tendencies of the disputants.

people and younger men who, for example, pursue non-tradi-
tional careers and spend their money on newfangled things.

Here we confront again the interdependence of gossip
and norms. Paine emphasizes that appeals to norms are moti-
vated by more than the desire to validate them.

> "Important data concerning the 'moral order' of a
> group are the manipulations it is possible for indi-
> viduals to make concerning their interests, and gossip
> is a device used in these manipulations." (1967:282)

If we observe gossips in action we soon understand that
one does not just _appeal_ to norms, or rules; rather one
applies them, manipulates them, and interprets them for
particular purposes. Gossiping _requires_ such manipulation
of rules; its great attraction as an activity stems from the
opportunity it provides to bend the 'moral order' to a parti-
cular purpose. And where there are alternative strategies
for success, alternative sets of values and ends, gossip
allows people to sound out the opinions of their associates
and to influence the values and assumptions of their neigh-
bors.

Consider how a single gossip session relates to a
widespread set of ethnographic facts and phenomena not bounded
by one particular story.

Fig. 9A

<div style="border:1px solid">Story</div>

Gossip begins with a story which we may, in principle,
write down; to the uninitiated ethnographer, in fact, gossip

consists of little more than a collection of texts. He is
ignorant except as he is told what happened. In Chapter 5
I took an inventory of the themes of gossip stories which I
collected; I put forward this inventory as a list of those
departures from normal behavior which are notable enough to
result in gossip.

Gossip necessarily offers an 'emic' description of be-
havior, which goes beyond ordinary observables. As ethno-
graphers we may observe behavior, but not know what we are
observing until we hear it described. We may not, that is,
be able to cut the behavior stream into words --- a feat which
a gossip text has already accomplished. To give a deeper
example, gossip frequently alludes to motivation, state of
mind, emotion, intent, and so on --- 'inner states' whose
outward manifestations ethnographers necessarily find diffi-
cult to recognize. Thus, gossip stories lead directly to the
normatively salient aspects of behavior. We learn what
constitutes sufficient excuse to break off a courtship;
we learn how Zinacantecos express anger; we learn how it is
possible to justify running away from one's husband, one's
wife, a religious cargo, and so forth. Gossip always draws
our attention immediately to the important facts, and it never
fails to draw appropriate conclusions: deciding who is to
blame, who acted badly, when things began to turn sour, etc.

Furthermore, gossip stories constantly allude to other-
wise invisible bodies of knowledge and belief. Quine (1960)

suggests that one's understanding of even a single word may be tied to a large body of sentences (e.g., theories) which relate to it. To understand gossip in Zinacantan one must be acquainted with Zinacanteco beliefs. Thus in recounting the story (G 1) of a woman whose first two husbands died, the narrator suggested that her palm might contain the design of a /zahal zek/ ('red scorpion'); people with such designs will only find a spouse who survives after three others have died. The participants in the gossip session joke: "Who knows when this guy she's married to now will also die!" An observer not familiar with Zinacanteco beliefs about the Earth and the Earth Lord would find it hard to comprehend the gossip that surrounded a project to dig up a supernatural bell in /Nabencauk/. (E 75) The project was unsuccessful and seemed thwarted by natural obstacles; but, as all agreed, /kuxul li balamile/ ('the Earth is alive.') Similarly, gossip alludes to otherwise inaccessible beliefs about 'hot' and 'cold' foods and diseases, about fertility and luck, about buried treasure and supernatural means to gain wealth, about the medicinal efficacy of various herbs and preparations, and so on. I call these beliefs inaccessible because they are infrequently expounded in other contexts; gossip, as the most common form of narrative, is almost uniquely responsible for keeping alive speculation about such matters.

Gossip stories raise a large class of problems surrounding the notion of 'cultural rule' (or 'norm' or 'value')

which I consider in more detail in Chapter 7. What is the
nature of the rule-like propositions that seem to underlie
evaluative statements in gossip? When someone remarks in
gossip that a particular awful boy does not respect and obey
his father (G 60), and that if his sons treated him in a
similar way he would turn them out, we seem by implication
to be able to extract some sort of 'rule' about the rela-
tionship between fathers and sons. And similarly, from
accounts of _cargo_ failures we learn 'rules' surrounding
proper _cargo_ performance; from stories of jailing, poverty
or divorce, we learn about upright behavior, successful
marriage, fortunate farming techniques, etc. The fact
that we can often draw morals from the transgressions of
others tells us little, however, about the 'rules' which
purportedly 'govern behavior.' Are such rules explicit
or tacit? May there not be conflicting orderings of rules,
such that one function of gossip is to bring agreement be-
tween participants about which rules are of paramount im-
portance in a particular case? There is a clear sense in
which these 'rules' amount to a statement of the semantics
of a language of behavior: they allow native actors to
discuss and interpret the behavior of others; they legiti-
mize speculation about motives, intentions, second thoughts,
regrets, etc. insofar as these are available to cultural
scrutiny, and insofar as they are relevant to evaluations
of behavior. (Consider the highly psychologized gossip which

characterizes American student circles: the rules of the game
permit (and, in fact, demand) discussion of the psychological
states of gossip victims. In this respect, gossip reflects
the native theory of behavior: that the prime determinants
of action are individual psychological factors.)

Fig. 9B

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┌─────────────┐
│ Protagonist │
└─────────────┘
      ⇕
   ┌───────┐
   │ Story │
   └───────┘
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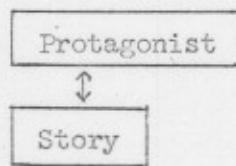
I have shown that by various identifying formulae gossip
leads participants to understand exactly who is involved. In
Zinacantan it was necessary to collect the information in the
Who's Who to understand the gossip itself, not only to
identify the protagonists. What is there to understand about
the identities of the characters in a gossip story?

Gossip relies on reputation while at the same time it
expands on it. The fact that a man is known as a murderer
certainly affects the way others treat him, the distance
they maintain; and a story about a past murderer may easily
trade on the man's reputation without explicitly stating it.
Here is one basis for Gluckman's argument that gossip excludes
outsiders. A man's proper name may even come to connote
aspects of his reputation. One woman was reputed to seduce
men with the object of stealing their good luck and wealth;
she used a certain magical trick to take their good luck:

"That's what she would do you see; she would get her riches from receiving just one thrust of the penis."

"That is wicked!"

"And our compatriots would end up just like Mat." (W 130) The speaker refers to a man named Mat who is a famous crazy, poor man, who wears a beard (in itself strange) and refuses to work, living instead by begging.

Similarly, two men were once discussing the crooked land deal being arranged by another man. They talked about how the affair would end in assassination if it came out publicly:

"If this is true, /kavron/, you'll see, he will end up like Lol Cauk; he will finish sitting behind a rock just like Lol Cauk."

"It will come out, /kavron/, the whole affair won't be settled easily. This argument will be decided with bullets." (W 85) Lol Cauk was murdered in an ambush as a result of his alleged witchcraft activities.

In a slightly different way, gossip identifies its protagonists not only by past reputation but in terms of culturally defined roles. An observer must be familiar with the cargo system before he can understand references to cargo positions. And so on. The seemingly simple ability to talk about people presupposes considerable knowledge about who people are, how they may be described.

Similarly to use nicknames speakers must have mastered
considerable native lore. A man's nickname in Zinacantan
often seizes on an outstanding feature of his past identity.
Thus a man is called /komite/ ('ejido committee') because he
served for a long time on the committee responsible for over-
seeing lands gained under land-reform laws; he has retained
a reputation for abilities in dealing with ladino authorities.
Another man is called by the name /kapon/ ('capon, castrated
animal'). He inherited the name from his grandfather whose
older brother never married and who himself married late.
The present generation has similar characteristics; the
man in question married very late, and his brother is not
married at all. In one gossip session everyone said: "Well,
they are aptly named even now!" (E 92)

Gossip often draws on its protagonists' personal asso-
ciations and factional alignments. Information about a person's
friends, or about the groups with whom he is /hp'eh shol
xci7uk/ ('of one head with', i.e., in agreement with) is
significant only to someone who knows the factions, who is
familiar with peculiarities shared by certain groups. Thus,
to say that a man is "there with the Valik family" is to
imply where he stands on a number of disputed issues in the
hamlet of /Nabencauk/. And to remark that a boy is a good
friend of one Antun K'at'ix condemns him as a rake, a licentious
misuser of women. Identifying formulae in gossip are rarely
neutral.

Fig. 9C

Narrator ⟷ Protagonist

Story
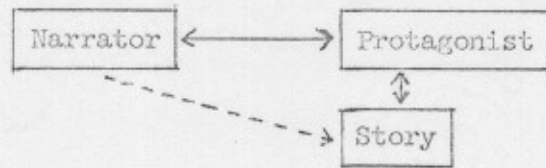
Nor is a man's gossip about someone else's factional ties or moral state likely to be disinterested. Gossip reveals a set of relationships between narrator and protagonist. If the narrator is himself involved in a factional dispute with which the protagonist is also connected, we obviously expect the gossip to reflect whether or not the two are on the same or opposite sides. Moreover, gossip often draws an implicit or explicit moral contrast between the protagonist and the narrator. Some Zinacantecos take advantage of others' misfortunes or misdeeds to draw attention to their own successes, and otherwise to give themselves airs. Thus the man who criticised another for letting his son be disobedient (G 60) went on to declare that if he were himself treated that way he would throw his sons out, let them find their own food. At a wedding, one Zinacanteco told me how the proceedings disintegrated whenever he wasn't there to tell everyone what to do. He said: "Old Petul is supposed to be the advisor, but he doesn't give orders the way I do." (G 57) Again, one ex-cargoholder used gossip about another cargoholder as a thin disguise for his own self-aggrandizement:

"In the middle of our circuit of all the alfereces' houses, we stopped to rest. Our musicians went to sleep.

The time came for us to leave, and I said we should wait.
But Cep said that we should leave:

"'We'll never finish our rounds if we don't go. We
are already overdue at the next house.'

"I said: 'But we can't leave without the musicians.
We had better wait until they sober up.'

"But Cep wanted to go. He said he would play the violin
and old Xun would play the guitar. He used to be a musician.
I told them to wait. I said I would wait behind and bring
along the musicians when they awoke.

"'But why should you do that? You are supposed to be
playing the part of jaguar. Let them sober up by themselves.'
..."

Eventually the musicians did awaken. They were angry
to find the party of ritual entertainers gone, and they
decided to go home. Only by dint of strenuous pleading did
my informant convince them to return to the group and con-
tinue to play. (G 24) The moral of the story, which I
heard the man repeat four or five times to different people,
was clearly: Cep, for all his good qualities, knows less
about the correct way to handle cargo duties than do I.

I suggested above that a gossip story represents an
'emic' description of behavior; but the fact that a gossip
story originates with a particular newsmaker makes it more

construal of events, motives, intentions, etc. We know from
conflicting versions of the same story that people gossip
about the same event for different reasons, and part of the
task of understanding gossip is untangling these reasons.

Rush (1971) demonstrates how people on opposite sides
of the main factional split in /Nabencauk/ tend to give
almost unrecognizably different accounts of the events which
led to particular manifestations of factional disputes. On
a somewhat smaller scale, I followed the progress of a dis-
pute between two men, Xun and Lol, centering on Xun's wife.
(G 4) Here are two versions of the story, one from a friend
of Lol, and the other from a friend and ally of Xun.

> Version 1 (from Lol's friend)
> Lol stole Xun's wife. Before she was married, Lol
> courted her, since she was very pretty. But Xun
> elbowed in and was the first to get the consent of
> the girl's mother. Lol went to the girl and asked
> whether she would marry Xun; the girl replied that
> she supposed she must. So Lol decided to marry the
> girl's younger sister. But Xun was a bad husband.
> He didn't provide his wife with corn; he was often
> drunk; he beat his wife. The wife and her children
> were suffering from hunger. The wife was very indus-
> trious, and she wove clothes to sell, getting the
> thread from her own labor. She was unhappy, and
> finally she went to Lol (who had a position at the
> town hall) to ask him to help her find work as a
> maid somewhere in San Cristóbal. She wanted to
> leave her husband. Lol thought: 'Why should I
> send her off to San Cristóbal. I'll just marry her
> myself.' So he sent her off for firewood, since
> his own wife was feeling ill. Soon Xun arrived and,
> as he came near the house, he caught a glimpse of his
> wife there. He said to Lol: 'Where is my wife?
> Have you seen her?'
>
> Lol replied that he had not. 'Why should she come
> to me?' he asked.
>
> 'Well, I got drunk and scolded her, so she ran
> away.'

'If you've lost your wife, don't come to me; go tell the Presidente.

Xun did take the case to the Presidente, who summoned Lol. But Lol waited several hours before going to Zinacantan Center, and in this time Xun got very drunk and was no longer able to plead his case before the Presidente. The Presidente scolded Lol for not admitting that Xun's wife had come to him. But Lol said he would marry the woman, since he had not solicited her attentions --- she had been driven out by her husband's ill-treatment.

Xun tried to have Lol jailed, but since the whole thing was his fault, he was unsuccessful.

Eventually Lol's first wife grew angry and threatened to leave. Lol told her: 'Go on if you want to.' Now he has just the one stolen wife (who is the prettier, anyway) and Xun is all alone at home.

Version 2 (from Xun's companion)

Xun's wife was always unsatisfied with her husband, and she took it ill when he would get drunk and scold her. However, he never beat her. One day she simply took it into her head to run away, so she went to Lol, where her sister lived, and asked to stay. Lol agreed to keep both women.

Soon Xun's wife said to him: 'You must murder my husband; otherwise he will come to murder you.'

Lol agreed and hired a friend named Petul to shoot Xun. Petul was a powerful ejido official with many lawyer friends in the ladino world.

Petul hid by the path and tried to ambush Xun. He shot at him twice and put a hole in Xun's shirt, though Xun managed to escape. Xun knew that, since Lol was sitting at the cabildo, there would be no success in the case in Zinacantan; so he went to the municipal town hall in San Cristóbal and had both Petul and Lol jailed for attempted murder. He brought in his shirt with the bullet hole and produced witnesses who claimed to have seen the attackers shooting and brandishing machetes.

However, after only a few hours in jail, both Lol and Petul managed to secure their releases; and they were walking the streets that same day.

That's how it is if you have money (for bribes); you can always get out of trouble.

Although in my fieldwork I did not systematically collect variant accounts of stories, I am aware of the fact that all of the gossip I did collect is likely to be as

selective and, in short, as biased as these two versions of the same story clearly are. The stories must be understood as coming from particular narrators each with his own interests and allegiances.

The identity of the narrator intrudes on gossip in another way. Different people are variously well-informed in the events about which they gossip; more interestingly, they may have different preoccupations. A man named Lukax was discovered in an adulterous relationship with the wife of a high town hall official. Men from his own hamlet, when telling the story, were most interested in the history of the liason, and in Lukax's previous evil tendencies. (W 89, E 470) A man from another hamlet, who is incidentally extremely concerned with his own public image, related only the circumstances through which the couple was punished and shamed by having to perform hard labor in the middle of a large fiesta. (H 61) Similarly, the fact that a particular man is himself reputed to have fathered several illegitimate children and possessed several dozen mistresses lends extra significance to the large number of gossip stories he tells about such womanizing behavior in others.

Fig. 9D
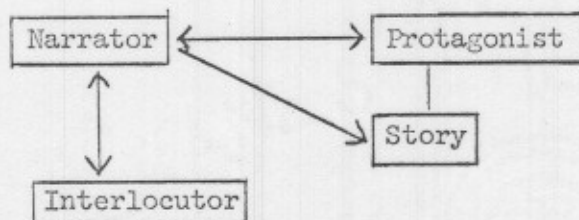
The interaction between the storyteller and his audience involves considerable manipulation of ideas, opinions, and information. Paine (1967) and Cox (1970) use the term 'information-management' --- after Goffman's 'impression-management' (1959), which itself characterizes gossip sessions --- to describe a narrator's use of gossip to influence his interlocutor's opinions, and, in fact, to control the other's access to information --- either by giving information or withholding it.

Clearly, the identity of the interlocutor will influence what a narrator says. One never gossips directly to one's victim; and one is reluctant to gossip to those who are in a position to blab. Contrariwise, Zinacantecos at first seemed reluctant to gossip in front of me as an outsider; only when I showed some familiarity with the people in question (by letting slip some bit of gossip I had heard elsewhere) would Zinacantecos decide it possible to talk freely in my presence.

Gossip is plainly aimed at the interlocutor. People try, through gossip, to convince their interlocutors, to arouse their sympathies, or to recruit their support. During the preparations for a wedding in the hamlet of /Nabencauk/, members of both the groom's family and the bride's family took time to gossip with the godfather, who is ritually charged with the care of the souls of the couple (Vogt (1969: 216)), and who will "mediate between the couple in any disputes that arise." (J. Collier (1970:159)) Before setting out for

the church in Zinacantan Center the groom's family told the
godfather how uncooperative the bride's father had been, how
the mother of the bride had continually sent messages to her
daughter (who had for several weeks been living with her
fiance) trying to lure her home on some pretext. They shook
their heads and said, "This wedding is not going well. The
relatives of the bride are ill-tempered." Later, while the
godfather and the bride's relatives rode together to Zina-
cantan Center, the bride's father complained of the boy's
misconduct. He allegedly got angry with the girl and beat
her whenever she went home to see her mother or visit her
sick grandmother. The godfather tried to soothe both sides,
urging them to wait until after the wedding to see how the
couple got along. The object of all this gossip was quite
specific; the bride's family wanted to avoid a civil marriage
in addition to the church wedding. In case the girl even-
tually decided she wanted to leave the man, she would have
to pay a large sum to have the record of a civil marriage
removed from Zinacantan records. Without a civil marriage
she would be free simply to leave if she liked. The groom's
family, on the other hand, planned to insist on a civil
marriage to bind the girl. The bride's family gossiped to
the godfather so that he would not insist on the civil mar-
riage after the church ceremony. (In this case the godfather
was most interested in making the marriage a success; though
he listened sympathetically to the pleas of both sides, he

nonetheless made sure that the civil marriage occurred.)

Gossip clearly propagates factions in Zinacantan; much of the informal talk between Zinacanteco men in San Cristóbal for business purposes has to do with the latest developments on issues which are the focus of disagreement and hostility. Recently, such factional issues have included the introduction (and payment for) schools, electricity, all-weather roads, potable water, etc. (Cf. Rush (1971)).

Zinacanteco narrative style, and the nature of the interaction between narrator and interlocutor, give gossip its power as catalyst of factional disputes. Moreover, gossip 'reaffirms cultural values' in the sense that in gossip events are discussed and their outcomes rationalized.[3] But there is a clear sense in which the narrator tries to manipulate his interlocutor's opinions; he not only makes statements with which the interlocutor will necessarily agree, but actively solicits agreement and sympathy. The patterned responses of an interlocutor, the interjections and grunts between the narrator's phrases, are morally charged.

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[3] Consider the parallel with what Jane Collier calls 'rational settlement' of a legal dispute.

> "A legal procedure can only produce a rational solution when an attempt is made to resolve the conflict in terms of norms and procedures regarded as valid by both parties." (1970:21)

Gossip rationalizes the past behavior of others in the sense that it tends to produce agreement between parties to the gossip about the applicable norms and standards and the appropriate judgements involved. But Cf. Chapter 7: Rules.

They are not merely neutral; they express agreement or surprise. The skillful gossip will appeal selectively to rule-like propositions and values to create the desired impressions. Moreover, a prudent gossip often will elicit as much information (if not more) from his interlocutor as he himself is prepared to give. A woman in Zinacantan whom I had frequent occasion to visit always asked me about doings of people with which she was well acquainted simply to discover what my reactions were, how much I already knew myself. Similarly, during the Who's Who gossip sessions for one hamlet, an old man who knew the histories of every person often pretended to be ignorant so that he could hear someone else's gossip and observe someone else's opinions.

Fig. 9E
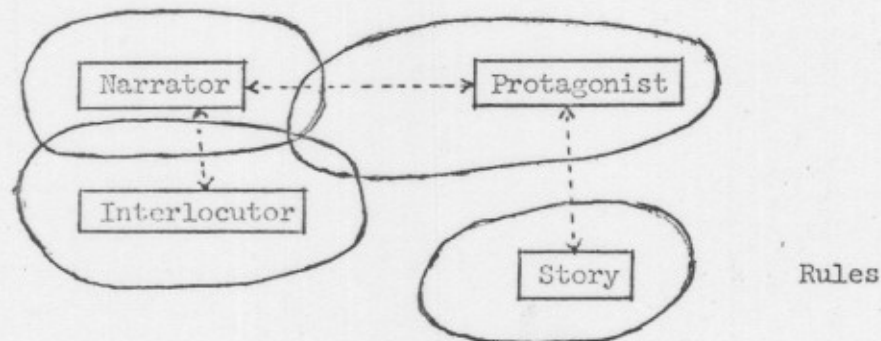
I may, finally, extend my diagram to include the salient groups to which Protagonist, Narrator and Interlocutor belong, and to relate the particular story recounted in a single gossip session to the entire 'cultural code' which 'governs' behavior. One might study what groups can (or commonly do) gossip with

what groups about what other groups. That is, in the most
general sense, gossip can be understood only as phenomenon
taking place between individuals who belong to groups, just
as the particular transgressions of individuals (which provide
the material for gossip) can only be fully understood as
departures from some general standards of appropriateness.
The striking thing about gossip is its absorbtive capacity;
it contains clues to an unlimited set of ethnographic facts.
Despite particular uses to which we put it --- as, for example,
when I survey the subjects of gossip stories in Chapter 5 ---
we only are able to master gossip as an activity when we
have, essentially, mastered the whole culture.

In the last two chapters of this thesis I consider
gossip as a general resource for ethnographic investigations.
Gossip uses words and arranges them into what I have been
calling 'rule-like propositions.' Wittgenstein (1953) has
taught us that to understand a language is to understand a
'form of life'. Gossip is based on a particular cultural
(or meta-cultural) language; as this language is employed
in gossip it bridges the gap to a cultural life --- to be-
havior as it can be construed through language. I expand
on these remarks in Chapter 7. Furthermore, I conclude from
the interrelationship between boxes in Figure 9 that the skills
required to understand gossip are virtually the same as those
required to do it. Such skills are certainly part of the
cultural competence which we expound in ethnography. But,

the ability to gossip presupposes a good deal of contingent

knowledge --- a census, for example. In Chapter 8 I consider

some consequences of the gossip's abilities for the theory

of ethnography.