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Why we gossip

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Chapter 2

Gossip is the weapon of the weak. How power differences shape gossip behavior

Abstract

Gossip entails spreading evaluative information about people who are not present. In two studies, we examined how power differences between individuals shape negative and positive gossip in organizations. The results of an experimental study ($N = 128$) showed that participants assigned to a low power condition gossiped more than participants assigned to a high power condition. In a scenario study ($N = 276$) we independently manipulated the power of the gossip sender and receiver, and found that low power people gossiped regardless of receivers' power level, whereas high power people gossiped less towards low power receivers than towards high power receivers. These effects were mediated by the motives to access information, to influence and to bond with the receiver, suggesting that gossip is a valuable resource that is shared strategically when it is beneficial for the individual.

Introduction

“Great people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, and small people talk about other people” is a quote most often attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Eleanor_Roosevelt). Roosevelt moralizes gossip, and also alludes to the common assumption that the powerless gossip more than the powerful (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009). Gossip is often considered to be the “weapon of the weak”, because it can mobilize resistance to formal changes and other organizational projects, and may threaten managerial decisions and disrupt organizational processes, without openly confronting others (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009). Some anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that indeed people in typical low power positions, such as secretaries or subordinates (as compared to their managers), and students (as compared to their professors), have a reputation for gossiping (Bergmann, 1993, Scott, 1985; Wert & Salovey, 2004). However, the relation between power and gossip behavior has not been systematically examined by previous research, and we currently know little about the mechanisms that drive effects of power on gossip behavior.

Gossip, or informally exchanging evaluative information about others who are not present, may express *positive* and *negative* facts and opinions about targets (Foster, 2004). Because gossip is generally considered unproductive or harmful behavior, people tend to disapprove of all gossip, and in organizations managers are the least likely to favor it (van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). However, documented across cultures and contexts, gossip is a universal human behavior, intrinsic to social and organizational life (Dunbar, 2004), thereby serving important functions for individuals (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). First, positive and negative gossip help people learn about their social environment, reducing uncertainty about formal processes and structures (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Second, individuals use positive and negative gossip to influence others by communicating norms and identifying

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those who cooperate or not, and by enabling gossipers to self-enhance relative to their targets (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, Feinberg Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Third, engaging in positive and negative gossip helps people develop social bonds and trust relationships (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; Rosnow, 2001).

Although gossip has adaptive value for all individuals, we propose that gossip may be more functional for less powerful than for more powerful people in gaining *information*, exerting *influence*, or *bonding* with others. Because a power relation implies the perceived asymmetrical dependence of the powerless on the powerful to obtain rewards and avoid punishments (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), lower power people experience specific needs and threats that have to be addressed in a way that cannot be fulfilled by exercising power. Gossip is an accessible behavior, available to most people, that may provide the less powerful with information, influence over others, and social connections. Furthermore, because high power people focus on opportunities and rewards, and attend more to others who can be instrumentally useful (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), they may engage in gossip, but preferably with people of equal or higher power rather than with lower power people. Downward gossip (towards less powerful receivers) may have less value for providing information, gaining influence or forming advantageous bonds with others; therefore, gossiping downwards may be unrewarding or even harmful.

In this contribution, we address the question of whether and how social power relates to spreading gossip. To answer this question, we first integrate the research literature on gossip and social power to argue that lower power people experience reduced autonomy and control in performing their job (e.g., Anderson & Brion, 2014; Keltner et al, 2003), which motivates them to engage in gossiping. 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

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others, we argue that the relative power of the person receiving the gossip may influence engagement in gossiping behavior. Therefore we propose that individuals are less interested in gossiping downwards and more interested in gossiping laterally and upwards (with equally or more powerful receivers). Third, as gossip is functional for people in gaining information (Baumeister et al, 2004), exerting influence (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, Feinberg et al, 2012, Sommerfeld et al, 2008, Wert & Salovey, 2004), and bonding with others (Bosson et al, 2006), 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 resource that is shared strategically when it is functional for the gossiper.

Theoretical background

Power and gossip

Power represents the asymmetrical control over valued resources in the context of social relations (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007), granting the more powerful influence over others (French & Raven, 1959; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). Power is inherently relational, because lower power individuals depend on higher power individuals to obtain rewards and avoid punishments (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Emerson, 1962), thereby putting the powerless in a state of asymmetrical dependence on the powerful (Keltner et al, 2003; Galinsky et al, 2008). Moreover, power is a relative construct, in the sense that people may have different power relations with different individuals (e.g. supervisors may have high power in relation to subordinates, but are powerless in relation to their superiors), and may experience specific needs and display specific behaviors that are activated by the power relation.

Because powerless individuals have reduced access to valuable resources, they experience reduced autonomy and control over their environment and outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2002, Case, Conlon, & Maner, 2015), which decreases their effectiveness, morale and

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job satisfaction, and makes them vulnerable to unfair treatment (Keltner et al, 2003).

Compared to the powerful, the powerless experience higher social and material threats, are more concerned with potential hazards and constraints, and less optimistic about obtaining rewards (Anderson & Galinsky; 2006 Keltner et al., 2003). Therefore, reduced power signals that one's fundamental needs are not optimally fulfilled, which motivates powerless people to cope with the disadvantages or threats associated with their power level.

Because less powerful individuals cannot address their needs by exercising power, they may do so through informal means, such as gossip. Gossip is exchanged in the target's absence, between people who are assumed trustworthy (Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012b), and it is an easy and accessible strategy to work towards desired outcomes: seeking information, influencing receivers' opinions in a desired way, and building a network that can offer support. In contrast, because high power individuals have more formal ways to exercise influence and control (e.g. Keltner et al, 2003; Galinsky et al, 2008), they depend less on informal means of gaining information and control and have a lower need to build support networks through gossip. Therefore, we expect that low power people spread more gossip than high power people (hypothesis 1a). Importantly, we expect similar patterns for both positive and negative gossip, because both types of gossip can be useful in obtaining information, exerting influence and befriending others. Although positive gossip is socially accepted, and is spread freely in the social network, whereas negative gossip is more restricted because it is socially undesirable and entails some risk for the gossiper (Ellwardt et al, 2012b; Wert & Salovey, 2004), we propose that they have similar functions in regulating power differences. As such, positive and negative gossip can be used by lower power people to address their specific needs: to better understand and control their social environment and to form alliances that may help them thrive.

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Furthermore, we propose that the relationship between social power and gossiping behavior depends on the power of the person receiving the gossip. According to research on social power, powerful people pay less attention to lower power individuals than vice-versa (Magee & Smith, 2013). Because high power people can exert formal control over valuable resources, they can afford to remain relatively unaware of the perspectives and actions of low-power individuals. However, low-power individuals are dependent on high-power individuals for obtaining rewards and avoiding punishments. Consequently, they attend carefully to high-power individuals to understand and predict their behavior by soliciting information, by influencing and bonding with them (Keltner, et al, 2003). Therefore, individuals may prefer to gossip with partners who are equally or more powerful than themselves, whereas they may be less interested in gossiping towards less powerful people, because downward gossiping is not very functional or may even be harmful. Formally stated, we expect that the power of receiver moderates the negative effect of power on gossip, such that the negative relation between gossipers' power and gossip behavior is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 1b).

Gossip motives

Gossip is a universal human behavior that serves particular functions for individuals (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Specifically, people can use gossip to inform one another about critical affairs in their social environment (Baumeister et al, 2004), to influence others' impressions about themselves and the gossip targets (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, Feinberg et al, 2012), and to develop social bonds and trust relationships (Bosson et al, 2006). We propose that these motives of exchanging information, exerting influence, and bonding with others operate as explanatory mechanisms that link social power to gossip behavior.

Information. To function efficiently in a complex social environment, like the modern workplace, individuals require information about people and events around them

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(Foster, 2004). Because leaders usually communicate decisions and policies from higher to lower levels in the organizational hierarchy, employees in lower power positions are the least likely to be fully informed about management actions, and are prone to experience uncertainty and threat (Wert & Salovey, 2004). As such, lower-power individuals may have a greater desire to seek information via the grapevine compared to higher-power individuals (Mills, 2010).

In order to reduce uncertainty about formal processes and norms, people often supplement incomplete information with news obtained informally through gossip, an accessible and low cost source of information (Baumeister et al, 2004). Gossip is a way of decoding other people's self-presentation efforts, true intentions, and trustworthiness (Mills, 2010). Gossipers exchange information to compare their observations and opinions and form a more accurate impression of the target (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Furthermore, by evoking social comparisons, gossip helps people learn from others' success and failure stories, understand what is expected of them, and what is the cost of misbehavior (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

In addition, the "corporate culture" in an organization is commonly expressed in gossip stories (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). For low power employees gossip is crucial, especially during organizational entry and organizational change, because it can provide information that clarifies rules, expectations, and ways of working, reduces role conflict, and provides a framework for interpreting feedback (Miller & Jablin, 1991). As a mechanism of observational learning (Baumeister et al, 2004), gossip may be more valuable for lower power individuals than for higher power individuals, because it enables the powerless to understand and interact with their social environment and acquire knowledge about the goals, values, and norms that are set by the powerful. Therefore we predict that the relation between gossip power and gossip behavior is mediated by the information motive,

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such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to seek information (hypothesis 2a).

Because the powerful are likely to objectify others and see them as instrumental in their goal pursuits, they approach and attend selectively to people who can help them achieve their goals (Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). The powerful tend to rely on stereotypes and ignore others' perspectives and emotions (especially for people who are not instrumentally useful), whereas low power people use identifying information about others (Keltner, et al, 2003). As such, lower-power people may have little insights to offer the powerful beyond contributions prescribed by their role, and are less likely to be chosen as gossip partners. Therefore, we expect a moderated mediation pattern, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to seek information, and this effect is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 2b). Furthermore, because gossip is effective in conveying information that helps people understand their environment, regardless of whether it presents the target favorably or unfavorably (Baumeister et al, 2004), we expect this pattern for both positive and negative gossip.

Influence. Gossip gives people the opportunity to pass on positive and negative information about organizational members, with the potential to influence attitudes, opinions and decisions. Because gossip is exchanged informally and in private, it may be an important means for people who lack formal power over others to exert influence and achieve desired outcomes (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). People talk to others when they think they can influence or change opinions (Festinger, 1948), and the more people gossip, the more informal influence they have in the eyes of colleagues (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). Gossipers try to ensure that their own interpretation of the situation prevails (Paine, 1967), because gossip communicates one-sided opinions and constrains recipients to support the

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point of the gossiper without challenge (Eder & Enke, 1991). There are several ways in which people can influence others through gossip and promote their worldview.

First, gossipers exert social control by pressuring others in their network who pursue selfish interests to respect the group norms, or by praising high performers (Baumeister et al, 2004, Dunbar, 2004, Feinberg et al, 2012). Furthermore, gossip enables people who lack formal control to oppose or support others indirectly by harming or boosting their reputation (e.g. Wert & Salovey, 2004, Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2015; 2016). Second, gossip may give people a degree of control over their work situation (Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Employees who experience reduced control due to the hierarchical nature of organizations may challenge managerial prerogatives and undermine their actions through gossip (Ellwardt, et al, 2012b; Sommerfeld et al, 2008). Third, people may exploit accumulated information to influence others for self-enhancement (Dunbar, 2004, McAndrew, Bell & Garcia, 2007; Rosnow, 2001). Because negative gossip gives people coercive power over recipients, and positive gossip gives them reward power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), evaluating others is a way of presenting oneself to others as a qualified judge (Amabile, 1983), which may increase one's status and power (Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Subjectively, gossipers boost their self-esteem or protect their self-image by making downward social comparisons with rivals, and upward comparisons with desirable allies (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Because they have reduced authority and control over others, gossip might be more instrumental to lower power people than it is to higher power people for influencing others. We therefore predict that the relation between gossiper power and gossiping behavior is mediated by the influence motive, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to influence others (Hypothesis 3a). Furthermore, because higher power people can exert formal control (rather than gossip) to attain desired outcomes from lower power parties, we expect the above relation to be moderated by the power of receiver: lower power

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people gossip more than higher power people to exert influence, and this effect is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 3b). Moreover, gossipers may influence receivers by sharing both positive and negative evaluations of others, and we expect the above patterns for both positive and negative gossip.

Social bonding. In evolutionary theory, gossip substitutes grooming as a way to build and maintain social relationships and to find allies and a group to belong to (Dunbar, 2004). Individuals with reduced power need to affiliate with others and find emotional support in order to cope with the high levels of anxiety and threat they experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Case et al, 2015). By discovering common perceptions and attitudes about others, people can develop interpersonal closeness, solidarity, and shared social identity (e.g. Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Repeated gossip episodes help develop trust, cement relationships and create a safe environment in which people can express their opinions (Bosson et al, 2006; Foster, 2004). Moreover, by relying on their network for support and comfort, people can avoid direct confrontations and safely de-escalate conflicts through gossip. In sum, because of their reduced access and control over resources, bonding through gossip may be more functional for the powerless than for high power people in order to face daily challenges and achieve desired outcomes (Case et al, 2015; Keltner et al, 2003). Therefore, we expect that the relation between gossip power and gossip behavior is mediated by the social bonding motive, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to bond with others (Hypothesis 4a).

Those who do not gossip or do not respond to gossip with a minimum of interest are quickly marginalized (Bergmann, 1993; Foster, 2004), which for most people is a painful experience, because it entails exclusion from a supporting network. However, people may purposely avoid the gossip network of lower power others, because sharing their opinions with them might bring disadvantages. Due to potential status leakage from higher to lower

power people (Podolny, 2005), the powerful may strive to maintain or increase social distance from the powerless, while lower power people may seek to bond with the powerful. Bonding with a lower power partner may damage one's reputation or the power relation, whereas bonding with equal or higher power partners may decrease dependency on others and increase one's informal power (Emerson, 1962). Therefore, we expect the power of receiver to moderate the above relationship, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to bond with others, and this effect is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 4b). Furthermore, because both positive and negative gossip help develop expressive employee ties (Grosser et al, 2010), we expect that sharing both positive and negative gossip foster social bonding. Our conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.1.

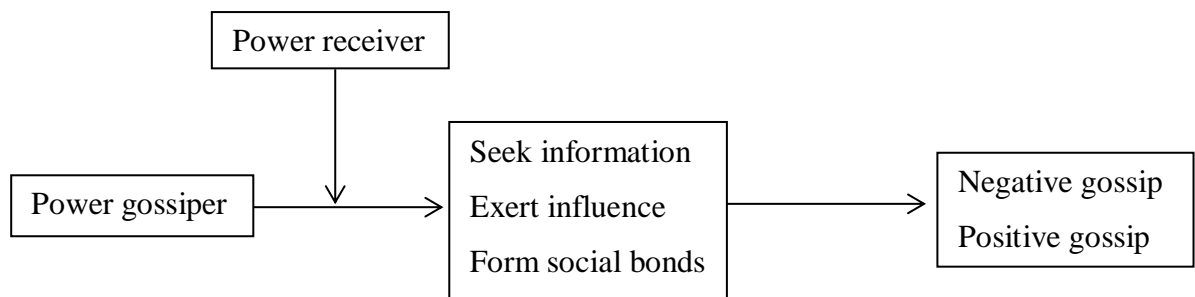


Figure 2.1. Conceptual model

Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two studies in which we manipulated the power of gossip sender and gossip receiver. In both studies we operationalized power as a dichotomous construct, so that participants have either high or low power. We first conducted a laboratory experiment with a student sample to investigate direct effects of gossipers' and receivers' power on negative gossip behavior (Study 2.1). Subsequently, in a scenario study with a working population sample (Study 2.2) we tested our moderated mediation hypotheses, assessing the role of information, influence and social bonding motives for spreading negative and positive gossip.

Study 2.1

Method

Design and participants. One hundred and twenty eight students (80 female) at a Dutch university with a mean age of 22.24 ($SD = 2.85$) participated in a laboratory study in exchange of course credit or 4 Euros. Participants joined two experimental confederates to form teams of three. These three-person teams were randomly assigned to a power condition in a 2 x 2 factorial design varying the power of the potential gossiper (the participant) and the receiver of gossip (confederate A); the third group member (confederate B, and gossip target) had low power across conditions.

Cover story and power manipulation. We informed participants that we investigated the effect of newcomers and task interruptions on task performance, by using groups of three members. Participants imagined they were the survivors of a spaceship that crashed on the Moon, and had to rank 15 items into three categories according to their usefulness for survival - reaching the space station (Hall & Watson, 1971). Participants were instructed that based on their answers on a leadership questionnaire, all team members were assigned the role of either officer or crew member in the group survival task, independently of other group members' responses, and that it was possible that all, some, or none of them were officers (or crew members, respectively). Before they were told what their and the other's roles were, participants read a detailed description of both officer and crew member roles: the officers had the power to rank 5 unique items without consulting the others, chair the discussion, evaluate the team members' performance, and divide a potential prize of 50 euro between the 3 group members at the end of the study. The participant and confederate A (the potential gossip receiver) were randomly assigned low or high power, and confederate B (the potential gossip target) had low power in all conditions. When both participant and confederate A had high power, the two officers would each have control over 5 items, evaluate the crew

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members and suggest a way of dividing the potential prize. Crew members had no specific responsibilities rather than following the commands or instructions of the officer(s).

Procedure. When participants arrived at the laboratory, two female confederates posing as participants were already waiting to begin the study. Upon participants' arrival, the three group members were seated in separate cubicles where they filled in questionnaires, received instructions about the group task and were administered the power manipulations. Participants read that the computer randomly assigned each group member the labels "A", "B" or "C" and were instructed to write this letter on a sticker and wear it until the end of the experiment in order to be visible by the other group members. All participants received the label "C". Next, participants read that the newcomer role was randomly assigned by the computer to another team member (who was always confederate A), and that this person would start solving the group task alone and join the other two participants after a few minutes.

Afterwards, participants filled in the leadership questionnaire based on which they were told that they and the other group members were assigned the role of either officer (high power) or crew member (low power) for the survival task. Next, participants read a description of the Moon survival task.

Afterwards, the participant and confederate B (the potential gossip target) went to a meeting room where they started discussing the task, while confederate A, the newcomer (and potential gossip receiver), would start the task alone in a separate room. Confederate B was instructed to act uncooperatively by saying: "This task is really boring," "I don't know what to say, all the items seem the same to me," and to express disinterest in the task by leaning away from the table and pushing the materials towards the participant.

After three minutes the newcomer (confederate A) joined the team. At this moment the experimenter repeated the power manipulation by providing instructions and materials for

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the high power group members, if there were any in the group. The teams engaged in the task for about 3 minutes. Afterwards, the experimenter returned and announced the task interruption (which was presented in the beginning as part of the research). The experimenter explained that confederate B was randomly chosen to leave the room, while the remaining two members (the participant and confederate A) stayed in the meeting room but could not discuss the task until B returned. Thus, participants were provided with an opportunity to gossip about confederate B. Unless participants started talking spontaneously, confederate A was instructed to casually ask participants how they experienced the task in the first stage, when they worked only with confederate B. After approximately two minutes confederate B returned and the groups finished the task. At the end of the task participants went back to their cubicles where they filled in other measures and were debriefed.

Measures

Negative gossip. The time interval when participants had the chance to share gossip with confederate A about confederate B was video recorded. Two independent pairs of raters coded whether participants did not gossip (coded with 0), whether they gossiped when triggered by confederate A (coded with 1) or whether they gossiped spontaneously (coded with 2), *Cohen's kappa* = 1. Furthermore, the two coding pairs also coded the content of gossip with two measures reflecting how *evaluative* and how *descriptive* the talk about the target was. The evaluative content varied from not at all evaluative (0, e.g. “I proposed stuff and she just agreed”), to low (1, e.g. “she was not really enthusiastic”), medium (2, e.g. “she is weird”) and high (3, e.g. “she was as cold as ice”), *Cohen's kappa* = 0.92; we averaged the two ratings into a measure of *evaluative gossip content*, $M = 0.93$; $SD = 1.02$. The descriptive content of gossip, indicating how much detail was provided about the behavior of the target, was coded on a four point scale ranging from not at all descriptive (0, e.g. “she was withdrawn and closed”), to low (1, e.g. “she suggested one thing but not really”), medium (2,

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e.g. “it was like one way traffic, she didn’t say anything”); 3 = high (e.g. “this girl doesn’t think it is interesting, she thought it was boring, she wasn’t interested, it wasn’t a really active discussion, she said I’m not sure, I don’t know”), *Cohen's kappa* = 0.94; we averaged the two ratings into a measure of *descriptive gossip content*, $M = 1.23$; $SD = 1.11$. We summed the descriptive and evaluative gossip ratings to calculate the *gossip intensity*, $\alpha = 0.78$, $M = 2.16$; $SD = 1.94$.

Manipulation checks. We asked participants to indicate on dichotomous measures for all team members (A – gossip receiver, B – gossip target, and C - participant) whether they had high or low power (officer or crew member). Afterwards, we measured participants’ perceived power of all members of their group, by using four Likert-type items (1- not at all; 7 very much): “How much was A/B/C in charge of directing the group task?”, “How much is A/B/C in charge of evaluating the other participants?”, “How much is A/B/C in charge of allocating the 50 euro bonus?”, and “To what extent did/does A/B/C have power over the Regular Crew Members?”. Internal consistency of these scales was sufficient: α receiver power = .90; α participant power = .85, α target power = .89.

Results

Manipulation checks. All participants correctly indicated whether they were assigned to the high power ($N = 64$) or low power condition ($N = 64$). All participants who interacted with a low power gossip receiver correctly indicated that confederate A was a crew member ($N = 63$), and 8 out of 65 participants assigned to the high power receiver condition incorrectly indicated that confederate A had low power. Moreover, 5 participants incorrectly indicated that the gossip target (confederate B) had high power. A total of 8 participants wrongly indicated the power level of at least one confederate and were excluded from further analyses². Two-way ANOVAs with gossiper power and receiver power as predictors

² The results did not change when these participants were included in the analysis.

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indicated that participants' perceived power was higher when they were assigned high power ($M = 6.19$; $SD = 0.56$) than low power ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.44$), $F(1, 116) = 196.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$; the power of receiver and the interaction effect were not significant. Participants perceived the power of the gossip receiver to be higher when gossip receivers were assigned high power ($M = 6.14$; $SD = .68$) as compared to low power ($M = 3.11$; $SD = 1.49$), $F(1, 116) = 195.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$; the power of gossiper and the interaction effect were not significant. We can conclude that the power manipulations were generally successful.

Gossip. Before further analyses we excluded 3 participants due to procedural errors (e.g. participant saw confederates in the lab prior to the experiment), and 10 other participants who indicated either during the interaction with confederate A or during the debriefing that they were certain that the gossip target was a confederate in the experiment. From the remaining 107 participants, 33 did not gossip at all, 61 gossiped when triggered by confederate A, and 13 gossiped spontaneously. A binary logistic regression, where no gossip was coded with 0 and gossip behavior was coded with 1, showed that gossiper power influenced the probability to gossip, $b = -.40$, $p = .066$, indicating that 79.62 % of participants in the low power condition gossiped, compared to 58.49 % in the high power condition, as shown in Table 2.1. Whether participants gossiped or not was not predicted by receiver power, $b = .33$, ns, or by the interaction between gossiper and receiver power, $b = -.14$, ns.

We conducted a two-way ANOVA on the gossip intensity measure, with gossiper power and receiver power as predictors. Participants gossiped more intensely when they had low power ($M = 2.59$; $SD = 1.98$) than high power ($M = 1.61$; $SD = 1.80$), $F(1, 103) = 6.89$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, supporting hypothesis 1a. There was no effect of receiver power nor an interaction effect of gossiper and receiver power, $F(1, 103) = 0.01$, ns, and $F(1, 103) = 0.02$, ns, respectively, which does not support hypothesis 1b (means are presented in Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Means and standard deviations of gossip intensity and number of participants who gossiped per experimental condition in Study 2.1

Power gossiper	Low			High		
	Low	High	Total	Low	High	Total
<i>N</i> Gossiped/ <i>N</i> Total (%)	21 / 29 (72.41%)	22 / 25 (88%)	43 / 54 (79.62%)	16 / 29 (55.17%)	15 / 24 (62.5%)	31 / 53 (58.49%)
<i>M</i> gossip intensity (<i>SD</i>)	2.63 (2.21)	2.54 (1.71)	2.59 (1.98)	1.60 (1.87)	1.62 (1.75)	1.61 (1.80)

N = 107

Discussion

Findings were in line of our prediction that people with low power gossip more than people with high power. However, results did not support our expectation that the receiver's power moderates the effect of gossiper power on gossiping behavior. There was no effect of gossip receiver power, possibly due to the experimental setup. To create realistic conditions for participants to gossip, our study required the use of two confederates: a gossip target and a gossip receiver. The downside of this complex setup is that the confederates had strict instructions for the interaction with the participants. To make the role of gossip receiver easier to play, the script did not differ in the low and high receiver power condition: during the task confederate A behaved in the same way regardless of the power level she was assigned, and did not emphasize specific behavioral cues associated with low or high power (e.g. directing the discussion and exerting control over the items she was assigned). Thus, it is likely that participants were aware of the power role assignment for all group members (as indicated by the manipulation checks), but in fact did not experience confederate A's power differently in the high and low power condition. As a consequence, participants may have been focused solely on their own power level, ignoring the power level of the receiver.

To overcome these methodological limitations, we conducted a second study with a different setup, in which the power of gossiper and receiver are both salient. We also aimed to investigate whether the power of the gossip target is a relevant factor in shaping gossip behavior. Thus, we conducted a scenario study in which we orthogonally crossed the power of

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gossiper, receiver, and target. Moreover, in order to clarify the mechanism driving gossip, we measured gossip motives: information seeking, exerting influence and social bonding. Furthermore, in Study 2.2 we investigated whether spreading negative and positive gossip follow the same pattern.

Study 2.2

Method

Participants and design. Two hundred and seventy six individuals employed or studying in the Netherlands ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.78$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.84$; 151 male, 10 unspecified) working in different sectors (e.g. retail, IT, finance, education) voluntarily and anonymously completed an online survey which was distributed using a snowballing method, with a response rate of 55.42 %. The study had a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design, crossing power of gossiper, power of receiver and the power of the target; participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they worked in a hospital at the cardiology ward, where they had just finished a long surgery with a team of specialists, along with their colleague Sam (potential gossip target). During the surgery the patient became unstable and the situation was getting out of control. We asked participants to imagine that the following happened:

“You asked Sam if anything looked suspicious in the patient’s file,” to which Sam replied “I didn’t have time to check the file before surgery,” whereas it is every doctor’s obligation to inspect thoroughly a patient’s file prior to surgery. You yourself did inspect the file, and although you saw no suspicious irregularities, it is standard procedure that all operating doctors inspect the file to prevent medical errors. In your opinion, Sam’s failure to inspect the file indicates carelessness and a bad professional attitude. While you were struggling to keep the patient alive, Sam looked at the medical

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equipment connected to the patient and noticed that the patient was not receiving enough oxygen, due to a suboptimal computer procedure. Fortunately, Sam identified the problem before any irreversible damage occurred. In the end the operation was successful and the patient's heart was restored. You were quite impressed by Sam's professional skills and the attentive and quick response to the situation.”

After the surgery, participants were asked to imagine that they go to the hospital restaurant, where they run into Max (potential gossip receiver), a cardiology colleague who was not present at the surgery but asks how it went.

Manipulations. Participants imagined they work in a cardiology ward, where there are 3 full professors who train and supervise 6 assistant doctors. The professors are in charge of the cardiology ward and determine the tasks that the assistants do. We manipulated the power of *participant (potential gossipper)*, the *gossip receiver* (colleague Max) and the *gossip target* (colleague Sam), by assigning them to either a high power position – cardiology professor, or a low power position – cardiology assistant doctor.

Measures

Manipulation checks. Participants indicated on dichotomous variables whether they, the gossip receiver and the gossip target were either professors of cardiology or assistant doctors. Furthermore, we measured participants' subjective sense of power in their role as either professor of cardiology or assistant doctor, using 3 Likert-type items ranging from 1- not at all, to 7 - very much: “how powerful would you feel?”, “how much influence would you have?”, and “how much control over resources would you have?”, $\alpha = .83$.

Dependent measures. We measured *negative gossip* with one Likert-type item “How likely are you to tell Max about Sam, the cardiology professor/assistant doctor with whom you conducted the heart surgery, that Sam didn't check the patient file prior to the surgery, whereas it is every doctor's obligation to do so. In your opinion, Sam acted irresponsibly,

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because this careless behavior put the patient's life in danger" and *positive gossip* with one item "[...] during the surgery Sam was the only one who noticed that the oxygen flow to the patient was not working properly. In your opinion Sam acted professionally, because this attentive and quick response to the situation saved the patient's life"³.

To examine whether hypothesized power effects are unique for gossip behavior, we also asked participants to indicate how likely they are to communicate formally their evaluations about the target, by mentioning their negative and positive opinion about Sam in an anonymous inter-employee official and confidential evaluation form.

Mediators. Participants indicated on Likert scales to what degree the following reasons were important in determining them to gossip *negatively* about the target: *information seeking*, measured with two items: "To find out what Max thinks about it" and "To get a better understanding of Sam's behavior," $\alpha = 0.64$; *social influence*, measured with four items: "To influence Max's opinion about Sam," "To inform Max that this happened with Sam," "Max should know about Sam's behavior," and "To let Max know what I think of Sam," $\alpha = 0.82$; and *social bonding*, measured with four items: "To make friends with Max," "To become more socially connected with Max," "To receive support from Max," and "To seek some encouragement from Max," $\alpha = 0.91$. The motives for sharing positive gossip, *information seeking*, $\alpha = 0.72$, *social influence*, $\alpha = 0.83$, and *social bonding*, $\alpha = 0.90$, were measured with similar items.

Results

Manipulation checks. We checked whether participants recalled correctly the power roles assigned to themselves, the gossip receiver and the gossip target. Four participants in the

³ We also asked participants to report how "comfortable," "eager," and "obligated" they felt to gossip negatively and positively. These alternative measures of negative and positive gossip were highly correlated with gossip spreading likelihood ($r_{negative} = .72, p < .001$, and $r_{positive} = .74, p < .001$) and yielded similar results (all coefficients and significance levels reported below).

low power condition and 20 in the high power condition incorrectly recalled their role assignment; 26 participants who interacted with a low power receiver and 12 who interacted with a high power receiver incorrectly remembered the receiver's power role; 16 participants who interacted with a low power target and 18 who interacted with a high power target incorrectly remembered the target's power role. We excluded 65 participants who failed at least one manipulation check. The remaining 211 participants experienced a higher sense of power in the high power condition ($M = 5.09$) as compared to the low power condition ($M = 3.00$), $F(1, 210) = 286.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .57$. The distribution of participants across experimental conditions is presented in Appendix 1 (p. 146).

Hypothesis testing. Because we expected a similar pattern of results for negative and positive gossip, in the following section we reported the analyses first for negative gossip and afterwards for positive gossip. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.2.

Negative and positive gossip. We conducted three-way ANOVAs with gossiper power, receiver power and target power as predictors of negative and positive gossip. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, results showed that people with low power negatively gossiped more than people with high power, $F(1, 202) = 4.43$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.3, row 1. Hypothesis 1b predicted that the effect of gossiper power would be stronger for low power receivers. ANOVA first showed that people gossiped negatively more to high power receivers than to low power receivers, $F(1, 202) = 26.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Consistent with predictions, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction of gossiper power and receiver power, $F(1, 202) = 16.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, showing that low-power people were equally likely to gossip negatively with low-power and high-power receivers, $F(1, 206) = 0.54$, ns. However, high power people gossiped negatively more with high power than with low power receivers, $F(1, 206) = 48.54$,

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$p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. The interaction is shown in Figure 2.2, and the means are presented in Table 2.3, row 1.

For power of target, only one effect was observed, which involved an unanticipated interaction between receiver power and target power on negative gossip, $F(1, 202) = 4.29$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Simple effect analyses showed that towards high power receivers, people gossiped negatively more about low power targets ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.89$) than about high power targets ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.84$), $F(1, 207) = 7.01$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, whereas towards low power receivers, people gossip negatively to the same extent about low ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.74$) and high power targets ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 2.09$), $F(1, 207) = 0.81$, *ns*. None of the other main or interaction effects involving target power was significant for negative gossip, all $F < 1.82$, *ns*.

Parallel results were obtained for positive gossip. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, people with low power positively gossiped more than people with high power, $F(1, 202) = 4.16$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.3, row 5. Hypothesis 1b predicted that the effect of gossiper power would be stronger for low power receivers. ANOVA first showed that people gossiped positively more to high power receivers than to low power receivers, $F(1, 202) = 6.74$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Consistent with predictions, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction of gossiper power and receiver power on positive gossip, $F(1, 202) = 5.87$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, showing that low-power people were equally likely to gossip positively with low-power and high-power receivers $F(1, 206) = 0.31$, *ns*. However, high power people gossiped more with high power than with low power receivers, $F(1, 206) = 12.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. This interaction is shown in Figure 2.3, and the means are presented in Table 2.3, row 5. None of the effects involving target power was significant for positive gossip, all $F < 2.71$, *ns*.

Table 2.2. Means and correlations for variables in Study 2.2

	Mean (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Gossiper power	.06 (1.00)	1											
2. Receiver power	.13 (.99)	-.07	1										
3. Target power	.01 (1.00)	-.11	.01	1									
4. Negative gossip	3.64 (2.06)	-.11	.32**	-.05	1								
5. Positive gossip	5.26 (1.58)	-.09	.21**	.14*	.49**	1							
6. Info seeking (n)	3.32 (1.66)	-.15*	.19**	.04	.62**	.32**	1						
7. Influence (n)	3.19 (1.48)	-.14*	.34**	-.03	.73**	.35**	.76**	1					
8. Bonding (n)	2.46 (1.44)	-.17*	.01	.12	.34**	.17*	.66**	.56**	1				
9. Info seeking (p)	3.41 (1.64)	-.11	.10	.06	.51**	.38**	.75**	.62**	.60**	1			
10. Influence (p)	3.49 (1.49)	-.08	.24**	.09	.62**	.47**	.61**	.71**	.47**	.70**	1		
11. Bonding (p)	2.49 (1.39)	-.21**	-.01	.09	.25**	.18**	.54**	.46**	.80**	.53**	.42**	1	
12. Gender ⁴	-.12 (.99)	-.09	-.02	.07	.01	-.01	.04	.05	.05	-.009	-.01	.10	1

$N = 210$; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Gossiper power, receiver power and target power were coded with -1 for low power and 1 for high power; n = mediator of negative gossip; p = mediator of positive gossip; gender was coded with -1 for male and 1 for female

⁴ The correlations with gender are based on data from 202 participants who reported their gender. We included gender as a control variable in all subsequent ANOVA and moderated mediation analyses; all coefficients were above conventional significance levels (all $F < .03$; all $t < 1.05$; all $p > .29$), suggesting that gender did not predict gossip spreading intentions or gossip motives.

Table 2.3. Means and standard deviations for dependent variables in Study 2.2, per experimental condition (collapsed over power of gossip target).

Dependent variable		Low power receiver	High power receiver	Average gossiper
1. Negative gossip	Low power gossiper	3.72 (1.98)	3.95 (1.95)	3.86 (1.95)
	High power gossiper	2.13 (1.66)	4.59 (1.82)	3.44 (2.13)
	Average receiver	2.81 (1.96)	4.27 (1.90)	
2. Information (negative)	Low power gossiper	3.87 (1.67)	3.42 (1.59)	3.60 (1.63)
	High power gossiper	2.27 (1.50)	3.77 (1.48)	3.07 (1.66)
	Average receiver	2.96 (1.75)	3.60 (1.54)	
3. Influence (negative)	Low power gossiper	3.43 (1.49)	3.40 (1.25)	3.41 (1.34)
	High power gossiper	2.00 (1.34)	3.87 (1.19)	3.00 (1.57)
	Average receiver	2.62 (1.57)	3.64 (1.24)	
4. Social bonding (negative)	Low power gossiper	3.18 (1.64)	2.43 (1.41)	2.72 (1.54)
	High power gossiper	1.88 (1.15)	2.52 (1.37)	2.22 (1.31)
	Average receiver	2.44 (1.52)	2.46 (1.44)	
5. Positive gossip	Low power gossiper	5.46 (1.31)	5.52 (1.37)	5.49 (1.34)
	High power gossiper	4.50 (1.96)	5.54 (1.36)	5.05 (1.74)
	Average receiver	4.91 (1.77)	5.53 (1.96)	
6. Information (positive)	Low power gossiper	3.78 (1.51)	3.51 (1.55)	3.62 (1.53)
	High power gossiper	2.79 (1.71)	3.62 (1.64)	3.23 (1.71)
	Average receiver	3.21 (1.69)	3.57 (1.59)	
7. Influence (positive)	Low power gossiper	3.71 (1.52)	3.56 (1.27)	3.62 (1.37)
	High power gossiper	2.61 (1.59)	4.05 (1.24)	3.38 (1.58)
	Average receiver	3.08 (1.64)	3.80 (1.28)	
8. Social bonding (positive)	Low power gossiper	3.07 (1.45)	2.64 (1.38)	2.81 (1.42)
	High power gossiper	2.10 (1.29)	2.31 (1.32)	2.21 (1.31)
	Average receiver	2.51 (1.44)	2.48 (1.36)	
9. Negative formal evaluation	Low power gossiper	5.28 (1.79)	5.32 (1.73)	5.30 (1.74)
	High power gossiper	5.21 (1.81)	5.14 (1.64)	5.17 (1.72)
	Average receiver	5.24 (1.79)	5.23 (1.68)	
10. Positive formal evaluation	Low power gossiper	6.10 (1.16)	5.87 (0.98)	5.96 (1.05)
	High power gossiper	6.02 (1.09)	5.85 (1.09)	5.93 (1.09)
	Average receiver	6.05 (1.11)	5.86 (1.03)	

N = 210; standard deviations are presented between brackets

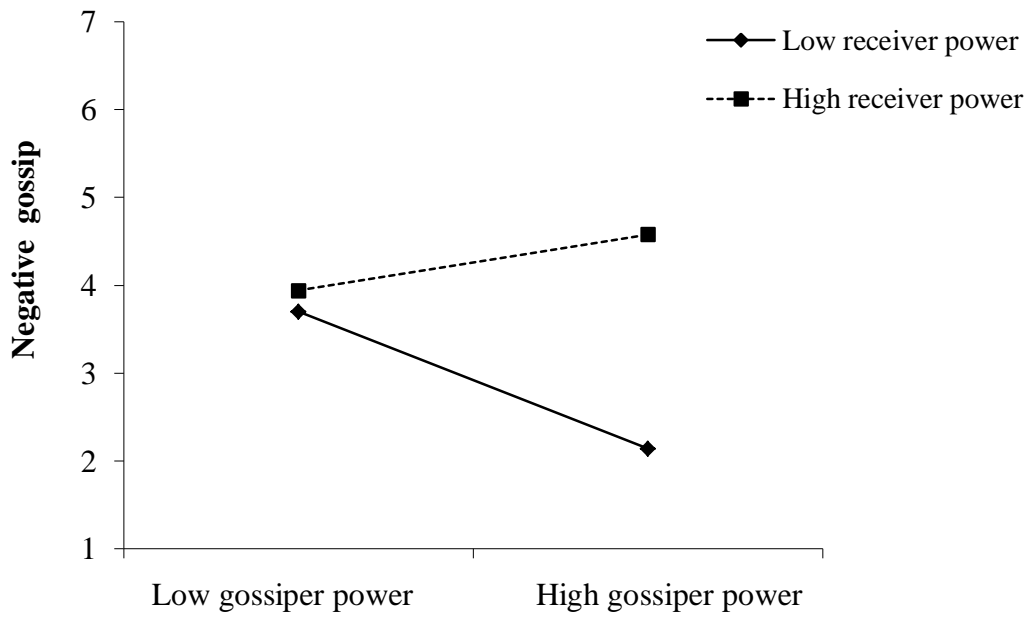


Figure 2.2. Negative gossip as a function of gossiper power and receiver power in Study 2.2.

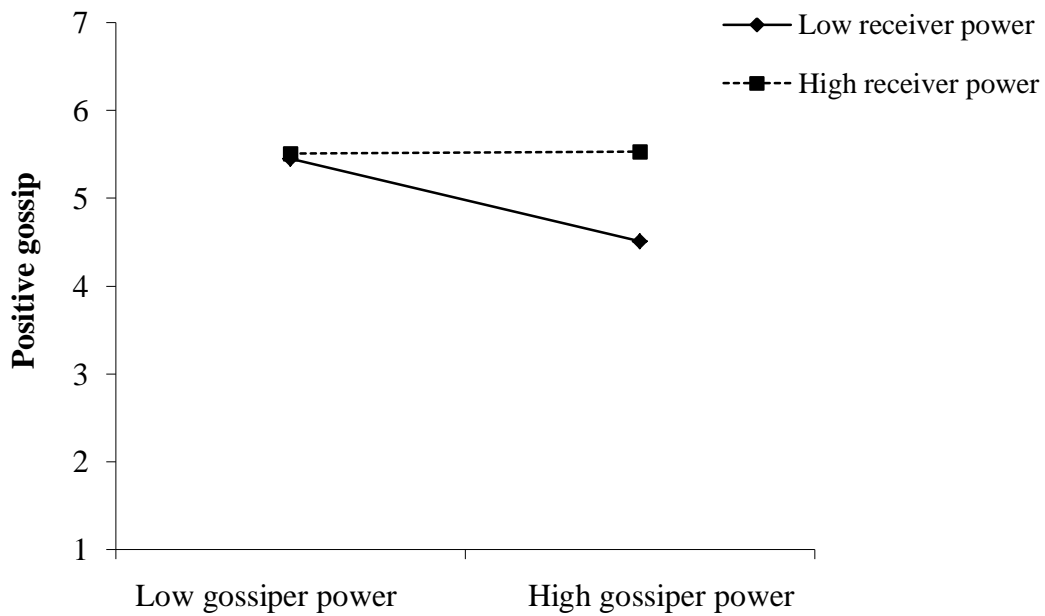


Figure 2.3. Positive gossip as a function of gossiper power and receiver power in Study 2.2.

Table 2.4. Conditional indirect effects analyses in Study 2.2 for negative and positive gossip.

Negative gossip	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mediator models	Seeking information (n)	Influence (n)	Social bonding (n)
	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)
Gossiper power (GP)	-.30** (-2.83)	-.23** (-2.61)	-.30** (-3.08)
Receiver power (RP)	.26* (2.41)	.46*** (5.01)	-.02 (-.29)
GP * RP	.48*** (4.46)	.47*** (5.16)	.34*** (3.55)
Dependent variable models: Negative gossip	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)
Gossiper power	-.005 (-.04)	.005 (.05)	-.08 (-.65)
Seeking information (n)	.77*** (11.42)		
Influence (n)		1.02*** (15.61)	
Social bonding (n)			.47*** (5.05)
Conditional indirect effects	effect [CI _{low} ; CI _{high}]	effect [CI _{low} ; CI _{high}]	effect [CI _{low} ; CI _{high}]
Low power receiver	-.61 [-.91; -.35]	-.73 [-1.07; -.44]	-.30 [-.50; -.14]
High power receiver	.13 [-.07; .34]	.24 [.003; .45]	.02 [-.09; .16]
Positive gossip	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Mediator models	Seeking information (p)	Influence (p)	Social bonding (p)
	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)
Gossiper power (GP)	-.21 ⁺ (-1.93)	-.15 (-1.53)	-.32*** (-3.41)
Receiver power (RP)	.14 (1.24)	.32** (3.31)	-.05 (0.55)
GP * RP	.27* (2.42)	.39*** (4.06)	.15 ⁺ (1.66)
Dependent variable models: Positive gossip	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>t</i>)
Gossiper power	-.15 (-1.49)	-.16 ⁺ (-1.67)	-.16 (-1.49)
Seeking information	.36*** (5.86)		
Influence		.49*** (7.58)	
Social bonding			.18* (2.40)
Conditional indirect effects	effect [CI _{low} ; CI _{high}]	effect [CI _{low} ; CI _{high}]	effect [CI _{low} ; CI _{high}]
Low power receiver	-.17 [-.35; -.05]	-.27 [-.49; -.11]	-.09 [-.21; -.01]
High power receiver	.02 [-.07; .13]	.12 [.01; .24]	-.03 [-.10; .007]

$N = 210$; ⁺ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; ⁺ $p < .06$; Gossiper power, receiver power, and target power were coded with -1 for low power and 1 for high power; ; n = mediator of negative gossip; p = mediator of positive gossip.

Negative and positive gossip mediators. We used the bootstrapping procedure outlined by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), to assess the conditional indirect effects of gossiper and receiver power on negative and positive gossip through information seeking, social influence and social bonding motives⁵. Means are shown in Table 2.3, and regression results are shown in Table 2.4.

Information. In line with hypothesis 2a, low-power people were more motivated to seek information by gossiping negatively than were high-power people (regression coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 1). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction with receiver power, showing that regardless of their own level of power, people sought information through negative gossip from high-power receivers, $b_{negative\ gossip} = .17$, ns. However, as compared to low-power people, high power people sought less information from low-power receivers, $b_{negative\ gossip} = -.79$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, as shown in Model 1, information seeking increased sharing of negative gossip. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 2b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on negative gossip through information seeking was significant only for low-power receivers, $indirect\ effect_{negative\ gossip} = -.61$ [-.91; -.35], but not for high-power receivers, $indirect\ effect_{negative\ gossip} = .13$ [-.07; .34].

Results showed a similar trend for positive gossip. In line with hypothesis 2a, low-power people were more motivated to seek information by gossiping positively than were high-power people (regression coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 4). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction with receiver power, showing that regardless of their own level of power, people sought information through positive gossip from high-power receivers, $b_{positive\ gossip} = .05$, ns. However, as compared to low-power people, high-power

⁵ We tested each conditional indirect effect in a different model, because entering the mediators simultaneously in the analysis generated multicollinearity (given the high intercorrelations between the mediators). Analyses with simultaneous mediators yielded significant positive effects of information and influence on negative gossip, but the effect of bonding was negative. Only influence had a significant effect on positive gossip.

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people sought less information from low-power receivers, $b_{\text{positive gossip}} = -.49, p < .001$.

Furthermore, as shown in Model 4, information seeking increased sharing of positive gossip.

Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 2b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on

positive gossip through information seeking was significant only for low-power receivers,

indirect effect positive gossip = $-.17 [-.35; -.05]$, but not for high-power receivers, *indirect effect*

positive gossip = $.02 [-.07; .13]$.

These conditional indirect effects show that compared to powerful people, people with low power gossiped more to low-power receivers in order to seek information, whereas people with low and high power gossiped to the same extent to high-power receivers in order to obtain information through negative and positive gossip.

Influence. As predicted by hypothesis 3a, low-power people negatively gossiped more in order to influence the receiver, than did high-power people. The interaction of gossiper power with receiver power was significant for negative gossip, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 2. High-power people wanted to influence high-power receivers marginally more than low-power people did, $b_{\text{negative gossip}} = .23, p = .052$, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to influence low-power receivers less, $b_{\text{negative gossip}} = -.71, p < .001$. Furthermore, desire to influence increased negative gossip (coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 2). Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 3b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on negative gossip mediated by desire to influence was negative for low-power receivers, *indirect effect negative gossip* = $-.73 [-1.07; -.44]$, and positive for high-power receivers, *indirect effect negative gossip* = $.24 [.003; .45]$.

For positive gossip, hypothesis 3a, predicating that low-power people have a higher influence motive than high-power people, was not supported. However, the interaction of gossiper power with receiver power on positive gossip was significant, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 5. High-power people wanted to influence high-power receivers marginally more than

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low-power people did, $b_{positive\ gossip} = .23$, $p = .054$, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to influence low-power receivers less, $b_{positive\ gossip} = -.55$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, desire to influence increased positive gossip (coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 5). Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 3b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on gossip behavior mediated by desire to influence was negative for low-power receivers, $indirect\ effect_{positive\ gossip} = -.27$ [-.49; -.11], and positive for high-power receivers, $indirect\ effect_{positive\ gossip} = .12$ [.01; .24].

Thus, people with low power gossiped negatively and positively to low-power receivers in order to exert influence more than high-power people did, whereas people with high power gossiped to high-power receivers in order to influence them more than low-power people did.

Social bonding. As predicted by hypothesis 4a, low-power people negatively gossiped in order to bond with the receiver more than did high-power people. This effect was qualified by an interaction with receiver power, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 3. People wanted to bond with high-power receivers regardless of their own power, $b_{negative\ gossip} = .04$, ns, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to bond less with low-power receivers, $b_{negative\ gossip} = -.64$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, bonding motivation increased negative gossip, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 3. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 4b, the effect of gossiper power on negative gossip motivated by social bonding was significant for low-power receivers, $indirect\ effect_{negative\ gossip} = -.30$ [-.50; -.14], but not for high-power receivers, $indirect\ effect_{negative\ gossip} = .02$ [-.09; .16].

Results showed a similar trend for positive gossip. As predicted by hypothesis 4a, low-power people positively gossiped in order to bond with the receiver more than did high-power people. This effect was qualified by an interaction with receiver power, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 6. People wanted to bond with high-power receivers regardless of their own

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power, $b_{\text{positive gossip}} = -.16$, ns, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to bond less with low-power receivers, $b_{\text{positive gossip}} = -.48$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, bonding motivation increased positive gossip, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 6. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 4b, the effect of gossiper power on positive gossip motivated by social bonding was significant for low-power receivers, $\text{indirect effect}_{\text{positive gossip}} = -.09$ [-0.21; -.01], but not for high-power receivers, $\text{indirect effect}_{\text{positive gossip}} = -.03$ [-0.10; .007].

Therefore, people with low-power gossiped negatively and positively to low-power receivers in order to bond more than high-power people did, whereas people with low and high power gossiped to the same extent to high-power receivers to bond.

Formal evaluative communication. To investigate whether power differences might shape formal evaluations similarly to gossip, we asked people how likely they were to share their negative and their positive opinions about the target in a formal inter-employee evaluation questionnaire. Three-way ANOVAs on negative and positive formal target evaluations revealed no main effects of sender power, receiver power and target power, and no two-way or three-way interactions (all $F < 2.73$, ns; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.3, rows 9 and 10).

Discussion

Consistent with Study 2.1, results showed that participants who had low power gossiped more than participants who had high power, and that the motives to seek information, influence and form social bonds mediated this effect. Moreover, results supported our hypotheses that receiver power moderates the effect of gossiper power on spreading gossip, showing that low power people gossip more than high power people towards low power receivers in order to seek information, exert influence, and bond, whereas low and high power people do not differ in gossiping towards high power receivers. Importantly, results showed that power differences shaped negative and positive gossip in the

same way, and the motives of information, influence and bonding motivated both types of gossip. Furthermore, the analyses showed that power of gossipers and receiver shaped gossip behavior, but not formal communication with the same content.

General Discussion

Power provides advantages such as access to resources, optimal affective and cognitive functioning, higher agency towards goals (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007), and relative lower power motivates people to engage in behaviors that can address their specific needs. Our results show that individuals' power position shapes gossip behavior. People share gossip preferentially with others of equal or higher power, because it is functional to learn from, influence or affiliate with powerful others. Rosnow (2001) notes that gossip is instrumental in bringing some personal benefit to the storyteller. Upward gossip is a one-sided strategic way to connect with others who are likely to help fulfill one's needs. As such, gossip is a levelling force that helps individuals cope with power differences.

First, people gossip to decode others' behaviors and understand their intentions. Gossipers seek information about others' functioning, with the goal of better understanding and controlling their own functioning (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). Gossip may have a negative reputation because it seems intrusive (Bergmann, 1993), but it helps people with reduced information access to learn from insightful others – one's equals and superiors.

Second, people gossip to influence other's opinions and worldview. Individuals may draw social comparisons through gossip in order to elicit a good impression about themselves to those who can help them (Nicholson, 2001). Direct self-promotion is socially undesirable, but, in order to function optimally at the workplace, people need to secure a good reputation, especially among higher power people (Burt, 2008). Because gossipers shape the way receivers think about gossip senders, the targets, or even about themselves (Martinescu et al, 2014), gossip is a way to informally exert power. As such, people constrained by formal

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power structures can informally negotiate their relationships and positions within the organization through gossip (Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Third, people gossip to develop social bonds with others. Gossip helps people build friendships (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012a), which are desirable when the gossip receiver has equal or higher power (Case et al, 2015). Developing expressive ties with powerful people may provide individuals with resources or social support in the future. Alliances with powerful others make people less vulnerable to risks or threats that may be present in their environment.

In addition, results of Study 2.2 showed that people's gossip behavior was shaped by their own and the receivers' power positions, but that the likelihood of sharing the same information anonymously through a formal channel did not change with gossipers' or receivers' power. These findings suggest that gossip is an attractive way of regulating power differences, while formal communication is not. Unlike formal communication, gossip can be emotional, spontaneous, playful, and symbolic, which are essential elements for creating interpersonal connections in organizations (Gabriel, 1991). People fulfill their needs by connecting with others through lateral or upward gossip, and not through formal channels.

Lastly, because gossip is a social phenomenon that involves at least three parties, the sender, receiver, and target of gossip, the power of the target is likely to be important as well in spreading gossip. For example, some empirical evidence shows that low status individuals are particularly interested in gossip about others of high status (McAndrew, et al, 2007; Ellwardt et al, 2012b). Employees often seek gossip about people in higher rather than lower positions; negative gossip about powerful others is especially valued due to functional dependence on them (McAndrew et al, 2007; Noon & Delbridge, 1993, Wert & Salovey, 2004). Results of Study 2.2 did not replicate these findings, possibly because repeated interactions with targets may be needed to evoke these responses, and may remain too

abstract in a scenario. However, results showed that people gossiped negatively more to high-power receivers than to low-power receivers about low-power targets (possibly because high power receivers seem better suited to act towards low power targets), but when gossiping about high power targets they did not differentiate between high and low power receivers.

Theoretical implications

Our results suggest that people at different power levels have different preferences for gossip receivers. On the one hand, people approach higher power gossip partners because upward gossip helps them fulfill needs. On the other hand, because associating themselves with others who have lower power may lead to status leakage or disrupt the status quo (Podolny, 2005), people avoid informal connections with lower power others. This is in line with findings from the power literature, showing that the typical approach tendencies of high power people and avoidance tendencies of low power people may be offset by the presence of opportunities to gain power for low power people, and threats of losing power for high power people (e.g. Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Mead & Maner, 2012), and spreading gossip entails such opportunities or threats.

Because people avoid lower power gossip partners, and seek higher power gossip partners, there is an asymmetry in gossip spreading patterns. This imbalance in the supply and demand for higher power gossip partners may result in most gossip being shared with equal power partners, who are less desirable than higher power gossip partners, but are acceptable because they may have some information, influence or affiliation value for gossipers. Moreover, one's equals are likely to experience a similar gossip asymmetry, making them interested in exchanging gossip. Therefore, lateral gossip, exchanged between people with similar power, may be where the gossip partners are equally interested and rewarded by the interaction.

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The gossip tendency asymmetry may create favorable conditions for people to opportunistically receive gossip from lower power senders, without reciprocating with gossip themselves. Thus, power holders may surround themselves with others who flatter them by sharing gossip (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). Because people who do not reciprocate to shared gossip are disliked and slowly excluded from one's network (Farley, 2011), if such unilateral gossip exchanges do not respond to lower power people's needs for information, influence or affiliation, they may be reduced over time. However, as low-power people cannot realistically expect reciprocity in unequal power interactions, gossiping upwards may be worthwhile for them even without assuming that gossip will be equally reciprocated.

However, there are instances when people may gossip to lower power receivers. When their power position is illegitimate or unstable (Lammers, et al, 2008; Sligte, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011), or when they need timely input about critical affairs, people may strategically gossip downwards. Managers may gossip to key lower power employees in order to quickly find information that can help them make timely decisions, influence others through informal channels, or find new friends who might support them if needed. Gossip is an adaptive behavior because it helps people address goals or needs in specific circumstances.

Practical implications

Our research shows that gossip responds to people's needs that may arise from power differences: finding information, exerting influence, and bonding. Although gossip is a widely disapproved behavior at the workplace because it is perceived as harmful to others, inefficient use of time and waste of organizational resources (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009), it is functional for addressing power-related needs. Contrary to views of gossip as harmful and invasive, because it is exchanged indirectly and privately, gossip may help people avoid or attenuate conflicts in the workplace (Schoeman, 1994). As such, while gossip is motivated by

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people's needs to cope with power differences, gossip may also be a mechanism that stabilizes rather than challenges the status quo in organizations.

Although most gossip is spread with benign intentions - learning, gaining control over one's outcomes or bonding (in the current study), some gossip may be explicitly harmful. Because power is desirable, and people actively strive to maintain or increase power (Nicholson, 2001), some may indeed use gossip to compete for resources, sabotage rivals and usurp their power (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Furthermore, some powerholders may feel threatened by benign gossip and become defensive (Mead & Maner, 2012), because gossip helps lower power employees satisfy their needs and create alliances, thus decreasing perceived dependence on the powerful. Although explicitly malicious gossip is relatively rare (Baumeister et al, 2004, Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997), such instances are very salient (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), making all gossip seem dangerous and unacceptable.

The general disapproval of gossip is unfortunate, because in organizations, gossip is vital for group formation and regulation, and it maintains and "oils" formal communication channels. Gossip is intrinsic to social and organizational life, and removing gossip is impossible without banning all forms of communication (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). A moderate level of gossip in the workplace is functional, because gossip responds to individual's needs and maintains group cohesion. Therefore, instead of suppressing all gossip, we advise managers to identify when and why employees gossip and respond accordingly by providing information, more control over processes and outcomes, or by reducing competitive incentives (Witteck & Wielers, 1998).

Limitations and future research

Our research has some noteworthy limitations. First, the two studies we conducted consistently showed that low power people gossip more than high power people. However,

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our hypotheses that receivers' power influences gossip spreading were supported in the scenario study but not in the experiment. We believe the inconsistent results between the two studies were caused by the experimental procedure, which did not instruct confederates to enact their power role. Future research should test the effect of gossipers' and receivers' power in an experiment where both gossip power and receiver power are more successfully manipulated.

Second, in both our studies we operationalize power as hierarchical differences in expertise and control over resources and outcomes. However, in organizations, power differences between individuals might be more subtle, or even differ across domains of expertise. As such, it might be interesting for future research to investigate whether subjectively perceived power differences or different types of power (e.g. expert power, reward power, legitimate power, c.f. French & Raven, 1959) may activate specific gossip motives or spreading patterns.

Third, our studies presented either the artificial setting of a laboratory, or an imaginary situation. Although these studies offer good insights into how power differences shape gossip behavior, a field study would provide higher validity for our results. Moreover, because the strong informal networks within hierarchical organizations develop in parallel with formal networks, and allow people to form coalitions (Witteck & Wielers, 1998), conducting a field study might help answer additional questions about how people use the informal and formal communication structures in different organizations.

Fourth, the gossip motives of information, influence and social bonding suggest that gossip is a behavior that serves distinct functions. However, in the current research these motives were very highly correlated, and we could not test their unique effects on gossip. For individuals it may be difficult to consciously distinguish their motives as they engage in gossip, because gossip is likely to fulfill multiple functions simultaneously. For example,

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besides the motives studied here, gossip researchers also identified a fun or social enjoyment motive (e.g. Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Noon, & Delbridge, 1993). Because gossip can address individuals' needs for information, influence or social bonding in a spontaneous, humorous, and playful interaction, people may experience gossip as relaxing and fun, remaining generally unaware of its underlying functions. Future researchers interested in gossip functionality should design studies appropriate for investigating gossip motives (e.g. by manipulating the motives).

Lastly, we propose power differences as the mechanism that drives gossip. However, other factors may interact with one's power level to facilitate gossip, such as hierarchical structure of organizations (Foster, 2004), organizational change (Mills, 2010), breaches of trust (Ellwardt et al, 2012b), competitive environments (Knifin & Wilson, 2005), interdependence between individuals, or monotonous tasks. It would be interesting to further examine how these factors may moderate the effects of power on gossip behavior.

Conclusion

The power position individuals have shapes their needs and gossip behaviors. In a power relation, the lower power individuals cannot fulfill their fundamental needs for autonomy and relatedness by exercising power, which they address by gossiping with equal or higher power others in order to seek information, exert influence, and establish social bonds. Thus, gossip is a functional behavior that responds to individuals' needs and allows them to cope with power differences in an accessible and risk free fashion.