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Gossip in organizations

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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.

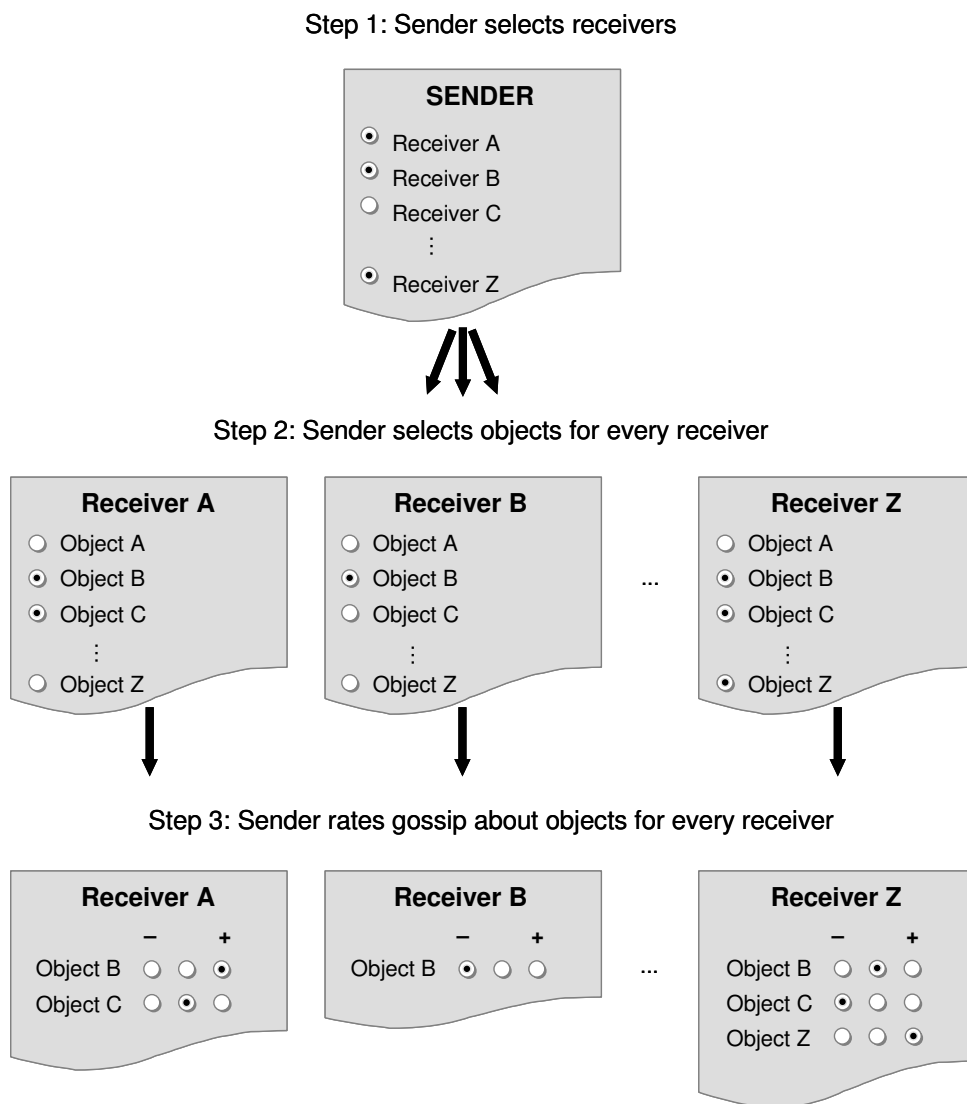


Figure 2.1 Three-step Procedure for Measuring Gossip Relations

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.