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Gossip in organizations

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Chapter 8

General Discussion and Conclusion

8 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

8.1 Summary of the Empirical Findings

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

Table 8.1 Levels of Analysis and According Book Chapters

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

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

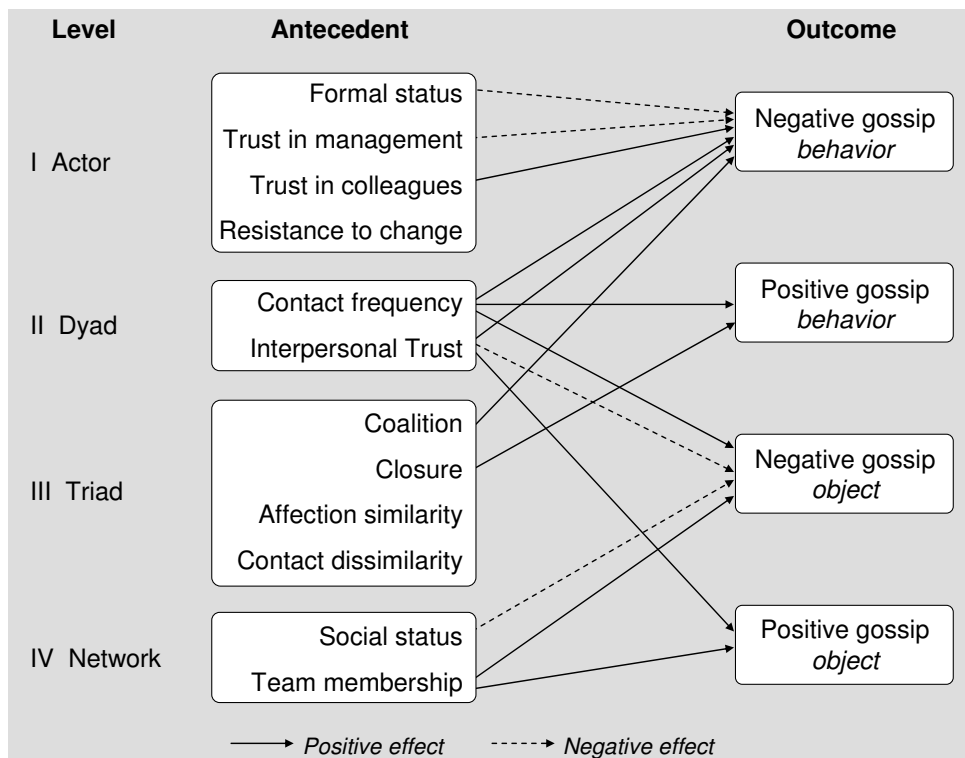


Figure 8.1 Summary of the Findings

8.1.1 *Who Gossips, and with Whom?*

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

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

8.1.2 *About Whom is the Gossip?*

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

Table 8.2 Overview of Hypothesized Effects and Results

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

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

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

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

8.2 Theoretical Implications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

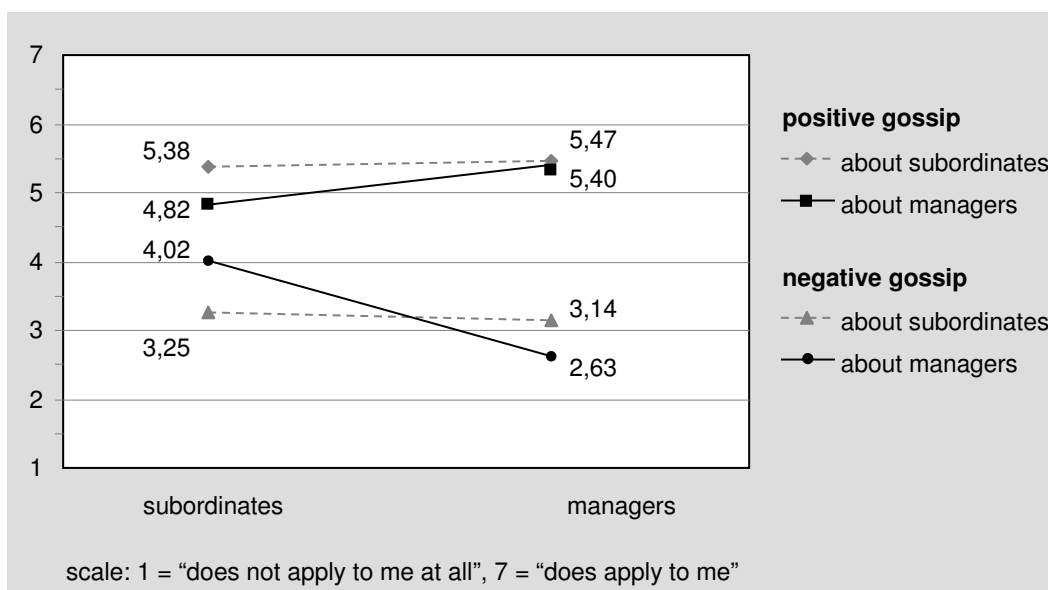


Figure 8.2 Positive and Negative Gossip by Formal Status

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

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

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

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

8.2.4 Gossip as an Under-researched Topic

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

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

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

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

8.2.5 Links to Previous Research Methods

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

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

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

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

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

8.3 Directions for Future Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8.4 Practical Implications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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References Appendix ICS Dissertations
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