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Backbiting as a systemic form of indirect communication in the family and its consequences for adults

Backbiting jako systemowa forma komunikacji pośredniej w rodzinie i jej konsekwencje dla dorosłych

Abstract

This article examines backbiting as a systemic form of indirect communication that serves functions such as tension regulation, coalition building, narrative control, and the maintenance of homeostasis in families with low tolerance for conflict. Drawing on Murray Bowen's multigenerational theory, Salvador Minuchin's structural approach, Paul Watzlawick's pragmatics of communication, and narrative perspectives, the analysis explores how speaking negatively about an absent family member shapes relational structures, boundaries, and loyalties. The article discusses the long-term consequences for adults raised in environments where indirect communication was normative, including difficulties with direct expression, fear of confrontation, and the replication of triangulated patterns. The practical section outlines implications for adult education and presents interventions that support direct communication and relational autonomy. The article highlights the importance of understanding backbiting as a systemic phenomenon whose effects extend beyond the family context and influence adult functioning across multiple domains.

Keywords: backbiting, indirect communication, triangulation, family coalitions, adult education

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje zjawisko backbitingu jako systemowej formy komunikacji pośredniej, pełniącej funkcje regulacji napięcia, budowania koalicji, kontroli narracji oraz podtrzymywania homeostazy w rodzinach o niskiej tolerancji na konflikt. W oparciu o koncepcje Murraya Bowena, Salvadora Minuchina, Paula Watzlawicka oraz perspektywy narracyjne przedstawiono, w jaki sposób mówienie o nieobecnym członku rodziny wpływa na strukturę relacji, granice i lojalności. Omówiono konsekwencje dla dorosłych dzieci wychowanych w środowiskach, w których komunikacja pośrednia była normą, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem trudności w bezpośrednim wyrażaniu potrzeb, lęku przed konfrontacją oraz powtarzania wzorców triangulacji. W części praktycznej zaprezentowano implikacje dla edukacji dorosłych oraz interwencje wspierające rozwój komunikacji bezpośredniej i autonomii relacyjnej. Artykuł podkreśla znaczenie rozumienia backbitingu jako zjawiska systemowego, którego

skutki wykraczają poza kontekst rodzinny i wpływają na funkcjonowanie dorosłych w różnych obszarach życia.

Słowa kluczowe: *backbiting*, komunikacja pośrednia, triangulacja, koalicje rodzinne, edukacja dorosłych

Introduction

Backbiting – understood as speaking negatively about an absent person – constitutes one of the most subtle yet destructive communication patterns within family systems. Its impact lies in its indirectness: it avoids confrontation while shaping alliances, redistributing tension and reinforcing covert loyalty structures. From a systemic perspective, backbiting stabilizes the family in the short term but generates long-term relational costs. Drawing on Murray Bowen's concept of triangulation,[1] Salvador Minuchin's structural theory,[2] Paul Watzlawick's pragmatics of communication[3] and contemporary relational perspectives, this article examines backbiting as a mechanism of anxiety regulation, narrative control and boundary distortion. It also explores how these patterns are carried into adulthood and how educators can support learners shaped by indirect communication.

Triangulation as a mechanism of tension regulation

In systemic family theory, triangulation is one of the primary strategies through which a dyad manages emotional tension. Bowen emphasized that triangulation is not inherently pathological; rather, it is a functional adaptation within systems that lack the capacity for direct emotional regulation.[4] By shifting tension from the dyad to a triadic configuration, the system temporarily stabilizes itself, even though the underlying conflict remains unaddressed.

Backbiting fits seamlessly into this mechanism. It allows a family member to discharge frustration without confronting the person involved, seek validation for their perspective, form or reinforce a coalition against a third party and redistribute emotional responsibility within the system. Instead of addressing concerns directly with Person B, Person A turns to Person C. The tension that originally belonged to the A–B dyad is now relocated into the A–C–B triangle.

[1] M. Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, New York 1978, pp. 306–307.

[2] S. Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, Cambridge, MA 1974, pp. 53–82.

[3] P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, New York 1967, pp. 51–67.

[4] M. Bowen, *Family Therapy*…, pp. 306–307.

From the perspective of communication pragmatics, this shift has significant consequences. Watzlawick's work[5] shows that introducing a third party alters the relational geometry, creating new alliances and redefining the flow of information. Over time, triangulation becomes a habitual pattern – an automatic response to discomfort – rather than a conscious choice.

Coalitions and hidden loyalties

Minuchin's structural family theory[6] emphasizes that families organize themselves around boundaries and subsystems. Backbiting operates as a mechanism that shifts, blurs or reinforces these boundaries depending on who aligns with whom. Coalitions formed through indirect communication are rarely explicit; they emerge through repeated patterns of shared narratives, emotional alignment and mutual validation at the expense of a third party.

Hidden loyalties, described by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy,[7] play a crucial role in sustaining these coalitions. Even when individuals consciously reject the narratives circulating within the family, they may still feel obligated to maintain relational balance by participating in indirect communication. Backbiting thus becomes both a symptom and a stabilizing force: it protects the system from overt conflict while simultaneously perpetuating relational injustice and emotional distance.

Functions of backbiting in the family system

Backbiting performs several key regulatory functions within the family system. Although often dismissed as mere gossip, it operates as a sophisticated mechanism for managing anxiety, maintaining relational balance and preserving the system's preferred patterns of interaction.

One of the primary functions is **tension reduction**, which aligns with Bowen's understanding of anxiety regulation.[8] Another is **coalition building**, central to Minuchin's structural model.[9] Backbiting also facilitates **responsibility shifting**, allowing the system to externalize conflict. Finally, it contributes to **pseudo-harmony**, a phenomenon well described in communication pragmatics,[10] where surface calm masks unresolved tension.

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[5] P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human*…, pp. 51–67.

[6] S. Minuchin, *Families and Family*…, pp. 102–128.

[7] I. Boszormenyi-Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy*, New York 1973, pp. 1–25.

[8] M. Bowen, *Family Therapy*…, pp. 373–379.

[9] S. Minuchin, *Families and Family*…, pp. 102–128.

[10] P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human*…, pp. 70–74.

Consequences for adult children

Adults who grew up in families where backbiting was a normative mode of communication often carry deeply ingrained relational patterns into their later lives. In such environments, emotions were rarely expressed directly, and conflicts were routinely managed through third parties rather than through open dialogue. These early experiences shape internal working models of communication, intimacy and conflict, influencing how individuals navigate relationships in adulthood.

One of the most pervasive consequences is **difficulty with direct communication**. For individuals raised in systems where speaking openly was associated with danger, disloyalty or emotional escalation, direct expression becomes intertwined with threat. As a result, they may avoid stating their needs, minimize their feelings or rely on indirect cues to convey dissatisfaction.

A second consequence is **fear of confrontation**. Because conflict in their family of origin was either suppressed or displaced onto third parties, adult children may equate disagreement with relational rupture. Even minor tensions can evoke disproportionate anxiety, leading to withdrawal, appeasement or triangulation in their own relationships.

Another common pattern is **over-responsibility for the emotions of others**. Children who were positioned as regulators of family tension – whether by listening to complaints, absorbing anxiety or mediating between adults – often internalize the belief that they must maintain emotional equilibrium in their relationships. This aligns with systemic observations of parentification and emotional role reversal.[11]

Backbiting also contributes to the **replication of triangulation** in adult partnerships. Instead of addressing issues directly with a partner, individuals may seek validation from friends, colleagues or extended family members. This pattern mirrors the relational strategies learned in childhood and perpetuates cycles of indirect communication.

Finally, many adult children struggle with **blurred interpersonal boundaries**. Growing up in systems where emotions and narratives were shared selectively, strategically or manipulatively can make it difficult to distinguish one's own feelings from those of others. This boundary confusion affects not only intimate relationships but also professional and educational contexts.

Backbiting as a form of indirect communication

Backbiting is a prototypical example of indirect communication – a relational strategy that replaces direct dialogue with circuitous, emotionally safer pathways. In families with low tolerance for emotional tension, explicit statements of

[11] V. Satir, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, Palo Alto 1964, pp. 30–55.

dissatisfaction, anger or unmet needs are often perceived as destabilizing. As a result, members resort to indirect forms of expression that allow them to communicate affect without confronting the relational risks associated with openness.

Watzlawick's pragmatics of communication[12] highlights that indirect communication is characteristic of systems marked by hierarchical rigidity and ambiguous boundaries. In such environments, messages are rarely conveyed at face value. Instead:

a) anger is expressed through hints and insinuations;
b) dissatisfaction emerges through complaints directed at third parties;
c) needs are articulated through intermediaries;
d) conflicts unfold through alliances rather than direct negotiation.

Backbiting functions as a central mechanism within this indirect communication ecology. By speaking about an absent person rather than to them, family members avoid the immediate consequences of confrontation while still releasing emotional pressure. Yet this strategy does not resolve conflict; it merely redistributes it.

Indirect communication also shapes the family's **epistemology** – its shared understanding of what is "true." Because narratives circulate without verification, perceptions become collectively constructed rather than relationally negotiated. This aligns with constructivist perspectives on relational meaning-making.[13]

Backbiting as a tool for narrative control

Backbiting is not only a strategy for regulating emotional tension; it is also a powerful instrument for shaping and controlling family narratives. Every family constructs shared stories about who its members are, how they behave and what roles they occupy. These narratives function as implicit rules that guide expectations, justify behaviours and maintain the system's internal coherence.

Through repeated negative commentary about an absent person, family members gradually construct a stable identity for that individual. The narrative becomes self-reinforcing: once someone is labelled as "difficult," "unreliable," or "oversensitive," subsequent behaviours are interpreted through that lens. This process is consistent with Kenneth J. Gergen's relational construction of identity.[14]

Narrative control serves several systemic functions. It allows the family to:

a) stabilize roles;
b) justify coalitions;
c) protect the status quo;
d) maintain hierarchy.

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[12] P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human*…, pp. 51–67.

[13] K.J. Gergen, The *Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, New York 1991, pp. 49–72.

[14] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Stanford 1991, pp. 36–45.

Backbiting is particularly effective in this process because it operates in the shadows. The absent person has no opportunity to challenge the narrative, correct misunderstandings or offer alternative interpretations. Their identity is constructed in their absence, through the emotional needs and alliances of others.

Family-based relational patterns in adult education contexts

Adult learners bring relational histories shaped by their families of origin, including deeply internalized patterns of communication, emotional regulation and conflict management. In groups composed of adults, these patterns often become visible in subtle ways: through avoidance of direct expression, heightened sensitivity to interpersonal tension or reliance on third-party validation.

Individuals raised in families where indirect communication was normative frequently exhibit **relational caution**. They may hesitate to speak openly, monitor the reactions of others closely or interpret neutral feedback as criticism. These behaviours reflect early adaptations to environments where direct expression carried relational risk.

Another common pattern is **coalition-seeking**. Learners accustomed to triangulated communication may gravitate toward forming alliances within the group, sharing concerns about others rather than addressing issues directly. This dynamic mirrors the coalitions described in structural family theory.[15]

Backbiting also shapes **perceptions of authority**. Adults who grew up in environments where authority figures were discussed indirectly – praised in public but criticized in private – may approach educators with ambivalence. This dynamic resonates with Anthony Giddens' observations on trust and modern identity.[16]

Finally, learners from families marked by indirect communication often struggle with **boundary clarity**. They may overshare personal information, withdraw abruptly when feeling exposed or become entangled in the emotional states of others. These behaviours can affect group dynamics, particularly in settings that rely on collaboration, reflection or interpersonal dialogue.

Recognizing these patterns situates learner behaviour within a broader relational context rather than pathologizing it. When educators understand the systemic origins of indirect communication, they are better equipped to create learning environments that support autonomy, direct expression and relational safety.

Educational interventions supporting direct communication

Adult education settings offer a unique opportunity to counteract relational patterns shaped by indirect communication in the family of origin. While educators

[15] S. Minuchin, *Families and Family*…, pp. 53–82.

[16] U. Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*, Cambridge, MA 1979, pp. 3–20.

are not therapists, they play a crucial role in creating environments that promote clarity, autonomy and direct expression. Interventions that support these goals do not require clinical competences – they are based on conscious design of group processes and clear communication norms.

A foundational intervention is the establishment of **explicit communication guidelines**. For learners who come from backgrounds where indirect expression was the norm, clear expectations about how to voice concerns, ask questions or offer feedback provide a sense of safety. Stating these norms openly – such as encouraging direct address, discouraging side conversations about absent participants and normalizing disagreement – helps counteract the implicit rules internalized in childhood.

Another important intervention is **modelling direct communication**. Educators who articulate expectations clearly, acknowledge misunderstandings openly and respond to tension without avoidance demonstrate alternative relational possibilities. This aligns with Satir's emphasis on congruent communication.[17]

Group-based activities can also be structured to **reduce opportunities for triangulation**. Reflective exercises that require participants to speak from their own perspective rather than about others shift the focus from relational speculation to personal experience. Small-group discussions with rotating roles prevent the formation of stable coalitions that mirror family dynamics.

Educators can further support learners by fostering **boundary clarity**. This includes helping participants distinguish between personal reactions and group-level processes, encouraging them to articulate their needs directly and guiding them in recognizing when they are taking responsibility for emotions that do not belong to them. These skills are essential for individuals whose early environments blurred emotional and relational boundaries.

Finally, interventions that promote **meta-communication** – talking about how the group communicates – enable learners to reflect on their own patterns. When participants recognize that indirect communication is not a personal flaw but a learned relational strategy, they gain the freedom to experiment with new forms of expression. This reflective stance supports both individual growth and healthier group dynamics.

Case studies: backbiting in systemic practice

The following case studies illustrate how backbiting functions within family systems as a mechanism for regulating tension, shaping alliances and maintaining established relational patterns. Although each case is unique, all demonstrate the systemic logic of indirect communication and its impact on family dynamics.

[17] V. Satir, *Conjoint Family*…, pp. 30–55.

Case 1: the parent–child coalition

In a family with two parents and an adolescent daughter, the mother frequently confided in the daughter about the father's perceived shortcomings. These conversations occurred when the father was absent and were framed as "sharing feelings" or "seeking support." Over time, the daughter became the mother's primary emotional confidant, absorbing frustrations that were never communicated directly to the father.

This dynamic created a stable coalition between mother and daughter, positioning the father as the problematic outsider. The daughter began to interpret the father's neutral behaviors through the lens of the mother's narratives, reinforcing the coalition and increasing emotional distance within the marital subsystem. Although the mother reported feeling "closer" to her daughter, the alliance placed the child in a developmentally inappropriate role and prevented the parents from addressing their relational issues directly.

Case 2: sibling triangulation

In a family of three adult siblings, longstanding tensions between the two older siblings were routinely managed through conversations with the youngest. Each sibling privately criticized the other, seeking validation and emotional alignment. The youngest sibling became the repository of unresolved conflict, carrying the emotional burden of both sides without the authority to intervene.

This triangulated pattern prevented the older siblings from engaging in direct dialogue and reinforced their mutual avoidance. The youngest sibling reported feeling "stuck in the middle," experiencing loyalty conflicts and chronic anxiety. Despite this discomfort, the pattern persisted because it allowed the older siblings to maintain a façade of harmony during family gatherings.

Case 3: intergenerational narrative transmission

A young adult reported that throughout childhood, extended family members frequently spoke negatively about one aunt who was rarely present at gatherings. She was described as "difficult," "unpredictable," and "emotionally unstable." These narratives were presented as unquestioned truths, despite the young adult having had minimal direct contact with the aunt.

When the young adult eventually met the aunt in adulthood, her behaviour did not align with the family's descriptions. However, the internalized narrative shaped expectations and emotional responses, creating a sense of distance and mistrust. The family's backbiting had constructed a stable identity for the aunt that persisted across generations, influencing relationships even in the absence of direct interaction.

Methodological notes

This article adopts a systemic and interpretive framework grounded in family systems theory, communication pragmatics and relational constructivism. The aim is not to diagnose individual pathology but to analyze patterns of interaction that

emerge within relational contexts. The methodological approach is conceptual rather than empirical, drawing on established theoretical models to illuminate the functions and consequences of backbiting in family systems.

The analysis integrates four complementary perspectives:

1. **Bowen's multigenerational theory**, which explains triangulation, anxiety regulation and the transmission of relational patterns across generations.[18]
2. **Minuchin's structural approach**, which highlights the role of boundaries, subsystems and coalitions in shaping family dynamics.[19]
3. **Watzlawick's pragmatics of communication**, which examines indirect communication, meta-messages and the relational impact of speaking about rather than to others.[20]
4. **Narrative and relational constructivist perspectives**, which emphasize the co-construction of identity and the role of shared stories in maintaining systemic stability.[21]

The case studies presented in this article are illustrative, not clinical reports. They synthesize recurring patterns observed in systemic literature and practice, serving as heuristic examples rather than descriptions of specific families. Their purpose is to demonstrate how theoretical concepts manifest in lived relational contexts.

Shame and guilt as relational regulators

Shame and guilt function as powerful regulatory mechanisms within families marked by indirect communication. In such systems, emotional expression is governed not by explicit rules but by implicit expectations about what can be said, to whom and under what conditions.

Shame operates as a **boundary-enforcing emotion**. Individuals who deviate from the family's preferred narratives or challenge established alliances may be subtly shamed through negative commentary shared with others in their absence. This dynamic resonates with Satir's observations on incongruence and emotional suppression.[22]

Guilt, in contrast, functions as a **loyalty-regulating emotion**. When backbiting positions one family member as the source of tension, others may feel compelled to align with the dominant narrative to avoid being perceived as disloyal. This dynamic reflects the contextual therapy perspective on relational ethics.[23]

Together, shame and guilt create a **self-reinforcing emotional loop**: backbiting defines what is acceptable; shame polices it; guilt ensures compliance.

[18] M. Bowen, *Family Therapy*…, pp. 373–379.
[19] S. Minuchin, *Families and Family*…
[20] P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human*…
[21] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 36–45.
[22] V. Satir, *Conjoint Family*…, pp. 30–55.
[23] I. Boszormenyi-Nagy, G.M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties*…, pp. 25–48.

Conclusion

Backbiting, often dismissed as a minor interpersonal irritation, emerges in this analysis as a complex systemic phenomenon with far-reaching relational consequences. It functions simultaneously as a mechanism of emotional regulation, a tool for coalition building, a strategy for narrative control and a means of maintaining homeostasis in families that struggle with direct communication.

Understanding backbiting through a systemic lens reveals that it is not an isolated behavior but part of a broader ecology of indirect communication. Families marked by chronic anxiety, rigid hierarchies or ambiguous boundaries rely on such strategies to manage emotional intensity. These patterns are then carried into adult education, professional environments and interpersonal relationships.

For educators working with adult learners, recognizing the systemic origins of indirect communication is essential. Educational settings can become spaces where participants experiment with new relational possibilities – where direct expression is encouraged, boundaries are clarified and meta-communication is normalized. This aligns with contemporary adult education perspectives on relational learning.[24]

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