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The Role of Gossip and Backbiting in Undermining Family Health and Stability from a Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Backbiting, defined as speaking ill of others in their absence, is explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an and the traditions of both major Islamic schools of thought. Islamic jurisprudence also considers it among the forbidden acts. This behavior has destructive effects on human relationships and communities, both small and large. Undoubtedly, the critical foundation of family life is also affected by the harms of this reprehensible act.

While the detrimental effects of backbiting are generally discussed in religious texts, psychological studies provide insights into factors that strengthen and maintain family health through empirical observation and research. By investigating the impact of backbiting on undermining these psychological factors, it is possible to measure the extent to which this unethical behavior influences family health and marital success.

Understanding how backbiting causes harm and identifying strategies to prevent it can significantly contribute to family stability and well-being. In this study, psychological findings on the factors that support family resilience and health were analyzed, and the role of backbiting in weakening these factors was examined using an analytical approach. The identified harms include diminished self-disclosure, alienation, chronic anger, erosion of trust, loss of familial support, and obstacles to intimacy. Strategies for prevention include adherence to divine commands, practicing gratitude, granting the right to make mistakes, and fostering closeness within the family.

Introduction

In the Quranic verses, backbiting or speaking ill of others in their absence is condemned as an unethical act and explicitly prohibited in Islamic traditions. The severity of its harm is elaborated upon in Islamic jurisprudence, classifying it as a sinful act. Since religious ethical and practical rulings are based on divine wisdom, the prohibition of backbiting is undoubtedly due to its detrimental effects on human development and the well-being of moral and mental health. For example, in a famous verse of the Quran (Surah Al-Hujurat, 49:12), the abhorrence of backbiting is metaphorically likened to consuming the flesh of one's deceased brother.While divine commands can be followed out of obedience, understanding the wisdom behind them enhances adherence. Given that backbiting pertains to interpersonal relations, one of its significant arenas is the family. This unethical practice undeniably disrupts the foundational pillars of family well-being, undermining marital success and the stability of family life. Identifying the factors that harm family health and resilience and discovering preventive strategies can play a crucial role in preserving family integrity and preventing its disintegration.This study collects psychological insights on the principles and factors contributing to family success and well-being. Using an analytical reasoning approach and drawing upon

Quranic verses and Islamic traditions, it examines the destructive impact of backbiting on these factors and proposes strategies to mitigate its effects.

Throughout history, Islamic scholars have extensively examined the concept of backbiting (ghibah), exploring its various dimensions and harmful consequences. These discussions are particularly emphasized in Quranic exegeses, especially in the interpretation of verse 12 of Surah Al-Hujurat and other related verses. Moreover, detailed analyses of ghibah are found in collections of hadith and jurisprudential texts. Ethical and mystical writings also address the inner and spiritual aspects of backbiting. For example, Imam Khomeini (1380) provides a comprehensive discussion on the topic, emphasizing its moral ramifications. Similarly, works like *Mi'raj al-Sa'adah* by Mulla Ahmad Naraqi (1361) dedicate specific chapters to examining backbiting and its consequences

In recent studies, the negative impacts of gossip have been examined from various perspectives. Haji Hosseini, in his article titled "The Social Pathology of Gossip," explores the detrimental effects of gossip on social relationships, such as disorder and disorganization in society. He also analyzes the factors contributing to gossip in communities and proposes strategies to eliminate it.

Baharestani and Panahi, in their article titled "The Negative Impacts of the Three Linguistic Afflictions (Gossip, Slander, and Calumny) on Islamic Life," investigate the harms of gossip and slander in human relationships.

Najati and Ghabezi, in their article titled "Psychological and Neurological Evidence on the Manifestation of Self and Other Perception Deficits in Gossip," delve into psychological and neurological texts. They discuss gossip through the lens of self-schema, self-affirmation, and the above-average effect, explaining their roles in the perception of others. Additionally, they identify factors that can prevent gossip.

Numerous studies have been conducted on family stability and health, examining the role of various factors in strengthening or weakening family health. In his article titled "Communication and Its Impact on Family Health," Shoaa Kazemi explores the factors contributing to intimate communication among family members and those that disrupt it. In his article titled "The Role of Relatives in Strengthening the Family," Sajadi examines the impact of kinship relations on family health and stability, highlighting how the absence of these factors can lead to marital instability. Panahi and Zarean, in their article "Family Health and the Social Factors Affecting It," investigate the relationship between family health components and social factors, including the alignment of cultural and economic capital and kinship relations. In his article titled "Factors Strengthening the Family in Islamic Culture," Hosseinzadeh provides a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing family stability within Islamic culture.

In previous studies, the role of Backbiting in damaging family health and stability, as well as reinforcing harmful factors within the family, has not been adequately examined. Therefore, the present research investigates the factors contributing to marital stability and success, with a focus on psychological findings. It specifically explores how Backbiting affects the factors that influence

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family health and stability, while seeking preventive strategies to mitigate such impacts. The main research questions are as follows:

1. What are the factors influencing family health and stability?
2. How can Backbiting damage the factors contributing to family stability?
3. What are the preventive strategies to protect family stability from the harm caused by Backbiting?

٢ - Conceptualization of Backbiting.

Backbiting is derived from the Arabic root "ghayb," which refers to something that is hidden from the sight (Mustafawi, 1394). When a person speaks ill of someone in their absence, if the negative trait mentioned is actually present in the person, it is called backbiting. However, if the trait is false, it is considered slander. If the criticism is directed at the person face-to-face, it is referred to as verbal abuse or insult. As defined by al-Fayumi (1372), backbiting occurs when a person mentions the undesirable traits of another, which the latter would dislike being exposed, and the speaker is truthful in their statement. In his book *Al-Tahqiq*, al-Raghib Isfahani (1374) states that backbiting is when a person reminds another of a flaw that they possess, without any necessity to mention it. According to Tabarsi, the term "backbiting" means mentioning someone's fault in their absence, which would be prevented by one's conscience and wisdom (Majma' al-Bayan, 548).

٣--backbiting in Islamic sources

Backbiting in Islamic ethical sources refers to speaking about others in a manner or act that, if they were to know, they would disapprove of, whether the subject involves their physical defects, moral weaknesses, or their way of speaking or acting, or otherwise (Fayz Kashani, 1396, and Narāqi, 1385). This act is explicitly prohibited in the Quran, where its repugnance is likened to eating the flesh of one's dead brother. Commentaries on this verse explain that backbiting gradually corrupts the components of human society, causing them to lose the potential for positive outcomes that are expected from individuals. Such outcomes include fostering trust and safety between members of the community, with individuals feeling secure in their relationships and having faith in each other's integrity. As a result, these individuals will become close (Tabatabai, 1402). Backbiting is also compared to leprosy, which gradually affects and weakens the body. Similarly, when backbiting spreads within a society, it disrupts unity, love, and religious bonds, fostering distrust and eliminating mutual confidence (Hosseini Hamadani, 1375). Consequently, due to the explicit prohibition of backbiting in the Quran and hadith, Islamic jurisprudence affirms its unlawful nature (Hilli, 1405, Abu Habib, 1408, and Bayhaqi, n.d., Ghazali, n.d.).

٤-family Health in Psychology

Family psychologists define a healthy family as one where all members utilize their blessings, skills, and talents, and are satisfied with their status and position. Their lives are filled with hope, enthusiasm, and energy, and they are treated with love and respect within the family (McGraw, 2009). John Bradshaw believes that "a healthy couple is voluntarily committed to each other, making decisions and choosing to stay together under any circumstance. A healthy marital relationship is based on unconditional love. It is not a passing feeling but a decision" (Bradshaw,

2007). In general, when describing the characteristics of a healthy family, it can be said that in a healthy family, relationships are based on mutual respect, and love and intimacy prevail among members. A healthy family is one where roles are clearly defined, and healthy communication exists between members, ensuring the emotional and spiritual well-being of all family members and providing an environment for their growth and development (Panahi, 2012).

٥- Factors of Family Health

In psychology, the factors contributing to family health and stability are often outlined through principles and guidelines based on extensive research and clinical experiences. John Gottman identifies seven ethical principles for marital success, which he tested in his counseling with couples. He considers the absence of these principles a cause of marital breakdown. Among these principles are creating a detailed "love map," enhancing appreciation and admiration, striving for closeness, allowing mutual influence, and fostering shared meaning (Gottman, 2001).

In his book on couples therapy, Gottman also compares four destructive factors in marriage to the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." These include criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. To neutralize the harmful effects of these factors, he emphasizes the importance of calmly managing conflicts (Gottman, 2018).

Psychologists also highlight effective communication and healthy dialogue as key contributors to family health. Accepting each other as they are, fostering honest and sincere communication, resolving differences of opinion, granting partners the right to make mistakes, and other related practices are

described as essential for family resilience and well-being (Ellis & Crawford, 2015).

٦-The Impact of Gossip on Family Health Factors

Considering the factors influencing the success, health, and stability of families, as well as the destructive and harmful elements affecting them, gossip undermines family health and stability in multiple ways. This includes weakening health-promoting factors and reinforcing destructive ones.

6-1-The Role of Gossip and Backbiting in Preventing Self-Disclosure

One of the factors contributing to marital health is self-disclosure (Shoa'a Kazemi, 2005). Clearly and respectfully expressing who I am, what situation I am in, and how I would like to be treated, represents assertiveness in relationships. Central to this is the ability to disclose one's thoughts, feelings, interests, experiences, and viewpoints to others. The more both partners disclose themselves appropriately, the quicker misunderstandings and resentments are resolved. On the contrary, the lack of self-disclosure may be interpreted as a lack of interest in the relationship or as dissatisfaction with it. Markman and colleagues believe that self-disclosure is a key feature of good psychological functioning, a sign of personal health, and a tool for acquiring a healthy personality. Hendrick suggests that self-disclosure is a means to improve marital relationships. It involves revealing verbal and non-verbal aspects of oneself that others cannot discern or understand without our help. He also believes that if relational factors influence self-disclosure, it, in turn, can affect those factors. Moreover, he asserts that couples who disclose more about themselves to each other are more satisfied with their marriage (as cited in Mirkheshti, 1996).

Regarding gossip, it occurs when a person feels discomfort with another's behavior. Within the family, gossip about a spouse's relatives arises from discomfort with them, and outside the family, gossip about a spouse or their close ones happens when dissatisfaction arises. Couples who habitually gossip about their in-laws or others tend to use gossip and backbiting as a way of coping with their discomfort, and this behavior extends to criticizing each other or their spouses' families. This pattern of behavior prevents them from expressing their needs, feelings, expectations, and characteristics, thus missing out on the benefits of self-disclosure in maintaining a healthy relationship with their spouse. Prophet muhammad (PBUH) praised those who refrain from focusing on the flaws of others, as this helps avoid neglecting one's own flaws. In a family environment, discussing one's own shortcomings and needs, and disclosing them, should be contrasted with the habit of gossiping, which hinders self-disclosure and its beneficial effects in relationships.

6-2- The Role of Backbiting in Alienation and the Inhibition of Self-Actualization

Alienation refers to a state where an individual's inner stability and strength are diminished by social influences, leading to a reduced recognition of their own identity markers. This results in the weakening of personal values and inner stability, making the person more likely to engage in disorganized and abnormal behaviors to seek approval from others, even behaviors that contradict their own values. Research shows that individuals may judge others based on stereotypes, especially when their self-concept is threatened. In such conditions, degrading others can temporarily boost one's self-esteem (Najati & Ghabezi, 2013). The tendency to belittle others within the family, along with neglecting personal values and inner stability, diminishes the expression of positive characteristics within the family, leading to less focus on fostering and demonstrating these traits. However, a critical factor in family cohesion is self-awareness, cultivating talents, enhancing moral traits, and addressing personal flaws (Nouri, 2010).

6-3-The role of backbiting in eroding trust

Gottman, in his analysis of healthy marital relationships, asserts that the "Seven Levels of a Healthy Relationship House" will remain stable only when built on two strong pillars: trust and commitment. Trust is established when both partners are assured that they will stand by each other in every circumstance, whether it is sadness, anger, fear, humiliation, physical changes, success or failure, joy or despair, illness or injury, or even during moments of dreaming and imagination. Building trust is a mutual process shaped by both individuals. This trust is further strengthened when one partner decides to demonstrate that, even if they are not perfect or cannot always act flawlessly, they are committed to improving the relationship (Gottman, 2007).Speaking negatively about a spouse in the presence of family, colleagues, or friends undermines trust between partners. Revealing a partner's behavior to others gradually disrupts the trust-building process over time and ultimately weakens the foundation of the family

6-4-Gossip as a Cause of Persistent Anger that Destroys Relationships

One of the negative consequences of speaking ill of a spouse's relatives, close friends, or acquaintances, as well as making harsh criticisms and offensive remarks, is the provocation of anger in the other partner.

Gottman argues that when spouses consistently voice critical complaints or blame their partner for shortcomings, their relationship gradually deteriorates. Such speech not only triggers anger but also diminishes mutual cooperation and attention. It can be inferred that the habit of disparaging or criticizing a spouse's close ones can yield similar effects.Gottman identifies contempt as another destructive behavior in marital relationships. This behavior, regarded as one of the most significant threats to a relationship, quickly pushes couples toward separation. Contempt, often expressed through arrogance, mockery, or non-verbal cues such as eye-rolling or sneering, reflects a sense of superiority and disgust in the offending partner. Such actions not only damage the relationship but also evoke feelings of humiliation and anger in the other spouse. In many cases, these contemptuous remarks are directed toward the spouse's family. When individuals insult or speak ill of each other's relatives, they may provoke even stronger emotions of anger and hurt in their partner.

6-5- an obstacle to understanding the inner world

Gottman considers the awareness of each other's inner world as a key factor in building a strong marital relationship. He suggests that when a husband and wife are aware of each other's concerns, fears, and stresses, and sincerely engage with each other's world, understanding each other's goals, hopes, and desires, it fosters closeness (Gottman, 2007, p. 54). If the atmosphere of the couple's communication is conducive to this kind of exchange, they can develop a deeper understanding of each other. However, a habit of gossiping and speaking ill of others causes partners to attack each other's family members or themselves in times of distress. Even in moments of joy, if a conversation

takes place, they may enjoy gossiping about others, which prevents meaningful dialogues about truly understanding one another.

٦-٦ -The role of gossip in losing the support of relatives.

One of the factors contributing to family stability is the support of relatives (Pahani & Zarayan, 2012). One of the aspects of gossip is the discussion of a spouse's faults with relatives, such as parents. Although this may seem like a private matter, it leads to the loss of respect and affection for the spouse in the minds of the other family members. This, in turn, negatively affects their interactions with the spouse and can result in colder behavior, exacerbating marital issues. Consequently, the support of relatives, a key factor in family preservation, may be lost. In such situations, instead of discussing the spouse's flaws and problems with relatives, it is better to seek solutions for improving the relationship. If necessary, consulting with a family counselor or psychologist is advisable.

7- Preventive Strategies for the Impact of Gossip on Family Stability

7-1-Mutual admiration and respect

One of the obstacles to the breakdown of marriage is admiration and respect, which can erase the lingering effects of gossip or disrespect. Without mutual respect and affection in a marriage, it becomes difficult for the relationship to thrive. If a person does not believe that their spouse is valuable and deserving of respect, no positive aspects remain to sustain the relationship. Ellis considers constant criticism as a killer of relationships and, in contrast, highlights expressing gratitude and appreciation, accompanied by sincerity, as factors that strengthen relationships (Ellis, 2009, p. 105). Couples who are accustomed to criticizing

each other also develop the habit of gossiping and making harsh criticisms about their spouse's relatives. They forget to appreciate even the small efforts of each other or their spouse's family and fail to take advantage of the incredible impact of gratitude. What abstaining from gossip, harsh criticism, and bad-mouthing can lead to is an easy flow of appreciation and admiration for one another, which fosters intimacy and brings balance to the relationship.

7-2-Coming closer instead of drifting apart.

when couples focus on personal conversations instead of external topics, their marriage tends to be more successful. When they maintain eye contact and share their personal thoughts, the bond between them strengthens. (Gottman, 2007) If they replace the habit of speaking ill of others with expressing their inner feelings, and observe improvements in their relationship afterward, they are likely to continue this behavior.

7-3-Granting the right to make mistakes to one's spouse

In psychological research, the concept of the "right to make mistakes" is presented within Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (Ellis, 1389, p. 197). When individuals belittle their spouses for every mistake or speak ill of their spouse's family, relatives, and friends, they essentially destroy others' trust in them and create feelings of hopelessness. However, if the approach of accepting others' mistakes and recognizing that everyone, like ourselves, is fallible is adopted, and if perfectionism is not imposed on others, it can reduce the tendency to gossip, blame, and insult the spouse or their family and relatives. This, in turn, can help mitigate the destructive effects on family stability.

Conclusion:

Considering the nature of gossip and the habit-forming tendency of this behavior, engaging in gossip about one's spouse, whether during moments of frustration with their relatives or in normal circumstances, can lead to neglecting essential practices for maintaining family harmony. These practices include expressing emotions, self-disclosure, and becoming more familiar with each other's inner world, which are vital for deepening emotional connection. This neglect exacerbates factors such as mistrust and alienation, ultimately harming the health and stability of the family. In contrast, if spouses focus on the crucial role of growing closer to one another by discussing their feelings and avoiding the habit of gossiping about others, and gradually replace the habit of destructive criticism with one of appreciation, they can prevent the negative effects of gossip on family health and stability.

Gossiping about one's spouse among close relatives erodes respect and genuine affection, cools the relationship with the spouse, and ultimately damages family ties. This results in losing support from relatives, further harming the family's well-being. In such cases, when advice is needed, it is better to seek professional counseling rather than discussing grievances and conflicts with relatives.

For future research, it is suggested to examine the impact of the habit of gossiping on the collapse or imbalance of families through field studies, and to conduct practical and statistical research. Additionally, the effect of gossiping on each factor contributing to family stability can be statistically investigated within specific communities.

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