

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Meltem Yucel

JVN [00:00:04] We've all been there. You tell your friend a secret, and then suddenly everyone knows your business. Or maybe a friend told you something that's a secret. And, well, it's not like the person you shared it with is even in the same city. I don't know, I've never done that. I'm like, the best secret keeper ever. Everyone knows that about me. Ooh! Or maybe a text about you comes to your phone by accident. Nightmare. Gossip. It's in schools, offices, extended families. Everyone wants to talk about it! So welcome to the show, Dr. Meltem Yucel, who is a postdoctoral associate at Duke University's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience. She researches the development of social cognition and morality, specifically focusing on how and when children become moral beings. She also founded an amazing website: PsychResearchList.com, where people can find incredible resources about psychology, which we're going to get more into that later. But Meltem, how are you?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:01:04] Hi! I'm so great. Thank you so much for having me.

JVN [00:01:08] You know, I have to tell you—did you hear that woman that runs this podcast behind the scenes, Erica? She's a total nightmare. She is just a total nightmare. Erica, I'm so kidding. I just had to go there for the gossip of it all—

MELTEM YUCEL [00:01:24] Actually, I heard the opposite.

JVN [00:01:27] She's the most amazing person of all time. No, I literally, like, would never, there would be no Getting Curious if it wasn't about Erica. We love her so much. But I just, like, dove in because I was, like, "Erica, are you still listening, but she always is." She's, like, the most amaze. We can't help it. Okay, but wait. So this all came from, like, 7:30 in the morning, one morning, which is typically when I have my best ideas. And I think I called Erica Getto, who's our amazing executive producer of Getting Curious, who we love so much. And I was, like, "I need to know, like, the psychology of why we talk shit about each other." Sometimes it's not even, like, malicious, like, I just want to know, like, I just want to know everything. So, we all know what gossip is, but how do you define it in your work?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:02:07] Yeah. So there's a lot of definitions of gossip out there. And that's something that gossip researchers can't seem to agree on. We all define it a little bit differently, and I tend to think of it as evaluative talk about other people. So it needs to have some kind of evaluation, positive or negative. You like something, you dislike something. This could happen with the words, with the tone you use. It needs to be about another person, at least another person, or it could be about a group. But the person doesn't necessarily need to be there or they can be absent. Or you could also talk about them by them—quietly, hopefully.

JVN [00:02:44] Yes. Okay. So when and where do we tend to gossip? Like, everywhere, right?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:02:50] Yeah. Wherever people are, there's gossip. You just need two people or one person with a phone. So from pickup zones and the schoolyard, by the watercooler at work, especially during really, really boring or weird Zoom calls where you're stuck listening to this person on and on and you see this little chat pop up from your friend or colleague telling you a juicy piece of gossip. Wherever people are, I think we're just yearning to learn more about others. And we gossip to do this.

JVN [00:03:22] So in your definition of gossip, it can be positive or negative. Is there a difference between positive or negative gossip?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:03:31] Yeah. So there are two different kinds of positive and negative gossip. One is about the valence and the other one is about the function of gossip. So the, the valence can be positive or negative. So, so I can say, like, "Oh, she's really beautiful. I love her hair." Or negative valence would be, "I hate it."

JVN [00:03:48] Yes!

MELTEM YUCEL [00:03:49] But the function can also be positive, prosocial or it's negative, where it's selfish. So you might be saying negative, something negative about a person. Maybe they always cheat in Monopoly. That would be pro-social because you want to tell your friend, "Hey, this guy always cheats. Whenever they play a game. Just heads up because they always tend to take a five here and there." So that would be sharing something negative about somebody else for a pro-social reason. Or you can also share it for selfish reasons. Maybe you just don't like that person's outfit and you want to say, "Did you see what she was wearing to work? Can you believe she would wear such a thing? What is this?"

JVN [00:04:29] That's so int—it reminds me of Mean Girls when Rachel McAdams is, like, "Oh my God, who made your bracelet? It's so cute." And then she's, like, "My mom." And then she's, like, "That bracelet's fucking fugly or whatever." It's, like, it's giving me that. Okay, so what does gossip have to do with rules?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:04:43] Yeah. So gossip is inherently tied to teaching and enforcing rules. So one of the reasons we gossip is to punish people for their infractions. So if someone is cheating on their partner or wearing work-inappropriate clothes, we gossip about those people to let others know that this person doesn't abide by whatever our rules are. If our rules are, you wear uniforms to work and that person isn't wearing uniforms to work, you want to make them pay for it. Another reason we gossip is to show people that we know and respect the rules. Because when I'm telling you, "Oh, I know someone who's unfaithful," I'm letting you know that not only do I care about being faithful, but our group also cares about this thing. This could be about our classroom, our religious group, our neighborhood. We just care about this thing. And that's why I think it's important to bring it up to you. And this is also how we teach these rules to other people. "Every time so-and-so wears this or does this or so-and-

so does this, people gossip about her, and maybe I shouldn't behave this way. Maybe this is a rule that my group cares about. So I should be more careful to not break this rule.”

JVN [00:05:52] It's giving me, like, gossip has a lot to do with, like, homophobia and transphobia.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:05:57] Oh, yes.

JVN [00:05:59] Interest.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:06:00] If the norm of your group or that society is to be homophobic, to be transphobic, that is the norm that most of the people in that group who believe in that norm will support. And then if they see two men holding hands, they will have an issue about it and they will gossip about it. But it can also be used to help queer people in terms of you can know: “Who is an ally, who will support me, who will snitch on me to the authorities,” especially in countries or places where being LGBTQIA+ is illegal.

JVN [00:06:38] A lot of the laws that are more restrictive to bodily autonomy, whether that's abortion access or access to gender-affirming care. They rely on gossip or, like, you know, reporting someone to the authorities, like, reporting someone to the Department of Child and Family Services or even this law in Texas that, like, basically made vigilantes out of, like, citizens to press civil lawsuits on people who were seeking abortions. Okay, so I just think that's interesting, like, when, like, gossip can become weaponized through, like, legislation or, like, when in reality, something is actually gossip. But then it gets, like, legislated, which is interesting, slash terrifying. So but more to my point of questions before I got scared. How do we use gossip within social circles?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:07:21] There's recent work showing that we spend up to an hour of our day talking about other people. So this is something we're constantly concerned about, other people. We're thinking about them, we're talking about them. Within our social circles, we mostly gossip about the people we know because it tends to get somewhat boring to constantly talk about people neither of us knows. And so we often talk about the people, mostly in our group, generally same gender, but doesn't actually have to be that case. But we also like gossiping about celebrities, politicians that we don't know or will never know ourselves.

JVN [00:07:58] Yes, that's so true. Ooh. So I think—well, we talked about some of the potential benefits of positive gossip, like letting people know, like, what someone's, like, true colors are or letting someone know if you're, like, an ally or, like, letting someone know if you're gonna, you know, be there for them. What are some other potential benefits of positive gossip?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:08:19] Yeah. I tend to think of gossip as having these two main functions, this normative side, which I'll get to in a moment, and the social connectedness side. So I went over some of how gossip can be used to teach and enforce our group's rules. So that's the normative side. So you get to enforce the rules that you care about, especially for the rules that there might not be any established laws about it. So nobody's going to put you in prison for cheating in the Monopoly game by stealing this fake money. But if you think that—if you truly believe that—somebody should be playing a fair game, you can protest them in the moment and then spread information about them through gossip so that others know not to trust that person, not to maybe even play games with that person. And also the possibility of being gossiped about. If I hold hands with so-and-so in my neighborhood and somebody in my neighborhood sees it and tells my mom, it becomes an issue, because then our name could be sullied.

So this keeps me accountable or keeps people accountable that, "Oh, I should do the right things so that there isn't a bad reputation going around about me or my family. And on the other side, the social side of it, you're still sharing some piece of salacious information, most likely. "Maybe to a degree, keep this a secret, don't necessarily go to people and definitely don't go to them and say, 'Meltem told you this gossip.'" So it does require a little bit of trust. It helps us bond with people, and it shows that you care enough about what they need to know or what they maybe do *not* know about their friends or other people in their group that you're looking out for them. So it can help strengthen our social ties and help us build a bigger social network. And if everybody is gossiping and sharing information, it increases how much we know in our group because we can't all be everywhere at once. So we're relying on what others have seen and experienced to then also use it in our future interactions with other people. And like I said, it's also very fun.

JVN [00:10:23] It is. It's so true. I mean, it really is fun. So growing up, were you always drawn to gossip? Like, when did you realize that you wanted to become a gossip expert?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:10:33] There's two, two or three things that really drew me to gossip. I wasn't always interested in gossip from a scientific perspective. But these things ultimately drove me into child development and specifically moral development. For some context, I'm from Turkey, and in Turkey we have this tradition where housewives or retired women get together in each other's houses once a week every couple of weeks. And it's called Day of Gold because in the past they would pass on pieces of gold to whoever's house they went to. And all they do that day is eat, knit, and gossip. And as a child, I distinctly remember being dragged to these events to listen in on whose husband was seen where, whose daughter is dating someone or held hands and was seen by the neighborhood. And as a curious child, whenever I wanted to comment or chime in on anything or ask for clarifications, I was always hushed, and I was told, "No, no, no, kids don't gossip. This is not for you, this is for adults." But I would just constantly see how, how much social information got passed around.

And the second reason that got me interested in gossip and here initially on the malicious side of gossip, is this really mean girl that I knew as a child. So one day when I was at her house, she told me that she wanted to bring a third friend over and get her to negatively gossip about me while I hid under the bed. And even as a child, that sounded pure evil. I didn't participate in this, but over the years, I kept going back to that moment to think, "What would drive somebody to behave like this, who can, especially as a child, who thinks of a situation where you're trying to really harm people's relationships while looking like you're the good one?" And I just kept thinking about it and this is definitely an anecdote that still motivates me to research gossip because why would somebody do this? I mean, now that I know the—some of the functions of gossip, I know why. But it still is mind boggling to me and that drove me into the reasons, the functions behind gossip and trying to make sense of: "How does it benefit a group of women in a society when they're gossiping? How might it hurt relationships when people overhear gossip or people are gossiped about?" So these are some of the things that I'm looking into right now that were stuff that I observed 20, more than 20 years ago.

JVN [00:13:29] So what are some of the risks of negative gossip?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:13:34] So as much as we love gossiping, gossiping is generally a social "No no." Because there are several places where you're open to risk. We have this social rule around, "You should not be gossiping." And sometimes religious rules around not gossiping. So you've broken this rule, and you can get caught gossiping. You can get caught by the person you're gossiping about, who we refer to as the target of gossip. And you might risk damaging your relationship with that person. You can also face social risks when you're talking about other people. Because if I'm coming to you and telling you, "Oh, did you hear that so-and-so promised to bring cake and they did not bring cake. And they always do this. Can you believe this?" Well, while you can appreciate that I'm sharing this interesting information with you. You might also be thinking, "Hold up, if she's talking badly about someone who forgot to bring a cake. She might also say these things about me." So you can also be called a gossip. And this comes with negative repercussions as well. People can trust you less if they know that you will then share this willy nilly with everybody. So these are some of the social risks of negative gossip.

JVN [00:14:46] So then what about, like giving the gossip or receiving the gossip?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:14:50] There would be different benefits or repercussions for gossiping or just listening in. So when you're sharing gossip this can help you form closer relationships with the people you're gossiping with. But at the same time, you're risking yourself. But the listener of gossip, they're not really risking themselves. If you come to me and share a gossip with me, I might just nod and move on. But I can also continue contributing. "Oh, do you know why they forgot to bring the cake? It's because their kid is being horrible and biting all the other kids in the class. So they were dealing with this and that's why their marriage is crumbling."

JVN [00:15:30] 'Cause their kid won't stop biting people! Yes.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:15:32] So gossip doesn't just happen with one person talks the other person is completely silent, we're often in this back and forth.

JVN [00:15:39] Yes.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:15:40] Filling in the information that other people may not know.

JVN [00:15:43] Her fucking kid won't stop biting people, honey. Like, just a fucking, I've never seen that kid bite so much. And, and now because they're fucking biting-ass a kid. She's fucking the milkman. And who even knew that she would fuck without me? And I'm obsessed with our story so much, like, I—someone write it down.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:16:04] And that's why the cake took a while, because there was no milk!

JVN [00:16:08] The milk man! There was no fucking milk! Because she was fucking the milk man. And I'm obsessed. So sharing information is coming up for me and then perspective because it, like, it depends on, like, from where you are in a situation for you to think of something as, like, good or bad and different, whatever. So what does gossip have to do with human evolution and how does our tendency to gossip change with age?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:16:35] These are great questions. So [Robin] Dunbar, in his 1997 influential book on gossip, made this evolutionary case for gossip that I really, really like. So he draws parallels between how apes groom each other and humans gossip. So there's work showing that apes spend up to 20% of their time grooming each other. And when they're spending this time in close proximity grooming, this indicates how willing they are to be an ally to each other, how much they trust. The fact that you can turn your back onto them so that they can groom you. And as humans, we don't really spend much time in groups grooming each other because the language allows us to take care of each other and look out for each other through sharing gossip. We all necessarily have to huddle constantly and pick things off of each other, but we can just say, "Hey, this person said something bad about you, or this person did something bad the other day. You shouldn't trust them." And this might be another way how we are, we might build these allies. So this is a one evolutionary story of gossip. But I resonate with this much because it makes sense. We need to spend time with each other. We need to know who does what. And gossip allows us to do this. While making it also fun or a social activity.

JVN [00:17:52] So, I think it's really interesting in your work, that, you study, like, when kids develop a sense of morality, like a sense of, like, right and wrong. And one thing that I am constantly realizing is that, like, really hard core binaries are limiting because, like, so often, like, things reside on this, like, spectrum, not necessarily, like, in such a "black and white" way. Like, it's more, like, on a spectrum than like this or that. So Nadia Brashier, which was an

amazing episode that we did, it was about like information and she's, like, a—she's an expert on information, and she was teaching us about how like when you learn something for the first time, whether the fact is true or not, you remember it as being factual. So it's part of the dangers of, like, disinformation and misinformation, one of which is intentional. And the other one is, like, you're not necessarily trying to be malicious. You just, like, are spreading information that you don't know if it's true or not. And I always get the two mixed up, like, which one's mis- and which one's dis-. But regardless.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:18:56] Yeah. So the way we gossip and why we gossip changes over the course of development. So young children around the age of three or by the age of three, they're willing to protest and tattletale when people break rules. My work looks at how kids think about different kinds of rules and how they respond when these rules are broken. So we see that they protest these rule violations, tattletale on rule violators and gossip is argued to be a little bit of a safer way for children to enforce these rules, because when you're protesting someone in the moment or tattletaling right in front of them, going to the teacher to say, "So-and-so broke the vase." That person now knows you're the person who snitched on them. But when you gossip and if you go around and tell, "Hey, you did not hear this from me, but so-and-so broke the rule." Then the target of gossip, the person you're gossiping about might not really know who started this, but you can still damage their reputation. So we think that children might be gossiping to enforce rules initially. And then over the course of development, adolescents, young adults might begin to use gossip a little bit more maliciously.

JVN [00:20:06] Ah! As we get older. Okay, that makes sense. I was kind of thinking about gossiping to enforce rules. Rules shift and change in your interpretation of them. So, like, do you see any, like, age or time when, like, people are willing to relearn or, like, change their interpretation of a rule that would, like, change their gossiping behavior?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:20:31] Yeah, we haven't looked at that in gossip, but I know some work on tattletaling, which is a similar-ish mechanism, but there are some differences there as well, where initially children are pro-tattletaling, they want to tattletale, but then over time they start learning that, "Oh wait, nobody likes a tattletale, snitches just get stitches." They start learning that not everything deserves to be tattletaled on. So initially, if children think that, "Oh, it's okay to tattletale about silly game rule violations and it's also okay to tattletale about somebody hitting somebody." And then as kids get older, they start saying, "Well, it's not okay to tattletale about silly rule violations because nobody cares about them, like, it's not that big of a deal. But if somebody is hitting other people, you really should tell that to the teacher. So I think gossip happens similarly. We might be, or kids might be thinking, "Well, I'm going to gossip just generally." And over time they start learning, "Well, it's a bad thing to gossip about people negatively." "It might be okay to gossip in these circumstances." "If somebody is hurting someone, maybe you shouldn't gossip. Maybe you should just intervene." Kids are also getting these different kinds of messages and lessons from people around them about when and where gossip is the best choice of action, and that's something that I've been interested in. But there isn't a lot of work on that yet.

JVN [00:21:58] Fascinating. Okay, so let's say that like, it got back around to Erica from the beginning of the episode, honey, that I was talking shit about her. I was talking shit about my friend and my colleague and that is, you know, it was wrong. I was wrong to do that. How can we apologize or show remorse. And! Can a good apology, like, restore trust between friends or colleagues?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:22:28] Yeah. So these are really good questions. I think the answer really depends on how close you are to the person you gossiped about, Erica, and how close you are to the person you gossiped with.

JVN [00:22:39] Ooooh!

MELTEM YUCEL [00:22:39] Because it's hurtful to be badly talking about our friends. Some degree of it is expected or could be understood. So if you and I are okay-ish friends in the same group and I talk about you to my best friend or my husband or my partner, people would be more understanding of this. Yeah, of course you will talk, like, a little bit more openly about that person. But if you are my best friend and I talk about you to somebody. Maybe I'm not even that close with that. I think there, you're not just breaking the social rule about, "You shouldn't gossip," but you're also breaking the friendship rule of how to be a good friend. I think as with any apologies, it would be important to not give excuses, accept your wrongdoing, and acknowledge that building their trust in you will take time and that you will be better about this. And then be better about it and don't, ideally don't badmouth them, but if you want to, don't make it in a podcast. As long as people properly apologize and don't behave the same way, apologies, a good apology can really restore trust.

JVN [00:23:52] And what is the difference between, like, a good apology and, like, a not good apology?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:23:58] Yeah, I would say excuses are bad. So little lasting anybody wants to hear during an apology is the word, "But." So if you say, "Oh, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but we were in a group, what was I supposed to do?" All I hear is, "You're not really that sorry about this. So as soon as you say "but" or give an excuse, you're not really owning up to your mistake. And then another bad apology indicator is not owning up or acknowledging the damage you have caused or you could have caused. So if you say, "Well if that made you feel bad, I'm sorry." And that is, for the lack of a better word, is a half assed apology, you're not really apologizing there. If you say, "If I made you feel bad. I'm sorry." Instead, focusing on the fact that you made a mistake. You shouldn't have done that and you won't be doing that again and then following it up with action.

JVN [00:24:54] And then, of course, that has to assume that you feel that you made a mistake.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:24:57] Yes, of course.

JVN [00:24:58] Because then, otherwise you wouldn't apologize. You'd just be, like, "Not apologizing.... that is what I needed to do, and so..."

MELTEM YUCEL [00:25:06] Yes, and I know plenty of people who love gossiping who will also come out and say, "I would have told that to their face, too," I'm not sorry about what I said.

JVN [00:25:15] Which, that means that it's not gossip, Right? Because if you're just being honest with someone, then it means you're not gossiping. If it's about the person that you're talking to.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:25:24] Oh. If it's to that person, then it wouldn't be gossip. But if it's about them to another person.

JVN [00:25:30] Right. Right. Yes. So it's like the time when you were talking shit about them to someone else. That was gossip. But then if you turn around and you're, like, "Honey, I'll tell you right fucking now." Then it wasn't gossiping on the second time, but you were still gossiping the first time.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:25:41] Yes, exactly.

JVN [00:25:42] That makes sense. Okay, that makes sense. So how is gossip ultimately about morality? And what does gossip reveal about our moral codes? That people are some transphobic ass, misogynistic, homophobic fuckers out here at these streets? I'm sorry. I just live in Texas, and we're going through it down here. But yes, tell me what? Yes, tell me everything.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:26:04] Yeah. Sadly, it's not just limited to Texas right now.

JVN [00:26:08] So many places.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:26:10] Yes. So gossip is highly tied to our moral codes, because whether you choose to partake in gossip or not, what and when you gossip about can tell a lot about your values. Because in some ways, the thing that makes you gossip should be important enough of a topic. It could be about a rule or value that you risk the label of being a gossip. Sometimes we don't often think about this, but I think to a degree in the back of our minds we're, like, "Do I want to be the person who says this? You know what? I don't think they should have done this. I'm going to share my thoughts." Or, "I don't agree with this value." So somebody homophobic, they will come out and talk about the things that they believe in and they will think that they themselves are correct when they're gossiping because they think there's this rule about how people *should* be behaving socially. For others, you see no issue and you shouldn't see any issue with two people loving each other, you might not even think

this is something that's gossip worthy. What you choose to gossip about can tell a lot about what you believe in, what you think is worthy of, why did you choose to talk about this?

JVN [00:27:23] Absolutely. Okay. I'm obsessed. And that also kind of speaks to, like, what it reveals about our moral intuitions or what we think about how things should be. Because, like, if you're talking shit about someone, like, the way they're parenting or, like, the way they're showing up in their relationships or job or whatever, it's, like, then that is revealing a little bit about the way that you think you operate and how you want people to think that you operate.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:27:52] Yeah. You're signaling your moral values, your thoughts about how things ought to be. In more moral cases, when you're talking about people stealing, cheating, hurting other people, or doing something that you might think is disgusting and you're really saying, this is my thoughts and feelings about this issue and you should know and you should care about this. You should also be outraged by what this person is doing or what this person wanted to do.

JVN [00:28:22] Yeah, that makes sense. So in your work and in your study, like, how have you found a relationship between gossip and gender? Do you find any, like—I have always thought, like, I feel socially women have this label of being more into gossip or more into. But really, I think that is another place where the binary has failed us miserably because men talk shit about each other like no one's business.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:28:50] Oh, yes. Oh, yes. So from a scientific perspective, the literature on this gendered view of gossip is a little bit mixed. Some researchers argue that there are gender differences where women gossip more or differently than men, and others don't really find any gender differences. And this might be related to the kinds of questions every researcher asks, but in my work, I don't really find much differences in the way different genders gossip. But it's also important to remember that there's a lot of socialization that goes on around gossip that may make it seem more like women gossip more. So because, like you mentioned, men gossip, too. But when men gossip, we call this "locker room talk" or "shop talk." And we don't necessarily label it "gossip." And I think in some ways this perpetuates the idea that when women do it, it's gossip, it's bad. And when men do it, that's not so. They're just talking about other people. There's also this other side of things. I was talking with a colleague, he was arguing, saying that, "I don't gossip, I don't partake in gossip. I don't care about gossip." And then over a conversation, it came out that he's married. His wife brings all the gossip to him. So I said, "Well, you don't really have to gossip because you get to tap into this hard work of your wife, figuring out who's doing what, who's where." And in his mind, he can get away with not gossiping because he might not be actively engaging in it. But he still benefits from the information. The socialization is so intricately tied to what we label gossip, who we label, or who we think of as gossips, and how we treat people who gossip.

JVN [00:30:36] Yes! Nailed that. So how can gossip be harnessed for LGBTQIA+ rights and visibility?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:30:43] Gossip has already been used by many LGBTQIA+ individuals as a way to protect themselves and their community. So there's gossip around who belongs, who is part of the rainbow family, who is or who is not an ally, and what part of town is safe for me to show my identity without getting attacked. So these are all the pieces of gossip that we use to figure out, "Okay, who can I trust? Who can I trust with my identity? Who can I trust to be who I am?" And having access to this information allows the LGBTQIA+ community to stay safe, physically and also emotionally. Because if you come out to the wrong person or if you are with somebody that might not be, like, heteronormative. Especially in a non tolerant community or country, you can put yourself to great risk, and in some parts of the world to death. So knowing who you can really trust can quite literally be lifesaving.

And where gossip helps us is you don't have to be the person risking your life. You can benefit from what others know about what spaces are safe, who has done what. "Oh, if I told my teacher that I like women or I like men, which teacher will respond back positively? Which teacher will be the one sending me to the principal's office or starting to behave weirdly around me?" Figuring out, getting to use other people's experiences with allies and haters can save you a lot of headache. And this can then be used in terms of: if you know who is an ally, who might be even you now, in your community, then you can also find those people and come together and fight for your rights and demand to be more visible. And in some sense, gossip can be used as some form of census, almost. Through gossip, you figure out, "Okay, how many people on my side, how many people on this other side? Hold up, there's a lot of us, we could come together and say something about it. We could go on to the streets. And Pride Month is coming up, like, we could go out and show our support."

JVN [00:32:58] That makes sense to me. I'm obsessed. So basically, it can help to harness and assess who is aligned with you and who you could, like, build a coalition with to make changes, which is fabulous. So what about, so we've spoken on the show about fake news, misinformation, disinformation. What can they have to do with gossip?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:33:20] Yes. So I think this is where the definition of gossip and rumors are a little bit more important to emphasize—

JVN [00:33:30] Yes!

MELTEM YUCEL [00:33:30] Because a lot of misinformation happens through, through rumors. So rumors are these unverifiable or unverified and not necessarily evaluative public communication. So it happens more in these ambiguous contexts when people feel some kind of danger or threat and they're trying to make sense of what's happening. And they put out this idea or whatever, whether that's true or wild and completely incorrect, they are trying to make sense of these ideas and they put it out there, and it's meant to be public-facing,

doesn't necessarily have to be about a person. It could be about a pharmaceutical company. If you think that they are doing certain things, which is how a lot of vaccine misinformation starts.

JVN [00:34:19] It's the great replacement theory. It's a vaccine misinformation theory. It's also like all of the "queer people are coming for the kids." It's all of that—

MELTEM YUCEL [00:34:28] Yeah, the agendas.

JVN [00:34:30] Yes. So those are all examples of rumors which are different than gossip.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:34:36] Yes. Gossip is more—

JVN [00:34:38] Interpersonal and rumors are, like—

MELTEM YUCEL [00:34:40] More interpersonal, more evaluative. It has this evaluation aspect to it. Rumors can still have this, but it's not necessarily the same. Rumors are this response to this weird threat.

JVN [00:34:53] Would it be true that, like, a gossip would be, like, "Did you hear that, like, so-and-so got their vaccine?" "Oh, yeah, I heard she got hers." Like, so that would be, like, that's a gossip.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:35:07] That's a gossip.

JVN [00:35:07] But a rumor would be, like, "so-and-so has brain damage or has this really serious thing from a vaccine when they maybe moved and," like, no one knows why they moved. No one knows what happened. But they're just saying that it's like a vaccine thing. When no one knows.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:35:20] Yes, or a rumor would be like, "Oh, there's not actually a real thing in the vaccine. There's other things in the vaccine." So that would be another rumor, which doesn't really concern or target one specific person.

JVN [00:35:31] Right. Oh, got it. Okay. But then a rumor can be targeting a person. It can be, like—

MELTEM YUCEL [00:35:37] Yes!

JVN [00:35:38] "So-and-so did whatever." Yeah. Okay. So that's interest. Okay. Yeah. I love a good definition. That's major. Okay, So. Okay. Okay. So. Oooh! So in addition to your gossip research, you've explored childhood roots of, quote, "being green." And how moral intuitions about the environment strengthen with age. I think this is such an interesting question because

I remember very clearly in first grade, the first time I ever heard about the term global warming or like what that meant. So I just thought that was a really interesting question. Can you explain your findings to us about that?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:36:12] Yeah. So first I have to give a shout out to my wonderful collaborator, lead author Jessie Stern, who we've been doing this work with. And so we were interested in how environmental morality and sustainable behavior emerges in childhood. So we looked at how children and adults judge pro-environmental actions. So throwing your trash away in the trash can or recycling and anti-environmental or environmentally harmful actions such as littering or harming a bird, and how kids and adults think about these things. And so we presented them with sets of morals or environmental stories, where the character is either that something, prosocial, antisocial, pro-environmental or environmental are harmful actions. And then we asked, "Who do you want to be friends with? The helpful or the harmful character? How much do you like these people? Or what are your thoughts about these characters?" And we're currently doing follow up work on this. But so far, the results seem to indicate that both kids and adults think of pro-environmental behavior positively and they think of environmental harm negatively. And even if the teacher says it's okay, or even if an authority figure says that it's okay to do this environmentally harmful thing. But they also still see, they also still think, other people's actions that harm m others are much more serious than actions that might impact the environment. So they are still distinguishing between something that might hurt somebody and something that might hurt the environment. But they still care about the environment.

JVN [00:37:49] Interesting. Okay. So does that support the idea that younger generations may on the whole, better understand the urgency and importance of climate action?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:37:58] Yes. And in fact, we were inspired by the younger generations. So our findings point to this developmental continuity and change in how we think about environmental morality and environmental actions. And we see this with our own eyes that some of the biggest voices in climate change is the youth. So from Mari Copeny, who spoke out about the Flint, Michigan, water crisis when she was eight to Greta Thunberg, who went on a strike to bring attention to climate change. I think as adults, we have a lot to learn from young children and youth when it comes to speaking out against these big corporations polluting our world and getting away with it. And I think kids are some of our biggest inspirations about how we should also be standing up for this beautiful world that we have that we can lose to climate change.

JVN [00:38:51] Hmm. So I loved when we were talking about great apes earlier, listeners of our podcast also will be excited when you mention that because we recently got to talk to Dr. Laura Simone Lewis on the show and we talked all about her research in great ape cognition, a field that you are obviously interested in. And we learned so much from her about how she tracks behavior and emotion in apes.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:39:12] I loved her episode so much and it took me a while to finish her episode because I kept pausing to take notes.

JVN [00:39:19] We have even a whole other episode that we just did with her that is part two. That was just, like, so fascinating. I just loved her. But so how do you conduct your research, like, when you're following, like, kids? Is it, like, in a, like, how do you conduct your research?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:39:31] Yeah. So I mostly do experiments with kids and adults. And we try to keep things as similar as possible across participants and change this one main thing to see whether that makes a difference in how kids or adults might be thinking about rules or how they might enforce rules. So, for example, if we want to see, "Do kids tattle to enforce moral rules," for example, you shouldn't harm other people, then we can put them in these situations where a puppet or a child breaks a rule and destroys another puppet's artwork. The other group of children, the other half of children who participate sees a puppet just rip a piece of paper that doesn't belong to anyone. So it's not a moral rule violation. And we can see, "Do kids in this moral violation group tattle more?" And in our studies we've seen, yes, they do. And we can then say that, "Oh, okay, in these moral rule violation scenarios, in situations where somebody's belongings get destroyed, but not in these control situations where something just gets ripped, kids tattle more." So maybe that might indicate that kids are not just tattling for no reason, they're tattling to enforce this rule that you shouldn't rip other people's artwork apart.

JVN [00:40:49] And how do you tailor your research to the age of the participants?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:40:53] Yeah. So when I'm working with adult participants. You can get away with a lot more because they know what you're saying. They can read on their own. You don't actually have to be the person helping them read along. But whenever I'm working with children, especially young children, you can't just ask them, "Why do you gossip?" You have to find clever ways around getting them to tell you what they think about gossiping, showing them these scenarios or videos of people gossiping. Putting them in situations that kind of encourage them to gossip themselves. Then to see, "How do they think about this situation?"

JVN [00:41:29] And then how do you, like, go about selecting your participants?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:41:32] Yes. So I'm currently located in Durham, North Carolina, I'm part of the Early Childhood Cognition Lab, and—which is part of the big Duke Child Studies Labs, where multiple labs conduct research with children on all sorts of topics, not just gossip or morality. And we have a database of families in the area who are interested in participating in research. We reach out to these families who have kids in the right age range, that there's a study that their kid is eligible for, and depending on what type of study it is, sometimes in person, sometimes over Zoom, we share further details. And of course, at all points we get the families' and the child's consent and assent to participate. We're also incredibly lucky that we get to partner with our local children's museum, the Museum of Life and Science. So we get to

go to the museum several times a week and if any of the families are interested to participate in our work at the museum, they can show up, we can walk them through. So these are some of the things we're interested in. We are, for example, if I have a shift at the museum, then I might tell them about what gossiping is, what gossiping does and try to disseminate our work to the families. Because a lot of the times, research gets siloed in publications or conferences that other researchers attend. So this face time with families or podcasts like this one really allows us to spread the word that gossip is not that much of a bad thing or could be a bad thing depending on how you use it.

JVN [00:42:13] And I actually wanted to ask because it's, like, that must be frustrating because, like, gossip does have this negative connotation, but in your research you find it's, like, it's actually a really useful tool and like so many functions. Like anything can be kind of used negatively, but also there's like a lot of beneficial uses out of gossiping and it's gotten, like, kind of a bad rap. So I think that's fabulous.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:43:34] Yes, this is my tour, this is gossip's "Reputation Era." Yeah, I'm trying to say that gossip can be good, too.

JVN [00:43:43] Yes! Yes, I love that. So and then back to your participant selection. It's, like, you have a network of people at Duke that you can go through and kind of utilize and obviously always using, like, familial consent, like, parental consent. You know, folks are having fun. You're just researching over there. That sounds exciting. And how did you become a literal gossip expert?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:44:04] By gossiping a lot. And it's only partly a joke because I think it helps. I was just very interested in gossip, and initially I was interested in children's tattling behaviors, and that sort of led to gossip. Or I finally found an excuse to bring gossip back into the picture.

JVN [00:44:25] Becoming a doctor of psychology and neuroscience probably didn't hurt either.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:44:30] Yes. So I did my doctorate in moral development, specifically about children's moral development. And so all of these questions really helped me think more deeply about gossip and not just look at it from this, like, lay perspective where it's just a bad thing, but how it can be used for good things.

JVN [00:44:50] Which I think is so fascinating. So in your work and in your evolution through your work and your life, like how has your relationship to gossip changed? Like, do you dish it out differently? Do you receive it differently? Like, are you just, like, all down to clown? Like, are we going to talk shit after this? Like, yeah. What do you think?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:45:08] I definitely have some rules about gossip. My first rule of gossip is you really want to make sure nobody is listening in, so no gossiping on stairways, public places —don't leave a trace. That is a really, really important rule of gossip.

JVN [00:45:20] That's smart. That shit's smart right there.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:45:24] So I'm happy, I'm happy to gossip after this. As long as that the record button is off.

JVN [00:45:30] Got it.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:45:31] And then the other rule, which is in the, in same line with "Don't Leave Trace" is I try to keep gossip offline as much as I can. Because it's really easy to take a screenshot or forward an email where you are being really mean or sharing a juicy piece of gossip, sometimes intentionally and sometimes even by accident. So I try to really not gossip too much by text. And I'm also careful about who I'm gossiping with. For silly things, it's not really that important, but for really serious stuff, I don't really go out and disclose that information to anybody willy nilly.

JVN [00:46:11] Mmm! Yes, Queen. Okay. So being a gossip expert, what are your thoughts on gossip and contemporary pop culture? Like, celeb gossip blogs, any sort of, like, salacious celebrity fodder. Like, what do you think?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:46:25] Yeah, I think that definitely feeds into some aspects of social rules, like enforcing social rules, especially celebrities. They tend to be the ones who bend the rules, break the rules or are outside of the rules. But if the society is really adamant about specific rules, they will still try to rein them in. So if somebody is in "Who Cares?" era, then you really want to highlight that this is still not an okay behavior. So that's where the gossip blogs come into place because you're trying to tell people, "Well, you know, so-and-so is skinny dipping in public at a beach or this should not be okay. And our society doesn't condone this behavior." So you're still highlighting what our group's rules are. It can also be damaging because there's a thin line between true gossip on those blogs and just outright rumors that are trying to damage people's careers.

JVN [00:47:24] Right. Which that happens. I feel like, just so much. But what about, like, reality shows with, like, information economies like Survivor or like The Bachelor or even, like, Vanderpump Rules, like, with their whole, like, controversy?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:47:37] Yeah. So with reality shows, it gets extra tricky. So for Survivor or The Bachelor, the contestants, there's, like, a layer for contestants, and then there's the layer as viewers. So a lot of the times contestants are socially excluded so they don't really know what's going on in the outside world. They don't have access to this information or they have limited access. And they also need to further themselves. So if they're in The Bachelor, they

want to ultimately marry The Bachelor or be famous enough that they can be an influencer. Whatever their goals are, they want to stay in the show as long as possible. So that they can reach that goal. Over the course of the show, they might be getting this information about other contestants. "Oh, actually, this person has a kid, but did not disclose it yet because they're waiting for the right time." So now contestants are socially expected to keep these kinds of information to themselves.

But they also want to disclose it because they can use it to their advantage. But ultimately, this can then destroy that contestant's reputation, because if you're the person outing someone on Survivor, if you're the person who is disclosing someone's, like, medical disability, then you're also showing for the entire world that you cannot respect certain kinds of rules where you shouldn't be doing this or where it's up to that person to share that about themselves. And then the other layer is: people also love gossiping. So as viewers, we watch these shows, we then go on to, like, those shows' podcasts, subreddit pages devoted to gossip. We go through their Instagram profiles to figure out, "Who did they follow, who did they stop following, what did they post?" So it becomes this, like, extra intricate or multi-layered gossip cake, I guess. And that's where gossip really takes off on its own.

JVN [00:49:39] So do you think that there's ways that we could harness gossip in, like, circles? Like, I always think, like, if people cared as much about trans rights and people's access to abortion and reproductive health care as they did about, like, the whole Vanderpump Rules scandal, then we wouldn't be having a lot of the issues that we have. 'Cause ultimately it's sharing information or evaluating information to other people. So it's, like, really, we need more people to engage in positive gossip when it comes to spreading information about, like, gender affirming care and, like, equal access for people in America.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:50:15] Or they could negatively gossip about people who are hindering equal access. They could use both kinds of gossip.

JVN [00:50:22] Both, honey! Let's get to those kinds of those coins. Yes, I love that. So what's left to learn about gossip? What questions are you currently pursuing in your research? And what's next for you?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:50:32] Gossip is pretty much an open field, especially with regards to how kids gossip. So I'm really interested in how, when and why children gossip and what happens when we gossip and what happens when we don't. And how we make the decision to gossip or not. So I'm really curious about those questions, currently.

JVN [00:50:50] And then where can people stay up to date with you, as you, like, publish your answers?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:50:55] Yeah. I am always on Twitter at @DrMeltemYucel on Twitter. And I've heard gossip or rumors about how long will Twitter last. So you can always find me on my personal website as well, which will be in the bio. But it's my full name, MeltemYucel.com.

JVN [00:51:15] Meltem, you've got to get on TikTok and the 'Gram. We need you to, like, share your information there. So I think people would really like it. get on there on Twitter to people, follow Meltem. Oh, and also, too, I wanted to talk a little bit about your website that you, that you founded. Will you tell us about PsychResearchList.com!

MELTEM YUCEL [00:51:32] My goal is to make psychology more transparent and accessible and more diverse. And the best way to do this is to make this hidden curriculum of academia: Where do you find internships? Where do you find How do you apply to graduate school? What does it mean to pursue a degree in psychology? Generally, the way this information gets passed around is through. If you have a good undergraduate advisor, they might tell you about some opportunities, but oftentimes they're also really busy and it's hard to keep track of everything that happens. So I made this website to put everything in one place where students, people interested in psychology as a field can find out about these opportunities and they can apply for paid internship positions. Because a lot of the times these paid internship positions are really important for people who are interested in pursuing a degree in psychology. Especially if you're from a minoritized background, if you're an international student and you might not be able to afford it on your own, or you might not be able to afford not working in the summer, you really need that monetary support. And I wanted to make these positions as visible as possible to diversify psychology and diversify who gets to be a psychologist as well.

JVN [00:52:58] Honey, we love that story. Got to get everybody a seat at the table and you got to pull up that chair. So thank you for doing your part. Final question. Do you have any advice for people who want a healthier relationship with gossip in their own life?

MELTEM YUCEL [00:53:10] Yeah, I would advise them to see all sides of gossip, the good, the bad, the ugly, and decide for yourselves what aspects of it do you want to participate and be okay with that.

JVN [00:53:21] Meltem Yucel, wow, way to mic drop on this fucking episode, you slayed so hard. You are brilliant. I love learning with you. I feel like I learned a lot about gossip today.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:53:34] That's awesome, that's the whole plan. And hopefully people will then positively gossip about this episode as well.

JVN [00:53:41] Meltem—excuse me, *Dr. Meltem Yucel*—thank you so much for coming on, *Getting Curious*. We appreciate you so much.

MELTEM YUCEL [00:53:47] Thank you so much for having me. I had a blast. And please send me your juiciest gossips. Whoever is listening. I would always love to hear. And I won't be sharing because I know the rules.

JVN [00:53:59] Oh, my God. Thank you. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our theme music is Freak by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, please introduce a brand and show them how to subscribe. You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter at Curious again. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me and Erica Getto with production support from Julie Carrillo, Chris McClure, and Erin McKeon.