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### Gossip in organizations

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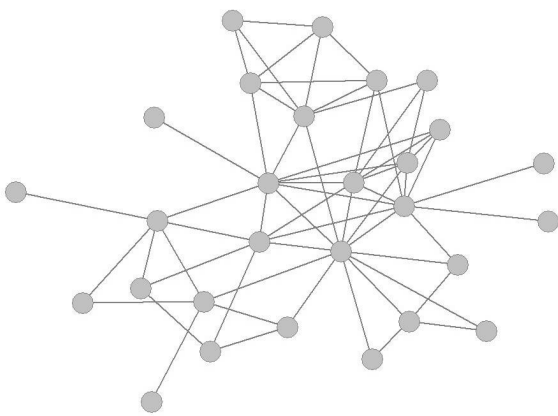
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# Chapter 4

## 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.*

This chapter is based upon Ellwardt, L., Wittek, R., Wielers, R. Talking about the boss: Effects of trust relationships on workplace gossip. Revised and resubmitted for publication.

## 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.

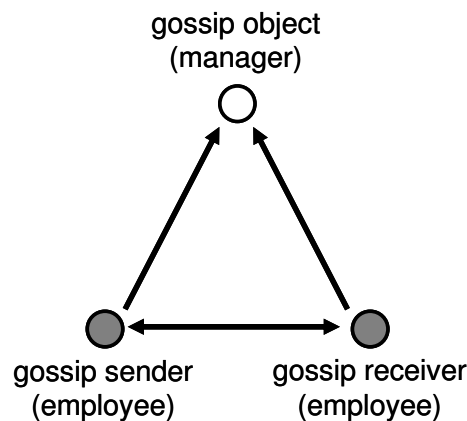


Figure 4.1 Gossip Triad

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 DeGoey, 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. †  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

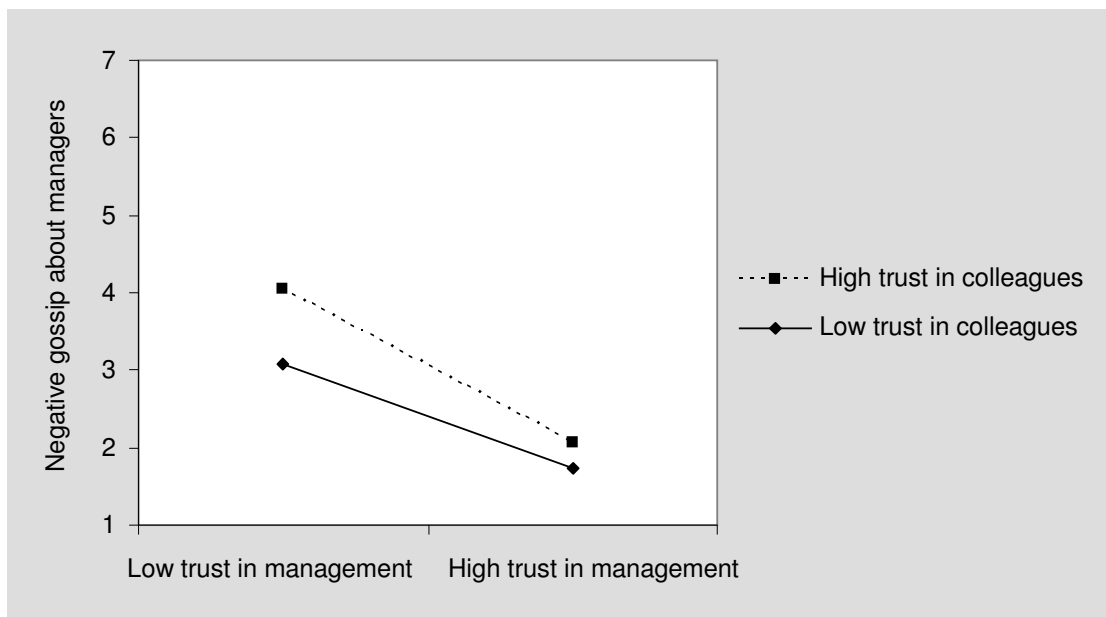
Table 4.2 presents two sets of OLS regression models, one predicting negative and one predicting positive gossip about managers. In Hypothesis 1a, we expected an increase in positive gossip but a decrease in negative gossip for employees who generally trust management. The results in model 1B only support 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<sup>a</sup>

	Negative Gossip (N = 133)						Positive Gossip (N = 134)								
	Model 1A			Model 1B			Model 1C			Model 2A			Model 2B		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
<b>Controls</b>															
(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 <sup>†</sup>	0.15	0.09	0.14 <sup>†</sup>	0.14	0.09	0.13 <sup>†</sup>	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
<b>Generalized Trust</b>															
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 <sup>†</sup>						
<b>Adjusted R-square</b>		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.* <sup>a</sup> Age, tenure, trust in management and trust in colleagues were standardized for calculating the model and for computing the interaction term. <sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

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.

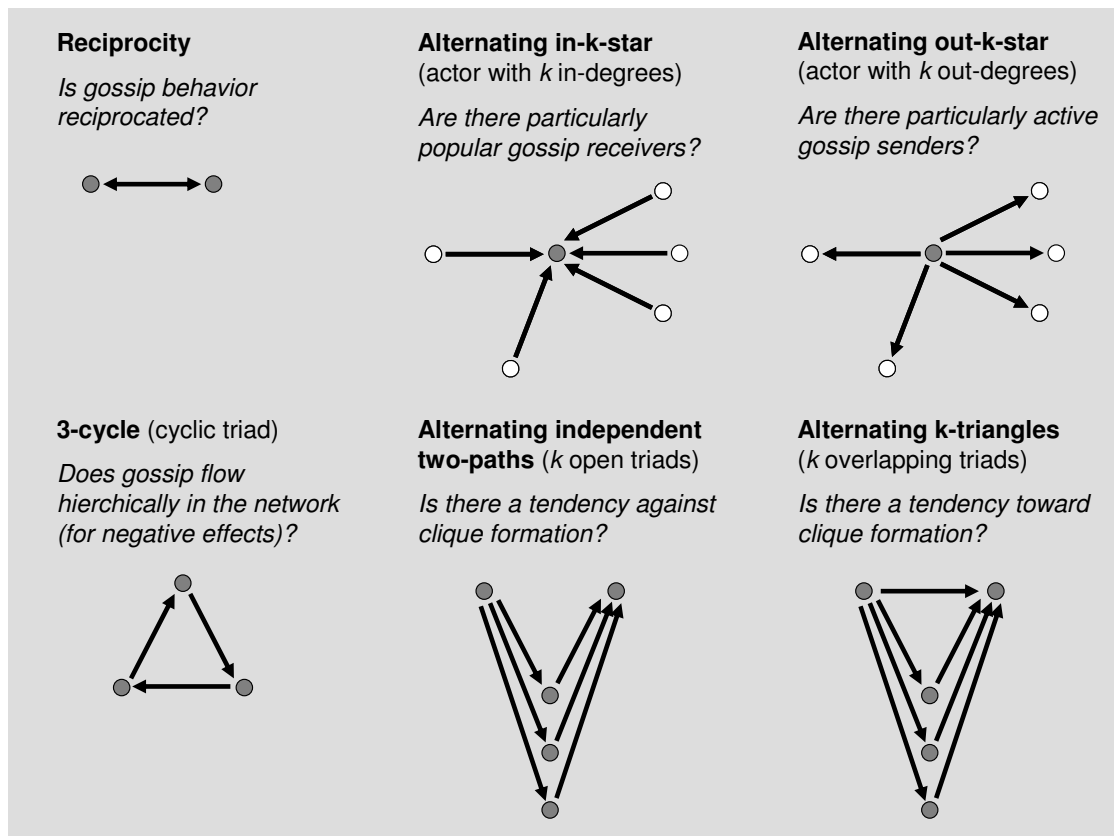
#### 4.5.3 Method of Analysis

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.

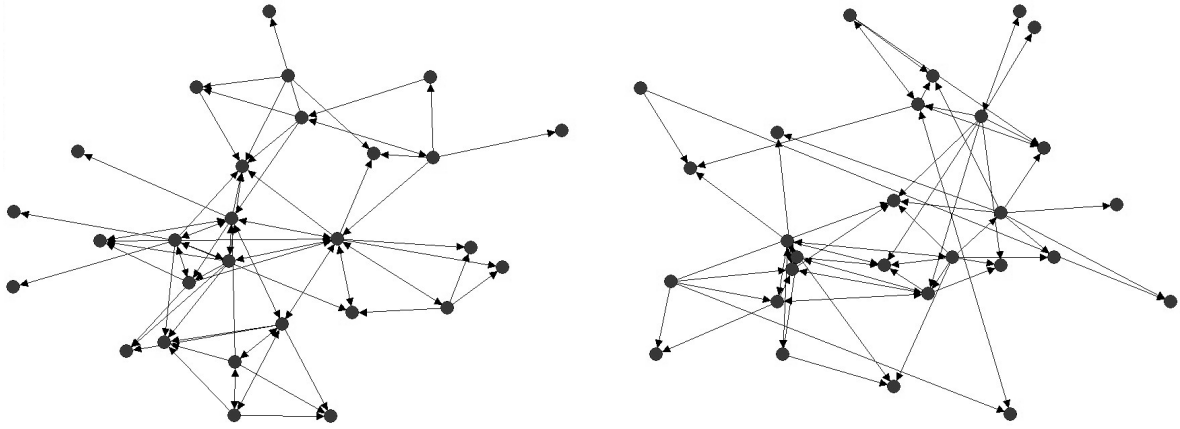
**Table 4.3** Study 2: Descriptive Statistics of Networks at Blue Site and Orange Site

<b>Network Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Blue Site</b>	<b>Orange Site</b>
Number of employees	35	35
Number of respondents	29 (82.9%)	29 (82.9%)
<b>Gossip about the Site Manager</b>		
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%
<b>Interpersonal Trust: Affection</b>		
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
<b>Interpersonal Trust: Contact Frequency</b>		
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 <sup>b</sup>	3.26	2.37
Density of contact network	0.33	0.72

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Because both networks are equal in size and response rate, network measures are non-standardized and hence directly comparable. <sup>b</sup> 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 ( $\theta = 0.00$ , *n.s.*). 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. <math>\theta</math></i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est. <math>\theta</math></i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est. <math>\theta</math></i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est. <math>\theta</math></i>	<i>SE</i>	
<b>Controls</b>									
1. Reciprocity	0.99	0.67	1.10 <sup>†</sup>	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 <sup>†</sup>	0.29	
5. Alternating k-triangles	0.70**	0.24	0.68**	0.23	0.40 <sup>†</sup>	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	
<b>Generalized Trust in Management</b>									
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	
<b>Affection for Site Manager</b>									
10. Sender of gossip	-0.44*	0.21			-0.18 <sup>†</sup>	0.11			
11. Receiver of gossip	0.21	0.32			-0.17 <sup>†</sup>	0.10			
12. Same level of affection of sender and receiver	0.15	0.26			-0.11	0.26			
<b>Contact Frequency with Site Manager</b>									
13. Sender of gossip	-0.33***	0.09			0.00	0.15			
14. Receiver of gossip	-0.10	0.13			0.44 <sup>†</sup>	0.25			
15. Similarity in contact of sender and receiver	-0.91	0.62			-0.06	0.46			
<b>Dyadic Relationships between Employees</b>									
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. <sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

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.