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Gossip in Organizations

A Social Network Study

Lea Ellwardt

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A Social Network Study

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The nature of my research topic comes with the handicap that I sometimes wonder whether my colleagues gossip about me. Without being paranoid, I am quite certain they do agree that I am a hopeless chocoholic. In fact, my chocolate brownies have built up a reasonable reputation in the department. The secret about these brownies is that I always add a pinch of chili. Working on this dissertation was like baking with chocolate and chili; while addictive, it could taste spicy at times. Be that as it may, the work would not have been as compelling without the latter ingredient. In the following, I would like to thank those people who aided me in finding the perfect recipe for my work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1 INTRODUCTION

Gossip, or talking about others in their absence, is one of the most pervasive human activities. Research has shown that people devote approximately 65% of their speaking time to social topics, with only marginal variation among age, gender, and cultures (Dunbar, 1996; Dunbar, 2004), and that up to two thirds of all conversations refer to third parties (Emler, 1994). Gossip can play an important role in sustaining durable cooperation in human groups in general (Bosson et al., 2006; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Sommerfeld et al., 2007), and within organizations in particular (see e.g. Burt and Knez, 1996; Houmanfar and Johnson, 2003; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Myers, 2002; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Consequently, over the last decade or two, organization scholars have shown increasing interest in the antecedents of workplace gossip, emphasizing the important role that gossip plays in the process of norm enforcement and cooperation (Coleman, 1990; Guendouzi, 2001; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Sommerfeld et al., 2008; Wittek et al., 2000). Two main assumptions have guided this research.

First, there seems to be wide agreement that gossip can be a low-cost, effective and efficient instrument for sanctioning deviants, cheaters or free-riders. James Coleman (1990) succinctly summarized the essence of this argument in what could be labeled the *low-cost assumption*:

“Gossip (...) leads to sanctions that may have little cost for the beneficiary of the norm, the one who passes gossip or the one who receives it, and also brings him potential benefits...Each person who has an interest in the maintenance of the norm and the application of sanctions to those who violate it comes thereby to have an interest in the spread of information that can lead to a consensus on legitimate sanctions.” (Coleman, 1990, p. 284)

A second widely held assumption is that small and cohesive groups are a major precondition for gossip to occur: “Gossip flourishes in close-knit, highly connected social networks but atrophies in loose-knit, unconnected ones” (Merry, 1984, p. 277). We refer to this argument as the *connectedness assumption*. It holds that network closure enhances information flow because it lowers the risks of trust (Burt, 2000).

Taken together, both assumptions suggest that within close-knit social communities, updates about norm violations are freely delivered and actively sought by all members of the community, independently of the individual characteristics, hierarchical positions or social relations of the norm violators, the gossipers, or the receivers of the gossip. There are both empirical and theoretical reasons to place the low-cost and the connectedness assumptions under closer scrutiny. Previous research indicates that there are large variations in who gossips, in who is likely to receive gossip, and in who becomes the object of gossip (Keltner et al., 2008; McAndrew et al., 2007). Put differently: not all norm violators are equally likely to become the object of gossip, nor are all potential

beneficiaries of a norm equally likely to share or receive gossip. For example, gender, high anxiety, and low need for social approval were identified as factors increasing an individual's tendency to gossip (Jaeger et al., 1994; Nevo et al., 1994), whereas persons who can seriously affect our lives, like high-ranking people, rivals, or free-riders (Bosson et al., 2006; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; McAndrew et al., 2007) are more likely to become the object of gossip (Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Wert and Salovey, 2004). These findings imply that engaging in gossip behavior may be more costly or beneficial for some individuals than for others, and that the relative price to the individual depends on their position in the social structure.

The connectedness assumption came under pressure, too. Several studies on the link between the structure of personal networks and gossip behavior (Burt, 2000; Burt, 2005; Burt and Knez, 1996; Wittek and Wielers, 1998) suggest that network closure is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to become involved in gossip events. For example, Ronald Burt's influential structural hole argument suggests that individuals exploit their brokerage positions through strategically disclosing or withholding information about their *unconnected* third parties. Another study (Burt, 2000) showed that closed trust networks reinforce predispositions towards third parties, rather than facilitating the transmission of new information about third parties.

We suggest that both the low-cost and the connectedness assumptions disregard the potentially strategic nature of gossip. This *strategy assumption* provides a better starting point of departure for gossip research. Talking about others reveals sensitive information about one's social network. This behavior can either be exploited by receivers at the gossiper's expense, or condemned by the group in more general terms. Potential gossipers and receivers are likely to anticipate these potential damages. Their social relationships are an asset to fulfill their need of belongingness and subjective well-being (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), as they entwine valuable resources of affection, friendship, interpersonal trust and social support.

Individuals who share private information about their personal contacts disclose intimate details about their informal network, thereby revealing information that can have strategic value for the receiver. The provision of this type of information can therefore be seen as a signal of trust towards the receiver. The receiver can violate this trust by misusing the information to the detriment of the gossiper. In this case, gossiping can have multiple negative repercussions for the gossiper, such as damaged relationships, harmed reputation, and social exclusion. However, gossipers may also deliberately spread (false) negative gossip to weaken competitors or rivals and to improve their own social status: how does the receiver know that the information provided by the gossip sender is truthful, rather than an attempt to manipulate the receiver's relation with the object of the gossip? In both cases, trust is essential. Potential gossipers need to trust the receiver to keep the secret, whereas the receiver needs to trust the sender concerning the veracity of the information. Also, trust relations are likely to affect the likelihood of becoming an object of gossip. Consequently, potential gossipers will choose both their gossip receiver

and object, based on the configuration of interpersonal trust relationships in the *gossip triad*, implying that models of gossip behavior need to take into account all three ties simultaneously. Hence the research problem of the present study:

How can variations in becoming the sender or object of positive and negative gossip be explained by variations in the interpersonal trust relationships in an organization?

1.1 Triadic Nature of Gossip

Following Kurland and Pelled, we define workplace gossip as “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000: 429). Literature quite consistently distinguishes the evaluative component further into positive and negative elements. (Elias and Scotson, 1965; Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Grosser et al., 2010; Soeters and Iterson, 2002). Examples of positive gossip are praising or defending a member’s behavior, and examples of negative gossip are criticizing or complaining about a member. Note that gossip is not synonymous with *rumor*. While gossip concerns personal talk about people, rumor typically regards unsubstantiated hear-say about significant events and matters relevant to a broader audience in the organization (Houmanfar and Johnson, 2003).

Gossip takes place in a setting of three actors: the sender, receiver, and object of gossip (i.e., the absent third party). Figure 1.1 depicts these actors in the so-called *gossip triad*. Arrows indicate to whom the behavior is directed, namely that two employees gossip with one another about a third person. As mentioned above, the emergence of gossip is assumed to depend on the interpersonal trust relationships between those three actors (Burt, 1992; 2005). Organizational researchers often strongly rely on arguments that focus on individual behavior and ignore this structural interdependency between employees.

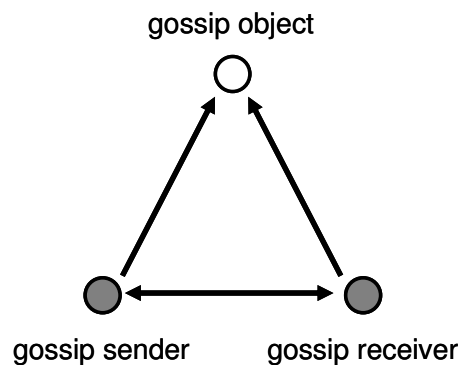


Figure 1.1 The Gossip Triad

The research in this book addresses three gaps in past studies. First, it broadens the focus of previous research on the characteristics of gossip by disentangling personal characteristics and interpersonal trust networks of the *senders and receivers* of gossip messages (Bergmann, 1993). Second, it models *about whom* the gossip concerns and how the choice of gossip objects is affected by the configuration of interpersonal trust

relations in the gossip triad. Much of the research on workplace gossip fails to elaborate on the question about whom is gossiped, perhaps because researchers assume gossip to spread evenly about organizational members: “It is still not clear, for instance, whether gossip occurs equally across all organizational relationships or is more prevalent in team member exchanges.” (Mills, 2010, p. 215). Third, gossip and trust are treated as *interrelated* phenomena. Besides the assumed effects of trust on gossip, it is asked how gossip behavior affects the emergence of trust between people.

1.2 Trust and Gossip

In line with our strategic view on gossiping in organizations, talking about third parties can serve at least three purposes (Dunbar, 2004; Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004). First, it can be used to reduce uncertainty about formal processes and structures. Often employees cannot access complete information about managerial actions and decisions, which may lead to insecurity at the workplace (Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). The second purpose comprises informal influence. Through gossiping people ensure norms of cooperation and punish those who do not cooperate (i.e., the untrustworthy) by spreading reputation-harming information about them in the broader informal network (Burt, 2005; Tucker, 1993). Third, gossip can be a signaling device, which is used to initiate, monitor, maintain and foster trust relationships. Through disclosing information about their personal networks, individuals make themselves vulnerable, thereby signaling their intention to strengthen relationships with others. They also may improve their social capital by seeking potential allies in the network and manipulating the reputation of foes (Bosson et al., 2006; McAndrew et al., 2007).

To what degree these objectives can be realized depends on the configuration of interpersonal trust relationships in potential gossip triads. The subsequent discussion is organized according to the relationships between the three aforementioned actors in the triad: the sender-receiver relationship, the sender-object relationship, and finally the receiver-object relationship.

1.2.1 Trust between Senders and Receivers of Gossip

Presence of trust. Gossip may be used to nurture existing trust relationships (Jaeger et al., 1994). If discrete information is exchanged repeatedly, social bonds between senders and receivers intensify (Bosson et al., 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Rosnow, 2001). From a trusted colleague the gossiper can expect a shared mindset and that this colleague will respond positively to the behaviors and attitudes of the gossiper in general. Gossip can be used to continuously scrutinize the quality of the relationship with the receiver: whether trust is still present and whether third parties in the social environment of the gossip sender and receiver fit into this relationship without causing tension. In this verification process, *positive* gossip (e.g., praising a friend’s behavior) is also meaningful (McAndrew et al., 2007).

Unlike previous scholarship which assumes gossip to be ‘cheap’, the studies in this book assume that gossip can be costly, especially when it has negative contents, e.g. about rivals. It is argued that gossip senders try to reduce the potential risks generated through gossip behavior by choosing trustworthy receivers. There is always a chance that the receiver of gossip does not agree with the gossip message. Spreading disagreeable third-party information may then be punished, for example when the receiver – unlike the sender – is a friend of the object of gossip. If the object learns about the gossip, the sender’s relationship with the object may be damaged. More importantly, the object may have powerful means to retaliate, for instance when the gossip object has a power position in the organization. Thus, gossip senders need to believe the information will not be used against them, and that it will not be disclosed to the objects (Burt, 2001).

Furthermore, trust has been proposed to facilitate gossip between employees because it allows receivers to evaluate the sincerity of the sender (Mills, 2010). Although veracity is not a prerequisite of gossip, its value increases with the extent to which it is perceived as credible (Hess and Hagen, 2006).

Absence of trust. Gossip can be an effective signaling instrument to create trust where trust between the sender and receiver is not yet present. A considerable body of literature employing evolutionary theory suggests that gossip induces trust, affection, and friendships between individuals over time (Barkow, 1992; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 1996; Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994; Hess and Hagen, 2006; McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002; Wilson et al., 2000). Experimental research has shown that senders gossip deliberately to weaken the receiver’s relationship with the object, and to strengthen their own relationship with the receiver – similar to the signal ‘trust me, not the others’ (Bosson et al., 2006). In order to study such potential outcomes, workplace gossip also needs to be modeled as a prerequisite (not just as an antecedent) of trust. The organizational literature clearly lacks an investigation of the dynamic interrelationship between gossip and trust. As a result, there is little knowledge about the consequences of gossip for the establishment of other informal relationship types, most importantly friendship, which is considered to create benefits for organizations (e.g., increase of cooperative behavior).

1.2.2 *Trust between Senders and Objects of Gossip*

Presence of trust. When the relationship between sender and object is characterized by interpersonal trust, closeness or affection, the sender will be less inclined to spread negative gossip, and more inclined to spread positive gossip about the object. Employees are less inclined to gossip about others whom they trust for several reasons. First, close (i.e., frequent direct) contacts with a colleague enhances the availability of first-hand information about a colleague, which decreases the news-bearing value of gossip. Moreover, frequently repeated interactions produce a ‘shadow of the future’ (Axelrod, 1984): The gossip sender knows he or she will have future encounters with the object, enabling the object to reciprocate negative behaviors. Objects who learn about harmful gossip may even withdraw from trust relationships with the gossip sender completely.

These risks delimitate exploitation of trust for selfish advantage. Third, employees will not want to jeopardize affective relationships and friendships because these relationships are valuable sources of belongingness, solidarity, and social support (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Instead, it can be expected that employees talk positively about their absent friends in front of others (and that these friends also positively appraise them in return) with the purpose of verifying and deepening the existent trust relationship (Sommerfeld et al., 2008).

Absence of trust. When interpersonal trust is absent, the salience of gossip as an information gathering tool increases. It likely serves the purpose of assessing the trustworthiness and reputation of others (Burt, 2005; Rooks et al., 2010; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Knowing little about the behaviors of a colleague creates uncertainty with regard to the extent that an employee can expose him or herself as vulnerable to this colleague. Based on gossip information, employees decide whether they want to intensify their collaborative relationship with this colleague, with the benefit of saving time and personal (potentially negative) experiences from direct interactions. Most importantly, having heard appraisal or criticism beforehand, an actual commitment to a collaborative effort can save the gossiper from exploitation, and thereby reduces risks in cooperative relationships that originally come with trust. If the colleague is known as being unreliable, this information likely spreads in social networks and manifests itself in a negative reputation (De Pinninck et al., 2008).

Presence of distrust. Low trust or distrust¹ relations increase the likelihood of spreading negative gossip about the distrusted individual, if also the potential receiver has a distrust relation with the object. Gossip has been shown to be prevalent in triads with so-called coalition structures where two employees have an interpersonal trust relationship *with one another but not with* the object (Bosson et al., 2006; Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Research has shown that poorly embedded employees are likely targets of negative gossip with few defenders by their side (Keltner et al., 2008), whereas employees with high social status are treated favorably (Keltner et al., 2008). This prevents them from becoming the object of negative gossip (De Vries, 1995; Kniffin and Wilson, 2010; Merry, 1984). Similarly, employees who perceive a breach of trust by managers, often take covert actions to weaken managerial authority, such as complaining to others and forming alliances against powerful players (Hafen, 2004; Morey and Luthans, 1991; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). The effect of social status on becoming the object of positive and negative gossip is examined in Chapter 5.

1.2.3 Trust between Receivers and Objects of Gossip

Presence of trust. Individuals who have an interpersonal trust relationship with a potential gossip object are less likely to become receivers of gossip about this third party. The reason is that gossip senders will anticipate on the receivers bond with the object.

¹ Low trust and distrust are used interchangeably in this dissertation and refer to the same concept (as opposites to high trust).

The receiver will want to avoid tensions and preserve the existing trust relationship, and will therefore be likely to express disapproval of the negative message, defending the object (cf. McAndrew et al., 2007).

Absence of trust. The absence of an interpersonal trust relationship between an individual and a potential object of gossip increases the likelihood that this individual receives information about the gossip object: the gossip sender runs a lower risk of facing a negative reaction from the receiver. Sending (negative) information about an object may alter the receiver's opinion about the object. Hence, absence of trust may transform into presence of distrust. A study on senior bankers by Burt (2005) demonstrated that after negative gossip was circulated about them in the organizational network, bankers suffered from a damaged reputation until they eventually exited the firm. Even colleagues who could not rely on experiences based on direct interactions with them withdrew from cooperative relationships, purely based on predispositions created by the negative gossip that had echoed through the grapevine earlier (Burt, 2005).

Taking all presented arguments together, expectations with respect to gossip triads tested in this book are summarized as follows. First, it is assumed that the gossip sender and gossip receiver are tied by a trust relationship (Chapter 4 and 6). Second, their trust relationship with the gossip object is argued to be similar, meaning both gossipers either trust or distrust the object (Chapter 4 and 7). Third, trust relationships with objects are expected to facilitate positive gossip and inhibit negative gossip about them (Chapter 3 and 5). Fourth, trust relationships are not only a predictor but also a consequence of gossip behavior (Chapter 6 on friendship).

People of a higher status play a special role as objects in the gossip triad. Cumulating evidence shows that employees often seek gossip about people in higher rather than lower hierarchical positions (Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007; Michelson and Mouly, 2000; Mills, 2010; Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). Chapters 2 and 3 of this book are therefore dedicated to the study of managers as objects of negative and positive gossip. The heightened thirst for gossip about managers is explained by the employees' functional dependency on authorities, who are powerful players in organizations: individuals have an enhanced interest in, but little access to information about those who can affect their lives, e.g. managers and direct supervisors (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007). Negative information is particularly valued because harmful behaviors of the powerful often affect the powerless more severely than beneficial behaviors (De Backer and Gurven, 2006). Taking these arguments together, it is expected that the employees' interests congregate around negative gossip about managers.

While trust is assumed to have the largest influence on gossip behavior, a number of related mechanisms are tested, namely the effects of resistance to organizational

change, formal and social status in the organization, and membership in formal work groups. The various expectations are further detailed in the chapter overview below.

1.3 Overview of the Five Studies

In what follows, a summary of the five empirical studies and their main findings is provided. The methods, which are specified in *Chapter 2*, are mentioned only briefly.

Chapter 3 studies the effects of trust, hierarchical status, and organizational change on negative gossip about managers. The theoretical framework connects to management literature, in which gossip has been argued to be a form of covert employee resistance to authorities in organizations (Hafen, 2004; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). Arguably, such resistance gossip is particularly likely during organizational change (Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997), which often causes employees to perceive a breach in trust (Robinson, 1996). Subordinate status, disagreement with organizational change, and a low trust in management are predicted to increase the amount of negative gossip among employees. In addition, the empirical model tests mediation and moderation between the three predictors. Methods of analysis comprise of multiple regression analyses and Sobel's test. The findings support a moderated mediation model: negative attitudes towards change decrease trust in management; decreased trust in management increases negative gossip about managers. The latter effect is moderated by formal position – low trust is more likely to result in gossip for subordinates than for supervisory personnel.

Chapter 4 builds on the previous study and elaborates on the theoretical framework of trust in organizations. Again, managers are analyzed as the objects of gossip. Three new specifications are introduced. First, different dimensions of trust are examined, namely generalized trust in the organization's management and interpersonal trust in particular supervisors and colleagues (Nooiteboom, 2002). Second, trust relationships with colleagues are considered important predictors of gossip about managers. Third, the approach distinguishes between positive and negative gossip. The empirical study is divided into two parts. The first part relies on a multiple regression design and illustrates that generalized low trust in management combined with high trust in colleagues increases negative gossip about managers. The second part uses cross-sectional social network analysis, more specifically exponential random graph modeling, to investigate interpersonal trust relationships in gossip triads. Two sites of an organization are compared. Similarly to the results of the first part, supervisors tend to be the object of negative gossip when employees have low interpersonal trust (i.e., little affection and little contact) in them but high interpersonal trust in other members of the site. Interpersonal trust does not appear to affect positive gossip behavior. Furthermore, balanced relationships in triads influence neither negative nor positive gossip incidents.

Chapter 5 addresses antecedents of becoming the object of workplace gossip. Taking a social network perspective, it is suggested that group boundaries and social status in the informal workplace network determine who the objects of positive and negative gossip are. By praising or criticizing the behavior of third parties, functionally

interdependent members of a formal work group socially control one another (Kniffin and Wilson, 2010). Hence, team membership is expected to enhance the employees' interest in positive and negative gossip. Furthermore, individuals of low social status, defined as having poor embeddedness in the overall informal trust network of employees, are predicted to be targets of negative gossip. These individuals are comparatively defenseless and may even become scapegoats. In contrast, positive gossip is proposed to be centered around employees with high social status. Using exponential random graph modeling, the position of employees is analyzed in both the network of negative and positive gossip of a site in an organization. The results confirm all expectations but *not* that high social status attracts positive gossip.

Chapter 6 studies the dynamic relationship between gossip and friendship (i.e., interpersonal trust). Two theories are presented. While social capital theory expects friendships to facilitate gossip activities between employees over time (Burt, 2005), evolutionary theory proposes the opposite, namely that friendship and popularity are consequences of gossiping (Dunbar, 2004). This study subjects both theories to a causality test by analyzing the dynamics of multiplex networks using longitudinal network data. Specifically, gossip and friendship are modeled as co-evolving networks with the recently innovated Multiple SIENA algorithm. The findings yield some support for the evolutionary approach by showing that gossip brings forward friendship in employee dyads. Despite this positive effect, active gossiping is *not* rewarded with higher popularity in the overall friendship network as expected. Instead, popularity decreases, which suggests that the group sanctions vigorous gossip behavior.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the study of complete gossip triads and consolidates elements of the previous studies. Based on social capital theory (Lin, 2001), it is expected that instrumental ties, i.e. shared group membership, between sender, receiver, and object increases the flow of positive and negative gossip. Furthermore, it is argued that closed triads, in which all actors share an expressive friendship tie, breed positive gossip (closure hypothesis). Negative gossip is assumed to flourish in coalition triads, where sender and receiver share a friendship tie with each other, but not with the object. The statistical model, which is specifically developed for this study, consists of a logistic regression with three correlated random effects for sender, receiver, and object. The results reveal that gossip activities are enhanced with the extent to which the sender, receiver, and object belong to the same work group. Furthermore, the results yield support for the closure hypothesis, showing that positive gossip increases with the number of friendship relations in the triad. The coalition hypothesis is partly supported, as there is no similarity in the sender's and receiver's relationship with the object.

Note that the five empirical chapters were written as independent articles, which were submitted to scientific journals. Therefore, some overlap between the chapters could not be avoided, especially with regard to details on the data.

Chapter 2

Research Design and Data Collection

Data was collected throughout a larger project together with Alona Labun, Michael Mäs, Birgit Paukzstat, and Timo Septer. The researchers thank Jesse van den Kieboom for programming the electronic questionnaire.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

As explained in the previous chapter, the likelihood of sending gossip, receiving gossip, and becoming the object of gossip is assumed to depend on the three trust relationships between sender, receiver, and object, who together constitute the gossip triad. This chapter outlines the general methodological approach to the examination of relationships in the gossip triad. Furthermore, samples and data collection are described. Finally, an overview of the gossip measure is presented, which was designed specifically for the purpose of studying gossip triads.

2.1 Methodological Approach

Triads are the smallest structural entity of gossip, but typically embedded in the context of larger social networks, such as organizational sites. The empirical design therefore relies on the investigation of complete employee networks in one or more sites of one case-study organization. The methods used in this book comprise of recent cross-sectional and longitudinal social network analyses, namely exponential random graph modeling (ERGM, Robins et al., 2007), modeling with Multiple SIENA (Snijders et al., 2010), and random-effects logistic regression models for triadic network data. These methods offer a number of key advantages that help with fine-graining and developing the analyses of gossip.

One advantage is that the applied models allow for the disentangling of senders and receivers in communication networks (instead of merely treating gossip communication as undirected mutual exchange). Many theories on gossip claim a distinction between senders and receivers, or solely focus on senders (Bergmann, 1993). The present study is one of the first to also implement this analytical distinction in empirical models of gossip. This way, the relationship between senders and receivers can be examined, as well as their different relationships with the objects.

Moreover, many empirical studies tend to neglect the objects of gossip (Michelson et al., 2010). This book presents a novel research design that accounts for the objects in gossip triads. In Chapter 4, managers are analyzed as particular *objects* in the gossip network of employees. A network tie represents a sender sharing gossip with a receiver about the site manager. This delivers twofold insights, namely on the effect of the sender's trust *and* of the receiver's trust in the site manager (i.e., object) on their gossiping behavior. In Chapter 5, a network tie represents a dyadic gossip relationship between a sender and an object ("who gossips about whom"). This way it is analyzed how embeddedness in the trust network (i.e., social status and interdependency) influences the likelihood of becoming the object of gossip. The studies in both chapters use exponential random graph modeling.

The study in Chapter 7 goes even one step further by combining the above-mentioned elements. Every single employee is treated as a potential sender, receiver, and object of gossip at the same time. Then, a statistical method specifically developed for the analysis of complete triadic data, models the propensity to send, receive, or become the object of gossip. It is also modeled how this propensity is affected by friendships in the triad. This way it is tested, for instance, whether the sender's friendship (i.e., interpersonal trust) with the receiver *and* object, *and* friendship between the receiver and object increases the sending of positive gossip. Such a specific research design requires special data collection, which is detailed further below in the section on 'Measuring Gossip Triads'.

Another key development is studying the dynamic relationship between gossip and friendship. Scholars generally perceive gossip and friendship as interrelated, meaning that change in one of these relationship types is proposed to cause change in the other. However, this interrelationship has not yet been tested with appropriate methods, most importantly longitudinal network data, meaning causality has not been assessed. This is perhaps because social network studies typically focus on the dynamics of single relationships but pay little attention to the dynamics of multiplex relationships. The main reason for this research gap is the shortage of statistical tools that examine the co-evolution of multiple relationship types. In response to that shortcoming, in Chapter 6, a recently developed Multiple SIENA algorithm (Snijders et al., 2008) is applied to longitudinal social network data collected in a child care organization over a one-year period. Both causality directions are modeled and tested: how friendship affects the dynamics of gossip, and how gossip affects the dynamics of friendship.

Because the use of a round-robin design (meaning that every employee provides information on every other employee in the organizational network) is limited to small groups, social network analyses cannot be applied to larger employee samples. Furthermore, complete networks cannot be assessed with a random sampling design but require measures from nearly all employees of a network. In order to examine a larger random employee sample and to enhance the general applicability of the study, this book includes additional data that is representative of a medium-sized organization. This data is investigated with ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. The data collection is specified in the next section.

2.2 Data

To test the hypotheses elaborated throughout this book, data was collected in one medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization over a one-year period from spring 2008 to spring 2009.² The organization is a major independent, subsidized, regional institution in the field of child care. At the start of the data collection it comprised of approximately 650 employees, with 15 sites spread across one region of the Netherlands. Its target

² Altogether the contact with the organization lasted approximately two and a half years.

group is children with problems in their social, psychological, and physical functioning. Most employees are female part-time workers.

Data collection was separated into two units. The first unit consisted of a representative employee survey. Data collected in this unit was used in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. The second unit consisted of a longitudinal social networks study in two sites of the organization using sociometric measures. Data retrieved from this unit was analyzed in Chapter 4, 5, and 6. More details on the research design, data collection, and methods for each study are provided in the individual chapters.

2.2.1 Representative Employee Survey

The organization agreed to a sample of approximately one third of all employees, and provided socio-demographic data on their gender, age, contracted hours per week, tenure, and working region in the country. Respondents stemmed from all kinds of different units across the organization: General/Management, Ambulant Care/Foster Care, Daycare, and Children's Home. In total, three quarters of the respondents were female; one fifth were managers; the mean age was 42. On average, employees held a degree in higher education (Dutch: HBO), and had been working in the organization for eight years, mainly part-time.

This paper-and-pencil survey was preceded by a phase of document study and exploratory in-depth interviews with several managers and employees, as well as a pretest. Questionnaires were discussed with management and piloted among six employees from various professions.

2.2.2 Network Study

Sociometric data was collected in two sites of the same organization. The two sites were special kindergartens and very similar in terms of hierarchy, number of employees (35 to 48), and workflow. Hierarchies were flat with one male line-manager, who directly supervised all employees. Teams of mostly four or five employees were responsible for a group of children, but there were no formal team leaders.

The topic of gossip is a sensitive one, so hesitance to provide accurate answers about other members in the organization can pose a serious problem. The research team therefore personally introduced the study with care on site. Beforehand, examples of sociometric questions were presented to the group of employees, so that they could anticipate what to expect. Full anonymity was guaranteed by using self-administered, computer-aided interviewing at both sites (hence the survey could be filled in from home). After completion of each of the three measurement waves the researchers went back and, as promised prior to the study, provided respondents with research reports and feedback discussions on site.

2.3 Measuring Gossip Triads

Sociometric measures on gossip are based on a model conceptualized as a triad in which two employees (sender and receiver) talk about a third employee (object). Two types of relationships are assessed: gossip *between* employees, and gossip *about* employees. The latter relationship type depends on the first type, but can also be analyzed separately.

The computer-assisted data collection proceeded in three sequential steps, as sketched in Figure 2.1. Because this design was very complex and required extraordinary motivation from respondents, the questionnaire was shortened in the second and third wave to reduce (increasing) drop-out rates.³ Original wordings of questions and answers per step are provided in the Appendix.

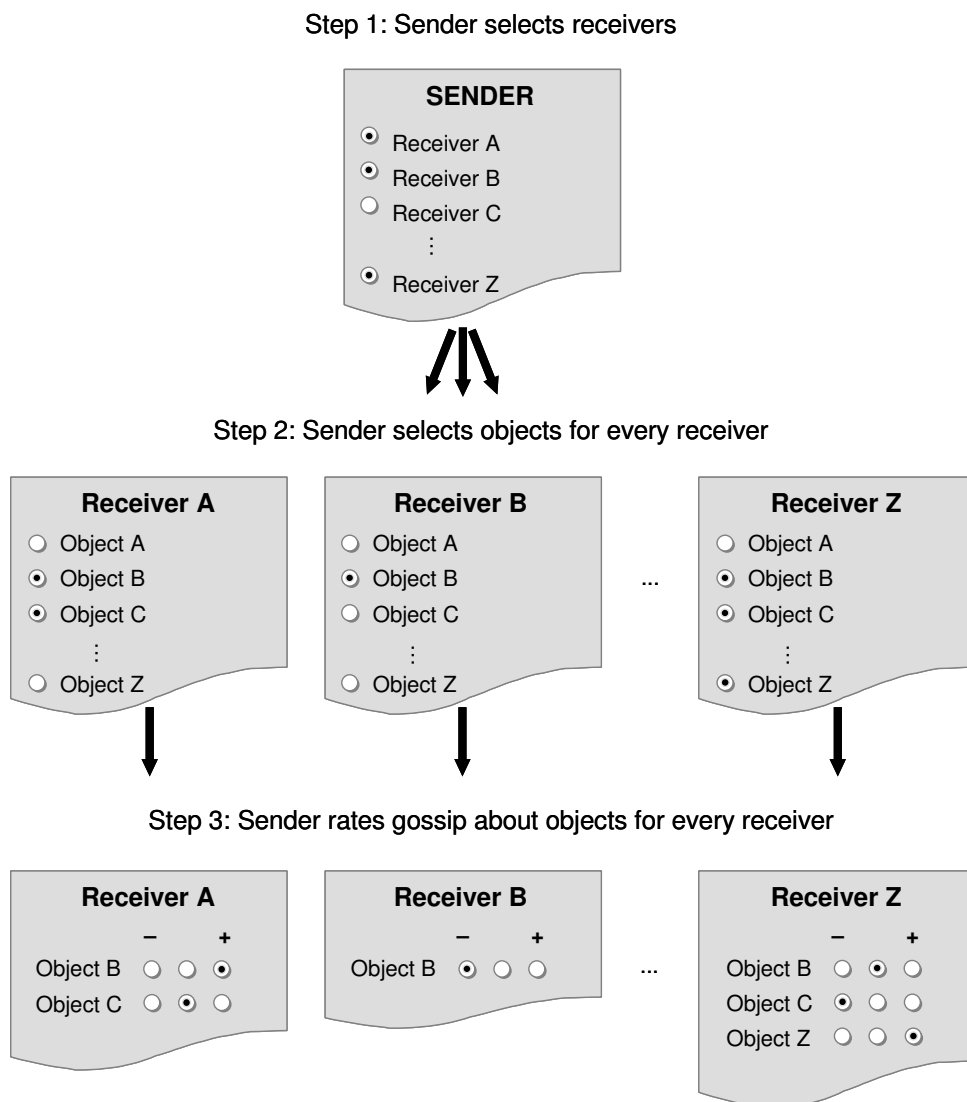


Figure 2.1 Three-step Procedure for Measuring Gossip Relations

³ Step 3 was dropped after wave one, and Step 2 was dropped after wave two. Step 1 was measured in all three waves without modification.

In the first step, respondents were asked to select all employees on a roster with whom they had regularly gossiped. This provided dyadic data on gossip *between* employees, i.e. sender-receiver relations. Second, respondents (senders) identified those third-party employees (objects) on a roster that they had gossiped about with the employees (receivers) selected in the first step. This provided triadic data on gossip *about* employees, i.e. sender-receiver-object relations. This data, however, could also be analyzed using methods for dyadic data (e.g., sender gossips about object regardless of receivers). In the third step, respondents were presented with a rating scheme in which they could evaluate the gossip as mostly critical, evenly critical and positive, or mostly positive. They rated the gossip about every third-party employee (object) in relationship to every employee (receiver) they had gossiped with.

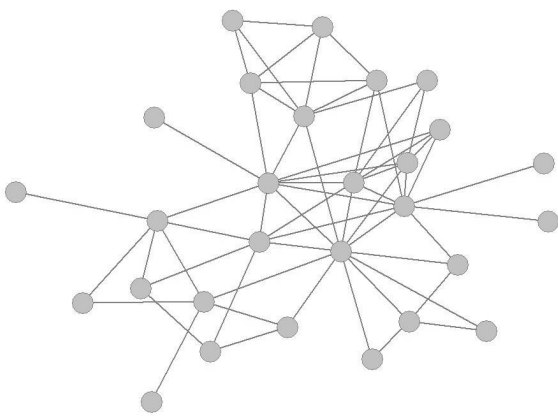
In sum, data provided directed and valued network data on who had gossiped with whom and about whom, and whether this gossip was negative (critical), positive, or a combination of both. The retrieved data could be analyzed with random-effects logistic regression models for triadic network data. However, based on this data various adjacency matrices were also computed, such as sender-receiver matrices and sender-object matrices, which served as input for social network analysis using exponential random graph modeling and Multiple SIENA.

It is important to note that the questionnaire posed a demanding task to the respondents, even though they were asked only about a small group. Respondents could be affected by a variety of confounding effects. For example, employees positioned on top of the names list might have been indicated more often as gossip receivers and objects than employees at the bottom. However, ERG models controlling for the respondents' rank on the names list did not reveal such primacy effects. To reduce the number of follow-up questions and hence the length of the questionnaire, the first step was limited to a maximum choice of ten gossip receivers. On average, employees indicated 4.7 receivers and, after that, 10.6 objects in the second step, which summed up to 15.3 follow-up questions. This can be considered a fair length.

Motivating respondents to participate in a longitudinal study where they need to fill in identical questions in every measurement wave is challenging, particularly in the case of lengthy network questionnaires. To ensure high quality answers and a sufficient response rate until the end of the study, the respondents were promised that the questionnaire would get shorter – and hence easier – with every wave. After the first wave, the last step of the three-step measurement procedure was left out (i.e., gossip ratings). After the second wave, the second step was left out (i.e., where respondents indicated the objects of gossip). Only the first step remained identical in every wave. There is hardly experience with demanding questionnaire tasks that generate information on three-way network data. Because of this, it would be an interesting subject for a field method experiment to establish the added value of such demanding tasks – and perhaps the lost value of less demanding tasks.

Chapter 3

Workplace Gossip about Managers as Resistance to Authority, Organizational Change, and Distrust



We develop and test hypotheses on the effect of formal position, cognitive resistance to change and trust in management on employees' tendency to spread negative gossip about managers. An employee survey (n=93) in a medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization supports a moderated mediation model: negative attitudes towards change decrease trust in management; distrust in management increases negative gossip about managers. The effect of distrust on gossip is moderated by formal position: distrust is more likely to result in gossip for subordinates than for supervisory personnel. The role of gossip as a form of resistance to authority and organizational change is discussed.

This chapter is based upon Ellwardt, L., Wittek, R., Wielers, R. Workplace gossip about managers as resistance to authority, organizational change, and distrust. Submitted for publication.

3 WORKPLACE GOSSIP ABOUT MANAGERS AS RESISTANCE TO AUTHORITY, ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE, AND DISTRUST

3.1 Introduction

During the past two decades, researchers on management and organizations have become increasingly interested in the topic of gossip about organizational members high in formal position (i.e., managers; Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007; Michelson and Mouly, 2000; Noon and Delbridge, 1993), with gossip being defined as “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000, p. 429). The relevance of gossip as a research topic for organizations is considered far from trivial, because the amount and content of gossip indicate how much trust and goodwill subordinates show toward management and the organization in general. Gossip about managers reflects their reputation and the acceptance of their power position by subordinates.

Although literature on gossip comprises of both negative and positive gossip, previous research mostly addressed workplace gossip in the context of negative behaviors, more specifically antisocial or deviant behavior in organizations. For example, gossip has received considerable attention in relation to concepts of employee resistance (Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993), indirect workplace aggression (Robinson and Bennett, 1995), social undermining at work (Duffy et al., 2002), and workplace incivility (Pearson et al., 2001). However, when lumped together with other forms of deviant behavior, the concept of gossip appears fuzzy. Demands on establishing an independent research line on gossip (Noon and Delbridge, 1993) have led to a growing body of both theoretical and empirical work on gossip as a central issue (put forward by Burt, 1992; Dunbar, 1996; Fine and Rosnow, 1978). The present study will focus on *negative* gossip about managers, such as complaining to others or criticizing them while they are absent.

Unlike related concepts, gossip is defined by the unique characteristics of indirectness and sociality. First, social undermining and incivility are intentional negative behaviors directed at the target *and* perceived as such by the target (Duffy et al., 2002; Pearson et al., 2001). Targets of gossip, however, by definition are excluded from the actual gossip activity and thus may not find out about the behavior. Gossipers may also not deliberately aim at jeopardizing the relationship with the target but instead are eager to maintain a *positive* relationship, especially when the target is powerful. Indirect behaviors like gossip provide lower risks of repercussions for subordinates, and therefore are more prominent than direct behaviors (Tucker, 1993). Second, gossip is a social phenomenon because it implies a set of actors: At a minimum, two people gossip with each other about a third person. Starting off within small groups, gossip often reaches employees in large parts of the informal organizational network (Noon and Delbridge, 1993). The group of subordinates can utilize gossip for informal social control when

disagreeing with management's actions. Eventually, the social dynamics of gossip potentially affect cooperation between employees, and thereby contribute to the stabilization and disruption of organizational networks (De Pinninck et al., 2008; Sommerfeld et al., 2008).

Managers need to maintain a positive reputation and rely on the cooperation of subordinates, especially during the implementation of organizational changes such as restructuring and reorganizing activities. However, management decisions on organizational changes often upset subordinates causing resistance (Oreg, 2006). We divide resistance into *cognitive resistance*, defined as a negative attitude towards a change, and *behavioral resistance*, defined as actions of employees in response to the change, such as complaining (Oreg, 2006). Subordinates who depend on their managers usually lack the resources to directly resist without risking that their actions backfire. Therefore, subordinates are likely to choose hidden forms of behavioral resistance (i.e., gossip), which managers find difficult to detect and control (Gabriel, 1995; Tucker, 1993). Consequently, some scholars have described gossiping as undermining authority (Noon and Delbridge, 1993), and others even formulated recommendations on managerial practices that limit workplace gossip (Baker and Jones, 1996; Greengard, 2001).

The main contribution of the present study is the focus on antecedences of negative gossip about *managers*. Previous theorizing on gossip in organizations has only made implicit assumptions on the importance of hierarchical relationships (Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007), and empirical insights rely on scattered evidence from few qualitative studies (Scott, 1985; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). We explicate ideas from previous reasoning and systematically test three antecedences of gossip about managers.

One argument is that the hierarchical nature of organizations as such triggers resistance against authority, and hence gossip (Hafen, 2004; Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007; Scott, 1985). According to this view, there is a general tendency of the powerless to gossip negatively about organizational members in powerful positions. The second argument states organizational change increases gossip among employees. Employees often feel uncertain about the consequences of a change in relation to their future in the organization, which causes negative reactions and the need to seek information through the grapevine (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). The third antecedent of negative gossip is argued to be distrust. Subordinates who distrust their managers can socially control the managers' actions by means of spreading gossip, and harm management's reputation (Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1990; De Pinninck et al., 2008).

While these antecedences of gossip are mostly treated separately in the literature, some scholars suggest a more complex mechanism. Negative attitudes about change as such, may not be sufficient to trigger negative gossip about management, but will do so only if the change is accompanied by distrust towards management. In their qualitative study, Tebbutt and Marchington (1997) showed that resistance to organizational change led to an increase in negative gossip about managers because employees perceived the

changes as stressful, demoralizing and as a violation of their psychological contract with the organization. Negative consequences include lowered citizenship behavior and feelings of insecurity at the workplace. According to this perspective, distrust should mediate the impact of negative attitudes about organizational changes on gossip about management. Finally, we argue that there are fewer effects of low trust on gossip behavior *among* managers, because managers are likely to show solidarity toward management.

We feel that the three suggested antecedences of negative gossip about managers are closely related, and interact with one another. The present study aims at testing and combining all three antecedences in one model. In what follows, we first briefly sketch the different theoretical rationales, and develop testable hypotheses. Section three describes the research design, data and operationalizations. Section four presents the results, and section five concludes..

3.2 Theoretical Background

In this section, we will first elaborate on each of the three suggested antecedences of gossip about managers, and after that discuss how they are interrelated. The first mentioned antecedence is hierarchical positions of employees. We roughly divide employees into subordinates and managers.

3.2.1 *Gossip as Resistance to Power*

It has been suggested that gossip about management is a form of resistance to authority and people in powerful positions in general (i.e., managers; Hafen, 2004; Scott, 1985). Resistance has been conceptualized as actions challenging an opposition, mostly by the group of oppressed individuals (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). However, the powerless rarely have the resources to openly confront their managers, meaning direct confrontations can backfire. Therefore, the powerless need to rely on ordinary strategies that are hidden from the powerful (Scott, 1985). Ordinary covert types of behavioral resistance include private acts, such as gossip, quiet complaining, or bad-mouthing. In their typology of resistance, Hollander and Einwohner refer to *covert resistance* as “acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed (and, therefore, unpunished) by their targets, although they are recognized as resistance by other [...] observers. Examples of this type of resistance include gossip, “bitching”, and subtle subversion in the workplace” (2004, p. 545).

The use of gossip as a strategy to resist managers was described in a study of 277 students who were in an employment relationship (Tucker, 1993). Fifty percent of the subordinates, who at some point during their employment had felt wrongly treated by supervisors or managers, reported that they did share their grief with fellow-subordinates. Only 29% of the subordinates directly confronted their supervisors. Tucker suggests that gossip functions as an informal court of justice, where absent managers are blamed by the complaining subordinates and their supporters (Tucker, 1993). We reason that

sharing negative attitudes with fellow-subordinates helps subordinates to find support in their peer group. The act of agreeing on a negative opinion about a manager ‘glues’ subordinates of a group together (Bosson et al., 2006), and as a result strengthens the position of these subordinates in informal networks (Dunbar, 2004). In some cases, subordinates even strategically coordinate collective resistance through the grapevine (Scott, 1985). Gossip about managers is therefore seen as a form of resistance of the relatively powerless subordinates against management, with the purpose to build coalitions and foster oppositional solidarity among subordinates, which undermines managerial authority (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Michelson and Mouly, 2002; Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). We follow Scott’s (1985) argument that gossip is “a weapon of the weak”, and expect that employees low in formal status (i.e., subordinates) are generally more likely to gossip about managers than high-status employees.

Hypothesis 1: Employees of subordinate status gossip more negatively about managers than employees of management or supervisory status.

3.2.2 Gossip as a Reaction to Negative Attitudes Toward Organizational Change

Another antecedent of negative gossip about managers that has been suggested in the literature is organizational changes. Many of these changes, such as restructuring, reorganizations, and downsizing activities, seriously affect employees’ working conditions, tasks, autonomy, job security, and rewards. Given their far reaching impact, it has been argued that organizational changes are likely to lead to an increase in cognitive resistance and workplace gossip (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997).

From research in psychology we know that changes in employment environment often cause negative emotions and feelings of cognitive resistance and distress in employees, because these changes create uncertainty about the future and require effortful adjustment to the new situation (e.g., Fugate et al., 2008). Cognitive resistance to a change, however, is not necessarily caused by a negative attitude toward the change itself, but rather by the employees’ subjective fear of negative consequences (Oreg, 2006). Employees often find it difficult to anticipate their future role in the organization, making the new situation ambiguous for them. A case study by Tebbutt and Marchington (1997) illustrated how an organizational change (introducing a new head manager) created ambiguity and insecurity among subordinates. As a result, subordinates in the researched organization increasingly sought information by means of informal communication (i.e., gossip). There was a particular interest in negative gossip about the new manager, because this provided information on possible negative consequences of the change for the subordinates. In line with this finding, other researchers have suggested that employees particularly value information concerning the reputation of people that they depend on for their well-being or security, such as higher-status people and managers (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; McAndrew et al., 2007; Sommerfeld et al., 2007).

Managers are usually the initiators of an organizational change and the driving force behind its implementation, which makes them a likely target of workplace gossip for subordinates who do not agree with the change. Gossip is a way of resisting an introduced change without the subordinates immediately jeopardizing their relationship with management. Through the informal activity of gossip, subordinates can coordinate actions unpunished outside the formal agenda and, more importantly, deviate from organizational task requirements (Hafen, 2004; Robinson and Bennett, 1995). This deviance sometimes hinders the accomplishment of managerial goals, thereby severely affecting organizational outcomes. In line with this, qualitative research by Hafen (2004) illustrated how ‘resistance gossip’ by subordinates was deliberately aimed at empowering managers during organizational change. Shared negative attitudes (spread by gossip) among subordinates about a manager, leads to greater subordinate resistance towards in-role behavior, making it more difficult for the manager to successfully implement the change. Therefore, we expect an increase in negative gossip about managers from subordinates who disagree with – or cognitively resist – an introduced organizational change.

Hypothesis 2: The stronger an employee’s cognitive resistance to organizational change, the more likely negative gossip about managers becomes.

3.2.3 Gossip as a Reaction to a Breach of Trust

The third antecedence of gossip that has been suggested in the literature is the absence of trust, or the presence of distrust in the object of gossip (i.e., manager). The concept of trust refers to the extent to which an employee ascribes good intentions to managers and has confidence in their words and actions (Cook and Wall, 1980). This form of trust is sometimes described as the employee’s belief in benevolence or ‘trustworthiness’ of management (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006; Schoorman et al., 2007). Absence of trust usually originates in the lack of contact with a person, and consequently the lack of information on the person’s trustworthiness (for example, in newly formed business relations). By talking to third parties who know this person, the gossiper is able to retrieve additional information on the person’s reputation (Burt and Knez, 1996), and reduce uncertainty about the future behavior of this person. Such information is especially valuable when the gossiper depends on this person for his or her well-being, and when the information has negative contents (De Backer and Gurven, 2006). Hence, in contexts of uncertainty and anxiety, employees actively *seek* information through the grapevine on the trustworthiness of those whom they depend on (Burt and Knez, 1996; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). The gathered information provides subordinates with the advantage that they can both anticipate, and react to future actions by their managers more easily.

However, a breach of trust and the presence of distrust will lead to gossip that is negative in its contents. We argue that employees who distrust management (e.g., as a consequence of disagreeing with organizational changes) are likely to gossip negatively about managers for several reasons. One reason to gossip is that frustrated employees

want to *share* their grief with colleagues and seek solidarity from fellow employees in the organizational network (Dunbar, 2004; Tucker, 1993). An employee, for example, who missed out on an expected promotion may complain to colleagues and *warn* them not to work too hard, since managers cannot be trusted in terms of rewards. This gossip behavior is often purely cathartic because it serves the relief of distress (Foster, 2004; e.g., Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Rosnow, 1977). But, it can also function as a means of social control or even retaliation against the person who is believed to have caused the frustration (i.e., the manager). If gossip is strategically aimed at promoting collective pessimism, it may harm the manager's reputation and thereby weaken management's authority (Scott, 1985). Similarly, Noon and Delbridge argue (1993) that gossip can be an 'informal path to empowerment' of subordinates who resist managerial control. Listeners may support the gossipers' view and decide about their own contributions to the organization in the future carefully. Malicious gossip can seriously affect the reputation of a manager, even if spread by only a small number of subordinates. A study by Burt (2005) showed that negative gossip about managers spread particularly fast in the organizational network and caused quite stable negative reputations.

While we expect distrust to facilitate gossip about managers, we reason that trust impedes gossip. Subordinates who trust their managers are likely to cooperate and show solidarity toward them (McAllister, 1995; Robinson, 1996). According to previous studies, employees tend to focus more on work-related tasks and organizational citizenship behaviors when they perceive authority figures as trustworthy (Frazier et al., 2010). In sum, we reason that the likelihood of negative gossip depends on an employee's trust in management.

Hypothesis 3: The lower an employee's trust in management, the more likely negative gossip about managers becomes.

3.2.4 Organizational Change, the Breach of the Psychological Contract, and the Role of Formal Positions

After having discussed the three possible antecedences of negative gossip as a form of behavioral resistance we will now turn to a model that combines the three. We argue that the relationship between resistance to organizational change and gossip about managers may be more complex than suggested in the literature. We expect that only one out of the three antecedences will have a direct effect on the incidence of gossip. The other two, will play a mediating or moderating role at most. More specifically, we reason that the trust or distrust an employee has in management can explain the relationship hypothesized in Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, we expect the hypothesized relationship in Hypothesis 3 to depend on the formal status of an employee.

Above we hypothesized the direct effect of organizational changes on the incidence of gossip. However, organizational changes trigger many different reactions, and not all of them result in behavioral resistance per se. Fear of negative consequences is more likely to occur than a negative attitude toward the actual change (Oreg, 2006). However, this fear potentially damages the trust relationship between management and

employees. Research has shown that changes – in particular structural reorganization – have significant negative effects on trust in management (Morgan and Zeffane, 2003). Similarly, in previous literature it has been stated that the massive organizational changes of the past decade led to an increase in the likelihood of psychological contract breach (Robinson, 1996). The psychological contract between employees and the organization refers to what employees think they owe to the organization and what the organization owes to them in return (Robinson, 1996). If the employees perceive that the organization is not fulfilling its promises toward them, they lose trust in the organization and become less willing to fulfill their own obligations. Organizations under pressure to make rapid changes often have to alter employment relationships, and thereby also change the psychological contracts that underlie them. Employees who disagree with these organizational changes are likely to perceive a breach in the psychological contract, causing them subjective feelings of anger and frustration. Research has shown that a (perceived) breach in the psychological contract is strongly related to lowered trust of employees in management and that the employees' reactions often involve increased levels of behavioral, affective, and cognitive resistance (Oreg, 2006). Such reactions include reduced commitment and cooperation (McAllister, 1995), as well as increased violation of organizational norms (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), like bad-mouthing managers and supervisors. More specifically, research has indicated that the relationship between attitude to organizational change and organizational citizenship behavior is mediated by trust in supervisors (Neves and Caetano, 2009).

Hence, trust in management is an important factor for investigating effects of organizational change on workplace gossip. We argue that employees who disagree with an introduced change will – as a result of a perceived breach of the psychological contract – have less confidence in future actions of management and thus trust managers less, than employees who agree with the change. A consequence of the damaged trust is the increased likelihood of behavioral resistance, and thus negative gossip about managers. Based on the presented arguments, we expect the previously stated relationship in Hypothesis 2 to be explained by a decrease in trust in managers.

Hypothesis 4a: The relationship between resistance to change and negative gossip is mediated by a decrease in trust in managers.

Others might suggest an alternative chain of arguments: A downside of low trust in management is the employee's hesitance to support managerial decisions, and consequently an increased likelihood of resistance to change. According to this reasoning, instead of trust, resistance to change would be a mediator. However, we argue that distrust in management causes gossip *regardless* of attitudes toward change, because the gossip is about the managers and not about the change itself (literature refers to talking about events or changes as 'rumor'; Rosnow, 2001). In contrast, resistance to change only triggers gossip about managers under certain conditions (i.e., when trust is affected by the change). We therefore hypothesize a direct effect of low trust on gossip and an indirect effect of organizational change on gossip. Our empirical test will shed more light on this issue.

So far, we discussed the possibility that subordinates gossip about management, but neglected the possibility that employees higher in formal status (i.e., managers in middle management) are themselves participating in gossiping activities. In the following, we outline why managers tend to gossip less than subordinates about management but rather show solidarity toward management, even when they perceive a breach of trust by the organization. Due to their direct involvement in and influence on organizational activities, managers are generally more likely than subordinates to be pro-change and support management decisions. Moreover, high-status employees might manage dissonance between change and trust better than subordinates, making it possible that they disagree with a change without feeling betrayed. This makes resistance to change and a breach of trust less probable for managers (Fugate et al., 2008; Robinson, 1996). Should a breach of trust occur, however, we expect that managers will not choose to gossip negatively about management mainly for two reasons.

First, even if a manager is only indirectly involved in the actual introduction of an organizational change, he or she is often better informed about the change than subordinates. Having more direct access to first-hand information and formally being part of the management unit, reduces feelings of insecurity and the need to retrieve gossip information informally during organizational changes (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). Hence, managers do not have to rely on additional information from the grapevine as much as subordinates.

Second, by gossiping negatively about management, managers would risk damaging the management's reputation, which can also affect their own reputation. Subordinates often perceive strong formal boundaries that separate them from the group of managers (Cole and Bruch, 2006). Therefore, managers are seen as representatives of the management unit. If the reputation of the management unit is negative, this is likely to be reflected in the reputation of individual managers. Managers who bad-mouth other managers not only harm these other managers, but also their own reputation, since they are seen as members of the same (management) group. Both theoretical arguments and empirical research suggests that harmful gossip does not tend to be about members from the gossipers' group, but is rather aimed at members outside the gossipers' group with the intention to strengthen and support the in-group (Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007; Suls, 1977). Managers need to support management, especially during times of organizational change, in order to preserve the authority of the management unit and consequently their own individual status. When these arguments are taken together, we can hypothesize that the relationship between low trust in managers and negative gossip is moderated by the formal status of an employee.

Hypothesis 4b: The relationship between low trust in managers and negative gossip is stronger for employees of subordinate status than for employees of manager status.

The logic behind this moderation argument also implies that subordinates do not gossip negatively about managers solely based on their formal status, as suggested in Hypothesis 1, but only if subordinates distrust management.

3.3 Research Design and Setting

3.3.1 *Sample*

Data was collected in one medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization in Spring 2008. The organization is a major independent, subsidized, regional institution in the field of child protection, and has several sites spread across one region of the Netherlands. Its clients are children with problems in their social, psychological, and/or physical functioning. Within the organization, there is a rich variety of professions, such as therapists, social workers, pedagogues, and medical doctors. Most employees are female part-time workers.

About one year prior to data collection the organization appointed a new head manager. He initiated many changes in the organization, mainly because the organization was expanding rapidly, and had to make several adaptations to this development. Adaptations included recruiting staff, buying new office complexes, and building houses for clients. Previously, the organization was managed centrally from head office. A major adaptation to the new geographical developments concerned the decentralization of the organizational structure; more specifically splitting up the organization into three regions that were previously managed on a central level. The main motivation for this change was the desire to serve children nearer to their homes (reducing not only geographical but also cultural distances). For a number of employees the decentralization meant for instance moving offices, more traveling, different colleagues, and different communication networks (e.g., different supervisors). We recognize that in management literature decentralization is depicted in largely positive terms. However, as argued earlier individuals may have negative feelings about changes, even if they are positive for the organization (Fugate et al., 2008). Generally, the acceptance of the decentralization was moderate, and only few very critical voices were raised (e.g., the concern of some employees that small locations would be cut-off from communication with head office). Hence, on average employees did not perceive the decentralization as a big burden.

The organization agreed to a survey of 200 employees, and provided socio-demographic data on all its employees, containing information on gender, age, contracted hours per week, tenure, and region of the country. A comparison of the sample data with the data on all employees resulted in no significant differences. The study was preceded by a phase of in-depth interviews, pretests, and pilots. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were sent to all 34 managers and a random sample of 165 employees. 72,8% of the employees completed the questionnaire after a second reminder was sent. Respondents who indicated that they had not experienced the decentralization (e.g., because they joined the organization at a later time point) were excluded from the analysis, so that 93 respondents could be included in the analyses. 76% of these respondents were female.

16% of the respondents were managers of which two thirds were male. Mean age was 42,87 ($SD = 10,29$). On average employees had been working in the organization for 11,40 years ($SD = 7,86$).

3.3.2 Measures and Methods

Negative gossip about managers. We used a modified version of Wittek and Wielers' (1998) gossip scale to measure an employee's tendency to gossip negatively about managers at work. The measure consisted of four items: "At work I sometimes complain about managers while they are absent."; "I sometimes criticize managers for a negative characteristic while they are absent."; "If I feel treated badly by a manager I talk about this to my colleagues." "I sometimes make a negative comment on the behavior of a manager while he/she is absent." Possible answers ranged from "does not apply to me at all" (1) to "does apply to me" (7). To check whether the measure was one-dimensional, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring (using the direct oblimin rotation method, which relaxed the assumption that factors are orthogonal). All items loaded on one factor, which had an eigenvalue of 3.18 and explained 80% of the variance. Scale reliability for negative gossip about managers was high with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91.

Formal status. The organization provided information on the formal status of every employee, that is whether an employee was (1) a manager or supervisor, or (0) a subordinate.

Cognitive resistance to organizational change. Disagreement with the change regarding the decentralization in the organization was measured with the cognitive resistance sub-scale by Oreg (2006), which is part of the author's change attitude scale. Respondents, for instance, indicated on four items whether they thought that the implemented decentralization was negative or harmful for the organization, e.g. "I believe that the change would harm the way things are done in the organization". Possible answers ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). A high scale score represents a negative attitude toward the implemented change. Cronbach's alpha for cognitive resistance to change was 0.76.

Trust in management. A sub-scale from the interpersonal trust at work scale by Cook and Wall (1980) assessed whether respondents trusted in the organization's management as a whole. For example, respondents said whether "the organization will always try to treat me fairly" and whether "management can be trusted to make sensible decisions". Again, answer categories ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). Scale reliability for trust in management was 0.83.

Controls. Gender (1 = female, 0 = male), age, and tenure were included as control variables. We included tenure because it differed rather largely across organizational members and might have affected levels of trust in management.

To test our hypotheses we applied hierarchical ordinary least square (OLS) regression with workplace gossip about managers being the dependent variable.⁴ We first computed three separate models to test for main effects of formal status, cognitive resistance to change, and trust in management on workplace gossip (Hypothesis 1, 2, and 3). In the next step, resistance to change and trust in management were included together in one model to test for mediation (Hypothesis 4a). We would find mediation, if the main effect of resistance to change on workplace gossip was initially significant, but became insignificant in the model together with trust in management (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Frazier et al., 2004). However, in addition to that, a necessary part of mediation is a statistically and practically significant indirect effect, which can be tested using Sobel's test and bootstrapping (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). This way we could be certain that the proposed mediation really did exist. Finally, to test whether the relationship between trust in management and workplace gossip differed for subordinates and managers we added an interaction variable (Hypothesis 4b), which we computed by simply multiplying the values for trust in management with the values for formal status. We would find moderation, if the interaction effect was significant in the final model (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Frazier et al., 2004).

3.4 Results

Table 3.1 presents the descriptive statistics and the correlations of the independent and dependent variables.

Table 3.1 Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Gender (1 = female)	73%	-	-					
2 Status (1 = manager)	16%	-	-0.46**	-				
3 Age	42.87	10.29	-0.39***	0.30**	-			
4 Tenure	11.40	7.86	-0.08	0.19 [†]	0.49**	-		
5 Cognitive resistance to change	3.42	1.14	0.20 [†]	-0.28**	-0.08	-0.04	-	
6 Trust in management	4.79	1.11	-0.12	0.46***	0.15	0.03	-0.43***	-
7 Negative gossip about managers	3.87	1.66	0.16	-0.31**	-0.23*	-0.04	0.28**	-0.52***

Note. [†] $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3.2 summarizes the results of the hierarchical regression. In Hypothesis 1 we predicted that employees of subordinate status would spread more negative gossip than managers. The first model contained the control variables and formal status. As

⁴ To avoid losing cases of the already small sample the pairwise deletion method was applied.

hypothesized, subordinates gossiped significantly more negatively about managers, than managers gossiped negatively about one another ($b = -0.28, p < 0.05$).

In Hypothesis 2 we predicted that cognitive resistance to organizational change would increase the frequency of negative gossip about managers. The results in the second model underpinned this assumption ($b = 0.22, p < 0.05$).

In Hypothesis 3 we stated that lower levels of trust in management would be related to an increase in negative gossip about managers. The significant negative effect in the third model supports our assumption ($b = -0.40, p < 0.001$). Interestingly, the effect of formal status became insignificant after adding trust of management. This suggested that low trust in management was a stronger predictor of negative gossip than subordinate status.

In Hypothesis 4a, we argued that the resistance-gossip relationship (previously stated in Hypothesis 2) was not direct, but mediated by an employee's trust in management. To test for mediation we followed a three-step procedure as recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, both the independent variable and the proposed mediator variable had to be significantly related to the dependent variable when included separately in the model. This was the case in our analyses: Both cognitive resistance to change ($b = 0.22, p < 0.05$; second model) and trust in management ($b = -0.40, p < 0.001$; third model) had a significant effect on negative gossip about managers. Second, the independent variable had to be significantly related to the proposed mediator variable. As shown by the correlation in table 1, cognitive resistance to change was negatively related to trust in management ($r = -0.43, p < 0.001$). Finally, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable had to become weaker or insignificant after including the proposed mediator variable in the regression model. Model 4 shows that this was the case in our analyses: The formerly significant effect of cognitive resistance to organizational changes disappeared when we added trust in management to the model, while low trust in management remained a strong predictor of negative gossip about managers ($b = -0.45, p < 0.001$). Sobel's test (Sobel $z = 2.99, p < 0.01$) and the bootstrapping method (0.26; 95% CI between 0.10 and 0.47) showed that this reduction of the direct effect of cognitive resistance to change on negative gossip was significant. The results in the fourth model also exclude (theoretically sensible) alternative sequences of mediation: cognitive resistance to change had no mediating role in the relationship between trust and gossip. This supported the proposed mediation in Hypothesis 4a.⁵

In Hypothesis 4b, we proposed that the relationship between trust in managers and negative gossip behavior (formerly stated in Hypothesis 3) was moderated by the formal status of an employee. Moderation would be observed when a third variable (i.e., formal status) significantly affected the relationship strength between two variables (i.e., the effect of trust on gossip). This means that according to our hypothesis the relationship

⁵ Theoretically, moderation instead of mediation is also plausible, so we additionally tested for moderation. The regression analysis, however, provided no support for a moderator relationship between cognitive resistance and trust in management ($b = -0.12, p = 0.24$).

Table 3.2 Hierarchical Regression on Negative Gossip about Managers ($N = 93$)

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>
Intercept	4.94	0.83		3.99	0.92		8.09	1.02		6.91	1.19		7.31	1.19	
Age	-0.03	0.02	-0.21	-0.03	0.02	-0.23 [†]	-0.03	0.02	-0.16	-0.02	0.02	-0.15	-0.02	0.02	-0.14
Gender (1 = female)	-0.05	0.43	-0.01	-0.16	0.43	-0.04	-0.24	0.41	-0.06	-0.06	0.40	-0.02	0.05	0.40	0.01
Tenure	0.03	0.03	0.15	0.04	0.03	0.17	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.08	0.02	0.02	0.09
Status (1 = manager)	-1.41	0.54	-0.28*	-1.11	0.54	-0.22*	-0.76	0.51	-0.17	-0.56	0.53	-0.11	-1.36	0.68	-0.27*
Cognitive resistance to change				0.32	0.15	0.22*				0.14	0.15	0.10	0.13	0.14	0.09
Trust in management							-0.61	0.15	-0.40***	-0.57	0.16	-0.38***	-0.68	0.17	-0.45***
Status × trust in management													1.26	0.68	0.26 [†]
R^2_{adj}	0.11			0.14			0.24			0.24			0.27		
ΔR^2	0.15**			0.05*			0.13***			0.10**			0.03 [†]		
Model summary	$F_{4,89} = 3.76^{**}$			$F_{5,88} = 4.11^{**}$			$F_{5,89} = 6.90^{***}$			$F_{6,87} = 6.00^{***}$			$F_{7,86} = 5.78^{***}$		

Note. [†] $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

between low trust and gossip should have been significantly weaker for managers than for subordinates. When adding the interaction variable for trust in management and manager status, a moderation effect was observed ($b = 0.26$, $p = 0.07$; fifth model). Although the moderation effect was only marginally significant, we reasoned that this result supported Hypothesis 4b, because of the small sample size in our study and the formulation of one-sided hypotheses. The relationship between low trust and negative gossip was significantly negative for both groups of subordinates ($b = -0.45$, $p < 0.001$) and managers ($b = -0.45 + 0.26 = -0.19$; $p = 0.07$). However, being a manager made it less likely that low trust led to an increase in negative gossip behavior. Our final regression model explained 27% of the variance ($R^2_{adj} = 0.27$).⁶ Figure 3.1 illustrates the findings.

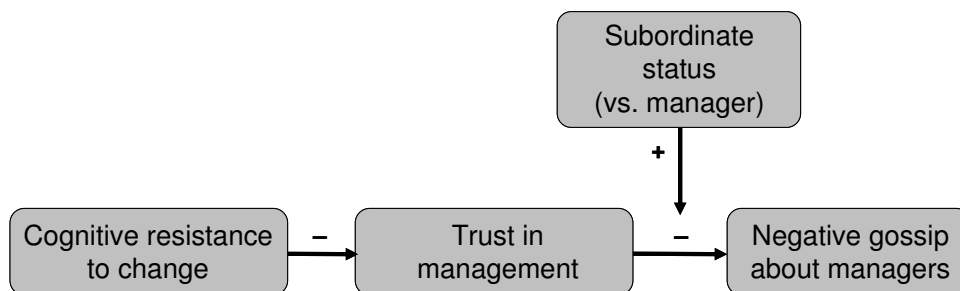


Figure 3.1 Overview of the Findings: Moderated Mediation.

3.4.1 Testing Moderated Mediation

So far, we conducted separate tests for both mediation (fourth model) and moderation effects (fifth model). It was interesting, however, to do a post-hoc analysis and test both effects simultaneously to check for so-called ‘moderated mediation’. A moderated mediation, which has also been described as a conditional indirect effect (Preacher et al., 2007), would occur if the observed *mediation* process depended on a specific value of the moderation variable. In the present study, this meant that we tested whether the indirect effect of cognitive resistance to change on negative gossip about managers via the process of low trust in management (see fourth model) was observed for both groups of subordinates and managers, or for only one of these groups (conditions). To do so, we followed the procedure recommended by Preacher et al. (2007), and conducted their analyses of *conditional indirect effects*, again using bootstrapping. The results revealed indeed a moderated mediation, more specifically the mediation was only observed for the group of subordinates ($\bar{z} = 2.51$, $p < 0.01$; bootstrap: 0.26, 95% CI between 0.08 and 0.50), but not for the group of managers ($\bar{z} = 0.03$, $p = 0.89$; bootstrap:

⁶ One might argue that there were potential differences between the three regions regarding the extent of the change, and hence differences in employees’ reactions. Indeed, an ANOVA revealed that employees expressed significantly less trust in management in one region than in the other two regions ($F(2,89) = 5.39$, $p < 0.01$). In order to control for these regional differences, we re-ran the regression including a dummy variable for the region with the lowest trust. Working in the low-trust region, however, showed no additional significant effect on negative gossip behavior ($b = 0.01$, $p = 0.96$), suggesting that our findings were robust across regions.

0.03, 95% CI between -0.28 and 0.59). This again underpinned our argument from Hypothesis 4b that the relationship between cognitive resistance to change and gossip behavior depends on the formal status of an employee.

3.4.2 Ruling out Potential Measurement Problems

Before we turn to the discussion of the results, we would like to briefly address some potential problems in research on organizational behavior, also referred to as ‘common method bias’ (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Common method bias occurs when results are produced by the measurement method rather than by the construct of interest. In our study, two potential biases seemed particularly relevant. First, social desirability has been related to under-reporting of gossip behavior in previous gossip studies (Nevo et al., 1994). To check for this problem, we included four items from the Crowne and Marlowe scale of social desirability (1960) in our questionnaire.⁷ There was no significant correlation between negative gossip about managers and social desirability ($r = -0.02$, $p = 0.85$), providing us with some certainty that respondents did not answer the gossip questions in a socially desirable way. A second potential problem was that independent and dependent variables were measured at the same time point and in the same questionnaire. This could have produced artificial covariance between the variables. To check for this problem, we computed the Harman’s one-factor test with an exploratory factor analysis that included all items of both independent and dependent variables. The analysis resulted in three separate factors according to the theoretical constructs: cognitive resistance to organizational change (eigenvalue = 5.57); trust in management (eigenvalue = 1.93); and negative gossip about managers (eigenvalue = 1.38). This provided some certainty that the covariance between those constructs was not an artifact but indeed existed. We now turn to the discussion of the results.

3.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Literature on organizations has classified gossip as deviant behavior that negatively affects organizational aims. More recently, researchers have increasingly acknowledged the meaning of gossip about organizational members high in formal status for the investigation of power, reputation, and cooperation in organizations (Kurland and Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007; Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Scott, 1985; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). Managers, as representatives of the authority body, need to rely on the cooperation of their subordinates if they want to successfully realize actions. Subordinates, however, do not always agree with the actions of management, such as the implementation of organizational changes. If upset by management, subordinates will search for forms of behavioral resistance that are likely to remain undetected, and hence unpunished. In the present study, we argued that subordinates use covert resistance, such

⁷ The items were: “I sometimes feel resentful when I don’t get my way”, “I am always willing to admit it when I make a mistake”, “I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone’s feelings”, “I always say what I think”.

as complaining to others about their managers. This way subordinates can collectively boycott management without jeopardizing their jobs (Tucker, 1993). Therefore, most managers are eager to restrain gossip activities at the workplace.

We contributed to the literature with testing and, more importantly, combining three antecedences of ‘resistance gossip’ (Hafen, 2004). We found low formal status (i.e., being a subordinate), disagreeing with an organizational change, and low trust in management led to an increase in gossip about managers. These antecedences, however, were related to one another, with only trust having a direct effect on gossip. The increase in gossip about managers for employees who did not agree with an implemented change was mediated by a decrease in trust in management. This relationship was stronger for subordinates than for managers, suggesting a moderated mediation. Hence, low-trust subordinates gossiped more than high-trust subordinates *and* low-trust managers, meaning that gossip was most likely for the group of subordinates who trusted management least. The results suggest that neither formal positions, nor negative attitudes about an organizational change alone are sufficient to trigger gossip. This underpins our argumentation for a more complex perspective on the antecedences of gossip. In contrast to previous perspectives, two out of the three suggested predictors were only indirectly related to gossip and largely depended on the third and strongest predictor: trust in management. Finally, our results lacked support for alternative mediation sequences, e.g. that employees who trust management are more receptive to organizational change and thus engage less in gossip. Uncovering mediation and moderation relationships is probably the largest contribution of the present study.

Whereas previous studies looked at the direct relationship between gossip and resistance against authority or organizational change (Hafen, 2004; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993), we investigated this relationship in more detail and took a quantitative approach. Our findings underpin previous arguments in the literature that workplace gossip is a form of resistance to organizational change and the organization’s management, which is seen as responsible for the change (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). Gossip about managers as a covert type of behavioral resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Robinson and Bennett, 1995) enables subordinates, who are relatively powerless and cannot influence on-going changes, to collectively share negative attitudes about management (Scott, 1985). The act of sharing negative attitudes with colleagues strengthens the subordinates’ feelings of solidarity against management and can seriously affect its reputation and power. Disagreeing with a change can result in disappointment of employees because managers do not fulfill their obligations (i.e., psychological contract) toward the employees, and thereby diminishes the employees’ positive beliefs about future actions from management (Morgan and Zeffane, 2003; Neves and Caetano, 2009; Robinson, 1996). As shown by our results, sharing negative attitudes and seeking information through the grapevine is a likely response to a damaged trust relation. Similarly, previous research indicated negative relationships of trust with gossip about third-parties and resistance (Burt and Knez, 1996; Oreg, 2006).

We also argued and showed that managers gossiped less about management than subordinates. The moderated effect of low trust on gossip, however, was negative for managers, suggesting that managers low in trust still tended to gossip about other managers. This is a very interesting finding, since managers are crucial inter-mediators ('brokers') between the changing organization and its employees. Although there are arguments that managers do not damage the reputation of their allies (McAndrew et al., 2007), one could also argue that in difficult times managers deliberately distance themselves from management decisions to gain a power advantage over the weakened authority. Managers from middle-management may openly criticize the introduced change and blame other managers in the presence of subordinates. This way they show solidarity toward the subordinates and preserve their own authority ("I did not want the change either, *they* did it."). Although gossip is less prevalent among managers than among subordinates, its consequences may be farther reaching. Organizations that cannot rely on the support of their managers will struggle to gain support from a larger number of subordinates.

Besides the findings of our study, we would like to address some limitations. A major limitation of the study is its cross-sectional design. The organizational change had already been implemented at the time point of data collection, so that it was impossible to obtain data on gossip and trust prior to the change. For tests of mediation a longitudinal design is preferable. It would have been interesting to compare attitudes and behavior before and after the change. We do know from our data, however, that the group of respondents who experienced the organizational change trusted management less than the group of respondents who did not experience the change.⁸ Future research could focus more specifically on the dynamics of gossip behavior over time, and on the role that gossip plays in the emergence of cognitive resistance over time. Researchers could address the reverse causality by investigating whether gossip in the organizational network triggers disagreeing with a change among employees. Another limitation is the small sample size, especially for the group of managers. This reduced the statistical power for detecting small effects. However, power was sufficient for detecting medium and large effects (>0.84). Results should therefore be interpreted with caution. Future research should aim at cross-validation in a different organizational setting (e.g., profit versus non-profit sector) with a different type of change (e.g., downsizing).

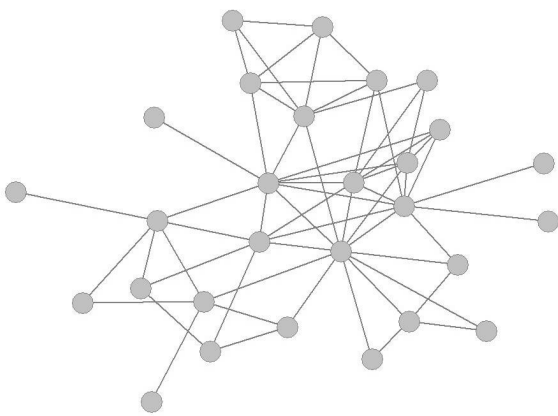
In times of organizational changes, supportive behavior by subordinates is especially important for managers. From our results, we conclude that organizational changes are a sensitive issue that may potentially trigger negative reactions from employees. Managers wanting to eliminate behavioral resistance and stimulate employee support need to maintain a trustful relationship with subordinates *and* managers (Frazier et al., 2010; Oreg, 2006). A breach of the psychological contract could be avoided, for example, by articulating a clear vision and/or more direct involvement and participation of subordinates in the change process. This way, subordinates are able to anticipate their

⁸ A t-test revealed a marginally significant difference in trust in management ($\Delta M = -0.37, p < 0.072$).

role in the changed environment, and perceive empowerment and control over their futures (Fugate et al., 2008; Morgan and Zeffane, 2003). This is important because employees often resist the change not because they necessarily disagree with the change itself, but rather because they fear negative consequences of the change for themselves. Managers who acknowledge the primary role of trust and prove trustworthy to employees during organizational changes can expect their support, reflected by low levels of negative gossip, little resistance to newly introduced rules, and high acceptance of authority.

Chapter 4

Talking about the Boss: Effects of Trust Relationships on Workplace Gossip



A relational theory of positive and negative gossip about managers is developed and tested. We argue that the likelihood of spreading negative information about managers depends on trust in organizations, more specifically the employees' generalized and interpersonal trust in managers and colleagues. Hypotheses are tested with two studies in a medium-sized Dutch child care organization, namely an employee survey ($N = 133$) and a network study in two sites ($N = 58$). Multiple regressions and cross-sectional social network analysis (ERGM) reveal that negative gossip about managers increases when employees have low trusting or weak relationship with them. This effect is further enhanced when relationships between employees are trusting and strong. Implications for theory on management and organizations are discussed.

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4 TALKING ABOUT THE BOSS: EFFECTS OF TRUST RELATIONSHIPS ON WORKPLACE GOSSIP

4.1 Introduction

Organization researchers have been showing an increasing interest in the antecedents of workplace gossip, because the patterns of talking about absent third parties appear to offer a key to understanding organizational processes. For example, gossip supports the diffusion of information, thereby stimulating sense-making, learning, and reputation in organizations, but also the emergence and sustenance of cooperative relationships (Baumeister et al., 2004; Blau, 1964; Gambetta, 1988; McAllister, 1995; Mills, 2010). During the last decade, a considerable number of studies has helped to understand the occurrence of gossip in general (Bosson et al., 2006; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004) and within organizations in particular (e.g., Burt and Knez, 1996; Houmanfar and Johnson, 2003; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Myers, 2002; Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Workplace gossip is defined as “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000: 429), and can have either positive or negative contents.

While workplace gossip hardly seems to depend on personal characteristics (e.g., no differences depending on age, education, or gender; Foster, 2004), its antecedents can be found in the social relationships between organizational members (Burt, 2005). We build on Burt’s introduction and methodological elaboration of a network perspective on gossip (Burt, 1992; Burt, 2005; Burt and Knez, 1996). His application of a network approach has led to insights that could not be retrieved by multivariate analyses of individual behavior, and therefore has proved to be powerful in the analysis of organizational gossip. Although less noticed, another substantial innovation was Burt’s argument on the role of trust for gossip behavior (Burt, 2001; Burt and Knez, 1996). Burt argues that gossip is risky behavior, because it may be damaging not only for the gossip object but also for the gossipers themselves (Burt, 2001). This risk is reduced in trust relations. In the present study, we focus on trust as an antecedent of gossip about managers.

We contribute to the previous literature with three extensions. First, we explicitly focus on particular objects of organizational gossip, namely managers. There is some indication that employees low in formal status have a particular interest in retrieving information about employees high in formal status (McAndrew et al., 2007; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). Furthermore, employees disagreeing with managerial decisions have little resources to openly resist and exert control because they depend on the goodwill of their managers. In this context, negative gossip has special value (Davis and McLeod, 2003). It is a hidden means of exchanging disagreeable opinions with

fellow-employees, with little risks of jeopardizing relationships with managers (Hafen, 2004; Tucker, 1993). Sometimes gossip is argued to have negative effects on the organizational outcomes as it can contribute to employee resistance against management and a decrease in cooperation with managers (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). Scholars arguing for detrimental effects have even developed suggestions on how managers can control negative gossip (Baker and Jones, 1996; Greengard, 2001). The present study investigates antecedences of positive and negative gossip behavior about managers and direct supervisors.

The second extension regards treating gossip as an activity in triads of individuals. Individuals exchange information and experiences on the reliability and reputations of third parties (Baumeister et al., 2004; Burt and Knez, 1995; Hess and Hagen, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Frequency and tone of the shared contents depend on the gossipers' relationships with the third person (i.e., the manager) and the relationship between the gossipers. Positive, trusting relationships for instance, inhibit spreading negative information. Furthermore, gossip is argued to be predominant in certain network structures: There will be more gossip about managers between strongly connected employees who have similar opinions about their manager, and less gossip between poorly connected employees with diverging opinions. In other words, most gossip can be expected in closed, balanced triadic structures. Although this perspective on triads has been prominent in social network theory (Heider, 1958) it has rarely been tested empirically (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Parts of the present studies are dedicated to studying such triadic structures.

Finally, we acknowledge the widespread view in the organizational literature that trust is a multidimensional concept, and distinguish between generalized and interpersonal trust (Nooteboom, 2002). We suggest that low trust in managers increases negative gossip about them among employees. Because negative behavior towards authority is risky, we expect this relationship to be stronger when employees trust in their colleagues. We test these mechanisms for the two distinct trust forms in two studies. The first study is tailored to investigating effects of generalized trust in the group of managers and colleagues on gossip behavior about an organization's management unit. This concerns the individuals' perceptions and is tested with multiple regression analysis on a representative employee survey. The second study researches effects of an employee's interpersonal trust in particular individuals, i.e. a focal supervisor or a specific colleague, on his or her decision to talk about the supervisor. For this purpose, the dyadic relationships between employees from two sites of the same formal organization are analyzed with social network analysis. We believe that the present research design benefits from a multi-level perspective on trust as an antecedent of gossip behavior, as it addresses individual perceptions and dyadic relations between people (Rousseau et al., 1998; Whitener et al., 1998).

4.2 Theoretical Background

Managers are central players in organizations, which makes them a likely topic of gossip. Workplace gossip is a social phenomenon that at a minimum involves three actors, who can be depicted in a gossip triad as done in Figure 4.1: Two employees share gossip about one manager. Our theoretical and empirical analysis addresses the relationships between all parties in this triad. More specifically, we study the employees' trust in their *managers*, who are the objects of gossip in our model, and trust in *colleagues*, who are the gossip partners.

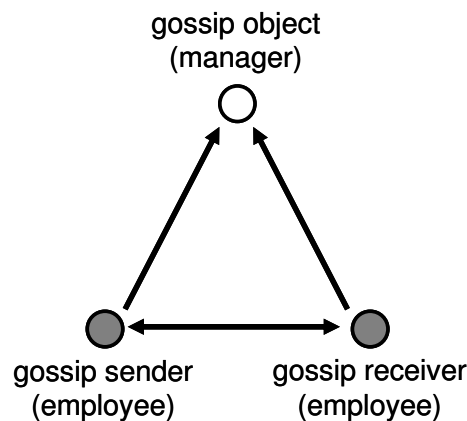


Figure 4.1 Gossip Triad

Trust within organizations has multiple facets. It can either relate to the general functioning of a firm or to the reliability of particular individuals. Therefore, we distinguish between generalized trust in organizations and interpersonal trust (Bachman, 2005; Nooteboom, 2002; Rus, 2005; Six, 2005). Similarly, Nooteboom (2002) differentiates between those two forms of trust. The first form of trust is impersonal and not related to specific social exchange relations between people. Instead, it is rooted in the employees' cognitive perception of an organization's functioning and the assessment of whether the organization meets its contractual and moral obligations towards its employees (Rus, 2005). Because this trust form regards a group of generalized others, Nooteboom (2002) also calls it "thin trust". We will refer to this as *generalized trust* and explicate it further in the first part of this theory section.

In contrast to generalized trust, interpersonal trust is "thick" and relation-specific. Employees have personal, affective relationships with particular others, e.g. their direct supervisor (Den Hartog, 2005), including feelings of mutual understanding and friendship. Such interpersonal trust is fostered by proximity in organizations and the (positive) experiences individuals share with each other in the course of frequent face-to-face interaction over a longer time period (Bachman, 2005). We refer to the second form as *interpersonal trust* in a particular supervisor or colleague. Researchers agree that trust between two individuals is rarely manifested alone but mostly grounded in specific relationship types (Grosser et al., 2010; Rus, 2005), such as strong work relations or

friendships. Therefore, we account for interpersonal trust by assessing the strength and quality of social relationships between members of an organization.

Different forms of trust relate to different forms of gossip. While low generalized trust will stimulate complaining and criticism of the skills of managers in general, low interpersonal trust in a specific manager will trigger person-specific gossip about this manager.

4.2.1 *Generalized Trust*

Employees can develop trust in the organizational environment without relying on interactions and transactions with specific exchange partners (Nooteboom and Six, 2003). They generalize perceived reliability, impartiality, and proper functioning of the formalized system to the people or groups that represent it. According to Den Hartog (2005) there are two important groups of generalized others, namely managers and co-workers. Generalized trust likely influences the employees' behavior towards these groups and the amount of effort they are willing to expend on their behalf. This is important in the facilitation of the employees' cooperation with those parties and the organization as a whole (Den Hartog, 2005).

Generalized trust in management. Because trust increases cooperation and hence performance, most managers have an interest in a favorable reputation. However, although managers try to present themselves favorably, the employees' core beliefs and predispositions about managers are subject to cognitive bias and ideological climate. Based on their beliefs, employees talk positively or negatively about managers. Such bias is further enhanced when only certain information is accessible. Some managerial decisions demand a level of discretion that forbids detailed accountability, for instance, where innovations take place, during times of reorganizing, or when information is likely to impair the employees' work motivation. Discrete decisions, which by definition cannot be fully accounted for, make management's reputation particularly vulnerable to a breach of trust.

Decision making and managerial policies are usually communicated from higher to lower levels in the organizational hierarchy. This means that employees in low positions are least likely to be fully informed about management's actions. However, individuals depend on the organization and thus have a genuine interest in credible information on management's intentions, so that they can anticipate and react to the consequences more easily (De Backer and Gurven, 2006). Incomplete information is often supplemented with news from fellow-employees via informal channels like gossip (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). In line with this, Mills (2010) in her recent field study demonstrated how employees used gossiping for sense-making about management's actions during organizational change. We argue that employees have a demand for truthful, second-hand information about managers, who represent the organization. This helps determining whether the organization is reliable, cooperative, and trustworthy in general (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Research has illustrated that information provided by gossip contacts is used to diagnose the trustworthiness of

indirectly connected third parties (Ferrin et al., 2006). This can lead to trust transfers in whole networks without making actual contact with the third party. Trust has been shown to increase with openness in communication and perceived information accuracy (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). Thus, lack or bias of information likely undermines generalized trust in management and thereby increases the demand for gossip.

Many scholars treat workplace gossip as problematic or deviant behavior, mainly because they sense a trust problem (Baker and Jones, 1996; Greengard, 2001; Robinson and Bennett, 1995). However, because gossiping takes place in spaces hidden from managers (Michelson and Mouly, 2004), even “best practices” of information management cannot completely eliminate negative gossip.

Hypothesis 1a (generalized trust in management): The less employees’ trust in management, the more negative and the less positive gossip about managers among employees.

Generalized trust in colleagues. Employees do not only generalize trust to the group of managers, but also to the group of co-workers (Cook and Wall, 1980; Den Hartog, 2005). This implies having general confidence in fellow-employees that they behave as expected, keep promises, and will help out at work when needed (Cook and Wall, 1980). Generalized trust beliefs are likely facilitators of establishing informal cooperation and forming alliances against powerful third parties. In this process, gossip has been shown to be a strategic tool. In a number of qualitative studies employees deliberately utilized negative gossip behavior to seek allies against managers and consequently undermine their managerial authority (Scott, 1985; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). Seemingly, in environments of high trust, employees feel encouraged to share information that is discrete or negative: Quantitative research demonstrated an increased prevalence of negative gossip in organizational structures that constitute alliances (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Once damaged, reputations are difficult to repair since employees embedded in cohesive structures tend to ignore new information from outside their network (Burt, 1992; Burt, 2001; Granovetter, 1985). The more trust exists in an employee network, the further negative gossip echoes (Burt, 2001), so that single incidents of negative gossip can have far-reaching impacts. In contrast, positive gossip travels less far in an organizational network, probably because of the heightened thirst for negative, sensational news (Davis and McLeod, 2003). We expect that negative gossip behavior about managers is further enhanced when employees perceive their collegial environment as generally trustworthy and confidential (Burt, 2005). In this process, trust serves as a moderator (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). We do not expect this effect for positive gossip, as sharing positive information does not require high levels of trust in colleagues.

Hypothesis 1b (generalized trust in colleagues): The less employees’ trust in management, the more negative gossip. This effect is enhanced by trust in colleagues.

4.2.2 Interpersonal Trust

Support of authorities and commitment in organizations can also be achieved through interpersonal trust relationships with particular others (Erdogan and Enders,

2007). This trust form relies on a personal relationship between two people and is therefore highly particularistic (Rus, 2005). However, it is rarely manifested alone but always embedded in the context of multiplex social relationships (Rus, 2005; Six, 2005). According to Nootboom (2002) there are two contexts in which interpersonal trust emerges. First, interpersonal trust is embedded in affective or friendship relations (Nootboom, 2002; Rus, 2005). Affection stimulates altruistic behavior between two people, thereby facilitating peoples' confidence in one another's benevolence. In line with this, in their sociometric study on organizational gossip, Grosser et al. (2010) operationalized interpersonal trust as expressive friendship ties in employee dyads. Second, continuous and intense communication is a requirement of active trust building (Möllering, 2003). Frequent contact prevents exploitation of the trustor when the opportunity arises because there is the possibility that the trustor will punish betrayal in subsequent interactions. This positive effect of the 'future of the shadow' on cooperation has been demonstrated in multiple empirical studies (Axelrod, 1984).

Based on the above definition and its discussion, we operationalize interpersonal trust as a function of relationship quality (i.e., measured with affection/friendship) and relationship strength (i.e., measured with contact frequency). In the following, we will discuss how affection and contact frequency in dyadic relationships between employees and their manager influence gossip behavior. After that, arguments on the dyadic relationships between employees are developed. Finally, we present suggestions from balance theory (Heider, 1958) on which combinations of relationships can be expected in gossip triads.

Interpersonal trust in particular managers. The absence of affection or even the rejection of supervisors eases the flow of negative gossip about them. Empirical research demonstrated that employees warn colleagues about their managers when they feel treated badly, and seek support from colleagues (Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). Similarly, an in-depth survey among 90 MBA students in employment relationships showed that bad-mouthing the manager was a major strategy to get even when managers violated trust (Bies and Tripp, 1996). They tried to punish supervisors by harming their reputation.

In contrast, employees who have affection and a positive attitude toward their manager will not want to jeopardize their personal relationship with the manager: Research on leader-member exchange suggests that employees who trust managers and feel well-treated tend to reciprocate positive behaviors (Erdogan and Enders, 2007; Frazier et al., 2010). They also repay their managers with behavior that benefits the organization, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). Hence, they are less inclined to deliberately damage their relationship with the manager by means of negative gossip (Burt and Knez, 1996). These employees are also less receptive to malicious gossip by colleagues, but likely to defend their manager. We expect employees to gossip less negatively about their direct supervisor when they have affection (i.e., interpersonal trust) for them.

Hypothesis 2a (affection for manager): The more affective an employee's relationship with the manager, the less likely the employee gossips negatively about the manager.

Managers have to monitor many subordinates, making it impossible to develop affective trust relationships with all subordinates. As a result, the managers' chances of isolation from informal networks and exclusion from gossip among employees are high. In fact, absent managers become the objects of gossip. Managers who are excluded from informal employee networks are unlikely to detect negative behavior by subordinates. The expectation of not being detected and punished decreases the perceived costs of gossiping. If employees have low trust in their manager, they will want to acquire more information about the potential damages that the manager may cause them (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). The grapevine provides sources of information in such cases of incomplete information and uncertainty about organizational practices.

We assume the strength of the relationship influences gossip behavior, more specifically frequency of communication contacts. Communication (e.g., accuracy, explanations, and openness) has been recognized as a dimension of managerial trustworthy behavior towards subordinates (Whitener et al., 1998). If communication contacts with the manager are sparse, employees have limited direct access to news from and about managers. This way gossip, as talking about absent people, gains special informational value (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Foster, 2004). We assume that employees with the weakest contact have the greatest desire to seek for information via the grapevine. They actively engage in conversations about the absent manager to compensate for their lack of information, by talking to colleagues who know more about the manager.

In contrast, employees with frequent contacts with the manager acquire more knowledge and thus have less need for opportunistic gossip behavior (Whitener et al., 1998), although their higher knowledge status attracts gossip seekers. Negative gossip is further inhibited in the case of frequent contacts because chances of being detected are higher. Research has explained the inhibition of negative behaviors with the 'shadow of the future' (Axelrod, 1984). The more people are required to interact frequently, the more they tend to cooperate with one another. Repeated interaction facilitates support and trust in relationships (Gambetta, 1988): Empirical research showed strong positive correlations between relationship strength and trust (Burt, 2005). The interpersonal trust embedded in strong relationships and frequent contacts reduces behavior that harms the reputation of managers.

Hypothesis 2b (contact frequency with manager): Employees who have frequent contact with the manager will be less likely to initiate gossip about the manager than employees who have infrequent contacts.

Interpersonal trust in particular colleagues. The exchange of gossip is likely facilitated in employee dyads of affective and close relationships. Spreading harmful and possibly unverified news about the manager is precarious because it potentially backfires when detected. Burt argues, "when you exchange sensitive information with someone [in

particular], trust is implicit in the risk you now face that the other person might leak the information” (Burt, 2005, p. 93). Gossip senders will choose receivers carefully because of potential drawbacks, especially when negative information is transmitted. In particular, they will prefer colleagues with whom they have affective relationships over other colleagues, as the interpersonal trust embedded in these relationships reduces the risk of negative consequences. In contrast, positive gossip does not impose the same drawbacks when detected, and therefore is exchanged more freely and independently of the nature of the relationship between two gossipers.

Hypothesis 3 (affection between employees): Negative gossip about the manager will be more likely between employees who have affective relationships than between employees who do not have this.

To test this prediction it is important to control for contact frequency with particular colleagues. The more frequently two employees interact, e.g. because they are part of the same formal work group, the larger the set of social topics they discuss (Dunbar, 2004). This increases the likelihood that the manager becomes the object of informal talk.

Gossip triad and equilibrium. Finally, similarity in the employees’ interpersonal trust relationships with the manager determines the incidence of gossip. Based on predictions from balance theory (Heider, 1958), we assume that two employees only talk about managers when they are bound by an affective relationship, and both have similar opinions about their manager. The contents of gossip will be positive when both have a friendly relationship with the manager, but negative when both have an unfriendly relationship with the manager. Disagreeing on the manager, e.g. when bad-mouthing the manager in the presence of someone who is friends with the manager, can have painful consequences for the gossip sender. First, the sender’s relationship with the gossip receiver may be damaged. Second, the relationship with the gossip object may be jeopardized when the receiver reports the negative behavior to the manager. This implies that the sender becomes the object of negative gossip themselves.. Consequently, gossip triads need to be balanced: Both parties either think positively or negatively about the third party. This equilibrium prediction, which stems from balance theory, is partly underpinned by empirical research (Wittek and Wielers, 1998): People bound by affective relationships tend to exchange similar opinions about third parties.

Hypothesis 4a (balanced triad): The likelihood of gossip about the manager between two employees increases when they have the same level of affection with the manager.

Balance will be particularly important for negative gossip. Talking negatively about a friend’s friend will be more conflicting and have a greater impact than talking positively about a friend’s enemy. It is easier to disregard positive news about enemies than negative news about friends.

In contrast, imbalances in relationship strength (i.e., contact frequency) may stimulate gossip flow in triads. Like on a market, the exchange of gossip requires demand and supply of information on third-parties (Rosnow, 2001). In the case of balanced,

similar contact frequencies, both employees either have a little, or a lot of access to information about the manager. With little information in their possession, employees simply have little news to share, even should they demand information from each other. Hence, there is no supply that can satisfy their demand. With a lot of information in their possession, employees are less likely to seek gossip because news increasingly becomes redundant and out-dated. Hence, there is much supply but little demand. We expect that gossip flourishes in dyads where one employee has some contact (and thus supply of information) and the other little contact (and thus demand of information) with the manager. Benefits of supplying gossip include enhanced social status and friendship.

Hypothesis 4b (information asymmetry): The likelihood of gossip about the manager between two employees increases when they differ in their contact frequency with the manager.

4.2.3 Effects across Trust Domains

Interpersonal and generalized trust can be viewed as complementary domains. This way, organizations failing to establish high generalized trust among employees may compensate this with interpersonal trust relationships (Tyler and DeGoeij, 1996). The domains are complementary because they develop based on different sources (Woolthuis et al., 2005). Based on the institutional environment of laws, norms, values, standards and policies, every employee has a general predisposition towards the reliability and functioning of an organization's management. However, employees also share experiences in day-to-day interactions with other members of the organization and develop personal relationships and attitudes towards specific members. Hence, due to their different sources, both trust domains exist relatively independently from one another: Employees can have low generalized trust in management while they have high interpersonal trust in their direct supervisor, and vice versa. In few cases, there may be a contagion effect where the interests and intentions of the organization are perceived as belonging to particular managers (Nooteboom and Six, 2003). However, contagion will be the exception, meaning the traditional distinction between generalized and interpersonal trust appears to be useful. From this distinction we conclude that low generalized trust will affect only gossip about the group of managers as the representative unit of the organization. It will not affect gossip about the direct supervisor.

Hypothesis 5 (independency): Low employees' generalized trust in managers does increase the employees' likelihood to spread gossip about management, but not about their direct supervisor.

4.3 Research Design and Setting

Data were collected in one medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization in spring 2008. The organization is a major independent, subsidized, regional institution in the field of child care. It comprises of approximately 650 employees, with 15 sites spread across one region of the Netherlands. Its target group is children with problems in their social, psychological, and physical functioning. Most employees are female part-time workers.

Two studies were conducted in this organization, with each study targeting one of the two trust forms. The purpose of Study 1 was to test to what degree generalized trust in management and colleagues affect the employees' inclination to gossip about managers (hypotheses 1a and 1b). It was based on an employee survey of a random sample of employees and managers, and limited to self-reported scale measures. The research design aimed at a representative sample, allowing conclusions for the organization as a whole. In this study we applied ordinary least square (OLS) regressions.

The purpose of Study 2 was to investigate how interpersonal trust between actors in the gossip triad (i.e., between employees and managers, and among employees) determine gossip about the site manager (hypotheses 2a to 4b). It also tested the relationship between generalized and interpersonal trust in managers (hypothesis 5). Unlike the first study, we could not rely on a random sample of employees but needed full information about all possible interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Such information is traditionally collected with sociometric methods where each respondent answers questions about every member of the organization. Sociometric research, however, cannot be accomplished for whole large organizations as it requires small group samples. We therefore carried out a social networks study in two sites of the organization using sociometric measures. The study design allowed us to focus on and compare two specific cases with highly comparable contexts. The two sites were special kindergartens and identical in terms of hierarchy, number of employees and workflow. Thus we were able to control for formal structure. Analyses comprised social network analysis, more specifically exponential random graph modeling (ERGM).

Both studies were preceded by a phase of document study and exploratory in-depth interviews with five managers and three employees, and pretests. Questionnaires were discussed with management and piloted among six employees from various professions.

4.4 Study 1: Employee Survey on Effects of Generalized Trust on Gossip

4.4.1 Sample

The organization agreed to a sample of approximately 30% of all employees. The organization provided socio-demographic data on all employees, containing information on gender, age, contracted hours per week, tenure, and region of the country. A comparison of the sample data with the data of all employees resulted in no significant differences. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were sent to all managers (there were 34), to ensure enough managers in the sample, and a random selection of 165 employees. As an incentive, 0.50 euros per completed questionnaire were donated to a prominent child charity. One hundred and forty-four respondents out of 199 (72.4%) completed the questionnaire after a second reminder. Respondents stemmed from all kinds of different units across the organization: General/Management, Ambulant Care/Foster Care, Daycare, and Children's Home. In total, 75.1% of the respondents were female; 18.8%

were managers; the mean age was 41.07 ($SD = 10.64$). On average, employees held a degree in higher education (Dutch: HBO), and had been working in the organization for 8.28 years ($SD = 7.92$), mostly part-time (94.4% worked 36 hours or less per week).

4.4.2 Measures

Gossip about managers. An adapted version of Wittek and Wielers' (1998) tendency to gossip at the workplace scale was used to operationalize the dependent variable, the employee's tendency to gossip about managers. We constructed and tested this two-dimensional gossip scale in a pilot study. Respondents were asked whether they sometimes talked positively or negatively about *any* manager in the organization. Three items addressed positive gossip, for example, "I sometimes praise the skills of a manager if she/he is absent" or "I sometimes make a positive comment about a manager if she/he is absent". Four items addressed negative gossip, for example, "I sometimes criticize managers for a negative characteristic while they are absent", or "If I feel treated badly by a manager I complain to my colleagues". Possible answers ranged from "does not apply to me at all" (1) to "applies to me" (7). When conducting a factor analysis (principal component analysis) with direct oblimin rotation, positive and negative items loaded on two separate factors (eigenvalues of 3.38 and 2.15, explained variance of 79.1%). Cronbach's alpha was 0.89 for positive gossip, and 0.90 for negative gossip.

Generalized trust. Trust at work was measured using Cook and Wall's (1980) two-dimensional scale on trust in management and trust in colleagues. Sample items are: "The organization will always try to treat me fairly" or "Management can be trusted to make sensible decisions", and "Most of my workmates can be relied upon to do as they say they will do" or "If I got into difficulties at work I know my workmates would try and help me out". Possible answers ranged from "totally disagree" (1) to "totally agree" (7). Principal component analysis confirmed a two-factor solution (explained variance of 64.1%). Cronbach's alpha was 0.92 for trust in colleagues, and 0.83 for trust in management.

Control Variables. The analyses controlled for gender (0 = male, 1 = female), formal position (0 = subordinate, 1 = manager), age, education, and tenure.

4.4.3 Results

Table 4.1 gives an overview of the descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables in Study 1. Positive and negative gossip behavior did not differ significantly between the four organizational units, as revealed by an ANOVA. However, there were significant differences for trust in management ($p < 0.05$), with trust being highest in the General/Management unit ($M = 5.20$), and lowest in the units Children's Home ($M = 4.61$) and Ambulant Care/Foster Care ($M = 4.62$).

Table 4.1 Study 1: Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations of the Variables

Variable	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender (1=female)	74%	-							
2 Age	41.62 (10.44)	-0.37**	-						
3 Education	7.84 (1.46)	0.17	-0.06	-					
4 Manager (1=manager)	20%	-0.39**	0.37**	0.28**	-				
5 Tenure	8.63 (8.02)	-0.05	0.43**	-0.14	0.08	-			
6 Trust in management	4.84 (1.10)	-0.17†	0.20*	0.17†	0.41**	-0.07	-		
7 Trust in colleagues	5.81 (0.91)	-0.05	0.04	0.07	-0.15	0.16†	0.11	-	
8 Negative gossip	3.73 (1.60)	0.14	-0.41*	0.04	-0.34**	0.04	-0.50**	0.21*	-
9 Positive gossip	4.99 (1.35)	-0.07	0.08	0.22*	0.15†	0.03	0.16†	0.09	0.19*

Note. † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4.2 presents two sets of OLS regression models, one predicting negative and one predicting positive gossip about managers. In Hypothesis 1a, we expected an increase in positive gossip but a decrease in negative gossip for employees who generally trust management. The results in model 1B only support our arguments on negative gossip, showing that talking negatively gets more likely when generalized trust in managers is low ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). In Hypothesis 1b we further elaborated on this by arguing for a moderation effect of generalized trust in colleagues. Trust in colleagues indeed increases the employees' frequency of negative gossip about managers ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). More importantly, as expected, we find a marginally significant effect for the interaction between trust in management and trust in colleagues ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.06$), as can be seen in Model 1C. Because we worked with one-tailed hypotheses and a small sample, we can consider this finding significant. A significant interaction effect indicates that the two slopes of the direct effects differ significantly from each other and thus effect curves do not run parallel. This means that low trust in management combined with high trust in colleagues enhances negative gossip behavior: Employees who do not trust management *but* trust colleagues are most likely to talk negatively about managers. However, high trust in colleagues is not a precondition for negative gossip about managers, as revealed by an additional simple slope analysis (Aiken and West, 1991). The negative effect of trust in management on gossip was smaller but still significant for employees with low trust in colleagues (low trust in colleagues: $\beta = -0.43$, $p < 0.001$

Table 4.2 Study 1: OLS Regression Models on Negative and Positive Gossip about Managers^a

	Negative Gossip (N = 133)						Positive Gossip (N = 134)								
	Model 1A			Model 1B			Model 1C			Model 2A			Model 2B		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Controls															
(Constant)	2.88	0.77		2.70	0.68		2.73	0.68		3.51	0.68		3.64	0.69	
Gender (1=female)	-0.18	0.34	-0.05	-0.04	0.30	-0.01	-0.03	0.30	-0.01	-0.10	0.30	-0.03	-0.07	0.30	-0.02
Age	-0.26	0.17	-0.16	-0.16	0.15	-0.10	-0.11	0.15	-0.07	0.05	0.15	0.03	0.03	0.15	0.02
Education	0.16	0.10	0.15 [†]	0.15	0.09	0.14 [†]	0.14	0.09	0.13 [†]	0.19	0.09	0.21*	0.17	0.09	0.19*
Manager (1=manager)	-1.42	0.39	-0.35***	-0.48	0.38	-0.12	-0.42	0.38	-0.10	0.22	0.35	0.07	0.16	0.38	0.05
Tenure	0.22	0.13	0.15	0.06	0.12	0.04	0.05	0.12	0.03	0.05	0.12	0.04	0.05	0.12	0.04
Generalized Trust															
Trust in management				-0.76	0.13	-0.48***	-0.84	0.13	-0.53***				0.13	0.13	0.10
Trust in colleagues				0.37	0.13	0.23**	0.33	0.13	0.20*				0.09	0.13	0.06
Trust in management × trust in colleagues							-0.16	0.08	-0.15 [†]						
Adjusted R-square		0.13			0.32			0.33			0.24			0.02	
R-square change					0.19			0.01						-0.22	
(sign. F-change)		(0.001)			(0.000)			(0.062)			(0.157)			(0.400)	

Note. ^a Age, tenure, trust in management and trust in colleagues were standardized for calculating the model and for computing the interaction term. [†] $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

versus high trust: $\beta = -0.63, p < 0.001$). The interaction finding is illustrated in Figure 4.2. The full model predicting negative gossip has strong explanatory power ($R^2_{adj} = 0.33$), while the model for positive gossip has no significant explanatory power ($R^2_{adj} = 0.022, p < 0.20$). We do not report a third model on positive gossip, as adding an interaction effect ($\beta = -0.02, p = 0.86$) did not improve but reduce the model's explanatory power ($R^2_{adj} = 0.015$). Because negative and positive gossip about managers correlated weakly ($r = 0.19; p < .05$), we additionally tested a multivariate generalized linear model to include both these dependent variables in one regression analysis. However, the results appeared to be robust as they were comparable to the results from OLS regressions.

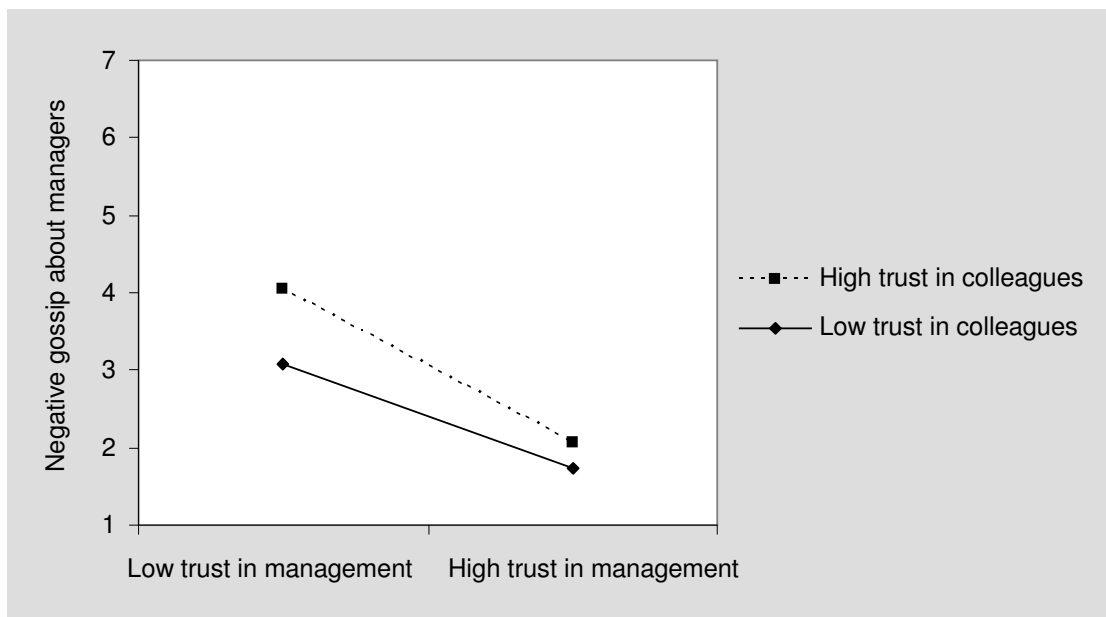


Figure 4.2 Study 1: Interaction Effect of Generalized Trust on Negative Gossip about Managers

4.4.4 Discussion

Negative gossip about managers is stimulated by low generalized trust in management and high trust in colleagues, which confirms our hypotheses. As argued before, negative gossip about management is behavior that implies more risks for employees than positive gossip. These risks seem to be minimized in collegial trust relations. However, the effect of trust in management was twice as large as the effect of trust in colleagues, and thus was the driving force behind gossip. A notable finding of Study 1 is that the model for positive gossip has no explanatory power. Hence, managers cannot stimulate positive gossip by means that generate trust, such as transparency, accountability of decision making and other managerial actions. Also, generalized trust in colleagues has no effects on positive gossip behavior, which suggests that positive gossip is shared independently of trust and more freely with colleagues.

4.5 Study 2: Network Study on Effect of Interpersonal Trust on Gossip

4.5.1 Sample

Social network data was collected in two sites of the organization to gain some case study insights. We refer to the two sites as 'Blue Site' and 'Orange Site'. These sites were chosen because they were identical in terms of hierarchical structure, staff numbers (one manager and 35 employees), division of labor, and buildings, which were constructed as kindergartens. Hierarchies were flat with one male line-manager, who directly supervised all employees. In the Blue Site all employees were female, in the Orange Site all but one were female. Teams of mostly four or five employees were responsible for a group of children, but there were no formal team leaders. These highly similar structures and organizational contexts provided conditions that reduced the influence of differences in environmental factors while comparing the gossip networks in these two sites.

The topic of gossip is a sensitive one, so hesitance to provide accurate answers can pose a serious problem. We took several means to ensure that employees were responding as truthfully as possible. First, we personally introduced the study carefully on site. We presented our ideas to the group of employees and showed them examples of sociometric questions beforehand, so that they knew what to expect. We also presented an example of a network analysis of a school class to demonstrate how data would be anonymized in future research reports. After completion of the data collection we went back to the sites and, as promised prior to the study, provided respondents with a research report.

We further guaranteed full anonymity by using self-administered, computer-aided interviewing at both sites. For this purpose, laptop computers were installed on site, and researchers were available to answer questions. Employees received an email invitation with personal login and password details to the study's website. This way, employees could choose to fill in the study at work or at home. Like in Study 1, as an incentive 0.50 Euro per completed questionnaire was donated to a prominent child charity. At both sites, 29 employees (82.9%) completed the questionnaire after a third reminder. The mean age of the respondents was 35.79 ($SD = 10.97$) at the Blue Site, and 38.57 ($SD = 11.53$) at the Orange Site. Sixty percent were social workers at the Blue Site, and 40.0% at the Orange Site.

4.5.2 Measures

Both dependent and independent variables were assessed with a sociometric design. This means that every employee in the Blue Site received a roster with the names of all colleagues (including the site manager) in the Blue site. For each of these colleagues, employees were asked questions about gossiping and their interpersonal trust relationships, operationalized as affection or close contacts. Exactly the same was done at the Orange Site.

Gossip about the manager. The dependent variable, gossip about the site manager between two employees, was measured as follows. From a list containing the names of all their colleagues working at the site, respondents selected every colleague with whom they had informally talked about their site manager (when absent) during the previous three months. “Informal talk” was described as talk that contained “positive” or “critical” comments. To limit social desirability effects, we deliberately avoided the term “gossip”. Furthermore, the question was formulated indirectly, asking respondents which colleagues had talked with them. We took this as a proxy for self-reported gossip. For each colleague, respondents could also indicate whether their conversations about the manager were critical (i.e., negative), positive, or mixed.

Affection for the manager. Employees rated how they perceived their personal relationships with the manager. The question primed affection and trust by using the following introduction: “With some colleagues we have a very good relationship. To some we would even confide personal things. With other colleagues, however, we can go along less well.” Answer categories ranged from (1) “very difficult”, “difficult”, “neutral”, “friendly”, to (5) “good friend”. This variable was implemented as an actor covariate in the analysis.

Dyadic affection between employees. We used the same question to rate relationships between employees, again using names lists. Every employee was asked to rate their personal relationship with every colleague at the site. We dichotomized this variable into (1) affection for respondents who rated a relationship as friendly or good friend, and (0) no affection for the other ratings. The dyadic affection variable captured the level of affection of an employee for a specific colleague, and was analyzed as a dyadic covariate.

Dyadic contact frequency. On a names list, employees rated how often they had had formal or informal communication contact with the manager and with every colleague at the site during the previous three months. Possible answer categories ranged from (1) “never” to (6) “eight or more times per week”. We dichotomized contact frequency into (0) low contact frequency (“two times or less per week”) and (1) high contact frequency (“three times or more per week”). To reduce the impact of missing data, we symmetrized contact frequency using the maximum method. This means if only one of the two employees in a dyad indicated that there was contact, we also coded the contact as present for the other employee in the dyad.

Formal team membership. Formal group structure was an important control variable because it determined who had to collaborate with whom in the sites. Previous research found evidence that physical proximity increases the likelihood of communication between a pair of actors (Krackhardt, 1994). The organization provided data on the formal work groups in the two sites. We gave every employee a group code and then tested whether being in the same group led to more gossip between those employees.

Relationship similarity in triads. Our last two hypotheses make predictions on all three relationships in a gossip triad. With social network analysis we could cover tests for intra-dyadic similarity and dissimilarity in the employees’ relationships with the manager. In

each gossip dyad, we compared whether both employees tended to have an affective relationship with the manager, or had similar contact frequency with him respectively.

Control Variables. We controlled for a number of common network configurations, which will be detailed in the following section.

4.5.3 Method of Analysis

To analyze our hypotheses with regard to relational determinants of gossip between employees, we used an exponential random graph modeling approach (ERGM), which is also referred to as the p^* model (Robins et al., 2009; Robins et al., 2007a; Robins et al., 2007b; Snijders et al., 2006). We computed the models using the statistical package SIENA- p^* in STOCNET (Snijders et al., 2008). An OLS regression approach could not be relied upon this time because network data violates its assumptions of observational independence. ERGM allows us to consider all observations as conditionally dependent, meaning that the change of one observation affects the probability of all other observations (Robins et al., 2007a). A major advantage, as with any social network analysis, is that ERGM investigates the structure within a complete social network. In our case, we look at gossip relations within an organizational network, where a gossip relation represents one employee gossiping with a specific colleague about the site manager. We assume that these gossip relations do not just form randomly but have a certain underlying pattern.

ERGM examines and empirically tests certain patterns with the following procedure: The observed gossip network is regarded as just one realization out of many possible realizations and might just be observed by chance. A number of random networks are simulated and compared to the observed gossip network. This procedure informs us about how much the observation differs from networks that occur by chance. A Markov chain Monte Carlo maximum likelihood estimation (MCMCMLE) is used for the simulation. Network density is not modeled but fixed to the observed density. After every simulation, the randomly produced network is compared to the observed network in terms of a number of parameters. If the simulation does not represent the observation well, the parameter values (zero at start) of the model are adjusted. A parameter is changed to a value above zero when an effect was more observed, and changed to a value below zero when less observed than in the random network. The simulation procedure is repeated at least 8,000 times until the simulated network provides a good representation of the observed network. Good representation is indicated by convergence statistics close to zero. We only used models with convergence statistics between -0.10 and 0.10 for every parameter, as recommended by Robins et al. (2009), to ensure that our results were robust.

We modeled two exponential random graphs, one for each site. Three levels of analysis were covered. The first level of analyses covered dyadic relationships with the site manager. We included parameters that tested whether the employees' relationship with the site manager affected their choice to share gossip about him, and whether there was similarity in relationships of gossip senders and their chosen gossip receivers. As

recommended for ERGM models, we also controlled for relationships of gossip receivers with the site manager. The second level of analyses regarded the dyadic relationships *between* gossiping employees. For the third level, we included parameters that described the overall structure of the gossip relations in the organization as a whole, as illustrated in Figure 4.3. These parameters are called “network statistics” and tell whether certain patterns of gossiping occur more or less often than expected by chance. They are typically included as controls in ERGM: reciprocity, alternating k-in-stars, 3-cycles, alternating k-out-stars, alternating independent, and 2-paths alternating k-triangles (Robins et al., 2007a; Robins et al., 2007b; Snijders et al., 2008). Controlling for cyclic structures is less common, but makes sense in networks of communication flow. While these control statistics rule out biases on our first two analytical levels, they offer additional material for interpretation of structural characteristics in gossip networks. More explanation of these effects will be provided in the results section.

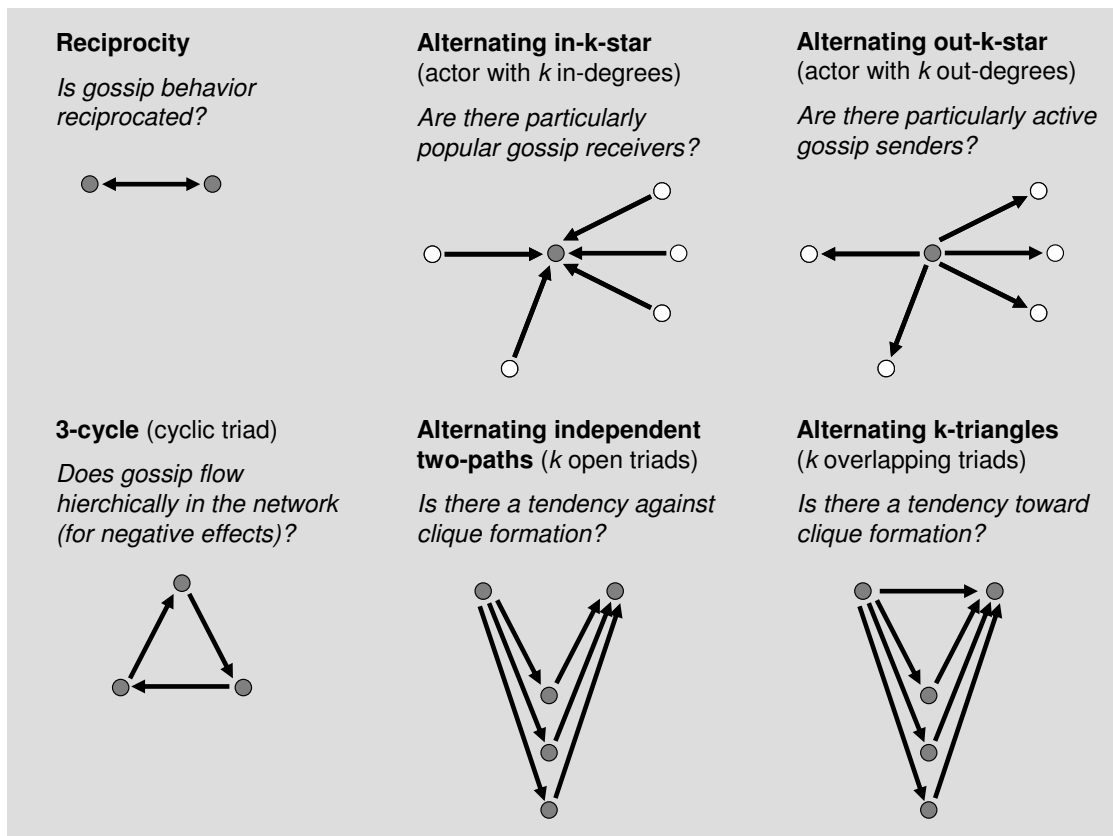


Figure 4.3 Study 2: Control Variables – Common Configurations within Social Networks

4.5.4 Results

Table 4.3 summarizes the descriptive results of the network study. The gossip networks of the two sites are reproduced in Figure 4.4. At both sites, 28 out of 29 employees engaged in gossip about their site manager. On average, they gossiped with three colleagues at the Blue Site, and with two colleagues at the Orange Site respectively. At the Blue Site, there was basically no positive talk about the manager (1.4%). About

fifty percent of the gossip was negative, while this figure was much lower at the Orange Site with about twelve percent of the gossip being negative.

While the gossip was much more negative about the manager at the Blue Site, the employees' ratings of their personal relationship (affection) with him were comparable to the employees' ratings of the manager at the Orange Site. The communication network of the employees was more than two times denser at the Orange than at the Blue Site. However, direct contacts with the Orange manager ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.55$) were less frequent than with the Blue manager ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.32$). Hence, the Blue manager appeared to be more central to the communication processes between employees. In spite of their sparser communication, employees at the Blue Site gossiped more negatively about the manager.

Table 4.3 Study 2: Descriptive Statistics of Networks at Blue Site and Orange Site

Network Statistics^a	Blue Site	Orange Site
Number of employees	35	35
Number of respondents	29 (82.9%)	29 (82.9%)
Gossip about the Site Manager		
Number of employees involved in gossip	28	28
Average number of nominated gossip partners per employee (out-degree)	2.69	2.28
Density of gossip network	0.08	0.07
Shares of total gossip:		
- negative contents	50.7%	11.8%
- mixed contents	47.9%	60.3%
- positive contents	1.4%	27.9%
Interpersonal Trust: Affection		
Average number of affective relationships with colleagues per employee (out-degree)	10.00	10.40
Average relationship rating for site manager	3.15	3.21
Density of affection network	0.30	0.31
Interpersonal Trust: Contact Frequency		
Average number of strongly connected colleagues per employee (three times or more weekly; degree)	10.61	23.67
Average frequency of contacts with site manager ^b	3.26	2.37
Density of contact network	0.33	0.72

Note. ^a Because both networks are equal in size and response rate, network measures are non-standardized and hence directly comparable. ^b A *t*-test revealed a significant difference in the employees' contact frequency between the two site managers ($p < 0.001$).

The identical formal structure of the two sites combined with different gossip behaviors provided interesting material for comparison: At the Blue Site gossip was predominantly negative; at the Orange Site gossip contents were more positive, meaning one site manager was much more criticized than the other. This enables us to compare

the effects of interpersonal trust relationships on gossip in two different workplace settings. In the following, we will refer to this difference in negativity when discussing our hypotheses on negative and positive gossip.

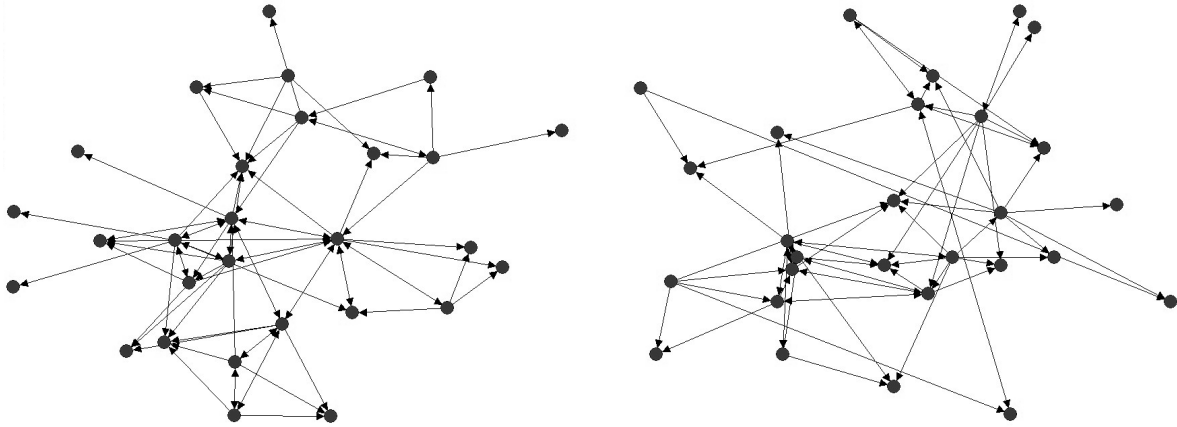


Figure 4.4 Networks of Gossiping Employees at Blue Site (left) and Orange Site (right)

Table 4.4 presents the results of the exponential random graph models for both sites. The first set of hypotheses regarded interpersonal trust relationships – operationalized as affection or close contacts – of employees with their manager. In Hypothesis 2a, we suggested that employees having an affective relation with their manager would be less likely to send negative gossip about their manager. The results support this argument with a significant negative sender effect at the Blue Site ($\theta = -0.44$, $p < .05$) where gossip contents among employees were mostly negative, and a marginally significant effect at the Orange Site ($\theta = -0.18$, $p < .10$) where gossip contents were much more positive. The effect was stronger at the site where the gossip network was mainly characterized by negative contents, suggesting that affection indeed inhibits negative gossip behavior. In Hypothesis 2b, we assumed frequent contacts with the manager would decrease the employees' likelihood to gossip about their manager. We find partial support for this prediction. There is a significant negative sender effect at the Blue Site ($\theta = -0.33$, $p < .001$) but no effect at the Orange Site ($\theta = 0.00$, *ns.*). This means that the effect of contact frequency, similarly to the effect of affection, is strongest in the negative gossip network (Blue Site).

We also formulated a hypothesis with regard to the social relationships between employees (Hypothesis 3). As expected, affection between two employees is a predictor of gossip behavior about managers between them. The results show that having an affective tie to a colleague made gossip with that colleague more likely. Interestingly, this is only observed at the Blue Site where gossip contents were mainly negative ($\theta = 1.76$, $p < .001$). This is an indicator for affection being a more important prerequisite in workplaces dominated by negative gossip rather than by positive and mixed gossip. Both control variables were significant: Frequent contacts between employees (Blue Site: $\theta = 0.83$, $p < .05$; Orange Site: $\theta = 1.11$, $p < .01$) and formal team membership (Blue Site: $\theta = 1.17$, $p < .001$; Orange Site $\theta = 1.27$, $p < .001$) increase gossip exchange in both sites.

Table 4.4 Study 2: Gossip about the Manager at Two Sites – Parameter Estimates and Standard Errors (SE)

Parameter	Blue Site				Orange Site				
	Predominantly Negative Gossip				Predominantly Positive and Mixed Gossip				
	<i>Est. θ</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est. θ</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est. θ</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est. θ</i>	<i>SE</i>	
Controls									
1. Reciprocity	0.99	0.67	1.10 [†]	0.67	2.52**	0.77	2.90***	0.77	
2. 3-cycles	-0.32	0.33	-0.29	0.33	-0.60	0.60	-0.82	0.56	
3. Alternating out-k-stars	1.05***	0.32	1.03***	0.31	1.58***	0.29	1.65***	0.27	
4. Alternating in-k-stars	-0.09	0.35	-0.18	0.33	0.22	0.35	0.53 [†]	0.29	
5. Alternating k-triangles	0.70**	0.24	0.68**	0.23	0.40 [†]	0.22	0.46*	0.22	
6. Alternating independent two-paths	-0.04	0.08	-0.09	0.08	-0.27**	0.10	-0.27**	0.09	
Generalized Trust in Management									
7. Sender of gossip			-0.03	0.02			0.01	0.02	
8. Receiver of gossip			0.04	0.03			0.01	0.03	
9. Similarity in trust of sender and receiver			-1.30*	0.63			-0.24	0.44	
Affection for Site Manager									
10. Sender of gossip	-0.44*	0.21			-0.18 [†]	0.11			
11. Receiver of gossip	0.21	0.32			-0.17 [†]	0.10			
12. Same level of affection of sender and receiver	0.15	0.26			-0.11	0.26			
Contact Frequency with Site Manager									
13. Sender of gossip	-0.33***	0.09			0.00	0.15			
14. Receiver of gossip	-0.10	0.13			0.44 [†]	0.25			
15. Similarity in contact of sender and receiver	-0.91	0.62			-0.06	0.46			
Dyadic Relationships between Employees									
16. Affection	1.76***	0.33	1.29***	0.33	0.21	0.23	0.17	0.20	
17. Contact frequency	0.83*	0.33	0.70*	0.33	1.11**	0.39	1.00**	0.38	
18. Formal team membership	1.17***	0.33	1.45***	0.33	1.27***	0.29	1.21***	0.26	

Note. Significance is calculated by dividing the parameter estimate by its standard error. [†] $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The next set of hypotheses covered assumptions on interpersonal relationship similarity in triads. In Hypothesis 4a, we argued that gossip about managers is predominantly observed between two employees who have the same trust relationship with their manager. Findings at neither site support this argument ($\theta = 0.15$, *ns.* and $\theta = -0.11$, *ns.*). This means that balance only occurred by chance, regardless of whether the gossip was negative (Blue Site) or positive and mixed (Orange Site). We further argued in Hypothesis 4b that gossip is more often observed between two employees who differ in their contact frequency with the manager. Again, there is no support in our data ($\theta = -0.91$, *ns.* and $\theta = -0.06$, *ns.*).

In Hypothesis 5 on cross-level effects, we predicted independency of an employee's generalized trust in managers and the inclination to spread gossip about a particular manager, such as the direct supervisor. As expected, in neither site generalized trust in management decreases or increases an employee's tendency to gossip about the site manager. We find further support for the independency assumption looking at the correlations between generalized and interpersonal trust in managers: There were no significant associations between generalized trust in management with affection (Orange Site: Spearman's Rho = -0.08 , *ns.*; Blue Site: Spearman's Rho = 0.24 , *ns.*) and contact frequency with the site manager (Orange Site: Spearman's Rho = -0.09 , *ns.*; Blue Site: Spearman's Rho = 0.09 , *ns.*).

Finally, our control variables accounting for network statistics yield some interesting insights. Reciprocity of gossip behavior is stronger at the Orange Site than at the Blue Site, which implies that colleagues reciprocate negative gossip less than non-negative gossip. At both sites, alternating out-k-stars are significantly overrepresented. This means that a small number of employees were particularly active in spreading gossip in the organization. The insignificant alternating in-k-stars show that gossip is received rather equally – there are no employees who were particularly popular gossip partners. The significant positive parameters for alternating k-triangles combined with the negative parameters for alternating independent two-paths indicate a statistical over-representation of closed triads. This means that gossip relationships tended to occur in local, dense social structures.

4.5.5 Discussion

The two sites of our network study differed remarkably with respect to the negativity in gossip among employees, which provided two interesting case studies. Our assumptions concerning the dyadic determinants of gossip about managers were mainly confirmed in the Blue Site, where the workplace was characterized by high criticism of the site manager. In the Blue Site, affective relationships of employees *with* their site manager reduced the likelihood of gossip about him. However, affection *between* employees diminished this effect by enhancing the probability of gossip about the site managers: Affection, frequent interpersonal contact, and team membership increased the flow of gossip. Frequent contact was also a determinant of gossip in the Orange Site,

where the site manager was viewed less critically. Expectations about balanced trust relationships in triads were not supported, perhaps because gossiping employees take views of their gossip partners less into account than assumed.

From these observations we conclude that interpersonal trust, as it is produced in affective and close relationships, is a prerequisite of negative but not of positive or mixed gossip. Altogether the findings of the network study strongly underpin results from the employee survey in Study 1: Both generalized and interpersonal trust between members of an organizational network seem to have a substantial influence on negative gossip behavior about managers. However, the two trust forms were not directly related to one another but operated on different levels of analysis.

4.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The present study concerns three innovations with regard to researching gossip in organizations. It accounted for important status differences at the workplace by focusing on managers as the objects of gossip between employees. Furthermore, it extended ideas from previous work using social network theory (Brass et al., 2004; Burt, 1992; Foster and Rosnow, 2006; Rousseau et al., 1998), which mainly drew on reputation and trustworthiness in people as antecedents of gossip (Burt, 2005). Finally, the present study disentangled two distinct variants of organizational trust. The first study inquired effects of generalized trust in the group of managers and colleagues based on regression analyses in an organization. The second study shed light on the influence of interpersonal trust on gossip about direct supervisors, based on a sociometric study in two sites of the same organization. The latter study exceeded possibilities of common regression approaches, as it captured quality and strength of relationships with specific others (i.e., affection and contact frequency).

We believe that the combination of the two studies advances the literature with a number of interesting findings. According to our findings, negative gossip about managers is triggered by the interplay of multiple factors. First, sharing negative gossip becomes likely when employees have low generalized or interpersonal trust in managers. Employees engage more in gossip conversations when they have little contacts with their manager, and thus their manager is often absent. Second, the impact of low generalized or interpersonal trust in managers on negative gossip behavior is enhanced when employees have high generalized or interpersonal trust in colleagues. Taken together, these results show negative gossip behavior is stimulated by strong and affective inter-employee relationships but inhibited by strong and affective relationships with managers. Third, we did not find the employees' generalized trust and interpersonal trust with managers influenced the propensity to gossip positively about them. Fourth, positive gossip was also observed independently of the level of interpersonal affection between employees. We conclude in line with Burt's (2001) research findings that negative gossip behavior, in contrast to positive gossip, is precarious and therefore requires positive relationships with colleagues.

We were intrigued by the absence of relationship similarity in gossip triads predicted by balance theory (Heider, 1958). Employees approach colleagues with gossip about their manager regardless of their colleagues' relationship quality (i.e., affection) with the manager (Study 2). We can think of two explanations: Either employees do not consider, or they do not know the relationship quality between the other two persons. In the theory part, we assumed employees to make careful and considerate choices to gossip, contingent upon interpersonal trust relationships. Therefore, we reason that balance theory may overestimate the capability of employees with regard to sensing relationship quality between others. This reasoning is further underpinned by the systematic lack of receiver effects in Study 2.

Our empirical findings strongly confirm previous research conducted using network theory: Gossip is likely to flow in networks with many strong and affective relationships between employees (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1990), when the object of gossip is of particular importance to a broader group of employees (McAndrew et al., 2007), and when information about the object is negative (Bosson et al., 2006; Davis and McLeod, 2003). These conditions make it easy for negative gossip to reach through entire organizational grapevines and create long-lasting, sticky reputations (Burt, 2005). Positive gossip spreads less easily, probably because people value negative information more than positive information, especially if it regards powerful people or even rivals (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004). This is because potential damage communicated via negative gossip poses a threat for an individual's well-being, whereas a potential advantage does not. In other words, positive news about managers simply may be not interesting enough to share (Davis and McLeod, 2003).

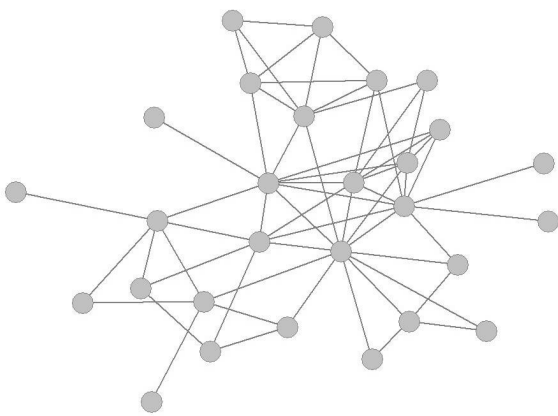
A conclusion from the present study is that negative gossip about management can hardly be avoided in dense organizational networks where employees perceive their relationships with managers as difficult, regardless of whether lack of trust concerns generalized or interpersonal trust. Whereas this sounds like bad news to practitioners, they may be able to curtail the emergence of gossip to some extent: The two forms of trust appeared to be unrelated in our study. This means managers in organizations may be able to compensate lack of one trust form with the other. This is particularly relevant in flexibly regulated organizations where much depends on individuals' idiosyncratic and situational context, meaning trust is primarily developed on an interpersonal level, rather than a general level. On the other hand, more strongly regulated systems may rely on impersonal power when building trust since they provide a reliable framework for individuals' expectations and interaction (Bachman, 2005). This may help practitioners reduce negative talk, promote a positive reputation of management, and consequently facilitate organizational citizenship behavior.

Further research is required to address some of the shortcomings of this research. First, though our study was limited to one organization, we already found strong evidence for contextual differences between the two sites. Future studies will benefit from a multi-organization design that allows more systematic variations in organizational context, such as hierarchical structure, demographic composition or diversity in

professions. Second, our study was restricted to the antecedents of gossip about managers, leaving us in the dark about potential individual and organization level consequences of gossip. In order to assess practical implications of workplace gossip, an integrated model addressing antecedents, processes and consequences would be necessary. However, whether these insights will ever lead to the design of viable interventions to “manage” gossip at work remains to be seen. As Noon and Delbridge (1993) suggested, the dynamics of workplace gossip are intrinsic to the workplace and belong to social life in organizations.

Chapter 5

Who Are the Objects of Positive and Negative Gossip at Work? A Social Network Perspective on Workplace Gossip



Gossip is informal talking about colleagues. Taking a social network perspective, we argue that group boundaries and social status in the informal workplace network determine who the objects of positive and negative gossip are. Gossip networks were collected among 36 employees in a public child care organization, and analyzed using exponential random graph modeling (ERGM). As hypothesized, both positive and negative gossip focuses on colleagues from the own gossiper's work group. Negative gossip is targeted, with the objects being specific individuals, particularly those low in informal status. Positive gossip, in contrast, is spread more evenly throughout the network.

This chapter is based upon Ellwardt, L., Labianca, G., Wittek, R. Who are the objects of positive and negative gossip at work? A social network perspective on workplace gossip. Revised and resubmitted for publication.

5 WHO ARE THE OBJECTS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE GOSSIP AT WORK? A SOCIAL NETWORK PERSPECTIVE ON WORKPLACE GOSSIP

5.1 Introduction

Gossip is a ubiquitous phenomenon which accounts for approximately 65% of people's speaking time (Dunbar, 2004). This suggests that time spent in the workplace is naturally accompanied by a large proportion of conversations on social topics, such as talking about colleagues. Many accomplished organizational goals cannot be accounted for only by the prescribed formal workflow, but instead rely on informal relationships between employees (Morey and Luthans, 1991; Oh et al., 2004). The quality and strength of these informal relationships smooth or impede cooperation within formal work groups, as well as across the entire organization, thereby potentially affecting the organization's outcomes. Gossip is argued to be one of the main mechanisms used by employees to strengthen relationships informally in organizations (Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Michelson and Mouly, 2004; Noon and Delbridge, 1993) and is, thus, worthy of study in its own right.

Workplace gossip is defined as "informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present" (Kurland and Pelled, 2000: 429). This definition, which is used widely in the gossip literature, has two crucial implications. First, gossip is "evaluative," which suggests that it can be either positive or negative (Elias and Scotson, 1965; Fine and Rosnow, 1978). Second, and more crucially, the member of the organization that is not present – the gossip object – is an important part of gossip episodes, even though the person is not directly involved in the transmission of the gossip. Much of what we know about gossip in organizations tends to be limited to predicting who will be a gossip (Litman and Pezzo, 2005; Nevo et al., 1994), or who is likely to gossip with whom (e.g., Burt, 2001; Leaper and Holliday, 1995). But less is understood about who these individuals choose to gossip about, which is the focus of the current study.

The relevance of studying positive and negative gossip is apparent when looking at its consequences for the object of gossip and for the group as a whole. Being the object of positive gossip, such as being praised or defended by others, is similar in its consequences to receiving social support (Dunbar, 2004). Social support is the positive behaviors and actions that foster positive interpersonal relationships (Duffy et al., 2002). Having a favorable reputation, feelings of belongingness, and friendships at work has been found to increase performance and job satisfaction (Morrison, 2004; Sparrowe et al., 2001).

Being the object of negative gossip can cause consequences similar to victimization, such as limiting work-related success and thwarting the fundamental

psychological need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). For example, Burt's (2005) study of bankers found that those about whom negative gossip was spread had difficulties in establishing cooperative working relationships with colleagues, and left the organization sooner than those who did not suffer from a negative reputation. Victimized employees usually find it difficult to cognitively control their social environment and trust others (Aquino and Thau, 2009). Because negative gossip is a light form of victimization, it is more precisely categorized as a form of social undermining (Duffy et al., 2002). Social undermining is behavior that hinders the establishment and maintenance of positive interpersonal relationships and a favorable reputation for the target. In the sense that gossip is defined above it is a key process in groups. Managerial and social psychology literature, however, study it mainly as one out of many aspects of more abstract psychometric constructs, like workplace deviance and social undermining (Bosson et al., 2006; Duffy et al., 2002). This makes it difficult to disentangle gossip from these constructs. We therefore propose to study gossip behavior as a subject on its own and without attaching an *ex ante* connotation (like deviance). Whether gossip is deviant behavior or not largely depends on the situational circumstances under which it is occurs.

Gossip also has implications for the overall functioning of the group in which individuals are embedded. For example, despite its harmful consequences for individuals, negative gossip might have beneficial consequences for group outcomes. Empirical studies have shown that negative gossip is used to socially control and sanction uncooperative behavior within groups (De Pinninck et al., 2008; Elias and Scotson, 1965; Merry, 1984). Individuals often cooperate and comply with group norms simply because they fear reputation-damaging gossip and ostracism.

Despite the ubiquity and importance of positive and negative gossip for employees and organizations, it is surprising how little research exists on who is selected as the objects of gossip. In contrast to previous studies, we will not study consequences but rather the antecedents of becoming the object of gossip. Characteristics of gossip objects have largely been neglected, while considerable effort has been taken to describe objects of more severe but rarer forms of victimization and bullying (Aquino and Thau, 2009; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Vartia, 2001). Asking why some employees are chosen as objects of positive and negative gossip, and others not, helps to identify the beneficiaries of positive gossip and its related social support, as well as the employees who may be victimized through the spreading of negative gossip.

The present study uses social network analysis. Social network analysis was successfully employed in earlier research on gossip and victimization in organizations (Burt, 2005; Coyne et al., 2004; Jaeger et al., 1994; Keltner et al., 2008; Lamertz and Aquino, 2004). Our contribution, however, is that we specifically focus on the gossip objects' formal group membership and informal social status within an organizational network. To date, there are too few studies to draw firm conclusions about network position in relation to gossip or victimization (Aquino and Thau, 2009). We will argue that being in the same formal workgroup as another person, even after controlling for the amount of interaction and relationship quality with this person, makes it more likely

that both positive and negative gossip is spread about this person. Both gossiping behaviors help in maintaining and reinforcing group solidarity (Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). Individuals who are low in social status in the organization's overall social network (that is, having few friends and/or being friends with unpopular individuals) are more likely to be victims of negative gossip, and in some cases become scapegoats.

We proceed in the following way: We first present a theoretical framework and hypotheses about who will be chosen as gossip objects anchored in discussions of group membership and social status. Then we discuss the research design and the methods of analyses we used. We next test our hypotheses using social network data collected in a Dutch child care organization that has seven formal groups embedded within it. Finally, we present our results and discuss their theoretical implications, along with a discussion of the need for future research on gossip in organizations.

5.2 Theoretical Background

Organizational gossip behavior is defined as a relational process involving, at minimum, a triad. In a 'minimal' gossip setting, a gossip sender is speaking with a gossip receiver, and the gossip content being spread is about the gossip object, who is not physically present but remains an important part of the relational gossip process (Bergmann, 1993; Kurland and Pelled, 2000). Because there are at least three individuals involved in a gossip episode, researchers have argued that it is useful to think of gossip as a group process, rather than simply treat it as a process between the sending and receiving dyad (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Merry, 1984).

Despite the theoretical arguments that gossip is at minimum triadic and needs to be considered from a group perspective, most of the previous research on gossip transmission through networks focuses on the dyadic relationship between the gossip sender and the gossip receiver. Much of it examines the extent to which there is gossiping in a network. For example, previous researchers have argued that as the density of a network increases, it increases the level of interdependence within the group, which makes norm monitoring more important (Hackman, 1992). This increases the transmission of gossip in a network because gossip allows the group members to control their fellow members' actions (Burt, 2005; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). Another factor increasing the flow of (negative) gossip is trust. The sender must trust that the gossip receiver either keeps the secret, or further spreads the gossip in a manner that protects the original gossip sender (Burt, 2001; Grosser et al., 2010).

While much is known about the relationship between gossip senders and receivers, little research has been done on the objects of gossip. For example, while Heider (1958) notes that gossip about an object increases between the sender and the receiver when they agree in their opinion on the gossip object, no attempt is made to understand how the characteristics of the gossip object might affect that attitude or the propensity to

gossip about the object either positively or negatively. Similarly, Wittek and Wielers (1998) showed that gossip flourished in organizational networks that had many ‘coalition triads’ where the gossip sender and receiver had a positive relationship amongst themselves but a negative relationship with the object of gossip. Again, no attempt is made to understand why that particular person was singled out by two individuals to be the object of negative gossip.

Because our theoretical perspective is to view gossip as a group phenomenon as opposed to a dyadic phenomenon, we will focus on two organization-level explanations of why certain individuals are chosen to be the objects of positive or negative gossip. We use formal work groups as one explanatory factor, and informal social status as the other.

5.2.1 Being the Object of Positive or Negative Gossip as a Consequence of Sharing Formal Group Membership

Being a positive gossip object. We argue that shared formal group membership breeds positive gossip about co-members. Several mechanisms contribute to this effect. Employees in mid- and large-sized organizations are usually asked to specialize in various functional or product-related areas that are often formalized into assigned units that keep employees focused on a specific set of tasks, which are then assembled into a whole at the organizational level. Such formal group structures create and reinforce intensive interaction and high interdependence among employees in the group. But this division of labor also decreases interaction with and dependence on employees from the other formal groups and units in the organization. Interactions beyond these formal group boundaries are therefore usually less prevalent and more voluntary in nature (Granovetter, 1973).

Interdependence between employees in formal working groups is further enhanced by organizational demands to achieve organizationally-mandated group goals. Such group goals are more likely to be achieved when all employees of the group cooperate with one another. Formal interdependence increases the likelihood of informal interaction, socializing and communication, which in turn favors reciprocity norms and cooperation (Oh et al., 2004; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Informal socializing often involves gossiping either inside the workplace, or while engaging in behaviors such as drinking outside the workplace (Michelson and Mouly, 2002; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Furthermore, norms of reciprocity are facilitated, so that individuals know that if they assist a fellow work group member, that work group member will be very likely to reciprocate in the future. Informal socializing also increases generalized exchange in groups, such that the group members don’t even worry about direct reciprocity from assisting a fellow group member, because they know that someone else in the group will offer assistance in the future. This informal socializing thus encourages group-serving behavior (i.e., cooperation), while also constraining self-serving behavior (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005).

While this existing research is focused on explaining how gossiping encourages cooperation between the gossip sender and the receiver, it is lacking in terms of explaining how the gossip object becomes involved in this group solidarity-creating

process (Dunbar, 2004). The importance of the gossip object in developing and maintaining group solidarity is fairly apparent when we examine the individual as an object of positive gossip. By gossiping positively about other members of our group who are not present, group members stay informed about each other, and demonstrate support and solidarity toward the gossip object and the group (Burt and Knez, 1996; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew et al., 2007). Positive gossip behavior includes, for example, praising the absent individual, providing political or social support for the person, or defending that colleague in their absence. As the gossip object is a reliable partner for social exchange within the informal network, a favorable reputation is built. Research has demonstrated the impact of third-party ties on trust (Burt and Knez, 1996). In a business environment, partners may ask acquaintances for their opinion on the trustworthiness of new business partners before engaging in deals. Positive information is likely to increase trust in others, even when they are fairly unknown to the trustor.

However, also the reputation of the gossip senders in the group may benefit: By praising group members in their absence, employees signal their commitment to group norms, and that fellow group members can count on this employee when needed (Gambetta, 2006). Having a favorable reputation increases the possibility that this employee will be socially supported when the need arises in the future. Although the gossip objects might not find out about the specific praising event, or even necessarily reciprocate the behavior when they have the opportunity to praise the gossip sender when absent, there is a greater chance that the *group* as a whole will generally reward this behavior. In contexts where individuals are interdependent, individual contributions to the welfare of the group are particularly acknowledged, and confer the contributor (i.e., gossip sender) prestigious status (Willer, 2009).

Research has shown that group affirmation through positive gossip becomes even more likely when the group members are highly interdependent in their goal achievement (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). Within formal work groups, there is often recognition that fellow group members are interdependent and that group solidarity is important to maintain the proper functioning of the work group. Thus, we would expect that employees would pass along favorable information about absent members of their work group, and that this effect cannot solely be explained by the level of daily interaction that is required and generated by being placed in the same work group.

Hypothesis 1: Gossip senders are more likely to spread positive gossip about a colleague from the sender's work group than a colleague from outside the workgroup.

The above argument implies that employees are less inclined to gossip positively about people outside their work group. Importantly, decreased positive behavior towards out-group members does not necessarily align with an increase in negative behaviors. Scholars using optimal distinctiveness theory argue that in-group favoritism (e.g., demonstrated by positive gossip) does not require hostile behavior towards out-groups (e.g., negative gossip, Brewer, 1999). Under conditions where there is no threat from the

out-group and no competition, in-groups often simply ignore potential gossip information about people outside their group, because it is not interesting. We now turn to the discussion of negative gossip.

Being a negative gossip object. As described above, spreading positive gossip about an object is a simple and low-risk way of demonstrating social support to the group. In the following we will argue for similar group-serving functions of negative gossip, more specifically, we suggest that gossip is used for reinforcing norms important to members of the group. Previous research has shown that there is often greater interest in hearing negative gossip than there is in hearing positive gossip (Barkow, 1992; Baumeister et al., 2004; Bosson et al., 2006; Davis and McLeod, 2003; De Backer and Gurven, 2006). First, negative information is hidden from the gossip object and therefore scarcer. Second, negative gossip may contain information about behaviors or intentions that have a damaging impact on the group. Given the heightened thirst for negative gossip, who do gossip senders choose to spread negative gossip about?

Negative gossip will be more focused on colleagues from the sender's work group than outside the group because potential benefits are high. Negative gossip often provides valuable information on uncooperative behavior and norm violation by individuals. Both theoretical and empirical literature on gossip suggests that acts of social control and ostracism involve sharing negative opinions about third parties (De Pinninck et al., 2008; Merry, 1984). By spreading gossip throughout their network group, members warn one another (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew et al., 2007) and signal that they consider the underlying relationship with the group a strong one (Bosson et al., 2006; Burt, 2001). Warning others in some cases leads to an unfavorable reputation or avoidance of the gossip object (Burt, 2005; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). Negative information, e.g. on violating the norm of cooperation, is of special value in the context of high interdependence, where group members cannot achieve their goals without the contribution of every individual.

Directly challenging the norm-violating group member, however, can be costly, if not backed by the group or at least parts of the group. A person detecting norm violations can therefore choose to first discuss the issue with other group members when the norm-violator is absent, and see whether they agree and will support sanctions. This is very important for the gossip sender, who must credibly demonstrate that the gossip behavior is solely motivated by the promotion of group norms (and not the gossip sender's own position). Research has shown an increased likelihood of repercussions for gossipers when other group members perceive the gossip behavior as self-serving behavior (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005).

So far, it has been argued that individuals who violate social norms tend to be the objects of negative gossip, usually targeted by those who want to enforce these norms (Aquino and Thau, 2009). We do not suggest, however, that norm violation is more likely to occur or to be perceived among in-group members. We only suggest that in-group violation is more important and judged more harshly. Highly interdependent individuals

are particularly affected by and sensitive towards norm violations by group members. As a consequence, norm violation is evaluated more extremely than analogous behavior from members outside the group, increasing the likelihood of negative gossip. The harsher judgment of in-group members has been called the “black sheep effect” (Marques and Paez, 1994). There has been empirical support for the black sheep effect in organizational contexts where employees identify with formal group boundaries (Bown and Abrams, 2003). Taking together arguments on the black sheep effect and group benefits, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Gossip senders are more likely to spread negative gossip about a colleague from the sender’s work group than a colleague from outside the workgroup.

5.2.2 Positive and Negative Gossip in Relation to Social Status in the Informal Network

So far, we have examined the costs and benefits of choosing certain gossip objects at the level of the work group. Employees, however, are simultaneously embedded both within particular formal work groups, as well as being members of the overall organizational network (Oh et al., 2006; Oh et al., 2004). While the organization’s formal structure imposes unit specialization on the employees, it also creates cross-unit interdependence in order for the organization to achieve its goals. No formal organization structure can entirely manage those cross-unit interdependencies perfectly, which opens the way for informal relationships across units to develop – that is, there will always be times when to get work done, people will need to tap their informal contacts in other groups in order to accomplish their tasks. While these informal relationships serve individuals’ expressive purposes, including their needs to find affiliation with others (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), they also serve instrumental purposes, such as providing a means to have goals that cross units accomplished without resorting constantly to the organizational hierarchy. Some of the large variation in the extent to which employees have access to cross-unit relationships is determined by the organizational hierarchy, as well as by their function (e.g., some people might be assigned to be cross-unit coordinators). But some of that variation is directly related to their social status within the informal network (Krackhardt, 1994): The more positive relationships employees have with colleagues throughout the organization, the higher the employees’ social status within the organization as a whole (Salmivalli et al., 1996), and the more access they have to social resources (Lamertz and Aquino, 2004).

This informal social status within the organization as a whole determines the extent to which an employee is the object of positive or negative gossip. Indirect acts of gossiping negatively about another person can lead to more direct offenses by the group, such as bullying this person. An influential study on bullying in classrooms revealed that being the victim of bullying largely depended on the victims’ social status in the class – measured as the victim’s centrality in the friendship network. Low-status children tended to be victimized, and were not supported by other children who were potential defenders, while high-status children were highly accepted by the group and not bullied (Salmivalli et al., 1996). We argue that the objects’ social status determines the costs and

benefits of spreading gossip about the object, and thus affects the likelihood of being a positive or negative gossip object.

Being a positive gossip object. We define a person's social status within an organization here as the number of friendship relationships that person has with other members of the organization, weighted in turn by how much status those members have (network researchers will recognize this as having high "eigenvector centrality", Bonacich, 1987). This definition is relative – two people might both have a large number of friendship relationships, but the person who has more relationships is likely to have greater status. The definition also takes into account the status of the people with whom the individual has their relationships. Similarly, Northway (1967) recommends calculating social status not only based on numbers of friendship nominations by others, but also on the relational pattern of who is friends with whom. For example, a person who has a large number of relationships with the most popular individuals in a network will have higher status than an individual with an equal number of relationships, but whose relationships are with individuals who are very unpopular in the network as a whole. Individuals in organizations enhance their status by being perceived to be tied to the most popular members of the organizational network (e.g., Kilduff and Krackhardt, 1994). Scott and Judge (2009) found that employees reliably agreed on which colleagues had high social status in a workplace informal network, and that those colleagues were treated favourably by the group, even after controlling for formal status and interpersonal liking.

We argue that humans strive for social status (Barkow, 1975), and that they will use gossip as a means of trying to attain that social status. Employees will be likely to ingratiate themselves with higher-status people through gossip in an attempt to promote their own social standing. Gossiping positively about high-status people can pay off for a number of reasons. First, gossiping positively about well-embedded others can be a relatively uncontroversial way of associating with other group members who are friends with the gossip object. The gossip senders signal these friends that they notice the good deeds of the high-status gossip object, and by doing so they indicate that they belong to the object's group. Researchers know that the mere perception of being connected to high-status people increases status regardless of whether this connection actually exists (Kilduff and Krackhardt, 1994). Second, high status people may have received part of their status because of their contributions to the group (Willer, 2009). Contributions trigger positive evaluations, because the group benefits from this behavior. Mentioning this positive behavior to others also sets standards and clarifies normative expectations.

Though contributions of low-status people also serve the group, gossiping positively about them yields comparatively less benefits than gossip about high-status people: The gossip sender signals affiliation with someone with whom relatively fewer others associate. The sender can be perceived as having unimportant (or even unpopular) friends, which in turn may reflect negatively on the gossip sender. Thus, there can be greater benefits for transmitting positive gossip about a high-status person.

Transmitting positive gossip about high-status colleagues also is affiliated with relatively low costs for gossip senders. High-status colleagues are generally accepted by the group (Salmivalli et al., 1996), meaning that they have many positive informal relationships to other members in the organization. This makes it easy for employees to find gossip recipients that are going to agree with the positive gossip that is being transmitted about the object. The act of connecting with the gossip receiver in agreement over an object through positive gossip adds further to the gossip sender's social status in the informal network (Bosson et al., 2006; Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Jaeger et al., 1994). Thus, when employees are gossiping positively about another individual outside of their workgroup, we expect that it will be about people that are high in status in the overall organization's network.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the social status of an employee in the overall organizational network, the more likely this employee is to be the object of positive gossip.

Being a negative gossip object. A corollary to this argument is that high-status people are unlikely to become the objects of negative gossip. Since employees high in social status are embedded in a supportive informal structure with many formidable allies who are themselves highly connected, they are likely to be well defended by other members in the organization (Salmivalli et al., 1996). This greatly increases the potential costs to a gossip sender for engaging in negative gossip about a high-status person. Passing along negative gossip about a high-status object is very risky because the high-status person can better monitor the flow of negative gossip – by definition, the high-status person has more friends, and more friends of friends than a low-status person. Negative gossip is more likely to be reported back to the high-status object as compared to a low-status object, thus increasing the probability of retaliation. The costs for the gossip sender include potential rejection and the loss of social status within the informal network at the hands of the high-status individual, and his or her high-status allies (Heider, 1958). Negative gossip about low-status employees involves relatively low costs for gossip senders, because their gossip behavior is backed by the members of the informal network, while these employees are unlikely to be defended (Salmivalli et al., 1996). This leads to the expectation that employees with a low social standing in the informal network are easy objects of negative gossip. Because of this, negative gossip is more likely about low-status individuals than high-status ones.

In addition to the greater costs of negatively gossiping about a higher-status object, there are greater benefits to negatively gossiping about a lower-status object. We know that there are some benefits to negative gossip in general. Researchers have often pointed out that one of the roles of negative gossip is to exert social control for the purpose of maintaining and promoting an organization's values (Dunbar, 2004; Elias and Scotson, 1965; Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Gluckman, 1963; Merry, 1984; Wittek et al., 2003). By engaging in negative gossip about an object, the gossip sender is signaling an understanding of the organizational norms, a willingness to monitor and enforce them, and an understanding that sanctioning is necessary lest the organization's identity is threatened (De Pinninck et al., 2008; De Vries, 1995; Keltner et al., 2008; Kniffin and

Wilson, 2005; Wilson et al., 2000), without damaging the gossip sender's reputation. Deviations from social norms are often seen as betraying the community. Ostracizing the offending individual from the broader community are important mechanisms for norm reinforcement (De Pinninck et al., 2008; De Vries, 1995; Merry, 1984). While some acts of ostracism are directed towards the object itself, such as excluding a person openly from activities, a crucial aspect of negative gossip is that it is mostly unobservable for the object. In their absence, the group coordinates sanctions aimed at employees who do not 'fit' the group's values. By targeting the low-status members of an informal network with negative gossip, the gossip sender is, in essence, playing an impression management game. The individual wants to appear to be upholding the organization's norms through norm monitoring and enforcement (Baumeister et al., 2004). While negative gossip potentially accomplishes this goal, it bears the risk of the gossip object learning of the negative gossip being spread, and thus retaliating. By focusing the negative gossip on the members of the network with the lowest status, the gossip sender can gain the impression management benefits of spreading negative gossip, including reinforcing the belief that the individual deserves to be on the periphery of the network (ie., they don't have many friends, and not many high-status friends, because their behavior is not in keeping with our norms and values). They might also find that the potential social costs in terms of discovery or retaliation are very low because the low-status individual has few defenders, particularly high-status defenders.

Hypothesis 4: The lower the social status of an employee in the overall organizational network, the more likely this employee is to be the object of negative gossip.

5.2.3 *The Relative Concentration of Positive and Negative Gossip on Particular Persons*

Is there greater concentration in certain individuals as the objects of negative gossip as compared to positive gossip? That is, do we see certain people becoming preferred targets for negative gossip at a higher rate as compared to the concentration in positive gossip? So far, we discussed how group membership and social status in the network determine gossip about particular employees. We did this separately for positive and negative gossip. In the following, we compare the distribution of positive and negative gossip in an informal network by analyzing a central network characteristic: the relative concentration on particular objects. In some cases, gossip is unevenly distributed and polarized around certain individuals. If the gossip is negative, we can speak of scapegoating, described as polarization of group aggression against individuals (Bonazzi, 1983; Cooke, 2007). The purpose is to maintain group norms and single out the scapegoat or "black sheep" (Marques and Paez, 1994), who is seen as the cause of emotional frustration in the community. Often employees of low status are blamed for problems for which they are not personally responsible in order to deflect criticism of the high status members of the community and to preserve the existing status hierarchy in the community (Bonazzi, 1983).

Ostracism becomes feasible when the ostracizing employees represent the majority against a smaller numbers of objects who are left with few or no opportunities to

mobilize allies. Continuous negative gossip about colleagues will verify their low social status: A gossip study by Burt (2005) showed how some bankers' negative reputations echoed throughout the organization's networks. Colleagues who potentially had information that could disconfirm the bankers' negative reputations were ignored, and instead the negative reputations became increasingly negative over time, causing the bankers to be permanently ostracized from productive relationships by their colleagues. Ultimately, these bankers were unable to repair their work relationships and were very likely to resign from the organization due to this "character assassination" (Burt, 2005).

Defenselessness, however, is not sufficient for becoming the object of scapegoating. We suggest that (low-status) people will be picked out as scapegoats in only few cases. On the one hand, really troublesome behavior that threatens essential group values tends to be relatively infrequent compared to minor norm violations given the risks it bears with regard to expulsion from the group and other sanctions. On the other hand, negative information about a person is scarcer than positive information. People will be more interested in negative than in positive information because it points toward norm-violating behavior that threatens the group. As a result, negative gossip is likely to be more concentrated around few individuals, who are unable to defend themselves socially, than positive gossip. We hypothesize that negative gossip will not be spread evenly across members of an organization.

Hypothesis 5: Negative gossip in organizational networks is concentrated on a small number of objects ("scapegoats").

5.3 Research Design and Setting

5.3.1 Data

Data were collected in one site within a medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization in Spring, 2008. The organization was a major independent, subsidized, regional child protection institution. These data were collected in a site specializing in treating children with special needs involving problems with their social, psychological, and/or physical functioning. This site employed 36 social workers, behavioral scientists, therapists, medical doctors, and administrative staff. The site was an ideal size for this study because there were enough employees for network analyses, but it was still small enough to be able to collect complete network data that asked about gossip sending, receiving, as well as the objects of the gossip. Surveys that employ network questions usually demand more motivation from respondents to fill in the survey than traditional methods, because respondents have to think about their relationships with every single colleague and respond in detail about multiple aspects of their relationships.

This site was autonomous, with the employees rarely engaging in contact with organizational members outside the site. Within the site, the organization was split into seven teams of anywhere between three and eight employees, some of which were directly engaged in treating children, and others that were engaged in various support

functions. While successful treatment required the team employees to frequently exchange information about the children, it also required the teams to work seamlessly with other teams that had support and professional staff who could assist in treating the children. None of the teams had formally designated team leaders or supervisors; instead, the teams were all managed centrally by one male manager. All but one of the remaining employees were female, and most were part-time employees. Table 5.1 gives more information on the work units.

Table 5.1 Description of the Work Groups in the Organization's Site

Number of group members	Description of functions
1	Line-manager
3	Social workers who supervise children group A
4	Social workers who supervise children group B
4	Social workers who supervise children group C
4	Social workers who supervise children group D
6	Flexible social workers who help out (e.g., on-call duty, coverage of maternal leave)
6	Support staff: secretaries, cleaning personnel, and chef
8	Scientific staff: behavioral scientists, medical doctor, physiotherapist, and other therapists

Data were collected through self-administered computer-aided interviewing. 30 out of 36 employees (83.3%) completed the survey, which on average took 32 minutes. The mean age of the employees was 38.94 ($SD = 11.89$), and on average they had been working in the organization for seven and a half years ($M = 7.46$, $SD = 5.68$).

5.3.2 Measures

Measures included network data, which capture the relationships between employees, as well as data on the individual attributes of employees (e.g., whether they were doctors or social workers), as detailed below.

Peer-rated gossip about colleagues. Being the object of gossip was the dependent variable. We presented respondents with a roster of the names of all 36 employees working at the site and the respondents were asked to indicate from whom they had received gossip during the last three months, and about whom they had received that gossip. Providing rosters rather than free name recalling is a preferred method of collecting data in social network analysis because it reduces selectivity bias in the answers due to memory effects (Marsden, 1990). Respondents first indicated from which employees they had received gossip. We did not use the term “gossip” in the question, choosing instead to use the wording “informally talking about absent colleagues in an evaluative way,” which is taken directly from Kurland and Pelled’s (2000) definition of workplace gossip. We asked the respondent to name the person from whom they

received gossip (which is called a “peer-rated relationship”), rather than asking self-reported gossip behavior (i.e., to whom they were sending gossip), to minimize the potential effects of self-serving attribution bias and social desirability. Social desirability had been found to affect self-reported gossip in earlier gossip studies (Nevo et al., 1994). The approach of measuring peer-rated relationships instead of self-reported relationships also has been successfully implemented in studies on bullying, which suffer from the same types of potential self-serving attribution bias and social desirability bias (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

After indicating from which *gossip senders* respondents had received gossip, respondents (*gossip receivers*) were asked to describe *about whom* they received gossip (*gossip objects*) from each of the previously selected gossip senders. The need to capture both the gossip senders’ names, as well as the gossip objects’ names, prevented us from attempting to collect network data in a larger worksite. Then, the gossip receivers were asked to characterize whether the gossip about the object sent by a particular individual was normally negative, positive, or an even mix of both positive and negative gossip. Thus, our dataset shows that Employee A had received gossip from Employee B about Employee C, and that the gossip about Employee C passed from B to A was either positive, negative, or a positive/negative mix.

Providing the option of characterizing the gossip as mixed gave respondents the opportunity to report gossip that was negative without having to check the negative box. We did this for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, negative aspects of relationships, including negative gossip, have a larger impact on the perceptions and behaviors of people than positive relationships, and are therefore extremely important to capture, even if they are sometimes less likely to be reported by respondents (Labianca and Brass, 2006). Empirically, purely negative gossip is not reported as readily compared to mixed gossip, which can seriously under-account for its prevalence. For example, 8.4% of the total gossip reported in this study was negative-only gossip, as compared to mixed gossip, which represented 27.4% of the total gossip (the remaining 64.2% of the gossip was positive-only). Providing the mixed option allows researchers to tap into the negative aspects of relationships while overcoming social desirability biases (Labianca and Brass, 2006).

Finally, we created two directed square network matrices, which served as the dependent variables. The first network matrix contained the gossip sender in the row with the gossip objects in the column. A cell containing the number 1 indicated that an employee had sent gossip about this gossip object, and that the gossip was positive (Positive-Only Gossip Object). The second network was the same, but this time the cell containing the number 1 indicated negative or mixed gossip was spread about the gossip object (Negative Gossip Object). The use of the peer-reporting data collection technique on gossip senders described above had the advantage of making full network data available for all 36 employees in the site, despite the fact that our response rate was less

than 100%.⁹ Thus, when we measured such network variables as social status (see below), we had ratings on all employees so that there was information on the social status of all employees working at the site.

Shared group membership. The organization provided the data on the formal work groups in this site. In addition to the manager, who was not assigned to a team, there were seven groups ranging in size from three to eight employees. Formal group membership was coded for each employee from 1 to 7 (the manager was assigned a code of 8), and then a match on formal group membership was used to test whether being in the same group lead to more often being the object of positive or negative gossip (Hypotheses 1 and 2). This variable was called Shared Group Membership.

Social status. In addition to asking about gossip, respondents were asked to describe their social relationships with every other employee on the following Likert scale: (1) “very difficult,” (2) “difficult,” (3) “neutral,” (4) “friendly,” and (5) “good friend.”¹⁰ This directed, valued network captures the quality of the dyadic relationships within the network, as reported by each individual. This Relationship Quality variable was included as a control variable in our models, since it is empirically important to distinguish the relationship quality on the dyadic level from social status in the network to demonstrate that social status influences who is an object of positive or negative gossip (cf. Scott and Judge, 2009).

We then used the same Relationship Quality matrix to create the Social Status variable. We recoded all of the “friendly” and “good friend” relationships in the Relationship Quality matrix as ones, and the remaining types of relationships as zeros to isolate the friends in the network (the term “friendly” is stronger in connotation in the Netherlands than in the U.S. and translates more directly to “friendship-like”). Based on this directed, dichotomized friendship network, we calculated the in-eigenvector centrality for every actor, using UCINET VI (Borgatti et al., 2002). Eigenvector centrality considers not only how many friendships an employee has in the workplace, but also whether the employee is connected to others who are themselves popular. For example, two employees might both have five friends in the site, but if the first employee’s five friends don’t have many friends, whereas the second employee’s five friends are extremely popular and well connected, the second employee will have a much higher eigenvector centrality score than the first. Thus, this measure represents each employee’s status or rank prestige in the friendship network (Wasserman and Faust, 1994: 206), as

⁹ Employees who were invited to the study but did not participate could still be nominated as gossip objects and/or friends on the roster by the employees who did participate. This way, we also retrieved information about non-participants – e.g., whether they had a central position in the gossip and friendship network – so that we could analyze whether being a gossip object depended on social status in the friendship network.

¹⁰ The question on relationship quality is roughly translated as follows: “With some colleagues we have a very good relationship. To some we would even confide personal things. With other colleagues, however, we can go along less well. The following question asks about your relationships with your colleagues. How would you describe your relationship with each of the following people?”

described by every other member of the network (hence, the term used is “in-eigenvector centrality,” which focuses on how others rated the person, which are incoming ratings). A major advantage of this measure is that it accounts for the social rank within the global network in the organization, and not just within local groups, clusters, or cliques. Using the incoming friendship nominations also allowed us to calculate this social status variable for those individuals who did not respond to the survey. This variable was called Social Status, and was used to test Hypotheses 3 and 4.

Scapegoating. We captured how evenly negative gossip was spread about particular gossip objects within a network using the structural measure called *alternating in-k-stars* (Robins et al., 2007b). A significant positive effect for alternating in-k-stars indicates that the organizational network contains some individuals who are chosen as gossip objects by many employees. These individuals are so-called “hubs” in the network, and there is a tendency that a larger number of employees, who are themselves less frequently chosen as gossip objects, gossip about a smaller number of hubs. In contrast, a negative effect for alternating in-k-stars indicates that there are less hubs than expected by chance, and that there are small variances between employees in the frequency of being chosen as gossip objects. This measure was calculated directly in STOCNET (Snijders et al., 2008). The variable was labeled Scapegoating, and was used to test Hypothesis 5. We also tested whether this effect occurred in the positive gossip network for the sake of completeness, although we did not specifically hypothesize this effect.

Control variables. In addition to relationship quality (mentioned above), we used a number of other control variables in our models, including dyadic contact frequency, individuals’ levels of job satisfaction, and a number of common network configurations which will be detailed in the Analytical Approach section immediately following the control variables section.

Dyadic contact frequency. We needed to rule out differences in potential gossip objects based simply on the amount of interaction the gossip sender had with the gossip object. We did this by controlling for the contact frequency between the gossip sender and the object. We asked each respondent to go down a roster of the site members and rate how often they had formal or informal communication with each colleague during the previous three months on a Likert scale that ranged from (1) “never” to (6) “eight or more times per week.” This communication network captured repeated patterns of work-related interaction between employees (Brass and Burkhardt, 1993; Scott and Judge, 2009), so that we could control for the employees’ amount of contact with the gossip object. This variable was called Contact Frequency.

Job satisfaction. We also felt it important to control for whether the gossip sender or gossip object was satisfied with his or her job. For example, a gossip sender who was dissatisfied might be expected to engage in a greater amount of negative gossip, particularly since gossip is sometimes used as a catharsis for negative emotion (Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; e.g., Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Similarly, a gossip object that was very dissatisfied might trigger negative gossip in the individuals to which he or

she is tied. We constructed a four-item job satisfaction scale specifically for our organization that was based on qualitative interviews conducted prior to the survey. We asked employees “How satisfied are you with: ‘your tasks,’ ‘your salary,’ ‘the collaboration with your colleagues,’ and ‘your workload?’” Respondents rated their satisfaction on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied). To check whether the measure was uni-dimensional, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring (using the direct oblimin rotation method, which relaxed the assumption that factors are orthogonal). All items loaded on one factor, which had an eigenvalue of 2.67 and explained 67% of the variance. Cronbach’s alpha for the Job Satisfaction scale was 0.81.

5.3.3 Analytical Approach

To test our hypotheses, we used an exponential random graph modeling approach (ERGM), which is also referred to as the p^* model (Robins et al., 2009; Robins et al., 2007a; Robins et al., 2007b; Snijders et al., 2006). We computed the models using the statistical package SIENA- p^* in STOCNET (Snijders et al., 2008). We could not rely on an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression approach because our data violate its assumptions of observational independence. A major advantage of ERGM is that it investigates the structure within a complete social network. In our case, we look at gossip relations within an organizational network, where a gossip relation represents one employee gossiping about a specific colleague. These network relations do not just form randomly but have a certain underlying pattern. With ERGM it is possible to examine and empirically test these structural patterns, and ask for example whether shared group membership affects the choice of certain gossip objects.

In order to answer this type of question, ERGM proceeds as follows: The observed gossip network is regarded as just one realization out of many possible realizations and might just be observed by chance. To see to what extent the observed gossip network we collected differs from a gossip network that occurs by chance, a number of random networks are simulated with a Markov chain Monte Carlo maximum likelihood estimation (MCMCMLE). The simulated network is compared to the observed network in terms of parameters. For example, we included shared group membership to predict whether an employee gossips about a colleague. If the simulation does not represent the observation well, the parameter value (previously zero) for shared group membership is adjusted and used for the subsequent simulation. The parameter is changed to a value above zero when gossip was more observed to be about employees of the same group, and changed to a value below zero when less observed than in the random network. This procedure is repeated at least 8,000 times until the simulated network provides a good representation of the observed network, indicated by convergence statistics close to zero. We only used models with convergence statistics between -0.10 and 0.10 for every parameter, as recommended by Robins et al.(2009), to ensure robust results. We also produced goodness of fit statistics through simulations to assess the quality of the estimated models. Structural statistics of the observed network

were compared with the corresponding statistics of networks simulated from the fitted model (thus using parameters of the model estimated earlier). The so-called t -statistics should be close to zero and less than 0.1 in absolute value (Robins et al., 2009).

We modeled two exponential random graphs, one for negative gossip about colleagues, and one for positive gossip about colleagues. We entered parameters that represented our three different levels of analysis. We included parameters to test whether individual characteristics like employee social status affected whether they were likely to become the object of gossip. As recommended for ERGM models, we also controlled for the social status of the gossip senders, and for the similarity in social status between the gossip senders and their chosen gossip objects. The second level of analyses regarded dyadic effects as described by our above example on shared group membership. For the third level, we included parameters that described the overall structure of the dependent variable, gossip relations in the organization as a whole. For example, we tested whether the concentration on some gossip objects was higher in the observed network than expected under random conditions (the alternating k -in-stars parameter). Four more network statistics were included that are typically recommended as controls in ERGM: alternating k -out-stars, reciprocity, alternating independent 2-paths, and alternating k -triangles (Robins et al., 2007a; Robins et al., 2007b; Snijders et al., 2008). Some models might also include estimates for density. Modeling density, however, was not necessary in our models because we used the conditional maximum likelihood estimation recommended by Snijders et al. (2006), which fixes density to the observed density.

5.4 Results

Table 5.2 presents descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the variables, including the correlations among the networks. Correlations among networks were computed with the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) algorithm in UCINET VI (Borgatti et al., 2002). The algorithm computes a cell-wise Pearson correlation between the two matrices, stores the resulting coefficients, then randomly permutes the rows and columns and recalculates the new coefficients 5,000 times. Finally, the algorithm checks to see how the original coefficient compares to the distribution of coefficients that have been generated during the permutation. If the original coefficient falls below the fifth percentile or above the 95th percentile tails of that distribution, it is considered significantly different from the null.

The positive gossip network contained 225 observations (i.e., 225 cases in which employees reported receiving gossip about objects). On average, an employee received positive gossip about six colleagues in the organization. The negative gossip network was somewhat sparser, containing 119 observations. On average, an employee received negative gossip about three colleagues in the organization. As a consequence, network densities differed dramatically for the two types of gossip: The positive gossip network ($\delta = 0.18$) was twice as dense as the negative gossip network ($\delta = 0.09$).

Table 5.2 Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations of Networks and Individual Attributes

Variable	N	M	SD	Density	Relation- ship	Contact freq.	Group memb.	Positive gossip	Negative gossip	Social status
Relationship quality (in-degree) ^a	30	8.67	3.72	0.31	-					
Contact frequency (out-degree) ^b	30	8.50	7.74	0.32	0.42***	-				
Shared group membership (degree)	36	5.06	2.52	0.13	0.18***	0.24***	-			
Positive gossip (out-degree)	36	6.25	6.46	0.18	0.20**	0.14**	0.12**	-		
Negative gossip (out-degree)	36	3.31	2.97	0.09	0.01	0.17**	0.08*	n/a	-	
Social status (gossip objects)	36	1.55	0.71	n/a	0.26**	0.28***	n/a	0.25**	0.11*	-
Job satisfaction (gossip senders)	30	5.07	0.97	n/a	-0.02	0.10	n/a	-0.13*	-0.12*	-0.48**

^a The network was dichotomized (1 = friendship; 0 = no friendship) for calculating means, standard deviations, and density. ^b The network was dichotomized (1 = three or more weekly contacts; 0 = less than three weekly contacts) for calculating means, standard deviations, and density. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

There was a positive correlation between positive gossip and group membership ($r = 0.12$, $p < .01$), which means that employees tended to gossip positively about colleagues who are in their work group. Furthermore, there was a weaker positive, but significant correlation between negative gossip being spread about members of the gossip sender's own group ($r = 0.08$, $p < .05$). A number of the control variables were significant in the models predicting negative gossip objects. Less satisfied employees gossiped negatively about a greater number of colleagues; more frequent contact between employees tended to increase the likelihood of gossiping negatively about that employee; and being friends with the employee significantly decreased the likelihood that they would negatively gossip about them, but also increased the likelihood of positive gossip.

Additional insights on these gossip networks can be gained through visualization. In the network graphs in Figure 5.1, each employee was represented by a circle. Arrows between circles were directed from gossip senders to gossip objects. Circles were drawn closely together by the visualization software when employees tended to gossip about one another, or the same gossip objects. The more central a circle in the network, the more often an employee was either gossip object, and/or gossip sender. The different circle shades and labels represented the different work groups within the organization. In the network of positive gossip, circles of the same shades were drawn closely together, suggesting that positive gossip occurred more often about employees from the same team. Circle sizes corresponded with each employee's social status. In the positive gossip network, there were hardly any central objects with a low social status (i.e., small circle size), since most of them were peripheral. In contrast, higher status employees were less central, and lower status employees were more central in the negative gossip network.

Finally, in both networks some employees seemed to be particularly central objects with many arrows directed at them, while others were hardly chosen as objects.

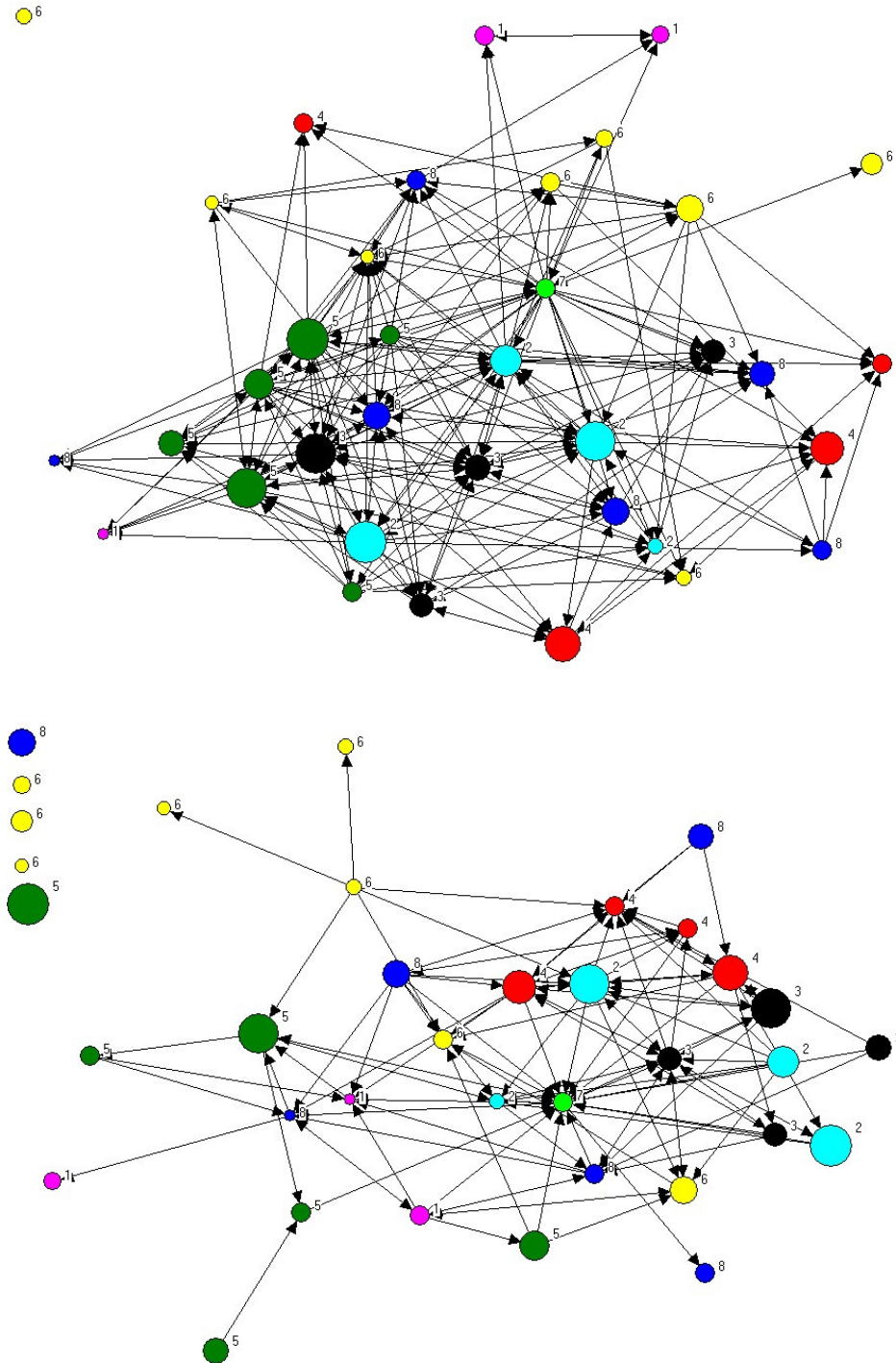


Figure 5.1 Networks of Positive (Top) and Negative Gossip (Bottom)

Note. Each circle represents one employee. Arrows are directed from gossiping employees to their gossip objects. The larger the circle size, the higher the social status of an employee. Employees with the same circle shades and labels belong to the same work group.

A descriptive measure that expresses the variability of object choices in a network is *group indegree centralization* (Freeman, 1979). Centralization reaches its maximum of 1

when one object is chosen by all other employees (as in a star structure), and its minimum of 0 when all employees are equally often chosen as objects. In our study, centralization differed considerably for positive and negative gossip objects: In the negative gossip network, centralization was almost twice as large ($C_D = 0.49$) as in the positive gossip network ($C_D = 0.26$), indicating that negative gossip was more centrally structured around star-like objects (“scapegoats”). We now turn to discussing the results of our hypothesis testing using the exponential random graph models, as shown in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Positive and Negative Gossip about Colleagues: Parameter Estimates and Standard Errors (SE) of Exponential Random Graph Models

Parameter	Positive Gossip Only About Colleagues		Negative Gossip About Colleagues	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Controls on individual level				
Job satisfaction of gossip objects	-0.13	0.08	-0.19	0.11
Job satisfaction of gossipers	0.14 [†]	0.08	-0.46**	0.15
Similarity in job satisfaction (gossiper-object)	0.04	0.34	0.06	0.47
Dyadic relationships				
Shared group membership	0.74***	0.19	0.55*	0.26
Relationship quality between gossiper and object	0.16*	0.08	-0.28**	0.11
Contact frequency between gossiper and object	0.01	0.05	0.30***	0.08
Social status in network				
Social status of gossip objects	0.15	0.13	-0.32**	0.13
Social status of gossipers	0.35**	0.11	0.17	0.16
Similarity in social status (gossiper-object)	-0.13	0.31	0.17	0.41
Network statistics				
Alternating in-k-stars	-0.04	0.34	1.02***	0.27
Alternating out-k-stars	0.42	0.29	0.41	0.30
Reciprocity	0.68*	0.29	1.04***	0.40
Alternating independent 2-paths	-0.18***	0.03	-0.08	0.05
Alternating k-triangles	0.52***	0.14	0.32*	0.15

Note. As conditional maximum likelihood estimation was used, no density parameters were modeled.

[†] $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

In Hypothesis 1, we argued that employees will gossip positively about colleagues from their own work group. The significant and positive effect of shared group membership in Model 1 ($\theta = 0.74$, $p < .001$) suggests support for Hypothesis 1. In

Hypothesis 2, we argued that negative gossip would also be spread about colleagues who belong to the gossip sender's work group. Again, the results of Model 2 support our hypothesis ($\theta = 0.55, p < .05$). Thus, gossip – without regard to whether it is positive or negative – is about colleagues from the gossip sender's work group. This result cannot be attributed to high contact frequency or higher rates of friendship within teams, since we controlled for these effects in Models 1 and 2. Over and above these control effects, then, being a member of the same group leads to being the object of both more positive and negative gossip from group members.

In Hypothesis 3, we argued that employees high in social status in the overall organizational network are likely to be the objects of positive gossip. Results in Model 1 fail to support our hypothesis ($\theta = 0.15, p > .05$) – they are no more likely to be the objects of positive gossip than those lower in social status. An interesting result, however, is found for the variable that controls for the status of gossip senders: High-status employees are more likely to be spreading gossip than those lower in social status ($\theta = 0.35, p < .01$). In Hypothesis 4, we argued that low-status employees will be more likely to be the objects of negative gossip. The significant negative parameter for social status of gossip objects in Model 2 ($\theta = -0.32, p < .01$) suggests support for this hypothesis.

In Hypothesis 5, we argued that negative gossip would be concentrated on a small number of scapegoats in the organization. We tested this by examining the alternating in-k-stars parameter in Model 2 which is significant and positive ($\theta = 1.02, p < .001$), indicating that there is a tendency for a larger number of employees to gossip negatively about a very small number of colleagues. These employees seem to be magnets for negative gossip in the site. We also performed an ad hoc test to see if the same phenomenon would occur in the positive gossip network – that is, would certain individuals be considered celebrity gossip stars about whom all of the employees would be interested in spreading positive gossip? The parameter in Model 1 is negative and non-significant ($\theta = -.04, p > .05$), suggesting that positive gossip is distributed rather evenly among employees. Goodness of fit statistics produced *t*-statistics less than 0.1 in absolute value for all but one variable in the model (the *t*-statistic of one control variable was -0.12), suggesting a good overall fit of the models.¹¹

ERGM models also include a number of network statistics about which we did not hypothesize. For example, we controlled for whether there would be a tendency for a

¹¹ As Robins et al. (2009) argue, the degree distribution of a network, if skewed, can inflate the parameter estimation of alternating k-stars. To rule out this possibility and check the soundness of the significant alternating in-k-star effect, we re-ran Model 2 controlling for three additional parameters (Robins et al., 2009): isolates (employees neither being object nor sender of gossip), sinks (employees being gossip objects only), and sources (employees being senders of gossip only). Three actor dummy variables were created: One dummy representing zero in- and out-degrees (isolates), one dummy representing zero out-degrees (sinks), one dummy representing zero in-degrees (sources). These dummies were included as sender effects in the model. None of the three additional parameters had a significant effect, so that the overall model (including the alternating in-k-star) remained unchanged with regard to the findings reported here.

gossip object to reciprocate by spreading positive or negative gossip about a gossip sender. This was significant in both the positive and negative gossip networks. The positive, significant parameter for alternating k-triangles together with the negative, significant alternating independent 2-paths in Model 2 indicate that positive gossip is characterized by network closure: Employees tend to gossip about one another positively in clique-like clusters.

5.5 Discussion and Conclusion

While gossip is a ubiquitous phenomenon on which individuals spend a large amount of their social time (Dunbar, 2004), relatively little is known about gossip, particularly in the workplace (Grosser et al., 2010; Mills, 2010). As researchers have increasingly turned their attention to this area of inquiry, it is natural that we should begin to move beyond understanding gossip from a dyadic perspective to understanding how it occurs in the groups and networks in the workplace. We contribute to the literature on workplace gossip by focusing on understanding who the objects are of the gossip that is being spread in the workplace. The topic of who are the objects is not often considered, although objects of negative gossip can be affected in similar ways to victimized employees, such as being thwarted in their feelings of belongingness. We argued that the choice of gossip object is driven by considerations for group solidarity and social status, and developed a theory beyond the dyadic level – whether the potential gossip object was in the same work group as the gossip sender, and whether the gossip object was high or low in status within the overall organizational friendship network. Our study is one of the first to examine how positive and negative gossip is distributed across a work organization's network, and to examine the issue of scapegoating with sociometric methods.

Our results are somewhat counterintuitive: gossip, even negative gossip, is not about out-groups but focuses on in-groups, and that high social status protects employees from being the object of negative gossip. In the following, theoretical implications of the results are discussed, first for work group membership and then for social status in the informal network. After that, we briefly mention practical implications, and address limitations of the current study and how future research could contribute to studying gossip in organizations.

As hypothesized, we found that both positive and negative gossip was more likely to be spread about colleagues within the same work group, even after controlling for the greater degree of interaction one would expect from sharing a workgroup, and even after controlling for the greater likelihood of having friendships within the workgroup. This supports arguments from interdependence theory and optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1999): Both positive and negative gossip might be used to maintain the control regime within the work group. A set of norms is monitored and enforced within each work group via means of both positive and negative gossip behavior. In contrast, little gossip information is exchanged about out-groups, because it is relatively uninteresting.

The organization operated in the child care field and its success relied greatly on highly interdependent employees working closely together in a collaborative manner. Our results suggest that interdependence between employees is a predictor of *any* type of gossip about group members. Similarly, in a study on highly interdependent group members by Kniffin and Wilson (2005), positive and negative gossip was directed in ways that supported group-beneficial rules: Gossip was aimed not only at group solidarity, but also at social control within the group.

Our theorizing also noted that each work group is dependent on other work groups in order to accomplish the overall organization's goals. This requires individuals to create relationships across groups that ultimately develop into an organizational network. We hypothesized that a potential gossip object's social status within this overall organizational network would be a major determinant of whether the person was chosen as an object for positive or negative gossip, after controlling for being embedded within certain workgroups. We hypothesized that passing positive gossip about a high-status individual helps the gossip sender to affiliate with people of this individual's social circle, and establish normative standards. However, we found no evidence for this effect. Instead, we found that the potential gossip object's status mattered only in whether negative gossip was spread about the person, with low-status individuals being chosen at a much higher than expected rate as objects of negative gossip. Results further yielded support for scapegoating theory (Bonazzi, 1983): There was a statistically significant tendency for these low-status individuals to be magnets for negative gossip, so that they were essentially scapegoats within the entire organization. There are some similarities between the negative gossip phenomenon, and some of the work that has been done on bullying – it is precisely the individuals who are lacking in social support and are least able to retaliate that are being selected as objects of negative gossip in a manner that suggests that they are being ostracized from the network as a whole (Salmivalli et al., 1996). The same was not true of positive gossip, which we found to be more evenly distributed across the entire organization.

Our study introduced a new methodological development to the study of gossip. We applied exponential random graph modeling on gossip data collected from peers reporting on each other, rather than through self-report data. In addition to allowing us to minimize potential social desirability bias, the manner in which the data were collected and analyzed allowed us to examine gossip from several distinct levels of analysis (i.e., the individual, the dyad, and the network levels; Borgatti and Foster, 2003). For example, we saw that dissatisfied individuals gossiped negatively about more people (individual level), that being in the same work group as another employee increased the likelihood of positive and negative gossip being sent about this colleague (dyadic), and that being high in status in the organization as a whole was related to being the object of negative gossip, but not of being the object of positive gossip (whole network), all of this while controlling for triadic network statistics.

Our results imply that organizations interested in reducing negative gossip need to consider the person's status within the whole network, as has also been suggested in the

literature on bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996), and particularly focus their attention on employees who are poorly integrated into the informal network. This seems especially relevant for work settings where employees are required to frequently collaborate and cannot avoid interpersonal contact (Aquino and Thau, 2009): As our results show, frequent contact with a colleague (a control variable in our models) increases the likelihood of negative gossip being spread about that person over and above their common group membership and their social status. In line with this finding, a sociometric study in a sorority by Keltner et al. (2008) found that gossip objects tended to be well-known, but not well-liked, and that their social reputation was perceived as poor. In contrast, the more popular employees are, the more support and the less counterproductive behavior they face from colleagues (Scott and Judge, 2009).

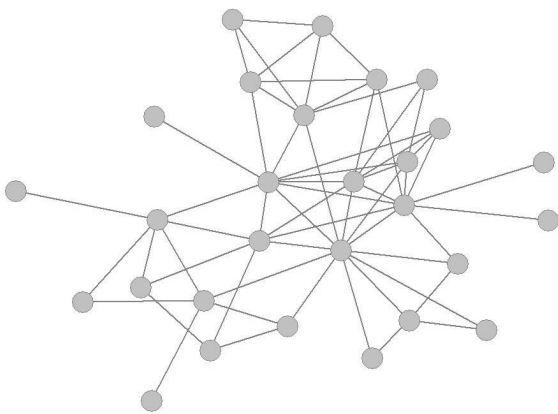
The present study has some limitations which suggest that the results need to be considered with caution. First, our findings might be context-specific to the particular type of organization (a child care organization) in which the data were collected. This context is characterized by strong solidarity norms, which might not be the case in other settings. As with nearly every social network analysis, this is a case study of one organization and further research is necessary to test the generalizability of our results. It might be the case that a setting where the solidarity norms were weaker might not produce as much intra-group gossip, and particularly negative gossip against in-group members because of lower levels of group norm monitoring and sanctioning. Negative gossip about out-groups might increase with inter-group dependency and competitiveness. A second limitation is that the study included only cross-sectional data which do not enable causality tests. For example, we argued that social status will predict whether colleagues become gossip objects. However, one could also argue that social status is a consequence of being gossiped about to a large extent. Theory suggests that gossiping increases interpersonal affection and helps gossip senders to build friendships (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Jaeger et al., 1994; Rosnow, 2001). Similarly, being the object of negative gossip can create a vicious cycle. There is some evidence that employees feeling thwarted in their belongingness needs engage in interpersonally harmful behaviors, and are further victimized because of this (Thau et al., 2007).

Future researchers should apply a longitudinal design, thus allowing them to study the consequences of positive and negative gossip. For example, the extent to which positive gossip about colleagues actually leads to workgroup solidarity, organizational citizenship behavior between employees, or in-role cooperation being facilitated during future interactions would all be interesting gossip outcomes to explore (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Similarly, exploring whether negative gossip objects are being further excluded (i.e., ostracized) from the informal network in an organization over time would be an interesting study for the future, particularly for those interested in understanding whether scapegoating can be overcome, or whether there is an inevitability to the continued targeting of a small subset of individuals as targets of negative gossip.

We conclude that it is essential to focus on the objects of gossip when we want to understand why workplace gossip in some cases leads to high integration of employees and cohesion in the informal network, and to low integration and structural holes in other cases (Michelson and Mouly, 2004; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). We found that the antecedents of being the object of gossip differ depending on whether the gossip is positive or negative in its contents. Similarly research on the consequences of workplace gossip would benefit from a systematic distinction between positive and negative gossip. There have been arguments for either detrimental effects (such as decreasing the well-being of victimized employees) or benevolent effects (such as increasing cooperation and social support) of workplace gossip for an organization. Both negative and positive effects can occur simultaneously. Hence, future gossip research is likely to benefit from considering both the positive and negative forms of gossip.

Chapter 6

The Co-evolution of Gossip and Friendship at Work: Studying the Dynamics of Multiplex Social Networks



This study investigates the co-evolution of friendship and gossip in organizations. Two contradicting theories are tested. Social capital theory predicts that friendship causes gossip between employees, defined as informal evaluative talking about absent colleagues. Evolutionary theory reverses this causality claiming that gossiping facilitates friendship. The data comprises of three observations of a complete organizational network, allowing longitudinal social network analyses and causal inferences. Gossip and friendship are modeled as both explanatory and outcome networks with Multiple SIENA. Results support evolutionary theory, as gossip increases friendship formation in dyads. However, high gossip activity decreases the number of friends in the group.

Based upon Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., Wittek, R. The co-evolution of gossip and friendship at work: Studying the dynamics of multiplex social networks. Revised and resubmitted for publication.

6 THE CO-EVOLUTION OF GOSSIP AND FRIENDSHIP AT WORK: STUDYING THE DYNAMICS OF MULTIPLEX SOCIAL NETWORKS

6.1 Introduction

The degree of social integration and cohesion is an important quality of social groups; mainly because of its multiple positive correlates, ranging from well-being (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) to cooperation and performance (Mehra et al., 2001; Oh et al., 2004; Sparrowe et al., 2001; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997). Cohesion increases with the number and quality of interpersonal ties – in organizations referred to as informal relations – between group members. Because of the positive correlates it is not surprising that practitioners seek ways to increase social integration and that organizational scholars have devoted considerable attention to researching antecedences of informal relations in work groups.

Much of the previous research on the evolution of informal organizational networks has focused on either attributes (e.g., trait homophily, Balkundi and Kilduff, 2005; McPherson et al., 1992; McPherson et al., 2001), or structural antecedences based on the relationship itself (e.g., centrality or reciprocity in uniplex networks, Grosser et al., 2010; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997). Whereas this research produced many valuable insights for our understanding of the emergence of informal relations, one of the key theoretical elements on the dynamics of social relations has not been fully explored. This key argument is that the dynamic of one type of social relation is usually tied to the dynamic of another type of social relation (Kossinets and Watts, 2006; Labianca and Brass, 2006). This phenomenon is called co-evolution of social relations. Social networks in organizations are likely to consist of more than one relationship type and can be more precisely viewed as *multiplex* networks. For example, theories on interpersonal trust relations assume that the development of trust is preceded by personal contact and exchange of communication (Burt and Knez, 1996). Interpersonal trust, in turn, breeds further communication and contact.

So far, the co-evolution of multiplex relations has not been systematically addressed in the literature on intra-organizational network dynamics and cohesion in informal groups. The purpose of the present study is to examine the co-evolution of two social relations that have been identified as representing important dimensions of group cohesion: friendship ties and gossip relations. Friendship, on the one hand, implies trust, affection, and bonding between people, which eases cooperation and the exchange of discrete information. Gossip, on the other hand, implies the sharing of potentially important information about third parties as it helps the receiver to learn more about the trustworthiness of others. Workplace gossip is defined as “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000, p. 429), and can be positive or negative. By providing discrete

gossip information the sender also signals to the receiver that their underlying social relationship is a close one and that the sender trusts in the discretion of the receiver. Hence, gossip can be an ingredient for the facilitation of friendships and cohesion. These arguments demonstrate how one relationship can serve as an instrument to build another one: Friendship may facilitate gossip between people, and gossip may foster friendships.

The result is a “chicken-egg problem”. It remains unclear whether friendship is a precondition for exchanging gossip, or whether gossiping about third parties precedes the creation of friendship ties. In the literature, two theories make predictions about the underlying causal mechanism. While both theories draw on trust and information gathering as an explanation, they assume different causalities. Researchers using social capital theory have argued that an affective relationship stimulates the flow of gossip between employees of an organizational network (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1990). Being embedded in the informal structure of a network either broadens or constrains a person’s opportunity to gossip (Coleman, 1990). More specifically, senders need to be tied to listeners who can be trusted not to reveal the source of the gossip. This required trust is predominantly created in strong informal relationships (i.e., friendships). Furthermore, embeddedness in large social groups creates possible tensions between group members, and thereby the need to gather third-party information on other members. A conclusion from social capital theory is that *friendship relations facilitate gossip between people* over time.

However, scholars employing frameworks from evolutionary theory argue that friendship is not a precondition for the occurrence of gossip, but rather that friendship is a product of gossip behavior. (Bosson et al., 2006; Dunbar, 2004; Jaeger et al., 1994; Rosnow, 2001). According to them, individuals establish and maintain informal relationships through the activity of gossip. By providing discrete information on third parties, gossipers signal trust and interest in a durable relationship with each other (Bosson et al., 2006; Burt, 2001). Researchers agree that gossiping with others helps people to monitor disruptions in the social landscape of large networks, find potential allies, and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Evolutionary theory predicts that, over time, *people better integrate into a social network, the more they gossip with others*.

Despite their congruence in the stated positive relationship between friendship and gossiping, the two theories contradict one another in the predicted causality. The present study offers two major contributions. First, we respond to the request of many theories for a multiplex approach on employee networks. We explicitly examine several types of informal relationships as co-evolving phenomena and apply an innovative research design. Because causal inferences can only be made based on repeated measures, we carry out longitudinal analyses on complete social network data from a Dutch childcare institution from several points in time. More specifically, a dynamic actor-based approach is applied, which considers actors to make rational choices with regard to creating, deleting, or maintaining social ties over time. A novelty of the present study design is the incorporation of two dependent network variables in one model: gossip and friendship. Modeling more than one dependent network variable is a major innovation in social

network analysis because it allows for the investigation of causal hypotheses on the co-evolution of multiple network types. Drawing on a new SIENA version, the *Multiple SIENA* program (Snijders et al., 2008), enables us to test multiplex structures of gossip and friendship networks. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first using this approach. Second, testing co-evolution can have important consequences for theories on employee networks. With our approach, we tackle the above theoretical puzzle. Social capital theory, which claims gossip to be a product of friendship, is tested against evolutionary theory, which claims gossip to be an easy pathway to friendship, rather than a product thereof.

6.2 Theoretical Background

Informal relations in formal organizations are often multiplex: employees who approach each other for advice may also lend each other money, or become friends. Often, within such multiplex relations, one type of relation (like gossip) gradually follows from another type of relation (like friendship). Previous research has shown that friendship and gossip are closely interrelated and might stimulate one another in their evolution (Bosson et al., 2006; Burt, 2005; Jaeger et al., 1994; McAndrew et al., 2007; Peters et al., 2009). However, not much is known yet about the sequence with which friendship-gossip multiplexity emerges: does friendship breed gossip, or does gossip bring about friendships? In the following, we present two different theoretical frameworks that explain how friendship and gossip co-develop: social capital theory and evolutionary theory.

6.2.1 *Social Capital Perspective*

A key assumption of the social capital approach to organizations is that being tied to resourceful others can provide access to critical resources and support at the workplace¹² (Brass et al., 2004; Labianca and Brass, 2006; Lin, 2001), as well as constrain one's action opportunities (Burt, 2005). Individuals evaluate existing and potential new contacts with regard to the potential benefits they may yield. This holds true both for the sender (i.e., ego signaling interest in a friendship relation with alter) and the receiver (i.e., ego receiving signals that alter is interested in a friendship relation) of friendship signals. Friendship in ego-alter dyads is often mutual (Knecht, 2007). However, a friendship "nomination" by ego may not immediately lead to reciprocation with a friendship choice by alter, but involve some intermediate steps in which alter first gathers more information about the trustworthiness of ego. Intensifying one's relationship with a new contact has opportunity costs for one's existing network. The time and attention ego

¹² Social capital results from friendship relations and informal socializing, and was found to affect a large variety of individual or organization level outcomes, e.g. leadership effectiveness and power (Balkundi and Kilduff, 2005), performance of individuals and groups (Mehra et al., 2001; Oh et al., 2004; Sparrowe et al., 2001; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997), job satisfaction (Morrison, 2004), access to information, organizational learning, and innovation (Burt, 1992; Podolny and Baron, 1997), social control and interpersonal conflicts (Lazega and Krackhardt, 2000; Nelson, 1989).

invests in the new contact may come at the expense of the time and energy invested in his or her existing contacts. We posit that individuals who receive a friendship signal from a specific alter will first “reciprocate” with gossip for three reasons.

First, ego does not yet know to what degree a specific alter who wants to establish a friendship relation can be trusted. Trust is the willingness to commit to a collaborative effort before knowing how the other person will behave (Burt, 2005). The nature of gossip implies communicating evaluations of third party behavior. Gossip senders approach gossip receivers with whom they suspect that they interpret the reported behavior similarly, and thus share the gossip senders’ belief (Burt, 2005). This requires interpersonal trust: “when you exchange sensitive information with someone, trust is implicit in the risk you now face that the other person might leak the information” (Burt, 2005, p. 93). The trust embedded in friendships reduces potential drawbacks of gossip behavior, such as rejection and damage of reputation. At the same time, exploiting an interpersonal trust relation can cause considerable damage, given that such strong ties usually involve large investments in terms of time, resources, and emotions. A useful strategy to limit the potential damage from defection is to start with minor transactions and then gradually expand the exchange (Blau, 1964). Repeated positive experiences eventually manifest in trust. Sharing gossip with alter helps ego to establish to what degree alter is willing to reveal sensitive information from his own network, and to assess whether alter will treat sensitive information confidentially: if the gossip returns back to ego, ego knows that alter is not trustworthy.

Second, gossiping helps ego to find out how alter “fits” into ego’s existing network. The new friend may also be a potential source of disruption in ego’s existing network, e.g. if some of ego’s friends do not like the new contact because they had a conflict with him or her in the past. In this case, befriending this new contact may cause more harm to ego’s social capital, rather than enrich it. To avoid potential tensions in one’s network, ego needs to find out how alter is positioned towards third parties, and whether the new friendship would potentially damage valuable friendships in ego’s existing network. In this process, gossiping serves as an echo sounding device. It helps to inspect the environment of the dyad and delineate its boundaries. In line with this reasoning, a recent study showed that sharing mutual third party ties led to negative gossip in employee dyads (Grosser et al., 2010).

Third, reciprocating friendship signals with gossip is a credible strategy to build a trust relationship, since ego makes him or herself vulnerable by sharing potentially sensitive information about third parties with alter. Given these assumptions, social capital theory hypothesizes that the multiplexity of gossip and friendship emerges as a result of friendship choices first being reciprocated by gossip, before they eventually become mutual friendship choices:

Hypothesis 1a (social capital): If ego nominates alter as a friend, alter will reciprocate this with gossip behavior over time.

Employees who receive many friendship nominations – and thus are popular in the network – have much choice with regard to which friendships to reciprocate and which not. The larger the number of friends in ego’s personal network, the higher the likelihood that some of the relations between ego’s friends are troubled. This increases the risk that ego’s personal network becomes disrupted, and its social capital value decreases: some contacts may start to disinvest due to the resulting conflicts or imbalances. Hence, the more friendship choices ego receives, the stronger the need for ego to monitor his or her social network for potential disruptions resulting from tensions between his or her contacts. As a result, individuals who are popular as friends are particularly likely to gossip:

Hypothesis 1b (popularity): The higher the number of friendship choices received by ego, the more likely ego’s gossip activity will increase over time.

6.2.2 Evolutionary Perspective

Based on the finding that humans devote a significant amount of their conversation time (up to two thirds) to talking about absent others (Dunbar, 2004), evolutionary psychologists reason that gossip is a vital and effective instrument for individuals to find out about friends and foes in their wider social environment (Barkow, 1992; De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Dunbar, 1996; Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994; Hess and Hagen, 2006; McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002; Wilson et al., 2000). Gossiping allows for an examination into the trustworthiness of one’s existing contacts as well as potential new ones. It helps to detect cheaters and free-riders, and to identify potential allies or sources of social support. By reducing the interaction opportunities of cheaters, gossip has a vital function both in the prevention of potential damage and its mitigation. Close social ties like friendship relations, are often multiplex: in addition to affect and liking, friends often help each other out in many ways, ranging from small loans or gifts, to sharing confidential and sensitive information. Therefore, friendship ties involve a high amount of trust, and usually result in considerable investments of time and energy. The solidarity norms governing these relations prescribe that these transfers need not be repaid immediately, which can result in considerable (temporary) imbalances in the “accounts”. As a result, friendship relations, when exploited by one of the two partners, can cause substantial damage, materially and emotionally. Hence, gossip can be expected to play an essential role in the formation of new friendship relations in at least two ways.

First, gossip was indeed found to be a means for advertising one’s qualities as a friend (Burt, 2005; Dunbar, 2004; Gambetta, 2006; Hess and Hagen, 2006). Before entering a friendship relation with a specific other, disclosing private and secret information about someone else in one’s network is a credible signal of faith in the other person, and a potential first step towards building interpersonal trust (Burt, 2001; Burt and Knez, 1996).

Second, gossiping also signals one’s position in the overall social network of the group. The gossip sender can test receivers’ reactions to the disclosure of information on third parties. Gossip is a social statement where senders signal that they are closer to the

receivers than to the object of gossip (Merry, 1984).¹³ Similarly, the receiver learns whether the sender shares the same friends and mindset. If the receiver has attitudes on third parties similar to the sender, the latter's suitability as a friend will increase in the receiver's perception.

Several experimental and survey studies have demonstrated the role of gossip in the formation of friendships. They show that sharing positive information about friends and negative information about disliked others promotes interpersonal closeness (Bosson et al., 2006; McAndrew et al., 2007; McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002), which is consistent with predictions from balance theory (Heider, 1958). Due to their cross-sectional research design, these studies could not draw strong conclusions about the *process* of friendship formation.

Compared to immediately entering a friendship relation and making oneself vulnerable to the exploitation of interpersonal trust that comes along with friendship, the risks associated with using gossip as a signaling device before entering a friendship are relatively small. If the receiver reacts negatively to the gossip, this may block the development of a friendship relation with the receiver and eventually result in a bad reputation for the sender as a gossipier, but it will not cause other losses that could result from a breach of trust in a friendship relation. In sum, we expect that individuals are likely to interpret a sender's repeated gossip behavior as a signal of intimacy and a shared mindset, which increases the likelihood that they respond with friendly feelings.

Hypothesis 2a (social bonding): If ego gossips to alter, alter will reciprocate with friendship over time.

Employees who frequently share gossip possess high information status in the group, which makes them particularly attractive as friends. Active gossipers have a broad overview of what is going on in the group and hence are able to warn about potential frauds or suggest beneficial contacts to others. Therefore, establishing a close relationship with an active gossipier can be an efficient instrument to monitor the behavior of others beyond one's own circle of influence. Evolutionary theory argues further that group members interpret the spread of gossip as a signal of commitment to group norms: by making public the type of norm violation and who the norm violator was, gossipers demonstrate that they are aware of group norms and their eventual violation (Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin and Wilson, 2010). This, in turn, enhances the social status of gossip senders. Therefore, we expect that an employee's number of friends increases with the employee's tendency to spread gossip in the group.

Hypothesis 2b (social integration): High gossip activity by ego causes an increase in ego's popularity in the friendship network over time.

¹³ The gossip sender, however, needs to take away the receiver's concern that the sender may also talk about the receiver himself when absent (especially when they are no friends yet).

6.3 Research Design and Setting

6.3.1 Data

Panel data were collected in one site within a medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization at three time points, namely in Spring 2008, Autumn 2008, and Spring 2009. The organization was a major regional child protection institution. These data sets were collected in a site specializing in treating children with special needs, involving problems with their social, psychological, and/or physical functioning. This site employed 45 social workers, behavioral scientists, therapists, medical doctors, and administrative staff. It was an ideal size for this study because there were enough employees for longitudinal network analyses, but it was still small enough to be able to collect data on complete networks using self-administered questionnaires. The site operated rather independently from the organization, with the employees rarely engaging in contact with organizational members outside the site. Within the site, the organization was split into seven teams of two to eight employees, some of which were directly engaged in treating children, while others performed various support functions. None of the teams had formally designated team leaders or supervisors; instead, the teams were all managed centrally by one male manager. Only one of the remaining employees was male, and most were part-time employees.

Due to employee turnover, meaning that some of the 45 employees joined or left the site during the course of our study, the sample size varies between measurement waves. In the first wave 29 out of 34 employees (85.3%) completed the survey. In the second wave 32 out of 37 employees (86.5%), and in the third wave 33 out of 38 employees (86.8%) participated. These response rates provide a solid basis for longitudinal network analyses, as good estimates can be obtained with response rates of 70% or higher (Kossinets, 2006). The mean age of the employees was 36.11 ($SD = 11.39$), and on average they had been working in the organization for seven and a half years at the start of the study ($M = 7.62$, $SD = 5.68$).

6.3.2 Measures

Measures included network data, which captured the relationships between employees. Gossip and friendship relations, which served as co-dependent variables in the analysis, were assessed at three time points with a time lag of six months.

Peer-rated gossip with colleagues. In each of the three measurement waves, we presented respondents with a roster of the names of all employees working at the site. The respondents were asked to indicate from whom they had received gossip during the last three months. Due to the social disdain commonly associated with gossip behavior, we refrained from using the term 'gossip' in the questionnaire to avoid social desirability bias, which had been found to affect self-reported gossip in earlier studies (Nevo et al., 1994). Instead, we asked whether they engaged in informal, evaluative talking about absent colleagues, which is in line with the definition by Kurland and Pelled's (2000). As an additional measure to reduce social desirability and self-serving attribution bias, we

asked respondents to name the person from whom they had received gossip (which is called a “peer-rated relationship”), rather than asking about self-reported gossip behavior (i.e., to whom they were sending gossip). Based on the gossip question we retrieved a directed, binary adjacency matrix for each measurement wave, where 1 indicated a present gossip relation, and 0 indicated an absent gossip relation.

Friendship. In addition to asking about gossip, respondents were asked to describe their social relationships with every other employee on the following Likert scale: (1) “very difficult,” (2) “difficult,” (3) “neutral,” (4) “friendly,” and (5) “good friend.”¹⁴ This directed, valued network captured the quality of the dyadic relationships within the network, as reported by each individual. Providing five answer categories rather than just two (e.g., friendship versus no friendship) made it easier for employees to answer our question on the relationships with every colleague. However, our theoretical approach and the analytical approach described below, required a dichotomized friendship variable. The distribution of the variable was bimodal with primarily answer codes of 3 and 4. We therefore recoded all of the “friendly” and “good friend” relationships as 1, and the remaining types of relationships as 0 to identify friendships in the network (the term “friendly” is stronger in connotation in Dutch than in English and translates more directly to “friendship-like”). Again, based on the friendship question we retrieved a directed, binary adjacency matrix for each measurement wave, where 1 indicated presence of friendship nomination, and 0 indicated absence. Both friendship and gossip were incorporated as dependent network variables in the analysis.

Controls. We needed to rule out differences in gossiping and friendship formation based simply on proximity and the amount of interaction employees had with one another. This was necessary because employees in our organization were assigned to formal teams and within those teams operated on differing work schedules due to their part-time contracts. Therefore, we controlled for formal team structure and weekly contact frequency in every dyad. In addition to that, several common network configurations and a period dummy served as control variables, which will be detailed in the Analytic Strategy section.

Formal team membership. As described above, the site was organized into seven teams with sizes of between two and eight employees. Prior to the study, the organization provided the data on the formal work teams in this site. Based on this information we created a symmetric, binary matrix on formal team membership, and tested whether being in the same group (i.e., high proximity) led to more gossip or friendship between two employees. Formal team membership was included as a constant dyadic covariate in the analysis.

¹⁴ The question on relationship quality is roughly translated as follows: “With some colleagues we have a very good relationship. To some we would even confide personal things. With other colleagues, however, we can go along less well. The following question asks about your relationships with your colleagues. How would you describe your relationship with each of the following people?”

Contact frequency. Because most respondents were contracted part-time, we needed to control for possible contact frequency. However, the number of contracted hours turned out to be a rather unreliable measure, because for some employees the actual hours worked differed largely from the contracted hours. Furthermore, we were interested in the possible contacts in every dyad. Therefore, we asked each respondent to study a roster of the site members and rate how often they had formal or informal communication with each colleague during the previous three months on a Likert scale that ranged from (1) “never” to (6) “eight or more times per week.” This communication network captured repeated patterns of work-related interaction between employees (Brass and Burkhardt, 1993; Scott and Judge, 2009), so that we could control for the employees’ amount of contact with each other. Contact frequency (in wave one and two) was included as a changing dyadic covariate in the analysis.

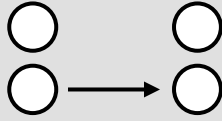
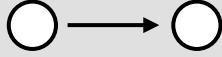
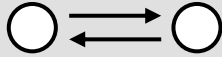
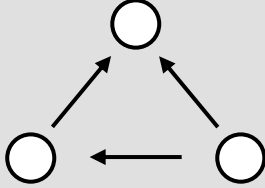
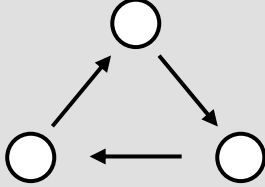
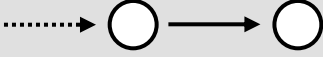

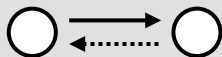
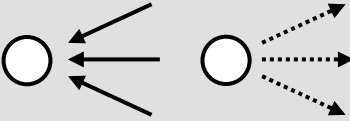
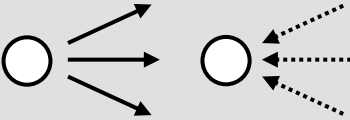
6.3.3 *Methods of Analysis: Multiple SIENA*

Our hypotheses cover two distinct levels of analysis. On the one hand, we made predictions on the co-evolution of gossip and friendship ties in employee *dyads* (hypotheses 1a and 2a). On the other hand, we hypothesized on the *network level* that the employees’ popularity in the group affects their gossip activity, and vice versa (hypotheses 1b and 2b). The complexity of our research questions requires an approach specifically designed for longitudinal social networks analysis. We use an actor-based approach that models the co-evolution of several social networks and behavioral dynamics.

An actor-based model. To date, researchers have used the program SIENA, shorthand for Simulation Investigation for Empirical Network Analysis, to carry out the statistical estimation of models for repeated measures of social networks. SIENA has been most widely applied in the analysis of friendship networks in schools (Baerveldt et al., 2008; Burk et al., 2007; Dijkstra et al., 2010; Knecht, 2007; Sijtsema et al., 2010), and its growing popularity drives continuous development by social network researchers. The basics of the model are detailed in Snijders, Van de Bunt and Steglich (2010). In this paper we use a variant of the SIENA model that allows the study of multiplex networks.

Multiplex networks. In our analysis, both gossip network and friendship network serve as explanatory and as outcome variables. We will refer to the testing of several dependent (outcome) networks as a multiplex test. While we need a model where we can specify *two dependent networks* to estimate parameters for their co-evolution, the SIENA model commonly used only allows the specification of one dependent network. This shortcoming was overcome only recently, when the SIENA program was extended to *Multiple SIENA* (beta version 3.3, Snijders et al., 2008). Multiple SIENA allows analyzing multiplexity, more specifically whether a change in one dependent network causes a change in another dependent network. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to investigate multiplex networks longitudinally.

Table 6.1 Effects in Multiple SIENA

Effect	Explanation	Graphical Presentation
Rate	Basic parameter indicating the number of opportunities to make changes in a certain network	
Endogenous Network Effects		
Out-degree	Ego's tendency to create ties in a certain network	
Reciprocity	Preference for mutual ties between ego and alter in a certain network	
Transitivity	Ego's preference for creating ties with ego's friends' friends; measure for network closure	
3-cycles	Negative values denote preference for hierarchical ties in the networks. Positive values indicate generalized reciprocity.	
Exogenous Network Effects (Multiplex)		
Dyadic covariate	Ego's tendency to create ties in Network A depending on ego's ties in Network B	
Out-degree multiplex	Ego's tendency to create ties in Network A together with ties in Network B	
Reciprocity multiplex	Creating ties in Network A by ego (out-degree) is reciprocated with nominations in Network B by alter (in-degree)	
Popularity × activity multiplex	Ego's general number of received nominations in Network A (in-degree) affects ego's general number of created ties in Network B (out-degree)	
Activity × popularity multiplex	Ego's general number of created ties in Network A (out-degree) affects ego's general number of received nominations in Network B (in-degree)	

Note. Parts of this table were taken from Sijtsema et al. (2010).

Analytic strategy. A visual presentation of all effects in our model can be found in Table 6.1. We proceeded in two hierarchical steps to specify the model. We first modeled control variables only, which can be classified into endogenous network configurations and dyadic covariates. Endogenous configurations are predominant structures in the network that influence changes and therefore require controlling. We controlled for

configurations often observed to influence the dynamics of friendship networks (Knecht, 2007): out-degree (representing the tendency to create new ties), reciprocity, transitive triplets (representing the tendency to close triads), and 3-cycles (representing the tendency for generalized reciprocity). Changes in the network are expressed with rate parameters. We used the same control variables for modeling the friendship and the gossip network. The dyadic covariates, i.e. contact frequency and team membership, controlled for exogenous effects on the dependent networks. Furthermore, we included a dummy variable to avoid biases in the results due to large differences in change between the two time periods. The dummy was incorporated as a changing actor covariate in the model, with the code 0 for the first time period (between wave one and two), and 1 for the second time period (between wave two and three). Again, this was estimated for both gossip and friendship network.

In the second step, we added multiplex parameters to the estimation to test our hypotheses. On the dyadic level, this included out-degree and reciprocity effects between gossip and friendship ties. On the network level, this comprised effects regarding the relationship between gossip activity and friendship popularity.

The model parameters are estimated according to the requirements outlined in the model specification section, using an iterative stochastic approximation algorithm. Estimation was done using the Method of Moments (MoM, Snijders et al., 2007). The first observation is used as a starting point for estimating the network evolution process. Model estimation amounts to the identification of those behavior rules that fit best the observed trajectory of networks. To gain excellent model quality, as recommended by Snijders et al. (2008), all analyses were carried out with 8,000 iterations and only used for interpretation when the convergence statistics were between -0.1 and 0.1 for all specified parameters.

6.4 Results

6.4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 6.2 presents the descriptive statistics of all analyzed variables. The biggest change in-between waves was observed in the gossip network, where on average, employees nominated five colleagues in the first wave ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 3.55$), three to four colleagues in the second wave ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 3.26$), and seven colleagues in the third wave ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 4.92$). The change between the latter two waves was significant in a Wilcoxon's signed-rank test ($z(26) = -3.00$, $p < 0.01$). Employees' friendship choices varied less in-between waves, with ten to twelve friends on average. At all time points, the friendship network was much denser than the gossip network. The networks are illustrated in Figure 6.1. The network pictures were created with the visualization program Visone 2.5.1. Note that only actors are represented who had worked in the organization site at all three time points of data collection.

Table 6.2 Ties, Density, Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of the Networks

Variable	Ties	Density	M	SD
Wave 1 (N = 29)				
Gossip ^a	137	0.14	4.72	3.55
Friendship ^a	300	0.31	10.34	9.62
Contact Frequency ^{a,b}	n/a	n/a	3.16	0.64
Team Membership	146	0.26	4.29	1.85
Wave 2 (N = 32)				
Gossip ^a	115	0.10	3.56	3.26
Friendship ^a	348	0.30	11.57	8.83
Contact Frequency ^{a,b}	n/a	n/a	2.93	0.60
Team Membership	-	-	-	-
Wave 3 (N = 33)				
Gossip ^a	217	0.18	6.76	4.92
Friendship ^a	348	0.29	10.91	9.51
Contact Frequency ^{a,b}	-	-	-	-
Team Membership	-	-	-	-

Note. ^a Statistics calculated based on out-degree. Density was calculated by dividing the number of ties by the number of possible ties. Possible ties are the product of the number of invited people minus missing and the number of invited people minus one. ^b Because contact frequency was measured with an ordinal scale, number of ties and density is not provided for this network. Means of the ordinal scale were first calculated per actor and then used to calculate mean and standard deviation for the whole network.

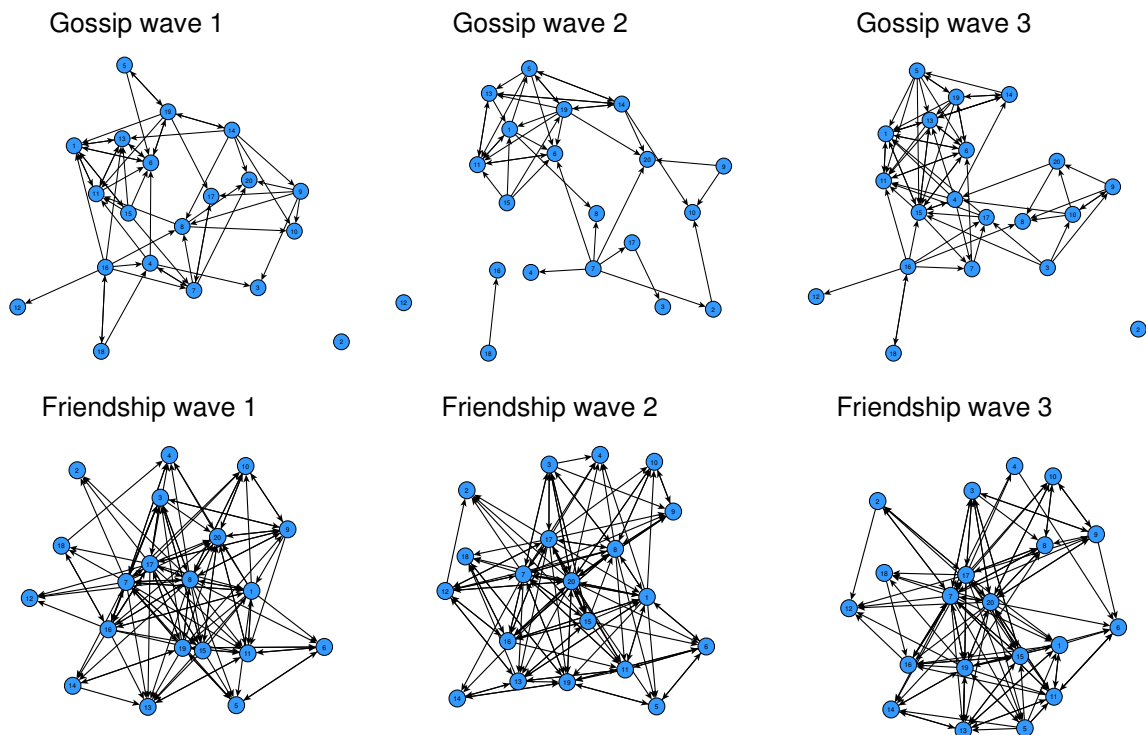
**Figure 6.1** Gossip and Friendship Networks at Three Measurement Waves

Table 6.3 provides details on the relationship between the two dependent networks, gossip and friendship. The cross tabulation gives an overview of counts and percentages of employee dyads in which ego and alter were connected with a gossip tie only, a friendship tie only, both gossip and friendship ties, or not connected.

Table 6.3 Dyad Counts and Row Percentages across Periods

End of Period: Ego's Nominations of Alter					
	No tie	Gossip tie only	Friendship tie only	Gossip and friendship tie	Total
					%
Beginning of Period: Ego's Nominations of Alter					
No tie	694	37	103	19	853
	81.36	4.34	12.08	2.23	100.00
Gossip tie only	23	9	5	15	52
	44.23	17.31	9.62	28.85	100.00
Friendship tie only	97	19	175	48	339
	28.61	5.60	51.62	14.16	100.00
Gossip and friendship tie	17	6	28	62	113
	15.04	5.31	24.78	54.87	100.00
End of Period: Alter's Nominations of Ego					
	No tie	Gossip tie only	Friendship tie only	Gossip and friendship tie	Total
					%
Beginning of Period: Ego's Nominations of Alter					
No tie	588	44	151	35	818
	71.88	5.38	18.46	4.28	100.00
Gossip tie only	25	2	11	10	48
	52.08	4.17	22.92	20.83	100.00
Friendship tie only	136	8	117	58	319
	42.63	2.51	36.68	18.18	100.00
Gossip and friendship tie	13	8	37	47	105
	12.38	7.62	35.24	44.76	100.00

Reading example: A gossip tie by ego at the beginning of a period was associated with a friendship tie by alter at the end of a period in 11 out of 48 dyad cases (22.92%). Missing responses are not included in the dyad counts.

In the upper half of the table, we plotted ego's nominations at the beginning of a time period (e.g., as measured in wave one) against the end of this time period (e.g., as measured in wave two). The dyad counts were summed up for both time periods and contain information on ego's stability in nominating alters. Because we were interested in multiplex reciprocity, i.e. the responses that ego would cause in alter, we plotted ego's nominations against alter's nominations in the lower half of the table. This enabled causal interpretation of change in dyads during the two time periods.

Chi-square tests revealed that in both periods the pattern of the observed dyad counts differed significantly from expectations under random conditions ($\chi^2(9, N = 595) = 110.20, p < 0.001$ and $\chi^2(9, N = 695) = 174.30, p < 0.001$). When we ignore cases without response, we observe that egos' gossip ties tend to be reciprocated with friendship nominations, or a combination of friendship and gossip nominations by alters (in sum 43.75%). In contrast, egos' friendship ties were much less reciprocated with gossip or a combination of both friendship and gossip (in sum 20.69%). There is some indication that gossip produces friendship, whereas friendship produces comparatively little gossip. These insights already deliver slight support for Hypothesis 2a, stating a positive effect of gossip ties on friendship formation, over Hypothesis 1a, which proposed friendship effects on gossiping. However, an inspection of dyad counts yields only vague results and is not a strict hypotheses test. For instance, we need to control for reciprocity in both gossip and friendship dyads when examining multiplex reciprocity. Therefore, we turn to the multivariate analysis.

6.4.2 Results from Multiple SIENA

Table 6.4 reports the results from the Multiple SIENA models. The social capital hypothesis (Hypothesis 1a) stated that ego's friendship nominations are reciprocated with gossip behavior by alter in dyads. The results in model two do not underpin this assumption ($\theta = 0.33, ns$). Employees were not more inclined to start gossiping with colleagues who treated them as a friend. The popularity hypothesis (Hypothesis 1b) predicted an increase in general gossip activity for employees who are popular in the friendship network. This assumption also lacks support in our data ($\theta = -0.23, ns$).

The social bonding hypothesis (Hypothesis 2a) reversed the causality direction of the social capital hypothesis, and suggested that gossiping facilitates friendship formation between employees. In support of this, the significant estimate in model two shows that gossip nominations tend to be reciprocated with friendship nominations in employee dyads ($\theta = 1.67, p < 0.001$). Gossiping employees become friends to their gossip partners. The social integration hypothesis (Hypothesis 2b) argued for positive consequences of gossiping on the group level. According to this hypothesis, an employee's activity in the gossip network would increase the employee's popularity in the friendship network. The results revealed the opposite effect. The negative and significant parameter showed that an increase in gossip degree caused employees loss of friendship nominations from their colleagues ($\theta = -0.21, p < 0.05$). Hence, the social integration hypothesis was rejected. We only found verification for Hypothesis 2a.

Table 6.4 Results from Multiple SIENA on the Co-evolution of Gossip and Friendship

Parameter	Model 1			Model 2		
	Est.	SE	<i>t</i> -value ^a	Est.	SE	<i>t</i> -value ^a
Dependent: Gossip Network						
Out-degree (density)	-2.27	0.22	-10.45***	-2.14	0.57	-3.74***
Reciprocity	0.91	0.27	3.37***	0.36	0.31	1.17
Transitive triplets	0.54	0.07	7.90***	0.51	0.07	7.70***
3-cycles	-0.46	0.13	-3.47***	-0.41	0.12	-3.29***
Period	0.61	0.16	3.94***	0.63	0.15	4.14***
Same team membership	0.86	0.17	4.92***	0.61	0.18	3.48***
Contact frequency	0.09	0.04	2.20*	0.07	0.05	1.63
Friendship (ego)				1.18	0.31	3.85***
Reciprocity friendship (alter)				0.33	0.25	1.31
Friendship popularity on gossip activity				-0.23	0.18	-1.29
Dependent: Friendship Network						
Out-degree (density)	-1.53	0.14	-10.57***	-1.49	0.20	-7.46***
Reciprocity	1.22	0.20	5.98***	0.73	0.25	2.88**
Transitive triplets	0.16	0.01	11.11***	0.17	0.02	10.69***
3-cycles	-0.19	0.03	-5.60***	-0.17	0.04	-4.77***
Period	-0.33	0.10	-3.35***	-0.39	0.12	-3.27**
Same team membership	0.75	0.14	5.31***	0.60	0.16	3.78***
Contact frequency	0.03	0.03	0.96	0.02	0.04	0.69
Gossip (ego)				0.89	0.36	2.45**
Reciprocity gossip (alter)				1.67	0.49	3.43***
Gossip activity on friendship popularity				-0.21	0.10	-2.11*
Network Dynamics (Changes)						
Gossip rate period 1	9.86	1.55		11.06	2.06	
Gossip rate period 2	10.50	1.53		11.73	1.76	
Friendship rate period 1	14.98	2.17		16.21	2.72	
Friendship rate period 2	13.86	1.76		14.86	2.24	

Note. ^a The *t*-values are calculated by dividing the parameter estimate by its standard error. They are not calculated for rate functions because a *t*-test would imply the null hypothesis that no change occurred. Change, however, was evidently measured in our data. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The Multiple SIENA models contained some more parameters, which we will discuss briefly. The amount of change is modeled by so-called rate parameters for the two time periods (see bottom of table). We also controlled for endogenous configurations in each of the two dependent networks, gossip and friendship. These configurations appeared to be comparable: in both networks there was a tendency

towards transitivity and generalized reciprocity (indicated by negative 3-cycle parameters) in triangles. However, dyadic reciprocity was stronger in the friendship network than in the gossip network. Furthermore, we controlled for ego's tendency to nominate alters as both gossip partners and friends. The positive and significant parameters strongly suggest co-occurrence of gossip and friendship for out-degrees of ego ($\theta = 1.18$, $p < 0.001$ and $\theta = 0.89$, $p < 0.01$). This association was further underpinned by an additional test of endowment functions. It tests whether gossip ties cause dissolving (not creation) of friendship ties, and vice versa. Endowment functions turned out to be insignificant, both in the model and in a score test (gossip effect on friendship: $\epsilon = 0.74$, *ns.*; friendship effect on gossip: $\epsilon = 1.95$, *ns.*). This indicates that the creation of gossip and friendship ties is closely interrelated on the actor level.

Finally, our dyadic covariates affected the dependent networks: being member of the same formal team triggered the formation of both gossip and friendship ties in employee dyads. Having frequent contact increased the likelihood of gossip slightly between employees (first model) but did not affect friendship.

6.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Organizational network literature has long since emphasized that informal relations usually co-occur in multiple forms, and influence one another in their dynamics (Brass et al., 2004). Nevertheless, empirical research has paid little attention to the co-evolution of multiplex networks. The present study examined the co-evolution of one affective and one communicative informal relation in an organizational setting: interpersonal friendships and gossip about absent colleagues. Though previous research showed that the two are related, it remains unclear whether friendships facilitate gossiping between employees, as implied by social capital theory (e.g., Burt, 2001); or whether friendships are a product of gossip interactions, as proposed by evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Dunbar, 1996). Applying a recently developed Multiple SIENA algorithm (Snijders et al., 2008) to longitudinal social network data, collected in a child care organization during a period of one year, showed that gossip favors the creation of friendship relations, rather than vice versa (Bosson et al., 2006): gossip is often shared between employees who are not friends (yet). This finding is in line with evolutionary arguments, and puts into perspective the widely shared assumption that friendship is a necessary precondition for gossiping. However, contrary to our expectation (Hypothesis 2b), disproportionately active gossipmongers became less, rather than more attractive as friends through time.

High gossip activity may decrease a gossipmonger's attractiveness as a friend for two reasons. First, to the degree that someone becomes known as a gossipmonger, gossip receivers are less inclined to interpret the gossip behavior as a statement of trust and intimacy, but more likely to perceive the gossiper as someone who will not treat sensitive personal information confidentially, and therefore are not trustworthy (Emler, 1994). Second, being constantly approached with gossip may raise the concern that the

gossip sender also talks about them or their friends to others (Gilmore, 1978). Active gossipers may not be trusted to keep discrete information to themselves but be perceived as easily accessible sources of third-party information. They may be attractive conversation partners because they provide much knowledge about the social landscape, but receivers will be reluctant to intensify the personal relationship or even become friends.

Several studies showed that active gossipers face the risk of losing the trust of others and being singled out by the group. In a study on an organizational network, Wilson (2000) found that gossiping was perceived as acceptable when it served the group, e.g. it occurred in response to a norm violation, whereas self-serving gossip was judged harshly. Also Jaeger et al. (1994) reported isolation in a friendship network in response to frequent gossiping in their sociometric research on a sorority organization. Moderate gossipers had more close friends than high and low gossipers (Jaeger et al., 1994). However, because the reported study relied on a cross-sectional design, the sequential order of popularity and gossip remained unaddressed. Against the widely assumed linear increase in friendship formation due to gossiping, our findings hint at a curvilinear association similar to the one in Jaeger et al.'s study (1994). From these insights, we conclude that disproportional gossip activities are likely to be sanctioned.

Our study also contributes to theories of network evolution in general, and friendship relations in particular. On the one hand, most theories of network evolution focus on a single relationship, but implicitly assume the presence of co-evolutionary mechanisms that drive its development and change. For example, communication ties tend to precede the evolution of interpersonal trust (Burt, 2005) or advice relationships (Lazega and Krackhardt, 2000). While two relationship types in a network may change independently from one another over time, a change in one type is likely to cause a change in another.

On the other hand, our findings suggest that the literature on friendship relations has underestimated the role of gossip as an antecedent. Most current models of friendship formation focus on dyad-level and person-specific characteristics, like homophily (e.g., Knecht, 2007), or draw on balance theory (Heider, 1958) to incorporate the broader social environment of the dyad. Gossiping may play a crucial but so far neglected role in these processes. When deciding whether or not to intensify the relationship with alter, gossip can help individuals to anticipate the structure of alter's network.

More generally, our findings suggest that gossip represents a "sounding device" which helps individuals to explore and monitor their social landscape. Before creating new friendships, gossip assists individuals in learning about the trustworthiness of potential friends before they have met them. They can find out whether potential new friends will fit into their existing social network, or whether they may create disruptions due to eventual pre-existing conflicts. With regard to their current friends, gossip not only facilitates the detection of cheaters, but also helps individuals to detect potential

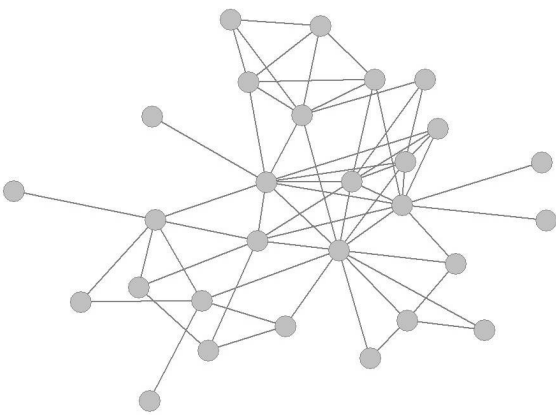
interpersonal conflicts or emerging ruptures in their ego-network (processes that are potentially detrimental for their social capital). The notion of gossip as a sounding device in fact is congruent with both the evolutionary and the social capital perspectives, which differ in the hypothesized sequence with which the two types of relationships co-evolve.

We conclude by referring to two limitations of our study. First, data were collected in an organizational setting existing prior to the study, where informal networks had already been established. Opportunities for future research include experimental studies that pinpoint the co-evolution of friendship and gossip relations by examining empty networks (without any pre-existing relations) as a starting point. Second, future research may benefit from a more systematic investigation of co-evolution in a broader set of organizational contexts: our study was conducted in a non-profit organization in the child care sector, with mainly female pedagogic professionals – and a particularly sociable work environment as our exploratory ethnographic studies had shown.

A key finding of our study is that talking about absent colleagues can strengthen informal relationships between employees. Whereas much effort has been put into studying organizational outcomes of interpersonal friendship relations, comparatively little is known about consequences of workplace gossip (for an exception see Wittek et al., 2000). Future research might benefit from a stronger focus on the effects of gossip, and an assessment of the joint as well as relative impact of gossip, friendship and other types of relations. Informal relations at work may have both detrimental and beneficial individual and organization level outcomes such as social support, cooperation, knowledge sharing, advice giving, well-being, satisfaction, politicking, and performance (Oh et al., 2004; Sparrowe et al., 2001). To fully grasp the antecedents, dynamics, and consequences of “the informal organization”, we need a fuller understanding of the co-evolution of multiplex networks. Our findings show that gossip deserves to be part of this research agenda.

Chapter 7

Me and You and Everyone We Gossip about: Social Network Analysis of Gossip Triads



This study investigates how instrumental and expressive ties influence gossip in employee triads. It is expected that instrumental ties, that is, shared group membership, between the three actors in the triad will increase the flow of positive and negative gossip (interdependency hypothesis). Furthermore, it is argued that closed triads, in which all actors share an expressive tie (i.e., friendship), will breed positive gossip (closure hypothesis). Negative gossip is assumed to flourish in coalition triads, where sender and receiver share a friendship tie with each other but not with the object (coalition hypothesis). The statistical model which has been specifically developed for this study consists of a logistic regression with three correlated random effects for sender, receiver, and object. Estimation was implemented using the software WinBUGS. The results yield support for the interdependency hypothesis and for the closure hypothesis, but only partial support for the coalition hypothesis.

This chapter is based upon Ellwardt, L., Van Duijn, M., Wittek, R. Modeling three-way social network data: A case study of gossip triads in the workplace. Submitted for publication.

7 ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE GOSSIP ABOUT: SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS OF GOSSIP TRIADS

7.1 Introduction

Gossip, i.e. talking about absent others, has received increasing attention in recent theories of cooperation (Coleman, 1990; de Pinninck et al., 2008; Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Most of these theories focus on the positive or negative effects of gossip for the group, or for the individual senders, receivers, and targets in the gossip triad. Not much is known about the social network conditions favoring or inhibiting positive and negative gossip, nor do we have the appropriate statistical models at our disposal that would allow us to take into account the relationships between all three actors of a gossip triad.

Discussing the behavior of absent third parties has been suggested to be a low-cost and effective means of punishing behavior that deviates from cooperation norms, but it goes on at the expense of those who behave in accordance with these norms (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Coleman concludes “each person who has an interest in the maintenance of the norm and the application of sanctions to those who violate it comes thereby to have an interest in the spread of information that can lead to a consensus on legitimate sanctions” (Coleman, 1990, p. 284). One prediction following from this argument is that gossip flow will increase to the degree that people have shared interests in a common goal and thus are instrumentally interdependent.

Moreover, in networks of high interdependency, enhanced gossip flow is assumed in highly cohesive structures, where individuals of a network are closely tied with one another (Merry, 1984). According to this assumption, connectedness and relationship quality between individuals in a network has consequences for their gossip behavior, namely, whether gossip is spread at all, with whom it is exchanged, who is the target, and whether the contents are positive or negative. Close, expressive ties are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, having expressive relationships protects individuals from becoming the target of harmful gossip (Keltner et al., 2008). On the other hand, in expressive relationships private information about others is exchanged (Bosson et al., 2006; Burt, 2005; Jaeger et al., 1994). Based on these arguments, we will argue that gossip is influenced by the various combinations of social relationships – both instrumental and expressive – in an organizational network.

Workplace gossip has been defined as “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000: 429). The literature quite consistently distinguishes the evaluative component further into positive and negative (Elias and Scotson, 1965; Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Grosser et al., 2010; Soeters and Iterson, 2002). Examples of positive gossip are praising or defending someone’s behavior, and examples of negative gossip are criticizing or complaining about someone. Therefore, we will examine both positive and negative forms of gossip. The definition indicates that workplace

gossip ideally should be approached as social interactions between three interdependent actors: sender, receiver, and object of gossip (i.e., the absent third party; Shaw et al., 2010; Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Figure 7.1 depicts these actors in the so-called *gossip triad*. Arrows indicate to whom the behavior is directed, namely that two employees gossip with one another about a third person.

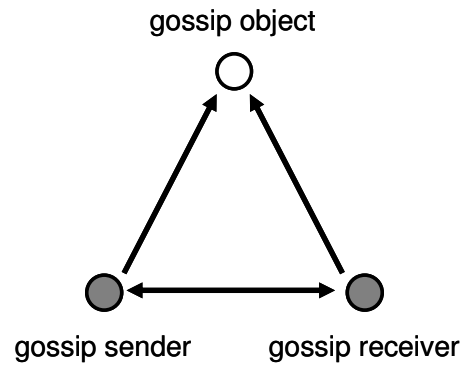


Figure 7.1 The Gossip Triad

We assume that the emergence of gossip is dependent on the multiple interactions of the instrumental and expressive relationships between those three actors (Burt, 1992; 2005). First of all, instrumental ties are considered an important predictor of gossip in organizations. Through gossiping, employees praise the contributions of group members to the work group and criticize deviance from cooperation norms. Workplace gossip is therefore expected to predominantly occur within rather than across formal work groups or teams. Second, we propose that gossip is affected by friendship relationships between the organizational members. It will be argued that closed triads, in which all actors share an expressive friendship tie, breed positive gossip. Negative gossip flourishes in coalition triads, where sender and receiver share a friendship tie with each other but not with the object.

This research contributes to both theoretical and empirical work on gossip. The underlying theory poses that individuals involved in gossip have differing, interchangeable roles – they send, receive or become the object of gossip. This allows hypothesizing on detailed configurations of instrumental and expressive ties in the gossip triad. However, testing such a detailed theory requires specific network data and complex data analysis tools. The empirical approach comprises a statistical solution for the analysis of triadic network data.

In what follows, a theoretical framework on gossip triads will be elaborated in order to answer the following question: *How does gossip depend on the employees' embeddedness in the network of instrumental and expressive ties?* In an empirical study, the predictions that follow from this framework will then be tested. For this purpose, three-way data on a complete gossip network were collected among employees in a Dutch child-care organization. Next, a new statistical model was developed, which consists of a logistic regression model with three correlated random effects for sender, receiver, and object of

gossip. Finally, the results will be presented and discussed with regard to their theoretical and scientific implications.

7.2 Theoretical Background

Social capital theory distinguishes two types of social relationships between employees in organizations (Lin, 2001). Instrumental ties arise in the course of fulfilling work tasks, for example, organizational members are formally assigned to work groups and are expected to interact with one another therein. Expressive ties contain a socio-emotional component and represent affective trust bonds between employees, and thus may support instrumental ties (Bohnet and Frey, 1994). For example, employees who share expressive ties more often help and advise one another in work-related matters (Lin, 2008). We propose that both instrumental and expressive ties influence the propensity to send gossip, receive gossip, and become the object of gossip, and whether the gossip tends to be positive or negative. Similarly, in their study on organizational gossip Grosser and colleagues argue “that positive and negative gossip is fundamentally different and that each form travels through instrumental ties and expressive ties differently. That is, an individual will engage in positive and/or negative gossip based on the individual’s dyadic relationship ties with others” (Grosser et al., 2010, p. 180).

In the following we will briefly discuss each of the three dyadic relationships in the gossip triad, and then formulate hypotheses on how their combination affects gossip. We will do this first for instrumental, and then for expressive relationships.

7.2.1 *Instrumental Ties: Shared Group Membership*

Individuals in an organization are required to collaborate toward organizational goals and allocate rewards on the group level. The resulting interdependency makes monitoring the group members’ activities and reinforcing cooperation norms important to all members (Hackman, 1992). It has been argued that gossip assists the necessary forms of control and thereby promotes cooperative behavior (Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1990; de Pinninck et al., 2008; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Surprisingly, so far much of the present research on workplace gossip has failed to elaborate on the role of shared group membership: “It is still not clear, for instance, whether gossip occurs equally across all organizational relationships or is more prevalent in team member exchanges” (Mills, 2010, p. 215). Based on the above-mentioned social control argument, we would expect gossip flow to congregate predominantly within work groups, that is, between instrumentally tied organizational members.

Sender-receiver dyad. Being assigned to the same formal work group increases the opportunities that sender and receiver will meet and engage in direct face-to-face interactions. Frequent interactions produce closure in social networks (Wasserman and Faust, 1994), which is assumed to facilitate gossip (Merry, 1984). Employees of a group more often discuss work-related matters and other people in the firm than do employees from different groups. Moreover, through their intense contact, group members may also

develop trust bonds in addition to original instrumental ties. The potential gossip sender will approach receivers who have proven reliable and cooperative in past work procedures, and who can be expected to also cooperate in gossip conversations by keeping discrete information about third parties to themselves. In line with the proximity assumption, previous research has shown that employees tend to gossip with colleagues from their own work group rather than from other groups (Grosser et al., 2010).

Sender-object dyad. We propose that employees gossip about colleagues from their own formal work group. Talking positively about group members allows the senders to signal their identification with the conduct of the group, and that they can be counted on (Gambetta, 2006). Positive gossip behavior includes, for example, praising an absent member, providing political or social support, or defending that member in their absence. This behavior increases the possibility that the group will socially support the gossip sender should the need arise in the future (Dunbar, 2004). Hence, although the object him/herself might not even reciprocate the positive behavior, the sender may benefit from a greater chance that the *group* as a whole will generally reward this behavior (Willer, 2009). Research has shown that group affirmation through appraisal of individual contributions (i.e., positive gossip) becomes even more likely when group members are highly interdependent in their goal achievement (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). The context of interdependency makes group solidarity important, since it maintains the proper functioning of the work group. Thus, we expect that employees will pass along favorable information about absent members of their work group.

Next, we suggest that employees not only spread positive but also *negative* gossip about organizational members from their group. The underlying rationale is similar to the one of spreading positive information, namely, supporting and defending group norms. By means of negative gossip, employees socially control the contributions of others who have the power to impede the group's functioning, and thereby the achievements of the single group members. There is agreement that gossip is a relatively cheap and effective instrument for sanctioning deviants, loafers, or free-riders in social groups (Coleman, 1990; Dunbar, 2004; Merry, 1984). In addition to reinforcement of cooperation for the benefit of the whole group, senders also use negative gossip to signal their commitment to group norms, and hence promote their own reputation (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). Praising and defending group norms has been shown to increase one's social status in the group (Willer, 2009).

Receiver-object dyad. Receivers, in much the same way as senders, will have an enhanced interest in hearing gossip about organizational members from their own work group, since the reported behavior will likely affect the group's goals and thus the receiver's personal achievements (De Backer and Gurven, 2006). Hearing negative information is expected to be conceived as more sensational than positive information in this context (Davis and McLeod, 2003). However, research has shown that positive third-party information is also valued, because it helps receivers learn about behavioral standards in the group, and about what is generally perceived as acceptable behavior and what is not (Baumeister et al., 2004). In addition to learning about the organizational

culture, receivers may use gossip to socially compare their own behavior and achievements with that of significant others such as their direct colleagues, peers, and influential people (Suls, 1977; Wert and Salovey, 2004).

Relationship similarity. From the above discussion we conclude that senders of positive and negative gossip will pick receivers and objects from their formal work group. Our theoretical and empirical model is based on the assumption that work groups are exclusive, meaning that an employee is formally embedded into only one team at a time. As a logical consequence, two people (i.e., sender and receiver) belong to the same group whenever they both share group membership with the third person (i.e., the object). In any case, the independence from the object will be similar for sender and receiver. Taking arguments on interdependency in work groups together, we hypothesize gossip flow to be highest in triads where both sender and receiver have an instrumental work tie with the object (and hence with one another).

Hypothesis 1(interdependency): The likelihood that a sender will spread positive and negative gossip about an object will increase with formal interdependency in gossip triads, meaning that sender, receiver, and object are members of the same work group.

7.2.2 Expressive Ties: Friendship

Privacy is a crucial factor in the exchange of sensitive informal information (Burt and Knez, 1996; Grosser et al., 2010), especially when negative. Gossip can cause embarrassing reactions or even social repercussions for the sender when the receiver disapproves of the messages or relays the news on to others, most importantly the object. Therefore, senders will try to reduce the potential costs generated through gossip behavior by choosing trustworthy receivers.

Sender-receiver dyad. We argue that the stronger the expressive tie between sender and receiver, characterized by friendship and trust, the more gossip will be transmitted (Burt, 2001). Negative gossip is especially risky and can cause particular embarrassment. From a trusted colleague the sender can expect a shared mindset and that this colleague will respond positively to gossip behavior and support the attitudes of the sender in general. In contrast, spreading disagreeable third-party information may be punished, for example, when the receiver – unlike the sender – is friends with the third party, that is, the object of gossip. If the object learns about the gossip, the sender's relationship with the object may be damaged. More importantly, the object may have powerful means to retaliate for the behavior, for instance, when the object has higher status in the organization. Thus, senders of gossip need to trust the receivers in two ways: that the information will not be used against them and that it will not be disclosed to the objects (Burt, 2001).

Sender-object dyad. When the relationship between sender and object is characterized by friendship or trust, the sender will reduce negative and increase positive gossip for the benefit of maintaining a high quality relationship with the object. Employees will not want to jeopardize friendship relationships but will want to make a good impression,

since friendships are valuable sources of belongingness, solidarity, and social support (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Instead, it can be expected that employees will talk positively about their friends in front of others when absent (and that these friends will also praise them in return) with the purpose of verifying and deepening the existent expressive relationship. On the contrary, when the relationship between sender and object is *not* characterized by friendship or trust, the sender will increase negative and reduce positive gossip at relatively low cost. In some cases, certain benefits are attached to spreading negative gossip, such as influencing the perceived trustworthiness and image of others (Burt, 2005; Rooks et al., 2010; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Employees have been shown to use bad-mouthing strategically for selfish advantage so as to manipulate the reputation of competitors and weaken powerful people (Guendouzi, 2001; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993).

Receiver-object dyad. We assume the receiver's relationship with the object to affect the valence of the transmitted gossip (which again may affect the relationship with the object). Individuals who have a friendship relationship with a potential object of gossip are less likely to become receivers of negative gossip but more likely to receive positive gossip about this object. The reason is that the gossip sender anticipates the receiver's expressive bond with the object. The sender knows that the receiver will want to avoid tension and preserve the existing trust relationship with the object. The receiver will likely express disapproval of negative messages in order to defend the object, while expressing approval of positive messages to support the object (cf. McAndrew et al., 2007). This latter point is eminent. Potential senders will want to spread positive or negative gossip about certain objects. However, the decision as to whether this is carried out will depend on the relationship between *receiver and object* – something in which the sender is not directly involved.

Relationship similarity. The above arguments can be summarized as follows. Friendship between sender and receiver is generally expected to facilitate gossip activities between the two. The sender's relationship with the object influences the valence of gossip. Friendship between sender and object is expected to enhance positive comments about the object, while absence of friendship is expected to enhance negative comments. The ultimate choice of whether to gossip, however, is influenced by the sender's perception of the quality of the social relationship between potential receiver and object, and the sender may choose receivers accordingly. Preferably, the sender needs to believe that the receiver's relationship with the object is similar to the sender's relationship with the object, that is, that both are friends or both are not friends with the object. This *relationship similarity* reduces risks of social repercussions due to disapproval but increases the potential benefits of intensifying social bonds and finding allies for the sender. Figure 7.2 illustrates the different pathways to positive and negative gossip.

Previous literature on organizational gossip has described triads with relationship similarity as either closure or coalition triads (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Closed triads consist of positive relationships only, while coalition triads are characterized by one

positive and two negative relationships. Drawing on this terminology, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2a (closure): The likelihood that a sender will spread positive gossip about an object increases with closure in gossip triads, meaning that sender, receiver, and object are tied by a friendship relationship.

Hypothesis 2b (coalition): The likelihood that a sender will spread negative gossip about an object increases with coalition in gossip triads, meaning that sender and receiver are tied by a friendship relationship with each other but not with the object.

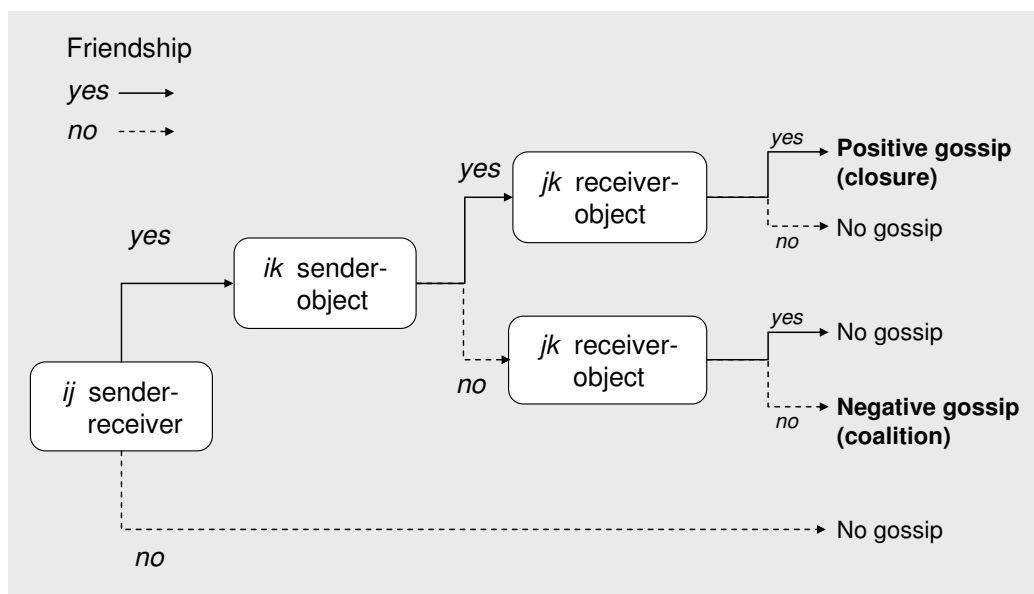


Figure 7.2 Gossip of Sender (i) with Receiver (j) about Object (k) Depending on Friendship

7.3 Data and Method

7.3.1 Data

Data were collected at one site within a medium-sized Dutch non-profit organization in spring 2008. The site was specialized in treating children with special needs which involved problems with their social, psychological, and/or physical functioning. This site employed 36 social workers, behavioral scientists, therapists, medical doctors, and administrative staff. This was an ideal size for this study because there were enough employees for network analyses, but it was still small enough to be able to collect complete network data that asked about gossip sending, receiving, as well as the objects of the gossip.

Within the site, the organization was split into seven teams of anywhere between three and eight employees, some of whom were directly engaged in treating children, while others were engaged in various support functions. None of the teams had formally designated team leaders or supervisors; instead, the teams were all managed centrally by one male manager. All but one of the remaining employees was female, and most were part-time employees.

Data were collected through self-administered computer-aided interviewing. Thirty out of 36 employees (83.3%) completed the survey, which took an average of 32 minutes. The mean age of the employees was 38.94 ($SD = 11.89$, Median = 34), and on average they had been working in the organization for seven and a half years ($M = 7.46$, $SD = 5.68$, Median = 5).

7.3.2 *Dependent Variable: Three-Step Procedure to Measure Gossip Triads*

Our sociometric measuring of gossip was based on a model conceptualized as a triad in which two employees (sender and receiver) talked about a third employee (object). The computer-assisted data collection proceeded in three sequential steps, as sketched in Figure 7.3.

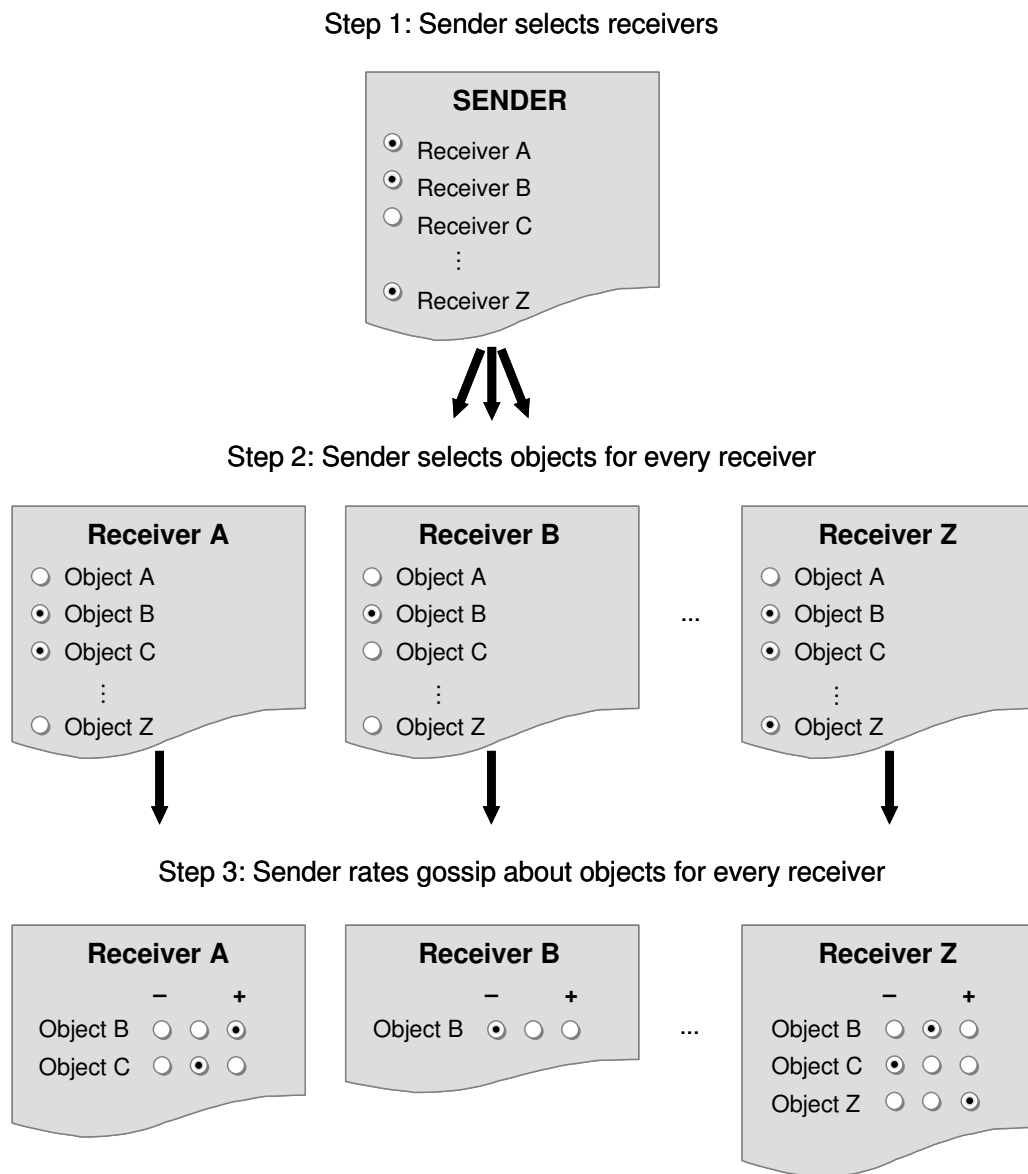


Figure 7.3 Three-step Procedure for Measuring Gossip Relationships

In the first step, respondents were asked to select all employees on a roster with whom they had regularly gossiped. This provided dyadic data on gossip *between* employees, that is, sender-receiver relationships. Second, respondents (senders) identified those third-party employees (objects) on a roster whom they had gossiped about with the employees (receivers) selected in the first step. This provided triadic data on gossip *about* employees, that is, sender-receiver-object relationships. In the third step, respondents were presented with a rating scheme in which they could evaluate the gossip as mostly critical, evenly critical and positive, or mostly positive. They rated the gossip about every third-party employee (object) in relation to every employee (receiver) whom they had gossiped with.

In sum, the data provided directed and valued network data on who had gossiped with whom and about whom, and whether this gossip was negative (critical), positive, or a blend of both. An example of a database generated by this three-step procedure is given in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Example of Three-way Data Generated by Questionnaire

Sender i	Receiver j	Object k	Rating
i_A	j_A	k_A	+1
i_A	j_A	k_B	0
i_A	j_B	k_B	-1
i_A	j_C	k_A	0
i_A	j_C	k_B	-1
i_A	j_C	k_C	+1
(i_B)	(...)	(...)	(...)
(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)

Example for interpretation of first row: $i_A j_A k_A = +1$ means that sender(A) gossiped with receiver(A) about object(A) in a positive way (+1). Negative gossip is coded as -1, blended gossip is coded as 0.

Providing the option of characterizing the gossip as blended gave respondents the opportunity to report gossip that was negative without having to check the negative box – in case they struggled to admit socially undesirable behavior. A total of 584 gossip relations were reported, of which 375 (64.2%) positive, 49 (8.4%) negative and 160 (27.4%) blended. Because of the low amount of negative gossip relations and the possibility to interpret blended as at least partially negative, these two types of gossip were coded together into one category. This came with the advantage of increased statistical power for the analysis of what from now on will be called ‘negative gossip’. Thus, two dichotomized outcome variables were generated. The positive gossip variable was coded into positive gossip (1) versus no gossip, blended, and negative gossip (0). The negative gossip variable was coded (1) versus no gossip and positive gossip (0).

7.3.3 Independent Variables

Shared group membership. The organization provided data on the formal work groups at this site. In addition to the manager, who was not assigned to a team, there were seven groups ranging in size from three to eight employees. Dyads of employees who belonged to the same work group received code 1 as opposed to employee dyads of differing group membership (code 0).

Friendship. Respondents described their social relationships with every other employee on the following Likert scale: (1) “very difficult”; (2) “difficult”; (3) “neutral”; (4) “friendly”; and (5) “good friend.”¹⁵ This directed, valued network captured the quality of the dyadic relationships within the network, as reported by each individual. The distribution of the variable was bimodal with primarily answer codes of 3 and 4. Therefore, all of the “friendly” and “good friend” relationships were recoded as 1 and the remaining types of relationships as 0 in order to indentify friendships in the network. Of the thus defined friendship network, 998 (out of 1260 possible) tie variables were observed, of which 312 indicated friendship.

7.3.4 Control Variables

Contact frequency. When researching gossip, it is important to rule out differences in behavior based simply on proximity, that is, the amount of interaction employees have had with one another. Each respondent rated how often they had had formal or informal communication with each colleague during the previous three months on a Likert scale ranging from (1) “never” to (6) “eight or more times per week.” For the analysis, contact frequency was dichotomized, where scores of (4) “three to four times a week” and higher were assigned a 1. Compared to friendship, the ‘contact’ network had more missing observations (958 observations) and slightly fewer ties present (306). In addition to the six employees not finishing the questionnaire, two employees did not provide information on contact frequency with the other employees.

Job satisfaction. It is also important to control for employees’ job satisfaction. For example, a gossip sender who was dissatisfied might be expected to engage in a greater amount of negative gossip, particularly since gossip is sometimes used as a catharsis for negative emotion (Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; e.g., Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Similarly, a gossip object who was very dissatisfied might trigger negative gossip in the individuals to whom he or she is tied. We constructed a four-item job satisfaction scale specifically for our organization that was based on qualitative interviews conducted prior to the survey. We asked employees, “How satisfied are you with: ‘your tasks,’ ‘your salary,’ ‘the collaboration with your colleagues,’ and ‘your workload?’” Respondents rated their satisfaction on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied).

¹⁵ The question on relationship quality translates roughly as follows: “With some colleagues we have a very good relationship. To some we would even confide personal matters. With other colleagues, however, we get along less well. The following question asks about your relationships with your colleagues. How would you describe your relationship with each of the following people?”

To check whether the measurement was unidimensional, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring (using the direct oblimin rotation method, which relaxed the assumption that factors are orthogonal). All items loaded on one factor which had an eigenvalue of 2.67 and explained 67% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha for the job satisfaction scale was 0.81. The resulting scale had a mean of 5.06 and standard deviation 0.94.

7.3.5 Analytical Approach

We investigated our expectations by incorporating actor and dyadic covariates in a logistic regression model with three correlated random effects for sender (i), receiver (j), and object (k). These random effects indicate the individual propensity of actors to send, receive, or be the object of gossip; their covariance matrix represents the variability between actors on these propensities as well as the correlation between them. A positive correlation between, for example, sender and receiver random effects indicates a positive association between propensities to send and receive gossip.

The model can be formulated as

$$\text{Logit}(Y_{ijk}) = \mu + \beta_1 x_i + \beta_2 x_j + \beta_3 x_k + \beta_4 z_{ij} + \beta_5 z_{ik} + \beta_6 z_{jk} + S_i + R_j + O_k$$

where x_i indicates an individual characteristic of an actor (here: job satisfaction) and z_{ij} a dyadic covariate (here: shared group membership, friendship, or contact). The model can be viewed as a cross-nested multilevel model with triadic relationships nested in the three actors involved, each with their different role as sender, receiver, and object of gossip, represented by the random effects S , R , and O , respectively. Because each actor can perform in all three roles, the accompanying random effects are not independent within actors, but assumed to come from a trivariate normal distribution.

Cross-nested multilevel or random effect models for digraphs (complete social network data) for dyadic tie variables that can be assumed to be normally distributed (or measured on an interval scale dyadic) are known as the *Social Relations Model* (SRM; Kenny and La Voie, 1984; Snijders and Kenny, 1999), whereas the *p2 model* (Zijlstra et al., 2009) is cross-nested random effects model for digraphs with binary tie variables. The latter model explicitly models reciprocity between sender and receiver, a feature that is not incorporated in the current model proposed for triadic data. The model presented here can be viewed as a simple binary version of the Triadic Relations Model (TRM), proposed by Bond et al. (1997; see also Card et al., 2010), omitting the random interaction effects of the TRM and the fixed reciprocity effects of the p_2 model.

Parameter estimates were obtained with Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) estimation, using WinBUGS1.4.3 (Lunn et al., 2000) with hierarchical centering and normal priors for the parameters. Estimates reported are based on samples of 6,000, using three chains and a burnin of 1,000 each (except otherwise noted).

Missing values of job satisfaction, friendship, and contact were imputed during the estimation process. For (centered) job satisfaction, a standard normal distribution was

used (close to the sample distribution). For friendship and contact, simple Bernoulli distributions were used with parameter equal to the mean of the probability of a tie in the complete dyads and the probability of all available tie observations; 0.28 for friendship and 0.34 for contact.

The analyses were comprised of two sets of models, one set with negative gossip and one with positive gossip as the dependent variable. The models were constructed in three steps. In the first step, the effects of the four variables of group membership, friendship, contact, and job satisfaction were investigated separately to identify the significant indicators of each variable for gossip. This was done in a backward selection process. This process began with a full model for the dyadic variables, which included all two-way interactions and the three-way interaction effect in order to capture all possible triadic configurations. The procedure started from the sender of gossip (i) and pointed to the object (k), in accordance with Figure 2.

This process was carried out twice for the directed networks (friendship and contact) in order to be sure about the direction of the relationships and to also check for reciprocity (interaction) effects between the pairs of actors of the triad. First, the process was carried out in the direction as described above, and, second, in the reverse direction, namely, by pointing to the sender (i) but starting from the object (k). Next, both directions were combined, including accompanying reciprocity effects, to obtain a complete model per dyadic covariate. The effect of job satisfaction was investigated at the actor level for each of the three roles, and at the dyadic level to investigate a homophily or similarity effect by using the absolute difference in job satisfaction as a dyadic covariate. The effect of a dummy actor covariate indicating the site manager, who had a special position in the network, was investigated as well.

In the second step, a joint model was constructed for the from step 1 remaining actor and dyadic control variables contact and group membership, again using backward selection with the purpose of retaining only the significant parameters. In the third step, the previously identified friendship effects were added to the model, leading to a final model using a backward model process.

7.4 Results

7.4.1 Descriptive Analyses

Employees had the roles of sending, receiving, and/or being the object gossip. Figure 7.4 gives an overview of the degree distributions for these roles, separately for negative and positive gossip. For the sender roles, only the 30 actors who completed the questionnaire were included. One actor sending 109 positive gossip ties was also left out of the picture. Figure 7.4 shows that negative gossip was less frequent than positive gossip, especially being the object of negative gossip. All degree distributions were quite skewed due to the many actors not involved in positive or negative gossip.

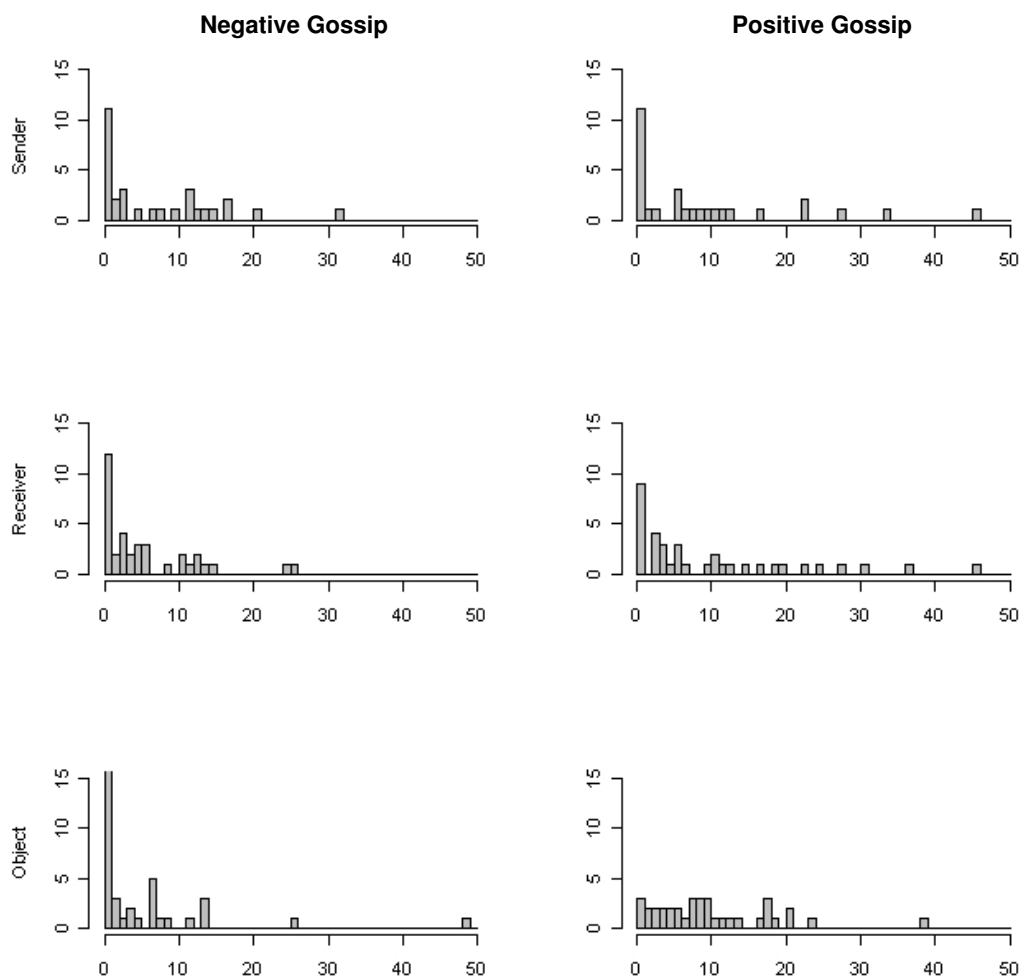


Figure 7.4 Degree Distributions of Negative and Positive Gossip for the Three Roles

More descriptive information and the ranked correlations between all gossip roles are given in Table 7.2. The median and spread in the negative gossip was lower than in the positive gossip network. The highest association was found between the negative and positive gossip degree for senders. Interesting was also the association between negative gossip degree of receivers and positive gossip degree of objects: employees receiving more negative gossip tended to be objects of positive gossip.

Table 7.2 Kendall's Tau, Median and Interquartile Range (IQR) for the Sender, Receiver and Object Degrees of Positive and Negative Gossip

	Role	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	Median	IQR
Negative Gossip Degree	1. Sender	0.21	0.18	0.53	0.08	0.18	2.5	11.5
	2. Receiver		0.23	0.00	0.28	0.36	3.5	8.75
	3. Object			0.10	0.07	0.21	2	7
Positive Gossip Degree	4. Sender				0.17	0.05	4.5	12.75
	5. Receiver					0.24	6	13
	6. Object						9	10

Negative gossip degrees correlated negatively with job satisfaction, especially with receiving ($r = -0.74$, $p < 0.001$) and sending ($r = -0.31$, $p = 0.10$), whereas positive gossip degrees correlated negatively with the objects' job satisfaction ($r = -0.42$, $p = 0.02$).

For descriptive purposes, the three-way positive and negative gossip data were summarized in three ways by summing over sender, receiver, or object dimension. The resulting matrices are represented as networks (where any positive number is represented as a tie) in Figure 7.5, together with the friendship and contact networks.

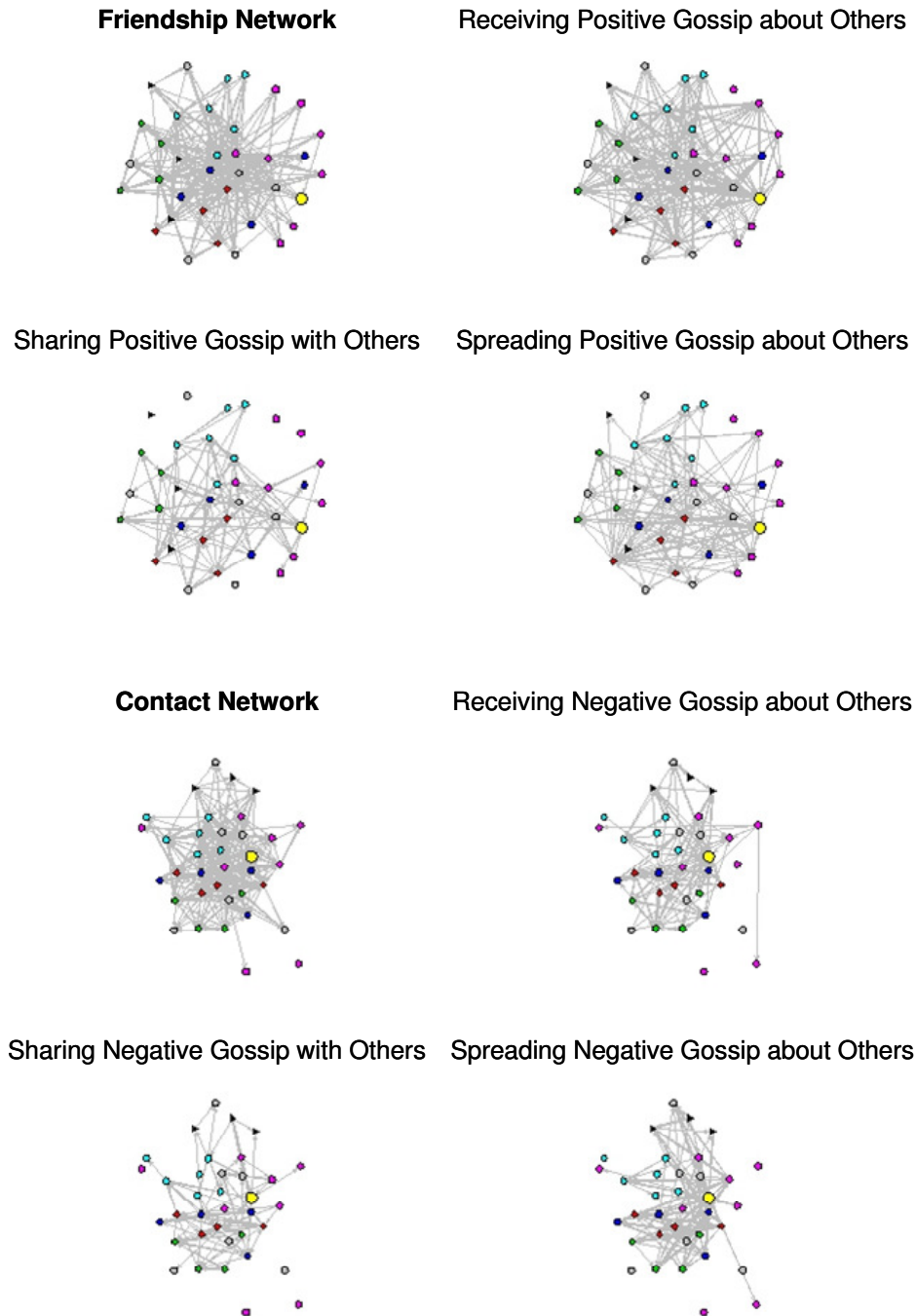


Figure 7.5 Social Networks of Friendship, Contact, and Gossip









As an example, the network “Receiving positive gossip about” is a result of collapsing the gossip three-way data over the senders. It indicates whether an actor (j) received positive gossip about an object (k) irrespective of the sender of the gossip. After positioning actors according to a Kamada-Kawai representation of the friendship network, the “Receiving positive gossip about” network seemed to resemble the friendship network. From the less dense “Sharing positive gossip with” network (collapsing over receivers), it can be deduced that the senders were most selective in choosing receivers. On the other hand, senders talked about more objects, as shown by the “Spreading positive gossip about” network. The negative gossip networks were organized according to contact, a slightly less dense network with a larger core, and some hardly connected actors (with one isolate). The site manager, represented by the larger light-colored node, was more central in the contact network than in the friendship network. The patterns of the negative gossip network were similar to the ones of positive gossip.

Table 7.3 shows the QAP correlations (Hubert, 1987; Krackhardt, 1987) using the numbers from the previously described two-dimensionally summarized gossip data (now called sender-receiver intensity for example for the “Sharing gossip with” network). Most correlations were weak. Correlations originating from sending gossip were strongest: 0.36 for negative and 0.44 for positive gossip. Shared group membership was positively associated with all other variables, i.e. gossip (except receiver-object), friendship, and contact frequency. Positive gossip correlated with friendship among the three actors in the triad, while negative gossip correlated only with friendship between sender and receiver. For consistency, the dichotomized friendship and contact networks are reported (correlations of the valued networks are slightly higher).

Before testing our hypothesis, we counted the friendship configurations (and the contact configurations) in every gossip triad, as shown in Table 7.4. Note that due to missing friendship and contact ties, the total numbers of positive and negative gossip for the friendship configurations were smaller than the observed counts in the data. Absolute numbers of counts by themselves, however, did not yet give an indication of effect sizes. For better comparison, and with the logistic regression model in mind, we computed log-odds ratios. Triads without friendships (000) served as the reference category, which by default had a log-odds ratio of zero. The results show, for example, that having a friendship tie with the object increased sending positive gossip but reduced sending negative gossip (log-odds ratios $n_{010(\text{pos.})} = 0.6$, $n_{010(\text{neg.})} = -0.7$).

Positive gossip triads were most often characterized by friendship among all three actors ($n_{111} = 86$, log-odds ratio = 2.8). This indicates closure, as stated in Hypothesis 2a. In triads of negative gossip, most often the sender was friends with the receiver, while they both were not friends with the object ($n_{100} = 54$, log-odds ratio = 2.2). This hints at the coalition structure proposed in Hypothesis 2b. These results on friendship are in-line with the above QAP correlations. Contact frequency was included as a control variable in our study. The tie counts show that both positive and negative gossip triads were mostly characterized by frequent contacts between sender and receiver, or by frequent contacts among the combination of all three actors.

Table 7.4 Counts and Log-odds Ratios of Friendship and Contact in Positive and Negative Gossip Triads

<i>ijk</i> Triad	Counts						Log-odds ratio			
	Friendship			Contact			Friendship		Contact	
	<i>N</i>	Pos.	Neg.	<i>N</i>	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.
 000	6828	24	22	5026	8	13	0	0	0	0
 100	1912	28	54	2362	41	25	1.4	2.2	2.4	1.4
 010	1932	12	3	2028	9	2	0.6	-0.7	1.0	-1.0
 001	3346	40	9	2740	11	16	1.2	-0.2	0.9	0.8
 110	2382	63	22	1653	62	30	2.0	1.1	3.2	2.0
 101	968	24	24	941	19	12	2.0	2.1	2.6	1.6
 011	948	14	4	1275	3	3	1.4	0.3	0.4	-0.1
 111	1598	86	18	1417	91	42	2.8	1.3	3.8	2.5
Total	19914	291	156	17299	244	143				

Note. Dark arrows indicate presence of friendship or contact, light arrows indicate absence of friendship or contact.

7.4.2 Hypotheses Tests: Logistic Regression Models with Three Correlated Random Effects

To test our hypotheses, we computed two sets of models, one set for positive and one set for negative gossip. Each set was comprised of a number of simple models and one joint model. First, separate models were estimated for every covariate (i.e., explanatory and control variables) to investigate the single effects of the covariates. The logistic regression parameter estimates of the resulting models after a backward selection process are presented in Tables 7.5 and 7.7. Second, a joint model was selected, backwardly from all variables in the separate models. The parameter estimates for the final model for positive and negative gossip are presented in Tables 7.6 and 7.8, respectively. Estimates of the covariance matrix and correlation between the random sender, receiver, and object effects are given in Table A.1 in the Appendix. In the following, we first test the hypotheses formulated earlier using the joint models. Second, further down after this section, we describe the results of the model selection process for

positive and negative gossip by comparing separate and joint models. Third, we discuss the impact of missing data.

The *interdependency hypothesis* (Hypothesis 1) stated that sending positive and negative gossip about an object would become more likely when sender, receiver, and object were instrumentally tied by shared group membership. The data yielded support for this prediction, as can be seen from the joint model on positive gossip in Table 7.6 and the joint model on negative gossip in Table 7.8. The likelihood of spreading gossip increased significantly if sender and receiver (positive gossip: $\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$; negative gossip: $\beta = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$), or sender and object (positive gossip: $\beta = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$; negative gossip: $\beta = 0.97$, $p < 0.01$), or receiver and object (positive gossip: $\beta = 1.05$, $p < 0.001$; negative gossip: $\beta = 1.27$, $p < 0.001$) belonged to the same group. However, there were no triadic interaction effects, suggesting that combinations of several shared group memberships in a triad did not lead to an additional increase in gossip activities. Based on these results, the highest increase can be expected when *any two* of the three actors are members of the same work group. Note that some configurations of the dyadic covariates did not need testing, since the variable of shared group membership was non-directional, and thus did not distinguish between out-coming and in-coming ties.

The *closure hypothesis* (Hypothesis 2a) predicted that a sender would spread positive gossip about an object when all three actors in the triad – namely, sender, receiver, and object – were tied by an expressive friendship tie. The results in Table 7.6 provide substantial support for this prediction. Positive gossip activities increased when the sender perceived the receiver as a friend ($\beta = 1.49$, $p < 0.01$), and when the sender perceived the object as a friend ($\beta = 1.39$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, friendship between receiver and object had a positive effect on the sender's tendency to gossip positively about this object ($\beta = 1.33$, $p < 0.01$). However, the relationship similarity of sender and receiver was not a precondition, as indicated by the lack of significant positive interactions of the dyadic covariates. This means sender and receiver did not both need to be friends with the object but may have differed in relationship quality. The dyadic interaction effects indicated the extra effect of two ties present in a triad. The negative estimates (for sender-object \times receiver-object) implies that the total effect was not simply the addition of the two single-tie effects, but that it was actually equivalent to the effect of just a sender-receiver tie (total effect is 1.48, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the sender-receiver \times receiver-object interaction effect showed that the indirect friendship effect was not (significantly) larger than the sender-receiver friendship tie (total effect is 1.78, $p < 0.001$). Only if the sender reported friendship ties with receiver and object, this increased the likelihood of a positive gossip tie, but not more than was to be expected on the basis of the single sender-receiver and sender-object friendship ties (in view of the non-significant interaction effect). Interestingly, the likelihood of positive gossip was further enhanced when friendship was reciprocated, i.e. when the sender was also perceived as a friend by the receiver ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) or by the object ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$). Generally speaking, it can be concluded that additional friendship ties advanced the

Table 7.5 Correlated Random Effects Logistic Regression Models for Positive Gossip: Separate Models by Covariate

			MODEL 1 Job Satisfaction ^b		MODEL 2 Contact		MODEL 3 Shared Group ^a		MODEL 4 Friendship	
			<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept			-5.65	0.33	-10.29	0.47	-8.18	0.33	-11.68	0.50
Main Effects of Dyadic Covariates										
→	<i>ij</i>	Sender-receiver	-0.74**	0.11	2.03**	0.37	1.78**	0.16	2.45**	0.34
↗	<i>ik</i>	Sender-object	-0.36**	0.11	1.20**	0.50	1.39**	0.14	1.91**	0.38
↘	<i>jk</i>	Receiver-object	-0.29**	0.08	0.87**	0.42	1.39**	0.14	1.68**	0.29
←	<i>ji</i>	Receiver-sender			0.36	0.42			1.51**	0.22
↖	<i>ki</i>	Object-sender			0.86**	0.16			0.44	0.25
↙	<i>kj</i>	Object-receiver			0.90**	0.16			0.94**	0.17
Interactions of Dyadic Covariates^c										
↗↘	<i>ij × ik</i>	Sender-receiver × sender-object			-0.22 (3.00)	0.52 (0.40)			0.29 (4.66)	0.43 (0.37)
↗↘↘	<i>ik × jk</i>	Sender-object × receiver-object			-0.83 (1.24)	0.73 (0.60)			-1.20** (2.39)	0.46 (0.46)
→↘	<i>ij × jk</i>	Sender-receiver × receiver-object			-0.51 (2.40)	0.47 (0.42)			-0.73* (3.41)	0.40 (0.38)
↖←	<i>ji × ki</i>	Receiver-sender × object-sender							0.56* (2.51)	0.27 (0.26)
↔	<i>ij × ji</i>	Sender-receiver × receiver-sender			1.36** (3.76)	0.44 (0.36)				
Interactions in Complete Triad^c										
↗↘↘	<i>ij × ik × jk</i>	Sen-rec × sen-obj × rec-obj			1.55** (4.08)	0.80 (0.41)			1.20* (5.61)	0.59 (0.39)











Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. ^a Because the shared group variable is undirected (i.e., symmetric), some effects are not applicable. ^b Burnin 1,500; sample size 6,000. ^c Statistics in parantheses indicate the total effects.

Table 7.6 Correlated Random Effects Logistic Regression Model for Positive Gossip: Joint Model for all Covariates

			JOINT MODEL							
			Job Satisfaction ^b		Contact		Shared Group ^a		Friendship	
			Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Intercept			-12.14	(0.57)						
Main Effects of Dyadic Covariates										
→	<i>ij</i>	Sender-receiver	-0.47*	0.15	1.76**	0.30	0.61***	0.20	1.49**	0.40
↗	<i>ik</i>	Sender-object			0.61**	0.18	0.89***	0.18	1.39**	0.39
↘	<i>jk</i>	Receiver-object					1.05***	0.19	1.33**	0.29
←	<i>ji</i>	Receiver-sender			-0.25	0.43			0.68***	0.23
↖	<i>ki</i>	Object-sender							0.57**	0.21
↙	<i>kj</i>	Object-receiver			0.60**	0.18			0.46**	0.19
Interactions of Dyadic Covariates^c										
↗↘	<i>ij × ik</i>	Sender-receiver × sender-object							0.40 (3.27)	0.45 (0.40)
↗↖	<i>ik × jk</i>	Sender-object × receiver-object							-1.34** (1.48)	0.47 (0.59)
→↘	<i>ij × jk</i>	Sender-receiver × receiver-object							-1.04* (1.78)	0.40 (0.41)
↖←	<i>ji × ki</i>	Receiver-sender × object-sender								
↔	<i>ij × ji</i>	Sender-receiver × receiver-sender			1.41** (2.91)	0.47 (0.30)				
Interactions in Complete Triad^c										
↗↖↘	<i>ij × ik × jk</i>	Sen-rec × sen-obj × rec-obj							1.50* (3.72)	0.58 (0.43)










Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. ^a For the shared group some effects are not applicable. ^b Simple actor covariates for sender, receiver, and object are not reported because they were insignificant. ^c Statistics in brackets indicate total effects, that is, the sum of main effects plus the interaction effect.

Table 7.7 Correlated Random Effects Logistic Regression Models for Negative Gossip: Separate Models by Covariate

			MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4		MODEL 5	
			Site Manager		Job Satisfaction ^b		Contact		Shared Group ^a		Friendship	
			<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept			-8.22	0.38	-8.21	0.38	-12.99	0.60	-9.39	0.40	-9.82	0.48
Actor Covariates												
	<i>i</i>	Sender	2.79	2.15	-0.96*	0.41						
	<i>j</i>	Receiver	1.84	1.68	-1.02***	0.23						
	<i>k</i>	Object	3.59**	1.65	-0.81*	0.34						
Main Effects of Dyadic Covariates												
	<i>ij</i>	Sender-receiver			-0.35*	0.14	3.10***	0.33	2.11***	0.18	2.22***	0.28
	<i>ik</i>	Sender-object					0.82***	0.23	1.33***	0.22		
	<i>jk</i>	Receiver-object					0.47*	0.21	1.39***	0.21	0.87**	0.39
	<i>ji</i>	Receiver-sender					2.06***	0.24			1.70**	0.38
	<i>ki</i>	Object-sender					1.13***	0.23				
	<i>kj</i>	Object-receiver					0.88***	0.23				
Interactions of Dyadic Covariates^c												
	<i>ij × ik</i>	Sender-receiver × sender-object									-1.14*	0.42
											(1.95)	(0.36)

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. ^a Because shared group is undirected (i.e., symmetric), some effects are not applicable. ^b Burnin 1,500, sample size 7,500. ^c Statistics in brackets indicate total effects, that is, the sum of main effects plus the interaction effect.

Table 7.8 Correlated Random Effects Logistic Regression Model for Negative Gossip: Joint Model for all Covariates

	JOINT MODEL									
	Site Manager		Job Satisfaction		Contact		Shared Group ^a		Friendship	
	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	-13.1	0.63								
Actor Covariates										
 <i>i</i> Sender	5.18*	2.26	-1.12*	0.51						
 <i>j</i> Receiver	3.06**	0.96	-1.02***	0.21						
 <i>k</i> Object	4.89**	1.59	-0.83*	0.33						
Main Effects of Dyadic Covariates										
 <i>ij</i> Sender-receiver					2.54***	0.35	0.91***	0.23	0.99***	0.27
 <i>ik</i> Sender-object					0.77*	0.24	0.97**	0.26	-1.03***	0.26
 <i>jk</i> Receiver-object					0.45	0.21	1.27***	0.23		
 <i>ji</i> Receiver-sender					1.25***	0.29			0.76*	0.32
 <i>ki</i> Object-sender					1.04***	0.25				
 <i>kj</i> Object-receiver					0.48*	0.24				

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. ^a Because the shared group variable is undirected (i.e., symmetric), some effects are not applicable.

chances of positive gossip in employee triads. This argument was eventually supported by a significant triadic interaction effect ($\beta = 1.50$, $p < 0.05$, with a total effect of 3.72, $p < 0.001$): The likelihood of positive gossip was highest when all three actors are friends with one another.

The *coalition hypothesis* (Hypothesis 2b) proposed that negative gossip about an object would be facilitated when sender and receiver were tied by a friendship relationship with each other but not with the object. The results in Table 7.8 yield partial support for this hypothesis.¹⁶ In accordance with our expectation, friendship between sender and receiver was positively related to sharing negative gossip ($\beta = 0.99$, $p < 0.001$ and $\beta = 0.76$, $p < 0.05$), especially when mutual. In line with our prediction, the findings also highlight that friendship of the sender with the object reduced negative gossip activities ($\beta = -1.03$, $p < 0.001$). However, in contrast to sending, negative gossip was not significantly reduced by lack of friendship of the receiver with the object of negative gossip (the non-significant negative effect in the separate model is not reported in the table). Apparently, senders spread gossip regardless of the receiver's relationship quality with the object. The latter finding did not support the hypothesized relationship similarity of sender and receiver with regard to the object.

Finally, the three control variables yielded some interesting findings. First, the site manager was very prominent in gossip triads: He was significantly more often involved in sending and receiving negative gossip than other employees at the site, and more often became the object of negative gossip. Unlike negative gossip, positive gossip activities were not affected by manager status but distributed more evenly across the network of employees. Models including manager status are therefore only reported for negative gossip. Second, job satisfaction had an impact on gossiping. While job satisfaction was not related to the individual's propensity to send, receive, or become the object of positive gossip, we observed a similarity effect in employee dyads: The more similar sender and receiver were in their job satisfaction, the more likely they exchanged positive gossip about their colleagues (Table 7.6; $\beta = -0.47$, $p < 0.05$). The same effect did not exist for negative gossip. Instead, we found that being satisfied with the job decreased the individual's likelihood to send and receive, and to become the object of negative gossip, as indicated by the three negative actor covariates for job satisfaction in Table 7.8. Last, the frequency of contact between employees was a strong predictor of sharing both positive and negative gossip, as demonstrated by the mainly significant and positive main effects. This effect was strongest for the relationship between sender and receiver, and

¹⁶ Note that from the separate model on friendship (Table 7.7, Model 5) it looks like there was positive closure in negative gossip triads, similar to the closure effect in positive gossip triads, meaning that all three actors were friends with one another. This effect, however, was observed due to the fact that the separate model did not contain and thus control for shared group membership, which correlated positively with friendship ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). The closure effect disappeared after shared group membership was added to the joint model.

weakest for the relationship between receiver and object of gossip (for positive gossip the latter effect between receiver and object disappears).

7.4.3 Comparing Separate and Joint Models for Positive Gossip

Model 1 in Table 7.5 investigated the single effect of job satisfaction on positive gossip. It shows that the effect of job satisfaction was best represented by the three dyadic effects of absolute difference between pairs of actors, whereas no significant effect of individual job satisfaction was found for the three roles. The larger the difference between two actors in job satisfaction, the lower the probability of a positive gossip tie became. This effect was strongest for the sender-receiver pair. This result seemed to contradict the QAP correlation, where the strongest correlation between the absolute difference scores of job satisfaction was found with intensity of gossip between receiver and object. This discrepancy could be due to the missing observations in job satisfaction and will be commented on further below. The dyadic effects found in the model for shared group (Model 3) showed a better correspondence with the QAP correlations by indicating a higher probability of positive gossip whenever sender, receiver, and/or object worked in the same group.

Contact also increased the likelihood of positive gossip for any (directed) contact tie between two actors, as shown in Model 2. In triads with more contact ties, this probability was even higher. The total effects are reported in parentheses below the interaction effect; e.g. for sender-receiver plus sender-object the total effect was 3.00 (this number resembled the log-odds ratio of 3.2 reported in Table 7.4; the other effects corresponded similarly). The effect of friendship (Model 4) was slightly stronger than that of contact, where single and total effects were all higher. For contact, there was a strong positive reciprocity (interaction) effect between sender and receiver (3.76), whereas for friendship the two separate effects (sender-receiver and receiver-sender) were both indicative of a larger probability of positive gossip.

In the joint model for positive gossip, presented in Table 7.6, job satisfaction only had a (diminished) sender-receiver dyadic effect. Furthermore, shared group had a reduced effect, especially in sender-receiver dyads. The effect of friendship proved to outweigh the effect of contact. Friendship in all directed ties enhanced the probability of positive gossip, and its effect increased if the friendship tie originated from the sender. The sender-receiver main and reciprocity effects of contact remained significant. Eventually, three dyadic effects remained: sender-receiver, sender-object, and object-receiver ties increased positive gossip. These ties together form a pattern of a *closed transitive triad*. Instead of the latter effect, object-receiver ties, we originally expected an effect in the other direction, i.e. for receiver-object ties. Transitivity indicates that senders may choose friends of friends as receivers for positive gossip to intensify expressive bonds with the receivers. However, without a causality test the sequential order of the tie formation between the three actors remains unknown.

7.4.4 *Comparing Separate and Joint Models for Negative Gossip*

In Table 7.7, the separate models for negative gossip are presented. They turned out to be simpler than the separate models for positive gossip: Fewer dyadic covariate effects were found. Instead, main dyadic effects and actor covariate effects turned out significant, except for a sender-receiver dyadic effect of job satisfaction (as in Model 2 for positive gossip, see Table 7.5) and a sender-receiver \times sender-object interaction effect of friendship (Model 4). The main actor job satisfaction effects were all negative, indicating that the higher an employee's job satisfaction, the less likely s/he engages in negative gossip, either as sender, receiver, or object. Model 1 shows the very large sender, receiver, and object effects of being the site manager. They are presented due to their size even though they are not significant except for the object effect (this is due to large standard errors, as there is only one supervisor). Belonging to the same work group increased the likelihood of gossip for all dyadic actor role combinations (Model 4). The dyadic effects found for contact (Model 3) were strongest for the ties involving the sender and receiver of negative gossip, followed by the sender-object dyad. There were fewer effects for friendship ties on negative gossip. Like for contact, the sender-receiver dyad was most important.

In the joint model (see Table 7.8), all of the earlier found effects remained, with the exception of the absolute difference between sender and receiver in job satisfaction and the dyadic interaction effect of friendship. This result implies that for negative gossip, contact ties between all actors were important (i.e., large enough to be significant), which was not the case for friendship. Next to strong sender-receiver effects in both directions, the object-sender contact tie (in both directions) had a relatively large effect in increasing negative gossip. Noteworthy is the large negative effect of a receiver-object friendship tie, which indicates that negative gossip was less likely in a triad where receiver was friends with object. This effect weakens the enhancing effect of contact on negative gossip.

7.4.5 *Influence of Missing Data on Results*

In our study, 30 out of 36 invited employees participated. Because the six non-respondents were still mentioned by their colleagues, missing data on actor covariates and dyadic covariates were imputed in a simple non-sophisticated manner. Thus, we could use all available triadic data. To check how sensitive the conclusions built on the models for 36 actors were for the imputed data, we also estimated the models for only complete data, which was available for 28 actors (two additional actors had provided data on job satisfaction and friendship but not on their contact relations).

As expected, the results suffered from loss of power in the sense that smaller effects found in the models for 36 actors were not significant anymore. No substantive other conclusions had to be drawn with regard to the joint models. For positive gossip, the dyadic interaction effects were reduced in size and therefore no longer significant. The total effects, however, were comparable in size. Both the sender-object and object-receiver effect increased, and together with the sender-receiver effect showed some evidence of the closed triad configurations found earlier in the joint model. For negative

gossip, the parameter estimates also showed some subtle differences, i.e. an increased (negative) effect of job satisfaction of receiver and object (apparently the imputation of the missing job satisfaction scores had a dampening effect on the estimates), and reduced dyadic sender-receiver and sender-object effects in favor of the receiver-object shared group effect (here no imputation was needed). The stronger effect of contact compared to friendship was confirmed by an increased (positive) object-sender effect of contact and a reduced (negative) effect of sender-object friendship.

Finally, because of the huge influence of the site manager in the joint model for negative gossip, we re-ran this model excluding the site manager – thus for 35 actors. Here, we found basically the same results (in terms of significance) but slightly weaker effects of the receiver-sender effect of contact, the receiver-object effect of shared group, and the sender-receiver effect of friendship. Taken everything together, the results appeared to be rather insensitive toward imputations. We now turn to the discussion of the findings.

7.5 Discussion

Researchers agree that gossip is a social phenomenon where multiple actors interact (Burt and Knez, 1996; Michelson et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2010; Wittek and Wielers, 1998): People can play the roles of sending and receiving gossip, and be the object of gossip. Based on these three different roles, we conceptualized the so-called *gossip triad*, in which a sender spreads gossip to a receiver about an absent third person, in other words, the object. Using reasoning from social capital theory (Lin, 2001), it was proposed that the employees' involvement in these roles would depend on the multiple combinations of the social relationships that the employees in the gossip triad had with one another, more specifically, the degree to which they were tied instrumentally and expressively.

In line with our expectation, instrumental ties between the actors in the triad, based on shared membership in work groups, increased the flow of both positive and negative gossip. Furthermore, closed triads, in which all the actors shared an expressive friendship tie, were found to breed positive gossip. The findings yielded only partial support for the assumption that negative gossip flourishes in coalition triads, where sender and receiver share a friendship tie with each other but not with the object: Friendship between sender and receiver enhanced gossip, and friendship between sender and object inhibited negative gossip. However, negative gossip spread regardless of the receiver's relationship with the object, in contrast to what we expected.

To the best of our knowledge, the study at hand is the first to systematically examine the three roles and the interplay of the social relationships in the triad, using an empirical case study and triadic social network analysis. Data stemmed from one site in a Dutch childcare organization and contained information on the employees' sociometric network (i.e., three-way network data). Building on models for continuous triadic data and models for binary dyadic data, the statistical model developed specifically for this

study incorporated a logistic regression model with three correlated random effects for sender, receiver, and object. No random interaction effects were specified in the model. This represents the implicit assumption that the correlations between the different actor roles are adequately represented by the covariance matrix of the random effects. The model could be extended with more random effects to (in)validate this assumption.

The findings underpin the notion that individuals required to cooperate in groups have a broad interest in exchanging information about each other. Interestingly, this is the case both for positive and for negative information. A possible explanation for this is provided by arguments from evolutionary theory (Davis and McLeod, 2003; Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005; McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002). According to this line of reasoning, individuals of a functional group are goal-interdependent, for example, they work together on a project or compete against other teams in sporting events. First, appraisal may be used to encourage and promote cooperative behaviors that are beneficial for the group, for instance, when a group member puts additional effort into a group task or displays extra-role behavior. Second, criticism can help to discourage behavior that impairs group aims, for example, behavior such as social loafing and free-riding on the efforts of those who do contribute to the goals (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). Through sharing negative information, group members become aware of norm deviations and coordinate sanctions collectively. This latter – criticisms of group members – seemed slightly more prevalent in our study, since the effect of shared group membership was stronger for negative than for positive gossip. Instrumental ties between *any* of the three actors increased gossip flow. There was no additional increase when all three actors were tied instrumentally. This means that not all three employees need to be part of the same work group, because gossipers also look for receivers and objects outside their group. This suggests that gossip is not necessarily an in-group phenomenon.

The substantial support for our closure hypothesis and the partial support for the coalition hypothesis indicated that gossip also originates in expressive ties. More specifically, we found friendship effects over and above shared group membership and contact frequency, which we controlled for in the models. The existence of many (mutual) friendship ties in the gossip triad potentially enhanced the likelihood of positive gossip, as indicated by the significant interactions. Previous research has also shown that gossip is mainly observed between friends (Bosson et al., 2006; Jaeger et al., 1994), and that people have an enhanced interest in positive information about friends (McAndrew et al., 2007). Contrarily, people are more interested in gossip about non-friends and rivals when it is negative (De Backer and Gurven, 2006; Keltner et al., 2008; McAndrew et al., 2007).

Our findings lacked support for the argument that senders of negative gossip would seek receivers who have a similar relationship with the object in order to reduce the risks of social repercussions, including tensions with both the receivers as well as the objects. This may be explained as follows. On the one hand, the sender simply may not find relationship similarity important. In fact, the sender may be concerned with dissimilarities in opinions about the object and may even attempt to change the receiver's

(i.e., his or her friend's) opinion of the object. However, this would appear to be unlikely because we have seen that, if receiver and object are friends, the likelihood of sending *positive* gossip increases. On the other hand, the sender may misperceive the actual relationship quality between the receiver and the object. It could well be that the sender approaches a receiver who he or she *thinks* has a negative relationship with the object, but which in fact is not the case, i.e. not reported by the receiver.¹⁷

From the results we can conclude that positive gossip is most influenced by expressive ties, in view of the strong friendship effects. In contrast, negative gossip is influenced by weaker, instrumental ties, given the stronger and exclusively positive effects of shared group membership compared to the mixed friendship effects. Involvement in negative gossip further increased for employees with low job satisfaction (however, this should be interpreted with caution because low satisfaction could also be a consequence). Thus, the data point out that negative gossip may be used to release frustration on the job (Fine and Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Furthermore, the site manager tended to attract negative gossip. Interestingly, the site manager was also actively (though not extremely) involved in receiving and sending negative gossip, which was actually mostly blended.

One limitation of the present study concerns its generalizability. Our findings were based on a case study in a childcare organization and should ideally be replicated in an organizational network with a more balanced gender composition and one characterized by a more competitive context (i.e., in the for-profit sector). Future studies might compare several networks and also elaborate on the structural antecedents of social networks beyond triads (Shaw et al., 2010). Some other subjects for investigation could also be, for instance, to what extent density in employee cliques enhances gossip, and how far communication constraints and brokerage (e.g., structural holes) in the network impair employees in their gossip behavior (Witteck and Wielers, 1998). Furthermore, future studies might go on to address the outcomes of gossip. Those consequences relevant for organizations would involve, for example, employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, cooperation, performance, and other relevant concepts from the organizational literature on social capital (Brass et al., 2004; Flap and Volker, 2001). It is crucial to differentiate between the consequences for gossipers and gossip objects. Sharing gossip may have beneficial effects for an employee's wellbeing and performance, while being the object of gossip may have detrimental effects.

¹⁷ Note that the lacking support did not result from data power issues as friendship was significant in the separate model. Instead, it can be argued that other covariates like contact frequency and group membership were more powerful predictors of negative gossip than friendship.

Appendix

Table A.1 reports the random effect covariance matrix estimates as well as the correlations between the random effects. Three general patterns are visible:

1. Sender variance was always largest for positive and negative gossip, whereas sender-receiver and sender-object correlations were lowest. We interpret this as: (fixed) sender effects were strongest (as was also seen in Tables 7.5-7.8).
2. Variances were highest (and correlations were lowest) for positive gossip. Again, this means that the positive gossip model explained more than the negative gossip model, or alternatively that the power was larger for the positive gossip data. This was because there were more positive gossip triadic relations.
3. The joint models always explained more than the separate models.

Table A.1 Estimated variances, covariances, and correlations of random effects for all models on positive and negative gossip

	MODEL 1	MODEL 1/2	MODEL 2/3	MODEL 3/4	MODEL 4/5	MODEL
	Site Manager	Job Satisfaction	Contact	Shared Group	Friendship	JOINT
	<i>Est.</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>Est.</i>
POSITIVE GOSSIP						
Variance						
Sender		4.55	5.56	5.11	7.99	8.94
Receiver		3.00	1.60	3.59	2.93	2.24
Object		0.98	0.85	2.58	1.14	1.14
Covar./correlation						
Sender-receiver		1.0/0.27	0.74/0.25	0.89/0.21	1.58/0.33	0.80/0.18
Sender-object		0.50/0.23	0.37/0.17	0.94/0.26	1.34/0.45	0.97/0.30
Receiver-object		0.99/0.57	0.29/0.25	1.88/0.61	0.59/0.32	0.19/0.12
NEGATIVE GOSSIP						
Variance						
Sender	4.33	3.58	6.87	4.51	4.79	4.69
Receiver	2.55	1.16	2.39	2.87	2.01	0.70
Object	2.57	2.62	4.10	3.65	3.29	2.27
Covar./correlation						
Sender-receiver	1.91/0.57	0.91/0.45	2.18/0.53	2.17/0.60	1.67/0.54	-0.07/-0.03
Sender-object	1.82/0.53	1.51/0.49	3.34/0.63	2.51/0.62	2.33/0.58	1.08/0.33
Receiver-object	1.77/0.66	1.07/0.61	2.13/0.68	2.37/0.73	2.01/0.78	0.51/0.40

Chapter 8

General Discussion and Conclusion

8 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Gossip is ubiquitous, it can be observed in virtually every workplace. However, the extent to which employees become involved in the activity of workplace gossip – either as senders, receivers or objects of gossip – varies largely across organizational networks. The present book studied how trust relationships in an organization affect who gossips, about whom, and how gossip impacts trust relationships between gossipers. It was argued that a substantial amount of this variance is explained by the different purposes of gossiping, and the characteristics of the informal trust network of employees. Five empirical studies shed light on the interrelationship between trust and gossip, by examining gossip as a product of trust (Burt, 2005), and as a cause of trust (Bosson et al., 2006; Dunbar, 2004).

The empirical findings confirm the notion that employees give away potentially precarious third-party information if they trust the others not to disclose it. Employees benefit from sharing third-party information, as it allows them to nourish, strengthen, and influence social relationships, and to gather information about tensions in the broader network. It also enables employees to influence the reputations of disliked others, rivals, and powerful competitors. However, gossipers are aware of the potential costs of their behavior, and hence choose their gossip partners carefully, namely those whom they trust. Employees know that “when you exchange sensitive information with someone, trust is implicit in the risk you now face that the other person might leak the information” (Burt, 2005, p. 93). By disclosing private information about social relationships in their network, senders of gossip make themselves vulnerable to receivers of gossip, who may exploit the information for selfish advantage. If the object finds out about harmful gossip, the senders run risks of direct or indirect retaliation. The sender may be punished by the object, or by defenders of the object, e.g. others may complain about the behavior. Therefore, negative gossip was proposed to be especially costly behavior and to require trustworthy allies.

Besides, it is important to also note the potentially positive effects of gossip. In the studied organization, employees on average gossiped more positively than negatively. Gossip is a way to signal trust in others and thereby is a mechanism to facilitate friendships with these others. Hence, gossip may promote trust relationships rather than undermine them. In fact, trust was undermined in employees who actively engaged in frequent negative gossip. A main conclusion is that gossip is strategic behavior on the one hand, and a means to foster trust relationships on the other hand.

In this concluding chapter, first the main findings are summarized. Then, theoretical implications are discussed, as well as directions for future research. Finally, the chapter finishes with a discussion of practical implications.

8.1 Summary of the Empirical Findings

The antecedences of gossip have been addressed through four levels of analysis, namely the actor, dyad, triad, and network level. Table 8.1 shows the addressed levels for every chapter (3 to 7).

Table 8.1 Levels of Analysis and According Book Chapters

Level	Outcome Variable		
	Who (sender)	With whom (receiver)	About whom (object)
Actor	3, 4		
Dyad	4, 5, 6	4, 6	5
Triad	4, 7	4, 7	7
Network	5, 6	6	5

Figure 8.1 gives a graphical impression of the findings revealed by the five empirical studies on each analytical level, using the original variable labels. Furthermore, table 8.2 presents a more detailed overview of the hypothesized effects and the according results at the end of this section.

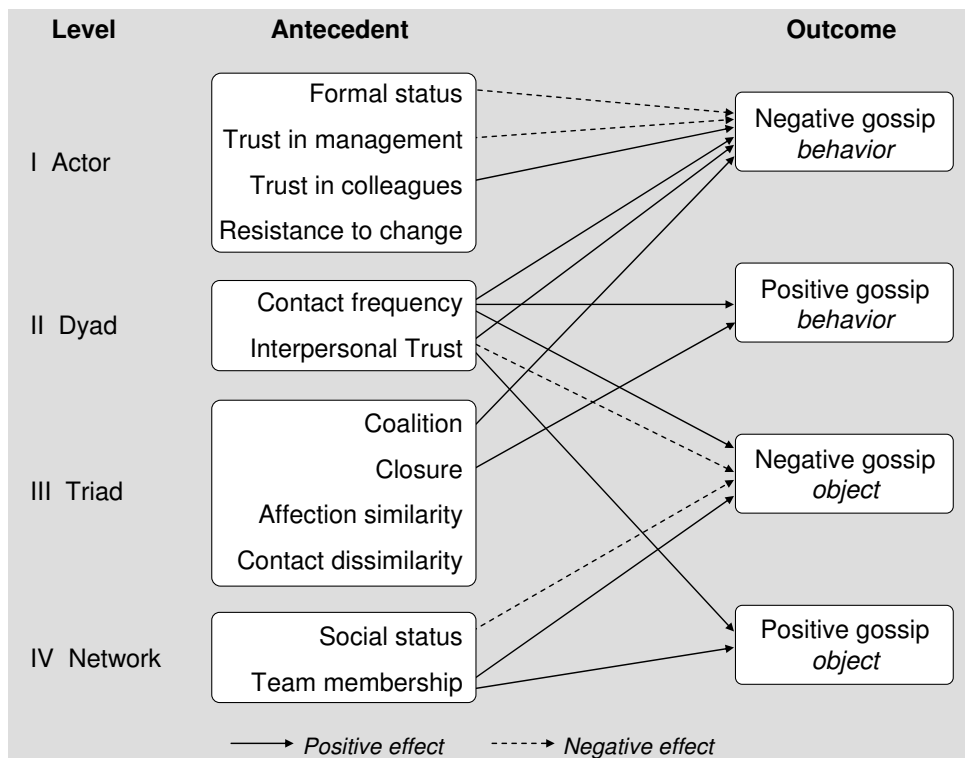


Figure 8.1 Summary of the Findings

8.1.1 *Who Gossips, and with Whom?*

Gossip seems to be a “weapon of the weak” (Scott, 1985), of the distrustful, and the dissatisfied. Specifically, Chapter 3 showed that employees of subordinate status were more prone to negative gossip about management than employees of supervisor status. The suggested underlying mechanism regards the use of gossip as a covert means of resistance against authorities, for example in response to disagreeable managerial decisions, unwanted organizational changes (i.e., cognitive resistance to change), and breaches of generalized trust. In addition, Chapter 4 demonstrated how employees with little contact and low interpersonal trust in managers engaged more often in negative gossip than employees with much contact and trust. Interestingly, the same predictors had no consequences for positive gossip behavior.

The negative gossip effects seen in incidences of low trust in management were further enhanced when employees had strong trust relationships with their colleagues. Based on these findings, it was further examined whether negative gossip is predominantly observed in so-called coalition triads, where two employees have a trust relationship (i.e., friendship) with one another but not with the third person. However, neither Chapter 4 nor Chapter 7 provided support for such a coalition effect. Hence, gossip senders, who trusted the receiver but not the object, shared negative gossip with receivers regardless of the receiver’s relationship with the object. Besides, Chapter 7 shows a closure effect for positive gossip: sharing positive gossip is predominantly observed in closed triads, where all employees have a trust relationship with one another.

8.1.2 *About Whom is the Gossip?*

Gossip is typically observed *about* employees who are poorly trusted, who have few friends in the organizational network, who are in the same work group, and who have a position of authority. First, Chapters 3 and 4 yielded that negative gossip was about managers who had few friends and were hardly trusted by their subordinates. This supports the assumption that gossip is a means of bestowing harmful reputations on others. Second, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, low informal social status in the broader trust network – and thus lacking trust by others in general – made employees vulnerable to becoming the object of negative talk. An intriguing finding is that these characteristics did *not* affect the likelihood of becoming the object of positive gossip. This provides some indication that gossiping is used for the purpose of socially controlling and encouraging the contributions of members to the group’s goal (e.g., accomplishing a project), and socially excluding members who are seen as misfits in the group, e.g. because they do not support the group’s values (Keltner et al., 2008; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). Third, further underpinning the social control function, formal relationships were a meaningful predictor of gossip behavior; employees had an enhanced interest in third-party conversations about colleagues who belonged to their formal work group, as both positive and negative gossip exchange was more prevalent within teams, than between teams. (Chapter 5 and 7). Finally, in Chapter 7, the site manager was the most frequent target of negative gossip in the site.

Table 8.2 Overview of Hypothesized Effects and Results

Ch.	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Hypothesized Effect	Result
Gossip about managers/management				
3	Formal status (subordinate vs. manager)	Negative gossip about managers	Subordinate status leads to more gossip	Supported
3, 4	Generalized trust in management	Gossip about managers	Trust decreases <i>negative</i> but increases <i>positive</i> gossip	Supported for negative gossip
3	Formal status × generalized trust in management	Negative gossip about managers	Moderation: effect of trust is stronger for subordinates than for managers	Supported
3	Cognitive resistance to organizational change	Negative gossip about managers	More resistance leads to more gossip	Partly supported
3	Cognitive resistance / generalized trust in management	Negative gossip about managers	Mediation: trust mediates effect of resistance on gossip	Supported
4	Generalized trust in colleagues × trust in management	Negative gossip about managers	Moderation: trust in colleagues enhances negative effect of trust in management on gossip	Supported
Gossip about direct managers and colleagues				
4	Contact frequency with direct manager	Gossip about direct manager	Frequent contact decreases gossip	Supported for negative gossip
4	Dissimilarity in contact frequency with direct manager between two gossipers	Gossip about direct manager	Dissimilar contact frequencies increase gossip	Not supported
4 / 7	Affective relationship with direct manager / colleague	Negative gossip about direct manager / colleague	Affection decreases gossip	Supported
4 / 7	Similarity in affection for direct manager / colleague between two gossipers	Gossip about direct manager / colleague	Similar affective relationships (coalition or closure) increase gossip	Not supported (some support for closure)
5, 7	Shared group membership	Being the object of positive and negative gossip	Increased gossip about colleagues from own work group	Supported
5	Social status in employee network	Being the object of gossip	<i>Positive</i> gossip increases with social status, <i>negative</i> gossip decreases with social status	Supported for negative gossip
5	Concentration of gossip on few objects	Negative versus positive gossip	Negative gossip is more concentrated than positive gossip (“scapegoating”)	Supported
Co-evolution of gossip and friendship between employees				
6	Friendship	Gossip	Friendship facilitates gossip over time	Not supported
6	Gossip	Friendship	Gossip facilitates friendship over time	Partly supported (for dyads)

8.1.3 *Does Trust Breed Gossip or Does Gossip Breed Trust?*

Gossip can breed interpersonal trust. The longitudinal study in Chapter 6 emphasized that gossip senders sacrifice private third-party information in order to send trust signals to gossip receivers, and eventually establish new friendships with them. From the present study it can be concluded that the creation of a ‘gossip tie’ does *not* necessarily require interpersonal trust, as commonly expected (Burt, 2005), but also can have a substantial influence on the generation of trust between senders and receivers.

The interrelationship between gossip and trust, however, seems to be a curvilinear one: disproportional engagement in gossip activity led to negative repercussions for gossip senders. More specifically, active gossipers (unlike inactive gossipers) were increasingly avoided by the group over time. Interpersonal and generalized trust in organizations are closely related to sending negative gossip and to becoming the object of negative gossip at the workplace, but not so closely related to positive gossip. In addition, formal relationships triggered gossip exchange, such as differences in hierarchical status, and working in teams.

8.2 Theoretical Implications

Gossip is a triadic social phenomenon. Gossip triads comprise gossiping behavior between three individuals, who are interdependent – individuals either send gossip, receive gossip, or are the object of gossip. The social relationships between these individuals may differ in their quality, e.g. the level of interpersonal trust. Although work on organizational gossip has theorized on the gossip triad (Bergmann, 1993), empirical research has typically focused only on a selection of one or two individuals. There were only few exceptions where the triad was studied as a whole (Buskens et al., 2010; Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Studied topics are, for instance, the relationship between sender and receiver (Bosson et al., 2006; Burt, 2005), the relationship between sender and object (McAndrew et al., 2007), or psychological traits of the sender (Nevo et al., 1994). Through perceiving gossip as a triadic phenomenon, this book advanced insights into the trust relationships between gossiping individuals in several ways.

8.2.1 *Disentangling Senders and Receivers: Individual Decisions to Gossip*

Disentangling senders, receivers, and objects of gossip is a necessary although complex step when researching gossip in organizations (Michelson et al., 2010). Employees participating in workplace gossip assume the role of either sender or receiver; sometimes they assume both roles interchangeably. Hence, there are different roles with different antecedences. The present studies found substantial differences in the employees’ inclination to either send or receive gossip. Most remarkably, interpersonal trust in an object decreased the tendency to *send* negative gossip about this object, but not the tendency to *receive* negative gossip about this object. This means that employees listened to gossip regardless of their relationship quality with the object (Chapter 4 and 7).

Because antecedences of sending and receiving gossip differ, it can neither be assumed that senders and receivers engage equally as much in gossip activities, nor that their roles are interchangeable. As a result, gossip should not be equated with mutual exchange behavior in dyads. Gossip may be initiated by one party (i.e., the sender) but not reciprocated immediately, or only at a later point in time. Moreover, receivers often reciprocate gossip with other behaviors instead, such as social support, trust, and friendship (Chapter 6). In some cases, receivers even decide to withdraw from gossip activities completely. A comprehensive analysis of gossip needs to account for possible asymmetric behaviors in dyads through studying the motivations of senders and receivers separately. Otherwise, some of the antecedences and consequences of gossiping will likely remain undiscovered.

Another advantage of disentangling the different roles involved in gossiping is that it allows for a comparison of the individual characteristics of senders with those of receivers. For example, it is typically assumed that women gossip more than men (Guendouzi, 2001). However, empirical support for this tendency seems to depend on the gender composition in gossip dyads (Leaper and Holliday, 1995). More gossip has been observed in woman-to-woman dyads than in man-to-man dyads or mixed dyads. In contrast, there are no differences in the inclination to gossip between men and women when they talk to someone from the opposite gender, i.e. *within* mixed dyads. Similarly to gender, other characteristics are comparable, such as formal status and job satisfaction of sender and receiver. It can be studied, for instance, whether similarly or dissimilarly satisfied employees tend to gossip with one another (Chapter 7), and whether they socially influence their satisfaction through the activity of gossip over time.

Moreover, senders and receivers can be compared with regard to their relationship quality with a third party. More specifically, we can ask whether two employees have a similar relationship with a target, i.e. whether they both trust the target, or whether they both distrust the target. Do they influence each other in their opinion about the target? In Chapter 4, it was tested whether gossiping subordinates had a similar trust relationship with their supervisor, who was the gossip object. The results, however, yielded no support for relationship similarity (i.e., balance, Heider, 1958). More research is needed into the area of triads to unravel the mechanism of balanced opinions on third parties. Chapter 7 presented a novel statistical approach that allowed the examination of complete triadic data. It could be shown how different combinations of relationships in the triad interact and facilitate gossip. Using this method, many of the puzzles of the earlier chapters were put together and analyzed jointly.

8.2.2 *Including the Objects of Gossip: Network Embeddedness and Status Matters*

The methodological approach developed in this book (Chapter 2) demonstrated how researchers opting for real-life workplace studies on gossip can measure and investigate the objects as part of the triad. The likelihood of becoming the object of gossip depended on the employees' embeddedness in the social network. Those who were poorly integrated in the overall trust network, more often became the topic of

negative gossip than other more embedded employees. This can turn into a downward spiral, as targets of frequent negative gossip may see their social embeddedness further impaired due to their damaged reputations (Burt, 2005; Keltner et al., 2008).

Besides informal status in the network, this book also reveals eminent differences in formal status with respect to both spreading gossip and becoming the object of gossip. Chapter 4 and Chapter 7 demonstrate a great interest of subordinates in information about managers in general and direct supervisors in particular. For example, in the network study in Chapter 4, 56 out of 58 subordinates participated in gossip activities about their supervisors. This confirms the theoretical notion and insights from previous field studies (Kurland and Pelled, 2000; Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997) that an analysis of workplace gossip must not ignore vertical relationships in the organizational hierarchy. Both theory and empirical research on organizational gossip needs to explicitly acknowledge the special role of powerful individuals, e.g. managers, influential others, and opinion leaders.

Interestingly, also managers took an active part in workplace gossip. Let us compare the frequency of gossip about managers with the frequency of gossip about subordinates. Figure 8.2 illustrates the mean values of positive and negative gossip frequency by formal status in the organization. Data stems from the representative employee survey, which is described in Chapter 4. Employees, who themselves either had subordinate or manager status, were asked to indicate frequency of gossip behavior about both the group of subordinates and the group of managers. On average, subordinates and managers communicated equal amounts of positive and negative gossip *about the group of subordinates*, as can be seen from the dashed lines, which run almost parallel. In contrast, gossip *about the group of managers* was more negative and less positive among subordinates than among managers, as can be seen by the diverging solid lines.

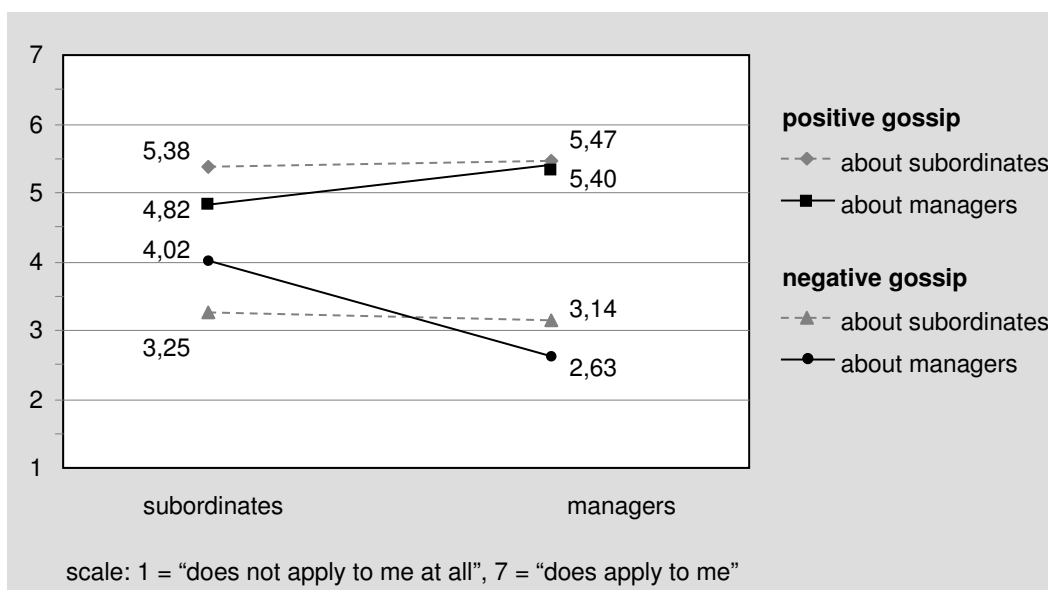


Figure 8.2 Positive and Negative Gossip by Formal Status

Taken together, employees tended to gossip more favorably about members of their own group, with this tendency being slightly stronger among subordinates. These outcomes stress that gossip addresses objects with a particular formal and informal status in the organizational network. Thus, the inclusion of objects in the analysis can be seen as a necessary and beneficial element in the investigation of workplace gossip.

8.2.3 Dynamics of Multiplex Networks: Gossip and Trust Co-evolve

Models on multiplex relationship dynamics (as opposed to models on single relationship dynamics) deliver empirical insights that have consequences for theoretical reasoning. Some of the theorized effects may have been overestimated, and others underestimated in uniplex models. More specifically, the analysis in Chapter 6 put into perspective the widely held view that friendship causes gossip. Instead, the process turned out to be more complex. Gossip stimulates trust and friendship between people (Dunbar, 1996), and this trust provides the basis of gossip again. Also previous experimental research has found that gossiping aids the production of trust and affective relationships between people (Bosson et al., 2006). In order to detect such causal mechanisms it is necessary to follow gossip networks over a longer time period.

In recent years, it has become increasingly popular to model the evolution of social networks over a certain time period instead of adopting cross-sectional measures. Much of this newer research has focused on the dynamics of single relationship types, most importantly friendship (Knecht, 2007; Sijtsema et al., 2010). The dynamics of one relationship type, however, may lead to a change in another relationship type, meaning social relationships should be perceived as multiplex. This book shows that it is advantageous to explicitly model, what many theories of the social and behavioral sciences implicitly assume, namely that different types of social relations co-evolve simultaneously. This is what we call multiplex relations.

8.2.4 Gossip as an Under-researched Topic

The analysis revealed that workplace gossip can be a powerful instrument to produce interpersonal trust relationships between employees in organizations. This finding supports Noon and Delbridge's (1993) earlier claim that gossip deserves a more prominent place on the agenda of literature on organizations, management, and trust. In many workplace studies, gossip is neglected or appears only implicitly. Typically, a small number of items on negative gossiping behavior are included in psychometric scales that cover antisocial behavior. After reviewing work on organizational gossip, Waddington (2005, p. 222) concluded that "the enduring theme is one of gossip as an almost coincidental finding in the investigation of 'something else'". As a consequence, gossip empirically confounds with various multi-dimensional concepts and is diffuse in its operationalization.

In addition, practitioners in management and scholars from business literature seem to share a pessimistic view on workplace gossip (Baker and Jones, 1996; Greengard, 2001), mainly because it is perceived as destructive for employee networks. It appears to

be common practice to associate gossip with antisocial workplace behaviors. First and foremost, in their well-known typology Bennett and Robinson (1995) classified gossip as deviant behavior and described it as indirect relational aggression against colleagues. Similarly, other scholars refer to gossip in the context of social undermining (Duffy et al., 2002) and workplace incivility (Pearson et al., 2001). These approaches do not compare to the definition of workplace gossip and the findings in this book, which also includes a positive dimension (e.g., appraisal of colleagues).

In the study of Chapter 6 gossip produced friendship between employees. However, very active gossipers were increasingly avoided. In such cases, gossip can hardly grow as the group of employees sanctions gossipers with social exclusion. Notably, organizations may benefit from gossip activities in multiple ways, as it helps employees to intensify social relationships. Strong social bonds have been shown to facilitate social control, advice giving, knowledge sharing, organizational citizenship behavior, and other benevolent outcomes (Brass et al., 2004; Lazega and Krackhardt, 2000; Podolny and Baron, 1997). The question whether gossip is socially disruptive and destroys trust between employees or not remains a point for future research.

8.2.5 Links to Previous Research Methods

Research on organizational gossip has only experienced a rise during the past two decades. The field of empirical studies and theoretical reviews on workplace gossip is small, so there are still open questions and problems to solve. The approach in this book opted for targeting some of these issues and employed the latest research methods.

Since gossip research is rooted in many disciplines there is a rich variety of methods. From these methods, different phases of empirical research can be distinguished. Early contributions from the 1960's and 1970's stem from social anthropology and ethnography. This research traditionally used observational field studies (Baumeister et al., 2004; Merry, 1984), and was carried out in community contexts with the scholars participating themselves (De Vries, 1995; Gilmore, 1978). Most studies used qualitative tools, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and dairies (Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Waddington, 2005). Conclusions from qualitative field studies depend on the researcher's access to the field, observational skills and subjective interpretation (Kniffin and Wilson, 2010). Yet, large social networks are difficult to grasp in their completeness by means of in-depth interviews and participant observation. The ability of gaining a complete overview is further challenged by the employees' tendency to hide gossip activities. Some of these issues can be solved with quantitative research designs, such as the one used in this book.

A major step toward quantifying research on gossip could be observed during the 1980's and 1990's, when methods became more technical involving video and audio recording (Eder and Enke, 1991). However, they produced mainly descriptive results, e.g. on topics of gossip conversations. Since the beginning of the 1990's, correlational questionnaire studies have gained in popularity (Nevo et al., 1993), which eventually increased awareness of the gossip topic among social and organizational psychologists. In

the past decade, there has also been a trend towards simulation studies on gossip (De Pinninck et al., 2008; Lind et al., 2007; Prietula, 2001; Shaw et al., 2010; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). However, simulations traditionally aid exploration and theory development but do not aim at hypothesis testing.

A further step in studying organizational gossip quantitatively was achieved by Burt and Knez' work on gossip networks (1995). A number of recent studies followed using experimental designs (Kniffin and Wilson, 2010), regression analysis (Rooks et al., 2010), and – most notably – social network analysis (Grosser et al., 2010; Jaeger et al., 1994; Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Sociometric, questionnaire-based studies deliver systematic information on the social relationships in a defined network and thereby allow for the testing of hypotheses. The observed network picture can be compared to what can be expected by chance. Yet, cross-sectional designs still dominate the field, making it difficult to disentangle causes and consequences of gossip. This book connects to the latest developments in quantitative social network analysis. It advances gossip research with a dynamic perspective, using longitudinal sociometric data, as well as a design tailored to the analysis of complete triads, using three-way sociometric data.

8.3 Directions for Future Research

The presented studies contribute to the relatively young research field of organizational gossip and offer directions for future research. There are still many open questions that researchers interested in workplace gossip may tackle. Suggestions for future research can be incorporated into four major topics: general applicability across contexts, structural effects in networks, individual variance of gossiping behavior, and consequences of workplace gossip.

First, most of the findings could not have been generated without the present in-depth research design, which focused on gossip triads. By analyzing only a limited number of social relationships in a small group, it became possible to realize detailed triadic analysis: All employees knew each other, and could indicate who gossiped with whom, and about whom the gossip was. However, such a detailed approach comes with the price of bounded generalizability. Future research may examine the general applicability of the presented findings across different contexts. The studies in this book are limited to the work setting of one case-study organization: a non-profit child-care organization with mostly female support workers and a sociable work atmosphere. The composition and structure of the collected data were very common for the social care sector in The Netherlands. However, the findings of the present studies cannot be generalized beyond this specific sector. Bounded generalizability and hence external validity is a common problem in research on organizational networks. Previous research on gossip was bound, for example, to the context of investment bankers (Burt, 2005), sorority sisters (Jaeger et al., 1994), rowing teams (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005), food and animal safety product manufacturers (Grosser et al., 2010). The findings need replication in diverse contexts, most importantly in the for-profit sector and in firms with a more

balanced gender composition. It would be interesting to compare the findings of the present relatively cooperative work setting with a more competitive setting (which is more often found in the for-profit sector), e.g. where employees regularly face formal performance evaluations and compete for promotions. Gossiping can be a strategy to get ahead in the job and to weaken the reputation of cumbersome competitors. Employees gather, control, and manipulate information flow for their own advantage. This becomes easier when employees are brokers in the organization, i.e. they connect to two colleagues who are not connected with one another. Brokerage of social capital provides employees with competitive advantages, which assist formal promotions and elevate careers in firms (Burt, 2005). Studying competitive contexts could enrich current knowledge about the motivations and consequences of workplace gossip.

Second, future studies may elaborate on the structural antecedences of social networks beyond triads, similarly to the above mentioned brokerage effect (Shaw et al., 2010). The hypotheses in this book included some structural effects, such as centrality, network centralization (Chapter 5), and popularity (Chapter 6). It could also be investigated, for instance, to what extent density in employee cliques enhances gossip and in how far communication constraints (e.g., structural holes) in the network impair employees in their gossip behavior (Witteck and Wielers, 1998). Ideally, the study sample should be broadened as this will allow tests that cover more network theory meaning effects can be investigated within and across different networks, depending on whether hypotheses target the dyad or the network level. The scope of theory testing could be extended even further by combining dyad and network level predictions. For example, in this book an employee's poor integration in a social network increased the likelihood of becoming the object of negative gossip (network level, Chapter 5). It was also shown that trust bonds between employees relate to enhanced gossip activities (dyad level, Chapter 4). Based on these insights, one can expect that a poorly integrated employee predominantly runs the risk of negative gossip when the other employees in the department connect particularly well, but not when they distrust one another. However, examining network-level hypotheses requires a substantial number of social networks that are comparable in their organizational context (e.g., survey of several departments in one organization), which implies considerable effort with respect to data collection. Furthermore, appropriate tools allowing and examining statistical variation in social contexts have not yet been developed (i.e., multi-level social network analysis). Similarly, the study of gossip would benefit from tools tailored to the analysis of triads. The random effects logistic regression model presented in Chapter 7 is one step towards such triadic data analysis.

Third, although social context is fundamental, future research may address the influence of individual attributes on gossiping behavior. The present study sample was characterized by a specific gender composition: the organization consisted of mainly female subordinates who were supervised by male managers. The network study revealed that employees had a huge interest in gossip about their supervisors (Chapter 4 and 7). The supervisors, however, were among the only men in the department, so some of the

enhanced interest could also be attributed to their gender. Furthermore, gossip behavior can depend on certain psychological traits, like anxiety (Jaeger et al., 1994) or individual attributes, like job satisfaction. Study of individual attributes, e.g. through the application of SIENA (Snijders et al., 2010), allows the possibility of disentangling the social mechanisms of selection and influence: for example, do dissatisfied employees initiate more gossip (= selection mechanism) and/or do they become more dissatisfied through their gossip activities (= influence mechanism)? Tackling this and similar research questions would provide additional insights into the potential consequences of gossip. Moreover, as the present findings highlight the importance of the social context, it would be interesting to test whether social explanations hold across individuals with differing psychological traits, and more importantly, to establish whether the social context buffers or even outweighs psychological explanations of gossip.

Fourth, whereas the present book primarily focused on the antecedences of gossip, future studies may research its outcomes. Consequences relevant for organizations include, for example, employee well-being, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, cooperation, performance, and other concepts from the organizational literature on social capital (Brass et al., 2004; Flap and Volker, 2001). It is crucial to differentiate between consequences for gossip senders and gossip objects. Sharing gossip may have beneficial effects for an employee's well-being and performance, while being the object of gossip may have detrimental effects. Unfortunately, the present book could not address these outcomes. Its original research design included supervisor-performance ratings of all employees in the network study. However, supervisors struggled with rating employees because the organization had no formal evaluation system, and the social nature of the work tasks made reliable comparisons between employees nearly impossible. As a result, supervisors were unable to distinguish good from poor performers.

The findings retrieved by the empirical studies in this book may have implications for practitioners, which are outlined in the next section.

8.4 Practical Implications

Among scholars and practitioners gossip is often considered to have negative consequences. In fact, many managers would like to eradicate it. Michelson and Mouly (2004, p. 196) highlight that “much of the popular business literature tends to treat rumor and gossip as a detrimental activity for organizations. Gossip is assumed to waste time, undermine productivity, and sap employee morale” (p. 196). It has been described as “poisonous” (Baker and Jones, 1996; Greengard, 2001) for the organizational climate and referred to as a “verbal Molotov cocktail” aimed at supervisors (Soeters and Iterson, 2002, p. 35). Not surprisingly, attempts have been made to advise managers how to eliminate gossip. A study on organizational gossip by Grosser et al. (2010) showed that active gossipers tended to be rated as influential by peers in the network. Furthermore, managers penalized gossiping subordinates with lower performance ratings, irrespective of whether the talk was mostly negative or positive. The authors relate this to the

managers' fear of losing control over subordinates and conclude: "It appears that gossip leads to informal influence, which managers can perceive as threatening. Managers' negative performance evaluations support the notion that they feel undermined by gossip (regardless of the valence)."

The results of this present study diverge from this negative viewpoint on gossip. Both practitioners and researchers seem to underestimate the potential benefits gossip has for organizations. It could be shown that gossip is an eminent part of the employees' worklife and component of informal relationships in organizations. It can be the first step in building an informal trust relation. The management literature has acknowledged the crucial role of informal relationships and has extensively studied how interpersonal trust can be established in organizations (McAllister, 1995; Nooteboom, 2002; Robinson, 1996; Tyler and DeGoeij, 1996; Whitener et al., 1998). The findings at hand show that gossip aids employees in the decision whether or not they should build a trust relationship with a colleague. In this process, employees differentiate and filter trustworthy individuals from untrustworthy others. Eventually, some individuals become more central in the organizational network of trust, while others only play a peripheral role. Through this mechanism, gossip can be the driving force behind social inclusion and exclusion of individuals (De Pinninck et al., 2008), and in some cases even lead to network segregation of whole groups (Shaw et al., 2010).

Gossip can be seen as reflecting relationship quality (Mills, 2010) and hence can be called a 'mirror of trust'. On the one hand, it enables employees to voice trust issues with regard to colleagues and supervisors. As we have seen in chapter 5, employees who have only few friends in the organization can expect to be the object of gossip among a larger number of colleagues. On the other hand, it is a means of socializing with others and establishing friendships. Informal talk about mutual friends and enemies can make the workplace more bearable for many employees (Roy, 1959; Waddington and Fletcher, 2005). In cases where managers hear gossip, they should not condemn but utilize it as a diagnostic tool and early warning device (Grosser et al., 2010). In the last study, it could be shown that employees engaged more in negative gossip about colleagues when dissatisfied with their job. Because gossip can be observed in many organizations, it is not a major reason for concern but part of a healthy sociable work climate (Mills, 2010). In fact, *lack* of gossip may be worrisome, as the results in this book suggest that high levels of gossip are coupled with the employees' interest and concern for one another (e.g., there was high gossip activity within formal work teams and among friends). Interdependent employees praised the contributions of others but criticized uncooperative behavior. These mechanisms of social control may help to reduce free-riding where employees collaborate toward common goals and formal surveillance systems possibly fail.

This present study highlights that managers and supervisors are natural targets of (negative) gossip. Managers want to retain the benefits of positive gossip but eliminate the downsides of negative gossip, most importantly back-stabbing leaders or undermining management's authority (Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). Results from this and

previous research, suggests that managers can best protect themselves against harmful gossip by investing in trust relationships (Frazier et al., 2010; Oreg, 2006). Managers have the choice of investing in different forms of trust, i.e. generalized trust and interpersonal trust. In large organizational networks, investing in generalized trust is supposed to be more effective and more efficient. Managers of small networks (e.g., site managers) may invest in more personal contacts with employees instead. Trust does not only protect management from harmful gossip of individuals but also from group dynamics in more general terms, like employee resistance against authority and scapegoating of managers.

Interestingly, high trust did not stimulate positive gossip, which implies that managers may only influence *negative* gossip by means of trust. Still, *absence* of negative gossip can be expected to mean a positive image of management, and the acceptance of managerial decisions. The absence of a positive effect of trust on positive behavior may be explained by the employees' expectations with regard to their psychological contract with the organization. Employees may simply perceive fair treatment by managers as granted and thus as something they deserve regardless (Oreg, 2006). Fair treatment then constitutes the bottom-line, which does not need additional appraisal. In contrast, violation of this fairness norm raises trust issues and promotes active complaining among employees (Bies and Tripp, 1996; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). Because managers are unable to develop interpersonal trust with every single employee in the organization, they may also invest in more generalized forms of trust.

Given its mitigating effect on detrimental gossip, how can managers promote generalized trust in organizations? First, as the grapevine is a source of information (Zaremba, 1988), managers may communicate information formally and make decision making processes transparent. Gossip has been shown to increase during times of organizational change, mainly because employees try to understand and predict their bosses' behavior (Doyle et al., 2000; Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). Employees tend to feel anxious about consequences of change and want to stay in control of their future (Oreg, 2006). Second, managers may promote organizational justice (Grosser et al., 2011). This implies that employees feel fairly treated with regard to outcomes, procedures and interpersonal contact; that they can voice issues without being punished; that the distribution of rewards is fair, and that managers treat them with respect (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001). Employees who feel taken seriously and are able to approach managers with their concerns are more likely to perceive managerial decisions as justified and the organization as trustworthy (Korsgaard et al., 1995). Third, managers may foster a culture of civility, by making clear that harmful gossip is unacceptable behavior (Grosser et al., 2011). This book recorded patterns of negative gossip similar to scapegoating. A few poorly integrated employees were picked out as gossip targets by the group. This can result in a downward spiral for single individuals (i.e., they become even more socially excluded from the network over time) and threaten their desire for belongingness and subjective well-being (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Because scapegoating is subject to group dynamics, managers need to tackle the informal network of employees instead of single gossipmongers. However, in most cases

managers probably do not have to rely on formal sanctions of vigorous harmful gossip. The findings in the present and in previous research suggest that the group of employees regulates particularly active gossipmongers (Jaeger et al., 1994; Kniffin and Wilson, 2005).

In conclusion it can be said that, when an organization's management fails to establish trust, negative gossip comes with the risk of scapegoating, which can turn into a weapon against single managers. Having said this, not gossip is the problem, but (lack of) trust. Negative gossip will have little chances to survive in well functioning organizations characterized by a sound basis of trust. Instead, these organizations will mostly benefit from the positive effects of gossip: Gossip lubricates the machinery of formal institutions, promotes information exchange and cooperation, and glues together the informal social network of employees. Because of this gossip is a necessary and healthy part of each workplace.

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Roddel in organisaties: onderzoek met sociale netwerkanalyse

In dit proefschrift is het verband onderzocht tussen roddel en vertrouwensrelaties in organisaties. Roddel, oftewel het praten over anderen in hun afwezigheid, is een van de meest voorkomende menselijke gedragingen. Uit eerder onderzoek blijkt bijvoorbeeld dat mensen rond tweederde van hun gespreksonderwerpen besteden aan sociale onderwerpen zoals roddel (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994). Maar waarom roddelen mensen eigenlijk?

Het verspreiden van roddel kan bepaalde doelen hebben. Er valt bijvoorbeeld te denken aan situaties waar medewerkers van een organisatie met elkaar concurreren voor een promotie. Ten eerste is roddelen een manier om de reputatie te beschadigen van concurrenten, machtige personen (zoals leidinggevend) en mensen die niet aardig worden gevonden (Burt, 2005; Emler, 1994). Ten tweede kan de roddelaar zichzelf interessant maken door privédetails over anderen te vertellen, waardoor hij of zij aandacht en affectie krijgt van toehoorders (Bosson et al., 2006). Maar door gevoelige informatie over derden te delen stellen roddelaars zich ook kwetsbaar op. De toehoorders weten dan immers hoe zij over derden denken en dat houdt risico's in, zoals afkeuring. Voor roddelaars is het daarom belangrijk dat ze erop kunnen vertrouwen dat de ontvanger de informatie discreet behandelt en niet verder verspreidt (Burt, 2001). De ontvangers van roddel kunnen de verkregen roddelinformatie namelijk weer voor hun eigen doelen misbruiken. Zo zouden ze de informatie bijvoorbeeld door kunnen vertellen aan de derde persoon (het onderwerp van de roddel) om hun eigen vertrouwensband met deze persoon te versterken of om juist de band tussen de roddelaar en deze derde persoon te verzwakken. Hoewel de zojuist beschreven doelen van roddel van belang zijn om meer inzicht te krijgen in roddelen, richt dit proefschrift zich op de *oorzaken* die ten grondslag liggen aan roddelgedrag.

Aan deze redenering ligt ten grondslag dat informele vertrouwensrelaties tussen medewerkers in organisatienetwerken beïnvloeden hoeveel, met wie, over wie en op welke manier wordt geroddeld. De overkoepelende onderzoeksvraag luidt daarom als volgt:

Hoe worden verschillen in positieve en negatieve roddel verklaard (oftewel het verspreiden en het onderwerp zijn van roddel) door vertrouwensrelaties in het netwerk van medewerkers?

Kurland en Pelled definiëren roddel als “informeel en evaluatief praten over een afwezige medewerker uit de organisatie” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000: 429). Deze definitie is vrij ruim en kan zowel positieve als negatieve oordelen over anderen inhouden. Positief roddelen is bijvoorbeeld het prijzen of verdedigen van gedrag. Daarentegen betreft negatief roddelen het bekritisieren van gedrag of klagen over collega’s. Verder moet roddel niet als individueel gedrag maar als gedrag binnen een *groep* mensen worden beschouwd. Zo kunnen groepsleden de rol hebben van roddelaar, ontvanger van roddel of onderwerp van roddel. Deze drie rollen staan in verhouding tot elkaar en zijn in dit proefschrift als ‘roddeltriade’ gekenmerkt. Afhankelijk van de vertrouwensrelaties, maar ook van individuele kenmerken zoals de formele positie in de organisatie (zie hoofdstukken 3 en 4), vervullen mensen een van de drie rollen.

Om de vraagstelling te onderzoeken is gebruik gemaakt van empirische data uit een organisatie in de zorgsector in Nederland. De methodische aanpak was met name gericht op de kwantitatieve analyse van sociale netwerken van medewerkers. De data werden verzameld in het kader van twee studies. De eerste studie was gebaseerd op een schriftelijke enquête die werd afgenomen bij een representatieve steekproef van medewerkers van de organisatie. Het was de bedoeling om een breed beeld te krijgen van de frequentie van positieve en negatieve roddel en hoe dit werd beïnvloed door vertrouwen in collega’s en in het management over het algemeen. De tweede studie was specifiek gericht op sociometrisch onderzoek en werd uitgevoerd in twee afdelingen van dezelfde organisatie. Hierbij werden alle medewerkers van de twee afdelingen uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan het onderzoek. Deelnemers werden in een elektronische enquête gevraagd met wie en over wie ze roddelen en wat hun persoonlijke relatie met elke collega van de afdeling is (bijvoorbeeld “vriendschappelijk”). Deze vragen gaven inzicht in het informele vertrouwensnetwerk van de gehele afdeling, maar leverden ook informatie op over vertrouwensrelaties met de directe leidinggevende. Van één afdeling waren drie metingen beschikbaar. Daardoor was het mogelijk om onderzoek gedurende een bepaalde tijdsperiode te doen naar de dynamiek tussen roddel en vertrouwen (oftewel vriendschap), zoals beschreven in hoofdstuk 6.

Is roddelen over leidinggevenden een kenmerk van indirecte weerstand tegen autoriteit, veranderingen in organisaties en wantrouwen?

Hoofdstuk 3 omvatte onderzoek naar het verband tussen negatief roddelgedrag over leidinggevenden (oftewel managers) en wantrouwen, hiërarchische status en organisatieveranderingen. In de managementliteratuur wordt beargumenteerd dat roddelen een verborgen vorm van weerstand is tegen autoriteiten in organisaties (Hafen, 2004; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). Er wordt verondersteld dat dit soort ‘weerstand door te roddelen’ zal optreden als er veranderingen in de organisatie plaatsvinden (Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997). Deze veranderingen leiden namelijk vaak tot een vertrouwensbreuk bij medewerkers (Robinson, 1996). Als gevolg hiervan was de verwachting dat negatief roddelgedrag bij medewerkers toeneemt, omdat zij (a) een

ondergeschikte positie in de organisatie hebben, (b) door onenigheid met organisatieveranderingen en (c) door weinig vertrouwen in het management. Verder werd ook gekeken hoe deze drie factoren zich tot elkaar verhouden. De hypothesen werden getoetst door middel van kwantitatieve data-analyse van een representatieve steekproef onder medewerkers van één organisatie in Nederland. De resultaten ondersteunden de verwachting dat bovengenoemde factoren invloed hebben op de mate van negatieve roddel. Dat wil zeggen, door negatieve houdingen ten opzichte van veranderingen in de organisatie daalde het vertrouwen in het management. Dit verlaagde vertrouwen leidde vervolgens tot een toename van negatief roddelen over leidinggevenden. Van het laatstgenoemde verband was vooral sprake bij ondergeschikten in het bedrijf.

Praten over de baas: wat zijn de effecten van vertrouwensrelaties op roddelen over leidinggevenden?

Het onderzoek in hoofdstuk 4 bouwde voort op de vorige studie en werkte het theoretische kader met betrekking tot vertrouwen in organisaties verder uit. Wederom werden leidinggevenden als onderwerp van roddel bekeken. Echter, in deze deelstudie introduceerden we drie vernieuwingen. Ten eerste werd er een verschil gemaakt tussen twee soorten vertrouwen: (1) vertrouwen in het management van een organisatie in het algemeen en (2) vertrouwen in specifieke personen, zoals leidinggevenden en collega's (Nooteboom, 2002). Ten tweede werden de vertrouwensrelaties *tussen* collega's als belangrijke invloedsfactoren op roddelgedrag over leidinggevenden geacht. Ten slotte werd er een onderscheid gemaakt tussen positieve en negatieve roddel. Het empirische gedeelte bestond uit twee onderdelen. Het eerste onderdeel liet middels een representatief enquête-onderzoek zien dat negatieve roddel over leidinggevenden toeneemt naarmate men zowel minder vertrouwen in het management heeft als veel vertrouwen in collega's. Het tweede onderdeel was gebaseerd op een sociale netwerkstudie. Voor de constructie van sociale netwerken werden vragenlijsten afgenomen over de interpersonele vertrouwensrelaties tussen alle medewerkers. Deze netwerken werden vervolgens onderzocht met behulp van sociale netwerkanalyse, te weten *exponential random graph modeling*. In de netwerkanalyse werden twee afdelingen in één organisatie vergeleken. Ook hieruit bleek dat leidinggevenden alleen onderwerp van negatieve roddel waren als medewerkers zowel weinig vertrouwen in leidinggevenden hadden als veel vertrouwen in andere collega's van de afdeling. Vertrouwen had echter geen effect op positieve roddel. Verder leek het niet uit te maken of medewerkers die met elkaar over de baas roddelen soortgelijke vertrouwensrelaties met de baas hebben of niet.

Wie zijn het onderwerp van positieve en negatieve roddel op het werk?

Het onderzoek in hoofdstuk 5 hield zich bezig met wie het onderwerp van roddel is. Vanuit sociaal netwerkperspectief werd verondersteld dat groeps grenzen en sociale status in het informele netwerk (oftewel het hebben van vrienden op de afdeling) bepalen

wie onderwerp is van positieve en negatieve roddel. Mensen die in hun functies en prestaties afhankelijk van elkaar zijn, bijvoorbeeld omdat ze in hetzelfde formele team werken, controleren elkaar. Dit kan door gedrag van collega's uit de groep in hun afwezigheid te prijzen of te bekritisieren (Kniffin and Wilson, 2010). De verwachting was dan ook dat medewerkers met name geïnteresseerd zijn in positieve en negatieve informatie over het gedrag van collega's uit hun eigen werkgroep. Bovendien werd verwacht dat medewerkers vaker negatief roddelen over collega's met een lagere sociale status. Lage sociale status is hier gedefinieerd als 'het hebben van weinig vrienden' en daarmee weinig sociale ondersteuning op de afdeling. Omdat deze medewerkers met een lage sociale status tamelijk weerloos zijn, zouden ze zelfs zondebokken kunnen worden. Daarentegen zullen medewerkers met een hoge sociale status juist positieve roddel aantrekken. De positie van medewerkers in het roddelnetwerk werd wederom onderzocht door middel van sociale netwerkanalyse in één afdeling van een organisatie. Alle bovengenoemde verwachtingen werden op basis van deze analyses ondersteund met de uitzondering dat medewerkers met een hoge sociale status *niet* vaker het onderwerp van positieve roddel zijn.

Het ontstaan van roddelen en vriendschap op het werk: hoe beïnvloedt de dynamiek van het ene de dynamiek van het andere?

In hoofdstuk 6 werd de dynamiek bestudeerd tussen roddel en vriendschap (oftewel vertrouwen tussen personen) gedurende een bepaalde tijdsperiode. Twee theorieën werden gepresenteerd: aan de ene kant voorspelt de sociaalkapitaaltheorie dat vriendschappen ten grondslag liggen aan roddelactiviteiten tussen medewerkers over de tijd (Burt, 2005). Met andere woorden: medewerkers die met elkaar bevriend zijn, beginnen na een tijdje ook met elkaar te roddelen. Aan de andere kant zegt de evolutietheorie het tegenovergestelde, namelijk dat medewerkers die vaak met elkaar roddelen na een tijdje bevriend met elkaar raken (Dunbar, 2004). Het onderzoek in dit hoofdstuk toetste beide theorieën. In de huidige deelstudie werd gekeken naar sociale netwerken op verschillende meetmomenten: binnen één jaar werden roddel en vriendschap tussen medewerkers van één afdeling drie keer gemeten met een vragenlijst. Op basis daarvan was het mogelijk om de invloed van roddel op vriendschap en vice versa te bekijken. Dit werd gedaan met het recent ontwikkelde netwerkanalyseprogramma *Multiple SIENA*. De resultaten leverden enigszins steun voor de evolutietheorie: medewerkers die roddelen raakten na verloop van tijd met elkaar bevriend. Maar hoewel er een positief effect van roddel op vriendschap bestond, werd actief roddelgedrag tegen de verwachting in *niet* beloond met een grotere populariteit in het gehele vriendschapnetwerk. In plaats daarvan ging de populariteit van roddelaars zelfs omlaag. Roddelen was dus geen middel om oneindig veel vrienden te maken, want blijkbaar werd fors roddelgedrag afgestraft door de groep.

Ik, jij en iedereen over wie wij roddelen: hoe werkt de combinatie van sociale relaties in de ‘roddeltriade’?

Hoofdstuk 7 verbond elementen uit de vorige studies en was gewijd aan de studie van triades. Een triade is een groep van drie mensen, in dit geval twee medewerkers, die met elkaar over een gemeenschappelijke derde collega praten. In de theorie werd roddelgedrag verklaard door het bestaan van formele werkrelaties en informele vriendschapsrelaties. De voorspelling was dat, naarmate alle drie de medewerkers in de triade formeel aan elkaar verbonden zijn en daarmee in dezelfde werkgroep zitten, er meer *met* en *over* elkaar zal gepraat worden. Verder werd er geredeneerd dat positieve roddel voornamelijk voorkomt in groepjes waar iedereen met elkaar bevriend is. Daarentegen werd negatieve roddel vooral in zogenaamde coalitietriades verwacht waar de twee roddelaars met elkaar bevriend zijn maar allebei niet bevriend zijn met de derde collega (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Om dit te onderzoeken werd er gebruik gemaakt van een statistische onderzoeksmethode die speciaal werd ontwikkeld voor deze studie. De methode was gebaseerd op sociale netwerkanalyse waarbij rekening werd gehouden met de verschillende relatiekenmerken tussen de drie soorten medewerkers in de triade (twee roddelaars en één onderwerp van roddel). Zoals voorspeld zag men positief en negatief roddelgedrag voornamelijk binnen formele werkgroepen en maar weinig daarbuiten. De bevindingen bevestigden ook de verwachting dat positieve roddelactiviteit toeneemt als alle medewerkers in de triade met elkaar bevriend zijn. De coalitievoorspelling vond maar gedeeltelijke ondersteuning.

Belangrijkste conclusies

De bevindingen uit het huidige onderzoek toonden aan dat mensen roddelen over mensen waarin ze weinig vertrouwen hebben en over mensen met een lage sociale status op de afdeling. Vooral ondergeschikten roddelden vaak over hun leidinggevenden als de vertrouwensrelatie slecht was. Dit soort ‘weerstand’-effecten werden bovendien versterkt als werknemers veel vertrouwen hadden in collega’s en daarmee konden rekenen op sociale steun. Een interessante bevinding is dat vertrouwen geen invloed had op positieve roddel; veel vertrouwen in anderen leidde dus *niet* tot meer positieve roddel over deze collega’s. Een mogelijke verklaring voor het toenemen van negatief roddelgedrag is dat de formele hiërarchie in een organisatie afhankelijkheid creëert tussen medewerkers en leidinggevenden. Deze afhankelijkheid roept behoeftes op naar informatie over anderen, en dan met name nieuws over negatief en schadelijk gedrag. Dit vermoeden werd ook ondersteund door het feit dat medewerkers vaker over mensen uit hun eigen werkgroep roddelden (oftewel mensen van wie ze voor hun werkprestaties afhankelijk zijn) dan over mensen buiten hun werkgroep. Verrassend genoeg bleek tegen de verwachting in dat roddelen tussen collega’s niet altijd direct volgt uit bestaande vertrouwensrelaties, maar ook onafhankelijk hiervan kan optreden. Het onderzoek toonde zelfs aan dat roddelen – het delen van gevoelige details over anderen – het ontstaan van vertrouwensbanden tussen medewerkers kan bevorderen en daarmee het sluiten van nieuwe vriendschappen

stimuleert. De conclusie hieruit is dat roddel en vertrouwensrelaties nauw aan elkaar verbonden zijn.

Verder benadrukken de bevindingen dat een theoretische en methodische aanpak zinvol is waarin een verschil wordt gemaakt tussen de drie rollen in een *roddeltriade*. Het werd duidelijk dat roddelaars en ontvangers van roddel vaak een verschillende vertrouwensrelatie met het onderwerp van roddel hebben en afzonderlijk moeten worden bekeken. Bovendien richtte eerder onderzoek zich nauwelijks op *wie* het onderwerp van roddel is, mede omdat het theoretisch en methodisch moeilijk is om deze triadische structuur te analyseren in één model. In dit proefschrift staat een voorbeeld beschreven van hoe het mogelijk is om de derde persoon (het onderwerp) in de roddeltriade alsnog te bestuderen. Echter, vervolgonderzoek op dit gebied is noodzakelijk.

Ook is het wenselijk vervolgonderzoek te doen naar andere contexten. De huidige bevindingen zijn beperkt tot één organisatie met bepaalde karakteristieken, zoals de context van kinderopvang met veel vrouwen die in deeltijd werken. Het zou interessant zijn om roddel ook in een meer competitieve organisatie met meer mannen te bestuderen. Daaraan gerelateerd zou vervolgonderzoek naar roddel grootschaliger kunnen worden opgezet: een vergelijking tussen een aantal sociale netwerken zou meer inzicht geven in de structurele patronen van roddelnetwerken en zou kunnen ingaan op de vraag of groepen worden gekenmerkt door segregatie of integratie van medewerkers. Daarnaast is het van belang meer onderzoek te doen naar de gevolgen van roddel. Op dit moment is er maar weinig onderzoek gedaan naar de consequenties van roddel voor werktevredenheid, welzijn en prestaties op het werk.

De bevindingen in dit proefschrift hebben ook implicaties voor medewerkers en leidinggevendenden in bedrijven. Aan de ene kant is roddelen een natuurlijk onderdeel van elke werkomgeving en meestal geen reden tot ongerustheid. Roddelgedrag weerspiegelt de vertrouwensrelaties tussen mensen van een organisatie en kan zelfs leiden tot hechte banden tussen medewerkers. Aan de andere kant kunnen mensen zich beschermen tegen negatieve roddel door in vertrouwensrelaties te investeren. De uitkomsten van het huidige onderzoek suggereren dat leidinggevendenden minder risico lopen op negatieve roddel als ze zich oprecht gedragen, informatie direct communiceren en medezeggenschap bij ondergeschikten bevorderen. Verder hoeven medewerkers die goed in de groep liggen (bijvoorbeeld omdat ze veel vrienden hebben) niet te vrezen voor negatieve roddel. Niettemin bleek uit dit proefschrift dat medewerkers over het algemeen vaker positief dan negatief over elkaar en over hun leidinggevendenden praten. Het is dan ook belangrijk om roddel niet alleen als een probleem te zien maar tevens als een wezenlijk onderdeel van interactie waarmee sociale relaties tot stand komen en in stand worden gehouden.

Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung

Klatsch in Organisationen: Forschung mittels sozialer Netzwerkanalyse

In dieser Dissertation wurde der Zusammenhang zwischen Klatsch und Vertrauensbeziehungen in Organisationen untersucht. Klatsch – genauer gesagt das (positive oder negative) Sprechen über andere in deren Abwesenheit – ist eines der meist beobachteten menschlichen Verhaltensweisen. So zeigen zum Beispiel frühere Studien, dass Menschen rund zwei Drittel ihrer Gespräche sozialen Themen wie Klatsch widmen (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994). Es stellt sich daher die Frage: Warum klatschen Menschen eigentlich?

Menschen können mit Klatsch bestimmte Ziele verfolgen. Man nehme zum Beispiel Situationen, in denen Mitarbeiter einer Organisation um eine Beförderung wetteifern. Zum einen bietet Klatsch die Möglichkeit, den Ruf von Konkurrenten, mächtigen Personen (wie Vorgesetzten) oder unbeliebten Menschen zu schädigen (Burt, 2005; Emler, 1994). Zum anderen können sich klatschende Personen interessant machen, indem sie positive oder negative Details aus dem Privatleben anderer weitererzählen, wodurch sie wiederum Aufmerksamkeit und Zuneigung von den Zuhörern bekommen (Bosson et al., 2006). Indem sie diskrete Informationen über Dritte erzählen, machen sich klatschende Personen jedoch auch angreifbar. Die Zuhörer erfahren nämlich, wie die Klatschenden über Dritte denken. Dies birgt immer das Risiko, dass sich die Zuhörer von den Klatschenden abwenden. Wichtig für die Klatschenden ist es deshalb, darauf vertrauen zu können, dass die Zuhörer ihre Informationen diskret behandeln und nicht weitererzählen (Burt, 2001). Ansonsten können die Zuhörer erhaltene Informationen für ihre eigenen Ziele missbrauchen. So könnten die Zuhörer beispielsweise der dritten Person (welche das Klatschthema ist) von dem Klatschereignis berichten, um ihre eigene Vertrauensbeziehung mit dieser Person zu intensivieren, oder aber, um die Vertrauensbeziehung zwischen dem Klatschenden und der dritten Person zu gefährden.

Obwohl die soeben beschriebenen Ziele als wichtig erachtet werden für das Verständnis von Klatschverhalten, beschäftigt sich diese Dissertation mit den *Ursachen* von Klatsch. Die Grundannahme ist, dass informelle Vertrauensbeziehungen zwischen den Mitarbeitern eines Organisationsnetzwerkes beeinflussen, wie viel, mit wem, über wen, und auf welche Weise geklatscht wird.

Die übergreifende Forschungsfrage lautet schließlich wie folgt:

Wie erklären sich die Unterschiede positiven und negativen Klatsches (d.h. das Verbreiten von Klatsch und die Wahl des Klatschobjektes) anhand der Vertrauensbeziehungen in einem Mitarbeiternetzwerk?

Kurland und Pelled definieren Klatsch am Arbeitsplatz als “informelles und urteilendes Reden über eine abwesende Person aus der Organisation” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000: 429). Diese Definition ist allgemein und schließt sowohl positive als auch negative Urteile über andere ein. Positiver Klatsch ist zum Beispiel das Loben oder Verteidigen von Verhaltensweisen. Im Gegensatz dazu ist negativer Klatsch etwa Kritik von Verhaltensweisen und Beschwerden über Kollegen. Darüber hinaus wird Klatsch nicht nur von individuellen Merkmalen bestimmt, sondern muss im Gesamtkontext einer Gruppe gesehen werden. Individuen einer Gruppe können die Rolle des Klatschenden, des Zuhörers oder des Klatschobjektes (der dritten Person) innehaben. Weil diese drei Rollen eng miteinander verwoben sind, sind sie in dieser Dissertation unter dem Begriff der *Klatschtriade* zusammengefasst. Welche dieser Rollen Individuen in einer Gruppe innehaben, hängt von den Vertrauensbeziehungen im Netzwerk, aber auch von individuellen Merkmalen ab, wie dem formalen Rang in der Organisation.

Um die Forschungsfrage untersuchen zu können, wurden empirische Daten in einer Organisation in den Niederlanden erhoben. Diese Organisation stammt aus dem sozialen Sektor, genauer der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe. Die verwendeten Forschungsmethoden beinhalteten hauptsächlich quantitative Analysen sozialer Mitarbeiternetzwerke. Die Datenerhebung war im Rahmen zweier Studien angelegt. Die erste Studie basierte auf einer schriftlichen, repräsentativen Mitarbeiterumfrage in der gesamten Organisation. Ziel war es, den Umfang von positiven und negativen Klatsch zu messen, und zu ermitteln, wie die Klatschhäufigkeit vom Vertrauen in Kollegen und Organisationsmanagement beeinflusst wird. Die zweite Studie basierte auf speziellen soziometrischen Methoden und wurde in zwei Abteilungen derselben Organisation durchgeführt. Alle Mitarbeiter dieser beiden Abteilungen wurden eingeladen, an der Studie teilzunehmen. Ein Onlinefragebogen erhob, mit wem und über wen die teilnehmenden Mitarbeiter klatschten. Der Onlinefragebogen ermittelte außerdem Informationen zu den persönlichen Beziehungen der Mitarbeiter aus der Abteilung (zum Beispiel, ob eine Beziehung freundschaftlich bzw. vertraulich war). Die in der Studie generierten Daten lieferten nicht nur Einblicke in das Vertrauensnetzwerk der gesamten Abteilung, sondern auch in die Vertrauensbeziehungen der Mitarbeiter zu den beiden Abteilungsleitern. In einer der beiden Abteilungen wurden drei Befragungswellen erhoben. Dadurch war es möglich, den Verlauf von Klatsch und Vertrauen (bzw. Freundschaft) innerhalb eines bestimmten Zeitraums zu untersuchen.

Deutet Klatsch über Vorgesetzte auf Misstrauen und indirekten Widerstand gegen Autoritäten sowie Veränderungen in der Organisation hin?

In Kapitel 3 wurde der Zusammenhang von negativem Klatsch über Vorgesetzte (bzw. Manager) mit Misstrauen, formalem Status und Organisationsveränderungen untersucht. In der Managementliteratur wird argumentiert, dass Klatsch eine verdeckte Form des Widerstandes gegen Autoritäten von Organisationen ist (Hafen, 2004; Scott, 1985; Tucker, 1993). Vermutet wird weiterhin, dass diese Art 'Klatschwiderstand' insbesondere in Zeiten organisatorischer Veränderungen und Umstrukturierungen stattfindet (Mills, 2010; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997), da solche Veränderungen häufig einen Vertrauensbruch bei den Mitarbeitern nach sich ziehen (Robinson, 1996). Anknüpfend an diese Argumentation wurde in dieser Untersuchung konstatiert, dass negativer Klatsch unter Mitarbeitern häufiger auftritt, wenn (a) diese eine niedrige formelle Position innehaben, (b) Veränderungen in der Organisation ablehnen, und (c) wenig Vertrauen ins Management haben. Darüber hinaus wurde analysiert, wie die drei genannten Faktoren zueinander in Zusammenhang stehen. Alle Hypothesen wurden mittels einer repräsentativen Mitarbeiterumfrage in einer niederländischen Organisation sowie mittels quantitativer Datenanalyse getestet. Die daraus resultierenden Ergebnisse stützten die Annahme, dass die oben genannten Faktoren Einfluss auf negatives Klatschverhalten haben. Konkret bedeutet dies, dass eine negative Haltung gegenüber Veränderungen in der Organisation einherging mit verringertem Vertrauen ins Management. Dieses verringerte Vertrauen führte wiederum zu einer Zunahme von negativem Klatsch über Vorgesetzte. Der letztere Effekt war insbesondere bei Mitarbeitern mit einer niedrigen formellen Position zu beobachten.

Klatsch über den Chef: Wie beeinflussen Vertrauensbeziehungen Klatsch über Vorgesetzte?

Die Studie in Kapitel 4 baute auf der vorhergehenden Studie auf und arbeitete das theoretische Modell bezüglich Vertrauen in Organisationen weiter aus. Auch hier standen Vorgesetzte als Klatschthema im Mittelpunkt des Forschungsinteresses. Allerdings beinhaltete diese Studie drei Neuerungen. Erstens wurde zwischen zwei Arten von Vertrauen unterschieden: (1) Vertrauen ins Organisationsmanagement im Allgemeinen und (2) Vertrauen in bestimmte Personen, wie unmittelbare Vorgesetzte und Kollegen (Nooteboom, 2002). Zweitens wurden die Vertrauensbeziehungen zwischen den Kollegen *untereinander* als wichtige Einflussfaktoren von Klatsch über Vorgesetzte erachtet. Drittens und letztens wurde zwischen positiven und negativen Klatschformen differenziert.

Die empirische Studie bestand aus zwei Teilen. Der erste Teil, welcher auf einer repräsentativen Mitarbeiterumfrage basierte, ergab, dass negativer Klatsch über Vorgesetzte umso öfter auftritt, je weniger die Mitarbeiter dem Organisationsmanagement *und* je mehr sie ihren Kollegen vertrauen. Der zweite Teil basierte auf einer

sozialen Netzwerkstudie. Um soziale Netzwerke zu konstruieren, wurden die Vertrauensbeziehungen zwischen allen Mitarbeitern anhand von Fragebögen erhoben. Diese Netzwerke wurden dann mithilfe sozialer Netzwerkanalyse ausgewertet, konkret mit *exponential random graph modeling*. Zwei Abteilungen in der Organisation wurden verglichen. In dieser Studie wurde erneut deutlich, dass Vorgesetzte hauptsächlich dann negatives Klatschthema waren, wenn Mitarbeitern ihnen wenig, ihren Kollegen aus der Abteilung aber viel vertrauten. Vertrauen hatte allerdings keinen Einfluss auf positiven Klatsch. Außerdem war es irrelevant für Klatsch, ob die verschiedenen Mitarbeiter ähnliche oder verschiedenartige Vertrauensbeziehungen zu ihrem Vorgesetzten hatten.

Wer ist Ziel positiven und negativen Klatsches am Arbeitsplatz?

Die Studie in Kapitel 5 beschäftigte sich damit, welche Personen Klatschthema in Organisationen sind. Der theoretische Ansatz der sozialen Netzwerkperspektive geht davon aus, dass Gruppengrenzen und sozialer Status im informellen Netzwerk beeinflussen, ob jemand Thema positiven oder negativen Klatsches ist. Menschen, die in ihren Arbeitsaufgaben voneinander abhängig sind, zum Beispiel weil sie im selben formalen Team arbeiten, kontrollieren einander bei der Aufgabenerfüllung. Dies geschieht unter anderem durch das Loben und Kritisieren von Verhaltensweisen der Teamkollegen während diese abwesend sind (Kniffin and Wilson, 2010). Anknüpfend an diese Argumentation wurde vermutet, dass Mitarbeiter insbesondere an positiven und negativen Informationen über Kollegen aus ihrer (nicht außerhalb ihrer) Arbeitsgruppe interessiert sind. Darüber hinaus wurde argumentiert, dass Mitarbeiter häufig negativ über Kollegen klatschen, die einen niedrigen sozialen Status haben. Niedriger sozialer Status ist hier definiert als 'wenig Freunde haben' und folglich wenig sozialen Rückhalt in der Abteilung. Weil Mitarbeiter mit niedrigem sozialen Status relativ wehrlos sind, könnten sie sogar zu Sündenböcken gemacht werden. Im Gegensatz dazu sollten Mitarbeiter mit hohem sozialen Status umso mehr im Mittelpunkt von positivem Klatsch stehen. Die Stellung der Mitarbeiter im Klatschnetzwerk wurde mittels sozialer Netzwerkanalyse in einer Unternehmensabteilung untersucht. Die Analyseergebnisse stützten alle oben genannten Hypothesen bis auf eine Ausnahme: Mitarbeiter mit hohem sozialen Status waren *kein* verstärktes Thema positiven Klatsches.

Die Entstehung von Klatsch und Freundschaft auf der Arbeit: Wie beeinflusst die Dynamik des einen die Dynamik des anderen?

Kapitel 6 widmete sich dem dynamischen Zusammenhang zwischen Klatsch und Freundschaft (bzw. Vertrauen zwischen Personen) innerhalb einer bestimmten Zeitperiode. Zwei Theorien wurden präsentiert: Einerseits geht die Sozialkapitaltheorie davon aus, dass Freundschaften Voraussetzung für Klatschaktivitäten unter Mitarbeitern sind (Burt, 2005). Dies bedeutet mit anderen Worten: Miteinander befreundete Mitarbeiter fangen nach einiger Zeit an, miteinander zu klatschen. Andererseits behauptet die Evolutionstheorie das Gegenteil, nämlich dass Mitarbeiter, die häufig miteinander

klatschen, sich erst im Zeitverlauf anfreunden (Dunbar, 2004). Die Studie dieses Kapitels testete beide Theorien. Dafür wurden zu verschiedenen Zeitpunkten soziale Netzwerke beobachtet: Innerhalb eines Jahres und insgesamt dreimal wurden sowohl Klatsch als auch Freundschaft zwischen den Mitarbeitern einer Abteilung gemessen. Dadurch war es möglich den Einfluss von Klatsch auf Freundschaft und umgekehrt zu untersuchen. Die Auswertung erfolgte mithilfe des kürzlich entwickelten Netzwerkanalyseprogramms *Multiple SIENA*. Die Ergebnisse bekräftigten den evolutionstheoretischen Ansatz: Mitarbeiter, die häufig miteinander klatschten, freunden sich nach einiger Zeit an. Trotz dieses positiven Effekts von Klatsch auf Freundschaft bestätigte sich die Vermutung *nicht*, dass aktives Klatschen mit einer gesteigerten Popularität im Freundschaftsnetzwerk *insgesamt* einhergeht. Stattdessen verringerte sich die Popularität von sogenannten *Klatschbasen*, also Personen die übermäßig viel klatschten, sogar. Übermäßiges Klatschen ist folglich kein Mittel, besonders viele Freunde zu finden; scheinbar straft die Gruppe solches Verhalten ab.

Ich, Du und alle, über die wir klatschen: Wie wirkt die Kombination sozialer Beziehungen in der ‘Klatschtriade’?

Kapitel 7 verband Elemente der vorhergehenden Studien und widmete sich der Analyse von Triaden. Eine Triade ist eine Gruppe bestehend aus drei Menschen – in diesem Fall zwei Mitarbeiter, die miteinander über eine dritte Kollegin oder einen dritten Kollegen reden. Im theoretischen Ansatz wurde Klatsch mit dem Bestehen formaler Arbeitsbeziehungen und informaler Freundschaftsbeziehungen erklärt. Es wurde vermutet, dass Mitarbeiter einer Triade umso mehr *miteinander* und *übereinander* sprechen, je stärker ihre formalen Arbeitsbeziehungen sind, sie also derselben Arbeitsgruppe angehören. Weiterhin wurde argumentiert, dass positiver Klatsch vordergründig in Gruppen vorkommt, in denen Mitarbeiter miteinander befreundet sind. Im Gegensatz dazu wurde negativer Klatsch in sogenannten Koalitionstriaden vermutet, in denen zwei klatschende Mitarbeiter miteinander befreundet sind, jedoch *nicht* mit der dritten Person (Wittek and Wielers, 1998). Um dies untersuchen zu können, wurde speziell für diese Studie eine neue statistische Analysemethode entwickelt. Diese Methode basierte auf sozialer Netzwerkanalyse und berücksichtigte die verschiedenen Beziehungsmerkmale zwischen den drei möglichen Mitarbeitern in einer Triade (d.h. zwei klatschende Personen und die dritte Person). Wie erwartet, war positives und negatives Klatschverhalten hauptsächlich innerhalb formaler Arbeitsgruppen und nur wenig außerhalb dieser zu beobachten. Die Ergebnisse bestätigten außerdem, dass positiver Klatsch zunimmt, wenn die Mitarbeiter einer Triade befreundet sind. Die Koalitionshypothese wurde nur teilweise verifiziert.

Zentrale Schlussfolgerungen

Die Ergebnisse der vorliegenden Studien zeigten, dass Menschen über Personen klatschen, denen sie wenig vertrauen, oder die einen niedrigen sozialen Status in der Abteilung haben. Vor allem Mitarbeiter mit niedriger formaler Position klatschten über Vorgesetzte, insbesondere wenn deren Vertrauensbeziehung schwach war. Diese Art ‘Widerstandseffekt’ verstärkte sich weiter, wenn Mitarbeiter viel Vertrauen in ihre Kollegen hatten und somit mit deren sozialem Rückhalt rechnen konnten. Interessanterweise hatte Vertrauen keinen Einfluss auf positiven Klatsch; viel Vertrauen in dritte Personen führte demnach auch *nicht* zu mehr positiven Klatsch über diese Personen. Eine mögliche Erklärung für die Zunahme von negativem Klatsch ist, dass formale Hierarchien in Organisationen Abhängigkeiten zwischen Mitarbeitern und Vorgesetzten hervorrufen. Solche Abhängigkeiten wecken das Bedürfnis nach mehr Informationen über andere, insbesondere über negatives oder schädliches Verhalten. Diese Vermutung bestätigte sich durch die Tatsache, dass Mitarbeiter häufiger über Kollegen der eigenen Arbeitsgruppe (und damit über Personen, von denen die eigene Aufgabenerfüllung abhing) als über Kollegen anderer Arbeitsgruppen klatschen. Entgegen der Erwartung ergab sich Klatsch nicht immer aus existierenden Vertrauensbeziehungen, sondern trat auch unabhängig davon auf. Die Ergebnisse deuteten sogar darauf hin, dass Klatsch – als Austausch diskreter Informationen über Dritte – die Entstehung von Vertrauensbeziehungen zwischen Mitarbeitern fördert und folglich das Schließen von Freundschaften stimuliert. Eine zentrale Schlussfolgerung hierzu ist, dass Klatsch und Vertrauensbeziehungen eng miteinander verwoben sind.

Die Ergebnisse zeigten zudem, wie wichtig und sinnvoll ein theoretischer und methodischer Ansatz ist, der die drei Rollen in der *Klatschtriade* ausdifferenziert. Zum einen wurde deutlich, dass die Initiatoren und die Zuhörer von Klatsch verschiedenartige Vertrauensbeziehungen zu den Personen haben, welche Klatschthema sind. Demzufolge müssen Initiatoren und Zuhörer getrennt voneinander untersucht werden. Zum anderen richtete sich die Forschung in der Vergangenheit kaum auf die Frage, *wer* nun eigentlich das Thema von Klatsch ist. Dies liegt wahrscheinlich an der theoretischen Komplexität und der methodischen Schwierigkeit, triadische Strukturen innerhalb eines Modells zu analysieren. In der vorliegenden Dissertation wurde eine Möglichkeit beschrieben, wie man dritte Personen (das Thema von Klatsch) dennoch als Teil der Klatschtriade erforschen kann. Weiterführende Forschung auf diesem Gebiet ist erforderlich.

Weiterführende Forschung könnte darüberhinaus andere Organisationskontexte untersuchen. Die vorliegenden Ergebnisse beschränken sich auf eine Organisation mit spezifischen Merkmalen, nämlich die Arbeit in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe sowie eine hohe Frauen- und Teilzeitarbeitsquote. Ein interessantes Setting zum Thema Klatsch wäre eine Organisation mit einem höheren Männeranteil und einer stärker leistungsorientierten Unternehmenskultur. Zukünftige Forschung könnte außerdem umfangreicher angelegt sein: Ein Vergleich mehrerer Organisationsnetzwerke würde zusätzliche Einblicke in die strukturellen Muster von Klatschnetzwerken geben, beispielsweise ob

Mitarbeitergruppen in der Regel durch soziale Segregation oder Integration charakterisiert sind. Des Weiteren ist es wichtig, die Folgen von Klatsch zu untersuchen: Momentan gibt es nur wenige Studien zu den Auswirkungen von Klatsch auf Arbeitszufriedenheit, Wohlbefinden und Arbeitsleistung.

Die Ergebnisse dieser Dissertation haben Implikationen für Mitarbeiter und Vorgesetzte in Unternehmen. Zum einen ist Klatsch natürlicher Bestandteil einer jeden Arbeitsumgebung und in den meisten Fällen kein Grund zur Beunruhigung. Klatschaktivitäten spiegeln Vertrauensbeziehungen zwischen den Mitarbeitern einer Organisation wider und können sogar enge Beziehungen zwischen Mitarbeitern fördern. Zum anderen können sich Menschen gegen negativen Klatsch schützen, indem sie in Vertrauensbeziehungen investieren. Die Befunde der vorliegenden Studien deuten darauf hin, dass Vorgesetzte weniger negativen Klatsch ausgesetzt sind, wenn sie aufrichtig agieren, Informationen auf direkten Wegen kommunizieren und Mitarbeitern Mitspracherechte einräumen. Weiterhin brauchen gut integrierte Mitarbeiter (die, die viele freundschaftliche Beziehungen in der Abteilung haben), sich kaum um negativen Klatsch zu sorgen. Darüber hinaus zeigte diese Dissertation, dass die Mitarbeiter der untersuchten Organisation generell eher positiv als negativ übereinander und über ihre Vorgesetzten reden. Deshalb ist es wichtig, Klatsch nicht nur als Problem, sondern auch als wesentlichen Bestandteil sozialer Interaktionen, die persönliche Beziehungen befördern und festigen, zu bewerten.

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Appendix

Dutch Questionnaire

Negative and Positive Gossip about Managers

This scale was developed using input from a study by Wittek and Wielers (1998). The scale is two-dimensional with the items 1, 3, 4, and 6 measuring negative gossip, and the items 2, 5, and 7 measuring positive gossip.

“In dit onderdeel gaat het over informele communicatie. Het komt vaak voor dat men op het werk met elkaar informeel praat over een collega die er op dat moment niet bij is. Dit kan zowel positieve als negatieve commentaren betreffen. De volgende beweringen gaan over praten over leidinggevendenden. Met "leidinggevendenden" bedoelen we teamleiders, afdelingsmanagers en -hoofden, regiomanagers, en leden van de Raad van Bestuur, inclusief uw directe leidinggevende(n).”

In hoeverre zijn de volgende uitspraken op u van toepassing?	Niet op u van toepassing				Op u van toepassing		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Ik klaag op het werk soms over leidinggevendenden, terwijl ze afwezig zijn.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Ik maak wel eens positieve opmerkingen over het gedrag van afwezige leidinggevendenden.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Als ik me slecht behandeld voel door een leidinggevende, heb ik het daar soms met collega's over als de leidinggevende afwezig is.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Ik maak wel eens een negatieve opmerking over het gedrag van een leidinggevende als hij/zij afwezig is.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Ik rechtvaardig of verdedig soms het gedrag van een afwezige leidinggevende.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Soms bekritiseer ik iets dat ik zie als een negatieve eigenschap van een afwezige leidinggevende.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Ik prijs wel eens de vaardigheden van een leidinggevende wanneer hij/zij op dat moment afwezig is.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Trust in Management

Items were taken from Cook and Wall's (1980) scale on *interpersonal trust at work*. The codings of the items 2 and 6 were reversed before computing the scale.

In hoeverre bent u het eens of oneens met de volgende stellingen?	Volledig mee oneens		Neutraal			Volledig mee eens	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Het management probeert oprecht rekening te houden met de mening van de medewerkers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. [De organisatie] heeft weinig toekomst, tenzij het betere managers weet aan te trekken.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Het management is te vertrouwen voor wat betreft het nemen van verstandige besluiten voor de toekomst van [de organisatie].	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Het management van [de organisatie] lijkt goed te functioneren.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Ik ben er vrij zeker van dat [de organisatie] altijd probeert mij eerlijk te behandelen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Het management zou bereid zijn om medewerkers te bedriegen voor eigen voordeel.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Trust in Colleagues

Items were taken from Cook and Wall's (1980) scale on *interpersonal trust at work*.

In hoeverre bent u het eens of oneens met de volgende stellingen?	Volledig mee oneens		Neutraal			Volledig mee eens	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Ik weet dat mijn collega's me zullen proberen te helpen als ik op mijn werk in de problemen raak.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Ik kan er op vertrouwen dat mijn collega's doen wat ze beloven te doen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Ik heb het volste vertrouwen in de kennis en vaardigheden van mijn collega's.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Ik kan er op vertrouwen dat mijn collega's me helpen als ik dat nodig heb.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Ik kan er op vertrouwen dat mijn collega's doorgaan met hun werk, ook als de leidinggevenden afwezig zouden zijn.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Ik kan er op vertrouwen dat mijn werk niet nodeloos ingewikkeld wordt gemaakt door nalatigheid van mijn collega's.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Cognitive Resistance to Change

Items were taken from Oreg's (2006) *change attitude* scale. The codings of the items 1 and 3 were reversed before computing the scale.

“De volgende vragen hebben betrekking op de regionalisering. Met "regionalisering" bedoelen we de opdeling in de regio's Noord, Oost en West.”

Wat is uw mening?	Volledig mee oneens		Neutraal			Volledig mee eens		Weet ik niet
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	?
1. Ik geloof dat de regionalisering de organisatie ten goede zal komen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	?
2. Ik geloof dat de regionalisering schade zal berokkenen aan de manier waarop in de organisatie gewerkt wordt.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	?
3. Ik geloof dat de regionalisering voor mij persoonlijk een vooruitgang is.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	?
4. Ik denk dat het slecht is dat de regionalisering is ingevoerd.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	?

Job Satisfaction

This scale was developed by the researchers based on in-depth interviews and a pilot study in the organization.

Hoe tevreden bent u met...	Ze ontevreden		Neutraal			Ze tevreden	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. ... uw taken?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. ... uw salaris?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. ... de samenwerking met uw collega's?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. ... uw werkdruk?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Note that, where necessary, scales were translated from English to Dutch using the forward-backward procedure.

Sociometric Gossip Measure

Step 1: Gossip between Employees of the Site (Ego Selects Alters)

Het komt vaak voor dat men op het werk met elkaar *informeel praat* over een collega die er op dat moment niet bij is. Dat kunnen zowel positieve als negatieve commentaren zijn over de afwezige collega. Te denken valt bijvoorbeeld aan het bekritisieren of het prijzen van gedrag.

1. Als u aan de afgelopen drie maanden terugdenkt, welke collega's hebben dan regelmatig informeel *met u over collega's uit uw afdeling* gepraat? Meerdere keuzes zijn mogelijk (kies maximaal tien).

Deze personen praatten informeel met mij over afwezige collega's:

The question was followed by an alphabetical names list of all employees working at the site including the site manager. Answer categories were binary as they comprised check boxes. Below the list the option of choosing nobody ("niemand") was presented.

Because there were follow-up questions on each selected employee, the selection was restricted to a maximum of ten to avoid lengthy follow-ups. There were follow-up questions on gossiping, which are specified below in Step 2 and 3.

Step 2: Gossip about Employees of the Site (Ego Selects Objects for Every Alter)

The computer-assisted questionnaire automatically filtered all employees that the respondent had selected in Step 1. Then the computer presented a new screen on *every single* selected employee, here indicated as [Alter], with the first follow-up question.

Informeel communicatie met [Alter]

Wij willen graag twee dingen van u weten. Ten eerste willen wij weten over wie de informele gesprekken gingen. Ten tweede willen wij weten wat de toon en inhoud van deze gesprekken waren. De tweede vraag hoeft u niet voor elke medewerker uit de lijst de beantwoorden *maar alleen* voor de medewerkers die u in de eerste vraag kiest.

2. *Over welke collega's* heeft [Alter] met u in de afgelopen drie maanden regelmatig informeel gepraat terwijl ze afwezig waren? (Meerdere keuzes zijn mogelijk)

This follow-up question was succeeded by an alphabetical names list of all employees working at the site including the site manager. Again, answer categories were binary as they comprised of check boxes.

Step 3: Positive and Negative Gossip (Ego Rates Gossip about Objects for Every Alter)

Again, as done in the previous step, the computer presented a separate screen on every selected employee from Step 1 (= alter) to ask the final follow-up question.

Voor diegenen die u bij **2.** heeft aangekuist: Waren de toon en inhoud van het gesprek met [Alter] over deze collega overwegend positief of overwegend kritisch, of kwam allebei voor?

This follow-up question was succeeded by the list of employees that the respondent had nominated before in Step 2 (= objects). Gossip about every of these employees was rated including the categories:

- 1 = Overwegend kritisch
- 2 = Zowel kritisch als positief
- 3 = Overwegend positief
- Weet ik niet.

Differences between the Three Waves

The first wave of data collection contained Steps 1, 2, and 3 as specified above. Step 3 was dropped after the first wave, so that the second wave only assessed Step 1 and Step 2. The questionnaire was further shortened in the third wave by modifying Step 2 into a simpler version (see below). Step 1 was used consistently across all three waves. In the third wave, Step 2 was simplified to assess objects of gossip:

Over welke collega's hebben uw collega's met u in de afgelopen drie maanden regelmatig informeel gepraat terwijl ze afwezig waren? Meerdere keuzes zijn mogelijk. Onze gesprekken gingen over:

The question was followed by an alphabetical names list of all employees working at the site including the site manager. Answer categories were binary as they comprised of check boxes.

Social Relationship

Met sommige collega's is er een zeer goede relatie; sommigen zijn misschien zelfs goede vrienden. Met andere collega's gaat het contact echter minder goed.

Wat een "goede vriend" of een "zeer moeizame" relatie is, is voor iedereen anders. Hier zijn we geïnteresseerd in uw eigen inschatting. Bijvoorbeeld, wie van uw collega's zou u een "goede vriend" noemen, of met wie vindt u de relatie "zeer moeizaam". Hoe zou u uw relatie met elk van de volgende personen beschrijven?

The question was followed by an alphabetical names list of all employees working at the site including the site manager. Answer categories were presented for every employee on the list and included:

- 1 = Zeer moeizame relatie
- 2 = Moeizame relatie
- 3 = Niet moeizaam en niet vriendschappelijk (first wave: neutraal)
- 4 = Vriendschappelijke relatie
- 5 = Goede vriend
- Weet ik niet.
- Ik ken deze persoon niet.

Frequency of Communication

Hoe vaak heeft u de afgelopen drie maanden op het werk met elk van de volgende collega's gepraat? Denkt u hierbij zowel aan informele praatjes als ook meer formele gesprekken.

The question was followed by an alphabetical names list of all employees working at the site including the site manager. Answer categories were presented for every employee on the list and included:

- 1 = Nooit
- 2 = Minder dan 1 keer per week
- 3 = Ca. 1 tot 2 keer per week
- 4 = Ca. 3 tot 4 keer per week
- 5 = Ca. 5 tot 7 keer per week
- 6 = Ca. 8 of meer keer per week
- Weet ik niet.
- Ik ken deze persoon niet.

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Curriculum Vitae

Lea Ellwardt was born in Pasewalk, East Germany, on September 12, 1981. She went to school in Viereck/ETS and in Dresden. In 2000, she studied Sociology at the Dresden University of Technology, followed by a year at the University of Vienna. Lea then took a short break from her studies to pursue an opportunity to work abroad. First, she accomplished a six-month internship in a European non-profit organization in Brussels. From there she went on to serve as a support worker for people with mental illnesses in Manchester for five months. In 2006, she obtained her Masters degree (cum laude). After that, Lea worked as a research assistant returning back to the Dresden University of Technology. In September 2006, she moved to The Netherlands, where she was appointed as a doctoral researcher at the ICS Graduate School, University of Groningen. In 2009, she spent two months as a visiting scholar at the University of Kentucky, U.S. As of September 2010, Lea is employed as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Groningen and received her PhD in Sociology in 2011.