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Why we gossip

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Chapter 5

General Discussion

Gossip is a paradoxical social phenomenon: although almost everybody gossips on a daily basis in all social environments, gossip is one of the most widely disapproved behaviors. Recent research has shed some light on the gossip paradox by outlining that gossip is functional for groups: it helps groups maintain cooperation and enforce norms by conveying reputational information (Burt, 2008; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Sommerfeld et al, 2007). Gossip may thus be unpleasant for its targets, but it facilitates group functioning. However, at the individual level, gossip continues to be seen as a socially disapproved behavior (Baumeister et al, 2004; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). This inconsistency between views on gossip at the group and the individual level is puzzling, because gossip cannot play an essential role for groups without fulfilling any meaningful function for the individuals who exchange or are targeted by gossip.

We propose that gossip is omnipresent because it serves important functions for those who engage in it or are affected by it. Gossip entails a complex exchange of reputational information about people in one's environment, which is central to individuals' success of living in that environment (Emler, 1994). As such, individuals 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 investigated gossips' functions and mechanisms from the perspectives of the individual sender, receiver, and target of gossip.

In this final chapter we summarize how findings in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 help address the gossip paradox and contribute to research on gossip functionality, and discuss the findings in light of the theories we used for specifying gossip's functions. Afterwards, we make some recommendations about how our research may help individuals and organizations better manage

gossip. Finally, we reflect on the limitations associated with our research and on how future studies may build on this dissertation's findings to further increase our understanding of gossip and its functions for individuals.

Summary of main findings

Gossip is functional for senders. In Chapter 2 we aimed to clarify the functions gossip has for senders, by investigating the connection between individuals' needs and gossip behavior. Specifically, we examined the role of social power for the decision to share gossip. Social power implies asymmetrical access to resources and dependence of the powerless on the powerful, which activates needs for information, influence and bonding (Keltner et al, 2003; Galinsky et al, 2008). Because these needs can potentially be satisfied through gossip, we examined whether people's relative level of power shapes gossip behavior, and whether their needs for information, influence, and social bonding mediate this relation.

The two studies we conducted supported our expectations that people's need for gossiping arises from power differences, and that the powerless gossip more than the powerful. Individuals' needs for information, influence and social bonding mediated the effect of power on spreading negative and positive gossip. Moreover, as social power is relative in nature, gossip behavior was influenced by the power of the gossip receiver: low and high-power people were equally interested in gossiping with high-power receivers, but low-power people were more interested than high-power people in gossiping with low-power receivers in order to gain information, influence or to bond.

In this chapter we showed that gossip is functional for gossipers, and that power differences can explain gossip behavior: power is associated with asymmetrical access to

information, formal means of influence, and central places in social networks. Individuals who lack power need to rely on informal means (i.e. gossip) for addressing their needs. Furthermore, our study showed that high-power people also gossiped with others in order to gain information, influence or to bond, but preferentially with receivers who also have high power, because informally associating themselves with lower-power people can lead to power loss. Importantly, the research presented in Chapter 2 showed that the mechanisms driving negative and positive gossip were similar, suggesting that both types of gossip are functional.

Gossip is functional for receivers. In Chapter 3 we aimed to clarify the functions gossip has for its receivers, by investigating the self-evaluative role of receiving gossip about other people. Specifically, we proposed that individuals need evaluative information about others to evaluate themselves and maintain a positive self-concept (Festinger, 1954; Sedikides & Strube, 1998). We therefore examined whether gossip about others offers receivers social-comparison information that is relevant for self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection, and what the effects of these self-evaluative motives are on self-conscious emotions.

In two studies, we demonstrated that gossip is self-relevant for receivers. Specifically, positive gossip about others had higher self-improvement value than negative gossip, whereas negative gossip about others had higher self-promotion and higher self-protection value than positive gossip. Moreover, the self-promotion and self-protection motives mediated the effect of gossip valence on emotions: receivers of negative gossip about others felt higher pride than receivers of positive gossip due to the self-promotion value of gossip, and higher fear due to the self-protection value of gossip. These relationships suggest that gossip facilitates receivers' self-evaluation.

Furthermore, we examined the moderating role of achievement goals, because they are salient in achievement contexts and regulate emotion, cognition and behavior (Elliott, 2005). People with a mastery goal – defined as a desire to improve one’s own performance - perceived marginally higher self-improvement value of gossip and significantly lower self-protection value compared to people with a performance goal – defined as a desire to demonstrate one’s superior performance relative to others. Moreover, possibly because they feel threatened by both types of gossip, people with performance goals experienced high self-protection value irrespective of gossip valence. However, for people with mastery goals negative gossip led to higher self-protection concerns and fear compared to positive gossip, because only negative gossip signals threats for them. Achievement goals were not related to self-promotion value of gossip.

These results clearly indicate that gossip has self-evaluative functions for receivers, and generates self-conscious emotions, which may help receivers adapt to their current situation. Furthermore, the self-evaluation process is not only meant to maintain self-concept positivity through self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection, but it is tuned to individuals’ goals: receivers’ achievement goals may determine, for instance, whether the gossip provides a role-model to follow or a warning about an imminent threat.

Gossip is functional for targets. In Chapter 4, we aimed to investigate the consequences gossip has when it reaches its targets. Specifically, gossip contains information directly relevant for targets’ self-evaluation, but also reputational information which affects how others evaluate the target. We used cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) to investigate the complex response pattern of gossip targets, and proposed that responses may be both self-directed and other-directed.

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Our studies showed that compared to targets of negative gossip, targets of positive gossip experienced higher self-directed happiness (pride) and other-directed happiness (liking), which positively predicted affiliation intentions. In comparison to positive gossip, negative gossip made targets feel more self-directed blame (guilt and shame), which predicted repair intentions, and other-directed blame (anger), which predicted retaliation intentions. Therefore, on the one hand, targets' reactions to negative gossip may be prosocial, when targets consider themselves blameworthy for the received criticism, or, on the other hand, antisocial when they consider the gossiper blameworthy for damaging their reputation.

To more accurately predict these prosocial or antisocial responses associated with self-directed and other-directed blame, we also examined the moderating role of two dispositional characteristics that reflect individuals' own self-valuation, and the importance they place on how others value them: core-self evaluations (CSE) and concern for reputation (CR). A low CSE strengthened the effect of gossip valence on repair intentions due to self-directed blame. Thus, especially when they had low CSE, people who received negative compared to positive gossip about themselves felt more self-directed blame and subsequently had higher intention to repair their shortcomings. Because people with low CSE do not believe in their abilities to cope with challenges or threats, they are likely to feel that indeed they are wrong and need to correct their behavior. Furthermore, having a high CR strengthened the negative effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions due to other-directed blame. Thus, especially when they had high CR, people who received negative compared to positive gossip about themselves felt more other-directed blame and subsequently had higher intention to retaliate against the gossiper. A high CR makes people aware of the value of having a good reputation "it is not enough to do good; you

need a reputation for doing good for it to count in your favor” (Nicholson, 2001, p. 42). Because people with high CR are very sensitive to how others perceive them, they are likely to believe that the gossiper has caused them harm and deserves to be punished.

The pattern of response showed by targets of gossip is complex and may cause reactions unintended or unforeseen by the gossiper. People are likely to ignore targets’ perspective when they gossip, because the gossip is not intended to reach its targets. However, people have high stakes in gossip about themselves, because gossip affects their self-views and their reputation, which activates strong emotions and motivates prosocial or antisocial behavior. We showed that targets’ complex reactions can be understood using a cognitive appraisal framework. That is, gossip valence and agent-causality (i.e., perceptions of the gossiper or themselves as being responsible for the gossip) influence targets’ responses to being the subject of gossip in terms of self-blame, other-blame, self-directed happiness, and other-directed happiness. Furthermore, we demonstrated that targets’ emotional and behavioral reactions do not only reflect their appraisal of the situation, but also their predispositions in terms of their core self-evaluations and concern for reputation.

Gossip has functions distinct from those of formal communication. In our studies we conceptualized gossip as a unique form of organizational communication, distinct from formal feedback or hierarchical information flow, and characterized by a number of essential traits: evaluative, informal, concealed from targets, subjective, and embedded in context. In two of the chapters presented above we measured formal communication as well as gossip, and we observed notable differences between these types of communication.

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First, in Study 2 of Chapter 2, where we investigated how likely people were to gossip positively or negatively as a function of their own and the receivers' power position, we also measured how likely people were to spread a message with the same content using a formal evaluation system. The analyses revealed that sender's and receiver's power had no effect on how formal evaluations were spread, which indicates that individuals use gossip but not formal channels to address their needs generated by power differences.

Second, in Study 2 of Chapter 4 we compared how targets react to gossip and to formal feedback about themselves in terms of self-directed and other-directed emotions, and associated behavioral intentions. People had distinguishable reactions to feedback and gossip about the self. Those who received feedback blamed themselves more and had higher repair intentions than people who received gossip, especially when the information was negative, possibly because formal feedback in organizations is a legitimate and established instrument intended to help the target correct faults, whereas gossip is not. Moreover, targets blamed gossipers more than people who provided feedback, and they were happier with others who provided feedback than with gossipers, suggesting that gossip is more threatening and less constructive for targets; the two types of self-relevant information generated similar self-directed happiness levels.

Taken together, our studies suggest that gossip is a type of communication that circulates in parallel with formal organizational communication, and it has distinctive functions for people who use or encounter it: gossip provides an informal way for people to address their needs, but it is less desirable for targets.

Men and women may use gossip differently. Although we did not set out to investigate gender differences in gossip behavior, we conducted exploratory analyses to test whether men

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and women may use gossip differently. Previous research suggests that because women are more interested in social stimuli, more responsive to the social cues and nuances of social relationships, they may have a higher interest in gossip (Pendleton, 1998; Weber & Hertel, 2007). Furthermore, women are more marginalized in society, and are less likely to have access to power positions and their associated resources. Thus, women would more often need to resort to informal means to meet their goals or needs.

Analyses in Chapter 3 indicated that women who imagined receiving gossip about others responded more strongly to the valence of gossip than men. Specifically, women were more alert than men after receiving negative compared to positive gossip about others; women experienced higher self-promotion value of gossip than men after receiving negative compared to positive gossip about others, and subsequently experienced higher feelings of pride due to self-promotion. Furthermore, women experienced higher self-protection concerns than men after receiving negative compared to positive gossip. However, women's fear reactions did not differ depending on gossip valence, whereas men experienced lower fear when they received negative compared to positive gossip about others.

In Chapter 4, we tested whether gender moderated the effect of gossip valence on targets' emotions and behavioral intentions, and discovered that gossip valence effects were stronger on women's emotions: receiving negative compared to positive gossip generated higher self-directed blame for women than for men, and receiving positive compared to negative gossip led to higher self-directed happiness and other-directed happiness for women than for men. Thus, indirect effects of gossip valence on retaliation and affiliation intentions were stronger for women: negative compared to positive gossip generated higher self-directed blame and

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subsequently higher repair intentions for women than for men; positive compared to negative gossip generated higher other-directed happiness and subsequently higher affiliation intentions for women than for men.

Received gossip about others or about the self induced stronger self-evaluations and emotions among women than men, possibly because women are more relational and interdependent than men and respond therefore more strongly to gossip, which is relational in nature (Weber & Hertel, 2007). However, in both Chapters 3 and 4 this pattern of results was stronger in the scenario studies than in the critical incident studies, in which participants recalled actual gossip they encountered. Thus, it is plausible that women react with more intense emotions to imaginary gossip situations than men, whereas women and men do not differ much in their emotional responses to real-life gossip situations, suggesting that people's meta-stereotypes about gossip and emotionality influence their reactions to imagined and real gossip incidents.

Theoretical contributions

Gossip is a prevalent phenomenon in all kinds of social contexts because it facilitates group functioning by effectively securing the collaboration of group members, as documented by studies in evolutionary psychology (e.g. Dunbar et al, 1997; McAndrew et al, 2007), social psychology (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011) or economic game theory (e.g. Sommerfeld et al, 2007). Considering gossip from an individual perspective, our work complements previous research by showing that gossip is functional for the individuals involved in the gossip triad. We demonstrated that gossip helps people better adapt to their social environment in a way that is sensitive to their personal needs and predispositions. Gossip senders use gossip as an informal

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way of addressing needs activated by power differences, receivers use gossip as an indirect way to evaluate themselves, and targets use gossip as an indicator of their self-worth and public image. Furthermore, in line with previous research portraying gossip as a fundamental human behavior, prevalent across social contexts (e.g. Dunbar, 2004), our studies showed that gossip is easy to elicit, recall, or imagine. Gossip seems to be a universally adaptive and a versatile human behavior, because it has clear functions for all the social actors it involves.

In the current work we not only contribute to gossip research, but we also connect gossip to major social psychological theories. We used a number of important psychological theories in conceptualizing the effect of gossip on senders, receivers, and targets. In Chapter 2, we connect gossip research with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and social power theories (Keltner, et al, 2003; Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Magee & Smith, 2013), by showing that individuals' fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness, which are likely to be activated by power dynamics, affect gossip behavior. Our results suggest that although low power brings people at a disadvantage, the powerless can overcome limitations associated with their position by gaining some informal control through gossip. Furthermore, in line with previous research, we found that low power people pay more attention to high power people than vice-versa. Our study is among the first to investigate mechanisms through which the powerless attend to the powerful. Specifically, our research shows that powerless people use informal gossip channels to actively cope with their disadvantageous dependence on higher-power people for resources, by striving to gain information from them, to influence or to befriend them.

In Chapter 3, we translated the SCENT model (Sedikides & Strube, 1997) into motives for valuing gossip about others, which is relevant for receivers for self-evaluative purposes (Wert & Salovey, 2004). The SCENT model postulates that individuals are motivated to engage in self-evaluation processes that will lead to self-concept positivity, “but the individual does not necessarily attempt to achieve this objective through brute self-aggrandization” (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 225). Instead, individuals most often evaluate themselves in ways that are subtle and sensitive to pressures of the social context. Gossip can serve as such a subtle manner through which people engage in social comparison processes to tactically self-evaluate and maintain self-concept positivity. Moreover, our results suggest that social comparison processes and self-evaluation can be triggered and activated externally, by people who share gossip about others with the receiver. As such, tactical self-enhancement of one’s self-image is a flexible process, because it is not only triggered by deliberate, self-initiated behaviors like seeking feedback, but also by spontaneous incidents like receiving gossip. Thus, people are able to tactically collect social cues from their environment through gossip and adapt their self-views accordingly.

In Chapter 4, we contribute to cognitive appraisal theory of emotion by showing that gossip targets’ complex emotional and behavioral responses can be understood in this framework. Our results suggest that the primary reaction of gossip targets is emotional, but also that these emotions are in line with targets’ appraisals of message valence (positive *vs.* negative) and responsibility for generating the gossip (self *vs.* other). Because gossip is extremely important and relevant for targets, as it concerns their self-image and their public image, a dynamic process of cognitions and emotions seems to underlie targets’ reactions to gossip. It was

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beyond the scope of our research to investigate the exact nature of these emotion-cognition dynamics, but this may be an interesting question for future research.

Our work shows that gossip is a complex social mechanism, simultaneously activating different motives and functions for its senders, receivers, and targets. For each actor in the gossip triad there are parallel mediation chains driving gossip behavior or reactions to gossip. Specifically, people spread gossip to address their needs for information, influence and social bonding generated by social power differences, receivers were interested in gossip due to its value for self-evaluation in terms of self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection, and targets reacted to being the subject of gossip because of its potential impact on their private self-view as well as their public reputation. As such, the current work may be among the first empirical studies to portray gossip as a social mechanism that is multi-functional and multi-final (helps achieve different outcomes simultaneously) for all the actors it involves.

Although it sometimes has destructive effects, we believe that gossip is not intrinsically harmful: “gossip is like eating: excessive eating is harmful, but that does not imply an intrinsic evil in eating” (Michelson et al, 2010, p. 384). In the current work we address gossip from an individual functional perspective, independent from moralizations of gossip behavior. We showed that gossip is meaningful and functional for all the individual actors involved in the gossip triad; furthermore, each actor’s perspective is unique and fundamentally subjective, because it is shaped by individuals’ specific needs, motives, interests, and traits. As such, each actor’s perception of gossip is likely to be shaped by their place in the gossip triad: sender, receiver and target.

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Because gossip is subjective and shared privately, it also associates with potential downsides and risks. Gossip is a complex social mechanism, personally relevant to all the actors it involves, and for each person in the gossip triad different intrinsic and situational factors shape the transmission and reception of gossip. As such, the framing and meaning of a gossip message is likely to change at every step in the chain of gossip transmission from senders to receivers and occasionally to targets, in the sense that the intentions of gossip senders may not correspond to how receivers and targets understand the gossip message. For example, someone may share a negative impression about a colleague's behavior in order to gain more information about the target and verify whether one's opinion is accurate, the receiver may feel proud due to the self-promotion value of the gossip, and the target may be angered by the negative gossip and intend to retaliate against the gossiper. Therefore, gossip's effects may be unpredictable or potentially dangerous, because gossip is bound to be spread and perceived from a subjective perspective.

Practical contributions

People are inclined to think that gossip is bad, that it should be prevented or controlled in the workplace, and to say that they personally avoid it. The negative consensus about gossip is related with the threats gossip poses for the reputations of its targets, receivers, and senders, as well as potential threats for the general level of trust between group members. However, gossip is present in all social contexts due to the wide range of functions it fulfills for groups and individuals. As Patricia Spacks noted "perfect silence, perfect solitude, would violate the human condition" (1985, p. 31), suggesting that it would be virtually impossible to create a social environment without gossip. The findings presented in this dissertation are aligned with recent research showing that gossip is essential for the functioning of individuals and the groups they

are part of (e.g. Beersma & van Kleef, 2011; 2012; Feinberg et al, 2012; , Sommerfeld et al, 2007) . We showed that gossip helps senders address their needs, it helps receivers self-evaluate, and it helps targets interact with their social environment. Therefore, we can offer individuals and organizations some recommendations regarding the use of gossip.

Because gossip is highly functional for the individuals involved in it, there is little to gain from demonizing or trying to ban gossip. Gossip is something that people who share a collective identity do naturally, in all social environments, including the workplace (Nicholson, 2001), and work satisfaction is directly related to the opportunities a job provides to talk (Emler, 1994). A more constructive approach is for both individuals and organizations to accept gossip as a given of their social environment, and to reflect more systematically on its functions and implications.

Members of the gossip triad. First, our findings may help senders, receivers and targets understand that gossip spreading is functional, and that people engage in gossip in order to fulfill their current needs. As shown in Chapter 2, people with lower power gossiped to seek information, to exert influence, or to bond with others more than those with higher power. Reflecting on the motives behind their gossip behavior may help gossipers become aware of their needs and how to best address them. Furthermore, our research may help receivers and targets understand that gossip is not inherently malicious (Baumeister et al, 2004; Ben'Ze-ev, 1994) and it is unlikely to be spread in order to hurt, manipulate, or deceive them. Moreover, people may even learn to identify the rare occasions when gossip is used for malicious purposes, for example when gossipers have high levels of psychopathy, narcissism or Machiavellianism (Lyons & Hughes, 2015). Purposefully spreading false or harmful gossip is risky for gossipers, because it is unlikely to be believed and it can be traced back to the sender (De Backer & Gurven, 2006),

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and as such may harm the moral identities or moral reputation of gossipers. Thus, understanding that gossip is functional may contribute to a less negative view of gossip.

Second, our research helps clarify that people are avid receivers of gossip because gossip provides them with input for self-evaluation, as shown in Chapter 3. Gossip helps receivers draw social comparisons between themselves and gossip targets, and become aware of ways to improve themselves, potential dangers and threats they need to protect themselves from, or their qualities and accomplishments relative to the targets'. Moreover, our studies may help receivers understand that gossip is subjective and delivered in a way that serves the senders' needs, and may not describe reality very accurately. Gossip is spread in private, and is not easily verifiable; thus, people who rely exclusively on gossip may oversample information they share with fellow gossipers and draw biased conclusions (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Third, our research may help senders and receivers of gossip anticipate the effect their behavior will have on targets. Gossip targets are the ones who may suffer the most negative consequences of gossip (at least, from negative gossip), because gossip shapes others' opinions about targets, but is concealed from targets. Thus, gossip targets have limited control over their own reputation. As such, gossip can lead to victimization, or distress in the form of emotional exhaustion and burnout among targets (Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery, 2014). As shown in Chapter 4, negative gossip targets experience self-directed blame, and subsequently develop repair intentions. However, gossip that is particularly negative or that is repeatedly spread about targets, might reduce targets' well-being and their ability to repair their faults. Furthermore, targets who experience other-directed blame may engage in disproportionately aggressive retaliatory behaviors that disrupt relationships between co-workers and organizational

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processes. Moreover, people who are very frequently the target of negative or positive gossip may become overly preoccupied with how they are perceived, to the detriment of their core activities and tasks in the workplace.

In sum, for each actor in the gossip triad the first step in coping with gossip would be to analyze their own perspective, and compare whether the way they use or understand gossip corresponds to the other actors' in terms of intentions or consequences. We believe that even minimal perspective taking may help individuals counteract important negative effects of gossip, because it would help gossip triad members anticipate their actions' effects on each other. Furthermore, perspective taking would help targets understand that negative gossip is not always meant to harm them, which may prevent them from overworking to repair their shortcomings or engaging in antisocial behavior by retaliating against gossipers.

Organizations. Our research may help organizations understand that instead of completely fighting against gossip or denying its existence, they should be open to learning about gossip that is circulated. Although gossip is subjective, most gossip reported by participants in our critical incident and experimental studies was true or believed to be true; false or malicious gossip was rather exceptional. As such, because gossip might represent a signal about problematic issues or changes in one's environment, we would advise organizations to consider the potential personal or situational circumstances that have generated the gossip and the reactions to it.

The current research may help managers recognize the underlying mechanisms of gossip and the needs their employees are fulfilling through gossip. Furthermore, managers may create working environments where people need to rely less on gossip for fulfilling fundamental needs,

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and where gossip is less threatening. For example, people who feel they do not receive enough information or have too little control over their work environment may engage in gossip spreading. As such, gossip may be a signal that communication and employee autonomy need improvement. Furthermore, receivers may be interested in gossip to make social comparisons and evaluate their own standing, which may be better achieved by more formal evaluations. As shown in this dissertation, formal evaluations are also more legitimate and trigger less other-directed emotions by targets. Moreover, targets are more likely to be victimized when gossipers intend to harm them. Malicious motives for gossip may arise more readily in a competitive climate, where people need to demonstrate they are superior to others in order to succeed. Thus, managers may work towards changing the climate, for example by implementing less competitive incentive structures.

A survey revealed that, although gossip is omnipresent in the workplace, 94% of the companies included had no policy for managing the grapevine, and managers had no control over information circulating through informal channels (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998). Leaders should recognize gossip's potential as a communication and a social control mechanism, but one that is highly related to and dependent on the needs of individuals who exchange gossip. Specifically, knowledge of the functions of gossip may be integrated in management development programs, training managers to make sense of gossip and utilize it in constructive ways. As proposed above, our research could help managers prevent gossip from escalating and damaging employees' well-being or the functioning of the organization, by adjusting the level of information and control employees receive in their work, decreasing competitive incentives and goals, and making feedback more available. Furthermore, human-resource specialists could use

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our research to design tools that inform employees about the functions and potential negative effects of gossip, and offer them support in coping with gossip. By trying to reconcile caveats and benefits associated with gossip, organizations may be able to find a balanced state in which gossip is functional and constructive, and develop the means to intervene before gossip becomes dysfunctional and destructive.

Limitations and future research

In the current work, with the exception of Chapter 2, Study 2, we investigated gossip from the three perspectives of the gossip triad actors independently of each other, whereas the three perspectives are likely to be interconnected. Interpersonal relations and social dynamics between the members of the gossip triad are an important factor which we did not include in our current studies. However, to better understand how gossip is spread and received by individuals, future research should explicitly take into account how the relational nature of gossip shapes its functions. Important questions that future research may address are whether perceived similarity, rivalry, the nature or qualities of the relation between members of the gossip triad affect the functions they derive from gossip, or to what extent and under what conditions the intention of the gossiper is accurately understood by receivers and targets.

Our work helps outline major functions of gossip for the individuals in the gossip triad. As such, the current work represents a first step in understanding that gossip is functional for individuals because it expresses their needs and motivations; however, our research does not offer a comprehensive account of how gossip's functions are activated. Future studies should explore other gossip functions than the ones we addressed here, and the mechanisms driving these functions. For example, an important motive often mentioned in the gossip literature is fun-

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seeking (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). In line with the idea of American comedian Will Rogers “everything is funnier when it’s happening to the other guy” (in J. Morreall, 1994, p. 60), new research could explore the connection between gossip and humor.

In the current work we identified situational achievement goals, and the individual differences of core self-evaluations and concern for reputation as moderators of the gossip functions for senders, receivers and targets. Future research should focus on identifying other factors that facilitate or hinder the expression of gossip functions. Because other needs and motives salient for individuals in different contexts are likely to shape gossip behavior and to activate functions of gossip, it remains for future research to explore how other situational factors and predispositions shape the functions senders, receivers and targets derive from gossip.

Furthermore, in the three empirical chapters presented in this dissertation we focused on gossip’s functions for individuals in a work context. However, we believe that our findings and their implications may be transferrable to other contexts, because the social mechanisms driving gossip’s functions are likely to come into play in many other contexts where social interactions are frequent: education, sports or recreational activities, one’s family or circle of friends. Moreover, the way gossip is spread and received may depend on how important a specific context is to someone, how much time they spend there and possibly on other situational contingencies. Future studies should address these questions.

Our studies outline the functions of gossip for individuals, and are complementary to previous research documenting the group-serving functions of gossip. In line with the multilevel selection theory of gossip (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005) we believe that the individual and group level functions of gossip are interrelated. Gossip’s group-serving functions are latent and may

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come into play because individuals are personally interested in gossip due to the functions it serves them. Although gossip offers clear advantages to members of groups, gossip's group protection potential is likely to be too abstract for individuals, who might have difficulties visualizing the group perspective beyond their immediate needs and interests. As such, by helping individuals address needs and motives that are personally relevant to them, gossip might enable people to engage in group-serving behaviors. Future research should study the link between the functions gossip serves for individuals and groups, by investigating how individuals address group-level problems by translating them into issues that are personally relevant for them.

Conclusion

The studies presented in this dissertation demonstrate that gossip is functional for individuals. Informal communication in the form of gossip is self-relevant for all the individuals involved in it, addressing their needs and motives in a way in which formal communication cannot: "stories, myths, gossip, and jokes [...] may represent attempts to humanize the impersonal spaces of bureaucratic organizations, to mark them as human territory. [...] When much of the information traded in organizations is symbolically and emotionally impoverished, [...] stories, jokes and gossip re-introduce a symbolically charged narrative to everyday life in organizations. Many organizations are not generally pleasant places in which to live or work. They place several restrictions on the individual's rights and freedoms and allow little room for those aspects of the human soul which are not directly relevant to the organizational objectives. Emotions, spontaneity and play are largely disenfranchised as is, in any meaningful sense, the

pursuit of pleasure and happiness. [...]. These myths are efforts to deal with life's harshness, unpredictability, arbitrariness" (Gabriel, 1991, p. 873).

Our work offers at least a partial answer to the gossip paradox: although socially disapproved due to its potential negative effects, gossip is ubiquitous because it is self-relevant and functional for all the individuals involved in it. We contribute to the increasing body of research demonstrating that gossip is a sign of healthy social functioning for groups and individuals. Specifically, through its functions, gossip helps senders, receivers and targets interact better with their social environment. As such, for each of the individuals involved, gossip represents an opportunity to learn about themselves and about others, and to respond adaptively to their environment, in a way that accommodates their needs, motives, interests and predispositions. Gossip is a versatile behavior: it can function both as an exchange of observations about people in one's environment, which is central to the success of living in that environment, and also as a way to manipulate other's reputations for self-serving purposes (Emler, 1994). Gossip is functional for the people in the gossip triad, and it may be used both as an instrument of adaptation, as well as an instrument of destruction. Thus, we advise a cautious but humane view of gossip in organizations.