

University of Groningen

Gossip in organizations

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2011

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ellwardt, L. (2011). *Gossip in organizations: A social network study*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. s.n.

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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 gossipers' 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 gossipers. In this case, gossiping can have multiple negative repercussions for the gossipers, 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.

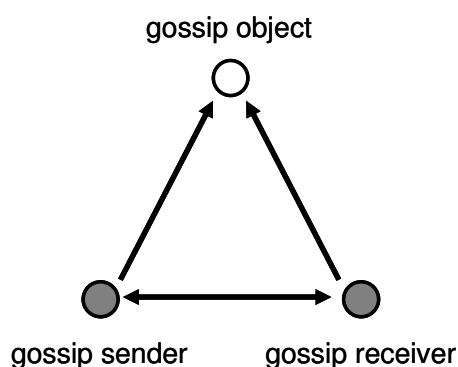


Figure 1.1 The Gossip Triad

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.