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Why we gossip

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

Gossip is one of the most ubiquitous human behaviors. Researchers have documented gossip across cultures, societies, types of groups and domains of activity, and estimated that people spend more than two thirds of their conversation time gossiping (Dunbar, Duncan & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994). Some claim that human society, as we know it, cannot exist without gossip (e.g. Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994). And indeed, people who do not gossip may be socially disengaged or alienated (Rosnow, 2001).

Although exchanging gossip is an omnipresent behavior which is not intrinsically good or bad, gossiping has a strong negative reputation¹. Compared to other socially disapproved organizational behaviors, such as deceptive sales practices, or misuse of organizational resources (MacLean, Anteby, Hudson, & Rudolph, 2006), gossip is more ambiguous in its manifestation and implications. Because virtually everybody engages in gossip in a broad range of circumstances, and anyone may be affected by it, gossip cannot be understood only as counterproductive behavior. Thus, on the one hand, gossip is a widespread behavior which is not per se positive or negative; on the other hand, gossip is considered socially undesirable and it is explicitly disapproved (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004).

This paradox suggests that gossip entails a complex exchange of information, highly relevant and functional for those who engage in it, or are concerned by it. As such, people may be interested in or may frown upon gossip for different reasons, which possibly depend on how the gossip relates to them personally. The individuals involved in gossip are likely to have a unique perspective on the gossip exchange, shaped by their specific role in the gossip process. Therefore, in this dissertation we will investigate what functions gossip fulfills from the perspectives of the individuals involved in it: the sender, the receiver, and the target of

¹ The content of gossip can be positive or negative; however, the gossip content is distinguishable from the act of gossiping (see definition and characteristics on pp. 5-12).

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gossip. Understanding the functions gossip has for each of the individuals involved may clarify the gossip paradox: the fact that gossip is prevalent across human communities, but it is generally disapproved.

We investigate the functions of gossip for senders, receivers, and targets in a workplace context, for three reasons. First, the workplace is ideal for the study of gossip, because it is a complex social environment, where individuals have frequent interactions with others. Second, people spend a significant amount of time at work, and organizational life is of major importance for individuals' well-being (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005). Third, understanding workplace gossip may help organizations optimize interpersonal processes and may ultimately help organizations to achieve their goals.

In the remainder of this introduction, we will first define gossip and describe its characteristics. Next, we will review gossip's most important functions, and discuss how they are addressed in the two main research traditions investigating gossip, which focus on groups and on individuals. Afterwards, we will outline current research studying gossip at the individual level, and discuss gossip's functions for people who are senders, receivers and targets. We will end the introduction with an overview of the studies in this dissertation.

Gossip definition and characteristics

The most widely accepted definition of gossip is *evaluative talk exchanged informally about an absent third party* (e.g. Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Because humans are social beings, who need to rely on each other and exchange socially valued information in order to survive and thrive, gossip is considered fundamental to human functioning or even hard-wired into human nature (Emler, 1994; Rosnow, 2001): "because gossip saved lives in the Stone Age, it will be with organizations forever" (Nicholson, 1998, p. 141). Evolutionary theory describes gossip as the reason why humans have developed language: to function optimally in complex social environments (e.g. Dunbar, 2004). Because it is impossible to directly observe

the behavior of all group members, people need to share reputational information about others, evaluate their trustworthiness and quality as exchange partners, and to exert social control over uncooperative group members (Dunbar, 2004; Giardini & Conte, 2011; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2015; 2016). Gossip has some important characteristics, which distinguish it from other forms of communication.

The gossip triad. Gossip involves minimally three people: a gossip sender – the person who sends the gossip message, a gossip receiver – the person to whom the gossip is addressed, and a gossip target – the person whom the gossip is about. The sender and receiver typically exchange gossip in face-to-face interactions, about a target who is not present (or does not hear the conversation). Figure 1.1 depicts the gossip triad. The three individuals in the gossip triad usually know each other personally, or at least share social network connections, and are prone to meet in the future (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012c; Emler, 1994). Although people may also be interested in reading about the lives of famous people in gossip magazines, we consider celebrity gossip beyond the scope of the current dissertation, in line with Noon and Delbridge’s definition of gossip: “the information must be about the members of the setting” (1993. p. 25). Previous research showed that a trust relation between sender and receiver makes gossip more likely, whereas the relation of gossip sender or receiver with the target is a less important predictor of gossip (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012a; Wittek & Wielers, 1998).

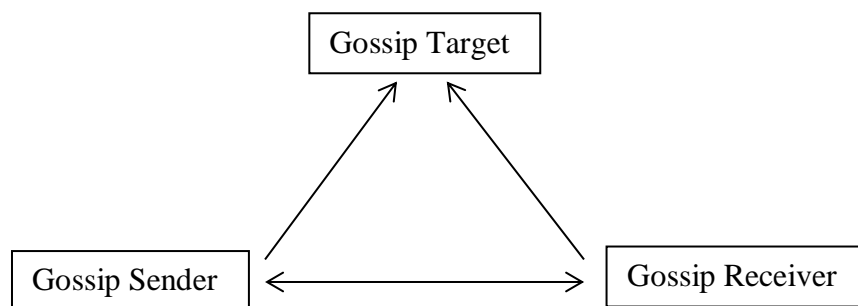


Figure 1.1. The gossip triad.

Evaluative. Although most people associate gossip exclusively with negative information about others, possibly because negative information is more memorable (e.g. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), the evaluative content of gossip can be negative or positive (Ben Ze'ev, 1994; Foster, 2004). The evaluation communicated through gossip may be of negative or positive valence, because gossip essentially reflects opinions about others in one's social environment, which are largely based on negative or positive perceptions of targets' behavior, characteristics, previous impressions of the target, or role expectations that targets fulfill or not. Furthermore, the positivity and negativity of gossip can vary, but gossip is never purely descriptive: gossip always contains an evaluative component, which can be explicit or implicit (Bergmann, 1993). For example, negative gossip may come in the form of factual or descriptive information (e.g. "*Lisa avoided celebrating her birthday at work*"), or as a judgmental message, resembling character assassination, a type of gossip that disqualifies targets as worthy members of the group (e.g. "*Lisa showed antisocial behavior towards colleagues*"). In the current work, we use moderate evaluative statements to operationalize gossip, which are more typical instances of gossip than extreme evaluations, or we let participants describe gossip incidents that they remember.

Concealed. Gossip typically involves talking about people who are not present. Gossip is distinct from more direct forms of communication because it creates a safe space in which the gossipers can voice their opinions about someone without being interrupted or corrected, and with a reduced risk of retaliation from targets (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Because the target or other individuals are not included during the gossip exchange, people may spread more sensitive information, may speak more bluntly, or may be more inclined to distort facts than they would if targets were present. The targets' perspectives on the issues discussed are missing, which might facilitate polarization of opinions about targets.

Informal. An important characteristic of gossip is that it occurs in informal conversations. It is incidental, unplanned, spontaneous, and voluntary. The people who engage in gossip usually cannot make a priori predictions about the content or outcome of their conversation (Emler, 1994). Furthermore, most gossip occurs in face-to-face interactions, where speakers can monitor how the message is received and can flexibly adapt their behavior based on cues indicating whether the gossip is appreciated and encouraged, and whether the conversation partner is willing to disseminate the information or contribute novel points about the target. As such, the exchange of gossip is gradual and it contributes to establishing a safe environment where participants can speak freely (Ellwardt et al, 2012a).

Subjective. Gossip does not reflect facts as much as the opinion of the speaker about the target. Gossip is subjective because it contains evaluations, moral judgments, beliefs and attitudes related to the experience of organizational life, resulting from the gossiper's (and potentially the receiver's) interpretation of a social situation (Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Rosnow, 2001). Because gossip reflects a subjective perspective, its truthfulness can be only partially assessed. However, the impact of one inaccurate gossip message is limited, because people corroborate multiple gossip statements and their own observations about targets when assessing targets' reputation (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008). Furthermore, most gossip is intended to offer a truthful picture of the target, and is based on concrete events (Bergmann, 1993). People are not inclined to spread false gossip because they may face repercussions from the target or they may lose credibility with the receiver (Kuttler, Parker, & La Greca, 2002). Although its truthfulness cannot be established precisely, and gossipers might manipulate information for their own benefit, gossip remains very interesting for receivers, because it conveys important reputational information about group members (Burt, 2008).

Embedded in context. Gossip is unconditionally bound to concrete events, and essentially an idiographic understanding of reality (Bergmann, 1993). As such, gossip is defined by the situation in which it occurs: gossip's subtleties cannot be fully interpreted outside the specific circumstances that generated it, outside the relationships between the members of the gossip triad, their shared social meaning and history (Foster, 2004), or in isolation from other types of communication, such as formal organizational communication (Mills, 2010). The only constant in gossip is that it contains an evaluation about people (Rosnow, 2001).

Moreover, whether a message constitutes gossip or not is also dependent on context (Jaeger, Skelder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994). Some researchers believe that there is nothing about the content of a sentence that classifies it as gossip, but rather the intention of the speaker (Cuonzo, 2008), how, when, where and with whom it is shared. Gossip is a complex behavior that may take many forms: it can involve facts or supposition, it can be communicated explicitly or implicitly through metaphors or other figures of speech, or even signaled through tone or body language (Rosnow, 2001). For example the sentence "*Lisa did not celebrate her birthday*" can be considered factual information when the budget for workplace events is reviewed, and gossip when the sociality of colleagues is discussed. Furthermore, the same sentence may be positive gossip in a context where colleague Lisa is appreciated for donating the event budget to help a colleague in need, or negative gossip when she is criticized for avoiding contact with the work-group.

General functions of gossip

Gossip is a ubiquitous behavior because it serves important functions for individuals and groups. Gossip's functions are interrelated and may come into play simultaneously, but separate categories can be distinguished: information, influence, social bonding, and emotion outlet (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Rosnow, 2001; Stirling, 1956).

The people involved in gossip may be unaware of the functions gossip has for them. The circulation of gossip may not always seem to have a conscious or explicit purpose (Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994): “gossip may involve a torrent of talk, yet its most vital claims remain silent” (Spacks, 1985, p. 22). Moreover, the functions of gossip are not fixed, but they are activated by specific circumstances and contextual cues (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). For example when people experience high uncertainty in their work environment they may gossip in order to seek for information (Mills, 2010), whereas in competitive contexts people may engage in gossip to denigrate their rivals and emphasize their own qualities (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007).

Information. People use gossip to communicate information about others in their environment. This is important because gossip helps people learn from others’ positive and negative experiences and adapt their own behavior. Furthermore, gossip contains reputational information, which helps people make better evaluations of others’ trustworthiness or ability to perform well (Baumeister et al, 2004; Beersm & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al, 2012; Sommerfeld et al, 2007). According to Emler (1994), the fundamental purpose of gossip as social observation is to make reputational inquiries; it allows individuals and communities to accumulate behavioral evidence about others and to form and refine judgments about their vices and virtues. The wide dissemination of reputational information has advantages for both the community and for individuals, because it helps identify social loafers and high performers. Gossip represents a good learning tool, helping people decode others’ self-presentation efforts, and understand “how life is lived behind the social mask” (Medini & Rosenberg, 1976, p. 462).

Influence. Gossip has a strong manipulative potential, shaping the way gossipers and receivers perceive and behave towards their targets (e.g. Beersm & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978). As a vector for transmission of social information, gossip influences

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receivers, whether or not people have access to original information about a target (Sommerfeld et al, 2008). By sharing their perspectives with the receivers, gossip senders offer to the receivers their own representation of the target, and help nuance views about the target. People can use gossip to exert influence over both targets and receivers; speakers may directly manipulate the behavior of receivers by influencing the way they evaluate targets, and indirectly the behavior of targets, through the effect gossip may have on receivers. Because gossip takes place in private and in the absence of targets, and targets have no opportunity to intervene and change how they are portrayed, receivers are likely to agree with the gossipers' perspective (Eder & Enke, 1991). Gossip creates social consensus about gossip targets, may polarize opinions in favor or against targets, and in extreme cases it may lead to scapegoating or victimization (Ellwardt et al, 2012c; Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery, 2014). Furthermore, by providing information about targets, gossipers may help receivers compare themselves with the targets; thus, gossip is a potential way to influence how receivers evaluate themselves (Baumeister et al, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Social bonding. In the process of exchanging gossip, senders and receivers build a trust relation and an emotional bond. Some believe gossip is a mutual grooming mechanism among humans (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Gossip is considered an effective way of making social alliances and finding new friends, because it helps people discover that they have similar likes or dislikes for targets, and that they may rely on each other in the future for resource sharing or emotional support (Bosson et al, 2006, Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012b). Furthermore, because negative gossip entails a degree of risk for the sender, the receiver may see negative gossip as an endowment of trust from the gossiper (Ellwardt et al, 2012a). Positive gossip may help cement social relations because it reaffirms values and cultural norms, and offers positive reinforcements to members of the social network.

Outlet for emotions. People are likely to exchange gossip in situations that are emotionally charged, because gossip can provide cathartic release from anger, guilt, anxiety, or other unpleasant internal states, and helps gossipers and receivers return to a state of emotional balance (e.g. Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956; Feinberg et al, 2012). Venting negative emotions through gossip might be a way to de-escalate conflicts without a direct confrontation with others. Because it provides an outlet for emotions in a private and safe environment, gossip may help stabilize hierarchies or conflicts between individuals (Foster, 2004).

Gossip is functional for groups

Previous research has mostly focused on understanding gossip's functions within a group context (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012, Feinberg et al, 2012, Sommerfeld et al, 2007; 2008). The basic notion underlying this research is that gossip can serve as an adaptive behavior for group functioning, because it helps define group identity and it protects group welfare.

First, gossip has a social control function, because it involves sharing reputational information about the past behavior of group members and helps them evaluate their trustworthiness. It enables group members to keep track of their interaction partners' actions, which is especially valuable because people cannot observe all others' behavior personally (e.g. Dunbar, 2004; Wu et al, 2015; 2016). As such, gossip restricts and controls the ability of individuals to pursue self-interest. Because social loafers or people who do not share resources are easily identified, gossip serves as a policing device that secures the collaboration of group members, thus maintaining or increasing group performance (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; 2012; Sommerfeld et al, 2007; 2008; Wu et al, 2015; 2016). Some studies show that merely the threat of becoming a gossip target has a powerful effect on people's collaboration decisions, because people fear reputation damaging gossip and

ostracism, and are pressured to behave more cooperatively (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Piazza & Bering, 2008).

Second, gossip helps groups communicate and enforce group morale, values, and norms, by providing concrete examples of how norms are applied to group members, and what consequences different behavioral choices may have for social actors (Baumeister et al, 2004; McAndrew et al, 2007). Gossip helps define and communicate social identity and group boundaries, by establishing who is and who is not seen as a group member, and what behaviors or attributes are expected of group members. Furthermore, because gossip is shared in private with trusted others, it is important for developing social bonds and emotional connections between members of the group. Gossip helps people visualize their group goals and common interests in relation to other, potentially rival groups.

Although gossip is socially disapproved, people are encouraged to gossip to warn others about a rule violation (Beersma and Van Kleef 2012). Moreover, failing to gossip when someone misbehaves can lead to negative interpersonal consequences, because it impedes groups from identifying and punishing free riders (Baumeister et al, 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012).

Is gossip functional for individuals?

Although gossip is considered to be functional for groups, gossip's role for individuals is not very well understood by current research. As an activity between individuals, gossip is often seen as cheap and trivial, talk about unimportant things, a superficial activity that appeals only to shallow minds, and is regarded (at best) as a waste of time (Emler, 1994). We believe that this negative view on the meaning of gossip for individuals is not constructive, because gossip has multiple functions at both the individual and the group level (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Gossip cannot play an essential role for groups without having any

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meaningful function for individuals, because individuals are the ones who exchange gossip, and the ones whom gossip is about.

Bergmann (1993) notes that there is a pseudo-conflict in the study of gossip between its social and individual functions, whereas the two perspectives are complementary: gossip has latent functions for group preservation, and manifest functions at the level of the individuals involved in gossip. As research has predominantly focused on examining the social-control functions of gossip in groups (Beersma & Van Kleef 2011; 2012, Feinberg et al, 2012, Sommerfeld et al, 2007; 2008, Wu et al, 2015; 2016), examination of the role of gossip for individuals is still in its infancy. Each individual, however, “brings to gossip his own interest and needs” (Nevo et al., 1994, p.181). As such, each of the three stakeholders in the gossip triad is likely to have a distinct perspective on the gossip process, with causes and implications defined by their unique place in the triad.

Functions of gossip for the gossip sender. The gossip sender plays the active role in the communication of gossip: this person initiates and often defines how the gossip interaction takes place. We believe that gossip has a clear functional role for the sender, because personal motives, interests and needs are likely to shape the gossip that is shared (Nevo et al., 1994). Only a few empirical studies have outlined some of the functions gossip may fulfill for senders, and most of these studies focused on outlining the group-serving functions of gossip.

The most prominent direction shows that people engage in gossip to exert influence, by protecting their group from social loafers and reinforcing group norms (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al, 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). People also gossip to influence others for selfish reasons, as shown by one study where gossipers self-enhanced by denigrating competitors or sexual rivals (Massar, Buunk, & Rempt, 2012).

Some studies offer evidence for the information function of gossip: managers who were doing business transactions were more likely to gossip when they had to solve a severe

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problem (Rooks, Tazelaar, & Snijders, 2011). In a qualitative study, researchers discovered that employees' need for information motivated them to gossip in order to make sense of their experience in the workplace and learn about their group (Kelly, 1985).

Furthermore, a few studies showed that people engage in gossip to seek emotional support and to bond with others (Bosson et al, 2006; Ellwardt et al, 2012a; Grosser et al, 2010; Wittek & Wielers, 1998), especially when they experience psychological contract violations and abusive supervision, and when they have low trust and infrequent contact with managers (Ellwardt et al, 2012b; Kuo et al, 2015).

Although previous research provides some evidence that gossip is functional for senders, it is focused on emphasizing how people use gossip to improve group functioning. No study offers a unitary perspective on the most important functions of gossip for senders, and their associated mechanisms for the individuals who spread the gossip.

Such a unified perspective can be offered by self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2002). According to SDT, some of the strongest needs humans experience in the workplace are the need to feel competent and in control of their work environment, the need to behave autonomously, and the need to have supportive social relations with others (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Gossip may help fulfill these needs, because it offers individuals an opportunity to gain information about their work context, to influence others, and to bond with others. This perspective would suggest that gossip is more prevalent among those who experience these fundamental needs more strongly, which will crucially depend on the level of one's social power.

Thus, people who have lower power may feel less competent, less autonomous, and more in need of social support, because they depend on others with higher power to access resources. In consequence, low-power people may experience reduced control over their outcomes and environment, and a higher need to bond with others they may rely on in the

future (Case, Conlon, & Maner, 2015). Because people are likely to spread gossip in a way that addresses their specific needs and brings some personal benefit to them (Nevo et al, 1994), we investigate whether low-power people gossip more, and use gossip to gain informal access to information and influence, and to bond with others. Thus, we propose that gossip is functional in addressing senders' needs.

Functions of gossip for the gossip receiver. The gossip receiver has a more passive role in the communication of gossip, and may or may not solicit gossip. From the receivers' perspective, previous research has mostly outlined the group-serving functions of gossip: people choose to collaborate or exclude others based on gossip they know about them (e.g. Burt, 2008; Sommerfeld et al, 2007). People are interested in gossip about others especially if they are of the same age and gender, because they are one's social rivals (McAndrew et al, 2007); individuals need to monitor and compare themselves with others in their network with whom they may compete for the limited resources of their group. Although some researchers described gossip as a social comparison mechanism (Baumeister et al, 2004; Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004), it is not yet clear what specific functions gossip has for its receivers. Gossip about other people is likely to be personally relevant for receivers, because gossip contains information about one's immediate social environment, and it potentially enables receivers to learn about themselves from social comparisons with gossip targets (Baumeister et al, 2004; Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

However, we know little about how people make social comparisons between themselves and gossip targets, and how they react to the information they draw from these comparisons. Because people experience strong emotions when they receive stimuli relevant to the self, receiving gossip is likely to generate self-evaluative emotions. As such, we propose that gossip is functional in helping receivers self-evaluate through social comparisons with targets, and that gossip generates emotions which may drive specific behaviors.

Functions of gossip for the gossip target. Gossip sometimes reaches its targets, although this is rarely the intention of the sender. Although most gossip is spread with benign intentions, gossip stories can threaten or damage targets' reputations and their relationships to others (Rosnow, 2001). Because people have no control over gossip about themselves, gossip implies a degree of threat for targets regardless of what is specifically said: "the third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the nonperson, it absents, it annuls" (Barthes, 1978, pp. 185). Previous research, focusing on social functions of gossip, shows that people are more prosocial when others are likely to gossip about them and when their group contributions are visible to others (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Piazza & Bering, 2008), because people are concerned about their reputation, especially when they expect to interact with their group members in the future (Wu et al, 2015; 2016).

However, previous research offers limited insights about the functions of gossip for its targets, and their individual response mechanisms. Because gossip is directly relevant to them, targets are likely to have a complex emotional experience when gossip reaches them. On the one hand, gossip provides targets with blunt evaluations about the self, which may influence their self-views. On the other hand, because gossipers communicate reputational information about the targets' self, and may influence the way others see and interact with targets, gossip targets are likely to react towards the gossiper.

Current research has not yet investigated what are the response mechanisms for individual gossip targets, and what behavioral consequences are to be expected from targets. Because gossip is directly self-relevant for targets and it shapes their reputation, hearing gossip about the self is likely to generate strong emotional responses directed at the self and at the gossiper. As such, because the gossip message is of critical importance for its targets, we propose that when gossip reaches its targets it has primarily an emotional impact, which generates specific behavioral responses.

Aim and outline of the thesis

Aim of the thesis

Although individual members of groups are the ones who spread, receive and are targets of gossip, research has investigated almost exclusively the role of gossip in group functioning. Little systematic research has focused on the individual perspectives of the actors in the gossip triad, and on the functions gossip fulfills for individuals. Because gossip is a behavior that takes place between individuals, and it primarily concerns individuals, it is important to understand the role of gossip from the unique perspectives of the sender, receiver, and target of gossip. Therefore, the purpose of our work is to examine and clarify the functions and implications of gossip from the individual standpoints of the gossip triad actors, and to offer the first account of gossip that considers all three perspectives.

Outline of the thesis

In chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this dissertation we present a series of empirical quantitative studies designed to investigate the functions associated with the spreading and receiving of gossip by its intended receivers and by its targets. For gossip senders and receivers, who are voluntary participants of gossip, we examine gossip's motives and functions; for receivers and targets, who learn reputational information that is relevant for the self (indirectly through social comparison for receivers, or directly through its evaluative content for targets), we examine gossip as an emotion generating process. Throughout the following chapters we employ different methods (scenario studies, critical incident studies, laboratory experiments), use different samples (Dutch students, Dutch employees, US employees), and use different psychological theories in conceptualizing the perspectives of gossip sender, receiver and target.

Chapter 2: The gossip sender. In chapter 2 we combine theories on gossip and social power (e.g., Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) to examine

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whether people who have low and high power share gossip strategically when it is functional for them. Because people who have lower power depend on others with higher power to access resources, lower power people experience specific needs and threats that have to be addressed without exercising formal power. Specifically, gossip is a strategy that lower power people may use to better understand and control their work environment and to form alliances that may help them thrive. Thus, we propose that low power people spread more gossip than high power people. Second, as social power can only be defined in relation to others, we argue that the relative power of the person receiving the gossip may influence gossiper's engagement in gossiping behavior. Low-power individuals are inclined to attend carefully to the actions of high-power individuals in order to predict and influence their behavior towards them, whereas powerful people pay less attention to lower-power individuals (Keltner, et al, 2003; Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Magee & Smith, 2013). Therefore, we propose that individuals are less interested in gossiping downwardly towards less powerful receivers, and more interested in gossiping laterally and upwardly (with equally or more powerful receivers). Third, we propose that effects of social power on gossiping can be clarified by the motives to access information, to influence and to bond with the receiver, suggesting that gossip is a valuable informational resource that is shared strategically when it is functional for the gossiper.

Chapter 3: The gossip receiver. In chapter 3 we investigate whether receiving competence-related gossip about others helps individuals self-evaluate. Gossip receivers are likely to make social comparisons between themselves and gossip targets (Wert & Salovey, 2004). According to the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model, people are motivated to draw conclusions about the self in ways that help them maintain a favorable self-view by improving, promoting or protecting the self (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Thus, we propose that individuals use evaluative information about others (i.e., gossip) to improve,

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promote, and protect themselves. Specifically, we expect that positive gossip has higher self-improvement value than negative gossip, whereas negative gossip has higher self-promotion value and raises higher self-protection concerns than positive gossip. Furthermore, we investigate whether people who hear negative gossip feel pride due to the self-promotion value of negative gossip about others, and fear due to the self-protection value of negative gossip.

Chapter 4: The gossip target. In chapter 4 we investigate the emotions and behavioral intentions of people who hear performance-related gossip about themselves in the workplace. Receiving gossip about the self may generate complex responses, because, on the one hand, gossip contains evaluations that are directly relevant for targets' self-evaluation, and on the other hand it contains reputational information which affects how others evaluate the target. As such, we use cognitive appraisal theory (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991, Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) to capture the two response directions that are likely for targets: self-directed and other-directed. We expect that targets of positive gossip feel happy with themselves and happy with the gossiper, and that targets of negative gossip experience self-directed blame and other-directed blame. Furthermore, we expect positive and negative emotional reactions directed at the self and at others to have specific behavioral consequences (repair, retaliation and affiliation).

Chapter 5: General discussion. In chapter 5 we provide an overview of our findings. We discuss the findings and reflect on their theoretical and practical implications, and we also discuss limitations of our current work, as well as avenues for future research.