



## AN INTERCULTURAL STUDY: FORMS AND NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SABUNESE AND ROTENESE WOMEN GROUP GOSSIPS

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**ABSTRAK:** This study examines gossip in two different ethnicities living in the city of Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara province namely Sabu and Rote tribes. This study specifically answers two main questions. First, what kind of gossip is usually discussed by women from both ethnicities. Second, which ethnic group produces more negative impacts from this social conversation. In addition to two questions above, several other elements were also analyzed in this study such as atmosphere, context, participants, age, ethnicity, education, social distance, and language use. The study employed observation and interviews method in collecting the data. The interview was done by applying close ended questionnaire. A total of 36 participants were included as samples and subjects in this study. The result of this study indicates that both ethnicities have a common topic when gossiping. For example, family problems, recipes, parenting, infidelity and others. Although two ethnicities are equally involved and experiencing the negative effects of this social conversation, women from the Sabu tribe have a higher level of involvement in terms of verbal and physical fights.

**Keywords:** *gossip, women, ethnicity, negative impacts.*

### INTRODUCTION

As a member of the Kupang community, I have encountered that gossiping is a part of daily conversation in this area. Gossip is generally found in all different ages, either young or old. Besides that, sex makes no difference in employing this informal talk since men are also involved in gossip. Holland (1996) argued that gossip is in all worldwide languages because many people find gossip as an entertainment. It is a pleasureable way of enjoying and resting from routine activities.

In addition to that, gossip can play a pivotal role in maintaining good rapport among individuals. It is noticed that many Sabunese and Rotenese women establish their own group as they participate in this verbal talk. Gossip in both ethnics occurs more often in several settings, such as the verandas of a house, kitchens, parties, traditional housewife meetings, and funerals.

However, gossip can be a double-edged sword which can create problem for the target of gossip, the gossipers and the listeners. It is often found that many verbal and non-verbal disputes occur in each ethnic or with other ethnics, beside the Rotenese, such as Timor, Alor, Flores and Sumba. As the negative gossip spreads, a negative reaction mostly becomes the response. The biggest contribution of the negative response might be determined by the content of the gossip and educational background. People with good education mostly less respond to this talk unless it is very crucial. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the forms of gossip employed by Sabu and Rote ethnics as well as the

negative consequences resulted from the talk. In addition, the setting, participants, age, ethnics, education, social distance, language use, and negative consequences were taken into account in the analysis. Furthermore, this research attempts to figure out two research questions. The first question is *what type of gossip's forms produced by both ethnics?*. The second question is *which group of women produces more negative consequences to themselves or other ethnic women after gossiping?*

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Gossip and its category

Many studies have already been conducted in gossip, however, the study of gossip among women in my local community is supposed to be the first research study which can contribute to the area of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the literature of this research proposal is based on several scholars' works, looking from different viewpoints such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and linguistics.

Gossip originally comes from the word *godsib* which means a godparent (Holland 1996, p. 197). However, this term later expanded to females' well-known friends or colleagues who were invited to come to the birth of a baby. Holland (1996) assumed that the existence of gossip nowadays was initially triggered by the women's talk at the time they were awaiting for the birth. Arising from small talk while awaiting the baby to be born, however now gossip is a women's oral culture, in which it takes place in many occasions with a variety of discussions.

Jones (1979) categorized gossip into four types, namely house-talk, scandal, bitching, and chatting. House-talk gossip is a label referring to information and resource sharing about a woman's job. The primary information which is discussed is recipes, domestic work, child rearing, dress pattern or the start of a relationship. Besides that, there are several secondary information that is shared for example, emotional support, self respect, feelings, attitudes, and complaints.

In contrast to house-talk gossip, scandal is a verbal discussion which judges one's behavior, a particularly woman's sexual behavior. Women are judged based on the social norm of moral rules in which they should obey. This talk also accommodates the interest of women on the life of each other. In other words, scandal becomes an interactional medium which pays much attention on isolated women due to work or other life issues. Regardless of both functions, scandal is just a leisure activity for women in knowing other women's lives, ranging from simple daily news to more serious issues.

The other category of gossip is so-called bitching. This category of gossip is different from house-talk and scandal because it mainly focuses on the complaints of women. The complaints are caused by the dissatisfaction and anger of women due to role restrictions and lower positions. Generally, bitching is considered as private talk so it is discussed among women only. Participating in bitching makes a woman feel relief because they can express their anger. In spite of finding a solution, women seek more understanding and attention on their problems from their peers.

In comparison to the previous three types of gossip, chatting is the most confidential talk, which reveals more about woman's self. Women complete each other in this talk by sharing their nurturing skills, knowledge and experiences. Despite the nurturing knowledge, Chesler (cited in Jones 1979, p. 5) described the distinctive aspect of chatting compared to other types of gossip. He argued that chatting is a woman's intimate talk because chatting is a medium of emotional confession, resolution, and comfort. Women often disclose their personal feelings, hoping that other peers will listen to and comment. A reflection and matching of life experiences are made by both the speaker and the hearer. In doing so, women prefer to share with women to men because they feel comfortable.

### **Social function of gossip**

Jorg Bergmann examined that this verbal behavior contains three social functions. He argued that 'gossip as a means of social control, gossip as a mechanism for preserving social groups and gossip as a technique of information management' (cited in Holland, 1996, p.201). Bergman described that gossip can be a social control instrument because gossip maintain the standard norms and values within a group. Thus, immoral people are assumed as a disobeying the social norms

In line with Bergman, Foster (2004) argued that as a mechanism of group maintenance, gossip joins groups

together by sharing common norms, knowledge and trust boundaries. Similar to Bergman, an anthropologist sees this talk as a way of preserving social harmony, beliefs, and ethics (Gluckman cited in Jones 1979, p. 2). The social harmony is created by a well-developed close relationship among the gossipers. It is due to the fact that a friendship's bond is established as the participants engage in life sharing. However, he also noted that gossip can become a fundamental standard to separate insiders from outsiders. Outsiders with no information can be excluded by the group. (Gluckman cited in Foster, 2004, p. 9).

Lastly, as an information management technique, gossips assist to disseminate the information so each community member gains equal information as much as the others. Furthermore, to the extent of a group and official works, gossip helps to update people with new resource and information.

### **Gossip and social threats.**

Even though many sociologists and anthropologists examine many positive benefits of gossip, they forget to consider the consequences of this verbal talk. Holland (1996) noticed that the consequences of gossip may impact the person being discussed as well as the gossipers and listeners. The person being gossiped might have personal insecurity, social rejection and self alienation. The reasons of these negative effects are the revelation of one's confidential issue and social impediment towards one's personal freedom.

In addition to that, gossip may possibly destroy the relationship among gossipers. It is due to the fact that the participants of this verbal talk could also discuss other participant's private life. The discussion thus leads to the violation of trust among them. Furthermore, Holland noted that gossip can boost malevolent attitudes for the gossipers and listeners because of being overexposed to negative evaluation. The more the participants take part in the activity of negative gossip, the more they become jealous, angry, disdainful and intrusive. Psychologists, moreover, figured out that negative gossip can bear psycho physiological impacts to the participants. Since the participants are involved in the talking, it then can affect neurocardiac health and respiratory rate (Withcel 2006, p. 6).

Apart from the gossipers, listeners and the person being gossiped, gossip additionally instigates detrimental effects to a social atmosphere. The activity of gossip creates a culture of criticism and narrows the life sphere of several people. It is because gossip becomes a benchmark for controlling the individual and community. The other unfavorable aspect of gossip to social life is the loss of empathy and moral awareness towards other's personal business due to the mismatch between the tone and substance of gossip.

## RESEARCH METHOD

As Foster (2004) noted that many research methods have been used in previous research on gossip, and this research employed observation and close ended questionnaire methods as data collection techniques. However, taking into account the weaknesses of both methods, interview was also conducted. The questionnaires aimed at gathering the detailed information about the form and the serious risks arisen from gossip activities. This cannot be done in video recordings because it only contains current conversation which does not show any risks on the spot yet. Therefore, questionnaires were very helpful in tracing back the previous serious consequences, happening to gossipers and listeners.

In investigating which group produces more risks, there are several essential variables that have to be taken into account in the questionnaires. The variables are participants, age, education, social distance, language use, and negative consequences. The questionnaires and interviewed were distributed to 36 participants consisting of gossipers and listeners of both ethnics living in Kupang.

### Classification according to functional categories of gossip

The investigation of this study was fundamentally hinge on the four functional categories of gossip, i.e. *house-talk*, *scandal*, *bitching* and *chatting*. These categories are assumed to be the main consideration which determines other related following variables.

#### a. Participants

Since gossip is an informal dialogue, the participants engaged and correlate with each other in this dynamic communication. The participants comprised of gossipers and listeners of the gossip.

#### b. Age

The age of the participants has big influence on the choice of topics which is going to be discussed. The age of the participants varies based on the gossipers and listeners. The gossipers only reveal private stories to their fellow or older people but less conveyed to younger listeners. Thus, the age of participants is categorized as follows:

The age of gossipers and listeners:

- 20 – 30 years old
- 30 – 40 years old
- 40 – 50 years old
- > 50 years old

#### c. Ethnicity

In addition to the participants, the ethnicity of the participants is also important to consider in this study. It is because of the reason that both ethnics dwell in a

multicultural community, beside indigenous Kupang. The other ethnicities of East Nusa Tenggara province consist of Timor, Sumba, Alor and Flores. Thus, it is important to investigate whether both ethnics only gossip the participants from their own ethnicity or if they include Kupang people and the other four ethnics. The relation of choosing participants' ethnicities may create problems someday if there is a negative gossip as it then may lead to intercultural disputes.

#### d. Education

The educational background is considered as one of the most influential factors of gossip. It is assumed that the higher the education that is pursued by someone, the more knowledgeable the person is. Therefore, there is a possibility that the person may avoid group of gossipers or conflict arose from gossip activity. Both the gossipers and listeners of both ethnic were expected to provide their latest education such as elementary, junior high school, senior high school, bachelor, master and doctorate.

#### d. Topics of gossips

The topics of gossips play important role in the discussion. The topics vary from cultures to cultures. The study however proposes some common discussion topics as follows: households works, child rearing, husband's salary, recipes, dress patterns, marriage, marriage affair, sexual immorality, feelings, health, family and relative problems, education problems, economics problem and others.

#### e. Social distance

It is very interesting to note that social distance becomes one of the variables which determine the consequences of gossip. It is believed that the more close the relationship, the more information will be discussed. The social distance between gossipers and target of gossip then was evaluated based on the two categories; close relationship and distant relationship. Close relationships such as husband, children, parents/ parents-in-law, close friends. While distant relationships are colleague, neighbors, relatives, strangers.

The other social distance is the relationship between gossipers and listeners. It is often found that the gossipers feel comfortable to share information or disclose their private lives if the listeners have close relationship with them. Gossipers are much comfortable to share their problem and initiate a talk with female parents/ female parents-in-law, female close friends, female colleague, Female Neighbors, Female Relatives, Female Stranger

#### f. Language use

Language is the fundamental tool for conveying gossipers' ideas and feelings during the conversation. In the role of communication, the gossipers employ both



verbal and non verbal languages. However, to the extent of projecting negative consequences, this research needs to examine the impoliteness of the verbal language, i.e. swear words, insult words, taboo words, ironic remarks, aggressive jokes, indirect attacks (Kientpointner 1997, p.5). Verbal impolite languages often become a triggering factor for more serious risk, such as fighting. These are the verbal impolite language: swear words, insult words, taboo words, ironic remarks, aggressive jokes and indirect attacks.

#### **g. Negative consequences**

As the result of impolite verbal language use, gossip may produce several negatives consequences. These consequences might impact the gossipers, the listeners, target of gossip and social atmosphere. In predicting which group encourages more potential risks, the variable of previous negative consequences is used as a comparative data to support the finding of language use. It is assumed that the more impolite languages are uttered, the more potential threats appear. The data of previous negative consequences that happened to the gossipers, the gossipee and social atmosphere were used to prove which group instigated more risks from two years ago until the data is collected. Effects of negative consequences that happened to gossipers and listeners: Angry, envy, jealous, verbal fighting, physical fighting, group dismantle and mistrust.

#### **Limitations**

The study investigated the forms and consequences of housewives' gossips in two distinctive ethnics, living in Kupang. Despite the indigenous Kupangnese, there are also other ethnics who may involve in this talk as participants. However, this study only investigated indigenous society of East Nusa Tenggara. The outsiders of East Nusa Tenggara people were not be taken into account.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The research was done involving 36 women coming from Sabu and Rote ethnicities. It was conducted in several areas where both ethnic communities live in Kupang. This research was conducted from 4 June 2019 to 27 July 2019. The research was carried out in the ethnic group of Sabu women in, Fatufeto, Tofa, Maulafa, Nun Baun Sabu and Nunhila in Kupang City. Meanwhile, the research on Rote ethnicity was carried out in Oesapa Village, Maulafa, Tofa, Oepura, and BTN Kolhua. The selection of this research area is based on the researchers' knowledge of the distribution of each ethnic group which tends to be centralized in specific areas such as the Sabu community which tends to be centered in the regions of Oebobo, Fatufeto, Batu Kadera, Nunbaun Sabu and its surroundings, while the Rote community tends to be centered in the large Oesapa area, Oebelo, and Naikoten, although the two ethnic groups also live

side by side in the Sikumana, Oepura and several other places in Kupang City.

The numbers of research informants for each ethnic group are 18 people with a total of 36 people. They are categorized in 12 Savunese gossipers, 12 Roteness gossipers, 6 Roteness listeners and 6 Savunese listeners. There was no target of gossips interviewed in this research.

The age group of both gossipers and listeners of Savu and Rote ethnic groups are mainly ranging from 30 to 50 years old. The age of the gossip listeners in Savu ethnic is slightly younger than the gossip listeners in the Rote ethnicity. In the researchers' observations, the older informants appeared to be more closed and more careful in expressing their opinions than younger informants.

Viewed from the level of education, the level of education of the gossipers in both ethnicities is lower than the gossip listeners even though the gossipers from Rote have different levels of education from one another.

The gossipers from the ethnic Sabu didn't just socialize with their age group. There is a kind of flexibility that allows them to also open up to younger people such as women aged 20 to 30 years even though they appear to be more comfortable sharing personal information with women aged 30 to 40 years. This fact looks different from ethnic Rote gossipers where the age factor in the Rote gossip group plays a significant role in gossip listener selection. The majority of the gossip listeners in the Rote ethnic group are women of the same age as gossipers. When the gossipers share information, both Savunese and Rotenese women agree that they are generally interested in discussing people between the ages of 20 and 30 years. However, 40 % of Savu women also gossip about people with an age group above 30 years. 35 % Rote women are more interested in talking about teenagers under 20 years.

Ethnically, women of both ethnicities tend to choose women from same ethnic background as their gossip partners. If they have to share gossip with women from different ethnicities, it is due to the emotional closeness that is built based on marital relationships and friendship. For example, some of the gossip partners of Savunese women are women from Alor ethnicity, while Rotenese women gossip partners are Timorese women. Furthermore, the two women groups agreed that they gossiped people coming from same ethnic background. It is due to the fact that they tend to try to find a safe way that will not lead to new problems such as verbal or physical fight. It is interesting to note that it seems reasonable and more interesting for them to talk about things about real life that are familiar with them.

From the educational background, gossipers in both ethnic groups agreed that their gossip targets were people dominated by high school graduates, some graduated from junior high school and elementary school, and a few people graduated from D3 / D4. Although gossipers from these two ethnic groups share information with the majority of peers who are equal or lower (<70%), they also have access to social outreach

in gossiping with more educated people with more or less 30%.

Gossipers from the two ethnic groups generally show differences in the tendency to choose dominant topics. Sabu ethnic gossipers have a dominant tendency to talk about education and child care, although they also talk about issues around domestic work, food recipes, domestic matters, health and kinship issues. Interestingly, one of the last topics they talked about was infidelity. On the other hand, ethnic Rote gossipers make economic problems and household matters the dominant topic of gossip. However, they also discussed matters surrounding child care and clothing as well as kinship issues and daily household activities.

Specifically, ethnic Sabu gossipers admit that they spend their gossiping hours discussing primarily family members such as relatives (35%), children (25%) and husbands (10%). However, the ethnic Sabu women also admit that they also talked about their coworkers (20%) and neighbors (10%). On the other hand, ethnic Rote gossipers spend more time talking about relatives and close friends (70%), although they also talk about their neighbors and children (30%).

In terms of partners in gossiping, gossipers from both ethnicities agree that female relatives are the main partners in gossiping. However, ethnic Rote gossipers also show closeness with close female friends. Apart from that, gossipers also make female friends and female neighbors their gossiping partners.

There are almost no clear feelings for Sabu women when they gossip. They tend to shut down or be defensive when asked so. Rote gossipers might be more honest. Some claim that sadness and disappointment are the two main feelings when they gossip even though others feel normal when they sit gossiping.

The result shows that the women of both ethnicities were involved in quarrel and physical fights. However, Savu gossipers involved more in conflicts with fellow women of Savu or other ethnic groups than Rotenese. For example, one person among Sabu gossipers involved in a quarrel with Rote and Timorese at work. On the other hand, Rotenese gossipers admitted that one of them had been involved in a verbal fight with fellow ethnic Rote women and furthermore they had experienced a fight with people from Bugis, Alor and Timor. However, there is uncertainty about when the incident occurred. They only stated that they have experienced above condition. Gossipers from both ethnicities agree that gossiping is an activity that worsens the social relation among women in their group.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that both Sabunese and Rotenese women group generally show differences in the tendency to choose dominant topics. Sabu ethnic gossipers have a dominant tendency to talk about education and child care, although they also talk about issues around domestic work, food recipes, domestic matters, health and kinship issues. Interestingly, one of the last topics they talked about was infidelity. On the

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The gossipers from the ethnic Sabu didn't just socialize with their age group. There is a kind of flexibility that allows them to also open up to younger people such as women aged 20 to 30 years even though they appear to be more comfortable sharing personal information with women aged 30 to 40 years. This fact looks different from ethnic Rote gossipers where the age factor in the Rote gossip group plays a significant role in gossip listener selection. The majority of the gossip listeners in the Rote ethnic group are women of the same age as gossipers. Ethnically, women of both ethnicities tend to choose women from same ethnic background as their gossip partners. If they have to share gossip with women from different ethnicities, it is due to the emotional closeness that is built based on marital relationships and friendship.

From the educational background, gossipers in both ethnic groups agreed that their gossip targets were people dominated by high school graduates, some graduated from junior high school and elementary school, and a few people with Diploma, Bachelor and even master degree. The result of the research shows that both ethnicities were involved in the quarrel and physical fights. However, Savu gossipers involved more in conflicts with fellow women of Savu or other ethnic groups than Rotenese thus it creates more negative consequences.

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